



Western Civilization

Sources, Images, and Interpretations

From the Renaissance to the Present

Fourth Edition

Dennis Sherman

John Jay College



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**Western Civilization: Sources, Images, and Interpretations
From the Renaissance to the Present**

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Preface

I compiled *Western Civilization: Sources, Images, and Interpretations* with three main goals in mind. First, I wanted to show readers the variety of sources historians use to write about history. Therefore, I have included not only primary documents, but also visual and secondary sources. Second, this collection is intended to be relatively concise, so I wanted the sources to “get to the point.” To do that, I have carefully edited each selection to highlight its historical meanings as efficiently as possible. Third, I sought to structure the book in a way that makes sense to the reader and does not dominate the organization of a course that may be following a textbook or using other books. To this end, I arranged the sources along chronological lines, beginning with the origins of Western civilization in the ancient Near East and gradually moving up to the present. From time to time, this chronological approach is modified, such as with the treatment of the Renaissance in one chapter, to account for the nature of the era and the organization of most courses.

This book thus provides a broad introduction to the sources historians use, the ways in which they interpret historical evidence, and the challenges they face in studying the evolution of Western civilization over the past 6,000 years. Each selection—whether a document, photograph, or map—is presented with an introduction, commentary, and questions designed to provide meaningful context and to facilitate readers’ understanding of the selection’s historical significance. I have also selected sources that provide a general balance among political, economic, social, intellectual, religious, and cultural history. However, different chapters highlight particular themes that are important for understanding certain eras. For example, some chapters offer more sources on social and women’s history, while others might emphasize political and religious history.

A book of this size can contain only a small portion of the historical material that is available. Thus *Western Civilization* is truly an introduction. Indeed, it is my hope that the materials presented here will serve primarily as a jumping-off point for further exploration into history and the historian’s discipline.

New in this Edition

This new edition includes some important changes.

- A new section, **Using This Book**, suggests ways to employ all the book’s features.
- The larger format and the use of full color add to the book in several ways. Since the images in each chapter’s Visual Sources section are presented in ways to encourage students to “read” and analyze what they are seeing as historical documents, the color and increased size of the paintings and photographs makes this popular section more useful. Maps within the Visual Sources section are presented similarly and now are easier to read and understand. Finally, the use of color in the graphics should make the book more appealing to the reader.
- In response to reviewers’ requests, I added several new primary, secondary, and especially visual sources.
- To reflect changing developments, the material in the final chapter has been reorganized and revised.

Otherwise, the structure, approach, and approximate length of this edition remain as in previous editions.

Structure of the Book

As the table of contents indicates, each of the book’s volumes contains chapters of manageable length. All the chapters are structured in the same way.

Each chapter opens with a **chapter introduction** that previews the period of history and the topics covered. A **time line** follows, outlining the relevant dates, individuals, events, and developments focused on in the chapter. In addition, a time line at the beginning of each of the six parts in the book puts the developments covered in each chapter into a broader perspective.

Then come the three categories of historical sources. First are **primary sources**, usually written documents that give voice to the individuals who lived through the events described. These are followed by the **visual sources**—paintings, drawings, sculpture, ceramics, photographs, buildings, monuments, coins, and so forth—which provide valuable historical insights that are difficult to gain solely through written documents. Included within this category are **maps**. Finally, **secondary sources**, most written by scholars looking back on the time in question, offer interpretations of primary sources.

Each source is preceded by a **headnote**, which identifies the nature of the source, places it in historical context, and indicates its particular focus. Headnotes for visual sources—including maps—are extensive, to help readers see their unique value as historical evidence.

The headnotes end with **points to consider**. These are not simply facts that readers must search for in the selection. Rather, they are designed to stimulate thought about the selections and to indicate the uses of each source.

Each chapter then ends with **chapter questions** that challenge readers to draw major themes together.

The first chapter of each volume contains three special sections: **Using Primary Sources**, **Using Visual Sources**, and **Using Secondary Sources**. The offer suggestions for interpreting and using these different kinds of sources.

Finally, what immediately follows the **acknowledgments** is a section on **Using This Book**, aimed at helping readers to use all the features in this book to their best advantage.

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Dennis Sherman

Using this Book

In using this book, you face a task similar to that confronting all historians: discover what people in the past thought and did, and why, and to organize this information into a chronological record. To do this, historians must search for evidence from the past, and this evidence comes in many different forms. Most sources consist of written materials, ranging from government records to gravestone inscriptions, memoirs, and poetry. Other sources include paintings, photographs, sculpture, buildings, maps, pottery, and oral traditions. Historians also use secondary sources—accounts of a particular topic or period written by other scholars. But in searching for sources, historians usually have something in mind—some particular interest or tentative conclusions that shape their search. Thus, in working with sources, historians make numerous decisions about which ones to include and emphasize, and how to interpret them. What historians write is ultimately a synthesis of the questions they posed, the sources they used, and their own ideas.

This book provides examples of all these materials and lets you try your hand at thinking as a historian does. However, working with sources takes practice. Each piece of historical evidence is usually mute. It's up to the historian (or "you") to unlock the message in the evidence—to give voice, in a sense, to the people who created that document or those paintings so long ago. The historian (or "you") therefore must be a skilled detective. Here are some guidelines to help you hone your detecting skills.

1. **What Is the Context?** Get a sense of the **context** of the source you are about to read or analyze. This book gives you three ways to do this. First, read the brief introduction to the chapter in which the source appears. This preview sketches some of the most important developments in the period covered by the chapter. It introduces the topics, issues, and questions that the sources in the chapter focus on, and places these sources in the larger historical context of the civilizations being examined.

Second, look at the time line, which shows the period covered by the chapter and indicates the approximate dates and life spans of the developments and people depicted in the sources. Third, read the headnote—the one or two paragraphs in italics that precede each

source. These provide the immediate context to the source, introduce the source's author or creator, and indicate what the source is about.

2. **What Kind of Source Is It?** Each chapter is divided into three kinds of sources: primary, visual, and secondary. Primary sources are "first-hand" or "eyewitness" accounts of historical events or issues. Historians consider these documents their main building blocks for learning about and interpreting the past. These pieces of evidence are the most direct links possible to what people thought, how and why they acted as they did, and what they accomplished.

The visual sources in the book—such as paintings, sculpture, photographs, and buildings—are far more than just ornamentation or examples of renowned pieces of art and architecture. These sources reveal just as much of the past as written materials do—if you know how to interpret them. The extensive headnotes accompanying the visual sources will help you with this challenge.

Finally, secondary sources are accounts or analyses of events by someone (usually a scholar looking back on the past) who did not witness the event or live through the particular era described in the source. Secondary-source writers usually base their interpretations of what occurred on their examination of numerous primary documents and other sources. The analyses in these sources reflect the authors' choices and their own understanding of what happened. Often scholars differ on how to interpret significant historical developments.

At times the distinction between primary and secondary sources blurs, as when the author of a source lived during the events he or she is interpreting but did not witness it directly. If a historian views such a document as an interpretation of what occurred, the document is considered a secondary source. However, if the historian treats the document as evidence of the assumptions and attitudes of the author's times, the document is considered a primary source.

3. **What Does the Source Seem to Be Saying?** All sources reveal some information (whether directly or indirectly) about people and societies of the past. As

you consider each source, ask yourself: What does this document or image tell me about this topic, society, individual, or era? The “**Consider**” questions that follow the headnote to each source will help you identify the important information contained in the sources.

- 4. Who Created the Source, and Why?** To critically examine a source, ask yourself four questions. First, who created the source? Knowing the author or creator—a religious figure? scholar? worker?—may give you clues to the point expressed in the view reflected in the source. Second, what might be the author’s biases and assumptions, such as political sympathies, group allegiances, or religious beliefs? Discerning these can give you valuable information that the author did not intend to convey. Third, why was the document written or created? Perhaps the author was trying to advocate a particular point of view or satisfy the wishes of a powerful group. Identifying the motivation behind the source sheds further light on its meaning. Fourth, who were the source’s intended readers or viewers? Were they scholars? nobles? women? Knowing this can help you interpret a document’s message or decipher the meaning of a painting.

Each kind of source—primary, visual, and secondary—poses its own challenge to historians who are trying to analyze them critically. Some primary documents, for example, may be forgeries or contain errors. There may also be inconsistencies within the document. These problems call into question the credibility of a document. The kind of primary source may limit its usefulness as well. For example, a law may not tell you anything about whether people followed it or whether it was enforced. And just because a book was published doesn’t necessarily mean that it was widely read at the time. A formal written statement may reveal less about an individual’s feelings and actual behavior than a diary entry can. Moreover, language constantly evolves, so the meanings of words and phrases may have changed over time. To fully understand a primary source, try to imagine yourself living during the time and in the society in which the source was first created.

Visual sources require especially careful interpretation. For example, a painter’s intentions can be difficult to discern. Furthermore, a particular painting might mean something completely different to a sixteenth-century viewer than it does to a twenty-first-century viewer. Similarly, it makes a great difference whether a photograph was posed or spontaneous. Scholars differ greatly over how to interpret

sources such as paintings, ceramics, and coins. Therefore, the descriptions that accompany the visual sources in this book are open to debate. They are designed primarily to show you how historians use visual materials—as unwritten evidence of what people in the past valued, thought, did, and found interesting.

Maps are a special kind of visual source. In this book, they are intended to shed light on relationships, such as the connections between geographical factors and political developments. As with other visual sources, the descriptions in the headnotes indicate some of the ways historians use maps.

With secondary sources, the authors (usually historians) often try to present a narrative of an event or era, or explain some social or political development. By its very nature, writing secondary sources means making decisions about what information to include. The author must make numerous judgment calls from among a huge amount of historical data. Therefore, read secondary sources with these questions in mind: What is the author’s point or argument? What sort of evidence does he or she use to support the argument? Does the author’s argument make sense to you? What political or ideological biases are revealed in the author’s interpretation? How might somebody argue against the interpretation presented by the author?

All historical sources—whether primary, visual, or secondary—can only be so “objective.” In fact, most evidence from the past omits important information about ordinary people’s lives, children’s lives, or particular ethnic groups. But good sources do reveal valuable information when you know what to look for and analyze them critically. In the hands of careful historians, they can offer a provocative glimpse into the hopes, dreams, and the thoughts and actions of people from the past.

5. What Connections and Comparisons Can Be Made?

In considering a source, ask yourself: Does this source relate in any way to another source in the chapter, to a broader topic covered in the chapter, or to any themes or developments covered in a textbook or classroom? Looking for connections and comparisons helps you stand back from the source and identify larger historical trends—perhaps even about yourself and your own society—beyond just the immediate message in the source.

To spot these links, read the chapter introductions. These list some of the broad questions and themes around which the sources are organized. Sometimes the headnotes or “consider” points also suggest

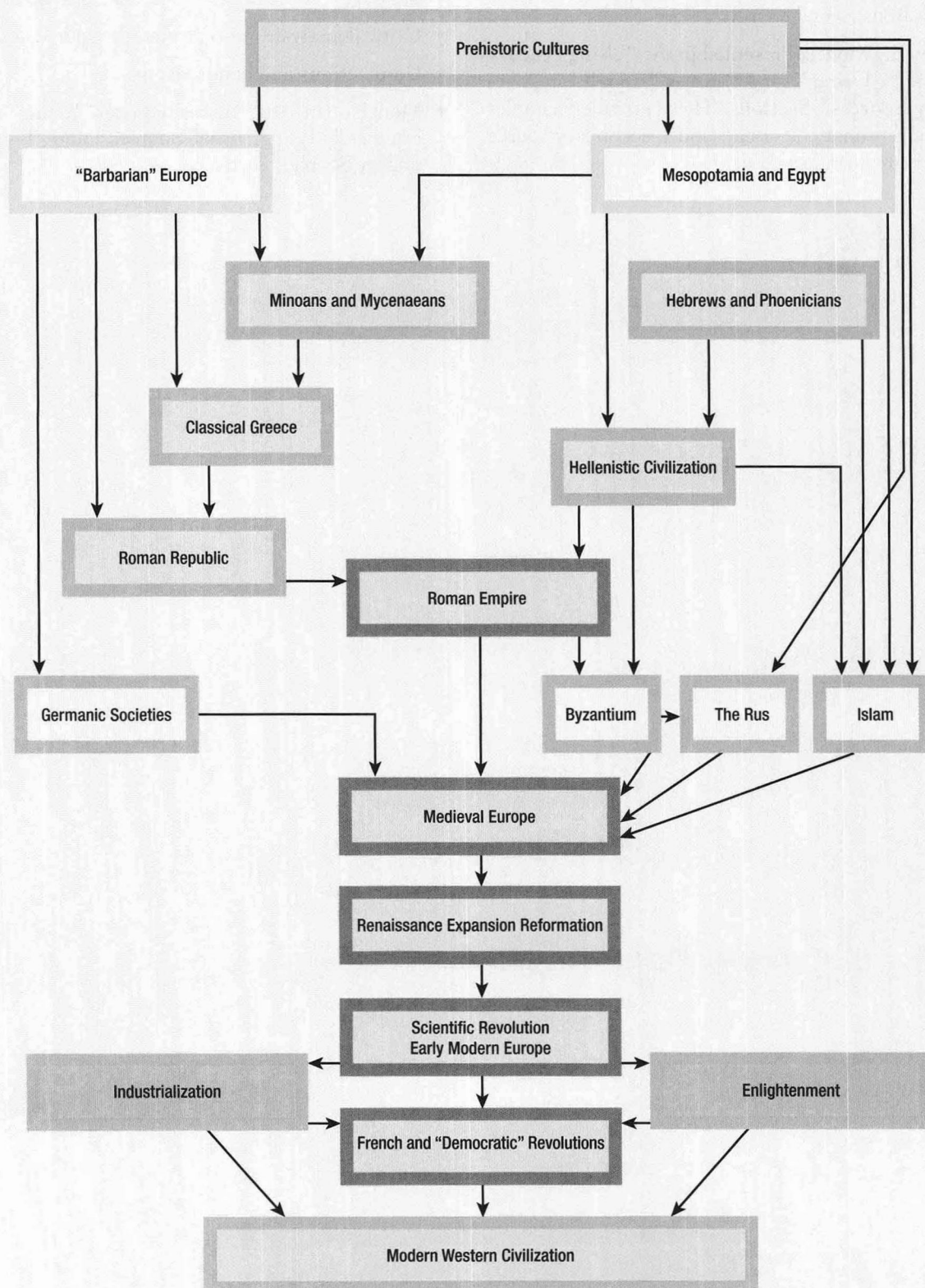
comparisons. In addition, the questions at the end of each chapter can help you make connections and comparisons. To answer these questions, you'll need to engage in analytical thought, look at several selections in the chapter together, and sometimes consider sources from several chapters.

6. **Employ the Models Presented in the “Using Primary Sources,” “Using Visual Sources,” and “Using Secondary Sources” Sections.** These provide examples of how a primary, a visual, and a secondary source might be read and studied.

Six-Point Checklist for Using This Book

- **Context.**
- **Kind of source** (primary, visual, secondary).
- **Message** (what does the source seem to be saying?)
- **Critical analysis** (who created the source, and why?)
- **Connections and comparisons.**
- **Models** (in the first chapter’s “Using Primary Sources,” “Using Visual Sources,” and “Using Secondary Sources” sections).

Schematic of Evolution of Western Civilization



The Evolution of Western Civilization

This chart is a schematic illustration of the development of Western civilization up to modern times. Caution should be exercised when reading such a chart. The connections made are a matter more of judgment than of fact. Moreover, what is missing—the how and why of the connections—is of great importance. Nevertheless, the chart can make it easier to see some of the broadest connections between societies and civi-

lizations, connections that are often lost when a single period or society is examined in detail.

Consider:

Possible reasons for the various connections within the chart; what might be added to this chart to make it more useful.

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