

# HIST 151

## History of Western Civilization to 1650

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### *General Description*

**Introduction** According to one historian, Western civilization is “still the most dynamic element in the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, its long history and accomplishments are impressive. Western civilization is heir to preceding civilizations that developed out of the Mediterranean region. In its broadest definition, Western civilization is that accumulation of political, economic, social, and intellectual traditions that has developed for 5,000 years since the appearance of the first civilizations in the ancient Near East. Today, Western civilization is primarily regarded as centering around the Atlantic community or Western Europe and those societies in the Western Hemisphere and Australasia that are offshoots of European tradition and culture.

The ancient Near Eastern civilizations established a solid foundation for Western civilization. They created the first cities and made significant achievements in writing, mathematics, engineering, architecture, and practical science. They contributed the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious traditions to the West. Yet an even more basic outlook and philosophy that undergirds Western culture first appeared after 1000 BC in ancient Greece. Although the Greeks borrowed a great deal from the preceding Mediterranean civilizations, they reorganized their inheritance and originated a brilliant civilization of their own. The Romans followed the Greeks as the dominant people in the Mediterranean area, absorbing Greek civilization yet adding important new ideas and institutions, especially in government and law. Taken as a whole, the Greco-Roman civilization is the direct ancestor of European or Western civilization.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry C. Boren, *The Ancient World: An Historical Perspective*, xiv.

In the late third century, the emperor Diocletian divided a declining Roman Empire into East and West as a reform measure. The Western Roman Empire, however, slowly crumbled in the fifth century, destroying the unity of the Mediterranean civilization. The southern and eastern shores became part of the Arab Empire that developed an extensive Muslim civilization. The Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, became the Byzantine Empire and developed a distinct civilization of its own: Christian in religion, Greek in language, and Roman in political structure. Byzantine civilization greatly influenced the Slavic peoples of Russia and Eastern Europe and also, to some extent, the Latin and Germanic peoples of the West.

After the fall of Rome, the peoples of the Western Roman Empire merged with the Germanic peoples of Europe. The Germans had developed their own culture and institutions but were slow in assimilating the inheritance of the Mediterranean civilizations. For more than six centuries, western Europeans struggled with the problems associated with absorbing the Roman inheritance, integrating the Latins and Germans, and accepting the doctrines of Christianity. The final product of the struggle, however, was the achievement of a distinct European or Western civilization.

During approximately the same period as the rise of the West, another group of civilizations developed in the Far East in China, India, and Japan. Despite a dynamic early development, however, all three civilizations became insular and isolated and lived within an agrarian village economic system. By the fifteenth century, none of these civilizations was involved in exploration or discovery beyond its own horizons. Moreover, in spite of impressive beginnings, none of the Far Eastern civilizations sustained strong scientific and technological traditions. These factors placed the Eastern peoples at a distinct disadvantage with the Europeans who, by the sixteenth century, had developed a capitalist mercantile economy. Furthermore, the great voyages of exploration and the scientific and mechanical inventions of the West enabled European civilization to expand throughout the world. The peoples of the world were thereby brought into contact with a single civilization, and many Western achievements in science,

technology, government, and law were absorbed, in varying degrees, by Eastern and African civilizations.

The ultimate global dissemination of Western civilization makes an understanding of its roots and background particularly important. So far no scholar has offered a full and thoroughly satisfactory or complete explanation of the development of Western civilization. Nevertheless, we will examine how certain ways of thought and action that developed first in the Mediterranean region and then in Europe gave Western civilization outstanding advantages and a unique character of its own.

**Required Text** The following textbook is required for the course:

Chambers, Mortimer, et al., *The Western Experience, Volume I: To the Eighteenth Century*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 9th edition, 2007.

The textbook can be purchased from the Higher Grounds bookstore at the Friday Center. A book order form is located in this manual, or you can purchase the book online at <https://s4.its.unc.edu/HigherGrounds>.

**Lessons** HIST 151 is divided chronologically, by topic, into twelve lessons. Each lesson includes an introduction, required reading, and written work (questions on the reading to be answered in written form). The introduction to each lesson complements the assigned reading by indicating significant highlights of the period, and underlines the continuing broad themes and developments throughout Western civilization. In the written work, two types of questions are asked, identification and essay. The identification or short-answer questions require a one- or two-paragraph description, definition, explanation, or answer to the questions who? what? how? when? where? and why? about an important person, place, event, date, or concept. It is most important that you give an explanation of the significance of the identification by placing it in its historical context. The essay questions require longer, more complex answers and should include not only factual

information but also analysis and interpretation. An adequate essay answer must contain three basic elements: an introduction that states the argument or problem to be analyzed, the body of the essay that presents factual information and analysis to support the argument, and a conclusion that summarizes the essay's major points and provides a concluding statement or overview. Please type your assignments or write them in ink. Write on one side of the page and proofread your answers for spelling and grammatical errors. The average grade for the total number of assignments will make up 40 percent of the final grade for the course.

### **Plagiarism**

Wholesale stealing of someone else's thought or language is called *plagiarism*, and it is an Honor Code violation. Always take care that your work adheres to a standard of honesty that is in harmony with the UNC-Chapel Hill Honor Code and that all citing of facts and language is properly acknowledged. When you borrow from another person's work, give proper credit either in the body of the paper or in a note. This applies to facts or words; indicate the exact place where you found the information.

### **The Final Exam**

The final exam is comprehensive; you are responsible for all the material covered in the course. The exam has three parts. Part I consists of sixteen identifications. Part II consists of one short-answer essay. Part III is a comprehensive essay. The essay calls for a discussion or explanation of a broad theme that runs throughout the period covered in the course. The final exam counts 60 percent of your final grade. You **must** pass the final exam in order to pass the course.