

## Introduction

"Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. "  
(John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn")

History, theory, politics, economy, dialectic, democracy, tyrant, anarchy, alphabet, cosmos, tragedy and comedy, idea, philosophy, theology, geometry, atom, ode: when we realize that each of these words is Greek, borrowed directly into English, French and the other European languages, we may begin to sense what is special about a culture which is at the origin of so many different human activities that have continued from then until today. Out of Greece the modern world received both philosophy and science.

The Bible continues to challenge and puzzle the world; the Christian faith has marked Western culture so deeply that it is still not easy to separate the two; yet why should texts, some written three thousand years ago, remain alive with meaning today? And not only texts, for millions of people look beyond the texts to the Living God and the Risen Christ in whom they find the origin and the goal of human history, at a time when there are more Christians in Latin America, Africa and Asia than in Europe and North America.

Rome, too, has left its mark in words: republic, empire, urban, justice, dictator, liberty, university, humanity, religion, and in whole languages too, since French (from which many current English words are derived), Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian derive directly from Latin.

These two great cultural streams combine fruitfully, but confusingly, to give Western culture: the Graeco-Roman and the Judaeo-Christian. Put as simply as this, the reader may not realize the full scope of what is being said. The Jewish religion and people, the Christian religions in all their variety, all that has been thought and written in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the centuries since then until today in philosophy, poetry, fiction, drama, history, social theory, ideology, the Humanism which is at present fiercely contested in parts of the West, certain aspects of modern science, and much of the dialectics called Marxism, to say nothing of the art and the architectural design of many countries, all these have their historical roots here. What follows in this book is designed to introduce some of the main background to these.

## The Origins of Culture

While people were nomads, living in tents, always travelling, or settled alone in family farmsteads, they had to plant their own food and do everything for themselves. With the rise of sophisticated technology, this was no longer possible. Specialists were needed. Urban society gives rise to an economy based first on exchange (barter), then on money. Money means records and contracts, archives and a collective memory.

In most early societies there was a ruling, royal class or family, within a sacral vision of kingship. Certain people, close to the king, had responsibility for public law, order, prosperity. Each society had its religious observances, which were institutionalized in public temples of many kinds, with castes of priests and traditions of mythical stories to be transmitted.

Among the ordinary people, who as "citizens" had a greater or lesser role in the democratic running of the city-state, there were responsibilities for the defense of the city against enemies. Military activity gave rise, in some cases, to a professional military class; in other places, the male citizens were all obliged to contribute military service, while they were able to, and according to their wealth and position in society.

Older forms of living continued in the farms outside the cities. There was thus a relationship between city and countryside to be developed, since the city needed food. The other aspect of this new world was the possibility it offered for exchanges of technology, culture, religions, between different cities. This was often done in the course of exploring another aspect of inter-city living, as people from one city tried to exercise power over other cities by attacking them and making them pay regular tributes in taxes or raw materials.

All of this gives rise to the need for permanent records, a collective memory for future generations. The origin of writing, probably in a religious context, is only the beginning of the story. It quickly becomes normal to use writing for financial records of taxes, of imports and exports, of debts and promises. Each society generates its own laws, which are also recorded, often in public places so that all can know them. Contracts between cities are necessary for peace; diplomacy needs correspondence.

Humanity must be supposed to have sung its joys and its pains, its memories and its hopes, from the moment it began to communicate in words. Songs and stories, great events to be remembered in a people's history, as in a family's, or a religion's. There is a beginning of literature, when these songs and stories were found to be worth writing down, as alphabets developed.

Skills, too, must be transmitted to new generations. Writing (and therefore reading) must be learned. Some kind of schooling arises. And since nothing is fixed, there are people who begin to ask questions, to challenge old ideas, to suggest new ways of thinking. Technology gives rise to science, religion gives rise to philosophy, all of it the fruit of a restless curiosity driven by practical necessities. From the earliest times, people in different countries, China, Babylon, Egypt, measured the movements of the sun and stars. They discovered, slowly, the ordered universe, the possibility of measuring time in years, centuries. Chronicles of the great events of a city's life could be fixed by dates.

All of this is a matter of communication. Languages are means of communicating with others, but also obstacles, since there are so many different languages. The history of human communication is one of constant fusion, change and exchange, words from one city passing to another, one group of people giving up their former language to blend with another group. The history of language is the history of encounters, with the need to understand one another.

Another great question in the world of business, particularly, was the possibility of recording numbers. How many ships? How much grain? In some ways, the difficulty of precise numerical writing has been much greater than that of phonetic alphabet. In an age dominated by 1, 2, 3... it is good to think of humanity's struggles to count and compute before the age of the computer. How did a Roman add XXXVIII and CCCLXXIV?

The history of human culture is also written in brick and stone. Each culture leaves its traces in buildings which survive, whole or in ruins, or excavated from beneath more recent layers of civilization. Temples (the Parthenon), tombs (the Pyramids), theatres (Athens), palaces (the centre of Rome), homes (in Pompeii).

Inside these buildings, and outside too, artisans placed what we now call "works of art", products of the visual arts of sculpture, painting, furnishing. And in many such buildings, for various purposes, people came to make music with voice and instruments. This too is part of the history of human culture, as is the study of the simple tools the workers used, the crops the farmers planted, and the clothes people wore.

All of this, applied to the Middle East and Egypt, to North Africa, to Greece, to Rome, and to Western Europe from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, and followed through from the earliest days, perhaps 3000 years before Christ, until today, goes to make up the Backgrounds of Western Culture, which is the material of this book.

Those using this book for teaching will need to develop their course according to the level, capacity and interest of their students. In this Second Edition, over a hundred pages of primary texts have been added in order to illustrate more fully what is being said by way of introduction. Needless to say, it may sometimes be found helpful to have students read entire works, be it in Greek drama, literature, or the books of the Bible.

One major lack is the absence of pictures. This can easily be overcome by giving students 'Scrapbook' assignments in which they find pictures in the library or on the Internet and compose their own visual presentations.

Both texts and illustrations can now be found in considerable quantities on the Internet, although the quality is sometimes not good, and the more modern translations of classical texts are mostly, for copyright reasons, not available. Since Internet addresses are notoriously unstable, it is not realistic to include lists in this book. At the time of publication, the author's Home Page includes lists of links to

useful resources:

<http://anthony.sogang.ac.kr>

It is assumed that the reader is able to refer to a Bible. For further information, readers are directed to the many Encyclopedias and standard works that exist, and in particular to such works as the following, which have been of immense assistance in preparing this book:

- Edith Hamilton *Mythology*  
Pierre Grimal, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Blackwell).  
Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (Dent).  
*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard.  
*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. F. L. Cross.  
*The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* ed. Sir P. Harvey.  
*The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, ed. P. E. Easterling and E. J. Kenney. Vol. 1, Greek Literature.  
*The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich. OUP, 1995.  
*The Oxford Book of Classical Verse in Translation*, ed. Adrian Poole & Jeremy Maule. OUP, 1995.  
M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (2nd ed., Harper & Row, 1960)  
A. R. Burn, *The Pelican History of Greece*.  
*A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nelson, 1975).  
*Latin Literature: An Anthology* ed. M. Grant (Penguin Classics)  
R. Warner, *The Greek Philosophers* (Mentor, 1958)