22. Greece

The first civilizations to develop in Europe were extensions of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Europe’s earliest major culture was the Minoan civilization of Crete, the largest of the Greek islands. Minoan culture was strongly influenced by Egypt. Minoan civilization is the source of the Greek myth about the hero Theseus who entered the labyrinth (a maze) and slayed the Minotaur.

Greece is a mountainous and rocky peninsula with little good farmland, but its long irregular coastline and numerous islands provided fine harbors. Many Greeks turned to the sea to make a living by fishing and trading. Greeks established colonies and dominated trade in the eastern Mediterranean and Black Seas. Greek communities isolated by mountains developed into independent self-governing city-states that often fought one another. The leading city-states were Sparta with its strong military government and Athens, the present-day capital of Greece. The Greeks had a polytheistic religion; their gods lived on Mount Olympus.

Greece is known for its classical civilization of 500 to 300 BC. Classical Greek culture, particularly that of Athens, is famed for its beautiful arts, architecture, philosophy, theater, Olympic games, and for creating the first democracy. Classical Greece is usually considered the principal source of Western Civilization.

23. The Iliad and the Odyssey

Modern people still read literature from ancient Greece including the Iliad and the Odyssey, two epic (meaning long and heroic) poems by Homer. The Iliad takes place during the Trojan War when the Greeks used a large wooden horse with soldiers hidden inside to defeat the defenders of Troy in Asia Minor. The Odyssey recounts the adventures of the hero Odysseus who had to overcome many obstacles during his 10-year voyage home from the war in Troy. These poems are the first literary works of Western Civilization.

The heroes of Greek myths such as the Iliad and the Odyssey served as models of excellence for the ancient Greeks. In both poems, reason and wisdom are more powerful than physical strength. Homer’s Bronze Age poems later inspired a great outpouring of literature during the classical Greek age.

24. Persian Wars

Centered in present day Iran, the Persian Empire stretched from the Middle East to India; it was the largest empire the world had yet seen. The Persians tried to add Greece to their empire in the 400s BC, but the Greeks united long enough to defeat them. At the Battle of Marathon, Greeks repelled a larger invading force of Persians, and legend says a Greek soldier ran nearly 26 miles from the battlefield to Athens where he died after delivering news of the victory. This legend is the basis for the modern marathon foot race.

In fighting ten years later (480 BC), the people of Athens fled to the nearby island of Salamis after the Persians conquered and burned Athens. The Persian king Xerxes had his throne placed on a hill where he could watch his fleet of 700 warships destroy the Greek navy of about 300 ships. Instead, Xerxes watched in horror as the Greeks lured his navy into a narrow strait that prevented many of the Persian ships from joining the battle. The Greeks won the battle, and the Persian Wars soon ended. Because the victory at Salamis preserved Greek culture, some historians have called this “the battle that saved Western Civilization.”

25. Parthenon

A statesman named Pericles became the political leader of Athens following the Persian Wars. Although the wars had ended, Persia remained a military threat, and other Greek city-states paid money to Athens for protection. Pericles used this income to rebuild his burned-out city and to finance the construction of magnificent new buildings including the Parthenon. The Parthenon is a temple built to honor Athena, goddess of wisdom and war and the patron goddess of Athens. The Parthenon is the main building on the Acropolis, a high point in Athens that was the center of Athenian life and a fortress against attack.

Although the Parthenon is now in ruins, it is famed for its beauty and proportion. It is probably the most influential building in the history of Western architecture. The Parthenon has served as a model for important buildings in much of the world including the Lincoln Memorial in the United States. Like all classical Greek temples, the Parthenon was built with closely spaced columns that left little interior space.
26. democracy
The Greeks established a new kind of society by inventing the polis. The polis was an association of free male citizens who served as the soldiers who defended their city-state from attack, and they managed the government. The polis chose leaders to govern the city-state for a limited period of time, often a year. This approach was quite different from other ancient societies in which government was headed by a king, and the people were separated by class into a small group of the rich and a large group of the poor.

The democratic principals developed in the polis reached their greatest extent during the rule of Pericles in Athens where every citizen was expected to participate in government. Democracy is a form of government in which power lies with the people who may exercise that power directly as they did in ancient Athens where all citizens could vote on new laws. Or, power may be exercised indirectly through elected representatives as we do in the United States. (“Democracy” comes from the Greek word for “the people.”)

Most of the Greek city-states did not have democratic governments, and even in Athens, citizens were a minority of the population because women, slaves, and foreign-born persons did not qualify as citizens.

27. humanism
The ancient Greeks considered human beings to be the center of existence. Unlike other ancient cultures that were deeply concerned with religion, gods, and the afterlife, the philosophy and arts of classical Greece were more concerned with the value of human beings on earth. This emphasis on humans can be seen in Greek art that portrayed the human body realistically. Art of the classical Greek period was much more realistic than the stiff, formal art of earlier eras such as the art of ancient Egypt and early Greece.

Greeks strived for excellence in the way they conducted their daily lives. They believed that reason was the true source of knowledge and that a wise person was the best person; reason, not emotion, should rule our lives. This concern with human life, and the effort to improve humanity through reason, is called humanism. Greek humanism emphasized order in daily life, nothing in excess, a balance between extremes known as “The Golden Mean.” In school, for example, both the body and the mind were trained. Over two thousand years later, Greek humanism would help shape the Renaissance and the Enlightenment in Europe.

28. Socrates  (SOCK-ruh-tees)
Talented artists and thinkers were drawn to Athens during the Age of Pericles. One of the best known was the philosopher Socrates. He was famed for saying, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates encouraged his students to question accepted wisdom including government policies.

But, the golden age of Athens was about to end as Athens went to war with Sparta. Early in the fighting, a plague of typhoid fever killed a third of the residents of Athens including Pericles. After 27 years of warfare, Athens was defeated and went into decline. Socrates was condemned to death by the citizens of Athens for neglecting the gods and corrupting the morals of the young. Many historians believe, however, that Socrates was made a scapegoat for the decline of Athens after it was defeated by Sparta.

Socrates did not leave behind written works; his philosophy was carried forward by his student, Plato. Plato was deeply troubled by the death of his friend Socrates. It caused him to question democracy; Plato warned that clever leaders could easily manipulate citizens who knew little about the important issues of the day. Plato established a school called The Academy, the first real university. His most famous student was the philosopher Aristotle whose ideas would dominate Western scientific thought for centuries to come.

29. Hellenistic Civilization
Despite the decline of Athens, Greece would again take the center stage of history with the conquests of Alexander the Great, a young man from the mountainous northern region of Greece called Macedonia. Alexander’s tutor was the philosopher Aristotle, and his father was Philip of Macedon, who succeeded in conquering all of Greece in 338 BC, ending the independence of the Greek city-states. After his father died, Alexander took control of Greece at the age of 20, but Alexander wanted more.

Alexander succeeded in conquering Egypt and much of the ancient world, extending his empire all the way to India. In the process, he defeated Greece’s old enemy, the Persian Empire. Alexander never lost a battle, but he became sick with fever and died at the age of 32. His empire fell apart and was divided among his top generals. After his death, a new culture emerged known as Hellenistic civilization, a blend of Greek, Persian, Egyptian and Indian influences that would flourish for centuries. One of the cities founded by Alexander, Alexandria, Egypt, had a great library that was the center of learning of the Hellenistic world.
30. Roman Empire

Rome, the capital of present-day Italy, was also the capital of the ancient Roman Empire. The Romans were a practical and hard-working people, and Rome’s sturdy farmers made good soldiers. Rome was only a small town on the Tiber River when Athens was at the height of its glory, but Rome grew to become a strong city-state at about the time of Alexander the Great. The Romans adopted Hellenistic culture; their gods, arts, and architecture resembled those of the Greeks. At first, kings ruled Rome, and then about 500 BC, the Roman Republic was established with a law-making body called the Senate. Every year the Senate chose two of its members to serve as co-rulers, or consuls. For a time Rome had a form of democracy, although wealthy upper-class families held most of the political power. Later, during a time of trouble in the republic, Julius Caesar seized control of the government. His successors took the title of emperor.

At its height, the Roman Empire completely encircled the Mediterranean Sea, extending from the Middle East to the British Isles. Rome’s central location in the Mediterranean made it an ideal location for building a large Mediterranean empire and international trading network. It was said, “All roads lead to Rome.” The empire had a strong central government that produced massive public works including paved roads, government buildings, baths, sports arenas, and aqueducts (water transport structures). As the years passed, the Roman Empire weakened, was divided into two parts, and eventually fell to nomadic invaders.

31. Carthage

Carthage was an ancient city on the coast of North Africa, and it was a powerful rival of Rome. From 264-146 BC, Carthage and the Roman Republic fought three Punic Wars. During the second war, a general from Carthage named Hannibal led a huge army supported by war elephants from Spain through the Alps into Italy, a troop movement considered one of the greatest in history. Hannibal could not be stopped, and he was threatening Rome when Roman armies attacked Carthage, forcing Hannibal to return to protect his homeland. Hannibal later poisoned himself rather than become a prisoner of the Romans.

In the third and final Punic War, Roman armies burned Carthage to the ground, and the people of Carthage became Roman slaves. As in ancient Greece, much of Rome’s work was done by slave labor. With Carthage defeated, Rome was free to expand into new territories including Spain, Greece, and Egypt.

32. Julius Caesar

Turmoil came to the Roman Republic following the Punic Wars. Small farmers could not compete with cheaper agricultural products and slave labor imported from the conquered territories. Farmers lost their land to rich landowners and drifted to the cities. Mobs of poor people rioted in the streets of Rome demanding more power. Civil war broke out when a successful general, Julius Caesar, moved his army out of Gaul (present day France) and marched toward Rome. Caesar won the civil war, and he had the Senate declare him dictator for life in 48 BC, ending the Roman Republic that had existed for over 400 years.

Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March (March 15th) in 44 BC by his friend Brutus and other senators opposed to Caesar’s dictatorship. Brutus and his fellow assassins wanted Rome to continue as a republic. It didn’t. While some people believed Caesar was an arrogant tyrant, others gave him credit for restoring order at a time when Rome’s republican government was no longer functioning effectively.

33. Pax Romana

During a trip to Egypt, Caesar fell in love with Cleopatra, the young queen of Egypt, and he brought her with him to Rome. After Caesar’s death, Cleopatra returned to Egypt, and civil war broke out again in Rome between Caesar’s supporters and his killers. Caesar’s friends won the struggle, and two of them took control of the empire, Octavian in the west and Antony in the east. When Antony traveled to Egypt, he too fell in love with Cleopatra although he was married to Octavian’s sister. In Rome, Octavian declared war on Antony and Cleopatra, and he eventually defeated their combined military forces. To avoid being captured, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. While alive, Cleopatra tried to keep Egypt great. After her death, Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire, ending the 3,000-year reign of the pharaohs.

Octavian became sole ruler of Rome and took the name Augustus. Considered a political genius by many historians, Augustus proclaimed himself Rome’s first emperor, and he was worshipped as a god. He quietly stripped the Senate of its power, turning Rome into an empire disguised as a republic. Nonetheless, the reign of Augustus ended nearly a century of political strife in the Roman world, and it was the beginning of a 200-year-long period of peace and prosperity called Pax Romana, Latin for the “Roman Peace.”
34. Roman law

Rome’s empire grew to its largest size during the Pax Romana. One way Roman emperors controlled their vast empire was through a uniform system of laws that was enforced from one end of the Roman world to the other. Judges were required to weigh evidence fairly, and accused persons were considered innocent until proven guilty. The courts enforced legal contracts. These principles were later adopted in legal systems of other nations including the United States. Roman law is one of the greatest legacies of the empire.

The empire was also held together by a well-trained army, by communications over an extensive road system, and by the Latin language. The Latin alphabet was derived from an earlier writing system created by sea traders from Phoenicia on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. From their travels, Phoenicians learned about Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics, writing systems that used hundreds of symbols to represent words or syllables. The Phoenicians had a better idea; they created just 22 symbols to represent spoken sounds. We call these symbols letters. Because the Phoenician Alphabet was simpler and more precise than picture writing, it spread to other cultures. It was adopted by the Greeks who added vowels and by the Romans who modified the letters to become the alphabet we use today.

35. arch

An arch is a curved opening that spans a doorway, window, or other space. The arch could span much greater distances than the column-and-beam architecture of the Egyptians and Greeks. Arches built side-by-side created aqueducts; arches placed in front of one another formed large “vaulted” ceilings, and arches arranged in a circular pattern created domes. The arch was adopted on a large scale by the Romans who also developed the use of concrete as a construction material. The arch and concrete made it possible to construct public buildings with large interior spaces that could be used for practical purposes, not just as temples.

One of the most impressive of these buildings is the Colosseum, a great arena of ancient Rome that seated 50,000 spectators. Bloody and deadly contests were staged in the Colosseum for the entertainment of Roman citizens. Although the Colosseum is now in ruins, it remains a monument to Roman engineering, and it is the symbol of the present day city of Rome. The Colosseum also stands as a monument to human cruelty that symbolizes the decadence, or moral decay, of the later years of the Roman Empire.

36. Constantine the Great

By the fourth century AD, the Roman Empire was in confusion; it was running short of money and facing increasing pressure from raiders pushing in from the borders. In one 50-year period, 26 emperors reigned, and only one of them died of natural causes. At about this time a strong general named Constantine took control of the empire and tried to stop its decline. He is remembered as Constantine the Great.

Although Christianity had long been outlawed in the empire, Constantine legalized Christianity, and he ended the blood sports in the Colosseum. He also established Constantinople as the capital of the stronger eastern part of the Roman Empire, while Rome remained capital of the weakened western part of the empire. Constantine ruled over both parts of the empire from Constantinople located on the Bosporus Strait that connects the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Constantinople was a prosperous crossroads of trade routes where Europe meets Asia. Today, Constantinople is called Istanbul, and it is Turkey’s largest city.

37. Fall of Rome

The fall of Rome was a slow-motion process that took centuries to unfold. Despite the best efforts of Constantine, the Roman Empire continued to decline after his death as nomadic warriors stepped-up their attacks. These nomads included Huns who swept down from the Eurasian steppes pushing other nomadic tribes like Goths and Vandals ahead of them. Many nomads were simply seeking a better life inside the empire. The Romans considered these nomadic peoples to be culturally inferior and called them barbarians. Near the end, the Roman Empire was in chaos, hiring barbarians to fight other barbarians.

The last emperor in the west was defeated in 476 AD, the date usually given as the Fall of Rome. It should be remembered, however, that the eastern portion of the Roman Empire lived on for another thousand years as the Byzantine Empire. Historians have long debated the causes of the Fall of Rome. Factors included a terrible plague, the decline of agriculture, heavy taxes, and a decadent upper class devoted to luxury and greed. Perhaps the more important question is not why Rome fell, but why it lasted so long.