

THE SHAPING OF A NEW WORLD

In this part of the course, we will look at some of the important ways the world was changing around **1492**, taking people out of the *Dark Ages* and making life more like it is today. The discovery of America by Columbus happened as part of an *Age of Discovery*, when Europeans became the first to learn just how big the world is, and what its entire surface of continents and oceans looks like. This period of discovery was part of a larger exciting rebirth of ancient (Greek & Roman) knowledge combined with completely original feats of invention and discovery in art and in science and technology that together are known as *the Renaissance*. Along with this progress in human life and knowledge came a reshaping of the Christian religion in Europe called *the Reformation*. Christianity broke up into separate beliefs, or sects, causing more wars between its already separate peoples. It was Europeans of separate countries — and different, warring forms of Christianity — that first globalized the world. Their conflicts and their changing attitudes towards life were an important cause of the kinds of actions they took as the primary shapers of the modern world.

I. The Rebirth of Greco-Roman Culture

A. The Rebirth of Freedom

1. We have seen from our survey of history's "anchor facts" that the United States was "born" in 1776.
2. It was in 1776 that America's founding fathers signed the *Declaration of Independence* stating that governments should protect individuals' rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."
3. This was the first time in modern times that freedom was achieved, but it was not the first time ever. It was a rebirth of freedom, based on the historical precedents of ancient Athens and ancient Rome.

B. Greek Democracy

1. The Greek people of the city of Athens were among the two people who simultaneously overthrew monarchy in ancient times and worked to create governments to defend individual freedom.
2. The Athenians decided that the best way to be free was to involve every person of their city-state (a city that was also a country by itself!) in the government.
3. The government they created is known as "democracy," the name of which comes from the Greek words "demos," meaning "people," and "kratia," which means to rule. So the basic meaning of democracy is that "the people rule."
4. In practice what this means is that people vote, and the *majority* rules.

5. The Greeks believed in individual freedom, and did not usually vote in ways that destroyed it, but the problem with democracy was (and *is*) that the majority could take away the rights of the minority by vote, if it chose to.
6. The worst example of this was when the Athenians *voted* to kill the unpopular philosopher Socrates, who had embarrassed many of the leaders of Athens. The smallest — and thus most vulnerable — minority of all is, of course, the individual.

C. The Roman Republic

1. When the founding fathers of America looked back to ancient examples of government other than monarchy, they decided *not* to make America a democracy. They chose to make it a *republic*.
2. The difference they focussed on was that a republic is dedicated to protecting the “unalienable” (or “inalienable,” in you prefer) rights of individuals from the power of government — including from the power of the majority.
3. In the ancient Roman Republic, the founders saw that an important way to protect rights was for a government to be formed with a set of laws that cannot be changed by the majority. This basic set of laws is called a *constitution*.
4. They also saw that if you broke up the powers of the government and gave them to many separate people, it would be harder for them to abuse those powers. This is called the “separation of powers.”
5. Building on this base, the founders worked hard to create even more methods to secure rights. They even created a “bill of rights,” but they knew that none of these things could guarantee the protection of rights indefinitely. When Benjamin Franklin left the constitutional convention, he famously warned Americans that the founders had created “...a republic, *if you can keep it!*” The founders knew that the Romans had failed, and that staying free would be a great challenge for Americans.

D. The *Renaissance* in Art

1. When most people think of the rebirth of Greco-Roman ideas, they do not connect it to the founding of America, which seems to come long after the time that most historians call “*the Renaissance*” — a french word meaning “rebirth” — when the people of Europe revived the ancient celebration of human life through realistic and beautiful art. That part of the rebirth started meekly in the early 1300s, and peaked in the early 1500s.
2. In ancient Greece and Rome, artists had celebrated the masculine strength of men, feminine beauty, the delight of childhood, and the intimacy of human relationships.
3. This close attention to and delight in human life ceased during the Dark Ages. Life, of course, was filled with tribal wars. People starved and fought for scraps.
4. Also, with the rise of Christianity came a preference to focus not on how wonderful life can be in this natural world, but rather in the belief that the only wonderful

existence humans could experience awaited them after death in the supernatural world.

5. By the time of Columbus, however, the *Renaissance* was in full swing. Artists such as Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci were creating amazing new examples of realistic and beautiful art.
6. Even art depicting religious subjects, such as sculptures and paintings

E. The Rebirth of Science

1. Along with the revival of Greek and Roman art and the later revival of Greco-Roman ideas of freedom, came the revival of Greek and Roman science and technology.
2. The Greek love of the human body and the desire to create a form of government proper to promote human life was accompanied by a desire to better know nature.
3. “Natural science” in Greece included the study of the solids, liquids, gases, (what we call “chemistry” and “physics”); plants (what we call “biology”), the weather, the universe (what we call “astronomy”), mathematics, geometry, and geography, to name just but a few.
4. The idea of scientific inquiry into nature was reborn in Columbus’s time as well, as we shall now see in detail in the *Age of Discovery*...