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AN INTRODUCTION TO
MEDIEVAL EUROPE

300-1500



AN INTRODUCTION TO
Medieval Europe
300 - 1500

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Preface

For this revision of his *History of the Middle Ages, 900-1500* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1951), Professor Thompson put at my disposal a manuscript in which he had made many alterations from the original text. I am deeply obliged to him not only for the opportunity presented, but also for the unlimited freedom he granted me to reorganize, rewrite and expand his manuscript. In so doing I have tried to remember his maxim that history, in the final analysis, must also be a history of ideas, and that, at the same time, it must also be refreshed constantly by intimate contact with warm human beings and the homely facts of daily life. The work on this book is also to be regarded as, at least in part, an inadequate acknowledgment of the stimulation and nourishment received from his splendid and exciting teaching. For his assistance with the proof I am likewise grateful.

Indeed, so many kind persons have helped to complete this task that I am under no illusions as to how much of it I have really done myself. Those who are acquainted with the authors cited in the footnotes and bibliography will know to what extent this book is a collection of other writers, whether of their words or ideas. Without wishing to pass on the responsibility for the errors which, despite all care, still remain in the book, mention must be made of my indebtedness to Mr. Richard Johnson, who has taken care of many details, and to the whole staff of W. W. Norton & Company. They, and especially Mr. R. E. Farlow, will know, I trust, that I am not ungrateful for the ways in which they have eased my labor. My colleague, Professor L. B. Smith, has read part of the material on architecture, and was so gracious as to let me see his notes on architecture. My friend, colleague and chief, Dean C. H. Oldfather, has read the early chapters pertaining to his field. My friend and colleague, Dr. Gleno W. Gray, has not only written the two chapters on the constitutional development of England, but he has also taken time from his own work to read most if not all of the remaining chapters. His extensive learning is strewn throughout the book. My sister, Mrs. Mireal Bickard, has buttressed me from the first with invaluable encouragement. She has,

Moreover, in countless ways helped to speed on the work. I should not dare to try to evaluate the help my wife has given me, nor the least part of which has been the preparation of the index. Likewise it is impossible for me to measure what I owe to my very dear friend, the late Dr. John Dean Bickford of The Hutchins School. From the very first he gave unsparingly of his time, strength, and intelligence to improve the quality of the manuscript. In order, in so far as it was possible, to bring it up to his own high standards of clear, effective and pointed discourse, he subjected it to a rigorous dissection, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and page by page. By the time of his death he was reading chapter twenty-four. Whatever this book may contain of clarity, grace, or spark of writing is therefore owing primarily to his alert, uncompromising and devoted criticism, lavishly bestowed.

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EDGAR N. JOHNSON

Lincoln, May 23, 1937.

Contents

PREFACE		v
I.	THE GREGG-ORIENTAL CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE	1
II.	THE CHRISTIAN CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (I)—THE SPREAD AND TRANSFORMATION OF CHRISTIANITY	25
III.	THE GREGGIAN CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (II): THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCH ORGANIZATION, MONASTICISM, THE LATIN CHURCH FATHERS	45
IV.	THE GERMAN CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (I) — TO THE END OF THE FIFTH CENTURY	62
V.	THE GERMAN CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE (II) — FROM THE END OF THE FOURTH CENTURY TO THE END OF THE SIXTH	85
VI.	THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE	117
VII.	THE EMPIRE OF THE ARABS	153
VIII.	THE CIVILIZATION OF EARLY WESTERN EUROPE	184
IX.	THE FRANKISH STATE UNDER THE CAROLINGIANS	228
X.	THE COLLAPSE OF THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE	263
XI.	FEUDALISM	290
XII.	MANICHAISM	326
XIII.	THE REVIVAL OF THE EMPIRE	352
XIV.	THE APEX AND DECLINE OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE	391

XV.	THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH STATE (1066-1272)	432
XVI.	FRANCE UNDER THE CAPETIAN KINGS (987- 1204)	463
XVII.	FRANCE UNDER THE CAPETIAN KINGS (1204- 1328)	489
XVIII.	WESTERN EUROPE ENCROACHES ON ISLAM. THE CRUSADES	515
XIX.	THE REVIVAL OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY	550
XX.	THE URBAN REVOLUTION. THE GILDS	579
XXI.	THE MEDIEVAL REFORMATION	607
XXII.	THE TRIUMPH OF THE CHURCH	643
XXIII.	THE MEDIEVAL RENAISSANCE (I)—PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, EDUCATION	687
XXIV.	THE MEDIEVAL RENAISSANCE (I.)—LITERA- TURE, ART, MUSIC	739
XXV.	THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH STATE (1272-1485)	833
XXVI.	WESTERN EUROPE IN THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES	863
XXVII.	CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE IN THE FOUR- TEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES	906
XXVIII.	THE CHURCH IN THE FOURTEENTH AND FIF- TEENTH CENTURIES	954
XXIX.	LEARNING AND ART IN THE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES	994
	GENEALOGICAL TABLES	1037
	REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING	1053
	INDEX	1069

List of Illustrations and Maps

ILLUSTRATIONS	pp. page
<i>Partibus mundi, Santa Sophia</i>	116
<i>Touf of diyyeh</i>	117
<i>Justinian and his mate</i>	117
<i>Court of the Lion, the Alhambra</i>	148
<i>Facsimile from Mincius, Corinium</i>	148
<i>Memorandum page, the "Book of Kellie"</i>	149
<i>Mosaics in situ</i>	180
<i>Ordnal by Les ions and cold water</i>	180
<i>Charlemagne's church at Aachen</i>	181
<i>Crucifix and heraldic badge</i>	212
<i>Sails of Gothic armor</i>	212
<i>Flags of armor</i>	212
<i>Golden Bull of Charles IV</i>	213
<i>King descending stairs</i>	213
<i>Walls of Constantinople</i>	213
<i>Ship in field</i>	308
<i>A man's house</i>	308
<i>House in place</i>	308
<i>Royal palace, Gorka</i>	309
<i>Bar barons and his two sons</i>	310
<i>A army galle</i>	310
<i>Crossed? cross, Syria</i>	340
<i>Palace and flag joint</i>	341
<i>Dancing bear</i>	341
<i>Field markers</i>	341
<i>St. Peter's Gate, A-104</i>	503
<i>The castle of Rottenberg</i>	532
<i>Market place and old houses, Wilschstein</i>	553
<i>Town Hall, Münster and Perugia</i>	553
<i>Building a road</i>	560
<i>Druggist's shop</i>	564
<i>Butcher shop</i>	564
<i>The Last Supper, window glass windows</i>	564
<i>Byzantine Tapestry, two scenes</i>	565

X LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS AND MAPS

ILLUSTRATIONS	Page
<i>Christiana monastery, Mainz</i>	505
<i>Circular at Maria Laach</i>	507
<i>Idonee</i>	517
<i>Lesson hall, University of Bologna</i>	628
<i>Book of work</i>	629
<i>Foglar, Cathedral of Amiens</i>	629
<i>Cathedral at Worms</i>	660
<i>Romanesque group, Pisa</i>	660
<i>Three Romanesque churches</i>	661
<i>Three Romanesque sections</i>	672
<i>Flying buttresses, Amiens and Bologna</i>	694
<i>Milly portal, Chartres</i>	695
<i>Three Gothic interiors</i>	724
<i>Lincoln and York</i>	725
<i>The Last Judgment, Bayeux</i>	759
<i>Geometric symbols</i>	759
<i>Princess Urs, Cathedral of Mainz</i>	757
<i>Equestrian statue, Cathedral at Bamberg</i>	757
<i>The Transfiguration, Minsterkirche, Würzburg</i>	812
<i>San Arnulfo, by von Bach</i>	815
<i>Virgin, by Jean Coquelet</i>	815
<i>Beast hunt, by Pol de Limbourg</i>	815
<i>Innocent III's edition, by Giotto</i>	822
<i>Geometricity, by Leonardo</i>	831
<i>Old man and woodman, by Goltzsch</i>	885
<i>Reputation from Rome, by Masaccio</i>	885
<i>Pierre de Medici, by Botticelli</i>	885
MAPS	Page
<i>A dome on pendentives</i>	148
<i>A projected ground plan for the Abbey of St. Gall</i>	217
<i>The noble house and wife</i>	312
<i>A late French stone house</i>	341
<i>The half-arched house and barn of a prosperous German peasant</i>	342
<i>A weaving loom</i>	346
<i>Medieval windows in the window of the Cathedral of Chartres</i>	353
<i>Dressing for the Last Judgment, Cathedral of Basel</i>	682
<i>Our Lady of the beautiful window in the Cathedral of Chartres</i>	685
<i>"Counselling" for a cabinet</i>	722
<i>Letters in a case of money</i>	727
<i>Discipline in a school for the sons of noblemen</i>	734
<i>The ground plan of Amiens, showing the typical arrangement of the Gothic cathedral</i>	807

LINE CUTS	page
<i>The Abbaté-les-hommes at Caen</i>	871
<i>The conclusion of a window in medieval architecture</i>	873
<i>Two bays in the Romanesque St. Ambrogio at Milan</i>	875
<i>The advantage in stability with a pointed arch</i>	876
<i>Showing the skeleton framework of ribs over a nave bay</i>	877
<i>Cross-section of a Gothic cathedral</i>	878
<i>Notre-Dame de Paris</i>	879
<i>The development of the ground plan of the medieval cathedral</i>	883
<i>The development of the flying buttress</i>	884

MAPS

COLORS	of page
<i>The Roman Empire at its Greatest Extent</i>	3
<i>Europe in the Time of Charlemagne</i>	254
<i>Colleges of the Carolingian Empire</i>	276
<i>Western Roman Empire</i>	424
<i>Europe in the Fourteenth Century</i>	976
<i>Europe About 1500</i>	203

BLACK AND WHITE	page
<i>Europe, A.D. 350</i>	91
<i>Germanic Kingdoms in Roman Gaul in the Fifth Century</i>	105
<i>The Expansion of the Italian Franks, 481-555</i>	113
<i>England in the Eighth Century</i>	115
<i>The Byzantine Empire Under Justinian</i>	124
<i>The Byzantine Empire in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries</i>	140
<i>Map of the Arabic Conquests</i>	155
<i>Italy in A.D. 570</i>	177
<i>Western Europe</i>	211
<i>Norse Expansion</i>	257
<i>Saxons and Danes in England in 886</i>	289
<i>Fiefs and Suzerainty of the Counts of Champagne</i>	373
<i>A Typical Manor</i>	395
<i>Germany Under the Saxon and Salian Emperors</i>	373
<i>The Holy Roman Empire Under the Hohenstaufens</i>	415
<i>France in 1169</i>	452
<i>France at the Close of the Reign of Philip Augustus</i>	487
<i>France in 1210</i>	508
<i>Spain at the End of the Twelfth Century</i>	510
<i>Routes of the Crusades</i>	537

BLACK AND WHITE	Page
<i>The Dominions of Saladin in 1193 and the Latin States and Kingdoms of Jerusalem</i>	541
<i>Spain at the End of the Thirteenth Century</i>	552
<i>Towns and Trade Routes</i>	560
<i>French Territory Ceded to England by Treaty of Brétigny, 1360</i>	585
<i>Territories of the Duke of Burgundy</i>	596
<i>France, Showing Additions to the Monarchy Between 1271 and 1328</i>	601
<i>Austrian Lands in 1527</i>	615
<i>The Swiss Confederation</i>	627
<i>The Hanseatic League</i>	633
<i>Italy in the Fifteenth Century</i>	658
<i>Medieval Trade Routes and Route of the Explorers to the End of the Fifteenth Century</i>	673

Chapter 1

THE GRÆCO-ORIENTAL CONQUEST OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

HISTORY, it has been remarked, is to the group what memory is to the individual. In order to get at the sources of our own cultural inheritance, we Americans must first go back across the Atlantic. For, in spite of the proclamations of chauvinists concerning the unique quality of the American civilization and the danger of its defilement by immigrants, we are all, unless we are native Indians, either immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Europe or elsewhere. This is not to say that we have not in the course of a comparatively short history developed certain characteristic traits and institutions; but it is to say that beyond a certain short time and a certain shallow depth our history is largely the history of Europe or of European influence. The sources of European civilization are therefore the sources of our own, and to understand ourselves we must understand Europe.

The use of the terms "middle ages" and "medieval" is convenient rather than logical or descriptive. The men of those times did not consider their age as middle or medieval; they were living in modern times. Those to whom that age first seemed medieval were the scholars of the renaissance, who, blinded by the radiant dawn of the rediscovered Greek and Roman world, were unmindful of the fact that that dawn came only as a consequence of the activities of a period upon which henceforth they looked back with scorn. We can understand their point of view, but as a result of all that we now know to have happened before them and all that has happened since them we can no longer suppose that their term really means anything in itself.

The geographical setting within which western European civilization first took shape is covered chiefly by present-day Italy, Spain, France, England, Belgium, and Germany. From these areas as centers, with a remarkable expansive strength that has by no means yet seen its limit, it spread in the course of a thousand years, although not al-

*The middle
ages in history*

*Expansion of
early western
European
civilization*

ways directly, to Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Denmark, Scandinavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary, even beyond Poland along the southern shores of the Baltic and past Italy into the north-western corner of the Balkan peninsula. From this point of view this expansion from definite centers into new areas can be looked upon as a widening of the area of civilization, as the extension of a particular kind of civilization to areas less civilized, or at least differently civilized. It is therefore only a small chapter in the gigantic process of civilizing all mankind.

The early formative period of the west

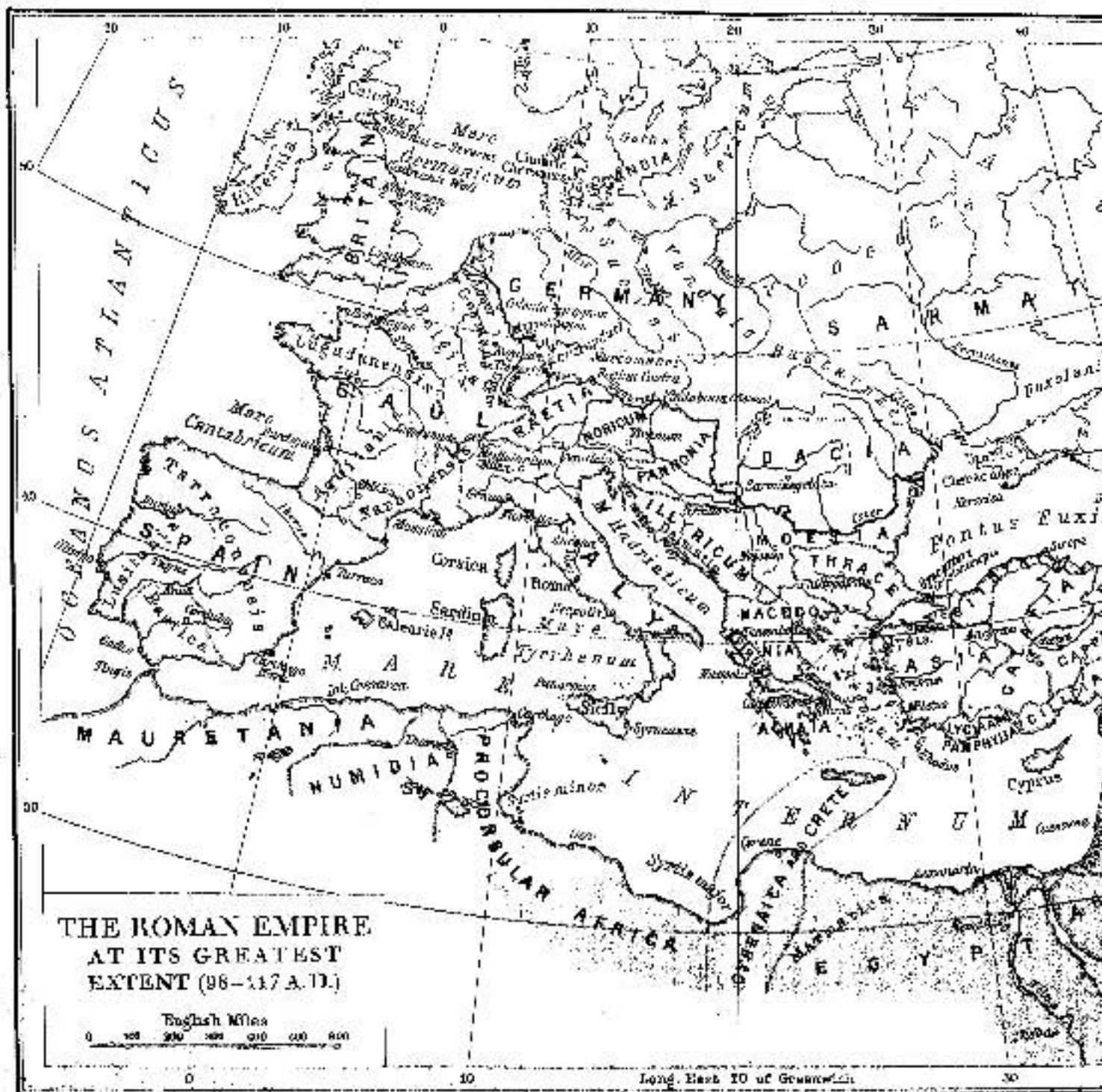
It is quite impossible to fix any specific date for the beginning of a particular line of western development within the above-mentioned areas. The shift from one age into another is, when looked at closely, gradual and imperceptible. Our thoughts always tell us that we are just entering upon a new age. To enclose historical periods within fixed dates is, no matter how convenient, to do violence to historical accuracy and to distort the general picture of slow but ceaseless change. But it is possible to define generally the larger periods within which some of the characteristic features of western history took root. Such a period is that from about A.D. 500 to 800, a period for which has often been especially reserved the epithet "dark ages," again a highly inaccurate term if one looks upon the period as the point of departure for a new growth.

Western Europe built on a Roman foundation

By 400 all Italy, with Rome as capital, had been the cornerstone of the Roman republic and empire for over six hundred years, and the territory of Spain, France, and Belgium had been organized into several Roman provinces for over four hundred and England for only some what less. The Roman provinces of Raetia, Noricum, and Pannonia, comprising most of what is now southern Germany, Austria south of the Danube, and most of Switzerland as well, had been subject to Rome only a little less than four hundred years. Within such long periods of time, about equal to or exceeding the chronological length of American history, these areas had naturally been pretty thoroughly Latinized in speech and Romanized in general culture, the degree of Romanization depending for the most part upon the length of time that they had been subject to Roman control. This means that western Europe began to build upon a Roman foundation of long standing. It is therefore necessary to appreciate to some degree the general character of the civilization of that Roman empire of which it was the western half.

Rome's Hellenistic heritage

In the course of its expansion from a small city on the banks of the Tiber to a world state embracing every civilized area that bordered on



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the Mediterranean Sea. Rome had become the heir of all that the Mediterranean countries had produced; she had, in fact, become the victor of the superior refinements of the older civilizations in the eastern Mediterranean. When during her desperate struggle with Carthage she was drawn to the east, she entered first into the political, then into the cultural heritage of the succession states into which the empire of Alexander the Macedonian had fallen. A fusion of what the Greeks themselves had achieved with the ancient achievements of the peoples of the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates, contemplated and begun by Alexander, took place in the centuries immediately before and after the beginning of the Christian era; and to this Græco-oriental amalgam has been given the term "Hellenistic" to differentiate it from the earlier and more strictly Greek, or Hellenic, civilization. In a sense it was the product of all that civilized man, outside of India and China, had been able to produce hitherto, but in addition it had the freshness and originality, as well as the mellowness, that can come from the mixture of older elements into a new combination.

This Hellenistic world of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Persia, Asia Minor, Greece, and the islands of the eastern Mediterranean was bound together by a cosmopolitan civilization and the use of Greek as a common language. It was dotted with large, fair cities, old and new, which gave it a strongly urban character. Its rulers were devoted to the cause of learning, and at Alexandria, the crowded scientific and literary capital of this world, there was a state library of some seven hundred thousand rolls for the use of societies of learned men. In the fields of mathematics and science there was such an outburst of activity that only the past hundred years can be compared with it. The *Logic* of Theophrastus and the *Meteor* of Herondas are ingratiating examples of the literature of the Hellenistic period, and its philologists established and handed down the texts of the Greek classics. It produced Epicurus and the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, the "gaunt ascetic Phœnician." Its sculpture reveals a superb mastery of technique and a tendency to theatrical display. In religion it fostered the oriental mystery cults that so strongly influenced the development of Christianity. Indeed, so great was the influence of some aspects of this Hellenistic world upon the Latin western half of the Roman empire that some historians say that Roman civilization is only an imitation of the Græco-oriental east. At all events, Rome's succumbing to eastern influence carries our own beginnings back to the shadowy origins of civilized existence in the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates.

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