



Why is the label
'Western Civilization'
a problem and
why should we stop using it?

DEFINING OUR TERMS:

What is 'Western Civilization'? How do we define it?

- The phrase 'Western civilization' describes the distinctive cultural pedigree of Europe and the US (along with Europe's other former colonies) as heirs to the cultures and ideas of ancient Greece, Rome, and early Christianity. This cultural heritage is understood to be entirely different from the world's other cultural traditions.
- Additionally, because 'Western Civilization' ostensibly traces its roots back to ancient Greece and Rome, this further suggests that the discrete cultural identity it defines is itself ancient, foundational, enduring, and even hallowed.

But the identity label 'Western Civilization' is not old. It was invented recently.

True, the *idea* that 'western' Greeks once fought 'eastern' Persians, or that 'western' European Christianity was opposed to the 'eastern' Islamic Ottoman empire, is old — but the *phrase* 'Western civilization' is not.

When was 'Western Civilization' coined and why?

Before there was ‘Western civilization’, there was ‘civilization’ — a word invented by the French...

13-14th centuries: French jurists coin the legal terms *civil* (civil, 13th c.) and *civilité* (civility, 14th c.) — derived from the Latin nouns *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (civic/political community, state) — to express French civil law’s foundational premise: that sociability and courtesy are crucial for promoting and fostering an orderly, moral, and erudite society.

1567: French theorist Loys Le Roy de Coutance writes *On the Origin, Antiquity, Progress, Excellence, and Utility of the Political Art*. Using the verb *civiliser* (to civilize) he describes how all cultures begin in a rude, primitive state but can develop into more urbane, courteous forms through civil and intellectual improvement (i.e., ‘cultural progress’). To Le Roy, European culture was the most civilized (*civilisé*), while the peoples of Africa and the Americas were still rude, ill-mannered savages.

1721/1743: the French noun *civilisation* appears in Trévoux’s *Dictionnaire Universel* as a legal term describing the judicial act of making a criminal case a civil one.

1766: in Nicolas Boulanger’s *Antiquity Revealed by Its Uses*, the word *civilisation* denotes both the process of cultural development and the achievement of a state superior to savagery.

1767: the English word ‘civilization’ first appears in Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*: “Natural productions are generally formed by degrees. Vegetables grow from a tender shoot, and animals from an infant state. The latter being destined to act, extend their operations as their powers increase: they exhibit a progress in what they perform, as well as the faculties they acquire. This progress in the case of man is continued to a greater extent than that of any other animal. Not only the individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization” (1-2). Ferguson views the native peoples of America, Africa, and Asia as less advanced than Europeans or their colonists.

Thus: as Europe’s contact with Africa, the Americas and Asia increased, the noun ‘civilization’ came to denote Europe’s status as the highest form of civility/order, a culture superior to the ‘rude barbarity’ of others. When it comes to this new word ‘civilization’, then:

- what assumptions govern its meaning and use?
- can it exist without assuming a barbarous opposite?
- how might its legal origins influence its cultural application?

In the 1800’s, however, the study of ‘civilization’ transforms into the study of ‘civilizations’...



← Waldseemüller, M. 1507; the first map to include ‘America’ (named for Amerigo Vespucci).

The phrase ‘Western Civilization’ first appears in the mid-1800’s:*

- 1) **1844:** in what seems to be its earliest appearance, a US report of the *Society for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education* argues that Western colleges must promote Christianity to civilize the barbarity of ‘Western civilization’, i.e., the US’s ‘wild west’. ‘Western civilization’ means the western frontier in most US texts through the 1880’s. Thus, the phrase here describes a direction from the US’s east coast, not an idea — though it does appear in a context opposing ‘superior Christian civilization’ to ‘barbarism and savagery’.
- 2) **1846:** for possibly the first time in print, a review of a book on Hungary in *The Southern and Western Literary Messenger and Review* uses ‘Western Civilization’ as a concept: it positions western Europe’s ‘culture’ as superior to (and, ideally, a positive influence for) the largely Catholic ‘cultures’ east of the Danube (an east-west division first devised by the Roman Emperor Diocletian). ‘West’ now means western Europe as an advanced civilization, while ‘east’ marks eastern Europe as an inferior one. Here, opposing directions reflect a hierarchy of cultural value.
- 3) **1863:** in H. Forbes’ book *Poland and the Interests and Duties of Western Civilization* (United Kingdom), ‘Western Civilization’ signifies western Europe’s superior Protestant civilization, which not only values (and represents) freedom and constitutional government but is naturally opposed to the ‘Eastern barbarism’ of Czarist Russia’s authoritarianism and Orthodox Catholicism. Here the phrase situates its identity as one of two extremes in a zero-sum conflict.



- What ideas (stated or implied) cluster around this new phrase ‘Western Civilization’?
- Who benefits from the phrase’s explicit and implicit meaning? How?

Our current understanding of the phrase ‘Western Civilization’ only materializes during World War I.

Why?

It was an ethnocentric response to the Ottoman Empire’s support of the German and Austro-Hungarian alliance:

- The Ottoman Empire was largely Islamic.
- Though the Ottoman Empire’s influence had waned, it still controlled:
 - parts of eastern Europe
 - western Asia
 - parts of North Africa
 - and the Middle East.

Thus, the allied western Europeans and Americans characterized the Ottoman Empire as an ‘eastern civilization’ culturally, religiously, and even innately hostile to ‘Western Civilization’.

In sum, the label ‘Western Civilization’ has only been employed in — and was, apparently, expressly designed for — narratives that treat the supposedly civilized (Protestant) Christian US and/or western Europe as separate from and superior to whichever barbarous ‘other’ the moment required.



Excursus: The ‘eastern’ Ottoman Empire was arguably a truer ‘heir’ to Greco-Roman antiquity than Europe!

- In 395 CE, the Roman Empire’s immense size made it hard to govern or defend. The royal brothers Honorius and Arcadius therefore divided it into a Western half (ruled by Honorius in Rome) and an Eastern half (ruled by Arcadius in Constantinople).
- Each half’s Roman Emperor remained loyal to and cooperative with the other.
- But in 476 CE, a Germanic revolt triggered the Western Empire’s collapse, while the Eastern Roman Empire remained intact.
- In 1453 CE, the Ottoman Sultans captured Constantinople, the Eastern Roman Empire’s capital. Though many scholars say this ended the Eastern Roman Empire, notably, the Sultans claimed that, by right of conquest, they were its new, legitimate Roman Emperors. They even adopted the title ‘Caesar’.
- When the Sultans captured Constantinople, many scholars fled to Italy with copies of ancient Greek texts previously unknown to or unavailable in Europe. This new classical knowledge, brought from the Roman east, accelerated Europe’s Renaissance.

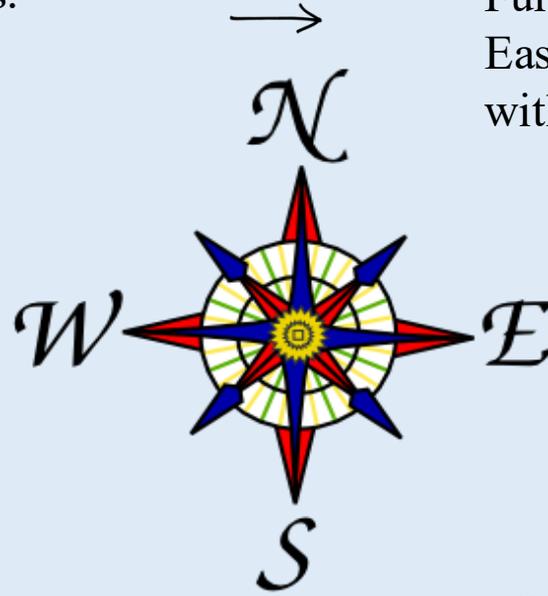


What do you think?

- As of 1453 CE, who is the classical tradition’s ‘true heir’: Europe, the former subjects of the original Eastern Roman Empire, or the new ‘Eastern Roman Empire’ ruled by the Sultan Caesars?
- Is the question above even a good question? Why or why not?

Yet also, the idea that the world can be neatly divided into diametrically opposed halves of ‘West’ and ‘East’ — which, somehow, exist in complete cultural isolation from each other — is simply impossible!

Human societies do not exist in static bubbles. For example, the Ottoman Empire regularly interacted with western Europe.



Further, European, Mediterranean, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian cultures have regularly engaged with each other since the Bronze Age.

Thus, treating these neighboring regions like culturally isolated, mutually antagonistic camps:

“denies centuries of complex systems of trade, communication, and cultural exchange between different peoples”.*

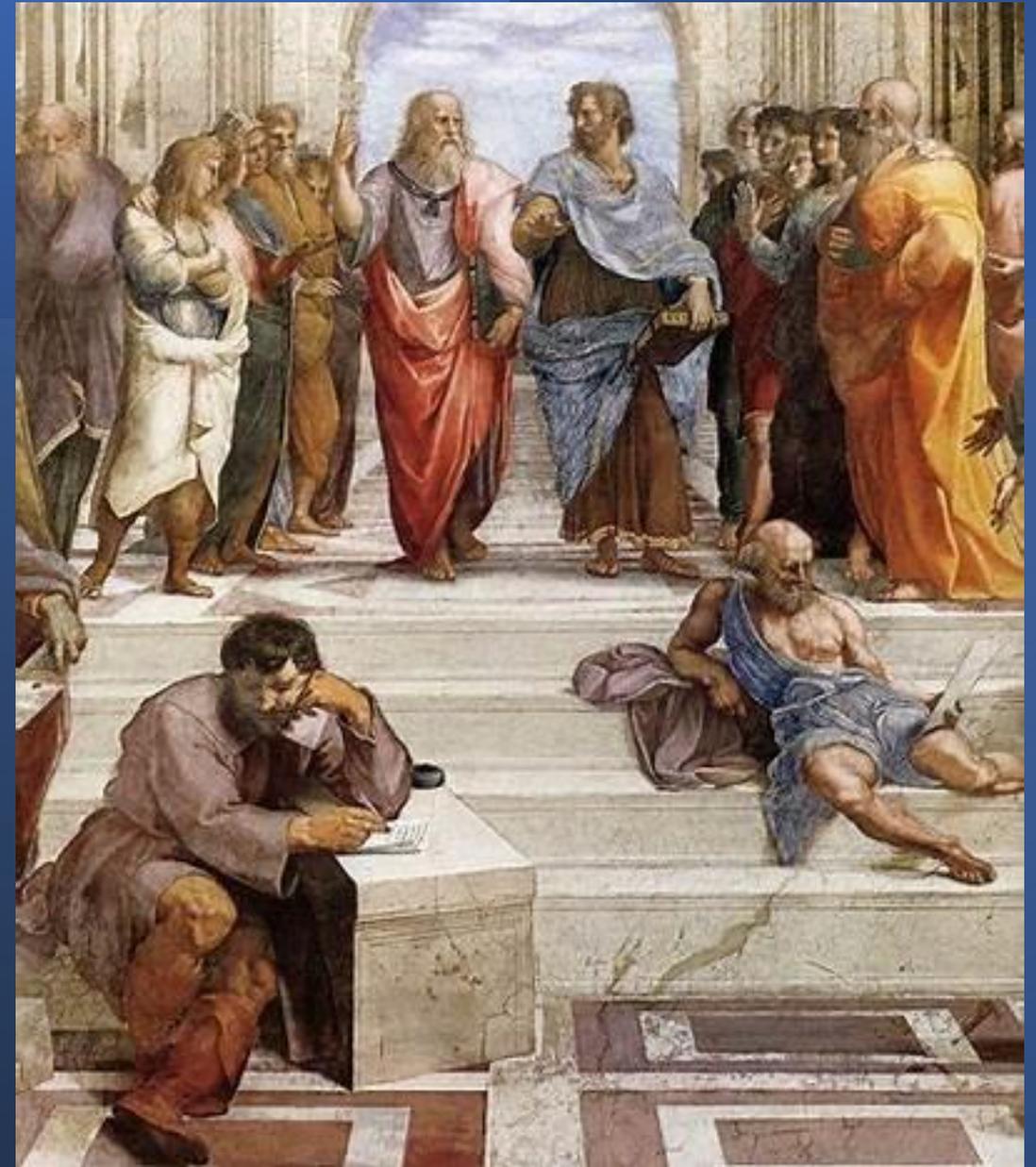
There has never been a monolithic ‘Western’ culture standing in opposition to an ‘Eastern’ one.

*Coleburn, C. November 20, 2017. [The concept of 'Western civilisation' is past its use-by date in university humanities departments \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/the-concept-of-western-civilisation-is-past-its-use-by-date-in-university-humanities-departments-125484)

Similarly, the ‘Western Civilization’ curriculum and its canonical, (usually) classical texts only materialized in US high schools, colleges, and universities after World War II ended.*

Why?

- Although “World War I promoted a sense of Western civilization, World War II and the Cold War heightened the sense of Americanness and a concern with things American”.** The US was primed to further enshrine its cultural opposition to a new ‘eastern’ threat: the Soviet Union.
- Likewise, the post-World War II decline of Europe’s colonial powers prompted them to assert their ‘superiority’ over their former colonies by claiming that Europe was the sole heir to— and culmination of — ‘Western civilization’, which they further claimed had generated every positive cultural development (implying that ‘Eastern civilization’, as a ‘lesser’ civilization, contributed nothing useful to human development).
- Finally (and ironically), as Edward Saïd notes in *Orientalism*, “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (1-2). Europeans used their invented ‘inferior, decadent East’ narrative as an opposite against which they could define themselves as ‘Western, superior, and civilized’. The ‘East’ is a construct *designed* to be denigrated by the ‘West’.

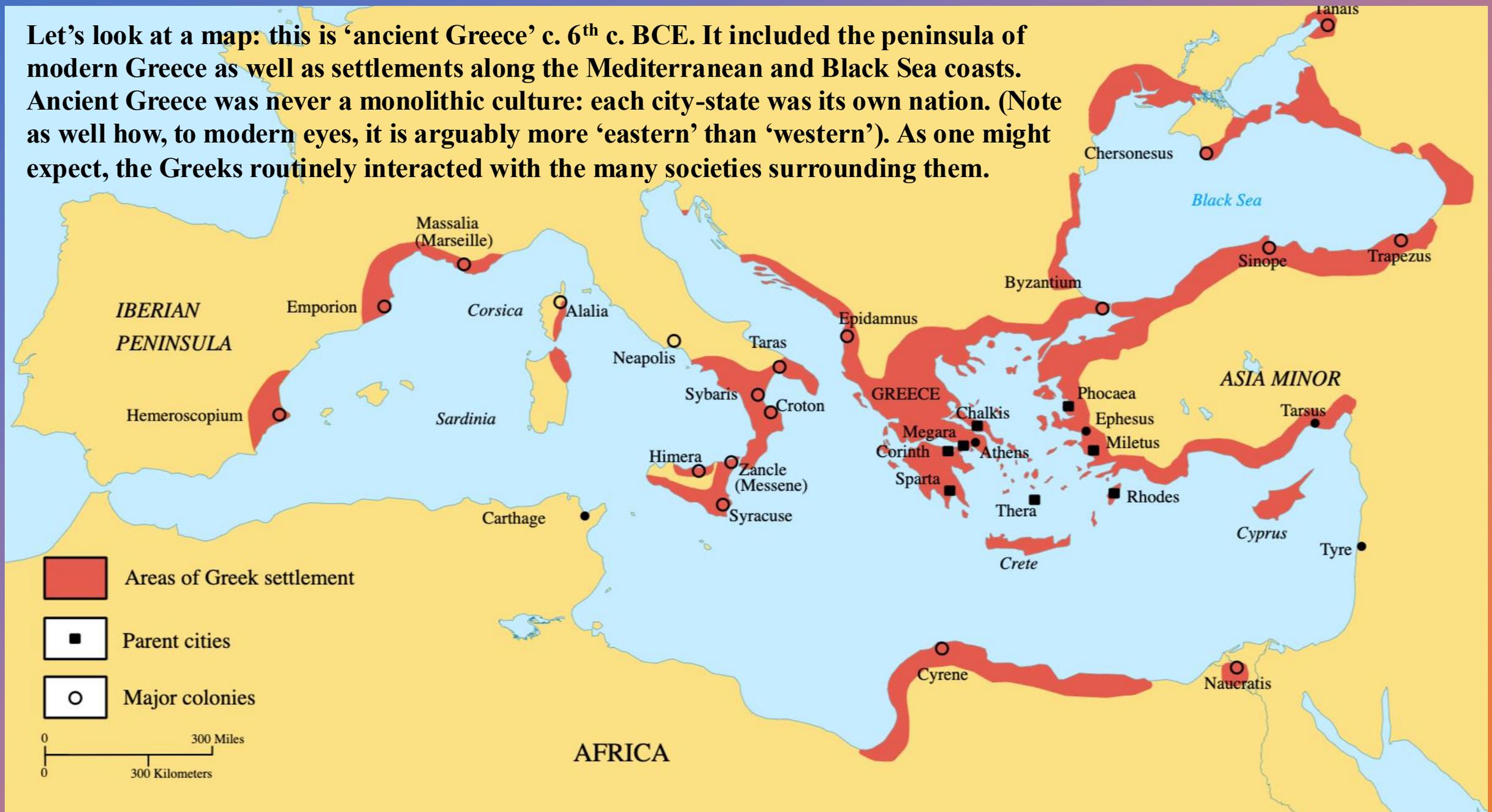


Raphael's *School of Athens*.

*DuBois, P. 2001. *Trojan Horses: Saving the Classics from Conservatives*. New York University Press: 46.

**Levine, L. 1996. *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*. Beacon Press: 100.

Let's look at a map: this is 'ancient Greece' c. 6th c. BCE. It included the peninsula of modern Greece as well as settlements along the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. Ancient Greece was never a monolithic culture: each city-state was its own nation. (Note as well how, to modern eyes, it is arguably more 'eastern' than 'western'). As one might expect, the Greeks routinely interacted with the many societies surrounding them.



Some more maps: the early Roman Empire

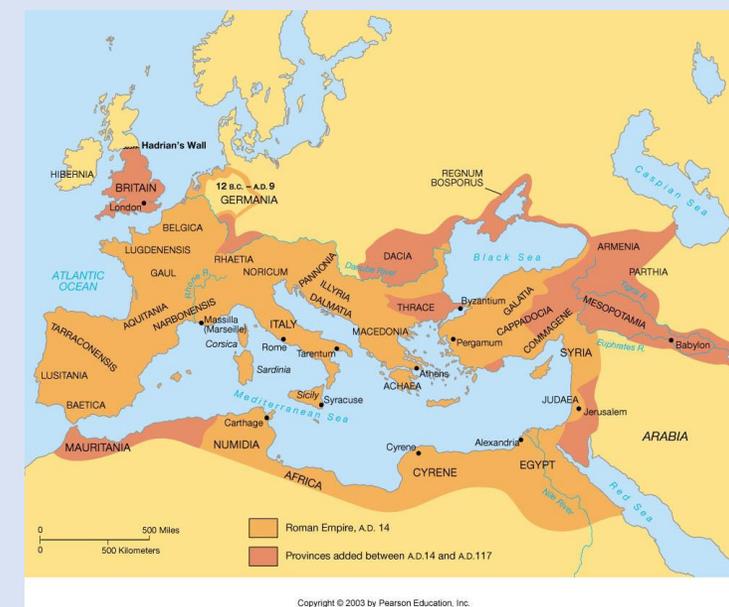
1) Rome controlled the Italian peninsula by 270 BCE but only became an 'Empire' after it won the First Punic War (264- 241 BCE) and gained its first province: Sicily. Rome claimed the islands of Sardinia & Corsica shortly after this. →



← 2) The Roman Empire further expanded after the Second (218- 210 BCE) & Third (149-146 BCE) Punic Wars. It claimed former Carthaginian territory (parts of North Africa & Spain), then also spread west & east along the Mediterranean coast into the Greek peninsula & Asia Minor.

3) Only in 44 BCE does Rome conquer Gaul (modern France), along with Northern Greece, a chunk of the North African coast, and parts of Syria. Under Augustus in 14 CE, Rome conquers most of the North African coast. The darker brown represents Rome by 117 CE. →

Was the Roman Empire 'European' or 'Mediterranean'? Was it 'Western'? After the city of Rome became the Roman Empire's capital, who could call themselves 'Roman': residents of the city Rome, or anyone residing in the Roman Empire?



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