The new diversity of the Mediterranean tradition was never reversed, even though the Greeks and Romans “re-conquered” the Persian Empire. Despite the political reunification of Mediterranean lands, our Mediterranean heritage took alternate tracks that would lead into different futures. We have followed the track established by the GRECO-ROMAN CULTURAL MATRIX, but we should remember that the Ancient Mediterranean Cultural Matrix led to many other developments elsewhere in the world – those that developed from the “other” track.
The Issue of “Classical”

A consideration of the GRECO-ROMAN CULTURAL MATRIX raises the issue of the idea of classicism, for our European ancestors, later in the 13th century (C.E.), began to look back at a largely imaginary Greece and Rome as the classical stage of human culture. What makes something a classic? First of all, a classic must represent quality viewed from a distance. Something only becomes a classic at a later time, so the label is applied to the past. Secondly, a classic must have influence (or meaning) at the time it is considered a classic. Through its influence, a classic always exists in the present, and also sets standards for activities in the present.

When the people of a society look back to some phase of their past as classical, they attempt to emulate this phase. In the Greco-Roman branch of Mediterranean culture, such emulation includes architectural and artistic styles, essential forms of government and law, and a model of learning that places value on Greco-Roman ideals and (until the 20th in the United States) language and literature. These factors tend to bind the people of a society together, giving them a common set of beliefs and a common vocabulary to describe their beliefs. In this way, the faith in something that is classical may benefit a society.

The price, however, is high. By setting forth a model of what is worthwhile, the idea of classical tends to exclude other models, fostering a perspective of ETHNOCENTRISM. Classical standards are, by definition, fixed. Any deviation constitutes a betrayal, and from the notion of betrayal it is a short step to the notion of inferiority. If something doesn't measure up to classical standards, it must be lacking. As an example that is not too threatening, consider the dominant point-of-view of nineteenth-century Europeans, who basically saw the entire world outside of Europe as so inadequate that it needed to be transformed into European-style culture.

For us, questions about the pros and cons of the idea of classical have become a matter of hidden cultural drives rather than questions that lie on the surface of our collective reality. When we have discussions or pass judgments the idea of classical (or classic) often surfaces with no reference to Greek or Roman models. A hundred years ago this would have been astonishing. Today it is expected. The difference has to do with organized education and curricula. Here’s an example…

Until the First World War, the required curriculum of many universities included Latin. Today, many do not even offer Latin, and few require it for all degree candidates. When the majority of universities in the United States abandoned Latin, they abandoned not just a language, but a body of literature which “educated” people shared in common that provided a collective frame-of-reference. Although major universities still have departments called Classics, the general frame-of-reference that the Greco-Roman "classics" once provided no longer exists. What remains is an ironic, smug superiority among those who make their way successfully in this society, a superiority unfettered by any significant responsibility to the knowledge-base that made this society possible!
The Interconnectedness of the GRCM

Confusion about the idea of classical does not make the Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix irrelevant to our lives, and understanding Greek and Roman cultures can help us better understand ourselves. In this sense, the Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix has about the same status for us as the Ancient Mediterranean Cultural Matrix. We must search (and sometimes deeply) to find it in our own time.

The Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix endured for about one thousand years. The division of the Matrix into Greek and Roman components partly reveals a chronological sequence: there was a Greek Empire, and later there was a Roman Empire. While Greece and Rome could not be politically dominant at the same time, the story of Rome, like the story of Greece, reaches back to Post-Amarna times. Still, the coexistence of Greece and Rome is a symbol for the most basic "fact" about the Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix: Greece and Rome together constitute a heritage from the beginning of the former to the end of the latter, and this total heritage preserved some aspects of the Ancient Mediterranean legacy while establishing and contributing unique innovations at the same time.

Although Greece went out of business politically sooner than Rome, the idea of "Greco-Roman" applies even after Greece is reduced to the status of just another colony in the Roman Empire. The whole has greater meaning than its separate parts. Their symbols, values, achievements, and Perspectives are comingled. Without the influence and inspiration of Greece, Roman values would have been quite different. Without the addition of Roman values and institutions, Greek values would remain largely unknown.

Culturally speaking, the relationship between Greece and Rome was complementary, even though their basic political relationship was conflicting.
The Greek Cultural Matrix
from 479/478 B.C.E. to 27 B.C.E.

In a **political sense**, the Greek Cultural Matrix began in 479-478 B.C.E. with the defeat of the Persian invaders and the beginning of the Athenian Empire. The Matrix came to its ultimate political end in 27 B.C.E. with the triumph of the Roman Empire. About halfway through the era, Alexander the Great, a military leader with a strong sense of cultural style, decided to re-establish the Persian Empire in reverse by reconquering the Ancient Mediterranean World.

Historians commonly use Alexander as a political dividing-point for the Matrix as a whole. The period from 479/478 B.C.E. until the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. is known as the **Classical(!) Period** of Greece, a 150-year period that may be characterized by the **value** of **achievement**.

After the death of Alexander the Great and the fragmentation of his Empire, an era known as the **Hellenistic Period** began, which may be characterized by the **value** of **dispersion** of Greek culture. In Greece itself, the Hellenistic Period lasted until 146 B.C.E., when the Romans sacked the city of Corinth, after which Greece became a Roman province. Elsewhere, the Hellenistic Period lingered until 27 B.C.E. and the founding of the Roman Empire.

The impact of the Greek period may be boiled down to the story of two **POLOI** (city-states) in Greece, each the head of an alliance of city-states, and each at odds with the other. One was **Sparta**, and the other **Athens**.
Two GREEK Poloi – one leading to the other

Spartan society was closed. It was militaristic and took form as an oligarchy of five rulers who governed in a totalitarian fashion. In a "closed" society, most of the people have little individual freedom, but they have plenty of opportunities to practice self-discipline. For the value it placed on discipline, Sparta actually became a model for later societies that opposed authoritarian government. Our knowledge of Sparta is mostly indirect. It would seem that Spartan culture did not give high priority to the literary arts (or else the bulk of its writings have simply been lost).

It is, however, in Athens that we find the major contributions of Greek culture to the future. Athenian society was open. In an "open" society policies are theoretically set by the majority of the "citizens" (a concept invented by the Athenians) and there is a strong emphasis on individual freedom. [NOTE - For the Athenians, people who qualified to be citizens amounted to less than 20% of the total population.] The openness of Athenian society paid off in a "Golden Age" led by Pericles (460-430 B.C.E.). During this thirty-year period, Athenians supposedly placed an unprecedented priority on human values. The leaders of society were committed to truth, beauty, and justice; and there was an aspiration to perfection resulting in an explosion of creativity amazing for such a small place (a minute fraction of twenty per cent of 250,000 people) in such a short time.

In his "Funeral Oration," Pericles accounted for Athenian greatness by describing the nature of Athenian democracy ("people-power") as the perfect model for others to follow, a model which balanced the wellbeing of the individual over against the wellbeing of the city-state. For Pericles, the center of Greek life was the polis, or city-state. The lifestyle offered to citizens in a polis provided not only government, but education, religion, and entertainment as well. The "downtown" plan of Athens included the Pynx, the Acropolis, and the Agora. The center of Athenian religious and civic activity was the Acropolis. The Agora was the marketplace of Athens. Politics, philosophy, and other matters were discussed in the Agora. Athenians valued discussion about perfection.
The lifestyle described by Pericles shows how Athens combined its Hellenic heritage with innovations of its own. The idea, and the fact, of democracy itself (a value enacted by the Athenians) emerged from a series of political reforms achieved by late Hellenic leaders of Athens.

The "games" to which Pericles refers have roots that go back all the way to the eighth century, to the establishment of the "Panhellenic Festival" at Olympia, a great religious center. The Athenians of the Golden Age did little to improve on these institutions.

In areas such as drama, the Athenians made radical innovations in their heritage. The origins of Greek drama are found in Hellenic religious festivals, but playwrights such as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles developed drama into a profound mode of reflection on the nature of the human condition.

Greek art and architecture found its inspiration in the art and architecture of ancient Egypt; but by making the "ideal" human form and its proportions the focus of their sculpture and building, the Greeks turned art in a new direction.

Despite Pericles' praise of democracy, as the leaders of the Delian League the Athenians ultimately aimed at the establishment of an empire. Perhaps because of the Athenian emphasis on the value of the individual, Pericles robbed the treasury of the Delian League to pay for construction on the Acropolis. The Golden Age of Athens fizzled out into the Peloponnesian War fought between Sparta and Athens and their allies. Even during this disaster, the Greeks would make contributions to the future. Thucydides, who gave us Pericles' speech, was the great "historian" of the Peloponnesian War. Like the dramatists, he wanted to use "history" to discover universal principles of human behavior.

The Legacy of Hellenism

The Greek leader who established the Hellenistic Empire was Alexander. He was NOT a “great” manager of all the he conquered, demonstrated by an incredible administrative incompetence. But, as an imaginative leader, he created a cultural ideal grounded in the lifestyle and achievements of the Athenians, and his empire forever enlarged the total reach of human imagination. Alexander's cultural ideal is called "Hellenism." Like other Greeks, Alexander and his successors understood cities better than empires, so they attempted to remake the cities of their empire along the lines of Athens, the epitome of Greek culture. Hellenism might be best defined as the imposition of Athenian culture on other poloi.

During the first Hellenistic era (when Hellenism was run by the Greeks), various Greek rulers after Alexander continued to impose Greek culture on the poloi of the Hellenistic Empire, a process seemingly greeted with enthusiasm everywhere except Jerusalem. In this way, conquerors spread Greek ideas throughout the Mediterranean world. Because those who promoted Hellenism viewed it as automatically superior to any alternatives, we would have to characterize the Perspective of Hellenism as ETHNOCENTRIC. The thought that it was well-intentioned does little to erase this aspect of the Greek legacy.
The Roman Cultural Matrix
from 509 B.C.E. to 476 C.E.

From REPUBLIC to EMPIRE

With its origins in Post-Amarna times, the **Roman Cultural Matrix** became prominent with the founding of the Roman Republic (509-27 B.C.E.). In a republic the supreme power rests in all the citizens entitled to vote and this power is exercised by elected representatives. During the Republic phase of the Roman Cultural Matrix, the fundamental *values* that we identify particularly with Rome emerged. These *values* made Rome famous for *organizational skills*, most spectacularly confirmed by the military power of the Republic (the **LEGION**), a power used by rulers to conquer as many other people as possible.

One of the most significant problems faced by the Roman government was how to maintain *UNITY* between the two basic classes that existed from the beginning of the **Republic**. These classes were the "patricians" (rich, land-owning minority) and "plebeians" (poor, peasant majority). The government attempted to maintain unity between these two classes by establishing a *LAW* code (written and practices in the established **LATIN LANGUAGE**).

A new, rich, middle class of merchants arose during the "Punic Wars." This emerging class threw off the balance between patricians and plebeians, and in so doing contributed to the demise of the Republic.

The Republic proved incapable of maintaining the balance among its classes, of being sensitive to the demands of conquered peoples, and of ruling a large empire efficiently. Civil wars involving Caesar (Augustus) and Pompey finally put the Republic out of its misery.
The new era, the time of the Roman Empire, would mark Rome's most enduring contributions to human life and tradition. One reason for the importance of Rome to later cultures is the fact that the Romans believed themselves to be divinely appointed to rule the world, and the Roman Empire aimed to accomplish this goal as far as possible. Augustus, the founder of the Empire, achieved the restoration of peace and of belief in Rome's destiny, as well as the encouragement of art and literature. Such achievements laid the groundwork for nearly two centuries of the Pax Romana, a time of overall peace when Rome became Hellenized.

From the Greeks, the Roman Empire inherited an urban world that was thoroughly Hellenized. The Romans preserved and expanded this Hellenistic cultural matrix. THE ROMAN WORLD WAS A HELLENISTIC WORLD and we should use "Hellenism" instead of "classical" to define the contribution of the Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix to subsequent cultures. The Roman Hellenistic world improved on the Greek Hellenistic world, partly because the Romans knew how to manage an empire effectively and partly because they took a much more inclusive view than the Greeks of who could make cultural contributions.

During the Pax Romana, the Roman genius for assimilation and synthesis led to outpourings of creativity and lofty standards of living. Romans traveled the world to bring back luxuries such as pepper, silk, and ivory, and they brought back knowledge as well.

The Romans also brought a new geographical focus to their empire. Rome itself lay west of Greece, and although the Romans maintained a strong imperial interest in the entire coastline of the Mediterranean Sea and in the other lands to the east which had been part of the Persian and Hellenistic Empires, their vision also shifted to the west and to the north – to what would become Europe. In 330 C.E., with the split of the Empire into an Eastern unit and a Western unit, Constantine made Byzantium his capital, and therefore the capital of the "Eastern" Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire outlasted the Western Roman Empire by several hundred years, and the Eastern Empire developed its own distinctive styles and values. After Constantine, emperors in Rome faced a cluster of unsolvable, fatal problems. A long series of economic crises destabilized the Empire, and a problem built into the system eventually proved too much to overcome.

The period from c.400-600 C.E. was a time of transition when the basic contributions of the Western Roman Empire were reaching their final form and the next cultural matrix was taking shape. With the previously stated developments in mind, the Greco-Roman Cultural Matrix divides as follows: