

WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY – Ancient Period

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POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

Etruscans. The culture of Western Europe, in the period prior to the birth of Christ, is for the most part close to its archaic roots—in its undeveloped paganism, its readiness to brawl for territory and goods, and its weak sense of organizational administration. In the case of the Etruscans—a deeply rooted and still little understood culture flourishing on the West coast of Italy during the period of the Roman monarchy and the very early Republican Period—we encounter a highly sophisticated but also archaic western European presence which interacted creatively with Roman culture, and which can, with the limited conditions just sketched, be considered part of Western European culture.

Influence on Rome. The coastal cities of Etruria expressed themselves in a language unrelated to Latin, and outside the Indo-European language family. While the Romans appear to have broken from Etruscan overlordship in the sixth century, BC, the Etruscan cultural bridge was responsible for the introduction to the Romans of many pathways to Hellenistic and later Greek culture, as well of many noteworthy traits of Roman culture: the Romans followed the Etruscans in numbering their citizens in ‘centuries,’ groups of one hundred; in the establishing and avid following of gladiatorial games; in the practice of public reading of auguries, in which animal entrails were consulted as a guide to the future—foreign policy in the public square.

MILITARY

Fighting, not warfare, is what we see in Western Europe in antiquity. If we are speaking of the Roman provinces that are today’s England, France, and Germany, especially on the cusp of the Christian era, at the beginning of the Roman Empire, we are talking about tribes with a capacity for iron-ware fighting equipment, for hand held military weaponry, for chariot fighting, as they would have known it from their relative proximity to the Roman heartland, and quite possibly from conscription into the Roman army. We are not, however, talking about organized military groups, strategic planning, or a military administration. Much of the time we are talking about local conflicts over territory and food. The tribal names blur in our minds.

SOCIAL HISTORY

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Fall of the Roman Empire, in the fifth century, was long in developing, and contingent on economic, social, and external pressures which had long been building. Consequently, the Fall itself was not as sharp as, say, that of the Berlin Wall, but was a product of gradual erosion. In the wake of the disintegration of long built social structures, there remained pockets of ethnic kingdoms, local governance areas, which were to be developmental areas, out of which emerged regional monarchies, with adherent social structures, in which structures the lives of both Church, which was growing, and the fields—we

were in an essentially agrarian society—melded. In such an evolving setting, the formation of a new social world, that of the 'Middle Ages,' was taking a shape which would make history of the Roman practices of the *cursus honorum*, the knightly, administrative and senatorial roles which structured the social setting of the Roman citizen.

GENDER RELATIONS

There are two periods of classical antiquity—the Minoan period in archaic Greece, and the later centuries of the Roman Empire—when something approaching humane standards were applied to the upbringing and training of girls and young women. Such was not the case even of the early Roman Republic and we have to assume, from almost no evidence, that the same is true of the western provinces of the Roman Republic and Empire. Settled life, the condition in which women have the best chance for a social existence, was not common in the provinces—with their occasional migrations, their frequent and brutal health conditions—and even settled life, itself likely to be devoted to agricultural occupations, then food preparation, and most of all sexual reproduction, hardly provided opportunities for personal or even familial growth.

ECONOMIC HISTORY

INNOVATIONS

Fragments. In tracing the earliest art works of Western Europe we find an abundance of sculptural examples dating from around the time of the cave painting explosion in south western France and northern Spain (that is, ca. 35,000 years ago.) We find these prehistoric sculptures of animals and birds scattered through caves in the mountains of Germany, while other types of sculpture—fertility figures with huge breasts and vaginas—appear throughout Europe, in rockbeds, streams, and on mountainsides. To indicate the diversity and long duration of this ancient western European art tradition, think only of the advent of Celtic metalwork sculpture, which made its way west across Europe, only in the last years of the pre Christian, between 400-100 B.C., and which brought with it metalwork designs which still awe us by their craftsmanship.

TRADE

Backwater. By the time of the birth of Christ, twenty seven years after the foundation of the Roman Empire, there was considerable trade along the Mediterranean basin. We have little evidence, however, for the details of that trade in western Europe, which was still a backwater, local in economy, and cut off even from the centers of energy in the Italian peninsula. Were our topic Italy in the Empire we would find that there was a roaring and mounting traffic around the Mediterranean, and much farther out into the world than that. The Western European lands, however, first come into their own trade life in the period we now call Mediaeval, though for the Romans the West was simply far flung *provinciae* of Empire.

What trade there was, in western classical antiquity, took place largely in, around, or in connection with the commercial power of the city of Rome. The port of Rome, at Ostia, was from the early Empire on bustling with merchant cargo, much of it amphorae (containing wine, oil, and grains), with a diversity of commercial products like leather, woods, and building materials. The far less developed economies, of the provinces to the west of Rome—in France, Germany, and England—were sufficiently –given their then needs and desires--supplied by internal and cross border trading. It was not until the third and fourth centuries, of the Christian era, that we note the first evidence of a coherent mediaeval trading economy.

CULTURAL HISTORY

VERBAL ARTS

Literature

Western European literature, unlike Western European music, had a life—of a sort—in antiquity, prior to the Christian era. Of a sort, because it was an entirely oral life, had not yet conceded to the force majeure of the written, which is the hallmark of generative culture-- built, urban, economically driving, and historically influential society. But of a sort, for sure, for among the creations of pre Christian oral literature in Western Europe, are versions of some of the world's great tales, epics, and heroic records: epics from Iceland, mainland Scandinavia and Germany, which we know to be at the roots of numerous written masterpieces dating from the centuries after Christ.

Languages

Indo European. Almost all the languages spoken in Europe today are descendants of Proto Indo European, their hypothetical but evidence-supported father language. That proto Indo European is a theoretical language, based on the evidence of language and speech predating the Christian era by many thousand years, and itself part of a distant pre-writing era, and yet we have no better argument evidence, for the diverse but interrelated facts of language history, than a hypothetical language-father origin.

Origins. Evidence from the three main language phyla currently dominant in Europe concentrates on: the *Romance* (215 million European speaker-users); the *Germanic* ('an estimated 210 million Europeans are native speakers of Germanic languages'); and the Anglo-Frisian, most dramatically represented by contemporary English, currently boasting some 60 million native speakers in the United Kingdom and a difficult to determine number of English speakers in the European Union, where perhaps as many as 100 million speakers now reside. Each of these three huge language phyla tracks its origins to Proto Indo European, as also does Slavic, of which there are 250 million native speakers in south eastern Europe. (We omit the Slavic element in this profile, which confines itself to the three most closely interrelated language families, Germanic, Romance, and English).

The three language phyla named above all passed through their ancient period—that period which, for ancient European philosophy, religion, and science, we have been accepting our weakness in evidence—as vehicles of the experience, and communication-desire, of widely outspread tribal and clan survivalists, who were living in loose bands with gradually thickening bonds of specialized labor. The barbarians to whom the ancient Romans turned, in their various efforts to pin the blame for their fall, were an already fairly developed example of the kinds of new language potential being imported onto the continent of what would later be called Europe. Of the proto languages they brought with them, over the time border into the postclassical age, we can say that they were kin but separate, say, from the Greek or Roman they would have intersected, at those points where the mature impulse of western civilization was already at work.

Script

Latin Script. The Latin script, which English speakers commonly call 'the alphabet,' is a writing system based on the letters of the ancient Roman alphabet, and though this script has evolved in many details—of added or subtracted or modified letters; of 'hands' or writing styles—it has nonetheless remained remarkably stable for over two millennia. (Does that mean that the script has functioned effectively, with a lot of nursing and caressing here and there, or does it mean that the script is partly a fossil?) The playwright Bernard Shaw, who created his own phonetic alphabet for English, felt that the Latin alphabet was so seriously unable to deal with the sounds of English, and thus so baffling in its spelling, that it needed replacement by a phonetically effective alphabet, the one he proposed.

Origins. The Latin alphabet was itself derived from a form of Cumaean Greek (itself derived from Phoenician)—from the early Greek settlements along the Italian coast—in use by the Etruscan peoples who were the neighbors to the ancient Romans. (The usage origin for the Latin alphabet was thus the seventh century B.C.) In its earliest form— like the Duenos inscription from the Quirinal Hill in Rome, which adorns the flanks of a three-part perfume bottle— the Latin alphabet was an uppercase (all caps) serifed set of letters. As it was adopted (and adapted) for use by the Romans themselves, the Romans were naturally inclined to explain this important step in their cultural development, and did not fail to ascribe more than human interventions to the invention of their alphabet, allowing their first century B.C.

writer and fabulist, Hyginus, to postulate divine intervention and observations of the flights of cranes, as the triggers to the creation of the Latin alphabet.

Mythology

Old Norse. Old Norse Mythology—to limit ourselves to an example; every part of Western Europe generated its own myths-- is the collection of tales from the peoples of North Germany, tales which have their origins in Norse paganism, and which continue to reach out and multiply into the Scandinavian folklore of the modern period. The ancient Norse mythology has its origins in the stories of various heroes, gods, and beings who came to life in the creative cultural imaginations of the pagan Norse, as well as in their mediaeval manuscripts, archeological materials, and folk traditions—which we will treat elsewhere. It need hardly be said that the stages of development of this mythology are difficult to delineate, and that, as with all mythologies, internal inventiveness, indifference to historical precision, and lack of archival consolidation prevent anything like a definitive chronological picture.

Development. Many languages at many stages of development have gone into the composition of such a mythology as the Norse, which is most prolifically testified by such a language as Old Norse, and in such a removed location as Iceland, where by the thirteenth century a fervent attention was devoted to the collection of old manuscripts, and which generated texts like *The Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturlisson or *The Poetic Edda*, which contained voluminous anonymous materials pertaining to Norse mythology. The best account of such a mythology, we see in surveying a mass of not yet organized myth-growths, is that which sees myth branching out in multiple forms around the 'believer' or 'user' who is invested in the beauty, wit, or healing good sense of the myth branch in question. Myth does not aspire to heal, save, or necessarily to instruct, but it preserves, entertains, and 'explains,' as when the narrative materials it tracks provide a useful setting for historical events or human behaviors.

Folklore

Dilemma. Once again, when we turn to the cultures of Western Europe, we are faced with a dilemma: we know that the pre-Christian world settings, of what would later be the high cultures of Britain, France, and Germany, were pervaded with tales, superstitions, miraculous lores, and phallic robustness testified to, all of it, by what is left to us of inscriptions, designs, and artifacts. We also know that the state of culture, in the pre-Christian Roman Empire, left us little verbal material of use for 'studying' the folk traditions of pre-Christian Britain.

Painting

Backdrop. In the sequence of profiles of Western European culture, from the viewpoints of various functions—philosophy, religion, music, dance—we inevitably face rebuffs. Taking the notion of *western*, seriously, we time after time discover that Western Europe, in the ancient or pre-Christian phase, was simply a dark and undeveloped appendage of the Roman Empire. We find we have little to say about the area of Western Europe in the pre-classical period, except that it was provincial, undeveloped, and in many ways primitive—in its living units, its folkways among territories still hardly cultivated, its relative vulnerability to the immediate perils of life, from wild animals to wild people.

Amazement. Given this temporal and geographical setting, we are stunned to find that in extensive cave paintings, at least thirty five thousand years before us, in Lascaux, Altamira, Les Eyzies, over a wide area of southeast France and Spain, there are networks of cave paintings, many of them cut sharply into the rock faces of deep caves. Many of the thousands of these sophisticated paintings created onto bare rock depict hunting scenes, rituals for cults we have no way to understand, and landscapes. (Startlingly enough, these profusions of highly subtle art can also be found deep in the Sahara, on cave walls similar to those in Europe. Many of the patterns on the African walls are almost identical to those found in Europe.)

Agriculture. To say more than this, about these paintings is almost impossible, for we have nothing but ill lit caves for evidence. To say less is useless. One direction of response is this: that the purposeful concern of these cave painters seems clearly involved with successful hunts, landscape maintenance, and in many scenes fertility: aren't these all panels of the vast looming human change, toward an

upcoming agricultural existence, the Neolithic revolution in agriculture, in which the quality of human life as a whole will be dramatically advanced?

Sculpture

Fragments. In tracing the earliest art works of Western Europe we find an abundance of sculptural examples dating from around the time of the cave painting explosion in south western France and northern Spain (that is, ca. 35,000 years ago.) We find these prehistoric sculptures of animals and birds scattered through caves in the mountains of Germany, while other types of sculpture—fertility figures with huge breasts and vaginas—appear throughout Europe, in rockbeds, streams, and on mountainsides. To indicate the diversity and long duration of this ancient western European art tradition, think only of the advent of Celtic metalwork sculpture, which made its way west across Europe, only in the last years of the pre Christian, between 400-100 B.C., and which brought with it metalwork designs which still awe us by their craftsmanship.

Architecture

Ancient. Ancient western European sculpture provided us abundant examples, from the Neolithic period, of small figurines evidently connected with fertility. (Large breasts resembling the Helladic sculptures from Neolithic Greece.) Paintings from the caves of southern France and northern Spain, dating to 35,000 B.C., similarly prioritized themes of harvest and fertility, quite naturally concerned with the promotion of the species. Massive architectural complexes, like Gobekli Tepe (in southern Anatolia; ca. 10,000 B.C.) or Stonehenge in central England (3000 B.C.), naturally lead us to suppose that they too have connections with promoting abundance in natural cycles.

Dance

Prehistory. We must imagine a robust prehistory for the dance as well as for religion and art, in the pre-Christian centuries; in those areas we now call France, Spain, England and Germany. Emphasis is due, here, on the robust, for it is easily enough assumed that those 'wild lands' beyond the Roman frontier were, because without writing, also without fields of art in which to express their emotions. (The simultaneous Roman and Greek cultures, which were so proficient at the language arts, and for whom {especially the Greeks} what could be said or written was the gold standard for depth and value, tend to overshadow the dark pre-Christian ages of West Europe.)

Music

Once again with music, as earlier with literature or philosophy, we have very little to say about the world of Western Europe, in the centuries (millenia?) which preceded the advent of Christianity and the Fall of Rome. There are early—more than 20,000 years early-- archeological remains of musical instruments, scattered through Europe—and there are portrayals of performing musicians on the walls of caves throughout France and Spain, but since music disappears, after having been aired, there are no remains once it has been aired. Whence, then, this thing called music even came from, will therefore remain among the mysteries of the phenomenon. What spurred the making of this 40,000 year old bone flute from 'France,' of which I am presently looking at a reproduction? Was it the desire to communicate, the need to give a warning, the inherent joy of the production?

Theatre

Frontier. Once again we imagine Western Europe, the western frontier of the Roman Empire, to have been barren of literary culture in pre-Christian times, and we can go farther and doubt that there were even non-theatrical performances at the time on the western frontier—it being possible, always, that a non-writing, even non-verbal dramatic tradition could establish itself. Therefore in looking for the origins of western European drama we will need to begin with the dramatic actions of the early Christian Church, as it gradually replaced the declining Roman Empire. We may thus start by reminding ourselves that for the fourth century St. Augustine, one of the culture giants for the values of the early Christian world, the stage was a home of vice and wickedness, and the practice of simulating others' moods and behaviors an

inherently wasteful use of the mind. Thus even in the new theater world, Roman theater as it was experienced by the first Christian intellectuals, there was resistance to the notion of the theatrical.

WORLDVIEW

Philosophy

Wilderness. The (later named) nations of Western Europe—vast areas we now call Germany, France, and England—were during the so-called Greco-Roman era relatively uncultivated wildernesses. By the time of Fall of the Roman Empire (5th century A.D.), the wild frontiers of what we now call Europe had begun to be ‘tamed,’ but nothing like a developed philosophy was to be found in Western Europe during classical antiquity. Awe at the wonder of creation expressed itself in brilliant works of painting, from prehistoric times on, and religious Nature and Great Mother cults had given expression to man’s need to feel at home in his universe but, to repeat, nothing like systematic, interpretive thought had been developed. There was no ‘philosophy.’

Religion

Pagans. Taking Western Europe to mean the areas of the present countries of England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, etc. in pre-Christian times, we would welcome the chance to discuss Western European *religion*, though hardly pre-Christian Western European *philosophy*, which in fact we passed over in our discussion of philosophy in the sweep of European cultural history. The area in question was in fact prolific with ‘pre Christian religious fervor’ though in that historical environment, of almost total illiteracy, infrastructural undevelopment, and an abundance of wild nature, the meanings of religious fervor were quite different from those which, say in the early Christian period, kept Christianity under the rug, hidden and clubbish. The religious practices of pre-Christian western Europe were ‘pagan,’ in the sense of ‘closely tied to the natural habitat, ancient folkways, and distinctive nature deities—earth mother avatars, malign spirits, menacing natural forces—thunder and lightning, the power of oceans; in short, to control mechanisms by which the fragile human person, still as vulnerable as prehistoric man, could make life as secure and comforting as possible. Were we to have included the Greco-Roman orbit within the ‘Western European,’ which we are not doing, we would have been able to note how advanced the classical god-system was, soaring above the contemporary pagan in its capacity to explain, evaluate, and anticipate the thermodynamics of interweaving deities, in a brilliant tapestry of meanings poised around the awes of belief; a portrayal, this, of the essential constructive power, of ancient Greek religion, in the formation and maintenance of the state; an insight expressed with classic fervor by the French historian, Fustel de Coulanges, in his magisterial *La Cité Antique* (1864).

Science

Transition. We now know that scientific thought and method proliferated in China, millennia B.C. Also in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Central America. But not in Europe—which had no such name, not to mention scientific skills—in the centuries which preceded the Roman Empire. In fact the areas we now call France, Spain, Germany were simple tribal cultures, with little infrastructure or communal development, in the millennia which preceded the Classical Age, and which led into the Fall of a great civilizing event, the Roman Empire.