

History 101-021: Western Civilization from Antiquity to 1660
Fall 2008 – Maybank 3103

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T, Th, 12:15-1:40 pm

Course Description

This course will explore the history of Europe from antiquity to 1660, as well as how we use this past to define ourselves today. Generally, western civilization surveys present the United States and Western Europe as the logical endpoint of human cultural development. This is a very pleasing way of seeing ourselves; it allows us to dismiss the dark side of our history, label mass-violence as “non-western,” and ignore pressing problems in our own society by claiming that we live in the best of times. In this course, we will not settle for such an uncritical interpretation of the past or the present.

In an effort to remove ourselves from the center, we will begin outside of the standard geographical boundaries of western civilization, in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Indeed, without these two early-flourishing civilizations, what we now term the west could never have existed. From there we will move to Mycenaean and classical Greece, the Roman Empire, the feudal system of Medieval Europe, and finally to the emergence of nation-states in the 17th century. At the same time we stand in awe of the literary and artistic achievements of Homer, Sophocles and Phidias in ancient Greece, we will look in dismay at a society based on slavery and the systematic suppression of women. While we admire Rome’s military might and system of laws and government, we will struggle to reconcile this with the methodical practice of genocide across three continents. As we look on approvingly at the rediscovery of Greek and Roman culture during the late middle-ages and the Renaissance, we will remind ourselves that most of the manuscripts were preserved and improved by Muslim and Jewish thinkers, unwanted outsiders in Europe then and now. Finally, we will recognize the growth of the modern, centralized “state” as the main source of power in the “nation” to be strikingly contemporary. We will reflect that in many ways, the state and nationalism are the two most important concepts in holding present-day societies together, but we will not run from the fact that the concomitant centralization of power made possible violence on a scale almost unheard of in human history.

To sum up, western civilization is a Janus-faced construction, and we need to look at it from multiple perspectives in order to understand how these people viewed the world, how culture functions, and how we use the past to define ourselves.

Required Texts

- *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- *Gospel of Mary/Gospel of Thomas*
- *The Three Theban Plays*
- *Beowulf: A Prose Translation*
- *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*
- *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or the Book of the Three Virtues*
- *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*
- *The Prince*

Optional Textbook

McKay, Hill, Buckler, *A History of Western Society*, Vol. I, 8th edition (ISBN 9780618946334)

There is a healthy amount of reading in this course. This reflects our three major, pedagogical goals: 1) careful and critical reading, 2) effective analysis and reasoning, 3) clear and accurate written presentation. Students who take responsibility for their own learning will leave this course with a better knowledge of key themes in western history and with fundamental skills essential to success in future college courses.

I expect you to abide by the honor code. Any student eligible for academic adjustments because of a disability should see me in a timely manner so that we may accommodate you.

The course requirements are: 1) regular participation in discussion sections. You will receive one free absence. For every class you miss after that your grade drops 5% 2) completion of all readings, 3) the exams, 5) the writing assignment.

The exams will be essay-based, and will draw heavily on material from lectures and readings. The final will be cumulative. The breakdown of grades is as follows:

1) Hourly exam I	15%
2) Take-home exam	15%
3) Final exam	25%
4) Discussion section	25%
5) Writing assign.	20%

Lectures, Readings, and Tests

Week I

August 26: Introduction & Comparative Religion: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel

August 28: The International Bronze Age - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 10-32, 37-72

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Week II

September 2: Classical Greece

September 4: Hellenistic World – **Discussion & Essay**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 72-99

Antigone, Oedipus the King

Week III

September 9: The Roman Republic

September 11: Diversity in Early Christianity - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 104-130

Gospel of Mary/Gospel of Thomas

Week IV

September 16: Germanic Invasions & **Review**

September 18: First Exam

Readings:

McKay, pp. 134-158

Week V

September 23: Feudalism

September 25: **Discussion**

Reading:

McKay, pp. 162-193, 242-267

Beowulf

Week VI

September 30: Byzantium

October 2: Islamic and Arab Civilization - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 199-236

Ibn Battuta in Black Africa

Week VII

October 7: Gregorian Revolution and Crusades

October 9: Medieval Culture and Learning - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 273-295, 301-329

Treasure of the City of Ladies, pp. 15-105

Week VIII

October 14: Fall Break

October 16: 14th Century

Readings:

McKay 334-371

Week IX

October 21: Late Medieval Europe: A Search for Harmony in a Changing World- **Discussion**

October 23: Take-Home Exam

Week X

October 28: Humanism

October 30: Exploration, Conquest, Colonization - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 450-480

Travels of Sir John Mandeville

Week XI

November 4: Renaissance I: Politics and Literature

November 6: Renaissance II: Art and Faith - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 379-396, 414-445

The Prince

Week XII

November 11: Reformation

November 13: Protestantism- **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp., 487-512

Week XIII

November 18: Wars of Religion

November 20: The Ottomans - **Discussion**

Readings:

McKay, pp. 523-565

Week XIV

November 25: Global Encounters

November 27: Thanksgiving

Week XV

December 2: Absolutism

December 4: Review

Final Exam: December 11th, 12:00 pm