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# GRECO- ROMAN

CIVILIZATION



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

1270L

# GRECO- ROMAN

EARLY EXPERIMENTS IN  
PARTICIPATORY GOVERNMENT

By Cynthia Stokes Brown

Instead of rule by a single person, Athens and Rome developed governments with widespread participation by male elites, which lasted about 170 years in Athens and 480 years in Rome.

## Deep time

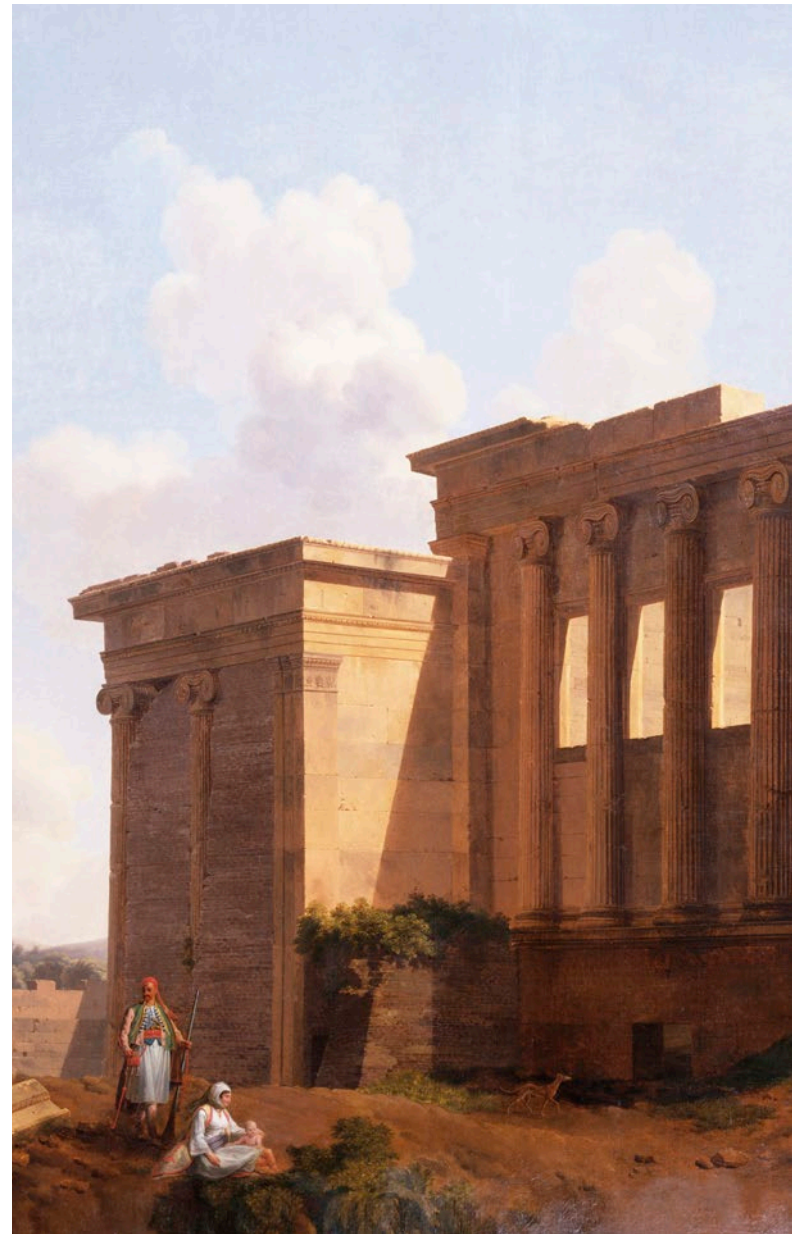
Present-day Greece, with Athens as its capital, and Italy, with Rome as its capital, are neighbors along the northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Eighty-five million years ago they were already neighbors, but across the sea on a thumb of land, a promontory of the continent of Africa. By 55 million years ago continental drift had carried the European and African continents together, and by 5 million years ago the promontory consisting of the future Italy and Greece had collided with the European crust, overriding it and piling the deformed crust higher and higher, creating the Alps and the mountains of Greece.

After 5 million years of rocks and water pouring out of the Alps over Italy, countless earthquakes, the apparent drying out and refilling of the Mediterranean Sea, and microplates (Corsica and Sardinia) swinging down the Italian peninsula, the northern coast of the Mediterranean became the setting for the development of two distinctive societies, with the Romans eventually swallowing the Greeks as part of the Roman Empire.

## Location and food

On the Greek peninsula, the Greeks occupied the southern shoreline, called Attica. Another group, the Macedonians, inhabited the northern territories. Attica was composed of rocky soil on steep mountains. The poor soil could sustain barley, grapes, and olive trees, and could accommodate sheep and goats, but not much else — just some figs and lentils. Hence, Greeks stayed near the coast and took to the sea for extra food and for trading with other people.

Fortunately for the Athenians, who had built their city near the southern coast of Attica, a large silver deposit near Athens brought them wealth and paid for additional timber from Italy, which they used to build warships that gave them a powerful navy. The Athenians reduced their own forest cover from about 50 percent in 600 BCE to about 10 percent in 200 BCE.)



A painting of the Temple of Athena (Minerva to the Romans) in Athens, Greece





A Greek silver coin from about 160 BCE

The Romans had a more productive site on the western side of the Italian peninsula. They built their city on seven hills by the Tiber River, not at the seashore, but inland 18 miles (30 kilometers). This gave them protection from naval attacks, while they could still access the Mediterranean by river to the port city of Ostia. To the north lived the Etruscans, and to the south the Greeks formed colonies along the coast and on the island of Sicily.

In their fertile river valley, early Romans grew wheat, barley, oats, rye, grapes, and olives. They used goat's and sheep's milk for cheese. Their local fruit trees included apples, pears, plums, and quince. They harvested many vegetables, but not corn, potatoes, or tomatoes — those came later from the Americas. For meat, they had fish, oysters, chickens, ducks, geese, and pigs; they seldom consumed cows. Salt, found in selected places, was controlled by the government. Soldiers were sometimes paid in salt, a practice from which our word salary derives, as does the phrase "worth your salt."

## Athens and Greece

From 1600 to 1100 BCE, Indo-European immigrants, called the Mycenaeans, occupied the mainland of the Greek peninsula. They attacked Troy, a city in Anatolia (now Turkey), on the other side of the Aegean Sea from Greece. This war is described in *The Iliad*, one of the earliest written pieces of Western literature, attributed to Homer and written down around the eighth century BCE.

By 800 BCE small, competing city-states, called "poleis" (or singular, polis), were forming in the mountains of southern Greece. These city-states each contained some 500 to 5,000 male citizens and had varying degrees of popular participation in political life. The total Greek population may have been 2 to 3 million. The city-states shared a common language and religion, and after 776 BCE they came together every four years for competitive games held near Mount Olympus.

The Greeks used their expanding population to set up more than 400 colonies along the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black seas between the mid-eighth and late sixth centuries. Their colonies in the Black Sea gave them access to fish, furs, timber, honey, gold, amber, and slaves from southern Russia. Greece introduced metallic coins in the seventh century BCE to facilitate trade; by 520 BCE they carried Athens' emblem of an owl, the sacred bird of the goddess Athena. Instead of expansion by conquest, the early Greeks expanded by colonization.

Sparta and Athens, the chief city-states, differed profoundly in their culture and politics. The Spartans conquered their neighbors and forced them to live as slaves, providing agricultural labor. To keep them in control, Sparta developed an austere culture based on maintaining an elite military force, with a ruling council of 28 elders.



An illustration of the Greeks attacking a Persian ship

Athens, on the other hand, gave wealthy men full political rights. A growing number were added as they could afford armor and weapons to serve in the army, which was a duty of all participants in government. By 450 BCE, holders of public office were chosen by lot, and even the 10 military generals were elected.

Since women, children, slaves, and foreigners had no vote, perhaps 10 to 12 percent of the estimated 300,000 Athenians were participating in government.

Five hundred years before the Common Era, the largest and wealthiest agrarian civilization in the world was the Persian Empire. It conquered some of the Greek colonies on the shores of Anatolia. But when the Athenians fought the Persians, they won — on land at Marathon in 490 BCE and in great sea battles. A runner, Phidippides, carried the news of victory the 26 miles from Marathon to Athens and died after shouting, “Rejoice, we conquer.” (Before that, he had run 140 miles to Sparta and back, asking for help, which for religious reasons the Spartans wouldn’t give until the Moon was full.) Phidippides’s effort 2,500 years ago also spawned the 26.2-mile marathon running races that are so popular today.

After their victory over the Persians, the Athenians enjoyed a golden age of cultural creativity of some 150 years. The high tide of democratic participation took place under the elected general Pericles, who served 32 years in the mid-fifth century. Athenian merchants had earlier brought knowledge and ideas from Mesopotamia and Egypt; Athenian scientists, philosophers, and playwrights developed and combined cultural traditions that would later spread throughout Europe and serve as a foundation for Western culture. (Just for reference: the philosophers Socrates died in 399 BCE, Plato about 348 BCE, and Aristotle in 322 BCE.)

Of course, most Greeks did not have an advanced education; the literacy rate for that time is estimated at about 5 percent. The more educated Greeks believed in a pantheon of gods, headed by the sky god, Zeus, who emerged triumphant from the battle of the gods. (See the Greek origin story in Unit 1.) Many Greeks believed in mystery religions, which involved secrets known only to initiates and often entailed a savior whose death and resurrection would lead to salvation for followers.

The Greek city-states never figured out how to live together peaceably; instead, Athens and Sparta fought the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BCE), in which Athens was defeated and all city-states were weakened. In the mid-300s BCE, Macedonia, their neighbor to the north, conquered the Greek cities. When the Macedonian leader, Philip II, was assassinated in 336 BCE, his 20-year-old son, Alexander, took the stage. In 13 amazing years, Alexander conquered enough land to form the largest empire the world had yet seen, from Macedonia and Greece to Bactria (Afghanistan) and parts of India, and including Anatolia, Egypt, the Middle East, Babylonia, and Persia.

Alexander died suddenly and mysteriously in 323 BCE after a big drinking party; his empire was divided among three of his generals — Egypt under Ptolemy (not to be confused with the scientist Claudius Ptolemy), Greece and Macedonia under Antigonus, and central Asia under Seleucus. For a little more than a hundred years, these Greek rulers brought Greek culture to their areas. For example, the city of Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile became the most important port in the Mediterranean. The Ptolemaic rulers there funded a museum that served as an institute of higher learning and research; it included a library that by the first century BCE had some

700,000 scrolls. Scholars came from around the Mediterranean to work in Alexandria. There Eratosthenes measured the diameter of the Earth, Euclid wrote the rules of geometry, and the scientist Ptolemy wrote the *Almagest*, unfortunately ignoring the ideas of Aristarchus, who also studied at Alexandria and theorized almost 2,000 years before Copernicus that the Earth circled the Sun.

Meanwhile, over on the Italian peninsula the Romans had developed a powerful agrarian civilization, one that was not fragmented into city-states. Between 215 and 146 BCE they gradually conquered the Greek cities in Italy, only to absorb much of Greek culture into their own.

## Rome and empire

Rome began as a merging of small towns on seven hilltops by the Tiber River, halfway down the west coast of the Italian peninsula. A hundred years after the union, in 509 BCE, Roman aristocrats overthrew their king and set up a republic ruled by the patrician class. (A republic is a form of government in which delegates represent the interests of varied constituencies.) The poorer classes, called plebeians, insisted on some protections and participation. The idea of the republic came to include the rule of law, the rights of citizens, and upright moral behavior.

As its population grew, Roman rule expanded. For various reasons — food supplies, defense, land, glory — Roman armies fought the powerful city of Carthage, across the Mediterranean near modern-day Tunis, Tunisia. After 120 years Rome finally won and went on to conquer Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East by 133 BCE.

The republican form of government, however, produced seething rivalries among its military leaders, who competed for power with their personal armies. Out of this competition emerged the winner, Julius Caesar (100 — 44 BCE), who conquered Gaul (modern France) and England, but not Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, where the Celts held the line. By 46 BCE Julius Caesar declared himself dictator for life, ending the republic. Two years later other

members of the Senate stabbed him to death in hopes of restoring the republic. Instead, after 13 more years of civil war, Caesar's adopted son, Octavian, known as Augustus, took power and ruled for 45 years virtually unopposed.

The empire reached its height in the first two centuries of the Common Era. From 27 BCE to 180 CE, a time known as the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace, Roman leaders controlled about 130 million people across an area of about 1.5 million square miles, from a city of 1 million people. Roman roads linked all parts of the empire. Roman law, which featured key concepts such as the principle that the accused are innocent until proven guilty, was administered everywhere.

Under Roman law men had most of the rights, as was also the case in Greece. The father of the Roman family could arrange the marriages of his children, sell them into slavery, or even kill them without punishment. Roman law limited women's rights to inherit property and assets, but some clever individuals managed to skirt this law.

Like all agrarian civilizations of its time, Romans made use of slave labor — but on a larger scale than most. No reliable data exist, but at the height of the empire maybe one-third of the population were slaves; an emperor alone might have about 20,000 slaves. In 73 BCE an escaped slave, Spartacus, assembled 70,000 rebellious slaves; after several years Roman troops crushed them and crucified 6,000 survivors along the Appian Way.

Romans put more of their creativity into roads, aqueducts (for carrying water), and law than into philosophy and science, unlike the Greeks. In a way, though, the Roman Empire was a vehicle for the spread of Greek culture. The Romans honored many gods, renaming the Greek ones and taking them as their own. Roman statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 — 43 BCE) adopted a version of Stoicism, a Greek philosophy seeking to identify universal moral standards based on nature and reason; Epicetus and Marcus Aurelius further popularized it. The older mystery religions — the Anatolian rites of Mithras and Cybele and the Egyptian rites of Isis — proved immensely popular in the Roman Empire.

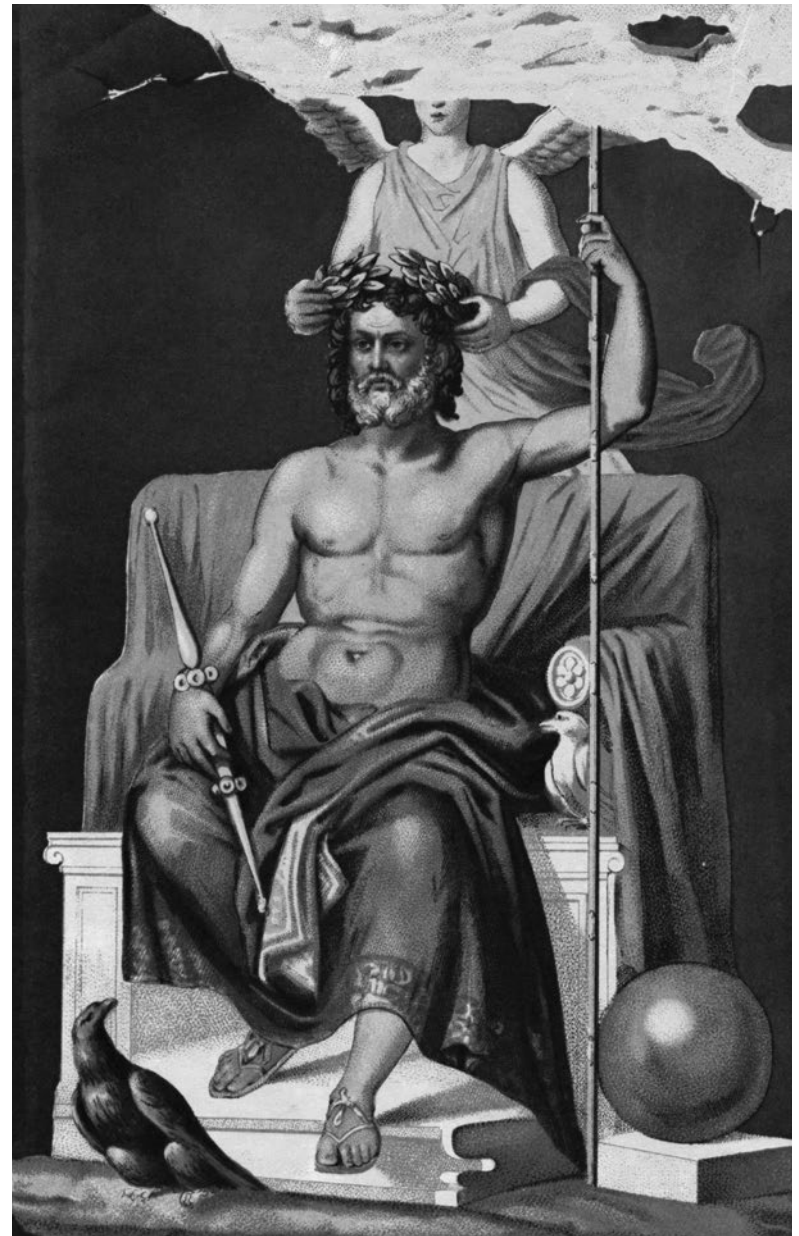


Out of a remote corner of the Roman Empire emerged a small sect that has become the most widespread religion of today's world — Christianity. The Romans conquered Judea (modern Israel) in 6 CE. Jesus, whom Christians consider the Son of God, grew up at a time of great tension between the Roman overlords and their Jewish subjects. The Romans allowed Jesus to be crucified in the early 30s CE to forestall rebellion, which they believed he was advocating with his message that “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

In 66–70 CE, the Jews actually did revolt against Roman rule; the Romans crushed this by destroying the Jewish temple, taking thousands of Jews to Rome as slaves, and sending most of the rest into exile.

After this revolt, Christianity spread to non-Jewish communities, led by Paul of Tarsus, Anatolia, who preached in the Greek-speaking eastern regions of the Roman Empire. At first Rome persecuted Christians, but by the third century CE Rome had become the principal seat of Church authority, with the religion appealing to the lower classes, women, and urban populations. In 313 Emperor Constantine (who ruled 306–337) legalized Christian worship after his own conversion, and by the end of the fourth century it had become the official state religion.

History books used to refer to the “fall” of Rome in 476 when a Germanic general, Odovacar (435 — 493), became the ruler of the western part of the empire. But the fall was a gradual dissolution, not a sudden collapse. After 200, Rome faced many problems. Strong leadership was lacking; during a 50-year span in the 200s there were 26 emperors, only one of whom died a natural death. Epidemics of disease spread along the Silk Roads; afflictions that began in animals — smallpox, measles, mumps, whooping cough — could spread rapidly in urban populations. The Roman world lost about one-quarter of its population before 450. Monetary inflation occurred; people lost confidence in coins and returned to bartering. The dissolving empire meant the decline of urban life, reduced international trade, loss of population, and widespread insecurity for ordinary people.



Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans) being crowned by Victory



In 324 Emperor Constantine moved the capital to Byzantium (renamed Constantinople and now called Istanbul) in Turkey, and from there the Eastern Roman Empire became the Byzantine Empire, which lasted another thousand years until the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453. The Western Roman Empire ended in 476. Centralized authority did not hold; government reverted to city-states and small territories ruled by princes, bishops, or the pope, with the Roman Catholic Church often at odds with state authorities. The common tongue, Latin, evolved into many splinter languages — French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian.



## Connections and legacies

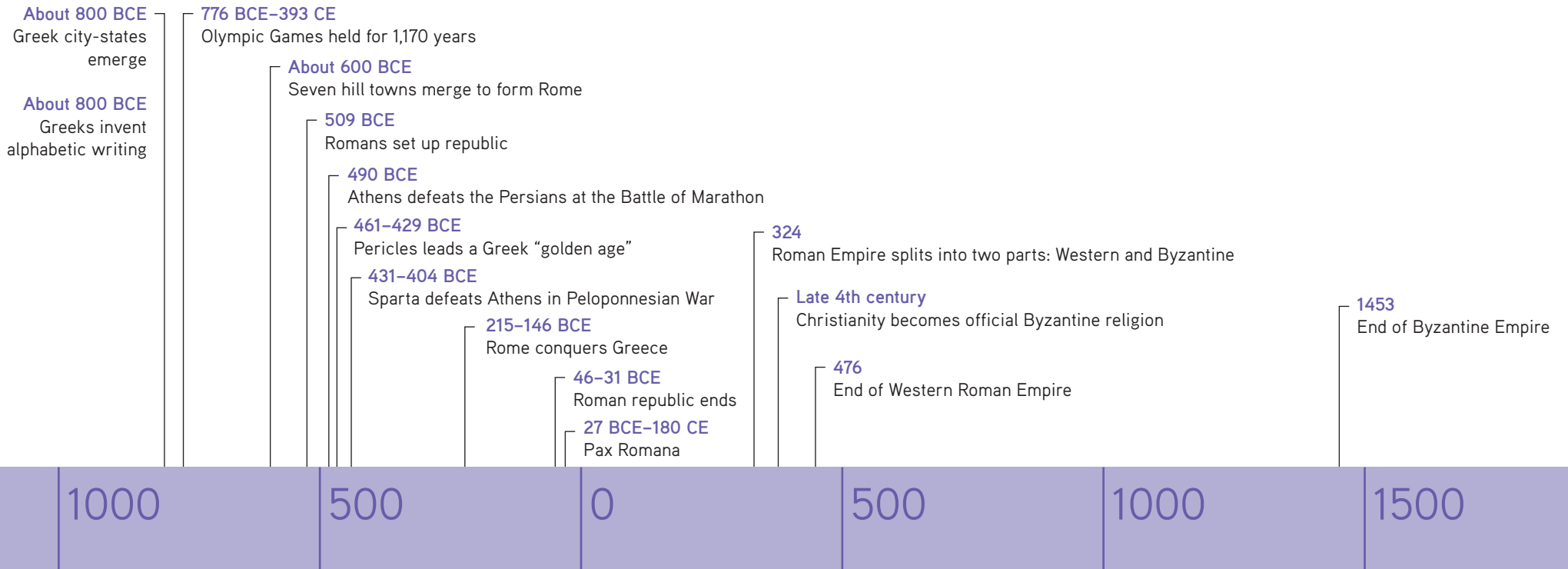
Even so, Greco-Roman collective learning managed to live on. Much credit must go to the Ptolemaic rulers in Egypt, who supported scholarship and research at the Museum and Library of Alexandria. Nobody knows for sure what happened to Alexandria's library, but eventually it disappeared. The part of the city where it stood now lies underwater; in 2004 excavators discovered 13 lecture halls. Three main claims have been made about the library's destruction: that Julius Caesar accidentally, or on purpose, set part of the city on fire in 48 BCE when fighting his rival general, Pompey; that Christians destroyed it in the early fifth century CE; and that Muslims, who took Alexandria in 640, ransacked the library and burned the documents as tinder for their bathhouses. (This was written 300 years after the purported event by a Christian bishop known for describing Muslim atrocities without much documentation.) Possibly all of these events, or versions of them, contributed to the library's eventual demise.

Whatever documents were at hand, Muslim scholars became interested in Greek ideas. These scholars spread their learning across North Africa and into modern Spain. In the eleventh century, Latin Christians took Toledo and Sicily back from the Muslims, and southern Italy from the Byzantines, acquiring many manuscripts written by Greek and Muslim scholars and monks.

In the twelfth century, the Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), known as Averroes in Latin, wrote commentaries on the Greek philosopher Aristotle and included some Arabic translations of the original Greek. By 1300, universities had been organized in many European cities, through which Greco-Roman ideas entered European intellectual life.

Scholars in the Byzantine Empire also played a large role in preserving Greek knowledge. During the centuries when scholarship disappeared in the western part of the former Roman Empire, Byzantine monks and academics copied and recopied the Greek manuscripts.

# Greco-Roman timeline



The Roman legacy seems a bit more concrete. Hundreds of miles of Roman road still exist, after 20 centuries of use. Emperor Justinian (reigned 527 — 565) reorganized Roman law with the Code of Justinian, which is still the basis of legal systems in most of Europe. (U.S. law is based on English case law.) Humanists in Europe used the ideas of Roman non-Christians, especially Cicero, to discuss how to live well rather than arguing about theology. The names of our months also derive from Roman times, carrying the names of their gods and of a couple of their most famous leaders.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Greco-Roman civilization is its experiments with male citizen participation in political life. Though these exercises seem rather short-lived in both societies, the ideas later reemerged in Europe and the fledgling United States to play a significant role in the shaping of modern governments.

## Sources

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