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Eugen Weber's The Western Tradition

#101 The Dawn of History

The first men and women were hunters and nomads, awed and frightened by a world they did not understand. They invested great energy in rituals, sacrifices, temples, tombs. And with religion came gods and god-kings, magicians and priests, and the beginnings of a more complex society.

The Dawn of History this time on The Western Tradition.

I'm Eugen Weber and I teach history at UCLA which is the University of California at Los Angeles. Today, I begin my personal journey through the history of Western Civilization. I say personal because one man or one woman's view of history is not necessarily another's, as we shall see again and again during the next fifty-two programs. If you're wondering how we're going to cram several thousand years into fifty-two half-hours, just remember that here in America we do everything very fast.

For example, here is the history of the world in four minutes flat, just to get you in the mood. It's an excerpt from a film called Why Man Creates, by a creative man called Sol Bass.

[mumble...UGH!...mumble...snort...UGHHH!...mumble...UGH...UGHHH!...AHHHHAAHHH-HAHHHHHH...growl...]

"A lever!"

"Harry, do you realize you just invented the wheel?" "I know! I know!"

[Un ya ohhh!... Un ya ohhh!... Un ya ohhh!... Un ya ohhh!]

Bronze!-Iron!

"All was in chaos 'till Euclid arose and made order!" "What is the good life? "And how shall it be lead?"

"Who shall rule the State?" "The Philosopher King!" "The Aristocrat!" "The People!" "You mean all the people?"

"What is the nature of the good?" "What is the nature of justice?" "What is happiness?"

"HAIL CAESAR!" "Roman law is now in session!" [mumble]

"Allah be praised! I've invented the zero!" "What?" "Nothing. Nothing."

"What is the shape of the earth?" "Flat!" "What happens when you get to the edge?" "You fall off!"

"Does the earth move?" "Never." "The earth moves!" "The earth is round!"

"The blood circulates!"

"There are worlds smaller than ours!" "There are worlds larger than ours!"

"Hey! Whatta you doing?" "I'ma painting the ceiling. What are you doing?" "I'ma painting the floor!"

"Darwin says man is an animal." "Rat! Man is not an animal!" "Animal!" "Man!" "Is!" "Isn't!" "An animal!!"

"Mmhhmm, shall we start from ze beginning?" "I'm a bug! I'm a germ! I'm a bug! I'm a germ! Louis Pasteur?! I'm not a bug? I'm not a germ! I'm not a bug! I'm not a germ!"

"Think it'll work, Alfred?" "Uh, let's give it a try." [whoooomm] "Whatta ya think?" "It worked!"

"All men are created equal!" "Life, liberty, and the pursuit..." "Workers of the world!" Government of the people,
by the people . . . .

"The world must be safe for democracy . . . ."

"The war to end all wars!" "A League of Nations!"

"I see one-third of a nation is ill-housed, ill-fed . . . one world."

[cough . . . cough . . . cough . . . cough . . . cough . . .]

"HELP! . . . ."

So now you know where we are headed, although I like to think it isn't as grim as all that. But, where should we start? Perhaps the first thing to ask is what the scope of a series on the history of Western Civilization should be—and the best way to think of it is that we are going back to the old country. We're going back to where many of our ancestors came from, to see where their stories came from and their memories, and their habits, and the way they are, which made us the way we are.

This is what history is about: where we come from; what lies behind the way we live and act and think; how our institutions, our religions, our laws were made. And this is what I hope to do in this series—to go back to our origins. I know that all of us do not stem from the little peninsulas of Asia that we call Europe. But the language, the culture, the politics of the society we live in stem from there. And so, it's an important journey for us to take from the very beginning.

For our purposes, let's start about sixty million years ago when the age of giant reptiles comes to an end. At that time dinosaurs ruled. Mammals were cowering, timorous beastsies that could never have challenged the superbly designed dinosaurs. And then, BANG! A comet hits the earth. The dinosaurs disappear; mammals get a chance to evolve. And, among the mammals are the primates who tend to swing about in trees.

Over five million years ago, one of these primate species, whose descendants made these footprints, one of these got up on its hind leg. It doesn't make up its mind to go biped, but the less they hang about in trees, the more the primate's upper arms can be used to carry things. And the less they swing from trees, the longer their thumbs grow until they become opposable, which is convenient for grabbing and manipulating. And then, about two million years ago, these hands turn out a miracle: an artifact, a tool, something they had fashioned themselves. And this is when we are no longer speaking of apes but of something recognizably human in which a larger brain and manufactured stone tools go together.

Like all primates, these beings close to human form that we call hominids did not have very good claws compared to a tiger, didn't have very good fangs compared to a wolf. But, they found that if they wanted to grasp, hands were superior to jaws. For example, with your hands you can take a knot, you can put it on a stone, you can hit it with another stone, you can break it. Sometimes a stone would slip and chip the other stone. And God knows how many flints were chipped and flaked by mistake, until one of these hominids actually saw what he had done and realized that he could do it again, and deliberately. From that day on, primitive flint tools like these saved him from using his teeth.

In the next two million years, he turned from vegetarian to carnivore, and the massive teeth made to chew on bark and grass and tuber, these teeth fined down. The powerful jaw muscles that imprisoned the skull relaxed. The brain that had been squeezed into the narrow skull began to expand. And this peculiar thinking animal was engaged on the road of thought and dental decay.

It was only around 7000 B.C. that Stone Age people really learned to make fire by friction or by striking flints. Fire and thought together allowed hominids to expand into new habitats and ever more distant lands, even in times when glaciers like this one were pushing practically into the tropics, and our ancestors had to think or die. So they thought, and they quickly realized that thinking did not prevent death. Here, for the first time in the history of life a creature makes the imaginative leap that lets it conceive its own end by looking at the end of a creature like it.

To imagine my death from the death of someone like me, to feel diminished, mystified, terrified by death and by the dead, and to deal with corpses and their mystery and the terror they generated, man develops rituals, myths, religions into which he invests an immense amount of energy. So that for millennia, a significant portion of
the little surplus of what people grew and made went into tombs and temples like Stonehenge here. I can talk about these roots because about a hundred thousand years ago, something that we can loosely call language, something like language, developed—a new tool that allowed people to communicate meaningfully with one another.

And then, in the New Stone Age, which is the age of Stonehenge, they also begin to devise primitive but revolutionary ways of storing information outside themselves, by notches and markings and drawings, which means that now human beings could convey information not by word of mouth alone, but by signs, as we do in writing. Above all, these first men and women were hunters, gleaners, and nomads, moving across the steppes and forests in small clans, following the animals and plants off which they fed. Most of the cave paintings we have found are obviously the work of artists who were part of a hunting society. Then, somewhere around ten to twelve thousand years ago, some of these people settled down and we got an agricultural revolution, its origins as obscure as those of fire. When man discovered how to make the ground bear fruit, how to domesticate animals, how to store the product of his labors, he also developed a sense of property. And so, structured societies grew up with villages, wells, walls, slaves, and families in which lots of children guaranteed labor and perpetuation.

I say all this breezily, but you have to understand how long it all took. I told you that Stonehenge was built thirty-eight hundred years ago. Now, the first stone tools go back to two and a half million years. The first stand-up creatures about our own size appear 1.6 million years ago. The first flaked flints appear one hundred thousand years after that. The first burials go back seventy thousand years. And then, at around 10,000 B.C., we finally reach the Neolithic or New Stone Age when our journey really begins. Neolithic societies and families depended on fertility and security, but both of these were very precarious indeed.

Stone Age agriculture goes with warfare; it goes with endless raids and counter-raids for the neighbor’s crops, for the neighbor’s pigs. And so, these people were never free from fear—fear of thieves, of raiders, of evil spirits, of nature. You name it and the rituals to protect them from danger, to secure good hunting, good crops, success in battle; these rituals were crucial. And so, these people developed increasingly complex magic techniques, most of which involved human sacrifices. They established their property and their welfare on heaps of human corpses.

Very few religions have ever done without sacrifices; and human sacrifice, with its terrifying emotional impact, enhances the power of religion to shape our imagination. In due course, more sophisticated religions were going to substitute animals for humans, but this kind of cut-rate salvation would have seemed quite useless in the late Stone Age. The paradox is that all these sacrifices were intended to help the forces of life as symbolized by this earth goddess. Stone Age peasants worshiped the forces of nature, ever burgeoning, ever dying, ever renewed; and in this preoccupation with fertility, we find the origins of religion, kingship, political institutions, and basic social patterns.

We don’t know how this worked, but it may be that once humans had figured out the relationship between sexual intercourse and child bearing, they created rituals based on the sexual act; rituals which they hoped would bring about the fertility of nature.

In many prehistoric rituals, a male impersonated the seed and so assumed the role of leader—became what ancient Britain called the "grain king." At first he was killed and buried, planted really, and replaced by a young and vigorous successor. And the people who acted this out, in whom the forces of nature were thought to be incarnated, these people were seen as gods and goddesses, or something very close to gods and goddesses. But eventually, society was persuaded that the grain king’s death could be made just as magically effective by going through the motions by symbolism. And then the grain king was on his way to becoming a real king as well. And this transition would be facilitated if he was also the war chief of the clan.

We’re not sure if this is the way it really happened, but we do know that real kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia did perform many of the functions in fertility rituals that I attributed to the grain king. In earliest societies, it’s possible to speculate that women might be worshiped as the creators of life. But while the reproductive power of women is recognized in mythologies and rituals, the position of women in agricultural societies was far less free and equal than it was in hunting societies.

And this was probably accentuated by a new tool that made it easier to grow crops: the ox-drawn plow. Because it required considerable strength, the plow was generally used by men. Women were left to do almost everything else, with most of the drudgery and practically no status, because men spent most of their time raiding or looking out for raiders.
Agriculture and husbandry, religion and war, would henceforth be the enduring benchmarks of human experience—the former to produce a subsistence and a small surplus; the latter to confiscate and consume them. Again, the details are rather vague. But we do know that early societies which left records were patriarchal, and so were their religions. And we know that these religions had priests.

If magic was essential to make crops grow and cattle prosper, if fertility and healing and preservation from danger were thought to benefit the whole community, then the community would contribute to the upkeep of these specialists. And with these magicians and priests, we get the first economic class not directly engaged in producing its own food. In time, other such classes would appear: potters, miners, and craftsmen who worked copper or other metals.

All of this implies two things: One, that the economy was capable of producing a surplus; two, that things were getting more complicated, that not everybody was self-sufficient anymore, which in turn led to trade with further specialization, further surpluses, markets where surpluses were exchanged, and eventually bigger settlements not directly connected with agriculture which we call cities and towns. And then, this economic differentiation would produce a social differentiation.

Society would then divide into the rich, nobles and freemen, and the poor, dependents and slaves, with the rich having most of the land, becoming lords over the others. These lords fought among themselves because being human, they wanted to dominate or to despoil one another. Then, as now, greed and revenge seemed to dominate what you might loosely call political activity. And so men joined under the authority of the strongest, or were forced to join, and a land owning system developed which lasted thousands of years, and which looks very much like the feudal system of the Middle Ages where one man holds his land from another and owes him payment and service in return.

This sort of evolution was general. We find it in India, in China, in the Near East, and also at a later time but in similar circumstances, in Europe. But it would be most early and most marked in areas where people were thickest on the ground; where the struggle for land was most intense; where organization for production or defense was most important. And these conditions were to be found in the area that we know today as the "Fertile Crescent," that small portion of Asia and Africa that runs from Mesopotamia and Syria in the east to Egypt in the west, as we shall see in our next program, The Ancient Egyptians. Until then, I'm Eugen Weber, for The Western Tradition.

#102 The Ancient Egyptians

A fertile desert, gigantic tombs, a religion dedicated to immortality, and the ruler who made sure the sun rose each day. Why did this civilization last longer than any other—an extraordinary three-thousand years?

The Ancient Egyptians this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The Western tradition really begins in the East—that's where the sun rises; that's where the first civilizations arise from which ours would grow; that's where we find the fertile crescent which some books still describe as the cradle of civilization and which, as you can see, is a rather small portion of Asia and Africa that runs from Mesopotamia and Syria to Egypt. But the importance of this little bit of land can hardly be overstated. Many of the things that we take for granted today had their roots here thousands of years ago, from the money in our pockets, to our attitudes towards immortality. It's a paradox, but most of the so-called fertile crescent is relatively arid. About five thousand years ago, the first permanent urban settlements were found only beside the river or by one of the springs that didn't dry up in the summer.

On the other hand, the three main rivers, the Tigris, Euphrates, and the Nile, frequently overflowed their banks and turned the valleys into marshland. So agriculture was largely dependent on flood control and on irrigation. First you needed to drain the land, then you needed to keep it watered; but if you did all that you had tremendously rich soil which could bear regular crops—not just once, but several times a year.
So the land promised a lot, but it also imposed special conditions on the people who worked it. The ancient Egyptians often depicted the Nile and their relationship to it on wall paintings like this one. Digging irrigation channels and keeping them up are social tasks, even more than building walls to defend the village, and the more critical these social tasks are, the more tightly knit the society must be to carry them out. Here we see men measuring a field for plowing. The control of water in the fertile crescent also provided society with a very powerful sanction. People who did not conform could be excluded from water. In a temperate climate like that of Europe, there's usually plenty of water and a sort of exclusion is not tragic, but in an arid zone, you can die of it, and this also helps to explain the early degree of organization among communities in the region.

One of the best organized civilizations in the crescent, though not necessarily the earliest, was to be found in Egypt—a place that I might best describe as an oasis in the desert. This relative isolation gave Egypt more unity than its neighbors and helped to make ancient Egyptians secure, stable, complacent, and very different from us. We are dynamic, progressive, curious, and interested in change and novelty and progress. The Egyptians were relatively passive, they did not think much about progress, they were more interested in stability, regularity, repetition, conservation! This allowed their culture to survive intact an extraordinary three-thousand years.

For the ancient Egyptians, as for so many other peoples, geography was destiny. The Nile alone made life possible in the desert that surrounded it as you can see in this scene of fishermen. It was about ten-thousand years ago that the native population in what was then the Nile's swampy valley switched from hunting and fishing to sowing crops. Over thousands of years they figured out how to drain some of the swamps; turn them into farmland, harness the river water. So the great Nile served as a life-line to the Egyptians and also provided the need for cooperative effort and an organized way of life. And this led to a number of crucial developments sometime before 3000 B.C.—astronomical charts and the calendar so you could keep track of season regularities for your crops, and writing, to record all this information. Egyptians used a kind of pictorial writing called hieroglyphics. Each image, each hieroglyph, originally stood for a word.

This for instance, is the sign for cattle. The Egyptians also used signs to represent a sound or a letter. These symbols represent the sounds, bu, hu and zu, and the word bu-her means cup. But because the Egyptians were such a literal people, they always wanted to use pictures next to the symbols. Eventually, they found something a little more practical to write on. A paper-like material which was made from the papyrus plant that grows all over the Nile delta. The graceful fan of the papyrus leaves would then come to suggest the basic design of the typical Egyptian column or at least of its capitals which you can see today in their ruined temples. And so Egyptian culture was shaped by its environment in a hundred different ways. When you look at the map for instance, you can see that although the Nile valley is very long, it's only seven miles wide, an oasis between two burning deserts.

Because Egypt is compact and surrounded by desert, it is defensible against attack and because of the Nile, it is predictable. So the river supports a static society where life is pretty secure and reasonably happy, if we can judge by the content and tone of the early documents. But above the Nile, there stands an even more powerful force and that is the sun. The sun which perfects what the river started and which burns so fiercely that it appears divine. As an Egyptologist has put it, the Nile demands that men coordinate their efforts, the sun reveals to them that a single power rules the world.

This symbiosis between sun, and river, and river valley is reproduced in the two most important gods of Egypt: Ra and Osiris. Ra is the sun and the begetter of the gods themselves, the creator of life and order, both human and divine. Osiris is the earth, the god of fertilizing water and of vegetation. He's also as shown here the god of death and resurrection. Osiris also has a wicked brother named Seth, who stands for all evil and unpleasant things; the desert, the night, the foreigner disorder and warfare. For the Egyptians the struggle between Seth and Osiris symbolizes the cosmic drama—the cycle of death after life, and life after death.

Meanwhile down in the valley, there's a man who is part god and part king. He is the pharaoh named after the great house of the pair-ole in which he held court. From the first warrior prince who called himself pharaoh around three-thousand B.C. to Cleopatra, the last Egyptian queen who died thirty years before Christ, Egypt counted thirty-one separate dynasties of pharaohs. To the Egyptians, it was pharaoh who made sure the sun was going to rise by journeying through the night, symbolized by this leopard, and arriving safely at dawn. It was pharaoh who guaranteed the harvest by being the first to wield a ceremonial hoe, and it was pharaoh who threw a written order into the Nile as to when the flood should come; luckily for him it came so regularly that his command was invariably obeyed.
If pharaoh was a god, he was also the state. He owned everything his people owned—and he even owned the people themselves. All officials acted in his name; all held their offices subject to his divine pleasure; law was not codified, it was based on custom, and it was held to be simply the king’s word; his personal interpretation of divine will and divine justice. You could not codify these decisions, because everyone of them was right for its particular moment and circumstances, and besides once you wrote down a law it acquired an impersonal authority of its own, an authority that might compete with the authority of the divine being whose will and way alone could be the law.

Only pharaoh expressed the ultimate truth and justice and goodness and cosmic force of harmony and order that the Egyptians called “Ma’at.” Here we see the final judgment of a dead man whose heart is being weighed against the feather from the goddess of truth and right. The power of pharaoh was so absolute in fact that he not only controlled the laws of life on earth, but also access to eternity. Only he could be sure of a blessed afterlife going on forever; the only others who could even hope for eternal life were his family and those who went along to serve them in the hereafter.

The pyramids indicate just how important the pharaoh’s funeral arrangements were. One pharaoh after another built ever more monumental tombs. The very first pyramid was built at Sahara during the Third Dynasty and it may well be the first example of stone architecture in history. Alongside the pyramid one can still see the smaller tomb of a nobleman. Eventually, it was felt that if a noble could be buried close to the royal tomb, and if he could carve or paint his titles on his own tomb explaining how he had served pharaoh in the past and how he could serve him in the life to come, then he might have a chance of being taken along. Better still, of course, was to get your effigy right into the royal tomb like this high official of Queen Hatshepsut, who had his portrait carved behind the doors of her temple so he could enter eternity with her.

The climax of this funerary obsession came about 2600 B.C. with the pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty and especially with the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza, just north of the capital, which was then at Memphis. The Great Pyramid is nearly 500 feet high and it contains nearly 2-1/2 million blocks of limestone—most of them two or three tons apiece, but some of them as much as fifteen tons. Napoleon once sat down in its shade and calculated that the mass of stone above him would build a wall around France ten feet high and one foot thick. All of these stones were hauled up and put together with the most extraordinary accuracy by the muscle power of conscript labor. The laborers were put in work camps during the summer months when the river covered their fields, and when the flooded surface offered a convenient transit for the stones from quarries on one bank to pyramids on the other. The Sphinx nearby is also monumental—240 feet long by sixty-six feet up. But at least it didn’t have to be hauled in; it was carved out of a rock that happened to be there.

The most imitable of Egyptian monuments however were the obelisks, tapered pillars—each carved out of a single block of granite between seventy and 100 feet tall. Today you can see them in the capitals of Europe, and of course in Washington, where as usual, Americans have improved on the original and made it five times larger. Like the pyramids, obelisks represent and symbolize the shining cone of the sun’s rays and also man’s aspirations to immortality—to oneness with the gods. But effort involved in building these monuments could not be kept up for long; the drain on the country’s manpower and resources was too heavy. Between 2500 and 2300 B.C. the kings of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties built much smaller pyramids, and this declining size was matched by a shrinking in the king’s position, and a concomitant rise of the priests and nobles. Egyptian culture flowered brilliantly during this time; trade expeditions went abroad to Lebanon for cedar, to Crete for olive oil, and into the desert to mine copper. And the whole nation moved forward economically and intellectually in the first four dynasties. At first, all this redounded to the greater power and glory of the pharaoh, but as the state became more powerful and effective, the pharaoh had to have a larger number of servants. Government became more elaborate, offices increased, and officials who were sent out far from the capital found themselves increasingly on their own. They were supposed to exercise the will of the king, but actually they exercised independent judgment.

And so, ironically, the centralizing forces of royal absenteeism, trying to expand and control more and more, built up a decentralizing counteraction of individualism. When royal officials were successful in carrying out the pharaoh’s command, they were granted hereditary lands and perhaps even hereditary rights to the offices they held. And as their wealth and position became more secure, the officials became less dependent on pharaoh in this life and the next.

Meanwhile, the great funerary foundations around the royal tombs were endowed with land to keep the priests praying and the dead kings happy; these great cities of death were not only using up important resources while they were being built, but their upkeep continued to eat up the land even after they were finished and their builder buried. So much of Egypt was bestowed on temples and tombs that the numbers and wealth of the priests
rose dramatically. And at the same time, the pharaohs were parting with a lot of their land, which was the source of their wealth. As the wealth and power of the pharaohs decreased, there was more decentralization, both political and magical. In 2600 B.C., in the Fourth Dynasty, and then in the Fifth, the tombs of the nobles had clustered around the tombs of the kings. By 2300 B.C. and the Sixth Dynasty a lot of the nobles like this one built their tombs at home—in the provinces. They and the priests and the high government officials became confident that they had a good chance of eternal life on their own; they didn’t have to bother pharaoh, they didn’t have to bother with pharaoh. Not only could they build for eternity, but they could also interpret “Ma’at”—the justice and truth that was once administered by the pharaoh alone.

And so, the Sixth Dynasty ends in 2200 B.C., and along with it there ends the period known as the Old Kingdom. For two centuries afterwards, the decentralization of Egypt’s failing kings brings fragmentation and anarchy with nobles and princes squabbling for supremacy. The so-called Middle Kingdom begins when a new dynasty of pharaohs restores order, but it too has a structural weakness. The pharaoh’s word is no longer law. Laws begin to be written down and pharaoh himself is accepted only as long as he is powerful and alert. With the increasing independence of the noble, its only a matter of time before the royal family loses its grip.

We get another period of war, disunity, and disorder between the 1700s and 1500s B.C., but this time foreigners from the northeast bring in war-like peoples much better armed than the Egyptians with horses, and chariots, and stronger bows. These are the Hyksos; the shepherd kings from Asia. Egypt was no longer an oasis now, but a battlefield. For the first time part of its territory was conquered by foreigners. The deep sense of security from attack which had been the cornerstone of the Egyptian system was fractured.

When the foreigner was finally cast out in the sixteenth century before Christ, he was succeeded by great warrior pharaohs whose heroic efforts are pictured in many war carvings. Under this New Kingdom Egypt was going to have more periods of glory and more years of peace, roughly from the 1500s to about 1000 B.C. Obviously, things weren’t too bad, because it’s from this period that some very charming paintings survive of people hunting and banqueting, and in one of the banquet scenes an old blind harpist sings a song, which like all good things in Egypt, is an old song, but one which would continue to be sung for a long time, and this is how the song ends:

Spend a happy day, rejoice in the sweetest perfumes.
Adorn the neck and arms of your wife with lotus flowers
And keep your love once seated always at your side.
Call no halt to music and dance, but bid all care begone.
Spare thought for nothing but pleasure for soon your turn
Will come; to journey to the land of silence.

This was nice but the Egyptians never forgot the Hyksos humiliation and they became nervous and insecure. The New Kingdom was faced with new invasions, and the powerful class of professional soldiers and administrators came to run the country, along with the omnipresent priests. By this time, the power of the divine kings had become a facade for a stiff formalistic hierarchy and bureaucracy based less on tradition and custom, than on rules and laws, less on Ma’at, than on formal discipline and pietism. Unfortunately, for the New Kingdom, the Egyptians would rather enjoy life than fight. Military service was always unpopular, and armament was frequently backward. So, whenever the Egyptians clashed with strong armies, they usually lost, which is what we see happening in the 1000 years before Christ. After Egypt was last conquered in 330 B.C. by Alexander the Great, it was ruled by the Ptolemies, descendants of one of Alexander’s generals, until the last dynasty came to an inglorious end with the suicide of Cleopatra and colonization by Rome.

But a most fascinating thing is that all this time the image of pharaoh remained the same, the Egyptian ideal, the conventional style and models established three thousand years before. These endured longer than anything in the Western world. And yet while the form persisted the substance changed. The relative security and serenity of the Egyptians had cracked. The song of the harper continued to be sung, but its words didn’t mean anything anymore, or else they referred to a Golden Age long ago and far away. In our next program we shall return to the fertile crescent to examine the Mesopotamians who are as similar to us as the Egyptians were different. Until then...
It was an oasis—a garden between two of God's rivers. A place of fantastic gods, sacred surrealism and ruthless pragmatism. A place where we can find our origins, laws, trade, money—and bloodshed on a lavish scale.

Mesopotamia this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Now see if you can recognize this passage: "And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden and there he put the man who he had formed, and out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight or good for food. And the river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from thence it was parted and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison; the name of the second is Gihon; the name of the third river is Hiddekel, that it is which goeth towards the east of Assyria, we call it the Tigris; and the fourth river is Euphrates." Now, first this is a passage from the Book of Genesis and it reproduces the image of the garden, an oasis between God's third and fourth rivers. The garden where the first men lived with the animals in the midst of a generous nature that posed no problems—yet. It was paradise, and paradise is another name for a garden; and this paradise was ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers.

But Mesopotamia and the lands around it from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf, from the Iranian Plateau to the Mediterranean, were a paradise in the shadow of natural disasters, just as the Garden of Eden was paradise in the shadow of the fall. The region had torrential rains like these, the Egyptians talked about a Nile in the sky. It had hurricanes, terrible sandstorms, uncontrollable floods, as we know from the story of the great flood which the Israelites got from a Babylonian epic. And when nature wasn't making life hard and unpredictable, people were with fire and sword. The Nile Valley in Egypt was never a highway for invaders; the sea lay at one end, unorganized savages at the other, so Egypt was able to develop its civilization without continuous warfare. But the Tigris and the Euphrates are great natural highways not only for trade but also for the movement of armies and the migrations of peoples. And so the Mesopotamians were both soldiers and traders. Their realism, their cruelty, their ruthlessness can be explained in part by their geographical circumstances, and so can their gods—terrible, unpredictable and likely to manifest themselves in unpleasant ways.

The beginnings of a great many things we use today can be found in a small area no bigger than Denmark on the Tigris-Euphrates delta which we know as Sumer. Even their endless wars, especially their wars, sparked technological innovations and spurred social, cultural, and economic change. It was in Sumer, through drainage and irrigation, that the first villages of reed huts and adobe became cities by the fourth millennium B.C. The founders of this first Mesopotamian civilization were called Sumerians. It's in this general area that we think the wheel first appeared, adapted from the potter's wheel and replacing the sledges that were used to transport heavy loads. Around 2000 B.C. someone invented spokes, which made the wheel much lighter, and later still the axle was invented; and so people in the Near East were the first to hunt and make war in chariots, which gave them a significant advantage.

By the time history begins, that is, by the time we start to have written records around 3000 B.C., we find not only cities in Sumer but also vast temples and a complicated social structure headed by priests. The social cement is provided not by a river and its water as in Egypt, but by the temple, which rules and dominates the community, which dominates the countryside and around which a city grows. The construction of a temple was a cooperative task. The labor of hundreds of people who took part had to be coordinated, had to be directed, everything had to be planned accurately in advance, and as a matter of fact, the outlines of a temple or building were laid out with string before work started on the walls.

And we have temple plans from various cities drawn to scale on clay tablets. The Sumerians believed that such plans were designed by the gods themselves and revealed in dreams. But the real architects were presumably the priests. Another thing we find connected with the temples are clay tablets scratched with shorthand pictures and with numerals. These are accounts kept by the priests who were the administrators of the temple estates and who had to give account for their stewardship to the gods, more probably to their colleagues. So they agreed on a conventional method of recording receipts and expenses in written signs that their colleagues and successors would understand—in other words, they invented writing. And writing, as the Mesopotamians developed it, reflects one of the chief differences between them and the Egyptians; their capacity for an inclination to abstraction.
The Egyptian hieroglyph, remember, is an image, a picture. The Egyptians were a very literal people, so even though they used signs to represent a sound or a syllable, they always wanted to use pictures as well. Even the alphabetic signs are not simply abstract letters, but little pictures in their own right. But then, the successors to the Sumerians, the Semites, went one step further. The Semites were a people who moved from the Arabian Desert to Mesopotamia in the third millennium and soon absorbed Sumerian culture. It was they who combined the alphabet- ic and pictorial forms of writing into a single system with abstract signs replacing literal pictures. Many Sumerian statues also tend to be abstract, and Mesopotamians were good at mathematics, too, where Egyptians were much more literal and concrete. This is a clay tablet of math problems for Mesopotamian students.

In religion there were differences as well. Egyptian society claimed to imitate the divine, but in effect it invented a divine world which was the double of the real one only much grander and finer. This is something we shall find also in ancient Greece. The Semites, on the other hand, invented a divine world which was peculiar to itself and separate in its divinity. They deliberately used a sort of sacred surrealism to move away from realism, emphasizing the fantastic aspect of their gods—their great hypnotic eyes, their nonhuman attributes. You might say that where the Egyptians try to capture the difference between the human and the divine by enlarging the scale of things, that is, by making bigger tombs and statues and images, the Semites appealed to a quality, to mystery and fantasy and essence.

Mesopotamian temples and religious life clearly reflected this tendency to abstraction, but they also helped to create abstraction and to structure it, and that is because Mesopotamian life and society focused on serving the temple, the gods, the priests—at least in the beginning. But temples and temple servants did not exist in isolation. For one thing, the Sumerian city needed imports: timber, stone for building, metals for tools and weapons, and then gifts for the gods: precious stones from Afghanistan and India, mother of pearl from the Persian Gulf. And so you get trade—trade that is extensive and active and you get the rise of an independent and very mixed merchant class.

The armed caravans and merchant ships of the time were a potent agent in the diffusion of culture. Free craftsmen might travel with the caravans looking for a market for their skill. Slaves would form part of the merchandise because defeated enemies could be more useful alive than dead, and these slaves together with the personnel of the caravan or the crew of the ship, would have to be accommodated in various cities. Foreigners in a strange land would then demand the comforts of their own religion just as there is an American church in Paris today. And useful arts and crafts could be diffused just as easily—the socketed ax of Mesopotamian craftsmen, for example, was a great improvement on the old model which was bound with cords. Their axes traveled to the Black Sea and to Troy. Their fast-spinning potter's wheels, which turned out jars like this one, went east to India and west to Greece and Egypt, and Egypt also adopted Mesopotamian glass making techniques a thousand years after they were first developed around 2500 B.C. Most important, perhaps, metal workers from Mesopotamia and from Anatolia to the north found out how to use furnaces to smelt metal ores: copper in the fourth millennium, bronze in the third, and iron in the second. This gave the region beautiful new objects but also tools of war like this helmet. Stronger metals make for better arms, and a lead over your neighbors in war and a lead in trade as well, because anything you make better than your neighbors you can sell.

Trade also made the population of the Sumerian cities more mixed, because merchants moved, craftsmen moved, and slaves moved from place to place. So the blood principle of the earlier societies, that all its members were descended from a common ancestor, this became more and more of a fiction. As a result, the hold of the temple on the city was loosened and the god or goddess ruling through the high priests was replaced by a secular governor or king like this one who ruled in the name of the god. You may think that this is a subtle distinction but it's the first step towards secular power, not sacred, not priestly, but power wielded by laymen. Although the secular rulers ended by claiming they were almost gods themselves, they were primarily regarded as representatives of the god, delegated to carry out his or her will. When they fought it was the god who directed their arms and really fought the battle, which meant that victory in battle confirmed the king's divine commission. And when they legislated, they simply interpreted and applied the rules that the god had told them he wanted men to follow.

Whereas in Egypt, justice was an aspect of the divine order of which pharaoh was an inseparable part. In Mesopotamia, as in Israel, Justice was an expression of God's commands, of God's will, written down by a man whom God had trusted the way he trusted Moses for example; and so the divine creator of the law and the commu nicator of the law were no longer one and the same. And with this separation, the law took on a life of its own. A written law, for instance, was a two-sided contract. The subject had to obey the king, had to obey the king's law, but the king was supposed to abide by his own law, by the same law, and so no one was above the law, at least in theory, and while the theory was often ignored and still is today, it was a basic principle with great power in the
long run, because it was respected even in the breuch. And so this writing down and codification of the law was going to affect the political life and political ideas down through the ages.

For the moment, however, Mesopotamian kings were mostly war lords, and that was a task that must have kept them fairly busy, because war played a major part in the life of these ancient societies. Although these peasants produced a surplus, it was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of people. This limited the opportunities of an expanding rural population, so the poor peasants had to find new lands to till. The Sumerian city sponsored reclamation works, both against the desert and the swamp. But then, as now, the most effective labor-saving device was stealing. So there were endless wars between cities, one trying to seize or recapture another’s land. Eventually a straightforward imperialism would develop from this warfare; some city or region would extend its power even further eliminating all the competition around it and establishing its rule and that of its god over all the others. So over the centuries, beginning about 2400 B.C., you have a series of empires, first dominated by Sumerian cities like Ur or Lagash then by cities further north like Akkad of the Semites, the exact location of which is still unknown; eventually by Babylon, the capital of a Semitic people, the Amorites. Babylon was the greatest commercial city in the area. There were an incredible number of languages and dialects babbled in its streets and markets, which inspired the legend of the Tower of Babble or Babel, although the prototypical steppe temple or ziggurats had been created by the Sumerians.

Around 1800 B.C., the king of Babylon, Hammurabi, on the right, gave his subjects a written code of law—public and private. Hammurabi’s code, carved here on a monument, became the basis of international commercial law regulating contracts, interests, forms of mortgage and every kind of commercial transaction. It also covered criminal cases, and rather severely at that. Law number Eight: “If a man has stolen ox or sheep or ass or pig or ship, whether from the temple or the palace, he shall pay thirty-fold. If he stole from a commoner he shall render ten-fold. If the thief cannot pay he shall be put to death.” Law number 110: “If a nun, a lady of God who is not living in a convent, has opened the door of the wine shop or entered the wine shop for a drink, that woman shall be burned.” Law number 196: “If a man has caused the loss of a gentleman’s eye, they shall cause him to lose one eye.”

So, Mesopotamia civilization was the first to develop things that we take for granted today including the idea of "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth." Both their laws and their standardized writing which preserved the laws came out of business practices, because they had to write their agreements down, and they had to enforce these agreements. And it was the Sumerians who also developed weights and measures which were necessary for trade and extremely useful for keeping temple accounts and for building public works. And meanwhile, the organized corporation of an urban population required more accurate divisions of time than you needed in a village. And so, the Sumerians divided day and night into twelve double hours, hence our twenty-four hours and they devised instruments to measure these intervals. They and the Babylonians also divided the year into weeks of seven days, an idea which the Jews were later to borrow, and then were going to improve upon by introducing one weekly day of rest. And then finally, the Sumerians and their cousins upriver invented a measure that we call money. By that time, the exchange of goods and services had come to play a really important part in the new economy and the common standard was needed so that different kinds of goods could be measured, could be valued.

What was a cow worth, after all—or a pot or a slave? And this conventional standard of value would also serve as a medium of exchange in which you could purchase commodities and reward services, that is, pay wages. The first standard so used was apparently barley, which was the staff of life. In fact, wages and rents would be paid most frequently in measures of barley for a couple of thousand years, even in Hammurabi’s time about 1800-1700 B.C. But by then, metal—that is, silver, and for small sums, copper, was being recognized as the most convenient medium for exchange. In the eighth century B.C., Assyrian kings began to stamp silver bars and in the seventh century B.C., Lydian kings began to make coins like this one. But in the beginning, the units of silver or copper used for exchange were not coins, but quantities of metal that you would weigh-out, which was a bit awkward.

Still, the adoption of a conventional metallic standard marks the transition from a natural economy, in which objects were barred to a money economy, in which everything could be priced at so many shekels of silver or so many girs of barley. And one result of this was that you could estimate wealth, not in food stocks or in slaves or in commodities that can themselves be consumed, used, enjoyed, but in terms of a general abstract medium which cannot, itself, be consumed but which can be exchanged for any consumable commodity or any useful service. And so the producers could consider working just for the market, rather than for themselves or for one particular person who ordered something and offered a particular commodity in return.
You could produce for the market, and you could take the price that you got in the market, and you could put it away and use it to get something that you might want another time. Moreover, the new generalized wealth possessed the same property that wheat and barley and cattle had; it could reproduce itself; it could multiply itself. Like grain, like livestock, money could be treated as capital and could be used to secure an increase, to become a profit; and if you lent it, you could charge interest. So that by the time Hammurabi came along 3800 years ago, he really had something to legislate about, as we shall see in our next program.

#104 From Bronze to Iron

Ancient Assyria, Babylon, Persia—out of their bloody wars, our civilization grew. As one empire gave way to another, trade and culture spread, barbarians were tamed, and new cities were founded around the Mediterranean.

From Bronze to Iron this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, you may recall, I ended on a subject dear to the heart of many of us--money. Now there was growing prosperity in Mesopotamia among the merchants, and also among the temples which filled their treasuries and put the money out to rent. In other words, they acted rather like banks. And yet, this new wealth benefited only a small part of the population, and oddly enough, one of the major factors in spreading the wealth and breaking up the rather stifling institutions of the third millennium were the great plundering wars in which the kings of Akkad and later of Babylon and Nineveh distinguished themselves. It was war, not peace, that spurred the greatest social changes.

Some of the booty these kings fought for consisted of the jewels and ores they either could not, or would not, buy from savage tribes or from other foreigners. The Egyptians used to send armed expeditions to extract the copper ores in the Sinai Desert in the same way Sumerians and more especially the Semitic kings in Akkad and Babylon sent expeditions north and west to get the raw materials they couldn't do without: metals, stone, timber.

The plundering wars of kings like Sargon of Assyria around 1850 B.C., also shed tremendous quantities of blood. And if you read the annals of the kings of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia you find them awash with pride, and blood, and gore. Cities are taken and plundered and burned; captives are flayed or impaled alive, and heads, hands, and feet are cut off in what sounds like industrial quantities. But, between the rapes and murders and humiliations, there are also long lists of plunder: silver, and gold, and metals, and crops, and cattle, and slaves.

There is one revealing passage from the Assyrian King Asurbanipal of the seventh century B.C. who boasts, "The people, the asses, camels, sheep are carried away as spoils to Assyria." When Asurbanipal distributed the camels and sheep to his people, there were so many, that they came down in price until they were a drag on the market. As the King tells us, "Tavern keepers got camels, slaves received camels, brewers for a drink of beer, and gardeners for a basket of fresh dates."

And so the forcible distribution of conquered wealth that had been hoarded in treasuries spread purchasing power throughout Mesopotamia; and this stimulated the demand and it stimulated production, while at the same time war captives swelled the supply of slaves and of available skills. The merchants who then contracted to dispose of the loot and the tribute, these merchants could make profits, and the staff of the merchants would benefit too. And so, a distinct social group began to take shape that we might call a middle class, in-between the warriors and priests on one side, and the poor masses on the other. And the money economy spread until even land was no longer the sole property of God or king, even the land came to be bought and sold just like any other commodity.

And war also helped spread what we might call culture. The success of the Akkadian armies for example, was due to their superior bronze weapons and their superior armor. If you wanted to resist the Akkadians you had to manufacture similar armaments; you had to find smiths and supply them with raw materials; you had to organize trade. So the imperialism of societies like those in Mesopotamia either conquered and assimilated or else generated resistance. And resistance in turn generated Bronze Age economies, which were dependent on trade, and which were as close to those of the aggressor as the resisters could possibly make them.
It's possible in fact, to argue that technological and economical improvements throughout history followed less the plow than the war chariot. And what was true in the early Bronze Age around 2400 B.C. seems to be equally true of the period of anarchy several hundred years later when one barbarian dynasty succeeded another in Babylon, and nobody's property or life was safe from the endless raids and wars of the time. What happened in those circumstances was that the pillaging of the countryside and the disruption of the great estates emphasized the value of incorruptible and much more mobile metal wealth, as compared to the real but perishable wealth produced by the land. It was easier to safeguard the bag full of silver than the field full of barley.

During this period, the natural economy collapsed in anarchy over and over again. And this too, encouraged the spread of the money economy. And as the money economy spread, or at least exchanges spread, production for the market became increasingly common. Businessmen realized that they could go in for speculative imports of cargo of this or that to sell in the market. And that they could make better profits this way than by working on commission to get specific articles that a state or a temple might order.

This was so, in part, because there were more people buying in the market. In Mesopotamia, as in Egypt, the end of the second millennium saw the rise of an army of literate officials appointed by the state ranging from junior clerks to judges, collecting taxes and fines and keeping accounts. And they got their incomes not just in kind, but in money too. They didn't have farms of their own; they couldn't produce their own necessities any more than the soldiers could who came back with captives and goods; and so all wound up as buyers in the bazaar.

And there were also growing numbers of professional priests as the victorious rulers and the superstitious citizens endowed more and more temples and chanceries, and these priests would go shopping too. So now craftsmen and peasants find a growing market for their products, like these jars; and they begin at last to get a larger share in the technical benefit of civilization—besides an arrow in the back. Metal begins to spread to the countryside, and even Egyptian peasants now start to use tools made of metal. Around 1500 or 1600 B.C. iron was so rare that it was worth twice as much as gold. After 1200 B.C., when they learned how to harden iron by carboration, it becomes increasingly affordable and it provides better cutting tools, whether for shearing wool or castrating animals or humans. Because iron is cheaper to produce and more readily available than bronze, it democratizes agriculture and industry until around 800 or 900 B.C. cheap iron perfects the process that economic imperialism had started a thousand years before. The peasants could finally afford iron axes and plow shares; the common artisan could own his own tool kit and be independent of temples or patrons; and the commoner could use iron weapons and meet Bronze Age knights like this one on better terms, which also means that iron democratizes war. Poor and backward barbarians could now challenge the armies of civilized states which until then possessed a monopoly on bronze armaments.

So once again the interaction between war and technology becomes manifest. The Bronze Age collapses around the end of the second millennium, and we see the rise of great military empires which are able to fulfill the aims of earlier Mesopotamian powers by gathering in all the lands and the products that their poor native economies might need. And next, we get seven centuries of blood and gore and chaos about which we can speak calmly because we weren't there, and then, when we look again, we find that things have moved forward once more.

Between about 1000 and 500 B.C. the zone of literate urban society had expanded far more than it had grown in the fifteen centuries of the Bronze Age. The change was largely due to the great empires of Assyria, and Neo-Babylon, and Persia. Each of these empires unify tremendous territories under their rule, and, even though they did this at frightful cost in human lives and wealth, the political unification they imposed promoted intercourse on an unprecedented scale over a wider area than ever before.

As armies and slaves and skilled workers and traders moved all over these vast areas, they developed a "lingua franca," a common speech, so they could make themselves understood wherever they went. It was a Syrian language from the region around Damascus, and it was called Aramaic. Aramaic had its own script with twenty-two letters, all consonants as in most Semitic languages. It was then absorbed by the Chaldeans who ruled in Babylon, and later adopted as the official language of the Persian Empire around the sixth century B.C. In the process it replaced Hebrew as the language of some of the Old Testament texts—and it's probably what Jesus and his Apostles spoke centuries later. The Assyrians, and still more the Persians, also built post roads to collect tribute more effectively, and these roads were used by soldiers, and officials, and couriers, and merchants. By the fifth century B.C. even people of modest means like Heroditus, the first professional travel writer, could afford to tour the back lands of Asia. The Assyrians and their neo-Babylonian heirs were also forcibly transporting whole communities from one end of their empire to the other to make them less dangerous by getting them away from home. One unintended result of this was a very thorough pooling of peoples, which made the big cities thoroughly cosmopolitan. The Assy-
ians brought disaster to, among other peoples, the Hebrews who may have come from Ur in Mesopotamia but who eventually settled to the West in Canaan by way of Egypt.

The Hebrews established two kingdoms in Canaan: one was called Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem; and the other, called Israel, to the north. This northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The Old Testament’s Book of Isaiah, which was probably written shortly after, describes what it must have been like—"Your country lies desolate. Your cities are burnt with fire. In your very presence aliens devour your land. It is desolate as overthrown by aliens. And the daughter of Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a lodge in a cucumber field, like a besieged city."

In 586 B.C. the Hebrew’s southern kingdom of Judah was also defeated, this time by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II. Thousands of captives were taken off to Babylon and enslaved. But the Hebrews were not the only people to be moved about in this way, and there were also many members of subject communities who were recruited for service in the imperial armies.

In the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., the kings of Persia hired archers from central Asia and Indian chariot troops to fight along with Syrian levies and Greek mercenaries; and these people carried the germ of one culture to another just as the caravans and the ships that moved about in increasing number through the vast relatively pacified, relatively secure empires.

The largest of these empires was established in the sixth century B.C. when Cyrus the Great of Persia made an alliance with Babylon, and then lead a rebellion against the Medes who were the overlords of Persia. Through subsequent conquests the Persian Empire spread from India to the Aegean Sea. The Persians were warrior horsemen ruling over a terribly disparate empire. As conquerors, the Persians and Medes were the privileged dominant race. Their king was not a god, rather the delegate of a god, the way local people were used to having and the way the god designated him was characteristic. The particular warrior chief whose horse, a sacred animal, had been the first to neigh in salute to the rising sun, became king.

Whether the great king was mortal or divine, his subject peoples still had to pay tribute as you can see them doing on the walls in Persepolis, the Persian capital in present date Iran. The Medes and Persians themselves on the other hand owed only military service. But as the empire expanded there weren’t enough Medes and Persians to go around, so the subject peoples had to serve as well, which meant they were forced to bear arms in defense of a state that kept them in servitude. So the Persians really couldn’t rely on their loyalty as they eventually found out.

Still, for a century or so, the Persian’s centralized bureaucratic state kept the peace, more or less, and that’s nothing to scoff at. And the Persian peace helped to spread civilization from Asia Minor into the Mediterranean. There in that great midland sea a few hundred years before the birth of Christ, we find vigorous barbarians tamed by rubbing against Syrians, Phoenicians, Persians, Egyptians—barbarians who are going to create an intellectual and artistic renaissance which combines strength and a new vision with the technical skills that they learned from the older traditions of the Near East.

After the ninth century B.C., the Phoenicians founded new cities around the Mediterranean, and after the eighth century B.C., the Greeks founded theirs. But these cities were not established to be provincial capitals and garrison towns and tax-gathering centers for the central power as the Asian cities were. Instead, they were overseas settlements of immigrant farmers, for whom there was no room in the narrow coastal plain of Phoenicia and the still narrower valleys of Greece. What theses colonists wanted were new lands to till, new fishing grounds, new bases for piracy and commerce.

So the Phoenicians colonized North Africa, and from there, fanning out from Carthage, they colonized western Sicily, Sardinia, the coasts of Spain; while the Greeks spread round the Black Sea and westward to eastern Sicily, southern Italy, and on to Marseilles. Finally there were the Etruscans, people from Asia Minor who had probably learned civilization through mercenary service in the imperial armies of the East, and who established themselves as a ruling class among the Indo-European farmers in central Italy around Florence.

The Etruscans imposed their kind of civilization on the barbarian natives, and they founded small cities as centers of an urban economy. But some of the people they conquered with great brutality were able to expel their alien masters and turn the weapons of civilization against their oppressors. And among these people, the most notable would be an obscure tribe or federation in south central Italy called the Romans.
At any rate, one thing the Greek and Phoenicians colonists brought with them was a simplified form of writing using twenty-two signs to denote the consonants which had been developed in some Canaanite or Phoenician city, and which would become the parent of our modern script. With the alphabet to simplify things, reading and writing became as simple as they are today. Literacy ceased to be the mysterious privilege of the highly specialized class of priests and scribes. Administrators, engineers, medical men, merchants, even some soldiers were learning to read and write. By the seventh century B.C., common mercenary soldiers, both Greek and Phoenician, were educated enough to scribble graffiti on their helmets. The Greeks then took this Phoenician script, converted some of the signs for peculiarly Semitic consonants, and invented a few more signs to express in Greek the vowel sounds that the Semites had ignored but that you need in Indo-European European languages. And it was apparently from Greek colonists in Italy that the Etruscans, and hence the Romans, learned how to read and write.

Of course, those who did read were not very numerous, but their appearance meant that a new distinction would join and reinforce the old distinctions between rich and poor, high and low. Literacy created a barrier which has persisted ever since between the educated and the uneducated sections of society.

But literacy also provided a means of communication that could last through time—a means of communication which not only stabilized culture, but also allows it to accumulate and grow by compound interest because knowledge was no longer condemned to die with those who held it, or at best to be passed on, garbled by word of mouth. It could be recorded, preserved, assimilated by following generations, referred to, added to, summoned up at will—a treasury of memory and inspiration or quite simply information. So, here you have the beginnings of our world in the Middle East, and in the Mediterranean.

If you are looking for origins you might say that our culture, our Western culture, is an Asian culture, and that the Western tradition has its roots in that great dust heap of history that runs from the Black Sea to the Persian Gulf, a dark and bloody ground that we never cease to recreate in our gods, in our wars, in our restlessness, but also in our inventiveness, and enterprise and expansionism. And this is even truer of the Mediterranean which is a kind of liquid history around whose shores the old traditions were transmuted, and from whose shores they have irrigated the entire Western world, as we shall see in the programs ahead.

#105 The Rise of Greek Civilization

Warriors, athletes, artists, and colonialists, sailors and pirates, traders and philosophers—the ancient Greeks never ceased to make creative trouble for themselves. And in their talent for creation and destruction, we recognize ourselves.

The Rise of Greek Civilization this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The Western tradition really begins with the Greeks—our kind of institutions, our kind of thinking, even our kind of sinning are all connected with the rationalism of the Greek mind. The Greeks did not take the world on trust, they did not attribute it to the will of God, they did not abandon themselves to fate; instead they asked questions and came up with answers. The Greek philosopher Plato once wrote that "Philosophy is the child of wonder." It was the gift of the Greeks that they inquired into the things that excited their wonder, and their insatiable curiosity paid off in instability, in insecurity, but also in greatness.

Let's begin with a Greece of three-thousand two hundred years ago, around 1200 B.C., when a series of invasions and wars shook the ancient world from Anatolia to Egypt. This is a scene from The Odyssey. Most of what we know about the four hundred years between 1200 and 800 B.C. comes from The Odyssey and from another epic poem, The Iliad, both attributed to the Greek poet, Homer. The first poem, The Iliad, tells how the Greeks besieged and destroyed Troy, an Asian city near the Hellespont. The second poem, The Odyssey, depicted in this Roman wall painting tells what happened after the Trojan War to Odysseus, the King of Ithaca and a leader of the Greeks. It's likely that the world both poems described was similar to the actual period between 1200 and 800 before Christ, a sort of Dark Ages. Dark because we know so little about them, but also because life was even more brutish and shorter than usual.
We see a society of warriors and petty chiefs greedy for honor and riches, ruthless, highly competitive, but with a code of behavior which provides an enduring formula for distinction in later times: that of heroism, nobility, eventually chivalry. By the eighth century B.C., the heroic quest for glory had been ritualized by the Greeks in great competitive games. We know this best from games established at Olympia in 776 B.C. The Greek name for the games was “agon”--the word for contest or competition from which our word agony derives. The honor you strove for was so high that neither agony nor even life were too high a price to pay for winning. On the other hand, the Greek athletes were realistic as well as materialist. Athletes faced the agony of competition because they wanted to win prizes. A winner might well be fed, clothed, possibly housed at the city's expense for the rest of his life, and he would pay no taxes.

Later, through the centuries, the Greek athletes' very sensible way of looking at competition was going to be sterilized by people who thought that material concerns were base. Noble sacrifice was what they wanted to see, not worldly ambition, and so the image of the athlete "agonistes," the athlete suffering in his quest, this became an important part of the Graeco-Roman culture. It was taken up by the early Christians who were a part of that culture of course, and who were engaged in a terrible wrestling match with the devil and with evil, and then it was going to be revived by the Protestants in the sixteenth century and the Victorians in the nineteenth century; and it's still with us today, as you can see in the disapproval of modern fans when they discover that their heroes are business people as much as they are athletes.

The heroic values that The Iliad and The Odyssey express have come down to our own day nearly three thousand years later. But that doesn't mean the Homeric hero is anything like the medieval knight, say, who blunders into battle for honors sake. The Homeric hero may be noble, but he is also shrewd. Odysseus, whom you see here as he blinds the monster Cyclops. Odysseus is not just a good sailor and a fine athlete, he is also quick-witted and crafty, a master of deceit and artful tales, as the Greek goddess Athena tells him more in praise than blame. Athena compares Odysseus to herself, saying, "You are far the best of all mortals in counsel and speech, and I am celebrated among all Gods in craft and cunning." Which tells you something not only about Greek heroes but also about Greek religion. Their gods like Pluto and Persephone here may have been supernatural and superhuman, but they were otherwise like men and women with human physiology and human passions. This humanization of the gods was something new, a revolution in religion. Gods were to be honored as men were with palaces like this one in Sicily where they could live and keep the offerings they got and be worshiped. But only gods would be worshiped; not pharaohs, not kings, for unlike Persians, the Greeks worshiped no man as master, only the gods.

So now, for the first time, "Man is the measure of all things" as the Greek philosopher Pythagoras said in the fifth century before Christ. This was an extraordinary assertion to make in a world where normal men and women still seemed very puny, and probably felt very puny in an immensely vast, immensely mysterious universe of which they knew almost nothing. And yet, in the same era we come upon an Athenian statesman, Pericles, extolling not just men, but free men, and the advantages of individual liberty. "We live as free citizens," says Pericles, "not only in our public life but in our attitude to one another in the affairs of daily life. We are not angry at our neighbor if he behaves as he pleases; we do not cast sour looks at him, which if they do no harm, cause pain." The ruins of Athens remain monuments to Pericles' vision of his city as a center for art, literature, and wonderful architecture. But Athens was only one of hundreds of Greek city-states in the fifth century before Christ, each of which was called a polis, meaning both city and state, but also commonwealth, a body of citizens in an autonomous fatherland.

These polis spread from the Black Sea to the western Mediterranean. The heaviest concentration was on the Greek mainland, on the Islands, and in Ionia on the western coast of Asia Minor where the richest and most advanced cities had grown in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. because they were closest to the trade and the culture of the Middle East. The scale of polis was small, partly because of geography. Greece, Ionia, and the Islands are checkerboards of mountains, valleys, and small plains, which tends to make for isolated settlements that have easier access to the surrounding sea than to one another, so the sea became the Greek highway par excellence. It was on the sea that Greeks sailed, traded, raided, pirated. But polis, like Salamis, the ruins of which we see here were also small--because the Greeks thought they should be small. Plato thought the ideal city should have five thousand citizens, which really meant a population of twenty thousand or so not counting a few resident aliens. Women, foreigners, and slaves of course had no civic rights in ancient Greece, but then that was true of most of the world until the nineteenth century. As it turned out, some polis were very tiny, and only three in the fifth century B.C. had more than twenty thousand, that is about a hundred thousand, Athens foremost among them.

But whatever its size each Greek polis had its own personality, laws, patriotism, and at the same time each shared in the common pride of being Hellenes, part of the world of Hellas, which is not a nation or a race but a cultural community and a very powerful concept. The Homeric myth attributes the community of Hellas to a
common ancestor, a hero called Helen, or Hellenos, and then to common action in the Trojan War. Historically, however, the sense of community was probably precipitated by the extraordinary experience of the Persian Wars.

Between the middle of the sixth century B.C. and the beginning of the fifth, the Greeks provoked and then withstood the immense might of the Persian Empire. They defeated the Persians not once but several times, most notably at Marathon in 490 B.C., at Salamis in 480, and finally at Plataea in the following year.

Marathon and Plataea were great victories for what the Greeks called "hoplites," disciplined, heavy armed infantry fighting in close formation. These hoplites would become the basis of Greek military success for the next two hundred years. But Marathon and Plataea were also great victories for the notion of community, the squabbling Greek polis had to bury their differences and join together against the foreign barbarians who didn't speak Greek but something that sounded like "Bar-bar-bar." As Themistocles, the Athenian commander said, after the Greeks had ripped the Persian fleet to shreds at Salamis, "It is not we who have done this..." meaning not we Athenians, but all Greeks together, all Hellas; and out of these victories an awareness would grow of Greece and of a common Greek spirit which hadn't existed before. It was a critically important impulse to Greek confidence, indeed to Greek civilization.

We can talk about a Greek civilization because despite geographical dispersions, political fragmentation, endless bloody conflict, the Hellenes shared a strong cultural unity in language, in common myths, in similar customs—you might say in a common cultural personality. No matter what polis they lived in, they were quick to adopt skills and practices they found useful and then improve them and make them their own.

They took the Phoenician alphabet, they added vowel sounds and they turned it into Greek. They didn't invent pottery, but they individualized it. By the sixth century B.C., potters and other artists were signing their work, a revolutionary step that proclaimed the artist as an individual. They copied the free standing statue from Egypt, but they liberated and they humanized its form and they painted it, which made it more lively, and they also invented the nude as an art form, one more assertion of human confidence. By the fifth century B.C., the Greek cultural personality had affirmed itself in a very grand enterprise indeed: the Acropolis, the hilltop citadel of Athens. In 480 B.C. the Persians had burned Athens, and although the city was quickly reoccupied and patched up, it continued to look a mess for the next thirty years. Until, that is, Pericles decided to rebuild the Acropolis, which became the seat of the gods with a great new temple, the Parthenon. Inside, a giant statue was raised of the goddess Athena, to bear witness to her power and the power of Athens itself. This was all done so quickly, within eleven years, that the technical tour-de-force impressed the Greeks as much as the grandeur of the results. The man who made this frieze was the Parthenon's artistic director, Phidias, considered one of the great sculptors of antiquity. We have some of his great works, and we have the work of other sculptors done in the Phidias style. Most critics, then as now, admire the restraint, the nobility, and the harmony that make them examples of the ideal and idealistic classical style.

This is the work of another sculptor, Praxiteles, who worked one hundred years after Phidias, in mid-fourth century B.C. Praxiteles liberated the rather stiff classical shapes and warmed them up, which they needed as you can see from this Aphrodite of Klidhes.

The Greeks have come a long way since the Heroic Age of Homer, not only in art and culture, but also in politics, a word of course derived from polis. By the end of the sixth century before Christ, most of the polis had cast off the rule of kings and princes and tried a variety of governments. There was "tyranny"—a kind of constitutional dictatorship not necessarily unpopular. There was "aristocracy"—the rule of the best, or the best bought. And "oligarchy"—the rule of the few, and "democracy"—the rule of the demos, the people, the crowd. Or there was some combination of these as in the Athens of Pericles. In Athens, all citizens had equal rights but, as Pericles wrote in the fifth century B.C., when a man is distinguished in any way, he is more highly honored in public life, not as a matter of privilege but as a recognition of merit. On the other hand, anyone who can do the city good is not debarred by poverty or by the obscurity of his position.

Pericles isn't meant to be taken literally, of course. Aristocracy wasn't really the rule of the best men, but rather of a few leaders drawn from old wealthy families; and democracy wasn't really the rule of all the people, but only a few thousand free-born men. Still, a poor Athenian like Demosthenes could become a political leader in the fourth century B.C. and we can see in his success that even an ideal can define values and encourage aspirations which in turn can affect and change society.
Because the way the Greeks chose leaders and the way they were ruled was apt to change, the Greeks also had a sense of history. It is no accident that the greatest historian of antiquity, Thucydides, was Greek. History is about men, women, institutions, changing in time and space, and Thucydides saw change all around him in the fifth century B.C. Unlike the Egyptians who were so impressed by continuities and long chronologies; unlike the Mesopotamians who were so impressed by supernaturally induced catastrophes; Thucydides was more interested in the discernible motives of men’s actions. He attributed decisions and actions and outcomes to objective factors like culture and economics instead of supernatural intervention. Of course, most Greeks were not as objective. They were mostly peasants, small farmers, holders, craftsmen, artisans, often rooted in custom, superstition, and narrow localism. But the Persian invasions of the sixth century B.C., and the great national struggle against the Persian Empire in the fifth century brought the first inkling that perhaps it was better to die than to be a slave; that it might make sense to face death not just for your own home but, incredible as it sounds, for other people’s homes, even for the homes of those wretched people in the next village. That a common humanity or a common Hellenism might be more important than your own local customs and prejudices.

There were also greater men who seemed even more important, the men that everybody was talking about. There was Themistocles, who commanded the Athenian fleet in the great victory over the Persians at Salamis in 480 B.C.—the victory that saved Greece. There was Aristides The Just, a contemporary of Themistocles who administered the finances of Athens and the finances of its allies—so honest. There was Miltiades, the hero of Marathon, and Hippias of Mile tus, who made a picture of the earth showing all the countries, and the cities, and the rivers, and Pythagoras, the wise teacher who discovered so much about numbers and about the wickedness of the world. What was it about these men that made them so different from the farmers who met in the agora on market day? It was "sophia", wisdom. It was "arete," virtue. These famous men were not so much stronger, or bigger, or richer, or better born, they were just wise and that is why they were better men. But if that were true, wasn’t it possible for others to become wise like them? Couldn’t even a peasant learn? There were a lot of Greeks who thought this might be possible, and from that kind of thinking there evolved a way of looking at the world that helped to shape future course of Western culture. And we shall see this in our next program.

#106 Greek Thought

The Greek search for wisdom spared them neither from war nor from decline. But the philosophies they left us, their questioning of everything, even the gods themselves—made certain they would never be forgotten.

Greek Thought this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The last time, if you will recall, we ended with the concept of "Sophia", or wisdom, which was so important to the ancient Greeks. They had come to believe that the wisest man was the best man, and that his wisdom could be taught even to the poorest, even to the humblist among them. These days, of course, it's sometimes hard to understand why the Greeks made such a lot of fuss about things of this nature. In fact, our modern view of philosophy in general is that it is abstract and divorced from the real world. But the Greeks had to conquer their wisdom bit by bit; and they found it fascinating as they ascertained it, precisely because it helped them make better sense of the world they lived in. So they did the hard work for us, and their thoughts about nature, and reality, and God, have so profoundly influenced us, that we now take them for granted— but in ancient Greece it was all very new.

As the fifth century before Christ ended, a group of philosophers called the Sophists appeared. The word "Sophist" means either one who makes wise, or possibly one who deals in wisdom; and so these Itinerant teachers and lecturers criss-crossed the country making their living by trading in Sophia. Some of them were good teachers; some of them were not, and a lot of their wisdom came down to teaching quickness of wit in arguments, so their students could win a case in court or make points in a political debate. Many Sophists were regarded as too clever by half, and critical and subversive because they were prepared to follow an argument wherever it might lead them. When you go all out after truth, you cannot tell in advance that the truth will be what society would like it to be. The Sophist, Thrasymachus, for instance, argued that rulers and governments make laws to their own advantage and that there is no justice except in the interests of the stronger. Another Sophist, Callicles, argued that institutions and moral precepts were established not by gods, but by men like these as a matter of convenience, at least this is what Plato says Callicles and other Sophists thought.
Plato was an Athenian, born around 427 B.C. Among other things, he founded a school of philosophy called The Academy, which evolved into the first real university. This is a Roman mosaic of one of his classes, but Plato is best known for writing a number of Dialogues in which philosophical questions were discussed. Because he was a conservative spirit, Plato sometimes made the Sophists out to be more subversive than they were; he was particularly disturbed by their argument that man is the measure of all things, and that man has no way of knowing whether the gods really exist. But conservative as Plato was, he too, was going to subvert old ideas simply by teaching that men had to use their own brains, and come to conclusions based on observation and reasoning. This, after all, was what his teacher Socrates had taught him. Socrates, whom Plato loved, was probably the most notorious of the Sophists; even though he himself did not want to be considered one, and never accepted pay for his teaching as the Sophists did. Socrates favorite pastime was to argue with fellow Athenians, and sting them out of their conventions and accepted ideas. Socrates questioned everything ordinary people took for granted or preferred to leave unquestioned. Above all, he questioned some of the gods that his countrymen believed in. Greek art is filled with images of gods who kidnap, and lie, and steal, and cheat, and murder unjustly, and who commit adultery. If these things were bad in a man, how could they be good in a god?

And so Socrates said, "Better listen to your conscience, listen to the inner voice that tells you what is truly right; and if you don't know, keep asking questions of yourself and others until you find out." Now this kind of free-thinking approach was particularly disturbing to Athenians at the time because of what was happening to their city. Athens was at war, and the war was going badly.

By the middle of the fifth century B.C., Athens had become an empire with its member states circling the Aegean Sea, and this expansion led her into a series of wars culminating in the great Peloponnesian War, the war between Athens and the states of the Peloponnesus to the south of it. In 431 B.C., Athens was attacked by Sparta, her neighbor, and achieved a standoff. But instead of stopping there, she pursued an aggressive war of expansion in Sicily that led to a catastrophic defeat in 413 B.C., in which she lost some two-hundred ships, 4,500 of her own men, and ten times as many of her subjects and allies. And yet the fighting continued for another decade. Here's how the historian Thucydides who actually fought in the war described it: "The Peloponnesian War was a protracted struggle and attended by calamities such as Hellas had never known within a like period of time. Never were so many cities captured and depopulated, some by barbarians, others by Hellenes themselves fighting against one another; and several of them, after their capture, were repopulated by strangers." Never were exile and slaughter more frequent, whether in the war or brought about by civil strife. This endless and bloody war triggered rebellions throughout the Athenian empire until Athens was finally defeated in 404 B.C. In that year, Athens was forced to surrender unconditionally to Sparta, and its city walls were demolished as a symbol of total defeat.

Yet here in the midst of utter disaster, the Athenians were being told by this poisonous old man, Socrates, to question everything at a time when most people wanted only to lick their wounds, not pour salt in them. And so, after being barely tolerated for decades as an eccentric nuisance, Socrates was put on trial in 399 B.C. on specific charges of impiety, and for corrupting the young, but actually for asking too many unpleasant questions in a time of crisis. This is an eighteenth century version of how it all ended. Convicted by a very close vote because he wanted to be, Socrates was offered exile, but preferred a sentence of death by poison as a martyr to free inquiry.

Three hundred years after Socrates' death, Cicero, the Roman philosopher and statesman, Cicero said that, "Socrates had brought philosophy down from the heavens." But by wresting it away from the gods and bringing it down to earth, Socrates also helped precipitate a crisis in Greek religion. You might broadly define the crisis as a questioning of civic religion. Each polis had its civic gods, and its civic laws, and worshiping the ones, and obeying the others was part of being a citizen, part of being a member of a political community. But neither the gods nor the laws had much to say about morality, about real justice; let alone about the soul, or what happened to the soul after death. And those were precisely the issues that Socrates and the other Sophists were most concerned about. Is your first duty to civil law or to your conscience? If public and private duty clash, what are you supposed to do? Which is more important, the individual or the state? None of these questions has an obvious answer. The novelty was that they were being asked at all; and once you start asking questions, it's very hard to stop. You might even end by questioning the gods themselves.

For instance, the Sophists argued that if these traditional gods like Athena are inextricably linked to the city, and their worship is linked to the laws of the city, then the gods must vary from city to city because different cities have different laws—which means that gods like Poseidon here have only relative importance and no absolute validity, and what kind of god is a relative god?
As the philosopher Xenophanes said, "Mortals suppose that the gods are born and that they have voices, and bodies, and clothes like humans; but if oxen, or horses, or lions had hands and could draw with their hands and paint pictures as men do, they would portray their gods as having bodies like their own. Horses would portray them as horses, oxen like oxen." Ethiopians have gods with snub noses and black hair. Thracians have gods with gray eyes and red hair. Furthermore, you only had to look around in the streets to see that bad men prospered, and good men sometimes suffered unjustly, so that either everything is a matter of luck, and there are no gods, or else the gods are stupid, nasty, and unjust with a very twisted sense of humor.

Every Greek knew that the gods particularly enjoyed imposing tests on innocent sufferers like Oedipus here, who after being abandoned at birth was set up by the gods to kill his father and then marry his mother. How can you respect unjust gods? All you can do is bribe them, or appease them with sacrifices or prayers, but even that doesn't seem to work very well. As a young man in one of Plato's Dialogues concludes, "Either there are no gods, or if there are, they take no care of men."

Another set of difficult questions had to do with the order of the world. Greek philosophers of nature called physiocrats had been trying to answer the riddle of creation since the sixth century B.C. "Fish," said the philosopher Anaximander, "are the ancestors of human beings, who originated in water, and evolved through several stages." Xenophanes who died in 475 B.C., noticed fossils and pretty much understood what they were. And there were other attempts to develop a scientific approach to knowledge. Hippocrates, who founded a medical school, applied the new approach to what was called then the sacred disease; the common term for epilepsy. I do not believe that the sacred disease is any more divine or sacred than any other disease; but on the contrary has specific characteristics and a definite course. It's my opinion that those who first called this disease sacred were the sort of people we call witch doctors, faith healers, quacks, or charlatans. If the patient be cured, their reputation for cleverness is enhanced; if he dies, they can excuse themselves by explaining that the gods are to blame. At the same time mathematicians like Thales borrowed geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy from the Babylonians and Egyptians, and improved on them. They found that the application of geometrical rules could help to locate ships at sea, and stars in the heavens, and help to divide sun dials more accurately.

Thales himself predicted the eclipse of 585 B.C. He accompanied King Croesus of Lydia as his military engineer and advisor, and he diverted a river. Other sixth century engineers at Samos used geometry to plan a tunnel one-third of a mile long which conveyed water through a mountain. But even if the applications of the new sciences could be very practical, the discoveries had been made in pursuit of higher ends. The Greek philosophers thought that the universal truths of mathematics could reveal an immutable eternal reality behind the passing drama of everyday life. They believed that geometry could provide a model of timeless nature just as a pyramid was supposed to do. Plato suggested that the truths of geometry were not reasoned deductions from experiments, from figures that people drew or constructed, but that they were ideal memories--memories of the properties of ideal geometrical shapes that existed in some timeless realm which reason could barely apprehend, and Plato argued further that there was an eternal world of ideas, prototypes of the debased reflections of things that we glimpse here on earth. This theory, that we do not experience reality in the so-called real world, but only its dim shadow, this theory has haunted philosophy ever since.

At the same time, the physicists were also asking what was behind life? Did everything start with fire, or with water, or with some other material element? Thales thought it started with water which by successive evolution became the other elements. Anaximander, on the other hand, thought it started with a spiritual force, "nous" or the 'mind,' whose action on matter produced both movement and order.

From this idea there grew a tradition which regarded this "first principle," or if you like this "prime mover" of life, which regarded these as divine, in fact as gods: a cosmic god who wasn't just responsible for the creation of things and their order on earth, and in the skies, but who stood for the ultimate truth, justice, beauty, goodness, harmony that you could not find on earth, and that you could not find either among the traditional gods on Olympus.

This sort of transcendent god was rather abstract and hard to imagine, and so Plato tried to produce a more accessible version. He began with a view that ideal reality is perfect because it is immutable and changing. The objects that we see all around us, on the other hand, are inferior because they change all the time. A perfect object would not need to change, precisely because it was perfect. There was one kind of visible object, however, that was not inferior, and that was the heavenly bodies. They change, but they always change in the same way; their movement is always constant.
To Plato such regularity, such constancy were very special, and they could not happen simply by accident. They presupposed a moving soul endowed with mind; therefore, Plato reasoned there must be a divine mind that moves the heavens, and this mind is God.

At the same time, the traditional city gods like Athena and the civic religions were declining. That's because as the poleis themselves were declining during and after the Peloponnesian War, they were losing their autonomy becoming part of bigger states which told them what to do. And as the poleis's civic religions lost their hold, at least over the elite, the Platonic religion of a cosmic God kept increasing in influence. Plato in his dialogue, Timeas, suggested that the human soul was akin to the soul of the stars. We come from the stars, he argued, and after death we return to them, to the celestial city of the stars. It was a very attractive idea, and one which also had worldly implications, because if there be such a place as the celestial city--and it would have to be a city, because where else would civilized people live, then why should we not conceive its counterpart on earth? Less perfect naturally, but still something for the wise, educated man to strive for. And this became the prototype for what we now call the ivory tower. Whereas once a socially active life was the ideal, now the ideal becomes escape to the contemplative life. As the fourth century B.C. ends, Aristotle, as depicted in this Roman fresco, follows Plato in pointing to the value of the theoretical and celebrating the life of study, that the philosopher and scholar enjoy--the meditation upon eternal things.

By the time of Aristotle, who died in 322 B.C., Philip of Macedon, and his son Alexander had totally ended the autonomy of the Greek poleis. The earthly city no longer offered the kind of noble aim which a wise man might live for. And so the sage took refuge in the heavenly city. This is where he would find consolation and strength to bring the movements of the soul into harmony with the movements of the heavens. And so, the disillusioned citizens of Athens tried to make their escape towards the city of the sky. This religion of cosmic forces and the cosmic god was going to become part of the Greek Phi-Beta, the intellectual equipment that everyone who aspired to be educated had to have in the Hellenistic world of the third century B.C., and afterwards. So long after the third century B.C. in effect, that it is still with us today.

In our next program, we shall take a closer look at what happened when Greece was conquered by Alexander the Great, one of the most brilliant generals of all times, and a megalomaniac of genius. Until then . . .

#107 Alexander The Great

He sought greatness in everything he did. He conquered the known world in a few years and was thought to be more god than man. And when he died he left behind warring empires, a common basis of Greek culture and a memory that has fascinated men ever since.

Alexander The Great this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

In the year 401 B.C. a Persian prince raised a force, a very large force, of about twelve thousand Greek mercenaries to fight his older brother the king for the Persian throne. Now, the prince was killed in the first major battle and even though his Greek mercenaries defeated the huge Persian army, the Greeks found themselves in the middle of Persia very close to Babylon without any friends and without any leaders. They had to march a thousand miles to the Black Sea coast and then five hundred more miles along the coast to Byzantium across horrible terrain and fighting all the way—but they made it. And this epic long march persuaded both Greeks and non-Greeks that the mercenaries hoplite phalanx, this wedge formation of heavily armed infantry—that the phalanx was invincible; and they reasoned further that if only the Greek infantry had good cavalry support no power on earth could withstand them—a prediction that turned out to be as accurate as it seemed sweeping.

The story of these mercenaries who were known as the Ten Thousand was told by one of them, an Athenian soldier named Xenophon, and by the time Xenophon died around 355 B.C., a new power was rising in the ancient world that would bear out the inspiration of the Ten Thousands' famous march—the power of Macedon. The Macedonians were really Greeks, but the Greeks didn't consider them to be so, any more than sixteen century Scots were considered English. These are Macedonian ruins. Back in the fifth century before Christ, Macedonia was still a wild country with a feudal system of rural tribes and clans. A hereditary king had religious and military power over all this and over his people, at least in theory.
This is what remains of the royal palace. Although the Macedonian royal house and nobles were attracted by Greek culture and quite Hellenized, the land remained the backwater until mid-fourth century B.C. when a Macedonian king named Philip tamed the local warlords. He did it by subjecting all free men to conscription and by making them serve in regular royal troops under his own officers. Philip copied the military methods of these Greek soldiers but improved on them, combining the phalanx with light infantry, and more importantly, with a heavy cavalry that the Ten Thousand never had. The Macedonians could mount a formidable cavalry force because their country had great plains and broad estates where the nobles especially rode from their early youth. As the world had surmised fifty years before, no power on earth was able to stop them. Philip set out with his army to dominate or conquer most of the Greek cities and he succeeded brilliantly; not only because he had a superior fighting force highly integrated and very loyal to him, but also because the Greek poleis were divided, even more divided than usual. The Persians had been working hard to keep them that way so that they would continue to fight each other instead of the Persian empire.

Philip was able to beat the Greek poleis handily, but the only thing that could then unite them under his rule, was an appeal to them not as Athenians, or as Corinthians, but as Hellenes. As Philip knew well, to be a Greek in those days, was to be a free citizen as contrasted to a barbarian subject of a despot as the Persians were. It was to cherish the pride of Salamis and Platea, great victories over the Persians. Most important it was to aspire to a fuller vengeance on the invader of the past, the Persians again who still ruled the Greek cities of the near east.

There was also the lost wealth of those eastern cities to regain. And there were the precedents of myth and legend in which heroes like Hercules had done great deeds in the East. In fact, when Philip’s son, Alexander The Great, crossed into Asia in 334 B.C. he took a side trip to the site of ancient Troy to convince his public that the new Achilles, Alexander himself, was arming for the traditional feud between Greek and Asia. And so, from the beginning of the fourth century B.C., we find the idea growing among the Greeks of a war of retribution against the Persians, a war of conquest in Asia that would defuse internal conflict by turning Greek violence and energy outward from the homeland. Such a war could also open new areas for commercial expansion and for colonization. As it were, the Greeks were checked in the west by the power of Carthage, and they were encountering local resistance to their colonies in Italy. In fact, the Greek colonial world hadn’t grown since the seventh and the sixth centuries B.C., but it needed to grow because constant warfare so hurt the economy and especially the agriculture that it couldn’t support even a stagnant population. So Greece sent out some of its excess people, artisans like this blacksmith, the young and adventurous, artists and scholars and engineers and traders. But it founded no new cities and it found no real solution to its problems of over population except for war.

All these arguments for a war against the Persians were invoked by the Macedonians but they didn’t always work because many Greeks liked the Macedonians even less than they liked the Persians, who were further away and not as familiar. Still, as long as Philip and his son Alexander proclaimed themselves champions of Hellenism, even if they couldn’t talk some cities into supporting them, at least they could shame them into staying neutral. The Macedonians also worked hard to intimidate the Greek mercenaries who were in the habit of selling themselves to the highest bidder, which was dangerous because the great king of Persia could bid a lot higher than Philip and Alexander could. But the mercenaries quickly got the message when they were declared traitors to the national cause, to the Hellenic cause, and massacred or sent off to work in the mines as slaves, which was a lot worse than being killed. And so, a national war to conquer the Persian Empire in Asia became the grand design.

Although King Philip was assassinated in 336 B.C. before he could carry it out, his son Alexander proved equal to the task. Alexander, who was twenty when he succeeded his father, was a pupil of Aristotle. He had read Xenophon, and he knew what could be done and what could be won in Asia. So, in 334 B.C. he lead the Greek and Macedonian forces across the Hellespont into Asia Minor. He then overthrew the Persian Empire; he conquered all the lands from Libya to Afghanistan. He created a Greco-Macedonian empire that would spread Greeks and Hellenism all over the east and he did all this in only eleven years, after which he died of a fever in Babylon—aged thirty-two or thirty-three.

Alexander was truly one of the greatest generals of all time and a megalomaniac of genius. Time has softened his more brutal aspects but it’s worth remembering that the ruthless Macedonian general, Cassander, who knew Alexander as a young man, could never pass his statue without shuddering. Because Alexander’s conquests seemed impossible, everybody except those who knew him thought he was more than a hero. He was a god. Soon Alexander decided that he should be treated as a god, which was also rather convenient because it fitted in with oriental traditions where the divinity of a king was the basis of his authority. One of Alexander’s bequests to history would be the memory of his megalomaniac ambition and the leader-cult that grew up around him. It would later
inspire ambitious and ruthless men who wanted to equal his achievements—men like Julius Caesar and Napoleon. Another aspect of this extraordinary man was the way he appears to behave as a philosopher king of the kind that Plato described and that Aristotle may have trained him to be. Alexander made sure that philosophers and scientists would be part of his expeditions to observe and record everything they could. And he sought greatness in everything he did. When he burnt down the Persian royal palace at Persepolis in retaliation for the Persians burning of Athens a century and a half before, he followed it up with a mass marriage between Persian maidens and Greek nobles, a symbol of the fusion he hoped to accomplish of Greeks and other peoples in order to create one great everlasting empire. But reality couldn’t be bent to obey Alexander’s dream. The worlds his conquests brought together were too different and when he died they split apart. These new empires and the culture they represented were neither Greek nor Asian but rather a bit of both, which is why they are described not as Hellenic, not purely Greek, but as Hellenistic.

The subsequent period called the Hellenistic Age spans the three eventful centuries between the death of Alexander in 323 B.C. and the death in 30 B.C. of Cleopatra, who was descended from one of Alexander’s generals. It was an age that looks remarkably like our own time. We find the same reversion from representative institutions to authoritarian regimes; the same sense of psychological and esthetic fragmentation; the same anti-rationalist trends, the same self-absorbed interest in the self; the same obsessive pursuit of affluence, exotic cults, peculiar fads, astrology, magic, eroticism; the same preoccupation with bigness; the same detachment from the home town, with a concomitant but not very comforting feeling that the whole cosmos is your polis; the same social conflicts and class wars and colonialism and wars of national liberation designed to expel foreign oppressors and to allow the locals to oppress each other; the same bureaucracy more interested in making and keeping rules rather than in making things more productive or more efficient; the same retreat from political involvement; the same cringing sense of depersonalization in the big cities, in Megalopolis, a place of which name actually exists in Greece, in Arcadia. So, let’s take a closer look at this strangely familiar period.

The states that Alexander’s generals founded in the Hellenistic Age, like that Ptolemy in Egypt or Seleucids in Babylon; these states were traditional monarchies highly regulated and bureaucratic, but the cities and the royal courts and the armies and the higher officials were mostly Greek with cosmopolitan Greek values. Although the Greeks and Macedonians intermarried with the local people and a lot of the locals were Hellenized, none of this integration went very deep. The difference was too great between the people in the relatively sophisticated, relatively free, literate Greek-speaking urban centers and the people in the unfree countryside, those immense regions where the king exercised direct authority as absolute master over his servile subjects. Greeks were reluctant to accept the authority of monarchs who demanded adoration in the oriental fashion and they didn’t believe in their divinity or infallibility either. Instead the Greeks continued to maintain that law and institutions were products of reason, not of some divine revelation. So there was no true cultural synthesis in the Hellenistic Age. As you can see from this Roman fresco of Syria on the right contemplating Macedonia, the two cultures remained mostly suspicious and contemptuous of one another even though they lived side by side.

One way of looking at the Greek and Macedonian colonies during this period is to compare them with the settlements of the British in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both cases an expatriate ruling class in an ocean of foreigners keeps the flag flying in their clubs and contumments with their peculiar social rituals which are designed to mark not synthesis but distinction and superiority. This kind of separatism could provide no basis for real integration, nor was any kind of integration desired. But it did offer impressive models for the surrounding population, just as British laws and administrative practices and the English language and even cricket have been taken over and adapted in India and throughout the rest of the empire which the British hold no more.

Unintegrated as these Greek and Macedonian cities were in the Hellenistic Age, they were going to be vehicles of Hellenization spreading Greek culture, institutions, ideas, styles and language as far away from Greece as Afghanistan and India. Let me give you an example: these are the ruins of a Greek city on the northern border of Afghanistan at Icanoon. We know that the men who founded the city probably came from Thessaly in central Greece. And from the inscription on the pillar we know also that another Greek, probably a philosopher, made an extraordinary journey here presumably because he knew he would find communities interested in hearing him lecture. In this particular city which was only excavated about twenty years ago, there was a gymnasium, that very Greek institution of culture and training where youths met for exercise and discussion, and there was a large administration area which contained the library. This papyrus document was found in the library ruins and it’s written in Greek. And here is the temple inside the city walls and the residential area with mosaic floors, and all sorts of things that typify a Greek city.
And these Greek institutions and Greek traditions continued strong here at the end of the world until the city was destroyed by nomads from the steppes in the late second century. So this is how the Greeks exported their urban culture throughout the Hellenistic world—a world which grew to be larger and more closely linked than anything before it.

When Alexander's wars of conquest were over, he had quadrupled the size of the Greek's known world and that gave a great impetus to travel and trade. Most of the overland trade went by caravan over tracks beaten hard by the hooves of pack animals. But the Persian kings had also built an impressive post road which ran fifteen hundred miles from Sardis on the coast to their capital at Susa. It was lined with stables, with hosteries, with forts. During the Hellenistic Age, roads and tracks were used mostly by soldiers and officials but they also improved the movement of goods when these couldn't be shipped by water, which was, of course, much easier. And this trade was going to grow tremendously because the wealth of rulers and of cities increasingly depended on exchange with other regions. In fact, Hellenistic rulers were really merchant princes. There were trade expeditions to Africa and Arabia and India for elephants and incense and spices and slaves. The size of merchant ships kept growing as well. Syracuse in Sicily even launched a ship with a capacity of 4,500 tons. And the circulation of money grew too. This is a silver coin from Phoenicia, and here is one from Syracuse. At the same time a Greek dialect called the "koine" was providing a common language from Gibraltar to the Caspian sea which greatly facilitated trade and the spread of Hellenistic culture as well. A Greek intellectual like this physician could feel equally at home in Alexandria, which was in Egypt, or in Syracuse in Sicily. Actors had international associations with chapters in every important city like the Guild of Dionysiac artists. And athletes joined such groups as the International Boxing Association. And if you wanted to worship goddesses like Isis here, you could find their temples here ever you went. And so, in the two hundred years before the birth of Christ, ideas, fashions and goods were spreading remarkably fast.

Ironically, it was the decay of the classical Greek polis so admired for centuries, it was this decay that gave birth to this new era. It brought about an openness to the outside world and the beginning of a certain cosmopolitan, even human, solidarity. And this decay of the polis which also undermined the classical disciplines with their order, with a certain rigor or at least a certain impersonality, this decay of civic bonds and discipline permitted—encouraged a new spirit of eclecticism that is highly characteristic of the Hellenistic Age. We shall see how this changed the way in which people looked at their world then, and the way in which we look at our world now in our next program. So, please join us then.

#108 The Hellenistic Age

It was a time rather like ours, of large impersonal states and individuals who felt lost in them; a time of consumption, brutality, sophistication, experimentation, and trying to find justification and consolation in religious cults.

The Hellenistic Age this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugene Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended with the waning of the independent Greek cities, the polis, and the decay of their classical dissidents in the three centuries before Christ. But this was not, as you might expect, an era of decline. On the contrary once the grip of the polis was weakened a new spirit of openness arose in the Hellenistic Age, a spirit of experimentation and diversity. The most striking example of this was in art. The artists of the classical period imposed standards that were outside and beyond the change and decay that are part of human life. But the artists of the Hellenistic Age tried to embrace those very qualities of humanity that go with change, and with a variety of life.

Classical perfection was pure, austere, unchanging. The artists of classical and pre-classical Greece had aimed at forms that could be regarded as timeless and ideal; calm, fixed in their perfection. But then everything loosened up. The statues of the Hellenistic Age move like human beings; they express human emotions; they strive for greater realism, for movement, for sensuality. This is the art of a society that is sufficiently pleased with itself not to want to imitate gods and heroes. Fortune is no longer enthroned in stiff majesty, she sits like a normal woman. Aphrodite flows and curves in a sensuous movement. Victory alights on the prow of a ship and you can feel the wind pressing the folds of her dress against her body. And then, all this technical virtuosity becomes exaggerated in statues like this one of Laocoön and his sons entangled in what appears to be a giant strand of pasta, but which is actually a snake that goddess Athena sent to kill them. In this respect the Hellenistic Greeks were rather like our-
selves, admiring moderation, but often going to extremes. But if much of this art with its Baroque convolutions and grotesque sugary pathos is less admired than its classical predecessors, its also more natural, more dramatic, more dynamic. And, it is also more inclined to historical references. This is the first age of museums, collections, libraries, private and public, and all archaeology. So what some denounced at the time as fragmentation and alienation in a vast impersonal state, others appreciate as greater independence in a more open, less constricting society. Polis directed art goes out, individual directed art comes in. We get portraits in busts and paintings that are not idealized but lifelike. We get landscapes, and still lifes, which would have been completely irrelevant when only gods and the poles mattered. And now the center of literary life is not Athens, as it had been for so long, but the new Hellenistic city of Alexandria, which produces psychological speculation and biography, and autobiography.

In this theatrical scene, lovers struggle not against gods, but against parents and rivals; and the references are not to higher values but to wills, and downries, and stolen letters, as in modern entertainment. And the public also wants happy endings, not just the inevitability grim misadventures of classical Greek tragedy. There is a wider market for art now, and there is a greater variety in public taste. It’s less grand, less noble than that of the fifth or sixth century B.C. It mirrors a more vulgar society; insecure, uneasy, excited, but livelier, much like our own.

Another familiar aspect of the Hellenistic world is that one’s social experience in the community had shifted from an accessible human scale where you could affect your environment, if you wanted, to a fragmented, depersonalized society. If you wanted to lead the good life, you could no longer say as Plato said, "Let's make a good society, good society make good men, good men lend good lives." And if you wanted to play a part in the world you could no longer just stay in your polis because the polis mattered less and less. You had to enter the service of one of the great kings who ruled in Macedonia, or Egypt, or Syria. These kings now ruled so many different people that they were practically forced to take over the oriental tradition of a god-like king because that alone could bind so many different territories, and tribes, and cities up to their rule. Even the lesser kings had pretensions based on Alexander's claims to divinity. But such pretensions were completely contrary to Greek values, so something had to give. And if it wasn’t going to be the kings, it was going to have to be the Greeks.

In the fourth century B.C., when Alexander wrote back to Greece asking to be worshiped as a god, the Spartans, for one, took it calmly with a mixture of practicality and skepticism. "If he wants to be a god," they said, "let him be God." You can see where this led by looking at Antiochus the First of Commagene, a Hellenistic king of the first century B.C. When he built his tomb at Nemrodag, which is now in Turkey, Antiochus cut off the top of a mountain 8,200 feet high and had it replaced with a tumulus, a grave mound four hundred feet high with colossal statues of Greek and Persian gods in whose midst he sits enthroned, a god among the gods. Hubris on this scale was a radical break with the Greek tradition of moderation. It also offended Greek ideas of the dignity of free men subject only to the laws of the Polis. But the days of the autonomous polis were long gone, now the power rested with the kings.

So the problem arose, how was a free-thinking man supposed to adapt himself to the new situation? What should he do if he wanted to live as a good man, an honest man, stand by his principles? Should he remain aloof, should he act; and, if he was going to act, by what rules should he act? This is the problem of the various Hellenistic schools of philosophy; the problems, the problem they had to face. And while they answered it differently, they all agreed that man must find the source of freedom and justice within himself. Freedom in classical times consisted of obeying the law of your city and its gods. But in the Hellenistic Age, it would have to consist of an internal freedom that comes from being at one with the cosmic order and with oneself. The wise man is free, even if he is a slave, as long as he can establish and retain his eternal freedom. If he is his own master, then he has no master. No human can intimidate him. Passions, fears, greed, desires cannot shake his equanimity. He doesn’t feel the slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes; indeed, he learns not to worry about chance, fate, or fortune at all because he is more autonomous than any polis could be.

The Cynics, whose best known representative was the philosopher Diogenes, had one of the many recipes for achieving such autonomy and detachment. Essentially, the Cynics believed in being poor, rude, and unconventional; dropping out of society, avoiding family or any kind of property; and begging to stay alive. Diogenes, himself, lived in a barrel, or whatever other shelter he could find in the Athens streets. This is a sixteenth century depiction of a famous story about him in which Alexander comes to ask if there is anything he can do for the old man; at which point, Diogenes asks him to get out of his light. This is one way to avoid fate: give up everything and be rude to others. Another way is to avoid the others and the world, except for a few kindred souls and the basic essentials you need to lead a civilized life. Avoid pain, avoid worry, and the anxieties that come with worldly interests. Seek only pleasure. The word “hedonism” is derived from the Greek word for pleasure; but these were not vulgar pleasures of body, but rather the satisfaction derived from having your mind at rest. This was the doctrine of the philosopher
Epicurus, who lived from 341 to 270 B.C. Since his doctrine recommended dropping out of the world, it never had much political or historical influence. Epicurus' more successful rival was Zeno, who lived from 335 to 263 B.C. It's significant that, where Epicurus taught his philosophy in a private garden, Zeno taught his in a public arcade, a stora like this one. And Stoicism, the name of Zeno's philosophy, is much more about public concerns than Epicurism is because it teaches that internal freedom comes from being in tune with the order of the universe. "Perceive the cosmic order," says Zeno, "grasp the ruling will of the universe; then submit to it, and you are free."

That, at least, was the Stoics' view of spiritual autonomy. But they also believed that you couldn't just ignore the world outside, because it was a reflection, however pale, of the cosmic order; and the wise man, they taught, conceived a relationship between the two. It's the wise man's duty to restore and improve order in the world around him, to bring the everyday world in line with the cosmos, to counsel the despots who have power to act, and so to turn kings into philosophers. So, where the Cynics were anarchists and the Epicureans were passive contemplators, the Stoics were conservative political activists who, rather as the Puritans were going to do, cheerfully took on the burdens of the world.

Yet, however reluctant the Stoic appears, his philosophy is positive because he teaches that a higher order governs the world; and that it's the duty of good men to uphold the nobler values which are their own reward.

The third century biographer of Greek philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, listed the principles of Stoic philosophy: he wrote, "The end may be defined as life in accordance with nature;" or in other words, in accordance with our own human nature, as well as that of the universe; a life in which we refrain from every action forbidden by the law common to all things; that is to say, the right reason which pervades all things. Now this Stoic belief in a moral law of nature, comprehending all people, was then translated into Roman legal terms and it became the sanction behind large scale government and it was passed on to the Middle Ages and beyond. And Stoic beliefs also made a major contribution to Christianity as you can see from the works of Epictetus, a Greek philosopher who lived from 60 to 120 A.D. This is what he wrote: "You, o' man, are God's principal work."

"You are a distinct portion of the essence of God and contain a certain part of Him in yourself. Why then are you ignorant of your noble birth? It is within yourself that you carry Him, and you do not observe that you profane Him by impure thoughts, and unclean actions." In the meantime, however, there is another, darker aspect of the Hellenistic period: the persistence and popularity of primitive mystery religions.

These women are participants in Dionysus cult rites. Only the initiated learn the secrets to the mystery of life, and so only they are afforded salvation. Whether these mystery cults worship Isis or Sc. apis from Egypt, Mithras from Persia, or others, they all had this in common: they were the business of the individual, not the polis. They took no account of the political responsibilities, and they bound people together in communities of worshipers quite independent of the state's religion.

The simplest of these were the good old earth religions like the Eleusinian cult you see depicted here, or the Dionysiac cults. This is Dionysus himself, the god of fertility, wine, and drama. In all of the cults, a young king appears who is the bearer of spring and a new summer. He appears as the savior of the earth, which winter had made cold and lifeless, and which all the pollutions of the past had doomed to barrenness. And by an extrapolation, the young king is also the savior and purifier of mankind--from all kind of evils--bringing a new age to the world. Then there is the lady, the old earth or fertility goddess, the mother or sister or wife of the savior, who is often both a virgin and a mother, and who appears all around the Mediterranean in a variety of shapes and names. Lastly, there are the heavenly bodies: the sun seen here in his chariot, the moon, the stars represented by these boys who dive out of sight when the dawn comes. Over the centuries this worship came gradually into contact with a more definite sun worship of Persia. And eventually it brought us the cult of Mithras, the unconquered sun, who is seen here slaughtering a bull to guarantee the return of the seasons. Mithras became particularly popular in Rome in the second century and proved to be the chief rival of Christianity. After the sun, there were the planets in their seven spheres surrounding the earth. Their movement reflected the will of providence; their power affected everything, even the days of the week.

Next to these heavenly bodies, life and human endeavor are a vague; so the religion of later antiquity becomes absorbed in plans of escape from the prison or earth, her sister planets, and the other lesser stars. Men and women are the sport of fate and chance, to say nothing of the native ills and demons of the earth. But if you could move away, past the sphere of the earth, past the sphere of the moon, and of the other rulers of the universe, then you could get to the sphere of the ultimate god, whatever his name may be, where there is true being and freedom--and more than freedom, the ultimate union with God.
The kind of knowledge which would enable you to get to this point must be taught. Men must be initiated as in this ceremony in the temple of Isis; so here you have priests and prophets and teachers. But, above all, you have the figure of a redeemer, a godly savior, who is connected with figures like Attis or Adonis in Asia Minor, or Osiris in Egypt, Dionysios in Greece, and the special Jewish idea of the Messiah who would save the chosen people. This redeemer has various names, particularly that of Christos, of Anointed; and above all he is, in a very profound sense, Man, or the Son of Man, even though he is also a god. The logic goes this way: since the ultimate unseen God, spirit though he is, made man in his own image, it follows that God is himself man. He is the real, the ultimate, perfect, eternal man of whom all bodily people are just feeble copies. So this God and ideal, or first man, is the Father; while the Redeemer, the Savior, is his son, the image of the Father or the Son of Man. Usually this Savior comes down from Heaven to save mankind. And then, when His work is done, He goes back to Heaven to sit by the side of the Father in glory. And thereafter, the chosen people He has saved will be able to join Him.

Of course, you can see the similarities with later Christian doctrine; but, you must notice too, that these early mystery cults, including the mystery of Gnostics who influenced some early Christians and against whom other Christians reacted, that all these mystery cults were exclusive, just as the Hebrew religion was exclusive. They were a set of cliques of chosen people, each with their particular contract or password to salvation. Whereas, as we shall see in due course, the Christians were going to realize the universal implication of these cults in a much more effective way.

For the moment I would just point out this: It's impossible not to see these religious developments as emotional aids for men and women who without them felt that they faced the world alone, and who found their native powers were simply not up to the ordeal. But out of this process there grew a new kind of self-consciousness, a sense of personal privacy and internality, such as the Greek of the Classical Age never possessed. Men and women were slowly making souls for themselves; and, they were making churches, too whose values and rights and institutions stood for the first time outside the political community, for better or for worse. Next time I shall talk about the rise of Rome.

#109 The Rise of Rome

The Roman Legions—they would march across the Mediterranean world making new conquests for the glory and profit of Rome. How did a culture that so stressed discipline and seriousness of purpose become a synonym for conspicuous consumption and public display?

The Rise of Rome this time on the The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

At the beginning of the fifth century B.C., when the Greeks were busy throwing back the Persians, a small, barely civilized city-state to the west of Greece was fighting for its life. It sat on a peninsula that was dominated by Gaulish tribes in the north, Etruscan warriors in the center, Greek cities to the south. But within two hundred years this insignificant city called Rome grew up to become master of all Italy, and was on the verge of conquering the entire Mediterranean world. It would prove so successful that its myth would endure for two thousand years—even into our own century.

In 800 A.D., Charlemagne had himself crowned "Roman Emperor," centuries after Rome's empire had collapsed. In 1804, Napoleon had himself crowned in the same tradition, and he called his heir the "King of Rome." Even the Russian Tsars, like Peter here, claimed to rule from the "Third Rome," better known as Moscow. And in this century in Rome itself, the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini would name his system of government "fascism" after the emblem of authority of ancient Roman magistrates. This extraordinary myth began, as most myths do, in a rather modest way. Rome, like so many other ancient centers, was blessed by geography. The city lay on a fertile plain that could support a relatively dense population with its grain, vegetables, and fruit. Rome also had the advantage of straddling the Tiber River just fifteen miles from the sea where boats could still come upriver. At this point there was first a ford, then a bridge, and across it ran the main north-south road and all the trade that came with it. The bridge was so important to the Romans that it was considered sacred and the official charged with its upkeep was sacred as well. He was called the Pontifex, and his title lives on in the title of the Roman Catholic Pope, the Pontiff.
So Rome began as a market town in the farming community. This is a sign from a green grocer's shop whose owner likely shared his neighbor's tough-minded, practical, conservative outlook. The virtues the Romans admired were all related to discipline and self-discipline. They believed in "Pietas"—respect for established authority and tradition. They believed in "Fides"—being true to your responsibilities; in "Religio"—the common belief that bind men together; and above all in "Gravitas"—the sober seriousness that marks a real man. Even the word "Virtus" means manliness.

Early Roman society was also strictly patriarchal, as middle eastern Greek Dionysus of Heliopolis, explained it. The lawgiver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, even during his whole life, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death. And this even though the son already engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth.

As for women, they didn't think much of them or about them. A Roman in the first century B.C. wrote to his wife, "If, good luck to you—you bear offspring, if it is male let it live, if it is female expose it," which of course meant leaving it to die.

One gets the clear impression that there wasn't much kidding around with ancient Romans, as you can see for yourself. They disliked disorder and luxury which meant excess. The legend of how Rome was founded is a case in point. These are Romulus and Remus, twin brothers who were raised by a she-wolf. Remus refused to follow Romulus' strict orders to behave while the sacred boundaries of Rome were being traced. He jumped over them as if they didn't matter, and Romulus killed him.

The moral of this story is that serious things should not be taken lightly. True virtue subordinates the person to the city, the individual to the state. On this solid base of Gravitas, or true gravity, the Roman Republic was founded in the sixth century B.C. The Romans were a conservative people and so they wanted strong leaders, but not too strong. So the city's wealthy aristocrats, the patricians, who pretty much monopolized state office, elected two of their kind to the executive office of consul, but only for one year. These consuls had vast powers, but they were constrained by law and custom and by the power of the senate, the main legislative branch. Since the consuls left office to sit as senators for the rest of their lives, it was a foolish consul who totally ignored or defied the will of the senate.

The Roman army also mirrored the values of this hard, embittered society. Every soldier provided his own equipment, which meant that he had to have a farm or some kind of property so he could have the necessary resources to buy a shield and helmet, a sword, a spear, and a pack on his back. If you didn't have all this, you didn't get into the army. So, the landless poor did not fight. They were called the proletariat because their only contribution to the state was their proles or offspring. They didn't pay taxes, and they had no say in how the city was run. Commoners in general were known as plebeians, and they could be small farmers, artisans, servants of the patrician landowners. For two centuries the more prosperous among them would struggle for political and social rights with mixed success, but it was their army service that gave them their greatest bargaining power. The primary attraction of life in the army was a very important fringe benefit, the spoils of war. And the potential for these spoils was going to increase dramatically after a war in the fourth century B.C. with the Samnites, a people who lived in the mountains to the southeast of Rome. At the beginning of the war with the Samnites, the Roman army fought like this, in the phalanx, a tight formation with much room to maneuver. But then they switched to smaller, self-contained units of one hundred and twenty men called maniples. Three maniples made a cohort of three hundred and sixty men, and ten cohorts made a legion. These smaller units could operate in a checkerboard pattern that allowed for a lot of flexibility, but they also made greater demands on the individual soldier, and they could be perfected only by strict training and discipline. So these Roman infantries were invariably better trained than their opponents. The legions proved so superior in discipline and determination to the crude troops of Rome's neighbors, that by the middle of the third century B.C., the city on the Tiber controlled nearly all of the peninsula.

It was then that the Romans did something that turned their military advantage into an even greater political advantage. Instead of slaughtering or enslaving their defeated enemies as was the fashion—the Romans made them allies. They took some of their land to settle Romans and they didn't treat them all alike because the Senate's maxim was "divide and rule." But on the whole, each conquered Italian state was allowed to run its own affairs. All that Rome asked was control of the state's foreign policy and military aid in time of war. It was an extremely liberal arrangement for those days, and it was eventually followed by the extension of Roman citizenship throughout the rest of Italy. So Rome gained the attachment of neighboring states in a way that no Greek city ever managed.
These attachments were then cemented by building first-class roads which provided concrete bonds quite literally, where ideological bonds might not have sufficed. Examples of Roman skills in civil engineering are everywhere you look in Italy today. This is an ancient sewer, and these are the ruins of a Roman aqueduct. They serve to remind us that technology can have long-lasting political uses as well as practical ones. By 270 B.C. or so, their last enemies of the peninsula, the Greek cities in the south, had been brought to heel. But once Rome controlled this territory, she was going to be drawn into the wider Mediterranean’s sphere and would collide with the Carthaginians, the Greek’s chief business rivals and enemies. This is an artist’s conception of Carthage as it might have been in the third century B.C., when it went to war with Rome. What had begun more than five hundred years earlier as a Phoenician colony in North Africa had become the greatest naval power in the western Mediterranean. In Rome, the senate was under increasing pressure to protect the southern cities from Carthage, after the Carthaginians got mixed up in a local war in Sicily, thus upsetting the balance of power. The senate was reluctant, but then it gave in to popular demand in 264 B.C., and the first of three Punic Wars began—”Punic” meaning Phoenician. The wars with Carthage would do two very important things to Rome. First, in order to beat a naval power, Rome had to become one which it did. These are Roman ship builders helping Rome rule the waves as every Mediterranean empire must, whether it’s Athens two centuries before or Turkey seventeen hundred years later. Like all sailors in the ancient Mediterranean, the Romans used galleys propelled by rowers. Galleys were invented by the Egyptians who could sail down the Nile but needed to row back up river.

By the time the First Punic war was over twenty-four years later, Rome had made Sicily a province and was soon to add Corsica and Sardinia and move into Spain, a Carthaginian stronghold, which brings us to the second result of the Punic Wars. All this territory was won by Rome’s fleet which was built to win a single war but which ended by gaining an empire. The Romans had never meant to be drawn so far away from home, but the fleet ensured that they would be. After Rome defeated Carthage, she went on to defeat the Macedonians, the Greeks, the Asian heirs of Alexander the Great, and finally Egypt as well. But there were some close calls. The Second Punic War began in 218 B.C. when Hannibal, a Carthaginian general, set out from Spain to invade Italy. Since the Romans now controlled the sea, Hannibal had to go overland through a thousand miles of hostile territory. When he made it across the first obstacle, the Pyrenees, he had about 40,000 soldiers and thirty-seven African elephants which were meant to strike terror in the hearts of Rome. By the time he crossed the Alps, however, he had less than half his troops and almost no elephants. Nevertheless, Hannibal was so brilliant a general that he beat the Romans to a pulp. He outwitted them, outfought them, and by 216 B.C., he was camping under the walls of Rome itself.

If Hannibal had succeeded as well in his political strategies as he had in his military strategies, the history of Western Civilization might have been quite different. But when he called on the other Italian cities to join him against Rome, they turned a deaf ear. Rome’s liberal policy toward them had paid off. While Hannibal hung around looking for support, the Roman fleet cut off his supplies and then landed troops first in Spain, then in North Africa near Carthage itself. Hannibal was forced to return home to defend his territory, and Rome was saved.

When Carthage foolishly went to war one more time two generations later, the angry Romans obliterated the city, literally tearing it down. The Punic Empire was no more. By this time, Rome itself had profoundly changed in all sorts of ways. For one thing, the old Roman infantry which had been formed by annual levies was replaced by professional infantry which signed up for long tours of duty and was paid by the state or by generals, from the booty they captured. So you could use the troops for long campaigns, which were more attractive now because they could pay for themselves and even return a profit. What had begun as a quest to defend the Roman borders against Carthage and against other hostile states eventually became a brutal search for territory and riches.

This is how Plutarch describes a Roman victory celebration or triumph: "The triumph lasted for three days. On the first, which was scarcely long enough for the sight, would be seen the statues, pictures, colossal images taken from the enemies, drawn upon two hundred and fifty chariots. On the second day was carried in a great many waggons, the finest and richest armor of the Macedonians, both of brass and steel. On the third day, first came the trumpeters, who did not sound as they were wont in a procession of solemn entry, but such a charge as the Romans used when they encouraged the soldiers to fight; followed by young men wearing frocks with ornamented borders who led to the sacrifice one hundred and twenty oxen." The more enemies to defeat, of course, the more jobs for soldiers and for the patricians and their hangers-on as well, who would be sent out to govern and tax and squeeze the provinces. This became the basis of Roman foreign policy, a very different spirit from the sensible federal approach they had followed in Italy itself. The spreading empire had other effects. It brought Rome into close contact with more sophisticated cultures. It suggested new tastes, new fashions, new luxuries unknown to the sober, frugal, older generations. The loot of a dozen legions was now flowing into Rome, and young gentlemen were learning to admire beautiful things and to collect them and to talk about them. While old gentlemen deplored the deca-
dence this represented, display and conspicuous consumption and ‘luxus’ at its worst; there were lots of Romans making money in the second and first centuries B.C., and quite naturally they wanted to show off their wealth. This is also when expensive homes began to include a vomitorium, a room where you go and vomit what you have just eaten so you could go back out and eat and drink another meal. It’s hard to imagine a better example of conspicuous consumption.

This is what the tribune Sallust had to say about the morals of his time: “As soon as wealth came to be a mark of distinction and an easy way to renown, to military commands, to political power, virtue began to decline. Poverty was now looked on as a disgrace, and a blameless life as a sign of ill nature. Riches made the younger generation a prey to luxury, avarice, pride. Squandering with one hand what they grabbed with the other, they set small value on their own property while they coveted that of others. Honor and modesty, all laws human and divine, were alike disregarded in a spirit of recklessness and intemperance.

Conspicuous consumption in large scale display also became a part of politics. In 65 B.C., Julius Caesar paid for four hundred lions and three hundred and twenty pairs of gladiators to fight and murder each other in one single show, all to amuse the public and gain political support. And along this main road, the famous Appian Way, you could see six thousand crosses, each with its own crucified rebel slave.

This new interest in public display also affected art, honorific statues, portraits, historical paintings, political advertising of all kinds were everywhere. Beauty now fulfilled a public function and was heavily involved in propaganda and publicity. This concern for impressing people explains why architecture becomes the Roman art par excellence. The ideal empire would be manifested in great, solemn, spectacular buildings like these: temples, palaces, triumphal arches and columns reflecting the grandeur of Rome and sometimes delusions of grandeur. Colossal pride made for colossal proportions, as the Colosseum, Rome’s huge stadium attests—the greater the proportions, the greater the power of Rome; the richer the decorations, the richer the Roman people seemed destined to become.

So even if you were a poor Roman, you could still participate vicariously in this orgy of conspicuous consumption and self-congratulation. But was it enough? For a while, yes; but eventually the strain of gaining and then holding on to such a huge amount of territory was going to take its toll on the republic, especially on its poorer citizens. We shall see how in our next program, which is about the Roman Empire.

#110 The Roman Empire

In the first century B.C., the Roman Republic was plunged into civil war. Powerful generals and their private armies fought for control of the state—until one man stood victorious, the absolute master of the Mediterranean world.

The Roman Empire this time on the Western Tradition.

And now UCLA professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

When we left Rome at the end of the second century B.C., it was triumphant in its growing wealth and power; but if you were an ordinary Roman there was also a great deal to be worried about. The wars of expansion into Greece and Asia had dealt a terrible blow to the small freehold farmers who were the mainstay of the Roman state. Those who went off to war returned to find their farms gone to pot, and they were the lucky ones. A lot of men never returned at all.

Once back home, the survivors had trouble reestablishing their holdings. Cheap grain was now pouring in from the provinces, the same provinces ironically that the farmer-soldiers had helped to conquer. With so much grain now available on the market, prices plummeted. Much of the farmer’s land was sold to other uses anyway, raising cattle or growing grapes or olives. And all of these could be worked cheaper on much larger spreads by slaves provided in great numbers and who furnished hard labor in return for bare subsistence. The family farmer could not compete. The rich, who found the capital to buy up the small farms got richer, while the farmers got poorer, and a lot of them sold out to large landowners. They moved into the city to swell the number of proletarians, to live on the bounty of the state, and to be manipulated by the politicians.
Cicero, the statesman and philosopher, was advised by his brother to, "Flatter endlessly, this is wrong and shameful in ordinary life, but necessary in running for office. Let the voters say and think that you know them well, that you greet them by name, that you are generous and open-handed. If possible, accuse your competitors of having a bad reputation for crime, vice or bribery." And so, by the late second century B.C., social unrest had become a serious problem. The displaced and needy masses were pressured by the rich trying to squeeze as much as possible out of them, and this included the conservative Senate which was indifferent to their plight.

The poor of Rome had few political options. Constitutionally, authority lay in the senate and the people, but practically, the state was run by the senate alone. And this august body with its massive authority and responsibility was really a municipal council that had been propelled into governing half the known world. It was simply not equipped for the job. Most senators just wanted the world to stand still but it wouldn't stand still, it never does. While the senators could handle foreign problems by simply throwing soldiers at them, social and economic problems were beyond them. In 133 B.C., Tiberius Gracchus, the noble grandson of the man who defeated Hannibal, took up the cause of the poor. He tried to limit the size of large estates and to provide land for the landless, but he was murdered by a group of conservative senators and their followers, beaten to death with chairs. His brother Caius Gracchus tried to carry on his work, but he too was murdered.

It appeared that the senate with its determination to keep the status quo had triumphed. But in fact, the political landscape had been changed by the Gracchi brothers and their followers. For the first time in Roman history, a popular party had grown up to challenge the authority of the senate. But this was not a blow for democracy as some might expect. On the contrary, the situation was made to order for men like Julius Caesar, who knew how to use and manipulate class hatred and social unrest for their own careers. Caesar was one of several outstanding generals who were also politicians, men who married politics to the army in the first century before Christ. Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and Caesar, they would all become dictators in turn, either in the name of the people or of the senate and so-called tradition. It didn't seem to matter which.

The first century B.C. was a bloody time of plots and rivalries among men who were too powerful to be stopped themselves yet not quite powerful enough to stop others from following in their footsteps. With their armies behind them they would march into Rome in times of crisis and force the senate to vote them extraordinary powers ostensibly to bring order and stability to the state. Then they would eliminate their enemies as best they could, opening an era of political murder that was going to last for several centuries and that would fill the history books with the most fascinating gore.

The generals also became very rich men. Here is Plutarch's description of Lucius Lucimius Lucullus, a very successful commander who retired to private life in 63 B.C. "Lucullus' life presents us at the beginning with political acts and military commands and at the end with drinking bouts and banquets and what were practically orgies, torch races, all manner of frivolity. For he counted as frivolity his sumptuous buildings, porticos and baths, still more his paintings and statues." You see, he doesn't like the absence of gravitas. Once when he dined alone, he became angry because only one modest course had been prepared and called the slave in charge. When the slave said that he didn't think there would be need for anything expensive, since there were no guests, Lucullus said "What? Do you not know that today Lucullus dines with Lucullus?" Well Lucullus and his kind were men of great appetite not only for luxury, not only for food, but also for power. And that power rested in their legions. Such might was made possible by the General Marius, who in 107 B.C. introduced an innovation that completely reshaped the army and ultimately upset the balance of power in the republic.

He did this by throwing out the financial requirements for enlistment and accepting volunteers from the whole citizen body. The poor proletarians rushed in to be equipped and paid by the state, while the other classes, who were growing less enthusiastic about military service because they had better things to do at home, stayed out altogether. Army pay was not very good even for a proletarian, but a successful commander could be expected to provide his men with a share of the spoils or a parcel of land on discharge. And these rewards which could substantially improve a man's life were under the control of the general. It followed from this that the Roman legions were no longer loyal to the state, but to their commanders.

Consider the Roman General Pompey, who lived from 106 to 48 B.C. At the age of 28, Pompey was commissioned to raise an army to protect the Senate from other overly ambitious generals.

He put down one major rebellion, but in the process his army became a private army even to the point that his soldiers directed their oath of loyalty not to Rome but to him personally. A general with such an army behind him could then dominate or intimidate the senate into giving him other commands and honors. And from there it
was only a short step to using his power to brush aside the senators and legalize his hold on the state as well. This is what happened with Pompey and a number of others, until it became clear to every thinking Roman that the days of the Republic were numbered. It had become a government not of law but of men; ambitious, powerful, ruthless men.

The generals and their legions had proved so successful that Rome controlled an extraordinary amount of territory by the middle of the first century B.C. But this expansion also brought with it new threats. In the east, there was the growing power of the Parthian Empire which had taken the place of the Persians. In the north, there was the thunder cloud of hostile Germanic peoples. In the south, there were Arab raids in Asia and Numidians in Africa and even inside the Roman state a lot of provinces were muttering volcanoes. The provincial governors appointed by Rome were changed each year and their performance depended completely on their individual character. There was no permanent civil service to provide stability. Here we see provincial peasants paying their taxes; the revenues from the provinces were the chief source of income for Rome, and tax collection was invariably farmed out to joint stock companies of Roman capitalists who paid the state only a fraction of what they extorted from the native people.

Something had to change, but what? The necessary reforms could not come from the senate, because it was too conservative and it was losing its grip anyway. And reforms were not likely to come from the radicals either, since they were mostly demagogues interested in power. So a lot of Romans began to think that the Republic would have to be replaced probably by a single ruler. The question then arose of who that ruler was going to be, because, in the chaotic conditions of the first century B.C. several great men faced each other, each with his own army, each claiming to stand for Rome, each trying to keep it in his grasp.

In the end, this struggle left Julius Caesar victorious. He took power in 46 B.C., and at once the senate rushed to load him with honors. The honor he liked best was the right to wear the triumphal laurel wreath at all times because this made his baldness less conspicuous. But there were more serious advantages. He was voted consul and the first dictator for life. The month of his birth was called by his name, July. And he was given the title of "imperator," which used to mean simply "victorious general," but which came to mean what it now signifies, emperor, sovereign ruler. Caesar did not live long to enjoy his power. After only two years of dictatorship, he was murdered in the senate in 44 B.C. by men who were not willing to see the Republic die so easily. But the Republic was doomed in spite of the senator's efforts.

There was another period of anarchy and bloody struggle before Julius Caesar's grandson Octavian vanquished his uncle's enemies and his own. In 31 B.C., at the battle of Actium, he defeated his last serious rival, Marc Antony, who had allied himself with the last Ptolemy Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra. And so Octavian was now the absolute master of the empire. He inherited all of Caesar's powers and he increased them further. Within four years of Actium, the senate conferred upon him a combination of military and religious titles, Emperor Augustus, and so he too got a month of his own. The greatest monument to the long reign of Augustus was going to be the Pax Romana, the longest period of peace and stability the Mediterranean world has ever known.

Augustus's two main problems were the imperial bureaucracy and the imperial army of defense, which were both under his authority. Although ostensibly he ruled with the senate, he saw to it that the senate was colonized by his men and that the imperial civil service, which was nominally under the senate's scrutiny, was filled with his choices too; in fact, he dominated everything.

These civil servants would prove indispensable to the sprawling empire, and the growing number of administrators reflected a new degree of social mobility and opportunity because these people were being recruited from the general body of citizens, not just the patricians. Sometimes they might even be ex-slaves or freedmen. At the same time, Augustus tried to reawaken Rome's citizens to their civic duties in order to keep them loyal to the state. He tried very hard to revive the old Roman virtues, using Roman history and legends very much as American history was once used to discourage small children from telling lies or to encourage adults to patriotism and enterprise. All this, however, depended on the army or rather on the fundamental stability and security that only the army could provide. Under Augustus, and for some time thereafter, every army commander depended directly on the emperor, not on the senate or the people. He was no longer an entrepreneur, recruiting soldiers and gambling on his own abilities; he was an employee of the state who could be transferred from one army to another just as generals are today.

Except for the household troops of the emperor, the Praetorian Guard, shown here, the great bulk of the army was based along the frontiers, strung out in small garrisons and fortified camps along thousands of miles of imperial boundaries. Meanwhile, the old aggressiveness was disappearing partly because everyone was heartily sick
of fighting and partly because in the long run, war has to pay. And there were few enemies with wealth worth conquering around the border, and those who did border Rome were very tough indeed. From now on, the biggest threat would be the poor and hungry barbarians trying to get inside rich Roman territory. And so the army became a defensive force, increasingly expert in building border fortifications like this one on the Danube. It was not very interested in expansion anymore because expansion would only cost money and strain the administration without bringing any tangible benefits. There was little treasure in the lands of the barbarians, only trouble. But the imperial army was more than just a thin wall stretched out around the empire. Its permanent camps became centers of urban development, centers of Roman civilization. Many of the great cities of Europe were born as army camps, from Vienna and Budapest to York; from Lisbon and Bordeaux to Cologne.

The centuries of security that the Roman army ensured, and the roads it build, and the settlements it created allowed Greco-Roman culture to take root so deeply that even when the barbarian invaders eventually broke through, they were not able to dispel it. A lot of our culture today is owed in no small part to those legions.

Each army outpost bore the signs of Roman life from its temples and public buildings to its theaters and baths. We talked earlier about the impact of Greek philosophy and learning. Now in the West, with a mark of Rome everywhere, education in Latin became an important vehicle for social mobility especially for civil servants. And it was also a vehicle for socialization to teach the conservative values of the Roman ruling class.

In architecture, the Romans developed the dome, and large scale vaulting, and the whole concept of vast, impressive interior space that had not much interested the Greeks. These were spectacular architectural advances. Still to a layman like myself, the main contribution of the Romans was to take Greek designs and make them larger and grander. Roman architecture also made vast advances in engineering.

Roman sculpture reflects Roman practicality. It brought a new realism to the Greek models which Romans had been copying for centuries. You can see it especially in the portrait busts of the emperors which were to be found in every corner of the empire.

Augustus and his Pax Romana preserved the Roman or the Greco-Roman tradition. Without him, Rome would have lost her conquests one by one and seen them relapse into barbarism or degenerate into petty tyranny. The barbarians of the east and the north would have invaded Roman territories centuries before they did. A parochial Rome would certainly have been destroyed by civil war and the great institutions of Hellas would have been choked by debris instead of being carried forward by conscientious Roman students. And when Christianity came in during the first century A.D., this imperial Roman tradition which the reforms and the will of Augustus had made possible, would profoundly influence the organization and the thinking of the Church. The imperial tradition would Romanize Christianity, would help make it the great organized, centralized, bureaucratized institution it eventually became, quite literally the Church of Rome, as we shall see next time.

#111 Early Christianity

The Roman Empire withstood war and the madness of its rulers until the stamp of Greco-Roman culture was left on Europe and on the Mediterranean world. Among those affected were the Jews and through Jews, a new heresy spread that would transform the West.

Early Christianity this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The story of the Roman Empire can be simply told. The two centuries that opened with the Emperor Augustus were a time of peace and prosperity. There were crazy emperors, and murderous emperors, and murdered emperors, but the empire marched on; the Mediterranean was full of ships, the roads were safe, the borders were well guarded: Greco-Roman civilization seemed so stable in fact, that it was taken as the ultimate structure of the world. History was no longer a process, but the record of how civilization got to be so stable and perfect; and politics were not about how things should go, but how things should be kept the way they were. The third century, however, was a time of progress, of war, of civil war, until the reign of Diocletian from 284 to 305 A.D., which was a period of reorganization and reconstruction. For nearly another century there was relative peace, but after that everything went to pieces; the economy cracked, the provinces were invaded by barbarians, Rome itself was sacked
and in 476 A.D. Romulus Augustus retired to the country, the last emperor to rule from Rome over the western part of the empire. And so, the end came just about five centuries after the Battle of Actium and the beginning of the peace of Augustus.

It was a remarkable run, as Edward Gibbon, the eighteenth century historian wrote, "Instead of inquiring why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it subsisted so long." The real turning point came, not in the fifth century, but way back in the second and third centuries, when Rome realized that she was mortal and when the calm confidence of an earlier age lapsed into something more anxious, more uneasy, increasingly decadent. You can chart the change in the portraits of the emperors. This is a bust of Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117 A.D., and who was one of the best emperors Rome ever had. He seems to have grown old with a sense of humor and a certain skepticism. Fifty years later, however, emperors just like their subjects, looked sad or worse. This is a portrait of Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic who ruled from 161 to 180 A.D. He was an excellent emperor, but one who seemed to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. From that time on, the emperors range from sad to worried, as in this portrait of Decius, to brutish, like the emperor Caracalla or to simply insane, like the young Commodus, son and successor of Marcus Aurelius, who rejected the rationalism of the Stoics and invoked the protection of every oriental deity in the book: Cybele, the great mother from Asia Minor; Mithras, from Persia; Isis, from Egypt; and any other god who promised salvation or immortality.

So, in the course of one century, the Romans shifted from confidence and stability to anxious uncertainty. And their view of the world shifted as well, especially in religion and philosophy. Back in the second century B.C., when Rome first became open to Greek ideas, the philosophy that became popular was Stoicism. You remember that for the Stoics, the basis of morality was conformity with nature, not only one’s truly human nature, but also that of the divine world order. The wise man perceived true nature and true order and conformed to them. The Romans adapted this to their needs by emphasizing self-mastery, temperance, courage, dedication, but they also learned the universal humanitarian ideas of Stoicism and their limited original notion of virtue as manliness in the service of the state, this was enlarged and enriched. The old parochial morality was broadened into a new humanism.

Men like Cicero tried to apply humanism to the practical problems of political and social life. Born in 106 B.C., Cicero, shown here, was a Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher until his outspokenness against Mark Antony and Octavian got him killed. It was in the name of a more humane philosophy that the Stoic, Seneca, became the tutor and then the counselor of the young emperor, Nero, until Nero accused him of conspiracy and ordered him to take his own life. And it was Stoic philosophy that helped justify a princeps like Augustus; a first citizen, that is, who would be the wise and virtuous protector of the state. The Stoics had transformed the platonic notion of a philosopher king into the idea that all men were equal in essence, but not in ability or virtue. There were a few superior souls like Augustus, who had pressed through to light and knowledge, and these alone could conceive and carry out what was good. And many of the reforms of Augustus reflected this conception of the exceptional man, a man with a mission who set out to reestablish and secure the balance and harmony of the world that were threatened by excess and corruption. Hence, Augustus’s efforts to restore the old moral virtues, to reaffirm traditional marriage, to reestablish old religious practices and the religious rituals of old Rome—this incidentally, is a shrine in a sacred landscape, to train and to hone a ruling elite, based on Greco-Roman humanism, whose values would still be taught in school in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this Augustan restoration, which lasted a long time, ultimately proved precarious because it depended on exceptional individuals to handle an immense and overwhelming task, the governing of an empire; and these outstanding individuals were not always available. The restoration was also shaky because the culture that was offered in addition to, or rather imposed upon, the lower classes by Augustus; this clashed with the brutality and irrationality that was common among the lower classes and rationality sat uneasily on the upper classes as well, so, when hard times came, it proved a veneer easy to discard. Augustus tried to introduce an ascetic elitist philosophy, good for the brightest and best. These men were told that public service was their duty and that power had to be exercised only to good ends and then with moderation. But the religious rituals were too businesslike, too cool for hot periods and the philosophy was too demanding for normal people.

So when security collapsed, and the economy broke down, danger and death were more on their minds and in their art. Stoicism was replaced by new ideas and new aspirations. What most people wanted as times grew hard was something more personal, more accessible; and they expressed this by saying that they wanted "salus," a word which originally meant simply physical health but which came to mean the health of the soul, that is, salvation. Stoic humanism might be good for a philosopher like Seneca, but the psychotic emperor Nero did not want to be told what to do, and Seneca’s Stoicism came in handy when Nero asked him to commit suicide. A century later, Stoicism lead Marcus Aurelius to write his Meditations; but his son and successor, Commodus, was a crazy lout, less interested in
inner fortitude than in magic salvation. By that time Roman culture was running hard just to stand still. Respectable citizens were trying to plumb the great unknown by way of seances like this one; emperors prayed for miracles to get them out of tight spots; and ordinary people relied on religious charms, astrologers and soothsayers and lots of amulets.

If you’re caught in an air raid and the bombs are falling, you know that virtue or wisdom or strength make no difference and you pray for divine intervention. That’s what happened as the second century slipped into the third and the fourth. In politics, in thought, in the arts, the realism and naturalism and the sense of perspective that were part of a rational attitude to nature and the world, these gave way. The more disorder grew, the less relevant rationality seemed. The more the empire cracked, the less self-discipline and self-reliance seemed to work, the more doctrines of salvation offered the promise of escape; which brings me to Christianity. There are three things we have to bear in mind when we look at early Christianity: first, the cultural context of a Hellenistic world all around it; second, the Jewish sources of the new creed and the Jewish influences on it; and third, the changes in the contemporary world between the first century when Christianity was born and the fourth century when it was recognized by the Roman state—in other words, the ways in which the world affected Christianity and the ways in which Christianity affected the world.

If we begin by looking at the dominant Hellenistic culture of the ancient world, we find that it had been deeply infiltrated by Orientalism, especially as regards religion. This for example is a Roman figure clad in Egyptian clothes, and this is a scene from one of the mystery religions or from a Gnostic cult, claiming to offer access to Gnosis or knowledge of spiritual mysteries. These cults were most popular among women and among the lower classes, for whom they had been greatly simplified and vulgarized. They were not new, but their importance in the Hellenistic, Greco-Roman world was new. Speaking in general terms, we might describe that world as skeptical, tolerant and materialistic. This for example, is a pillow merchant doing business in the market place. But it was above all, perhaps, a cosmopolitan world, in which, under Roman rule, tribes and races intermingled within the same empire. In the midst of this, only the Jews really kept their identity and their uncompromising Semitic outlook.

The word, Semitic, remember, refers back to the Semites a people who moved from the Arabian desert into Mesopotamia more than two thousand years before Christ. The Hebrews were Semites and so were the people we now call Arabs. The Jews, especially, were children of an idea, the idea of Jehovah, a god of supreme universal significance and power but with whom they had a particular, unique and exclusive relationship. It was this idea that kept them alive as a people though years of trial and tribulations, alive and also jealously aloof from other religious influences in the world around them. Although Hellenistic influences affected the Jews as they affected everybody else, they affected them first in a contrary fashion by making them resist assimilation, by stirring their nationalism, and by forcing them to reconsider and reform their religious attitudes and their ethics. In the year 175 B.C., Antiochus IV, who ruled Syria and Palestine, started a campaign designed to unify his realm by wiping out competing religions and traditions and so he prohibited circumcision and dietary laws which were central to Judaism. The Jews, of course, refused to give up their traditions, they refused to worship Antiochus IV as a god—to subordinate their religion to the state. The friction got worse until it finally erupted in the bloody Maccabean revolt of 164 B.C., that was so bloody and murderous, that even today the French slang for corpse is "macabre." These are coins struck by the new Maccabean rulers. As often happens, the results of the revolt went well beyond the practical issues that set it off, and in this case, the chief result was mainly that, in resistance, the Jewish religion survived as a distinct and very self-conscious belief.

If Antiochus had succeeded, if Judaism as such had died out, neither Christianity nor Mohammadism in the form they actually took would have existed. But as it happened, the persecutions and the fighting produced a sort of revival of Judaism, partly as a nationalistic manifestation, and partly as a search for consolation. War was hell, life was hell and so, just to make up for it, the Jews started to think of Heaven. They took over ideas of immortality from the Gnostics, and they did this partly to encourage themselves and their friends not to bow to Antiochus and to the Syrian gods. Look at it this way, if you had to choose between sticking to Jehovah and being burned, or worshipping a barbarian god like Baal and staying alive, you could take comfort and fortitude from the fact that if you were burned, you would be rewarded afterwards in eternity, which is a long time. On the other hand, if you broke your compact with Jehovah, life was short and you would be very sorry afterwards.

The Hellenistic influence which was rejected by the Jews when it tried a frontal attack was, however, going to affect Jewish thought in more subtle ways through the ethical developments of Pharisaic philosophy. The Pharisees were a religious sect given to piety, earnest prayer, strict observance of Jewish law, but also to interpreting the law of Moses in the context of changing situations. Jewish observance in general centered increasingly on reading the law and the scriptures in the Synagogue, discussing them, interpreting them, but this was a habit which lead people to
think for themselves and to listen to others around them who were developing notions to be found less in the scriptures than in current thought: belief in an immortal soul, in angelic spirits, in personal resurrection, in free will, reconciled with predestination.

So with one ear to Hellenistic culture, and another to their inner voice, the Pharisees were going to evolve most of the socially significant ideas which have since come down to us in the New Testament. "The Sermon On The Mount" is a perfect reflection of early Pharisaic doctrine. For those of you who know it, here is a passage that may sound familiar: "Love ye one another from the heart and if a man sin against thee, speak peaceably to him and in thy soul hold no guile, and if he repent and confess, forgive him. But if he deny it, do not get into a passion with him, lest catching the poison with thee he take to swearing and so sin doubly. And if he be shameless and persist in wrongdoing, even so forgive him from the heart and leave to God the avenging."a

This passage was written by Jews over a century before the birth of Christ, it comes from The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, which was written between 109 and 107 B.C. and which later proved extremely popular with St. Paul and was probably known to Christ as well. Now obviously we can not understand Christianity unless we realize that it was the product of this long development and interaction of thought and religion within and upon the Jewish people. Jesus, after all, was a Jew and probably a rabbi, who followed Jewish laws; and Christianity was first preached by Jews to Jews as a sort of reformed Judaism. Jesus won a considerable following among Jews, especially among the poor, until his success provoked the hostility of the Jewish establishment which did not find it difficult to convince the Roman governor that Jesus was a dangerous radical. So the Romans put him to death in Jerusalem probably in 30 A.D. But it’s important to realize that from the first, Christianity claimed to be not a break from, but the continuation and the fulfillment of the great history of the Old Testament which promised a Messiah, a Redeemer, who would make Israel and the Jewish people triumph over their enemies.

The Christians inherited a lot of things from the Jews, including the Semitic sense of world worthlessness and the conflict between body and spirit. And they took over, too, the typically Jewish vision of a blinding all powerful God above, and the abject condition of man below, with his overwhelming sense of sin and a passion for salvation. But this salvation could not come from anything man could do, as the rationalist Greeks might have argued, but only from God, or as St. Paul later put it, "from faith in God," which in Christian terms is simply faith in the reality and value of Christ’s sacrifice. However, there is one thing to remember about all this: at the beginning, in order to be a Christian, you had to be a Jew. There was no thought of separateness in Christian communities, which were merely reformed religious groups within a Jewish community. We shall see how this changed and why in our next program.

**#112 The Rise of the Church**

An obscure Jewish sect follows the teachings of an heretical prophet who claims he is the Son of God. How did the cult of Christ withstand the might of the Roman Empire and then become its ally?

The Rise of the Church this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended at the dawn of Christianity when Christ and his disciples were preaching to their fellow Jews a sort of reformed Judaism. Where the long tradition of the Hebrew prophets promised the coming of a Messiah who would establish the Kingdom of God on earth, Jesus seems to have preached there would be no kingdom, but instead, a day of judgment coming very soon when the wicked would be punished and the righteous rewarded. And so the message was abandon all sin while you still had time. This was definitely a departure from orthodoxy, but even so there was no thought of separateness in Christian communities until, that is, St. Paul came along.

Paul was a Roman citizen born in the city of Tarsus in Asia Minor. He was a rabbi and a Pharisee, in other words, a very pious Jew. And as a pious Jew, he persecuted Christians whom he regarded as heretics and a menace to Judaism. But around 35 A.D., five years after the crucifixion of Christ, Paul had a vision on the road to Damascus and he became convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. Here is a fifteenth century version of Paul’s conversion. Paul turned out to be the great organizer, the great public relations manager of the young faith, and in effect, he made Christianity competitive with other religions. He enlarged its scope by recruiting outside the restricted group
of people who obeyed Jewish law. He admitted non-Jews without asking them to be circumcised first and without insisting they respect the ritual laws—especially the laws concerning food. He probably did it because he was in a hurry; the end of the world was coming and you couldn’t quibble over trifles.

But, it is worth remembering that Paul and his like were able to spread Christianity because of Roman roads, and Roman peace, as well as his skill and the religion’s appeal. It was Rome that linked the Mediterranean world together. Equally important, was the Koine, the Greek’s common dialect which spread from east to west making all the Mediterranean a bilingual world where traveling men could make themselves understood everywhere.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans in Greek, and until early in the third century A.D., the language of Christian liturgy in the Church of Rome was Greek. It was also into Greek that the Hebrew scriptures had been translated two centuries before Christ. That extremely important translation was finished in Hellenistic Alexandria with its great Jewish community. It was called the Septuagint from the Latin for seventy, because there were supposed to have been seventy translators. And so it was ready for early Christian missionaries when they began to carry their message through the world.

In the synagogues, which you could find in Hellenistic cities like this one, Adora Europas, the translations of the Hebrew scriptures were read and studied. And I don’t think the early Christian Church would have gone very far, or Paul either, without the Septuagint and the synagogues, and without writing the New Testament in the Greek Koine from the very beginning.

So here you have a crucial interconnection of factors. First, the conquest of the Roman Empire which unified the Mediterranean world. Second, the Hellenistic creation of a common speech for this world. Both were preconditions for the advance of Christianity. However, as time went on, the Jews became increasingly hostile to Christians, and the Christians also became more and more hostile to the Jew. To the Jews, the Christians were heretics. To the Christians, the Jews were willfully blind to what was so evident and so evidently holy. And so, Christianity separated from Judaism. It left the fairly straightforward path of Jewish religious thought, and moving westward along both shores of the Mediterranean, it started to appeal to a new public and to develop a theology of its own. This advance of Christianity was spurred in the second half of the first century by a great Jewish rising against Rome and a wave of antisemitism that swept over the East about the same time.

But then the Roman General Titus put down the uprising and sacked the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This is the Roman processions with the spoils of Jerusalem. At this point, the Christians were still pretty much a Jewish sect, and they were emotionally affected by the humiliating defeat. But then two things happened: on the one hand a lot of Christians were left with an abiding hatred of secular power, and on the other hand, as you can tell from this coin with the inscription “Judea taken captive,” established Jewish communities and the power of Orthodox Jewish religion temporarily collapsed. So the Christians found it easier to break free.

The earthly Jerusalem had been destroyed, so that now the ideal version could be better projected into Heaven without having to worry about real nations and real governments. The result of all this can be found in the suggestion made by Origen, a Christian teacher, who lived in Alexandria in the third century. Origin wrote that, “Christians should not take part in the government of the state, but their only concern should be the divine nation, that is, the Church.” Some churchmen went even further, denying the world and their own bodies, which, in the dichotomy between spirit and flesh, came out a poor second. They gave away their property, they fasted, they flagellated themselves; and Origin advocated complete chastity, probably had himself castrated. If the Church had heeded Origen, its story would have ended there, but fortunately St. Paul suggested it was better to marry than burn.

Still, the unworldly anti-secular ideas of Origen remained influential, and as the Roman Empire disintegrated, churchmen looked on with some detachment. They exercised their talents in bitter theological controversies, and in the spread of monastic communities like this one in Greece, cut-off from the wicked world where Christians could concentrate on personal salvation and spend their lives in contemplation and penitence.

It can be argued, and it was argued even at the time, that this attitude was a sort of "sour grapes," a retreat from the world when the world became too hard to bear, denying earthly values in order to secure one’s self against their loss. It can also be argued, however, that when you deny certain values, you are at least by implication, you are affirming alternative values. But to many people of that time, even this positive aspect looked uncommonly like a negative one. And to understand this, we have to imagine what these early Christians looked like to the respectable property owners of the first three centuries after Christ.
To begin with, many people thought the Christians were crazy or drunk. The resurrection of Christ and the ascension were incompatible with natural science, and for a late pagan intellectual to accept the incarnation of God in the human form as Jesus, would be like a modern man denying the Evolution of Species! He would have to abandon not just the most advanced, rational knowledge available, but by implication, the whole Greco-Roman culture that had been marked by that knowledge. But the ultimate accusation was the one that the high priest brings to the Roman governor against St. Paul when he complains: "We have found this man to be a pestilent fellow and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." And this is the point, these Christians are dangerous, they insist that all men are brothers; that the beggar is as good as the solid citizen; that the slave is equal to his master, in essence if not in fact, since this doesn't prevent Christians from keeping slaves.

All in all, they deny the value of everything society holds dear. The good shepherd offers salvation, not money, or family, or property, or success, or service to the state. Leave thy father and thy mother and thy brother and follow me. What good will all this do if you have lost your own soul? What was even worse, the Christians even denied the final power of the emperor, and the ultimate value and worth of imperial power and imperial justice. By all means render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, but there is a limit to what belongs to Caesar. And this means that for the Christians, there is a higher power than the state. There is an ultimate good or aim which may not be the ultimate good, or aim, of the state. And if that aim—God's aim, clashes with that of Caesar, there is no doubt about whom the Christians must follow.

Think for a minute, of the revolutionary character of such ideas being spread around a society where material values reign supreme, ideas which found particular favor with proletaria, especially around the ports and Levantine cities. It's a society where gods, like Diana here, were anthropomorphic with human form and personality, where the emperor was God, where imperial unity called increasingly for religious unity and for the subordination of private opinions to the state.

So Christians were dangerous and they were subversive, because their success threatened not just the state, but the whole established, accepted basis of social life and social value. When Christ says: "My kingdom is not of this world," he means that the world is irrelevant which challenges every Stoic notion of city community. When he says: "Repent for the Kingdom of God is near," the kingdom of God means the end of politics on earth insofar as you define politics as a reasonable attempt to organize human society.

On the other hand, a lot of what the Christians said could have fitted the Stoic tradition: the focus on individual salvation, the heavenly city to which the pure and high minded aspire, the rejection of social or national differences, above all, the high moral value. They all sounded familiar, or they could be made to sound familiar. And so, on another level, did the mystic aspect of Christianity and its promise of a special revelation, a special road to salvation, just like the other so-called mystery religions, the Cults of Mithras and Isis and so on. But, the real secret weapon of the Christians was that they soon developed a tight-knit, disciplined organization that stretched all over the empire.

It all began with a fact that Christians had a book, the Bible, full of potent promises and stories of miracles that bore out the tales attested to by people who were practically contemporaries. The Christians, being a practical group, meeting, and reading, and having discussions about the Gospels, took advantage of Roman respect for tombs to organize themselves legally as burial societies. And this is one of their catacombs, their underground burial tunnels. This meant that even when the authorities persecuted the Christians, they generally respected their catacombs, at least until the third century when the Christians were already pretty well organized. There was also the fact that, while Christianity was just as mysterious as any other mystery cult, it was much cheaper to join. Initiation as a worshiper of Mithras called for a bull. Initiation into the Cult of Isis call for a whole series of gifts and sacrifices. But if you wanted to worship Christ, there were no initial expenses, and most church meetings were rather like highly emotional Sunday school picnics. It was pleasant and it was economical. But, if you wanted to, and you probably did want to, you could give alms to the Church. By the third century, the Church had become rich. Alms giving was a judicious transfer of capital from this world to the next—a sort of fire insurance. These contributions and legacies accumulated in the hands of the Bishops and were devoted almost exclusively to charity, and not just for Christians either.

You can imagine what a tremendous lever of power this Christian charity must have been, as the imperial Roman organization disintegrated. As misery increased, as the great cities crowded with starving poor, as men were thrown out of work or off their land by barbarians or nobles or tax collectors. And the Christian bishops who controlled the alms were often the only honest men around, or the only honest powerful men around. The provin-
cial governors and other magistrates were mostly blue-blooded ninnies, appointed for a year or two to act as the figureheads of an ill-paid, and hence corruptible staff. And so, in the third century, the bishop stands out as a permanent figure to his town, dedicated to his job, to his flock, and responsible only to God.

And then by the next century, he also offers something everybody wants: a free, quick, uncorrupt settlement of lawsuits by arbitration. And this is sought by pagans and heretics, as much as it is by Christians. So the Church became a force to be reckoned with until by the fourth century, it was officially recognized by the Roman state.

That happened after yet another civil war between rivals to the throne of the empire ended with a victory of Constantine, who enlisted the support of the Christians against his chief opponent, his opponent who worshiped Sol Invictus (the invincible sun) as most soldiers did then; Constantine, who was emperor from 306-337 A.D. was given to visions and conversions. He had shifted from one god to another before. This time, however, a vision told him that the sign of the cross would bring him victory. And so he put the cross on his banner and on the shields of his soldiers and it worked. In 312 A.D., Constantine defeated his chief rival Maxentius at the Millvian bridge, near Rome. And soon after this, his Edict of Milan granted full toleration to the Church and freedom of worship to all Christians. It also established an alliance between the Christian Church and the Roman state that was going to last a very long time.

Within a few decades, toleration for Christians turned into the right for Christians to be intolerant of any other faith or church, and to tear down temples, like this temple of Artemis, in Jordan. Around 400 A.D., public paganism was suppressed, the temples were closed everywhere, the statues broken up, often by Christian mobs, and the proud inscriptions proclaiming the unshakable alliance of cities and their Gods were carted away to pave the public highways. For the Jews during this period, there were pogroms, organized massacres which enlisted the antisemitism of the urban Greeks in the cause of God.

For the pagans, there was the closing of the schools, the closing of temples, persecution and sometimes lynchings, as happened with Hypatia, a distinguished lady of Alexandria who went in for philosophy and mathematics. As described by Edward Gibbon, the historian who didn't like early Christians very much: "Hypatia was torn from her chariot, stripped naked, dragged to the church, and inhumanely butchered by a troop of savage, merciless fanatics. Her flesh was scraped from the bones with sharp oyster shells, and her quivering limbs were delivered to the flame. The just progress of inquiry and punishment was stopped by seasonable gifts thus given."

By the time this happened in 415, the Christians were reserving most of their passion for fighting each other. And they invested far more fury and energy into persecuting fellow Christians than they did in hurting non-Christians, especially as non-Christians were becoming ever more scarce. What you get now is the clash of groups holding strong views on things like diet, marriage, property, clothing, which could and very often did lead to violence. Above all, you get doctrinal discord about the Trinity, the union of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost which is a difficult concept anyway, and especially about the nature of Christ himself. Is Christ a man who becomes God? Is he a God who temporarily becomes a man? Is he a God who is God and man at the same time? And is he equal to God the Father or subordinate as a son should be? This may sound like hair splitting, but a lot of blood was shed and a lot of people suffered for each of these views. Rival doctrines also became associated with this region or that. They became a part of what we might call a national or tribal identity.

For example, the city of Constantinople stood for a Christian God who combines two natures in one; Alexandria stood for one nature only. From then on, when one province, or people, or political party fought another, it would very often be as Orthodox against heretic on behalf of one doctrine or another. As long as Christians had been part of an alternative society, their shrines had been harbors in a world ruled by demonic powers. But now, the alternative to society had become "the" society. The shrines proclaim the greatness of God and of his church, and they also provided arenas where battles between Christians could be fought out. The Christian himself had been an athlete in Christ, committed to a wrestling match, an Argon, as the Greeks called it, a match against evil, and darkness, and his own lower nature. Now that the churches were full, he could wrestle against those whose idea of truth, especially Christian truth, was different from his own. And this was to bring centuries of conflict, as we shall see in the programs ahead.
#113 The Decline of Rome

Was it the barbarians who sapped the strength of the Roman Empire? Was it disease? Was it Christianity? Was it taxes that caused its decadence or was it just another ancient empire that could not adjust when circumstances changed too radically?

The Decline of Rome this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

In the sixth century, a Roman nobleman was dragooned into becoming pope, which wasn’t the most comfortable of jobs in those days. Eventually that gentleman would be known as Gregory the Great, and he would be canonized as Saint Gregory. But by this time there hadn’t been an emperor living in Rome for nearly two hundred years, or one in Italy for one hundred.

In fact, all the territory from Hadrian’s wall in Britain to the Adriatic Sea and beyond, was now dominated by a number of backward, warlike tribes, most of them German. The western part of the empire was no more. The emperor ruled in Constantinople, and though some of his ships and troops still held a few Italian ports, most of the peninsula was occupied by barbarians. Pope Gregory believed that the end of the world was near. After all, the empire was staggering to its end, so judgment day must be nigh. Gregory also thought that volcanoes were the gates of Hell and that their mouths were growing larger in order to admit the increasing number of damned souls. Although Gregory was anxious to mitigate the suffering and still the turmoil around him, the main business of life in such circumstances was to prepare for death.

In one of his sermons, Gregory looked back from the disorder and misery of his own age—“everywhere death, mourning, desolation,” as he said in one of his sermons—“to the material prosperity of earlier times when Christians were martyrs to their faith.” In those days, the beginning of the second century, when Trajan was emperor, there was long life and health, said Gregory; “material prosperity, growth of population, and the tranquility of daily peace.” Yet while the world was still flourishing in itself, in their hearts it had already withered.

You might call Gregory’s description of better days sour grapes, but it does raise the question of how a prosperous, lawful society gave way to darkness and chaos. The first and obvious answer is that the Roman Empire of the second century was surrounded by darkness and chaos, by a host of backward, hungry savage tribes across the Tyne, the Rhine, and the Danube Rivers, not to mention the mountains and deserts of Asia and Africa. As long as these tribes were held in check, they mostly fought each other. Individuals often trickled into the empire to look for work, or sign on as mercenaries, and some of them settled as immigrants do today and became Romanized. But when they could, they burst through over the border to raid and loot and ravage as a tribe; and when the opportunity offered, instead of turning back home with their plunder, they might even take over the better lands of the empire itself and settle there until someone else came and pushed them off. After 250 A.D., or thereabouts, this process accelerated. The raids became invasions and the emperors bent all their energies to stabilizing what was left and keeping the barbarians at bay, sometimes by hiring a group of barbarian mercenaries to fight on behalf of Rome. Better still, the Romans would try to persuade one tribe to fight another, so that they would be too busy to threaten Rome.

But around the year 214 before Christ, when the Chinese began to build a great wall to preserve their civilized world against barbarians, a federation of aggressive Mongol tribes had turned west. These were the people we call the Huns. As they traveled westward over the course of several centuries, the Huns pushed before them other warlike tribes, the Goths and the Vandals, who were desperate to get away from them, which tells you just how awful the Huns must have been. In the late fourth century, some of these fleeing peoples, notably the Goths, got into the Balkans, which were among the richest provinces of the empire, and from there into Italy. Then, around the year 406, many more Vandals crossed the frozen Rhine and ravaged Gaul. As one contemporary observer remarked, “Gaul smoked to Heaven in one continuous pyre,” and after Gaul was devastated, they crossed into Spain and North Africa. In due course, the Huns followed, carrying even worse destruction wherever they went. After that, the West was a chaos of frightened Roman survivors and brawling savage tribes.

It’s difficult to exaggerate the horror and suffering all this involved for generations. It wasn’t war as we understand it, but robbery and mayhem on a vast scale, exercised on an almost defenseless population, rather like an endless raid by motorcycle gangs. It meant the sack of cities, the massacre and enslavement of populations, and the devastation of open country. Attila the Hun, who led his people for twenty years in mid-fifth century, was
known as the Scourge of God. In 448, in the Balkans, Roman envoys to Attila found the once-populous city of Nisros empty except for corpses. In Africa, a few years earlier, if a city refused to surrender, the Vandals would march their captives up to the wall and butcher them en masse, so that the stench of their corpses should make defense untenable.

As St. Jerome wrote in 396, "The mind shudders when dwelling on the ruin of our day. On every side sorrow, lamentation, everywhere the image of death." By Pope Gregory's time in the sixth century, chaos and mayhem had become a part of normal life, so the question becomes how did it happen? Why was Rome unable to defend itself?

Edward Gibbon's great history, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, was published in London in the years between the American Revolution and the French Revolution, and it attributes much of the responsibility for Rome's decline to the insidious effects of Christianity, which Gibbon thought was bad for the Roman fiber--calls it the triumph of superstition. But it's interesting that Gibbon's story runs from the end of the first century to the fifth century, which is a pretty long incubation period for a mortal illness, especially when you consider that Gibbon was writing just when the British Empire was about to rise. Today, two centuries after Gibbon, the British Empire is no more; whereas just the decline of Rome took four centuries. And unlike Gibbon, most present-day historians concentrate not on Christianity but on social, economic, constitutional factors, which is reasonable because those can be traced and measured to some extent. So let's take a look at them.

One of the most striking versions of the fall of Rome focuses on all the fertile soil, upland farms, well-drained or irrigated areas, passing over generations into the hands of landlords who cultivated them by slave labor. The poorer areas, especially the marshlands, were left to the peasants. In these marshes, the malaria mosquito bred. The disease and the poverty that resulted drove the victims into the cities where they spread the infection and perhaps contributed to the feverish kind of city politics characteristic of Rome. Then, according to one theory, malaria, joined perhaps by smallpox or some other plague, moved outward to the frontiers of the empire, decimating the garrisons, depopulating the towns, eventually leading to the final breakthrough of the barbarians. If this theory is true, the Roman Empire was actually destroyed by a mosquito, which may not be so farfetched, if you consider that Alexander the Great had probably died of malaria.

It has also been argued that shortsighted methods by farmers like this one exhausted the soil, impoverished small holders, depopulated the countryside and left little for the tax collector, hence little to pay the legionaries, who were the protectors of the empire. According to another view, it was too heavy taxes that drove people off the land, and so the decay of agriculture was the result of tax burdens. Actually, both points are true, but neither is a sufficient explanation, since soil exhaustion was not general. For instance, Gaul and Egypt were pretty lush, and while taxation was general, some provinces fared better than others, especially when they were safe from invasion.

There was, however, one problem which was basic to Hellenistic society in general and to the later Roman Empire in particular: the cities consumed without producing. As you might guess from this well-stocked bread shop in Pompeii, the cities ate up what the countryside produced, and they left little for the peasants, who grew increasingly desperate. This situation became more serious as barbarian pressure increased, and with it economic pressure on the countryside became harder and harder to bear. The Imperial administration was always concerned with keeping the big city population happy because it was more volatile and prone to riot. So the government offered what the Roman poet Juvenal called "bread and circuses." Races, shows, games, displays of every sort which had once offered occasional entertainment, now became an organic necessity. The symbol of all this was the Colosseum, which had been built in the first century. It could hold up to fifty thousand people, and it seldom stood empty. Under the republic there had been sixty-five days of games a year. Their number increased steadily until by the fourth century they took up one hundred seventy-five days—half the year. "The circus is their temple," said a contemporary observer.

The Christians tried to put an end to gladiatorial combat, which declined after the fifth century, but chariot races and shows and bear-baiting continued; and pantomimes—the more obscene the better. And though the Church tried to restrain the passion, the crowds got their kicks by demanding a high degree of bloody realism, so that the actor who played Hercules in a show would really be burned in the end, and a mime would be crucified and left to die. Only total ruin puts an end to the games in the sixth century.

The bread, however, ran out long before the circuses. It, too, had changed from an occasional handout to a regular aspect of public assistance designed to mollify the urban crowd. There was free wine, free grain, oil, bacon, even money. There might be handouts equivalent to ten or fifteen or even twenty dollars, to three hundred thousand
people or more. If the state was going to pay for all this, someone had to pay the state. Obviously that would be the provinces, the producers, the rural population. This led to growing resentment of all those greedy, useless mouths in the city, or else it meant an attempt to join the useless mouths, who at least had some fun—to become a consumer rather than a producer, and this, of course, meant fewer producers and still more problems.

The cost of large-scale public assistance did not matter so much when the economy was reasonably stable. But when it was disrupted by civil war after the second century, and by foreign invasions after the third, such burdens became serious. As the economy began to crack in the second and third centuries, the emperors concentrated on squeezing all the money and the goods they could in order to pay the army, or else to pay the barbarians whom the army no longer held in check. Now, this meant that the economy entered a vicious downward spiral, and society with it. There were even heavier taxes, ever fewer people capable of paying taxes. Inflation and debasement of the currency drove gold and silver out of circulation. Taxes were increasingly paid in kind, in grain, in cattle, in forced labor; or else they weren’t paid at all. The economy which had taken centuries to shift from barter to cash slipped back to the primitive level of bargaining. And so this was another factor in the decline of Rome.

The principal cause of ruin, however, was probably hypertrophy, growing too big, which is the essential sickness of every ancient empire. A state grows, it eliminates one threat after another, it gobbles up competitors, and after a while the sheer cost of army and administration proves too much for the economy. Communications break down under the strain. Distant armies cannot be commanded from the center, and distant provinces break off. In the 280s, the Emperor Diocletian realized what was happening. He took a co-emperor who could look after the eastern part of the empire while he looked after the West, and then each of the two emperors took a vice-emperor, so the administration of the empire was split into four.

The future Emperor, Constantine, was the son of one of these vice-emperors. Constantine inherited his place in this tetrarchy, a government by quartet. You can still see a statue of the Tetrarchs anxiously clinging to each other, which makes them look very chummy and more like Medieval knights than Romans. The quartet did not last, but the duet did. The system of one empire with two emperors survived until the last emperor of the West, Romulus Augustus, was deposed by barbarians in 476. In the Eastern Empire, Constantine took the old Greek city of Byzantium on the Bosporus, he enlarged it, he renamed it Constantinople and made it his capital in 330. Even so, the problems of scale would not go away. They had been manageable in peacetime, but they proved overwhelming when war became endemic in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Finally and inescapably, there was the economic problem, and what we can say about Rome from scenes like this one applies more or less to every society up to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and that is, that every central power and every imperial court was not a producer but a consumer. A great city like Alexandria, Antioch, Rome, was an octopus, with great tentacles reaching out to suck the substance of its hinterland or of the provinces. The cities created very little in terms of material riches. Buying power was low, even in the great cities. Ordinary people lived crowded in narrow quarters, cramped, unheated, barely lighted by a small oil lamp, hardly furnished at all. They spent as little time as possible in these unattractive holes, and when they weren’t working they were in the street, in the forum, in the theater or circus, or the baths, which were practically free.

So, great as the empire was, it was economically anemic. There was little industrial production, there was little investment in enterprises that would increase the quantity of available goods and money and set them circulating, and this is one of the great differences between ancient and modern economies. Ancient capital, unlike modern capital, went either into buying land or else into usury, which is the lending out of money at extremely high interest rates. And there was little interest in new possibilities for technological change, because production was generally limited to domestic economy, what an individual home or estate needed, or else to luxury goods. Let me give you an example. About two thousand years ago, an Alexandrian mathematician named Hero, invented a steam engine which was perfectly practical and which embodied the principles of the turbine and of jet propulsion. The point about the engine was not that he invented it, but that nobody used it. What made Hero well-known was that he invented a lot of tricks and toys that could amuse rich people or serve the temple priests, like a contraption that produced steam in order to open temple doors so that the gods inside would be revealed without any human intervention. But none of this led to more practical applications.

There were, of course, plenty of slaves, and in any case mechanics were not respectable, just as working with your hands wasn’t respectable, which you can understand when you think that slaves and poor folk did it. At any rate, nobody paid much attention to science in general and to technology in particular, except for warfare and for civil engineering—aqueducts, sewers, public buildings, ingenious ways of heating baths, all of which were very advanced, very impressive, but not terribly productive.
And so, the ancients reached the threshold of an Industrial Age, but they never crossed it. The world had to wait seventeen hundred years after Hero to get a steam engine and all the joys that go with it. Which is not meant to suggest that the society was bad, but just that it wasn't flexible. It was not structured or equipped to adjust, to expand its means to the scale of its need. And so, when it had to adjust, all it could think of was to try to freeze things in place, or to make them worse: tax more, control more, enforce and coerce and restrain, as we shall see next time.

#114 The Fall of Rome

As the pressure of the barbarians increased, the Roman emperors grew more despotistic while their citizens grew more impoverished. Why did the empire finally run down? Or should the question be, why did it last as long as it did?

The Fall of Rome this time on the Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber's continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, we talked about the barbarian tribes which contributed to the decline of the Roman Empire and also about the measures the emperors took to oppose them, which led to further decline. But when you talk about the barbarians, you have to put them in perspective. The population of the empire in the third and fourth centuries was only between fifty and sixty-five million people, and this was for a realm that ran all the way from the Tyne River in northern England to the Euphrates. So the barbarians were able to have an impact far beyond their numbers.

Tribes of Germans and Huns might vary in size between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand people, which meant between five thousand and twenty thousand warriors. But the indigenous populations were also small, and so were the Roman armies. As soon as one gang of barbarians was eliminated or assimilated, another came along—and then another. Some of the Roman emperors tried to position their troops so that they seemed to be everywhere at the same time, but this wasn't always an easy trick to pull off. After mid-third century, when the barbarians were everywhere, urban life changed radically for the worse. Towns used to be large, open centers of life and culture, but as you can see from this plan of a Roman town in Silchester, England, now they contracted and turned into fortified enclosures. You can still see the general lines of the town today, extremely compact and easy to defend. Even a major city like Bordeaux shrank to seventy acres or so during this time.

Life in these fortified towns became so dreary that the aristocrats deserted them for their country estates and built large fortified villas like this one. They hunted, they feasted and entertained their neighbors, and they developed a sort of rural life that would be normal for lords or country gentlemen for the next fifteen centuries. In this context, the large landowner became a little local king. He didn't bother to pay his taxes and no one could make him. He paid his own guards and men-at-arms; he administered the law on his estates and built his own prison and fed and protected his clients who were really his subjects. And so, by the fourth century, the basis of the medieval economy and of the feudal system to come, was pretty much in place.

You can also see the breakdown of Roman civilization reflected in the arts. Statues of emperors and other great men were now made in two sections: a standardized body that could be imitated and shipped anywhere, and a particular head which tended to look more and more like a shepherd who has eaten his sheep. And the classic calm had given way to apathetic expressionism. The elegant naturalism of Hellenistic art had been replaced by cruder figures still classical, but stiffer—rougner.

More important, there was a decline in the competence of the emperors which was bound to be serious in a system in which the emperor was everything; where the emperor's capacity and will were crucial. And in fact under both republic and empire, Rome had a fundamental institutional problem—the inability to adjust institutions to the scale and the nature of changing reality. When the republic got too big to handle, the Romans adjusted to it by accepting the personal government of Augustus and his successors. Nothing was codified, nothing was regulated; it was left to chance. And sometimes chance served Rome well and sometimes it didn't.
On the whole, most of the second century was a lucky break because the murder of this man, the despotic emperor Domitian in 96 A.D., opened the door to a succession of first class rulers, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antonius and Marcus Aurelius. But then Marcus Aurelius placed family feeling over logic in naming his successor. In 180, his son Commodus became emperor, a teenage megalomaniac who thought he was Hercules. He sacrificed to the gods large numbers of gladiators and beasts. He kept a harem of three hundred female concubines and as many males. And he was finally assassinated--good riddance! Commodus, depicted here as Hercules, opened a series of regimes in which brutal efficiency alternated with more or less absolute madness. It was a time when personal oppression could only be remedied by personal initiative, mainly in the shape of rebellion and murder. And since neither murderers nor victims could measure up to the immense problems the empire posed, things were bound to fall to pieces eventually.

Part of the reason why it took so long lies in the maxim of Septimius Severus, who was emperor from 193 to 211. Severus told his sons, "Be united, enrich the soldiers, and scorn the rest." This was good advice, but it couldn't keep his son, Alexander, from being murdered by conspirators in his own army. And it couldn't prevent his grandson, Heliogabalus, from turning into a homosexual eccentric who gave himself up to debauchery. Heliogabalus became emperor in 218 at the age of fourteen, and he ruled only four years. He made the mistake of forgetting to pay his soldiers enough attention, and he was killed by his own Praetorian guards, in a barracks latrine, in a plot hatched by his own family. In fact, the whole third century appears as a very dark period in the history of the empire: a period of anarchy during which the Praetorian guard and the provincial armies contended to place their respective candidates upon the imperial throne--the office of emperor being auctioned off to the highest bidder. Behind this decay, there were also important social divisions. From the beginning of the third century on, the army consisted almost entirely of peasants from the less civilized parts of the empire. And these peasant soldiers were in violent opposition to the urban middle classes who had provided the leadership in the Augustan Empire. So, a struggle developed between a barely Romanized provincial army, and the civilian elements of the population who were mostly Roman, and who were trying to keep the peasant soldiers from taking over.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that each legion had been made responsible for its own recruiting. Remember that most of these legions were permanently quartered on the frontiers which meant that they would naturally draw recruits either from their immediate locales, or else, and even more likely, from barbarians across the border. Oh this system de-Romanized the army even more, and it produced strong local tendencies that you might call nationalistic. Soon the army of Gaul or of Illyria wanted its particular leader as emperor and no longer felt the old sentiment of imperial patriotism for a cosmopolitan kind of realm. And this in turn accentuated the conflict for political power, in which all the frontier armies were engaged.

Out of this century of chaos, there came a militarized empire and a pretty straightforward despotism under Diocletian at the end of the third century, and then under Constantine at the beginning of the fourth. All this time, lip service was paid to the old Roman traditions, but in reality, the government was carried on by members of a military caste. The emperor was a soldier, and he appointed only soldiers to positions of authority in the central and the provincial administrations. This created a purely military aristocracy and one that was continually reinforced by barbarian recruits. So the later empire was really an oriental monarchy with the trappings of a police state: a realm in which the citizen body no longer pursued its own ends, but became merely the exploited appendage of its so called defenders--the legions.

This is how a historian, J. W. Thompson, described the court of Diocletian: "The emperor was a god and moved as an absolute sovereign reigning by divine right. It would almost be true to say that the Roman world trembled at the emperor's nod." The greater the barbarian pressure on the empire, the greater justification there seemed to be for this kind of despotism, social regimentation, extortionist taxation. But the more extreme the later emperors were in this direction, the more they centralized power, the more outrageously they taxed. The less Roman civilians felt they had to defend, the more they came to accept the coming of the barbarians, almost as relief. At least barbarians didn't tax.

It has always been a problem for a society faced by a serious challenge to decide just what measures it can take and how far it can go in opposing and meeting that challenge. If you argue that you can only preserve your way of life by adopting certain means which negate that way of life, that you can only preserve democracy or free speech by limiting them, for example, or preserve a high standard of living by taxing and restricting it, or preserve liberty by a regimentation, or moral order by inquisition, then you run the risk of sacrificing exactly the things you say you are fighting for. You run the risk of sacrificing precisely those things that you use to justify the sacrifices in the first place. And you risk becoming so like your enemy that the differences matter very little.
In the case of Roman society from the fourth century on, most of the civilians were less well off than the barbarians across the Rhine, especially if we set aside a small educated aristocracy leading a rather precarious existence in provinces like Gaul or North Africa. As for the soldiers, they were the barbarians. By the fourth century, the old Roman legion was no more, and the barbarian infantry serving as Roman soldiers didn’t have the discipline to execute complicated maneuvers.

In 378, the Emperor Valens led a Roman army that was almost annihilated at Adrianople by the heavily mailed cavalry of the Goths, and Valens was killed. This was probably the worst defeat the Romans had suffered since the days of Hannibal six centuries before. And the most important result of it was that the Emperor Theodosius, who succeeded Valens, decided that the infantry had become obsolete, and he hired in its place precisely the Gothic cavalry that had shown it to be so and that had settled in Roman lands anyway, after Adrianople. With this act, the corpse of Roman military tradition was formally buried, and the system that replaced it produced the Gothic war lords and their heavily armored cavalry. These were the soldiers who would supervise the dismemberment of the western empire in the fifth century.

So it can be argued that the Roman Empire, which had been built in the first place by the Roman legions and the Roman farmers who fought in them, was bound to fall to pieces when the small independent farmer was extinct and the legions decayed partly for lack of him. After that, the soldiers we call Roman were all barbarians paid to fight other barbarians. Even high generals and officials running the state would themselves be barbarians, like the general Stilicho, a vandal who was Emperor Theodosius’s son-in-law. In 402, Stilicho moved the imperial court to Ravenna in the northeast, where it would be safer behind the marshes, and where it would find it easier to escape by ship if the enemy got too close. So Italy was no longer a safe place for Romans. Rome itself was a sitting duck. And indeed within a few years of the move to Ravenna, the inconceivable happened. In 410, an army of Goths under the command of Alaric, their king, entered the city and sacked it.

The fall of Rome was the symbol of the fall of the whole civilization—the end of its security, however imaginary it was by then, and the end of a whole way of life. The world one lived in could no longer be taken for granted. Saint Jerome writing from Jerusalem commented, "If Rome can perish, what can be safe?"

So the end had finally come and the search for the reasons why began, a search that would fascinate countless generations of historians. Messy politics over the succession of emperors was one reason, so was declining military power and of course economic strangulation. But there was also a process of sociological decay which gradually destroyed the foundations of the Roman Empire’s strength. And this was in effect the victory of the oriental model of despotism over the Mediterranean city state, and the decline of the Rome’s urban citizen class under the pressure of that oriental like centralization and bureaucracy.

To understand why that happened, we have to keep in mind that the Roman Empire had never possessed a really homogeneous culture. After it spread out of Italy, the empire was an artificial union of alien social organisms which had been largely brought together by an amazing effort of military and administrative organization. But it was a shotgun marriage—not a love-match. In the eastern part of the empire, Rome inherited the debris of oriental and Hellenistic monarchies. In the west, Rome conquered and assimilated the tribal societies of European barbarians.

Although there was a community of culture between cities, the Hellenistic cities of the east and the Latin cities of the west, this unity was superficial, and it was mostly limited to a privileged class. It was a society of consumers, based on slave labor and on the exploitation of subject classes and subject peoples. As soon as this privileged class was ruined by the economic crisis of the third century and by the loss of its political privileges, the underlying differences between the eastern and western parts of the empire emerged as strong as ever.

As it turned out, the West disintegrated totally and only the East survived with its firm base at Constantinople. And that was because the eastern empire was more compact and better able to defend itself, but also because the autocratic traditions of the East even though they destroyed Rome’s urban citizen class, were still better suited to running an empire than the decentralized divisive tribalism of the west being revived by the incoming barbarians. Remember that long before Rome declined, the solution to the anarchy of the late Republic days had been found by appealing to eastern ideas; one-man rule, god kings and all the rest.

The Augustine restoration wouldn’t have been possible without it. And when Constantine reorganized the eastern empire in the fourth century, he made it a sacred monarchy, united by religion, and based on a hierarchy of clergy and officials. In other words, he led a return to the underlying social and political tradition of the ancient East.
In the provinces of the west, however, this tradition was absent. The western peoples had more in common with the warrior tribalism of the north, with men like this adalid from north of the Danube, than they did with the theocracy of the east. And so eventually, the leadership of western society fell into the hands of Barbarian chieftains. Of the greatness that was Rome, only ruins and memories and myths were going to survive in the west.

All this took a long time to happen, of course. Even before Rome passed on the torch to Constantinople, she lasted far more centuries than the United States have lasted so far. So perhaps the question shouldn’t be, "Why did the empire come to an end?" since all ancient empires explode or collapse when they get over a certain size and a certain age. Instead, we should probably ask, "How come it lasted as long as it did?" And there, your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps the long, desperate resistance of emperors and generals and ordinary people may have had something to do with the belief that the Roman Empire represented the last empire, and that as long as the Roman Empire lasted, the end of the world would not take place. They believed that the empire was the last age of humanity. When it fell, that would be the end of mankind, and the last judgment would be upon us. So there was good reason to keep it from ending. There was good reason to pretend that it was alive even when it was dead and then to revive it as soon as possible, as it would be revived when Charlemagne was crowned Roman Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day of the year 800. And although the Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne and his successor was neither Holy nor Roman nor really an empire, it was going to keep the myth going another thousand years— but that’s another story for another time.

#115 The Byzantine Empire

They called it "the second Rome." A great city astride Europe and Asia and its vast empire which would preserve Greco-Roman culture and transmit it to the West, when Rome itself lay in barbarian hands.

The Byzantine Empire this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

The power of the western Roman Empire lasted five centuries. The power of Babylon and Assyria rather less than that. The Persian Empire took three centuries before Alexander put an end to it, and the British Empire lasted about two centuries. But the Byzantine Empire survived longer than any of these. Only Egypt lasted longer. The word "Byzantine" comes from Byzantium, the old Greek city on the Bosporus that became the site of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Byzantines called their lands Rumania, and they called themselves Romans; and their empire remained for many centuries the only civilized power in all of Europe.

Just as we attribute the creation of the Roman Empire to Augustus, so we can attribute the creation of the Byzantine Empire, which was the second Rome, to Constantine the Great, who transferred the empire’s capital to the city that would bear his name, and who made the empire a Christian empire and the emperor into the anointed of the lord. The Byzantine Empire copied and preserved much of the classical art and literature and Roman law which we have inherited. And the empire’s importance to eastern Europe is even greater because it was Byzantine missionaries and Byzantine prestige that civilized and Christianized the Eastern Slavs, from the Baltic to the Balkans and beyond. For example, this eleventh century enamel medallion was made in Georgia which is now part of the Soviet Union.

Constantinople was inaugurated as an imperial capital of the Roman Empire in 330, and it survived until 1453 when the Turkish conquest put an end to one imperial tradition and began another, renaming the city Istanbul. But it was a remarkably long run, while it lasted. During this more than a thousand years, the Byzantines conquered and lost several empires. In the sixth century a Balkan empire was recaptured from the Goths; a Mediterranean empire was built up after a long hard-fought war, also against the Goths; and an African empire was reconquered from the Vandals. But the African empire and much of the Middle East were lost to the Arabs in the seventh century. Most of the Mediterranean empire was lost about the same time, with the remainder going in the eleventh century, and the Balkan Empire was lost and partly regained in the ninth century.

The trouble with Constantinople, represented here as a classical figure, was that her tradition was Roman. You can tell this is Rome because of her helmet and military dress. Constantinople’s imperial vision was that of the old Roman Mediterranean Empire, which it was not well-placed to run, if you bear in mind the problems of time and scale that had proved too much even for Rome to handle. The average ship would take a week or two to cross the
Mediterranean from north to south, fifteen days from Constantinople to Alexandria, but it could take as much as two or three months from east to west, for example, from Crete to Carthage or Cadiz. So there were considerable obstacles to the realization of the Byzantine’s imperial ambitions.

In the sixth century when the Emperor Justinian, seen here, regained Italy from the Goths and North Africa from Vandals, he exhausted the resources of Byzantium while also ruining Italy’s economy and killing a large part of its population. So it was no accident that the Byzantine Empire reached its high point when it became smaller and more defensible between the eighth and twelfth centuries. It had survived new waves of Barbarian invasions, but equally important, it had lost its outlying possessions to the Arabs and Slavs and had become more compact. Yet, whatever happened to its outlying empire, Constantinople remained what Paris was, what New York is today: the foremost city of luxury, fashion and culture—also the city of sin, corruption, and material temptation all of which, however you look at it, is no mean achievement. The city was built on a high peninsula on the Bosporus where Europe comes very close to the Asian shore. Astride both Europe and Asia, Constantinople was a crossroads par excellence. It commanded the route from the Caucasus and the Steppes to the Mediterranean and also the route from the Danube valley to the Euphrates valley. The Balkans were its backyard. Asia Minor lay just across the water, and beyond that Syria and Mesopotamia.

So Constantinople was perfectly situated to serve as the capital of a realm that bridged East and West, that connected Greco-Roman culture with Christianity and with Oriental civilization. And its history is indeed the bridge that links us with Egypt, which it came to rule, and with Persia which it fought and finally defeated, and even with Alexander the Great, whose title of Basileus, or Royal King, the Byzantines borrowed for their own rulers. For centuries Constantinople was the repository of Greek and Roman culture and of the tradition that had been built up in preceding ages in Egypt and Babylon and Athens and Rome and Jerusalem. Our civilization wouldn’t be the way it is today if the city of Constantinople hadn’t endured to transmit these traditions: to transmit the Latin of Rome and the Greek of Athens, the skills, the arts, the thought, the memories to the barbarians of the West and to their gradually more civilized successors. So the survival of the city was crucial because it helped to make our past.

Perhaps the most important factor in its survival was the conviction that the empire was willed by God and protected by God and his anointed representatives. On the other hand, it was this same religious conviction that goes a long way to explain the traditionalism, the extreme conservatism of Byzantium. If your state is founded on the will of Heaven, why innovate? A Byzantine ruler might be dethroned, and God knows enough of them were, by murder, as shown here, or palace revolutions or riots in the city. But a change of emperor did not mean a change of policy, except in minor details, because to change it would have been something like changing your faith. And so, with Heaven’s approval secure, the Byzantine sovereign and the Byzantine state were both “Defenders of the Faith.” The concentration of all authority in the hands of God’s representative, like the emperor depicted here, was in itself a great source of strength. In the West, men lived their lives under a lot of different legal systems: tribal law, local law, manorial law, and the law of the central, or would-be, central state fought a continuous battle for recognition from the countryside, from the provinces, which took centuries, and didn’t really get settled until quite recent times. Here, for instance, are great landowners from sixth-century Italy who were a law unto themselves. But in the East there was only one law, and that Roman law emanated from a single source: the emperor. Even the decisions of the council of the Church needed the emperor’s approval. This is what has been called “Caesaropapism,” a political system in which the head of state is also master of the Church. And the patriarch, the bishop of Constantinople, lived in the shadow of the Imperial palace.

When Constantine died in 337, with his heir far from Constantinople, the embalmed remains of the dead emperor continued to rule the empire through the whole summer, autumn and winter, with courtiers reading their messages before it, ministers making reports to it, and courtiers seeking audience before it. It is important to realize, however, that even this macabre image of a ruling corpse had its roots in a long past. It was simply the triumph of the Hellenistic view of the emperor’s lofty position, a view which had developed in the East since the days of Alexander, which the Romans had taken some time to adopt, but which the Emperor Diocletian explicitly claimed in Rome at the end of the third century. And it was very useful because it lent the Byzantine Empire a sort of authority and stability that the old unified empire never had.

It did not matter anymore whether the emperor was elected or if he was born to the purple, or if he seized power, because his throne rested on more solid foundations than worldly processes could ensure. He was the anointed of the Lord, chosen from birth to fulfill the will of Heaven. And since Byzantines believed that promotion to rule came solely from God, the Imperial throne was open to everybody: peasant, and noble, to scholars, and to unlearned men, the only condition being that the ruler should be an Orthodox Christian.
Leo I, in the fifth century, had been a butcher. People in Constantinople used to point out the stall where he and his wife had sold meat. Justin I, in the sixth century, was a poor swineherd from the countryside who first appeared in the capital with bare feet and a pack on his back. And then one day his nephew left the family village to join him. His name was Justinian, and he became emperor in 527. Phocas, who ruled in the seventh century, was a simple centurion. Leo III, in the eighth century, was an odd-job man. Basil I, in the ninth century, was a peasant, probably a shepherd from Macedonia. And Michael IV, in the eleventh century, was a servant from Paphlagonia on the Black Sea.

But once a man had become emperor, there was no constitutional method by which he could be deposed except a successful revolution. And here again the fact of success set the seal of heavenly approval upon the man who, had he failed, would have been a mere usurper and would have been punished in the most terrible way. The Byzantines knew that Jehovah had transferred his favor from Saul to David. They believed that God would withdraw his support from any ruler, and then you would know it because the ruler would fall. And with this belief, revolution itself was incorporated into the body of constitutional practice. As the German historian Mommsen said, "Roman government was an autocracy tempered by the legal right of revolution."

Out of eighty-eight emperors who ruled in Byzantium through eleven centuries, over one-third would be usurpers, and as many died in violent circumstances: poisoned, stabbed, strangled, beheaded, starved, tortured to death, or simply blinded, which was considered more humane. As one result it became particularly important to emphasize the sanctity of the emperor, his distance, his untouchableness—the more vulnerable the emperor in fact, the greater the efforts to make him appear invulnerable in principle.

This is Constantius II and his empress who ruled in the fourth century. This is when the empire is most threatened, in their time, and throughout the third, fourth, and fifth centuries and this is when the personal position of the emperor is least secure. This is when the imperial ceremonies stiffen, and the distance grows between the ruler and his subjects. A spectacular megalomaniac kind of drama is devised, both to enhance power and to make up for the shortcomings of this power. You can see this if you look at the mosaics of the Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora, stiff and splendid in the midst of their courtiers, their posture reminiscent of the unmoved mover, the highest power in the cosmos.

Although it was very important that the emperor should impress upon his subjects this feeling of divinity which might help to preserve him from an undignified end, it was equally important that he should impress the barbarians, friend or foe. This was rather more feasible because barbarians were less sophisticated. So imagine the arrival in Constantinople of a barbarian chieftain from the steppes, from the desert, or even from the underdeveloped countries in western Europe. He finds himself in this terrific maze of streets and concentrated humanity. He is taken over by imperial officials who look after him every day, every hour; who show him the sights and who finally take him to the palace for an audience with the emperor.

To get to the throne room, he passes through a sort of palace of the Wizard of Oz, through a maze of marble corridors and chambers rich with mosaic and cloth of gold, through long lines of palace guards in white uniforms, through great crowds of patricians, bishops, senators and all of this to the music of organs and church choirs, with eunuchs on either side of him holding him under the armpits, until at last he enters the octagonal room, where this silent, stiff, completely motionless figure is seated on an elevated throne veiled by purple fabrics, purple being the imperial color and forbidden to everybody else. The furniture of the room is very strange. There are golden lions, golden griffins, golden birds perched on golden trees, rather like a sort of glorified mechanical toy store gone wild. And all of this is set in motion by the chieftain's entrance. The animals open their mouths, the birds open their beaks and sing, the griffins whistle, the lions roar and thrash their tails, and meanwhile the visitor has to prostrate himself. When he gets up, he cannot see either the emperor or the throne.

Finally he discovers that the throne has somehow risen way up and the emperor is still sitting on it, stiff, painted, but now wearing another costume than the one he apparently had been wearing a moment before, and certainly too far away to hold a conversation. The man is not just impressed, he is befuddled, he is dominated by all this splendor. He agrees to fight for the Roman Christ and for the empire. He will be kept happy by presents, honors, subsidies. He may be given a Byzantine princess in marriage. He will certainly be sent a bishop who is subject to the Patriarch of Constantinople, and who will sustain imperial interests. The Byzantines and their emperors understood well that diplomacy is cheaper than war, because when it works, your enemies do your fighting for you. And even when it doesn't work, it helps to buy time.
But all of this needed money—a lot of money. In the third century, remember, the imperial administration of the united empire, pretty much broke down. Inflation sent prices rocketing sky high, and the economy of the empire threatened to regress into a system of barter. But then in the fourth century, reform restored the value of money and taxation was reestablished which could be used to keep up a bureaucratic government. This saved the East, but it couldn’t save the West which lapsed back into a barter economy under its barbarian rulers and grew weaker and weaker because it could not pay to protect itself. The Eastern part of the empire, however, was safeguarded by firm administration and stable economy which bolstered its diplomacy and enabled it to pay its soldiers with gold.

The East’s ability to tax enabled it to maintain a highly trained army and navy which could preserve the empire. War for Byzantium was a desperately serious business. So the Byzantines kept and developed strategies and practical improvements in a way that barbarians, and later lords of the West, cared little about. The Byzantines developed drill, they developed tactics, they also developed secret weapons like Greek fire, a petrol-based mixture rather like napalm that could be shot from ships and from battlements. It proved deadly against Arab and Slavonic fleets. And they did great things with small numbers. This medallion commemorates the triumph of Justinian’s general Belisarius who reconquered North Africa from the Vandals with about fifteen thousand men, and Italy with only about eight thousand. By the tenth century, the grand total of Byzantine military forces was at most a hundred and forty thousand men.

But there was one institution that was even more important to the survival and the unity of the Byzantine Empire than the army, and that was the church we now call Greek Orthodox: Greek, because Byzantium had been an ancient Greek city, and its successor Constantinople inherited its Hellenistic traditions, Orthodox, because it alone in its own eyes represented correct doctrine. The church’s faith became the bond that in large measure took the place of a common nationality, and its position in society was crucial to the state in ways that the Latin Church in Rome never was. We shall see why and how in our next program.

#116 The Fall of Byzantium

For centuries, the Byzantine Empire survived internal conflicts and external threats. It became the center of the trading world and the focus of Christianity. But just as religion served to hold the empire together, it also tore it apart.

The Fall of Byzantium this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time, we ended with the statement that the Greek Orthodox Church was critical to the unity, even the survival, of the Byzantine Empire. In the United States, with our constitutional separation of Church and State, it’s sometimes hard to understand just how powerful a political force religious institutions can be. But in the Byzantine Empire, the Church was one with the State, and it prospered when the empire prospered. Now, that made it very different from the Latin Church, which never quite identified itself with the Roman State. At first, of course, it was persecuted, but even when it became the state religion, it tried to stay autonomous.

When the Eastern Church sent out missionaries like these, however, they were also ambassadors of the Byzantine State, and the pagan rulers they converted became political allies of the empire as well; or at least it was hoped they would so become. The best example of this religious diplomacy occurred in the ninth century when two missionaries, Cyril and Methodius, later canonized, produced a script and liturgy that would be adopted by the Bulgarians and by the Slavs of the Balkans. In the tenth century, the Slavs of Russia adopted them too, and that is why today the script of the Russians is pronounced “Kyrillic,” or if you like “Cyrillic.”

The other side of the coin, however, was that religious dissent in the Byzantine Empire easily turned into political division, and vice versa. The political stability of the empire, even its unity, were affected by theological disputes. One sometimes feels that theological disputation was the Byzantine’s favorite sport, more so even than chariot racing; but some of these disputes were going to have dire long-term results.

One of them was a long-standing difference between the Orthodox view that Christ had two natures, human and divine, and the rival belief which held that Christ had no humanity, only one nature which was totally divine. The
people who believed in one nature were called Monophysites, literally, “one naturists.” Monophysites were particularly numerous in Egypt and Syria, where their different vision of Christ came in very useful to affirm political differences against the central government in Constantinople. And so, the dispute went on for a couple of centuries, and it became particularly bitter in the seventh century, just when unity was needed most, as a new and explosive force burst onto the world stage. In the Arabian Peninsula, a prophet had arisen. His name was Mohammed, and in just a few years he united the fierce, warlike Arab tribes into a confederation dedicated to the spread of a new religious message—the message of Islam.

Mohammed’s revelation was that there was only one God—Allah, and Mohammed was his prophet. There had been other prophets—Moses, Jesus—but Mohammed said he was the last, and the only one to reveal the whole truth of what God was about. The religion he preached was simple and accessible, a strict monotheism with none of the complications that Christians had developed, a straightforward ritual rather similar to that of the Jews, and related to cleanliness and hygiene; the emphasis of basic virtues like courage, charity and hospitality; and the important promise that those who fell in battle for the faith went straight to a paradise, which the holy book of Islam, the Koran, described in detail, and which sounds a lot more fun than the paradise of Christians or Jews.

Combined with military force, the message of Islam proved very potent indeed. In the ten years before his death in 632, Mohammed had united all the tribes and cities of Arabia. By 644, twelve years after his death, Egypt and Libya had fallen to Islam, as well as Syria, Iraq, and Persia. By the time the century ended, Arab armies had overthrown what was left of the Persian Empire, they had laid siege to Constantinople, and within another fifteen years, they had spread from India to Spain. Part of the secret of their success was that they were not quite as barbaric as they seemed. Arabia had been long a crossroads for trade in spices and perfumes and slaves; and Mohammed himself was a merchant in Mecca, which was a great merchant town, and found his first support in Medina, another merchant town. Mohammed also knew a lot about Jewish and Christian beliefs. Here he is depicted riding next to Jesus, which shows that the Arabs were not so isolated as one might think. Another part of Arab success was that they were Semites, speaking a Semitic tongue close to the Aramaic spoken by common people from Iraq to Palestine.

Perhaps the most crucial factor was their relative religious tolerance. This is a scene from a Passover service held in Spain under Muslim rule. Muslims did not try to exterminate those who believed in Judaism, Christianity, or anything else. They simply asserted a higher revelation which made Muslims the Chosen People, entitled to special privileges on earth and exclusive access to Heaven, and which left non-Muslims as second-class citizens, tolerated but a bit despised.

Muslims didn’t have to pay taxes; only non-Muslims paid taxes. This was a strong argument for conversion, of course, and an equally strong argument for Muslims to tolerate the non-believers around them. And, while non-Muslims had to shoulder the entire tax burden, they paid no more, often less, than they had done before being conquered. Moreover, if they were religious dissenters at loggerheads with Constantinople and with the Orthodox Church, they invariably felt freer to worship in their own way under Muslim rule than they did under Byzantine rule. This is the story of the Coptic Church in Egypt—Monophysites who preferred Muslim tolerance to Orthodox persecution.

But Muslim tolerance was not just about taxes and non-believers. An attractive characteristic of the Arabs was that they were culturally tolerant, curious, ready to adapt traditions they found in the civilizations they conquered. They took over the Persian and Byzantine forms of government, complete with bureaucracy and absolutism. But they also preserved the cultural heritage of Greece and Persia: philosophy and geography, astronomy, mathematics, chemistry; and in many cases they improved on them. Arabic became what Greek had been to the Hellenistic world, the common language of an Islamic world that ran from the East Indies to Spain. It created a sort of international network of letters and science where writers in Spain could affect thinkers in Persia and where philosophers from India could read what was written in North Africa. The Arabs transmitted the works of Aristotle, who is depicted here in a thirteenth century manuscript, and the works of Plato, when both were forgotten in the West.

The Arabs picked up Greek medical science as perfected in Persia and passed it on; this, for instance, is a doctor preparing a batch of cough syrup. And Arab medicine was sufficiently in advance of European medicine that when the first European medical school was founded at Salerno in Italy in the tenth century, it was staffed by Muslims. Their architecture influenced Western design, especially the minarets of their Mosques which are reflected in our bell towers. They borrowed from the Hindus what we now call Arabic numerals. They introduced a Chinese invention, paper; and we can see by the words we have taken from them—algebra, alcohol, zenith, zero—how much they affected our sciences as well.
Militarily, Islam was checked in the eighth century. In 718, the Arabs were stopped in the East after a year-long siege of Constantinople, and in 733 they were driven out of Gaul by the Franks. But the influence of their civilization was going to affect backward Europe for centuries to come. Another instance of religious conflict with long-range effects was a long and bitter struggle dividing Christians between those who worshiped icons, that is, images like these of Abraham or David, and those who wanted to ban icons and were known as “iconoclasts,” literally, “breakers of images.” In this Byzantine manuscript, a group of bishops expresses strong disapproval of an image of Christ. Now icons depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, and a variety of saints had become tremendously popular objects of worship, relating to healing, protection, and all kinds of miracles. Here again, the profound cultural differences divided East and West.

It was the eastern provinces, closer to Jewish and Muslim traditions, which bred the greatest opposition to the worship of icons. The West, meanwhile, regarded Eastern iconoclasm as sacrilege and heresy. This issue divided the empire for over a hundred years, between 726, when one Byzantine Emperor, Leo III, ordered all icons destroyed, and 843, when the icons were finally reinstalled for good. It also quite literally helped to divide Christendom between Rome and Constantinople because the Patriarch of Constantinople stood for iconoclasm while the Pope of Rome stood against it. This meant that, after the eighth century, the Roman popes no longer looked for support from Constantinople against the barbarians; instead, they turned to barbarians for support in the religious struggle against Constantinople. Actually, the formal break in Christendom was going to come in 1054, when Pope Leo IX in Rome and Patriarch Michael Cerularius in Constantinople excommunicated each other. That was when the political division that had been growing between East and West for centuries was confirmed by a religious division which persists today.

Officially the break came because when Romans and Byzantines stopped disagreeing about icons, they disagreed about whether priests should marry, or wear beards, and whether the bread in the Sacrament should be leavened or not, and whether the Creed, the official statement of the most essential articles of faith, whether the Creed should have the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father "and" the Son, or from the Father "through" the Son. Behind the doctrinal differences, however, lay the immemorial contempt of the Latin for the Greek and the disdain of the legitimate empire in Constantinople for the upstart empire in the West, which was now run by barbarians. And behind that there must have been, too, the simple fact that the empire was no longer united in any way, that its parts had become quite different, with one speaking Latin and the other Greek, so the Mediterranean world, which had once been knit together by a bilingual culture, was now split into two halves which could no longer understand each other.

The only thing that East and West had in common by the eighth or the ninth century was the agreement that Constantinople was "the" city, the great marketplace, the focus of the Christian and the trading worlds. Constantinople had paved streets that ran for miles; it was lined by arcades full of countless shops, with running water in every quarter; with a hippodrome greater than the Colosseum and four gilded horses above the emperor's box, which were later stolen by the Venetians to adorn the facade of their Basilica; and, above everything, the wonder of Santa Sophia, the great cathedral which had been rebuilt by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century after the previous church had been burnt down in a riot.

The harbor was crowded, the bazaars were full of people and goods from all over the world. As one visitor exclaimed in 1161, "Great stir and bustle prevails in Constantinople, in consequence of the conflux of many merchants who resort there both by land and sea from all parts of the world: from Babylon and Mesopotamia, from Media and Persia, from Egypt and Palestine, from Russia and Hungary, and from the West."

You can get a vague idea of what it was like by looking at the site today, or by looking at architecture which imitates the Byzantine style, from the domes of churches in Moscow, to this one in Perigueux in France, and by looking at Venice, where Saint Mark's is the eleventh century copy of a sixth century Byzantine church and where many of the palaces are touched by the Byzantine style. But in the ninth and tenth centuries, when Constantinople was the wonder of Christendom, the West was backward. It didn't have much to offer the East in exchange for its silks and spices: a bit of iron and timber, slaves who were mostly captured or kidnapped Slavs, hence the term "slaves", and eventually woolen textiles which would improve the balance of trade. But for a long time, the Byzantines despised Westerners as barbarians, which they were, and as poor barbarians, which was worse; and the Westerners despised Byzantines as effeminate, devious and wicked. They ate fancy foods, they wore fancy clothes, they washed far too much; and the women painted themselves, and the men hired other men to fight for them. So Westerners looked down on the Byzantines, but they also envied their riches. And this attraction which drew them to the glamour and the splendor of Constantinople was dangerous, because if all roads led to the city, to "New Rome," then everybody was likely to end up there, with fair intentions or foul.
The Byzantine Empire had already been beset by a number of pressures from the Turks in Anatolia, the Normans in Italy and Greece, and especially the Italian sea powers—Genoa, Pisa and Venice. Finally, in 1202, Venice convinced some thirty thousand Crusaders, who were unable to pay for transport to Muslim Egypt, to conquer Venice's rebel Christian port city of Zara instead. The pirate Crusaders then moved on to Constantinople with the flimsiest of excuses, and they took the city in 1204. This is an artist's rendering of the event, done a long time later. And this is Venice, which was the primary beneficiary when the Byzantine Empire, its riches and trade, fell into Western hands. It was Venice that went on to dominate the eastern Mediterranean, and the shadow of the Byzantine Empire that survived disappeared in 1453, when the Turks delivered the coup-de-gras by capturing Constantinople.

You can imagine, then, how difficult it was for the people of Constantinople to live in a pot of honey when the land was full of wasps. Toward the end of the empire, the life of the average east Roman was a life of terror. They were afraid of the ruthless tax collector, of the arbitrary tyranny of the imperial governor, of the devouring land-hunger of the powerful, of the recurrent menace of barbarian invasion.

It's to the credit of the Byzantine world, to the credit of the tradition of Christian charity and social justice which it often incorporated, that it realized this burden of fear and perennial danger and tried to lighten it by building hospitals for the sick, for lepers, for the disabled; by building hostels for pilgrims like these, and strangers and old people; by building maternity homes for women; and refuges for abandoned children and the poor; well-endowed institutions with elaborate charters telling just how they were to be administered. The Byzantines listened to the texts they heard in church, one of which inspired the future Saint Anthony to become a hermit—"If you would be perfect, go sell all you have and give to the poor and come follow me." Many people followed this advice, and they did it the more readily since, in the insecurity of their times, material goods could come and go very quickly anyway. Life was insecure and dangerous, and religious vocations, as well as outbreaks of violence and cruelty, were the natural consequence.

The world of our own time ought to make it easier for us to understand the passions of the Byzantine world, the problems it faces, the fears under which it labored, and the simple feat of endurance it performed; because, finally, that is what remains: the historic function of Constantinople as the outpost of Europe against the invading hordes of Asia. Under the shelter of that defense of its eastern gateway, western Europe could refashion its own life; and it's hardly an exaggeration to say that the civilization of western Europe is a by-product of the will of the Byzantine Empire to survive. Next time, the Dark Ages. Until then . . .

#117 The Dark Ages

It was a time of anarchy, of murder, arson, pillage, rape—a time when the world seemed to fall apart. Even the Church depended on the barbarian tribes who ruled the West. As the barbarians were Christianized, the Church became more barbarous.

The Dark Ages this time on The Western Tradition.

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The final collapse of the Roman Empire in the West came in the fifth century under the pressure of German barbarians. Three centuries later, on Christmas day of the year 800, a German was crowned in Rome as Emperor of the West. He was Charles, King of the Franks, whom history knows as Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, and whose glorious reign was, for the times, a paragon of stability. But the period in-between those three hundred years from collapse to coronation—this period is known as the Dark Ages, partly because we don't know much about it, and partly because it was just that—dark and bloody. The economy had gone to pot. The social fabric fell to pieces as much by internal as by external disruption. Material culture decayed as we can see by new settlement patterns, with a lot of farms and villages on the best lands deserted for upland places. Old strongholds that hadn't been inhabited since the Stone Age, the like of which came back into use, not because you could hope to make a better living there, but simply because you had a better chance to stay alive. That's what the general situation looks like, or we guess it looked like.
At the political level, you remember that the Roman Empire in the West had been replaced by smaller barbarian kingdoms: Visigoths in Spain, who were later gobbled up by the Arabs around 700; Lombards in Italy; Franks and Burgundians in Gaul; Angles and Saxons in England—these represented whatever organized political power there was in Europe. Everything else belonged to the Roman Church: moral authority, learning, the prestige of the Roman name, and the care of the people. It was to the bishop that ordinary people looked for leadership in Christian society. All this time, a process of assimilation was going on. The barbarians were converted to Christianity in the fifth and sixth centuries and acquired a thin Roman veneer, but as the barbarians were converted to Christianity, the Church was increasingly barbarized. You can see this in the description that Gregory of Tours gives us of how things were in the kingdom of the Franks during the second half of the sixth century. Gregory, seen here in an illuminated manuscript from the tenth century, was himself a man of aristocratic Gaelic lineage, a descendant of Roman officials, a member of a dynasty of bishops. But Frankish history, at least what we know of it from Gregory, is one long tale of arson and rape, murder and purgery; sons strangling their mothers; mothers throwing their sons down a well; people getting kicked or burned to death at a friendly banquet; wives encouraging their lovers to murder their husbands and then in due course, murdering their daughters because they were afraid that they might tempt the lover away—incest rife and sometimes leading to murder, servants and allies betraying or poisoning their masters and their friends.

This all came to a high point or rather low point with the death of Queen Brunhildis who was captured along with her three sons by her enemies, tortured for three days, and on the fourth, paraded around the camp on a camel in what state you can imagine. And then she was fastened by her hair, an arm, and a foot to the tails of wild horses and torn limb from limb. But the fate of one of her sons is particularly interesting because even though two of the lads were killed at once, one happened to be the godson of the captor; and so he was spared and left to finish his life in a monastery—a good indication of the strength of religious bonds, even in a brutish superstitious world.

It was on these savage barbarians that the Church was increasingly dependent. Consequently, the outward decline in the condition of culture was accompanied by a deterioration of moral standards among the clergy. We have to remember that these standards, at least at the higher levels which are the only ones visible to us, continue to be those of the Roman world. So we shouldn’t be surprised that bishops had slaves and concubines as other gentlemen did. But we also find bishops who wore mail and sword under their vestments, presumably for ready use and who despoiled poor men of their holdings and sometimes of their wives as well. There is a scene at the table of a Frankish king where two bishops accuse each other of licentiousness, and there are many scenes where the bishops get so drunk that they can’t even recognize their guests. The world which Gregory of Tours describes is a world of violence and corruption in which rulers set the example of injustice and contempt for the law, and where even the barbaric virtues like loyalty and military honor are no longer preserved.

In such a world, religion was able to maintain its power only by the terror and the awe that its supernatural prestige sometimes inspired, and by the threat of spiritual violence which it used to protect itself from the physical violence of barbarism. Fear of the wrath of God, fear of the vengeance of the saints, these were the only things that might intimidate the lawless ruffians who were so common among the new ruling classes.

This is the period when saints played their most important part. Here for instance, is Saint Cuthbert, who once revived a dying baby with a kiss. In The Dark Ages, saints were not merely models of moral perfection whose prayers were invoked by the Church, they were very pragmatic forces who played a constant part in daily life, intervening in very practical ways so that the fishermen of Naples scourged their saints when they caught no fish. Saints were, in effect, supernatural powers, and they were thought to live in the sanctuaries from which they could watch over the welfare of their land and their people. The most important saint for Gregory was Saint Martin, whose shrine at Tours was considered a fountain of grace and miraculous healing to which the sick came from every part of Gaul. Saint Martin was thought to be particularly good against epilepsy and impotence. The shrine at Tours was destroyed in 853, and it was replaced several times, this one being the latest version. The original shrine was a sanctuary where fugitive slaves, escaped criminals, people outlawed by the king could all find refuge and supernatural protection. As a result, it was chock full of refugees.

In principle, any church was supposed to provide sanctuary, but it had to be a pretty important saint who could actually frighten the great lords or the king from robbing the saint’s property or from shedding blood on his premises. Those churches that were spared owed it largely to the power of their patron saint. And so the early centuries of The Middle Ages see the rise of a new Christian mythology in the West—the legends of the saints, like Saint Eriex here, which represented the other side of the dark picture of barbarian society that Gregory wrote about.
On one side, we see a world of violence and injustice which is sinking to destruction by its own weight. On the other side, there is the world of divine power and mystery in which man is freed from the harsh necessities of daily experience, where nothing is impossible because the saint can bring children back to life, or provide food and drink, where every human suffering can find a remedy because the saint can heal the sick and feed the poor and even purify the guilty. Now in this twilight world, it was inevitable that the Christian saint should acquire some of the features of the witch doctor on one hand and the demigod on the other, that his prestige should depend upon his power as a wonder worker, and that men should appeal to him very much as they used to appeal to the family gods or to the local gods of the ancients as a patron of the family, as a patron of the community. It was only in this world of Christian mythology that the vital fusion of the Christian faith and ethic with a barbaric tradition of the new peoples could have been achieved. It was obviously impossible for peoples without any tradition or philosophy, without any written literature, to assimilate directly the subtle profound theology and metaphysics of the great doctrines of the Church. The barbarians could understand and accept the spirit of the new religion only when it was manifested to them obviously, visibly, in the lives and the acts of men who seemed endowed with supernatural qualities, so the conversion of western Europeans was not achieved so much by a new doctrine as by a new power that impressed them and subdued them.

The Christian missionaries themselves were powerful personalities—brave, hardy, inspiring enthusiasm and trust. And there were women saints as well as men; Walpurga who practiced medicine among the Saxons and who is remembered on the night of May the first, Walpurgisnacht, and Saint Audrey, Abbess of Ely, whose feast on June the twenty-third was so popular that it became famous for its annual fairs. The cheap trumperies and necklaces on sale there gave the name to "tawdry."

Women also played an important part in the conversion of the pagans at the political level. In 496, a Catholic princess of Burgundy, Clotilda, married Clovis, King of the Franks, and helped to convert him to Christianity. A hundred years later, Clotilda's great-granddaughter, Bertha, married and converted this man, Ethelbert, King of Kent, and their offspring carried Christianity from Kent to Northumbria. In 987, the Hungarians were Christianized by Stephen, later Saint Stephen, who was baptized by his mother and encouraged by his wife. This was not pillow talk, of course. It was a matter of alliances and political interests; but whatever the reasons, wives played an important role in such conversions.

Then, once Christianity was accepted by the nobles, the Church's prohibition of incest began to change the political face of Europe. It meant that the network of royal marriages was going to spread from Ireland to Constantinople, from Castile to Novgorod, avoiding the disadvantages of inbreeding but also intertwining a group of families highly selected for their abilities in government and war. And the Church's prohibition of polygamy meant that, theoretically at least, bastards were excluded from succession to the throne. Now, it took a long time to convince the ruling classes to abide by such exclusions. Still, gradually it would no longer be necessary to murder all your brothers to be safe. Succession to the throne was clarified and stabilized, all of which had its uses.

The main thing, however, is that the Western Church did not come to the barbarians with a civilizing mission or with any promise of political and social progress. It came with a tremendous message of divine judgment and divine salvation. Humanity was born under a curse. It was enslaved by the dark powers of cosmic evil. It was sinking ever deeper under the burden of its own guilt. Now this was obvious enough, and it was only by way of the Cross, it was only by the grace of the crucified redeemer, or better still, of Christ in majesty, that men could extricate themselves from the damned mass of unregenerate humanity, could escape from the wreckage of a doomed world.

The world was falling to pieces, it was coming to an end, and so it was natural for Christians to turn their eyes to the other world, to the eternal city rather than to an earthly one, and to the Church which offered the only avenue towards it.

The argument was so convincing that while chaos continued and increased in the Western world, all the activities and the aspirations that we call cultural were concentrated in and on the Church. The tradition of Latin culture, the patterns of Christian life were not going to be preserved or developed in the cities which fell more and more into ruins, but in monasteries. And the monks would become not only the apostles of the West, but also the founders of Medieval culture. Men and women withdrawing from the world to find salvation as isolated hermits or in small communities were not a new phenomenon. Christians had begun to do this in the Egyptian and Syrian deserts from the third century on, but this sort of thing is easier to do in Egypt where you can go and dig a hole in the sand or build a little but out of reeds, out of mud, and doze through most of the day. It's easier to do it there than it is further north in Germany or France, or even just across the Mediterranean in Italy, where winter can be very cold. So harsh climates posed a problem to the monastic life and so did discipline, given the chaos around.
These were the problems Saint Benedict addressed when he set up his first monastery on Monte Cassino, south of Rome in 520, and when he drew up rules for his community in or around 529. The Benedictines may be taken as typical of all the older monastic orders. They took a lifelong vow to observe obedience, poverty, and chastity. These were supported on four main precepts: no private property, no eating of butcher’s meat (except in case of sickness), steady manual labor, and strict confinement within the monastery itself.

Benedict recommended three or four hours a day to be spent reading devotional books, although he made allowance for those who couldn’t read. But everybody had to spend four or five hours a day in prayer and religious services. This public prayer became increasingly important as time went on, and the average monk did less and less manual work and concentrated on praying for his fellow men. So by a curious paradox, the monk who abandoned the world to save his own soul found that one of his major tasks was the job of interceding with Heaven on behalf of his fellow men.

The rule of Saint Benedict is a model of practical and spiritual wisdom, even to recommending how monks should sleep—they shall sleep separately in separate beds. A candle shall always be burning in their cell until early in the morning. They shall sleep clothed and girt with belts or ropes, and they shall not have their knives at their side; lest perchance in a dream they should wound the sleepers. But like a lot of great documents, the rule of Saint Benedict became in time more a statement of what should be than an indication of what actually was. Property and meat crept in; work and abstinence went out. In spite of repeated reforms, monasteries became more businesslike and more worldly. This isn’t surprising when you consider that in a troubled, violent, unsafe world monasteries and convents afforded shelter and a minimum of order and comfort to a greater extent and for longer periods of time than any other residential establishment.

The shelter wasn’t merely physical, of course. It was spiritual too. Men and women crept into monasteries out of the cold, chilled to the marrow by the wickedness and wildness outside, envisaging the cloister as a refuge where they could keep warm in the faith. They could also maintain what bits and pieces of civilization were left, copying and illustrating old manuscripts when they weren’t scraping them off to make room for something else.

And they could spread the Christian message by missionary work, not just by sending out fiery preachers, but by example. Monasteries were cited in rural areas, and it was the monks who converted illiterate and heathen peasant populations and who also probably introduced agricultural and technological improvements that were going to change the quality of life all over Europe. The Dark Ages must have been incredibly dismal, with raids and counter raids, ambushes, robberies, murder, looting, kidnapping, torture, and drunken brawls ending in bloodshed and hands and ears and noses cut off, which was considered a more Christian treatment of criminals or enemies than putting them to death. But through all this, life went on. In burgs and monasteries and fortified manors, people maintained a minimal security. Merchants traveled on the old Roman roads. They were robbed once and twice, but they went on trading. Above all men and women went on sowing, harvesting, driving the pigs into the forest, driving the cattle out to pasture, to feed themselves and their masters as best they could. Next time we shall see how the Dark Ages came to an end, although not the darkness.

#118 The Age of Charlemagne

Even the Dark Ages were not uniformly dark. There were attempts to restore productivity and order. There was the brilliant success of a Frankish king crowned in Rome as emperor of the West. But what looks exciting to us today must have been hell to live through.

The Age of Charlemagne this time on The Western Tradition.

And now UCLA Professor Eugen Weber’s continuing journey through the history of Western Civilization.

Last time we ended on a rather bleak note. We were in the Dark Ages, that dismal period between the sixth and the ninth centuries when violence and corruption, both physical and spiritual, were endemic in Europe. But of course history is never as neat, let alone as linear, as we like to think. At the grass roots level, great things were also happening in the Dark Ages.

Historians disagree about the exact date, but sometime between the sixth century and the tenth century, a new heavy plow with wheels began to replace the old, light plow that had been used for thousands of years. The new plow dug deep and turned over furrows instead of just scratching the topsoil the way Mediterranean plows did and