

CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS: IDEAS AND EMPIRES

New Ideas, Emerging Societies

The Origin of Monotheism

The Ancient Hebrews and the Roots of Judaism

Zoroastrianism

The Greeks and their Influence

Greek History

Greek Ideas

The Flowering of Indian Religion

The Many Paths of Hinduism

Buddhism

Jainism

Zhou China

History

Thought

Confucius and Confucianism

Way Beyond Words: Taoism

The Iron Fist: Legalism

Conquest and Transformation

Alexander and the Hellenistic World

Maurya India

Shihuangdi and the Unification of China

The Peak of the Classical Age

Han China

India through the Gupta Empire

Parthians and Sassanians

Rome

The Roman Republic

The Early Empire

Early Christianity

Decline and Fall in the West

Meroe, South Arabia, and Aksum

Note to online readers: This chapter, like many, is not quite finished. It still lacks discussions of Zoroastrianism, Jainism, and culture during the Pax Romana. It may be a little heavy on Roman history. Like all the history chapters, it will eventually be supplemented with maps.

NEW IDEAS, EMERGING SOCIETIES

Ever since the rise of complex societies, a predominant theme in human history has been the domination of one group of people by another. The first chiefdoms and small states arose when small groups of people came to dominate the masses, and the first empires arose when nation gained power over others. Over and over throughout history, one group has dominated another, usually because of some new means of production or technique of war. It is not a pleasant fact, but it is a fact nonetheless. Might does not make right, but it does make history. Still, history is built on more than iron, chariots, and tanks. It is also built on ideas—more subtle, but every bit as powerful. Indeed, the struggle for dominance has sometimes gone to those with the best ideas, not the best weapons. A more encouraging thought, however, is that some of history's best ideas have been about going beyond violence and the struggle for dominance.

Some of the most important ideas in human history emerged in ancient times, beginning around the time of the chariot revolutions, and peaking between and BCE. During this time every major world religion except Islam was established, as well as many of the basic philosophical themes of secular thought. Together, these ideas helped define not only the societies which produced them, but later societies as well.

THE ORIGINS OF MONOTHEISM

THE ANCIENT HEBREWS

The power of ideas transcends the power of the particular people who first have them. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the origins of Judaism—the world's first enduring monotheistic religion—among the ancient Hebrews (refer to the timeline in the last chapter for events discussed in this chapter and the next. The Hebrews were a small group of people who were constantly buffeted by the struggles of large empires. Their origins are obscure because, being a small group of people, they are rarely mentioned in the records of the larger empires. We have to turn to their own writings to get a picture of their origins—primarily the Hebrew Bible (which Christians call the Old Testament). Of course, the Bible was composed primarily as a testament of faith, not as history. Except for biblical literalists, who believe that the Bible

was dictated by God to its writers and is therefore entirely factual, most historians take the bible with a grain of salt; trying to extract the facts from the myths and drifting interpretations. This allows us to extract a likely scenario about the origins of Judaism.

According to the Bible, the original defining figure of Hebrew history was Abraham, who is said to have left the Sumerian city of Ur to settle with his herds in Canaan, some time between 1900 and 1600 BCE. Abraham was the first to break with the common pattern among early peoples of recognizing a host of nature dieties and spirits. He may have believed in many deities, but he worshiped only one, called Yahweh (Hebrew for “I am”). According to the Bible, Abraham made a pact, or covenant, with Yahweh. Abraham would worship only Yahweh, and Yahweh would watch over Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, lead his people into Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan. Jacob was re-named Israel, according to the Bible, after wrestling with an angel. He had one daughter and twelve sons, and later, Hebrews arranged themselves into twelve tribes (the Twelve Tribes of Israel), each tracing its lineage to one of Jacob’s sons. This is why they were also called Israelites. At first, the Israelites were treated well in Egypt, because Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons, had become a chief minister to the Pharaoh. When a new Pharaoh came to power, however, the Hebrews were enslaved.

They were lead out of slavery under Moses, the second defining figure in Judaism. Moses lead his people out of Egypt, back toward their homeland of Canaan. On the way, in the Sinai desert, the Hebrews are said to have formed another covenant with Yahweh. They would worship only Yahweh, and obey his laws, which the Bible says were dictated to Moses. These writings, called the Torah, constitute the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. As his part of the covenant, Yahweh would adopt the Hebrews as his chosen people, and lead them back to Canaan, the “Promised Land”. Moses died before the Hebrews reached Canaan, probably around 1200 BCE. While none of this appears in Egyptian records, this period was in fact a time of mass migrations, as well as a weak time for Egypt, so the basic story of enslavement and exodus is plausible.

Over the next two centuries, the Hebrews fought with the Canaanites, Philistines (settled Sea Peoples), and others for possession of Canaan. At first, the 12 tribes were under the loose leadership of so-called “judges”. Troubled times called for united leadership, however, so they chose a king, named Saul. Under Saul’s successor, David, they defeated their rivals and set up a

small kingdom of their own, with its capital at Jerusalem (just west of the ancient town of Jericho). The kingdom grew under David's son, Solomon, who built a temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem. When Solomon died, however, the kingdom split in two—into Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. Over the next two centuries, these two states quarreled while Assyrian power grew. In 722, the Assyrians conquered Israel, and scattered its people forever. These came to be known as the ten “lost tribes” of Israel. Now Hebrew tradition would be maintained by the descendants of the people of Judah. This is why they are called Jews, and their faith, Judaism.

The kingdom of Judah fell in 586 to the New Babylonian Empire, under Nebuchadnezzar II. Their temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the upper classes were taken to Babylon. Unlike the people of Israel, however, the people of Judah maintained themselves and their faith, even during their “Babylonian captivity”. In fact, their exile was a period of great creativity. Having taken their faith with them away from their homeland, the Jews began to see it as universal. Yahweh came to be seen not just as the god of the Jews, but as the God of all peoples. The New Babylonian Empire was soon conquered by the Persians, who allowed those Jews who so wished to return to their homeland. Some returned and rebuilt the temple, while others stayed. The tiny Jewish homeland continued to be dominated off and on by foreign powers in later years. Finally, Jerusalem was ravaged and the Jews dispersed by the Romans in 132 CE. Still, the Jews continued to develop their faith, and their evolving laws were compiled in a second sacred work, the Talmud, between 200 and 500 CE.

ZOROASTRIANISM

THE GREEKS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

GREEK HISTORY

After the collapse of the Mycenaeans in the invasions of the 1200's, Greece had entered a dark age with no significant towns, little trade, and practically no literacy. Urban life eventually began to return by the 900's BCE, in the form of the *polis*, or city-state, many of which were built around an *acropolis*—an easily defended hilltop. Trade began to revive, and writing was rediscovered. It was improved in fact, as the Greeks were the first to add vowels to the all-

consonant alphabet of the Phoenicians. This made it relatively easy to learn to read and write, and literacy became unusually widespread. By the 800's, populations had grown beyond the capacity of the rocky Greek soil to feed them, and Greeks began to colonize other areas. City-states began to dot the coastlines of the northern Mediterranean, the Aegean islands, the Anatolian coast, and the Black Sea.

All this time, Greek power structures had been in constant flux. During the dark ages, Greek tribes had been ruled by chieftains, who shared some power with the warrior nobility and with councils of elders. With the rise of the city-states, chieftains had given way to kings, and between the 800's and 600's, power passed from kings to groups of aristocrats. Then a new development in warfare changed the power structure yet again. This was the **phalanx** style of fighting, where large groups of soldiers would march shoulder to shoulder in tight formation, shield to shield, with spears protruding. This formidable arrangement depended, not on the heroics of a noble warrior like the legendary Achilles, but on the coordination of the rank and file. Common soldiers, suddenly decisive in warfare, began to command more power. At the same time, merchants had prospered in the rejuvenation of trade, and began to wield more power themselves. Between the late 600's and late 400's, leaders called *tyrants* grew popular enough with commoners to seize control of the city-states from the nobility, and rule as populist dictators. Popularity is hard to hold on to, however, and in many city-states control finally took the form of an **oligarchy**, composed of wealthy commoners as well as nobles. Power had extended past the circle of nobility, though not far past. In some cities, however, the widening of power went farther. These developed democratic assemblies of all citizens. Of course, citizens were a pretty select group—basically the adult males who fought in the phalanx. Women, serfs, slaves, and foreigners were all excluded, so only a minority were involved in decision making. Still, these were some the world's first steps toward the democratic government of states (lots of simpler societies have had a roughly democratic structure).

By 500 BCE, Athens and Sparta had emerged as the two most powerful cities in the Greek world. Athens owed its power in part to its vigorous democracy, but it didn't hurt that it had rich silver mines and a great many slaves to work them. Sparta's power rested even more firmly on human exploitation. The Spartans had conquered their neighbors in the early 700's, forcing them to work their land as serfs (called *helots*). Spartans were outnumbered by helots, however, and it was a constant fear of helot revolt that forced Sparta to develop its famously

militaristic way of life. Strict discipline and regimentation were more appealing to Spartans than working their own fields, so Sparta's population practically turned into one big, powerful army.

The Greeks considered themselves a single people, united by language and other cultural traits such as religion, the Homeric epics, and the Olympic Games; which began in the early 700's. Still, they devoted most of their loyalty to their city-states, which they fought for and sometimes voted in. And with Greek land so poor and populations rising, the city-states were constantly fighting each other. They were only able to come together as a people once, when threatened by a formidable common enemy—the vast Persian Empire.

The struggle with the Persians began when the Ionian city-states of western Anatolia were conquered by Cyrus' armies between 546 and 540. These cities revolted in 499, with the support of Athens. The revolution was crushed by Darius in 494, who then decided to punish the mainland Greeks for their support. Darius was profoundly shocked to be defeated at the Battle of Marathon, and decided that it would be necessary to conquer the Greek mainland entirely. Xerxes, his successor, tried to do so in 480, but his fleet was destroyed by the newly-equipped Athenian navy (aided by Aegean storms). In 479, the Persian army was defeated. The Spartans and most other city-states withdrew from the war, but the Delian League, a coalition led by Athens, drove the Persians from Europe and freed the Ionians from Persian rule in 468.

After this victory, Athens came to dominate the Delian League until it was basically an Athenian empire. But when the Athenians tried to extend their influence into the Peloponnesian peninsula, the home of the Spartans, the first of the Peloponnesian Wars broke out between Athens, Sparta, and their respective allies. The first war lasted from 460 to 445, and ended with an Athenian defeat. It was not a terribly destructive war, however. The second Peloponnesian war, which began in 435, was devastating. Athens was eventually defeated in 404, but both sides had been weakened. Sparta began to dominate Greece, but fighting began again, and Thebes defeated Sparta in 371. Exhausted from constant in-fighting, Greece grew weak and chaotic. In the north, the region of Macedonia was growing more powerful. Macedonia was a Greek speaking region, but its people were regarded as semi-barbarians by the Greeks. They were formidable, however, especially under the leadership of Phillip II (father of Alexander the Great). The era of independent Greek city-states ended in 338, when Phillip's armies conquered Greece, and incorporated it into an expanding Macedonian empire.

GREEK IDEAS

The ancient Greeks were a warlike, self-destructive people, but in the midst of all their fighting, they produced many of the ideas that served as foundations of modern Western culture; and by extension, world culture. We have seen how the seeds of modern democracy were first sown in ancient Greece. Modern architecture and sculpture also owe a great deal to the Greeks, as does modern athletic competition. Theater was also a Greek invention (though it was independently invented elsewhere), and natural science, philosophy, and mathematics all made huge breakthroughs in Greece.

Why were the ancient Greeks so creative? This is a tough question to answer in any simple way. One likely contributor was the simultaneous sense of teamwork and entitlement that came from participation in phalanx warfare (not that such things are entirely positive). The Greeks also had a tradition of personal achievement and heroism. This combination may have helped create a more individualistic society, where people felt freer to express themselves than in most previous societies. Greek creativity also had a lot to do with the confidence boost of their rather unexpected defeat of the powerful Persian Empire. This confidence was focused on Athens, whose period of dominance between the Persian and Peloponnesian wars is often called the Athenian Golden Age. Athens was wealthy and powerful, and it attracted some of the brightest people from all over the known world. The arts were heavily supported by the state, and many of the great works of ancient Greece, from the Parthenon to the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, were produced at state expense during the Golden Age. So, another source of Greek achievement was generous patronage.

Another was a rather unique mindset. The Greeks were given to thinking in the abstract. They were fascinated by the idea of universal truths—common features that might tie together particular things. One aspect of this mindset was the Greek infatuation with the idea of perfection, which is so well illustrated by the beautiful bodies and ideal proportions of Greek sculpture and architecture. The Greeks believed that there are such things as a perfect body, an ideal building, or a perfect musical harmony—if not in physical reality, then at least in the realm of ideas. Another aspect of this tendency toward abstraction was the search for universal laws that characterized Greek science, philosophy, and mathematics. The Greeks wanted to know what basic substances the world is made of, and what general laws of motion moving objects

obey. In mathematics, they were among the first people to assign numbers a reality beyond the particular things they enumerated. They decided, for example, that the number eight is the same whether they were talking about eight rocks or eight people. We take this idea for granted so much today, it's hard to realize what a leap of imagination it actually was at the time.

Greek science and philosophy (which were not really separate things in the ancient world) can both be traced in large part to one person—Thales, of the Ionian city of Miletus. Thales, who lived from 624 to 546, saw that water could take various form (solid, liquid, and gas), so he suggested that *all matter* is made of water. This thought itself is not particularly impressive, but its style was revolutionary. For one thing, it established the search for a basic element or set of elements upon which everything else is based. This approach would continue throughout the history of philosophy and science up to the present day, with great success. Even more importantly, it was the first time that someone had tried to explain physical phenomena in entirely natural, as opposed to supernatural, terms. Thales left out gods and magic, and assumed that things have causes which can be understood rationally.

Of course, it wasn't long before others questioned the idea that everything was made of water. Anaximander, also of Miletus, was the first to divide things into earth, air, fire, and water, which he thought transformed into one another based on how hot, cold, wet, or dry they were. Underlying all these things, he thought, was a fundamental substance called *apeiron*, "the unlimited". Later, Leucippus and Democritus decided that the world was not composed of one thing, but of many. They suggested that everything is composed of tiny things called atoms (atom is Greek for un-cuttable) which represent the basic building blocks of all things. Different material properties, they thought, were linked to the properties of the atoms. They thought fluid because its atoms are smooth, and flow past each other easily.

All these thinkers were *materialists*, who believed that matter was the ultimate substance of the world. In contrast, Pythagoras thought that ultimate reality was number and proportion. In other words, form, not stuff, is primary. Another debate concerned whether reality is constant or changing. Heraclitus claimed that all is flux and change, like a flickering fire. Parmenides and Zeno, on the other hand, claimed all change is illusory, and that ultimate reality is eternal and unchanging. Parmenides was the first to ask deeply abstract questions about the nature of being and existence itself, and how it differs from non-being. Such questions would occupy philosophers, and, in a more concrete way, scientists, right down to the present day.

During the height of Athenian power, a group of people emerged who embraced the debating techniques developed by earlier philosophers, but rejected the seemingly unanswerable questions of their predecessors in favor of more worldly concerns. Some of these *Sophists* theorized about the nature of power and government; often arguing that, far from being some transcendent ideal, government is a creation of humans. Some Sophists taught the new argumentation techniques to ambitious Athenians seeking better political skills. Out of this tradition emerged the first giant of Greek philosophy, Socrates. In some ways, Socrates behaved like a Sophist, spending his time debating with other Athenians, and brilliantly puncturing their preconceptions. But Socrates was not simply trying to expose human ideas as so many illusions. He believed in an underlying, eternal reality, and he was trying to clear away misconceptions, in order to truly understand that reality. Socrates believed that happiness lay in finding eternal truths, and living according to them. He practiced what he preached. In 399 BCE, shortly after the fall of Athenian dominance, he was accused of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens. When asked to defend himself, he said that he would rather die than betray his philosophical principles. And he did. Sentenced to death, he killed himself by drinking hemlock, surrounded by grieving friends and admirers.

One of Socrates' friends was the young Plato. Plato had revered Socrates, and honored his memory by using him as the main character in a set of brilliantly written dialogues, in which Plato developed his own philosophy (heavily influenced by Socrates). Plato believed that reality can be divided into two realms. One, the realm of everyday experience, is indeed a world of impermanence and change, as Heraclitus had said. But this world is just a pale reflection of a more perfect, unchanging world like that suggested by Parmenides or Pythagoras. Plato called this the world of *forms*. For Plato a form is the perfect example of a category of things, such as a perfect circle or a perfect human body. The fact that we can imagine such things, even though we have never truly seen them, means that they exist in the world of "Forms", and that knowledge of them comes from the mind's "recollection" of these forms. Wisdom, then, consists of seeing past the everyday world to the eternal world of perfect forms. There, Plato thought, we can find the ideal forms of things like truth, justice, and the good society.

Plato's student, Aristotle, was a much more down to earth philosopher than Plato. Whereas Plato was an idealist and a literary genius, Aristotle was more interested in practical questions and facts. He had an encyclopedic, systematic mind, which he set to the task of

unifying all Greek science and philosophy into a coherent system. (Alas, he was no literary genius. Few philosophers have been.) Many of Aristotle's books deal with natural sciences such as physics and biology. He refined Anixamander's theory of the four elements, as well as Pythagoras' idea of the celestial spheres. Contrary to Plato, he did not believe in a world of forms. He did think that things have an "essence", which makes them what they are, but this was much closer to everyday experience than an entire world of forms. He also believed that things have an ultimate purpose, toward which they tend to move. In physics, he believed that heavy things tend to move downward, that light things move upward, and that heavenly bodies move in circles around the Earth. He believed that objects in motion (on Earth) tend to stop in the absence of outside influence (a reasonable, but wrong, idea).

The ultimate purpose of the universe, Aristotle believed, is the ultimate reality (which might even be equated with a very abstract idea of God). In ethics and politics, Aristotle believed that the best course is to find the ultimate purpose of the self and the state. In both cases, happiness, or the "good life" can be attained by a combination of reason and virtue. Aristotle gave clear and concrete prescriptions for what constitutes the good life, many of which centered around moderation and self-control. All in all, Aristotle succeeded in his goal of unifying Greek thought. In fact, perhaps he was more successful than he would have wished. His work represented a culmination of the Greek tradition, which thereafter would lose much of its vitality. Aristotle founded a school of his own, the Lyceum, but his most famous pupil was not a philosopher, but a conqueror—Alexander, later to be called "the Great", the young son of Phillip of Macedon. Greek culture would become less creative, but Alexander was about to make it much more widespread.

THE FLOWERING OF INDIAN RELIGION

In the Late Vedic period, from about 1000 to 500 BCE, the Aryans spread from the Punjab region, east along the Ganges valley, and then south, burning and clearing forests as they went. They also struggled with the native peoples, usually conquering and dominating them. But cultural influences were not entirely one-way. The invaders absorbed some of the ways of the natives, including many of their gods. This gave the tradition that would become Hinduism its famously pluralistic character—its tendency to absorb, rather than reject, new influences. By

the 800's BCE, a patchwork of small states and growing cities had begun to appear; centered around the middle Ganges. By 500 BCE, most of India was organized into states. Aryan influence dominated in the north, while Dravidian and other indigenous influences were more pervasive in the south.

As the later Vedic period progressed, the Aryan priestly classes came to be preoccupied with Vedic ritual. This is reflected in the *Brahmanas*, composed between 1000 and 800 BCE, which are an extensive set of commentaries on such ritual. Such ritualistic orthodoxy had little appeal for people outside the priestly caste, especially since they supplied the livestock for the large-scale animal sacrifices the rituals called for. Many reacted to the Brahmanic tradition by stressing personal knowledge and enlightenment over ritual. This movement found widespread expression in ascetic practices, ranging from meditation to self-mutilation.

These new tendencies were expressed in the *Upanishads*, composed between about 800 and 500 BCE. The Upanishads focus on the idea of *Brahman*. Brahman had originally referred to the power derived from proper performance of rituals (by priests called Brahmins). In the Upanishads, Brahman came mean something far more profound. Basically, it meant ultimate reality; the ground and source of existence. Brahman was considered the only thing that is whole and boundless. The transient, contingent world of daily experience is an aspect of Brahman, but only a fleeting, surface manifestation, like blowing spray on the ocean. Because it is infinite and unbounded, Brahman is thought to be beyond categorization. Words can only point at it, but never capture it. All the many gods of the Vedic tradition, and the many more that would be added later, were simply considered different manifestations of a single reality—Brahman. According to the Upanishads, while Brahman cannot be fully described or categorized, it can be experienced, because every individual self, or *Atman*, is simply a manifestation of Brahman. The trick is to realize it. Indians have traditionally reminded each other of this with the phrase “Thou art that”.

For the ancient Aryans, there was a clear afterlife with a heaven and a hell. This also changed in the Upanishads. Each soul, or *Atman*, was still considered immortal, but immortality now took the form of rebirth in new lives, in an endless cycle called *samsara*. This was not considered a positive thing. It was exhaustive and oppressive, a never-ending rehash of life's struggles. Closely tied to the idea of *samsara* is the idea of *karma*—the idea that every action has consequences that reverberate through the world and from one life to the next. Good actions

have good consequences, such as rebirth in a higher caste, or even as a god. Bad actions have bad consequences, such as rebirth in a lower caste; or worse, as a worm or an insect.

Ideally, the way to deal with this situation is to try to transcend karma altogether, thereby escaping from the endless treadmill of samsara. This requires extreme devotion to meditative practices (*yoga*) and renunciation of worldly things. The reward is *moksha*: dissolution of one's limited self (*atman*) into the infinite Brahman, resulting in an escape from samsara and karma. But this is a tall order, and such a rigorous path is not for everyone. Indeed, it *cannot* be for everyone, because if everyone went into the wilderness to be an ascetic, no one would raise children or tend crops. This was the point that the priestly class made in response to the growing trend toward asceticism. Their solution was to declare that different religious practices were appropriate for different people at different stages of life.

A person's religious path, or *dharma*, depends on their age and their inborn spiritual aptitude (and traditionally, of course, on their sex and caste). In terms of age, people are expected to progress through a series of stages. First, they should be quite, chaste students. Then, they should marry, have children, and honor the gods with the appropriate Brahmanic rituals. Next they should retire and go into the woods for contemplation. Finally, they should end their lives as wandering ascetics. Of course, some people have more spiritual aptitude, and will progress through the stages more quickly than others. Some would launch directly into asceticism, while others would never become ascetics. This variation was accepted, and explained with the idea that different people have attained different stages in the cycle of samsara. The precocious ascetics, for example, have already achieved a great deal in past lives. Accordingly, different people should follow different paths throughout life. For many, the path of moksha and asceticism is too steep. What such people should do is try to make the best of their karma, not escape it altogether. Traditionally, there have been two paths toward this goal. In the *path of duties*, one simply performs the appropriate rituals, and acts in ways appropriate to one's caste and stage in life. In the *path of devotion*, one devotes oneself to one of the many gods. Each one, of course, is simply a manifestation of Brahman.

THE AWAKENED ONE: BUDDHA AND BUDDHISM

The Upanishads were really just one of many reactions to the older Vedic traditions. Another reaction would develop into a distinct tradition of its own—Buddhism. Strangely, Buddhism has all but vanished in India, where it originated, but it has spread to become a dominant religion of many East Asian countries. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism began with the teachings of a single person—Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be called the Buddha, meaning *awakened one*. Gautama seems to have lived between the 560's and 480's BCE, but this is uncertain, and he may have lived as much as a century later. In any case, tradition has it that he was a prince of the Shakya kingdom, in the foothills of the Himalayas. He is said to have been raised in extreme comfort, and carefully sheltered by his father from anything unpleasant. At age 29, however, Gautama was profoundly shocked by three sights that disturbed his artificially skewed view of life: an old, decrepit man; a deathly ill man; and a dead man. Gautama was suddenly struck by the hard reality that everyone will one day get sick, get old, and die. Life, he realized, is transient and full of suffering; yet according to Hindu traditions, we all have to endure *endless* lives. While pondering this bleak prospect, Gautama saw a fourth man; a wandering ascetic. Resolving to become an ascetic himself, he left his comfortable life (as well as his wife and newborn child) and wandered south in search of release from life's terrible wheel.

Gautama studied and meditated with two different teachers, but left when he saw that he had learned all they had to teach. He became the most extreme of ascetics, starving himself until he was near death. This went on for five years. Then he is said to have heard a chance remark that revolutionized his approach to enlightenment. A music teacher was telling his student that if he left the strings of his instrument too loose, it would not play, but if he pulled them too tight, they would break. In a flash of insight, Gautama realized that he was about to break as well. How could he find enlightenment if he was growing too weak to think clearly? The key to enlightenment, he realized, was not extreme self-denial, but moderation, a "Middle Path" between self-indulgence and self-torture. Leaving his ascetic companions (with their ridicule ringing in his ears), Gautama took a bath, had a decent meal, and sat in the shade of a great banyan tree. Nourished and comfortable for the first time in years, he commenced meditating through the night. By morning, he is said to have become enlightened, and realized the way past life's suffering. According to Buddhists, the Buddha had freed himself from the endless round of samsara, and would not return for further lives.

The Buddha had a long life ahead of him however, and used it to teach others what he had learned. First he returned to his old partners in asceticism. They were skeptical at first, but when they heard what he had to say they accepted him as their teacher. What he said was quite simple, and can be expressed in the so-called Four Noble Truths:

1. Suffering, or *Dukka*, is pervasive in life.
2. The cause of suffering is desire.
3. The key to eliminating suffering is letting go of desire.
4. The way to do that is by following what the Buddha called the Eightfold Path, a prescription for living that includes: right views, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

These precepts would be the Buddha's basic teaching, which he delivered to the many students who followed him until his death at age 80. We don't have the space to go into the specifics of each of these precepts. The important thing is that the Buddha wanted to put forth a simple, clear prescription for becoming enlightened. He avoided any discussion of metaphysical issues, such as whether or not there is a god (or gods) or a heaven or hell. Two things are worth noting about the Buddha's teaching. First, he did not believe in caste, and this would set Buddhism apart from Hinduism. Second, one should not think of Buddhism as though its main goal were negative, and based solely on aversion or avoidance. Buddhism does teach a way to avoid suffering, but this is a part of a positive goal—the attainment of enlightenment, based on clearing away limiting desires which are obstacles in the path to this goal. Enlightenment is said to be a blissful state, though it goes beyond such contingent, fleeting emotions as pleasure and pain. So, even though Buddhism teaches that life is pervaded by suffering, it would be a mistake to conclude that it is pessimistic. On the contrary, it is positive and compassionate, as are many of the millions of the Buddha's followers.

ZHOU CHINA

HISTORY

In 1122 BCE, the Shang Dynasty was overthrown by Wu of the region of Zhou, establishing the Zhou Dynasty (sometimes spelled Chou). The Zhou rulers legitimized their usurpation by introducing the idea of the “Mandate of Heaven”, which claimed that a ruler was supported by heaven only as long as he ruled justly. If he did not, heaven would allow him to be overthrown by new, better rulers. By claiming such a mandate, the early Zhou rulers commanded obedience from their subjects, but they also established a ready rationale for future usurpers. Nonetheless, the Zhou Dynasty was the longest in Chinese history, lasting from 1122 to 221 BCE. The Zhou rulers were little more than figureheads after the mid-700s, but the early rulers would one day be looked upon as models of wise rule.

Though Zhou territory extended over a vast area, past the Yangtze River in the south, only the small Zhou state itself was ruled directly by the king. The rest was governed by a feudal system similar to later systems in Europe and Japan. It was divided into fiefs ruled by members of the royal family and their friends, who gained their fiefs in exchange for pledges of military service. As among the knights and samurai of later societies, an “honorable warrior” ethic developed among the nobles. War was certainly common enough, because steppe peoples were continually raiding from the north and west, especially after they learned to ride horses. This would be a defining problem in Chinese history.

Nomad raiders forced the Zhou rulers to abandon their capital at Hao, in the far west, for Loyang, closer to central China. Afterward, their power began to slip as their vassals gained more independence. Soon the vassals were basically kings of their own states, constantly fighting amongst themselves, while giving nominal recognition to the Zhou dynasty. This time of turmoil would come to be called the *Springs and Autumns* period. There is an ancient Chinese curse that says “May you live in interesting times”. The late Zhou dynasty was certainly that. Iron was introduced around 600 BCE, and had become common by 200 BCE. As in other places, iron plows made agriculture more productive, but iron weapons made warfare more destructive. As in Greece and India, the early iron age would be a time of great upheaval, but great creativity. Three of the major philosophies of China—Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism—would emerge during this time. Other changes included the rise of a bureaucratic class, and a little later, the rise of a merchant class. During the *Warring States* period, beginning around 480 BCE, the war between the various states intensified, and the more powerful states began to absorb less powerful ones. By 221, the tough people of the western state of Qin had

conquered all the other states and deposed the Zhou Dynasty, creating, in the process, the first Chinese empire.

CONFUCIUS AND CONFUCIANISM

Among the many people troubled by the chaos of the Springs and Autumns period was a man named Kong Qiu, who came to be called Kongfuzi, or “Great Master Kong”. He is known in the west by the Latinized form of his name—Confucius. Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, was a scholar and teacher with a deep reverence for classic Chinese texts. Horrified by the turmoil of his times, he believed that the solution was a return to the ways of earlier times, especially the early Zhou. Confucius saw himself simply as a transmitter of the old ways, but he was really molding older customs into a new system of ethics. For example, he promoted the old ideal of behaving as a gentlemen, but he transformed the standard of gentlemanly conduct. The term for gentleman, *chunzi*, originally meant “son of a ruler”, but Confucius used it to mean any person with virtue and grace. Virtue, for Kongfuzi, was a kind of self-cultivation based on respect for others and behaving appropriately in terms of the traditional hierarchies of Chinese society (between ruler and ruled and father and son, for example). Like Aristotle, whom he resembled in many ways, Confucius promoted a practical set of rules for living with virtue and poise. His philosophy was fundamentally based on respect; toward other people, and toward traditional Chinese culture. When pressed for a summary of his thought, he offered a version of the Golden Rule, “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others”.

Confucius made his living as a teacher, but he aspired to be a court advisor to a ruler who would do what he suggested. He never achieved this during his lifetime, though he may have held some minor advisory positions. Confucius did accumulate a great many followers, however, and most of what we know about his thought comes from their record of his words, which is called the *Analects*. Tradition holds that Confucius edited another set of classic works of early China, which came to be called the *Five Classics*, but this is very doubtful. After his death, Confucius’ ideas were elaborated, especially by Mengzi (Mencius), an optimistic philosopher who believed in the innate goodness of people. Mencius’ version of Confucianism was adopted by the Han Dynasty, and came to be the official state philosophy of China. For

hundreds of years, students were selected for civil service based on examinations testing them on their mastery of the “Confucian” classics.

WAY BEYOND WORDS: TAOISM

It is often said that the Chinese have been Confucians in their public lives and Taoists in their private lives. While Taoism (pronounced *Dowism*) is very different from Confucianism, it is in many ways its complement. To understand Taoism, first we have to realize that it has two very different strains. *Religious Taoism* is a folk tradition which deifies the founders of Taoism and involves a great deal of magic relating to health and immortality. This is very different from philosophical Taoism. Both religious and philosophical Taoism have their origins in ancient Chinese thought, in its emphasis on harmony and the union of opposites; Yin and Yang. Philosophical Taoism, however, is a very subtle, elegant refinement of these themes.

The most defining book of philosophical Taoism is a short book called the *Tao Te Ching*, sometimes called the *Laozi*, after its purported author. The origins of the *Tao Te Ching* are mysterious. Laozi (a name roughly meaning “Old Master”) is traditionally thought to have lived in the 500's BCE, making him an older contemporary of Confucius. The *Tao Te Ching*, however, is clearly the work of more than one person, and may have been finished as late as the 200's or 100's BCE. It is quite possible that Laozi is a completely legendary figure. In any case, the best starting point for grasping Taoism is to consider the title *Tao Te Ching*, which can be roughly translated as “The Classic of the Way and its Power”. *Ching* means “classic”, and is in the title of many venerable Chinese works, such as the famous *I Ching*. *Tao*, literally translated, means “way”, or “path”. Confucius used the same word to describe the proper path of a virtuous person or society. In Taoism, however, the meaning of “the way” is far broader, referring to the overall order and harmony of the universe.

But this is not something that can be clearly described, as Confucius might have done. The *Tao Te Ching* opens with the warning that “The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao”. “Tao” is just a word, a label for a concept. But a concept is not the thing itself. All concepts are limited and relative, while the Tao itself is all encompassing and complete. The Tao can be experienced more clearly than it can be described, and it is experienced best with a mind cleared of concepts and desires. Still, one can use words to give an idea of what the Tao is

like. The main characteristic of the Tao, besides completeness, is smoothness or flow. Water is a common metaphor. Water doesn't plan what it is about to do—it just does it, flowing along the path of least resistance. By doing so, it attains efficiency and beauty.

Water is also one of the most powerful substances in nature. This brings us to the second word in the title of the *Tao Te Ching*. *Te* roughly means “virtue”. Confucius also used this word, but once again, it is a very different concept in Taoism. *Te* basically refers to the power and grace that comes from being in accord with the Tao. What is fundamental here is the idea of doing by “not doing”. Things in accord with the Tao act with a seemingly effortless spontaneity, which gives them grace by their very effortlessness. The Tao Te Ching is constantly advising that things are best accomplished by not trying too hard. For example, a great athlete doesn't think too much about what she is doing. She lets her body do what it knows how to do. An average athlete, on the other hand, is prone to “choking”; to thinking too hard about what she is doing, which actually gets in the way of doing it. A Taoist would say the great athlete is in tune with the Tao. The Tao Te Ching is also full of advice to rulers, telling them to rule by interfering as little as possible, so that the people hardly know they have a ruler.

One thing that should be made clear is that Taoism does not advocate laziness or passiveness, things Westerners associate with “going with the flow”. On the contrary, being in accord with the Tao—finding the flow—is not an easy thing, as many artists, musicians and athletes can tell you. And such flow so does not result in decay or sloth, but in power and beauty. Of course, Taoism does not put great stock in progress and accomplishment, because it advocates letting go of desires in a way very similar to Buddhism. If you are satisfied with what you already have, a Taoist would ask, why strive for more when it will only make life more complicated? Taoism, then, is not a progressive philosophy. But it is a powerful, beautiful philosophy. It served as a wonderful complement to (and a welcome relief from) the duties and obligations of Confucianism. Confucius realized that many people need clear instructions on ethics and duty. For those who want to aim above morality, there is Taoism.

THE IRON FIST: LEGALISM

Taoism, like Confucianism, was a search for harmony in response to the chaos of the times. But Taoism was also a reaction to the relative rigidity of Confucianism. Another school

of thought that emerged around the same time reacted to Confucianism as well, but in a very different way. This school is called *Legalism*. While Taoists thought Confucianism was terribly rigid and confining, Legalists thought it was not nearly confining enough. According to Legalism, people are inherently selfish, and the only way to achieve social order is to guide them with a system of rewards for good behavior and harsh punishments for bad behavior. According to early Legalists, these rewards and punishments should be meted out regardless of social status. The way to enforce such a system, they thought, is to have a strong, centralized state capable of ruling absolutely. Such a state would in fact soon emerge, and abstract Legalist theory would be turned into concrete, brutal practice.

CONQUEST AND TRANSFORMATION

Across the entire axis of the state-organized societies of the time, from Greece through the Middle East, India and China, the beginning of the Iron Age had been a time of great turmoil, but also great creativity. Across most of this area, the chaos of the time would be brought to an end by conquerors, who then spread their regional culture across wide areas. Two of these conquerors, Alexander the Great and Shihuangdi, of the Qin state in China, had strikingly similar careers. Both came from rough frontier states, both were brilliant campaigners who established vast empires in just a few years, each of which collapsed upon their death. Nevertheless, these conquerors spread their cultures, as well as a uniform system of rule, over vast areas, laying the groundwork for lasting, well-organized empires like Han China and Imperial Rome.

ALEXANDER AND THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

Phillip of Macedon had conquered Greece in 338, uniting the entire Greek mainland under Macedonian rule. This done, he began planning to attack the Persian Empire, the old enemy of the Greeks. Phillip was assassinated in 336 BCE, so the task of leading this expedition fell to his son, Alexander, who, at 20 years of age, had already shown a genius for organized violence. Alexander began his career by ruthlessly suppressing a revolt in the city of Thebes, killing many and selling the survivors into slavery. Having thus stabilized his domain, he set out to expand it in 334. Alexander's armies marched across Anatolia and down the eastern

Mediterranean coast, sending the main Persian army into retreat. After capturing Phoenicia and Egypt, they continued into Mesopotamia, defeated the Persian army, and captured the entire region, including the rich treasury at Susa. Alexander burned the Persian capital of Persopolis in 330, and had conquered the eastern regions of the Persian Empire by 327. Then he crossed the Indus River into India. He wanted to keep going toward the Ganges Valley, but his soldiers, who had marched 15,000 miles, would go no farther. They marched back to Babylon by 324. Alexander fell ill and died in 323, at age 32.

Alexander left no heir, and within a few years the empire was divided among three of Alexander's generals. One, Seleucus, began a dynasty in Mesopotamia and the lands to the east which came to be called the Seleucid Empire. Ptolemy did the same in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean, while Antigonus' descendants came to rule Macedonia and Greece. Alexander's enormous empire had broken up, but Greek influence was there to stay. Alexander had founded cities (mostly named Alexandria) across the entire region, and these were soon filled with Greek colonists. Alexander had treated the peoples of the lands he conquered relatively well, and many preferred Greek to Persian rule. Regions from Egypt to the Indus began to absorb and transform Greek culture, blending traditions from east and west into a new *Hellenistic* (Greek influenced) culture.

Culturally, the Hellenistic Age was a time of elaboration on earlier ideas, not the appearance of revolutionary new ones. Athens remained an intellectual center, and new schools of thought, such as Skepticism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism, arose there. The new cities across Alexander's realm were the sites of great experimentation in architecture, which became much more ornate. Sculpted figures became less idealized, and more emotional and action-filled. Math and science advanced during the Hellenistic Age, partly through the dissemination of earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian advances. Euclid almost singlehandedly systematized geometry, while Archimedes made advances in mathematics and physics. Aristarchus of Samos was the first to suggest that the Earth moves around the sun, but his theory was eclipsed by persuasive new models of an earth-centered universe, put forth by Hipparchus and Ptolemy. Eratosthenes of Cyrene was able to measure the circumference of the Earth to within 1 % of its true value. The city of Alexandria in Egypt became a great center of trade and learning, with a state-supported research institute called the Museum of Alexandria, which boasted a library with over half a million volumes.

Hellenistic cultural influences would last longer than the Hellenistic world itself. The Seleucid Empire fell to the Parthians by 141 BCE. Greece was ruled by the expanding Roman Empire by the same time. Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemaic dynasty, committed suicide in 30 BCE after being defeated by Rome. Dynastic Egypt and the western Hellenistic kingdoms were both engulfed by the vast Roman Empire. But, then, Rome itself was built almost entirely on the foundations of Greek and Hellenistic culture.

MAURYA INDIA

Alexander had conquered the Punjab region of the upper Indus in 326 BCE, but this area was among the first to become independent after Alexander's death in 323. Into the resulting power vacuum stepped Chandragupta, a formidable conqueror who may have been inspired by Alexander. Chandragupta conquered the state of Magadha in 321, and then began to conquer most of India. He defeated Seleucus' bid to retake his Indian territories in 305, and arranged a treaty by which Seleucus' gave up claims to all lands west of Kabul (Seleucus got 500 war elephants in return). With the help of a Machiavelli-like minister, Kautilya, Chandragupta set up an efficient empire with excellent roads, a uniform legal system, and an unusually extensive secret service (which a Seleucid ambassador claimed to be extensive enough to constitute a separate caste). Because Chandragupta came from the Maurya tribe, his realm was known as the Maurya Empire.

Chandragupta's empire expanded under his son, and also under his grandson, Ashoka. But Ashoka, horrified by his experiences with warfare, renounced violence and took up Buddhism. He had Buddhist-inspired edicts carved on pillars and rocks throughout the empire, and sent Buddhist missionaries abroad. At the same time, he respected Jains and Hindus. Modern Indians still revere Ashoka as the greatest of Indian rulers. By Ashoka's death in 233, the empire had become overextended, and began to fall apart. The last Mauryan emperor was assassinated in 185, and India fragmented once again into a patchwork of minor kingdoms. Soon afterward, invaders from the north began to set up their own kingdoms. First were Bactrian Greeks from a splinter state of the Seleucid Empire, who set up a kingdom in the north. These were overrun beginning in 150 BCE by an Indo-Iranian people called Kushans, who set up their own state. The Kushans had been pushed from central Asia by a different ethnic group that

had recently taken up pastoral nomadism. These were a Turko-mongol people called the Xiongnu, who had also been terrorizing the Chinese. Related peoples would one day terrorize, and occasionally rule, most of Eurasia.

SHI HUANGDI AND THE UNIFICATION OF CHINA

In 352 BCE, during the Warring States period, a man named Shang Yang was appointed chief minister of the Qin state. Shang Yang was a great believer in Legalist principles, and immediately began rearranging the state of Qin accordingly. He established a universal draft for all men over age 15 and based military standing on merit, thus creating a formidable army based on iron weapons and peasant infantry. Shang Yang also abolished serfdom, granted land to the peasants that worked it, and collecting taxes directly from them. All this broke the back of the old feudal nobility, and made Qin the strongest state in China. For the next century, the Qin people campaigned against other states, absorbing weaker ones one after another. All of China was finally conquered between 230 and 221 by a man named Zheng, who took the title Shi Huangdi, or “First Emperor” of the Qin Dynasty. The word *China* is actually derived from Qin, the first dynasty to unify the land under a strong, centralized government.

The Qin would be a short-lived dynasty, however. Shi Huangdi modeled his empire along the lines of the earlier Qin state. He abolishing serfdom, but then heavily taxed the former peasants and put them to work on vast public projects, such as canals and enormous walls (the Great Wall was not built until later). An extremely harsh law code kept executioners busy. Those who questioned the government, for example, were sometimes executed with their entire families. Everything was standardized, from weights and measures, to writing, to the space between cart wheels. Shi Huangdi tried to standardize the Chinese mind, as well. He burned books on philosophies other than Legalism (particularly Confucianism, because of its emphasis on tradition). Shihuangdi wanted to erase history and tradition, beginning anew with himself as the first great ruler. He did bring a centralized government to China, but he did so by alienated almost every class of Chinese society. When he died in 210 BCE, his empire immediately collapsed into chaos. His tomb is still guarded by 7500 life-sized terra cotta soldiers, each one unique. Over half a million laborers are said to have worked on the tomb; a vivid reminder of Shi Huangdi’s terrible power.

THE PEAK OF THE CLASSICAL AGE

HAN CHINA

In the civil wars that broke out after Shi Huangdi's death, the old feudal aristocracy was pitted against those who wanted to maintain a centralized state based on meritocracy. The second group won under Liu Pang, a former peasant who had risen through the ranks of the Qin military. Liu Pang established the Han dynasty in 206 BCE. This would be the definitive Chinese dynasty, in many ways the Chinese equivalent of the Roman empire, with which it was contemporary. Like Rome, Han China was a well-organized, expanding empire based on an earlier culture that was more creative, but less stable (Greece in the case of Rome, and Zhou in the case of China). The first Han emperors gained the favor of the peasants by reducing taxation and forced labor, and gained the favor of the aristocracy by returning some lands and establishing a bureaucracy based on Confucian traditions. Theoretically, the bureaucracy was open to anyone who could pass the exams, but only the landowning class could typically afford the necessary schooling. Legalism and other aspects of Shi Huangdi's legacy were denounced, but many Legalist government institutions remained in place, as they have ever since.

Han Empire reached its greatest territorial extent under the emperor Wu Ti. As it expanded to the south, many Chinese settlers flooded the ethnically distinct south with their languages and ways, leaving earlier peoples as islands in a Chinese sea. Strong walls and aggressive campaigns temporarily reduced the threat from the Xiongnu nomads, and a corridor of territory extending far into the west was annexed. Trade with the west, which was already well-established along the Silk Road, was given official support. The Romans had little that the Chinese wanted, however, except gold coins, which began to flood into China. Confucian scholarship, the study of history, and sculpture all flourished under the relative peace of Wu Ti's reign. But peace came at a cost. The people, especially peasants, were heavily taxed to support military campaigns, to the extent that many peasants had to sell themselves into debt slavery. This led to a usurpation of the throne by Wang Mang in 9 CE, which ended the so-called Former Han Dynasty. Wang Mang tried and failed to enact reforms, and was overthrown by relatives of the former dynastic family, who established the Later Han Dynasty in 23 CE. The Later Han

Empire lasted for 200 years, though it was never as strong as the former. Terrible diseases passed along the Silk Road and ravaged the population of China (and of Rome at the other end). Nomad raids began to increase. Warlords grew more powerful throughout the period, and finally overthrew the Han dynasty in 220 CE. The fall of the Han Dynasty, like the later fall of Rome, brought on centuries of division and chaos.

INDIA THROUGH THE GUPTA EMPIRE

Though India was not united by a single government in the centuries after the fall of the Maurya Empire, this was a period of consolidation of Indian culture. The Brahmanic religion of the Vedas, modified by the Upanishads, Buddhism, and Jainism, assumed the broad synthesis that can truly be called Hinduism. The idea of the great trinity of Hindu gods—Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer—emerged, and Vishnu and Shiva came to be worshiped almost exclusively by some groups. Toward the end of the period, the goddess Devi emerged as a revered deity, capable of taking creative forms (as Shakti) or destructive forms (as the terrible Kali). The great epics of Hinduism took their final form during the first centuries CE (though their characters are of the Late Vedic period). The *Mahabharata* tells the story of a great war between cousins. In one famous section, the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Song of the Lord), Arjuna, a great warrior, hesitates before riding into battle against his kin. His chariot driver, Krishna, then reveals himself as an incarnation of Vishnu. Krishna tells Arjuna about the transience of life and the need for duty (which in this case means continuing the battle). In the *Ramayana*, Rama (another incarnation of Vishnu) takes an epic journey to Sri Lanka to rescue his wife, Sita, from a demon. Like the Iliad, it is built around the theme of a woman taken away to another land. In fact, the story has other family resemblances with the Odyssey and Iliad, epics of another Indo-European people.

Buddhism also evolved greatly during this period. In the first century CE, Buddhism developed a much more flexible, popular form called *Mahayana*, the “Great Vehicle”. In the Mahayana tradition, which was clearly influenced by Hinduism, the historical Buddha is seen as just one of millions of Buddhas who have existed (and will exist) in time’s eternal cycle. The ideal in Mahayana Buddhism is the *Bodhisattva*, a person who has attained enlightenment, but puts off entering Nirvana in order to help others attain enlightenment. An older form of

Buddhism, called *Theravada* (Way of the Elders) is closer to Buddha's original teachings (Theravada is sometimes called *Hinayana* (The Lesser Vehicle) but this term is frowned up by Theravadans, for obvious reasons). Mahayana Buddhism would spread into China, Tibet, Korea, and Japan, while Theravada Buddhism would spread through Southeast Asia.

In 320 CE, a minor prince named Chandragupta (not related to the Chandragupta who founded the Maurya Empire) gained control of the Magada area, the former center of the Maurya empire. His son, Samudagupta, and grandson, Chandragupta II, extended their influence across most of northern India, consolidating it into the Gupta Empire. The Gupta was a loose empire, based on direct rule only in the heartlands, with tribute from the hinterlands; and it was not nearly as large as the Maurya Empire. Nevertheless, the Gupta rulers were great cultural patrons, and the Gupta period is regarded as a golden age of Indian culture. Indian sculpture flourished, as did Sanskrit literature. Both had a life-embracing feel, often dealing with love (both romantic and spiritual) and adventure. Indian mathematicians invented the decimal system of notation, Hindu-Arabic numerals, and the symbol for zero, all of which are still vital today. The Gupta golden age was short lived, however. In the late 400's, invasions of Huns and a war over dynastic succession sent the Gupta empire into a decline. Though the Gupta family ruled minor states until the early 700's, their empire had collapsed by the early 500's. Northern India was unified again under Harsha, who ruled from 606 to 647, but Harsha's kingdom fell apart after his death. For centuries, nomads from the steppes continued to stream into India, which remained a patchwork of small states. Eventually, some of these steppe peoples intermarried with Hindus, resulting in a formidable warrior caste known as Rajputs.

PARTHIAN AND SASSANIAN IN PERSIA

Between 170 and 141 BCE, the Seleucid kingdom gradually fell to the Parthians, an Indo-Iranian people related to the Scythians. The Parthians established an empire stretching from the Euphrates to the Indus, ruled once again by Zoroastrians. The Parthians were constantly struggling with the Romans to the west, the Kushans to the east, and nomads (which they had once been) to the north. They were able to hold their territory against the nomads more effectively than other empires by breeding a new kind of large horse, capable of carrying heavily-armored bowmen. Their other great contribution was to maintain trade across the

Iranian Plateau, preserving the link between east and west. The constant pressure on their borders finally weakened the Parthians, however, and in 233 CE they fell to a Persian people, the Sassanians, who set up an empire of their own.

The Sassanian Empire consciously revived Persian traditions, and strongly supported Zoroastrianism. It was in the Sassanian Empire that the prophet Mani tried to combine the best features of Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism into a new and universal religion that came to be known as *Manichaeism*. Manichaeism spread across the trade routes as far as Rome and China. It was a serious competitor with early Christianity (St. Augustine was a Manichaean in his youth), and lasted until the early 900's in central Asia. The Sassanian Empire remained strong until the mid-600's, when it was conquered by a group who inaugurated a whole new era. These were the Muslims, bound together not so much by ethnicity as by religion.

ROME

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The city of Rome, which would become the heart of the Roman republic, and then the vast Roman Empire, is said in legend to have been founded by twin boys, Romulus and Remus. In fact, Rome was created in the interaction between two very different peoples. The Latins, members of the Italic family of Indo-European peoples, had settled in the plain of Latium, along the Tiber river, by around 1000 BCE. The Etruscans (a non-Indo-European people who may have come from Anatolia), had settled to the north, in Etruria, by 800 BCE. Heavily influenced by the Greeks, who had settled in southern Italy, the Etruscans developed a far more sophisticated culture than the Latins, with cities, an alphabetic script, and beautiful artwork. Rome was founded by Latins, but heavily influenced by Etruscan lifestyles. The city originated as a common meeting place called the Forum, which arose near a ford in the Tiber river, in a valley sheltered from invaders by marshes and easily-defended hills. It was an ideal location for a city. It also happened to be at the center of the northern Mediterranean; an ideal location for the capital of an empire.

The early Latins were ruled by kings in a manner similar to the early Greeks. The king was a war leader and chief priest, who was advised by a council of nobles called the Senate, and

by a popular assembly of all fighting men. The nobles were called *patricians* (from *pater*, or father) while commoners were called *plebians*. The Etruscans conquered Rome in 625 BCE, and Rome grew into a real city-state under three Etruscan kings. The last of these kings was overthrown in 509 BCE, and power passed to the Senate, who elected two leaders, called *consuls*, every year. They called this system a *republic* (from the Latin *res publica*, or commonwealth) but power was firmly in the hands of the patrician class. The plebians were accustomed to having a voice, however, and soon established their own assembly, presided over by *tribunes*. These assemblies could pass decrees binding on all plebians, and the tribunes had the right to *veto* (meaning “I forbid”) any act of the Senate, so the plebians steadily gained power. By 450 BCE, they forced the patricians to publish a uniform law code. By 287 BCE, the plebian assembly could pass laws binding on all Romans, and plebians could run for any office. Rome had become a democracy. Sort of. Women and slaves were excluded, and in practice, most power was in the hands of patricians and a growing class of plebians who were becoming wealthy.

Such wealth generally came from Rome’s territorial expansion, which was proceeding rapidly. The Etruscans’ power had been broken by invading Celtic peoples whom the Romans called Gauls. The Gauls sacked Rome in 390, but the Romans soon conquered the Gauls and Etruscans of northern Italy, as well as other Italic peoples of central Italy. By 275 BCE, they had conquered the Greeks of southern Italy. When Carthage, the capital city of a North African empire founded by Phoenicians, occupied part of Sicily, the Romans felt threatened. In the first Punic War (264-241), they captured Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia from the Carthaginians. The Second Punic War (218-201) was hard fought by the brilliant Carthaginian general Hannibal, but Carthaginian power was eventually broken, and Rome gained Carthaginian lands in Spain. In 168 BCE they “liberated” Greece from Macedonia, gaining influence, but as yet, no land. In the Third Punic War (149-146 BCE) Rome attacked and destroyed Carthage, turning the lands nearby into the Roman province called Africa. By the end of the war, they had also come to rule Greece and Macedonia. The king of Pergamon, in eastern Anatolia, bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans in 133, and it became the province of Asia. Southern France, or Gaul, was conquered in 121.

By this time, the Roman republic was experiencing growing pains. Rich landowners were using slaves from conquered regions for their farm labor, and buying up the lands of small

farmers, who could not compete. Great slave plantations called *latifundia* replaced many small farms. Displaced farmers streamed into cities, but few could find employment. The situation called for reform, but reforms were bitterly, and then violently, opposed. The reformist tribune Tiberius Gracchus was murdered in 133, and his brother, Gaius, killed himself to avoid being murdered in 121. Another commoner, Gaius Marius, was elected consul in 107. A military man, Marius employed many landless Romans by allowing them to serve in the army. These soldiers, many of them former farmers, were frequently granted land in regions they helped conquer. Generals thus felt the need to conquer more lands to grant to their troops. In return, they, not Rome, commanded the loyalty of their troops. Soon powerful generals began to compete for the leadership of Rome.

In 88 BCE, a king in Anatolia declared war on Rome. The Senate chose Cornelius Sulla to lead the armies, while the plebian Tribal Assembly chose Gaius Marius. The result was civil war. Sulla emerged victorious and was appointed dictator, a one-man leadership position used in time of crisis. He massacred thousands of plebians, and drastically reduced the power of the Tribal Assembly before resigning in 79 BCE. In the following decades, two more generals gained power and began to compete. Pompey was elected consul in 70 BCE. He repealed many of Sulla's measures, and conquered Syria by 64 BCE. Julius Caesar was elected consul, and then conquered all of Gaul between 58 and 51 BCE. Pompey and the Senate, worried about Caesar's growing power, ordered him to disband his army in 49 BCE. Instead, Caesar crossed the Rubicon, the boundary of his jurisdiction, and marched on Rome.

Caesar's armies won the civil war that followed, and Caesar declared himself dictator for life. He gained popularity among the common people with his reforms, but some feared, justifiably, that the republic was giving way to a monarchy, and in 44 BCE, Caesar was stabbed to death on the Senate floor. Caesar's nephew, Octavian, along with Mark Antony, defeated Caesar's killers, and the two ruled Rome as dual dictators. Soon they began to quarrel, however. Antony had become involved with Cleopatra of Egypt, and ceded some Roman lands to her. Octavian declared war on Antony and defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE. Both committed suicide, and Egypt fell to Rome. Octavian returned to Rome in triumph, and in command of all Rome's armies. He was given the honorific title *Augustus* by the senate. In 27 BCE, Augustus announced that he would "restore the republic". What he did in fact, though not in name, was make himself emperor.

THE EARLY EMPIRE

Augustus was an effective, diligent leader. Throughout his 45 year reign, he set out to restore order and peace to the empire, and he succeeded admirably. He reduced corruption by building up a professional civil service, based on merit instead of class. He extended the Roman border to the Danube in the North, but mainly concentrated on strengthening existing borders. Peace and prosperity returned to the empire, and remained for nearly 200 years; a period called the *Pax Romana*. Augustus died in 14 CE, and was succeeded by 4 successive members of his family, called the Julio-Claudians. These were a mixed batch. Tiberius and Claudius were decent rulers, but Caligula was insane, while Nero was a cruel sociopath who killed his wife and mother along with many others. The Julio-Claudians were followed by the Flavians, who assumed greater imperial powers. These were followed by the Antonines, the “Five Good Emperors”, who presided at the height of Roman power and stability. The last of these was Marcus Aurelius, a notable Stoic philosopher who had to campaign hard against invasions by Germanic peoples as well as Parthians. The *Pax Romana* broke down with the reign of Commodus, a cruel and corrupt man whose murder was followed by civil war.

art and science pax romana

For over a hundred years after Commodus, the empire continued to unravel. The military became embroiled in politics, and civil wars broke out often. Taking advantage of the chaos, Germanic peoples penetrated far into Roman territory, as did the armies of the Parthians, followed by their conquerors, the Sassanians. Trade declined in the chaos, and inflation became so bad that the empire stopped accepting its own money for taxes. Most emperors during this period rose on the strength of their popularity with a particular legion, and fell when they were murdered. The chaos finally ended in 285 when Diocletian came to power. Diocletian separated the military from civil administration and enacted price controls and tax reforms to stabilize the economy. He also appointed a co-emperor, who would rule the western half of the empire while he ruled in the east. Diocletian was an effective but autocratic ruler, who demanded to be treated as a god. Many Romans had blamed the decline of the empire on Christians, who refused to honor the traditional Roman gods, and Christian persecution reached its height under Diocletian. The emperor Constantine, however, believed that he had been aided by the Christian God in

defeating his rivals to the throne, and issued an edict declaring that Christianity would be tolerated. He moved his capital to the ancient Greek city of Byzantium, renaming it Constantinople. Constantine was baptized on his deathbed, and most of his successors were Christians.

CHRISTIANITY

The conversion of Constantine marked a turning point in the history of western society. The pagan, Mediterranean society of Greece and Rome was giving way to the Christian society of Europe. The roots of the transformation, however, lay to the east among the Jews. Many Jews had returned to Judah after their release from Babylon by the Persians, but they continued to be ruled by a succession of empires—Persians, the Alexandrian empire, and then its successors; the Ptolemies followed by the Seleucids. Since the division of Judah and Israel, the idea of a *messiah* (anointed one), who would restore a unified kingdom of the Israelites, had been a prominent theme in Jewish thought (as it still is). The occupation by a series of foreign powers had helped propagate this vision. However, schools of thought differed as to what the messiah would do. Some thought he would be a supernatural being who would bring on the end of the world, leading the faithful to a new, heavenly kingdom. Others thought that he would be simply be a king who would establish an earthly, independent kingdom in the occupied homeland.

The earthly kingdom was in fact restored to independence for a short time, when Judas Maccabeus led a successful revolt against the Seleucids in 142 BCE, an event still celebrated at Hanukkah. Before long, however, disagreement between factions led to a civil war, which the Roman emperor Pompey used as an excuse to intervene, establishing a Roman protectorate in 63 BCE. The protectorate soon became the Roman province of Judea. The Jews, their kingdom fallen once again, were rebellious, and rebellions were dealt with harshly by the Romans. Some factions saw the end of the world approaching, and expected the heavenly messiah to arrive any time.

This was the background for the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was born about 4 BCE, shortly before Judea became a Roman province. As a young man, he worked with his father as a carpenter. In his early thirties, he began his preaching career, spending most of his time in Galilee. Jesus urged Jews to repent from sin and prepare for the heavenly kingdom of

God, which he said was at hand. Jesus urged a very personal, informal kind of faith, centered around love of God and other people, but not terribly concerned with the details of Jewish ritual. Like Confucius, he advised treating others as one would want to be treated. He preached that a spiritual kingdom, not an actual one, was coming and did not advocate political rebellion against the Romans. Many Jews agreed with his message of a coming spiritual kingdom, and he gained many disciples, twelve of whom were close companions who became known as *apostles*. Word of Jesus' teachings, and stories of his miracles, soon spread across the region. Large crowds turned out to see him when he arrived in Jerusalem for Passover, many proclaiming him messiah. This was seen as blasphemous by the Jewish authorities, who arrested him and gave him over to the Romans, saying that he claimed to be the "king of the Jews". The Roman official Pontius Pilate, who was quick to put down any disturbance, charged Jesus with treason and had him crucified.

Jesus' followers were shattered. But in just a few days, some of his disciples claimed that their leader had risen from the dead and appeared to them before ascending into heaven. This was proof for them that he had in fact been the Messiah, and they began to preach that Jesus would return soon to establish the Kingdom of Heaven. This idea found favor with some less traditional, Hellenized Jews, many of whom spoke Greek. They began to refer to Jesus as "Christ", meaning "anointed one" or messiah. One of these hellenized Jews was Saul, a well-educated Roman citizen. At first, Saul violently opposed the new sect, whose members were now called Christians, but he experienced a sudden conversion on the road to Damascus. Changing his name to Paul, he became the most influential of Christian missionaries. It was Paul who taught that Jesus had sacrificed himself in atonement for the sins of all people—not just Jews, but everyone. Paul taught that, whereas strict adherence to the Jewish law had been necessary before, now all that was needed for admission into the kingdom of heaven was faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This meant that anyone could be a Christian, and the faith began to spread among non-Jews, especially among the poor. Soon Christian churches were established throughout the Roman Empire, united by Paul's letters regarding proper worship. Like Jews, Christians refused to participate in rituals to Roman gods, so they were considered anti-social and subversive by many Romans, and often persecuted. Many were killed, but their martyrdom only strengthened the faith. Paul, as well as Peter, one of Jesus' original disciples, was killed in Rome during the reign of Nero.

The early churches were simple places where Christians gathered for worship and mutual support. In time, however, a church hierarchy began to emerge. Priests were supervised by *bishops*, and the bishops in the larger cities soon grew more powerful than others. These were called *archbishops*, or, in great cities such as Rome and Constantinople, *patriarchs*. In time, the patriarch in Rome came to be recognized as the ultimate leader of the church by Christians in the west, who called him the *pope*. In the culturally distinct eastern half of the empire, however, the pope was not recognized as superior to other patriarchs. This difference would eventually split the church in two.

As church organization grew more complex, so did church doctrine, especially as Christian ideas encountered Greek-style philosophy. One of the most important early questions regarded the relation of Jesus to God. At a council of church leaders at Nicaea, gathered by the emperor Constantine in 325, the official doctrine of the Trinity was established. According to this doctrine, God is manifest in three forms—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. At the Council of Nicaea, it was decided that the Father and Son were equal. In other words, Jesus was the divine incarnation of God. All other ideas were branded as heresy.

DECLINE AND FALL IN THE WEST

At the time of Constantine, Christians composed about 20 percent of the Roman Empire. After Constantine's conversion, the new religion spread even faster. In 395, the emperor Theodosius I proclaimed Christianity the official religion of the empire, and made ancient Roman religions illegal. By this time, Rome itself, not just Roman religion, was in trouble. The stability imposed by Diocletian and Constantine came at the cost of heavy taxation, which tended to fall mostly on poor farmers. At the same time, the armies in the west came to be composed mainly of Germanic mercenaries. A relatively stable boundary had developed between Roman and the Germanic lands, corresponding to the Rhine and Danube rivers. Beginning in about 372, this stability began to fall apart. This was the year the Huns, a Mongol people from the eastern steppes, appeared in Eastern Europe and devastated the Ostrogoths, the easternmost and most powerful of the Germanic peoples. This, of course, terrified the other Germanic tribes. One group, the Visigoths, were granted shelter in Roman territory, but they were treated poorly there. They rebelled, defeated the eastern Roman troops, and killed the

eastern emperor. After the death of Theodosius I in 395, Rome was permanently divided into an eastern and a western half, each ruled at first by one of his sons. The eastern Roman Empire was wealthier and had a smaller northern frontier, so it was better able to hold off Germanic invasions.

The western empire was not so fortunate. The Visigoths rebelled again in 396, looting in Greece and then invading Italy before being beaten back. The terrified Roman officials moved their capital from Rome to the more secure Ravenna. Vandals and other tribes then invaded Spain, while Franks invaded Gaul. The Visigoths rose up once again and looted Rome. The Vandals crossed from Spain to North Africa, and captured Carthage. This was a severe blow, because North Africa was Rome's main source of grain. The Huns, led by the ferocious Attila, defeated a Roman army in 441, and then began to push into Gaul in 451, where they were finally defeated by a coalition of Germans and Romans. Germanic Angles, Saxons, and Jutes began to move into Roman Britain in 450, and the Vandals crossed into Italy and sacked Rome in 455. The western empire was falling apart. A coup in 475 put a puppet emperor, a child named Romulus Augustulus, on the throne. He was deposed by the Germanic commander named Odoacer in 476. Rome was now ruled by non-Romans, and 476 is the traditional end of the western Roman empire.

But such a precise date is misleading. Rome did not fall in a year. It fell over centuries, and its rubble provided the foundation for new societies. In 476, the eastern half of the empire was still strong, and before long, eastern emperors tried to regain the lost territories of the west. In 488, the eastern emperor Zeno supported the Ostrogoths in overthrowing Odoacer. Italy became an Ostrogoth kingdom under Theodoric, who carefully maintained Roman culture until his death in 526. Like most Germanic peoples (except the Franks) the Ostrogoths had converted to a form of Christianity called *Arianism*. Arianism denied the divinity of Christ, and was thus considered heretical by the church, as well as the leadership of the eastern empire.

Ironically, much of the heritage of ancient Rome was lost in a devastating war intended to restore Italy to the empire. The emperor Justinian was intent on regaining lost territories. His armies conquered the Vandal kingdoms of North Africa in 533, and invaded Italy in 535. Because the eastern empire was also fighting a war with the Sasanians of Persia, the reconquest of Italy turned into a long struggle which devastated the peninsula. The Ostrogoths were finally defeated between 554 and 562. Southern Spain had been retaken from the Visigoths in 554, so

the Roman Empire once again stretched across the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to northern Mesopotamia.

But this resurgence would not last. Justinian's wars had nearly bankrupted the empire, and the Persians and Slavs continually hammered away at its northern and eastern borders. In 568 another Germanic tribe, the Lombards, conquered large parts of Italy. Italy now consisted of several independent regions. Rome was more or less ruled by the pope, who would now compete with Germanic kings for power in Western Europe. While fighting a new invasion of nomads, the Avars, the eastern emperor Maurice was murdered by Phocas, who was incapable of ruling the troubled empire. Avars and Slavs invaded from the north, while the Sasanians occupied most Middle Eastern territories. In 610, the governor of the African provinces sent an army led by his son, Heraclius, to restore stability. Heraclius overthrew Phocas, beat back the invaders, and restructured the administration of the empire. The administrative language was switched from Latin to Greek (which had always been the main language in the east). These reforms mark the end of the eastern Roman Empire and the beginning of the Byzantine Empire.

MEROE, SOUTH ARABIA, AND AKSUM

Soon after the relocation of the Nubian capital at Meroe, an elaborate network of trade began to emerge, centered around the Red Sea. Trading kingdoms such as Saba developed in southern Arabia around 600 BCE. Ivory, gold, slaves, and spices were traded between Meroe, the Arabian kingdoms, and the Egyptian, Hellenistic, and Roman lands to the north. In the last centuries BCE, sailors discovered that they could use the monsoon winds to sail to India during half of the year, and then back to the Red Sea during the other half. Soon afterward, people in Arabia who used camels as beasts of burden learned to ride them as well. This revolutionized desert warfare as well as desert trade. Soon great camel caravans began to crisscross Arabia and the Sahara desert, thus linking the Mediterranean with sub-Saharan Africa. Meroe reached the height of its powers during the first centuries CE, growing wealthy through trade with Rome during the Pax Romana.

Meroe began to decline after 300 CE. It had been weakened by attacks of camel riding nomads, and around 350 it finally fell to another rival—the rising kingdom of Aksum. Aksum was a kingdom in northern Ethiopia that had developed under the influence of the south Arabian

kingdoms. Aksum had grown powerful around 100 CE, trading by land and sea with Rome and India. Soon after the conquest of Meroe, King Ezana of Aksum converted to Christianity, and the new religion spread through the kingdom. Aksum conquered southern Arabia in 522 CE, but the Aksumites were overthrown by Sasanians in 574. The loss of Arabia weakened Aksum, and between the 600's and 900's the Aksumites were driven into the Ethiopian highlands to the south by Arabs. Aksumite culture contributed to a distinctive Christian society in Ethiopia, which remains to this day. But since the 600's, this society has been an island surrounded by the great expanding sea of a new religion—Islam, which, along with Christianity, would shape the world to come.

THE NEW WORLD

THE CLASSIC PERIOD IN MESOAMERICA

During the so-called Classic Period, beginning around 150 CE, the city-state of Teotihuacan and the Maya states would be the dominant powers of Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan was by far the largest and most influential city, with a population of 150,000 people at its peak. To the east, large cities were also emerging in the Mayan lands constantly fighting and allying with each other as they grew. The city of Tikal, in what is now Guatemala, was dominant through most of the Classic period.

Mesoamerican culture generally reached a high point during the Classic Period. Enormous pyramids were constructed during this time, including the 210 foot Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan and the soaring, tower-like pyramids of Tikal. The Mayans elaborated on the simpler writing systems and calendars of earlier cultures. They mostly used writing to keep track of tribute from subordinate cities, and to record the deeds of rulers, in inscriptions carved in stone. These inscriptions are only recently being deciphered, and archaeologists can now ascribe exact dates to the events they describe. The Classic period began to wane after 500 CE, when Teotihuacan went into decline. It had collapsed entirely by 750, leaving a magnificent skeleton of well-defined avenues and stone pyramids. During the 800's, most of the Maya cities began to decline as well, and had fallen apart by 900. The fall of Teotihuacan is a complete mystery, and the fall of the Classic Maya is poorly understood. It seems that the Mayan cities

began to fight amongst themselves more intensively after the fall of Teotihuacan. At the same time, populations were growing, and the poor soils of the rain forest may have been exhausted. In any case, most of the Maya in the south reverted to a simpler lifestyle.

THE EARLY INTERMEDIATE PERIOD IN SOUTH AMERICA

Cultures in the Andean region grew more diverse and complex during the Early Intermediate Period, which began around 200 BCE. The Paracas and Nazca cultures of the southern coasts produced beautiful textiles, and the Nazca scratched enormous figures on the desert surface, of hummingbirds, spiders, and other animals. Some of these figures are nearly 100 meters across, and still visible from hillsides and airplanes. The first true empire in the Andes was that of the Moche of the northern coast. The Moche produced spectacular ceramic portraits of rulers, enormous pyramids, and finely-crafted metal work. They seem to have practiced ritual human sacrifice, though not on the same scale as the Mesoamericans. Their empire lasted until about 700 CE, when it was devastated by drought and El Niño storms