

D. Connecting to the Archaic Past

1. Our main connection to the ancient past lies in the heritage of Greco-Roman ideas, such as the ideas of democracy and republic. However, this heritage only extends back to c.508/c.509 BC. Ancient history extends much further back. In particular we know that Egyptian history extends as far back as c.3000 BC. So what is our connection to that even more distant time?
2. To mark the difference between the well known and still useful past of Greece & Rome on the one hand and the much more ancient and less important past of more ancient cultures, such as Egypt, historians use the terms “classical” and “archaic.”
 - a) Since the inventions and ideas of the ancient Greeks & Romans are still highly valued today, we refer to the Greco-Roman period of ancient history as “classical” antiquity, where the term “classical” means “old or ancient, but still valued in modern times.” (“Classical” music, in the same sense, is music that was composed centuries ago, but which people still like to perform and listen to today.)
 - b) “Archaic” cultures are those that are as old, and usually even older, than “classical” cultures, but their values are no longer upheld by people today. (For instance, nobody prays to the Egyptians gods, such as the sun god Ra, or Horus. Nor does anybody believe that human beings should be ruled by a pharaoh.)
 - c) The period from c.3000 BC - c.509 BC is the “archaic” part of ancient history, and it is more difficult to feel a strong connection to that part of history. This is a reflection of the generally lesser significance of “archaic” cultures, present-centrally. It is very important to recognize this lack of connection and not over-emphasize Egypt (and other) “archaic” cultures when studying history.