

# WESTERN CIVILIZATION

## *An Urban Perspective*

*Volume I: From Ancient Times Through the Seventeenth Century*

*F. Roy Willis • Third Edition*



THIRD EDITION

# WESTERN CIVILIZATION

An Urban Perspective

VOLUME I

*From Ancient Times  
Through the Seventeenth Century*

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# PREFACE

The growing response of teachers and students to the original approach to the study of Western civilization adopted in this book has prompted the preparation of this third edition. My aim was to avoid the sense of superficiality a reader feels when compelled by a textbook to move at a judiciously balanced pace through the myriad details that compose the Western past. Too often, I wrote in the preface to the second edition, "the study of Western civilization was like an infinitely long train ride with no stopovers allowed, a kind of Orient Express in which Paris, Vienna, and Istanbul were viewed as little more than names on railroad stations. In a way, this book was to be an invitation to the student to stop and explore the intricacies of the great cities that might otherwise have flashed by largely unobserved. Better yet, as historians we could visit the city as it was at the time of its greatness."

This essential objective remains. The book is organized around the study of fourteen great cities that both have been important in the evolution of Western civilization and have been unique urban creations in their own right. From Athens in the fifth century B. C. to New York City in the twentieth century, we attempt to identify each city's essential character, using narrative chapters, usually with an urban focus, to link the studies of the individual cities. The book is thus intentionally unbalanced, as analyses in depth alternate with chapters that place the cities in their historical settings.

This approach made it possible to use the new historical work based on techniques of the other social sciences that is pouring from the presses each year. More and more, we are able to study the lives of classes that have left few written records, to apply economic and sociological concepts to the understanding of past societies, and to gain new insights into such questions as family structure, the nature of morality and law, and the position of minorities. The results of this work have been brought together

with the historian's more traditional interests in the nature of politics, the lives of the elites, and the achievements of the intellect.

A number of changes have been introduced in this third edition.

1. A serious attempt has been made to integrate in every section the rich research and synthesis in women's history that has been one of the most fruitful endeavors of historians in recent years. As will be evident in the bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter, the major part of these publications has appeared in the past five years, although women's history remains indebted to such pioneers as Eileen Power. The coverage of this area includes both the study of individual women and the analysis of women's roles in different classes of society, in the legal system, and in the family.
2. Coverage of the details of daily life, such as food, clothing, housing, and work experience, has been amplified.
3. Several chapters have been substantially revised or expanded. The changes include: greater coverage of the religious tradition of the Jews in Chapter 1; expansion of the treatment of science in the ancient world in Chapters 2 and 3; fuller analysis of Venice and the Italian cities in Chapter 8; further details on the rise of French literature in Chapters 10 and 15; grouping of the political history of the late nineteenth century in Chapter 21 and of the international history in Chapter 22.
4. The bibliographies for suggested reading at the end of each chapter have been updated.
5. The large time charts have been replaced by a number of short chronological tables within the chapters.
6. Many new illustrations have been added with direct relevance, as in previous editions, to material presented in the text.

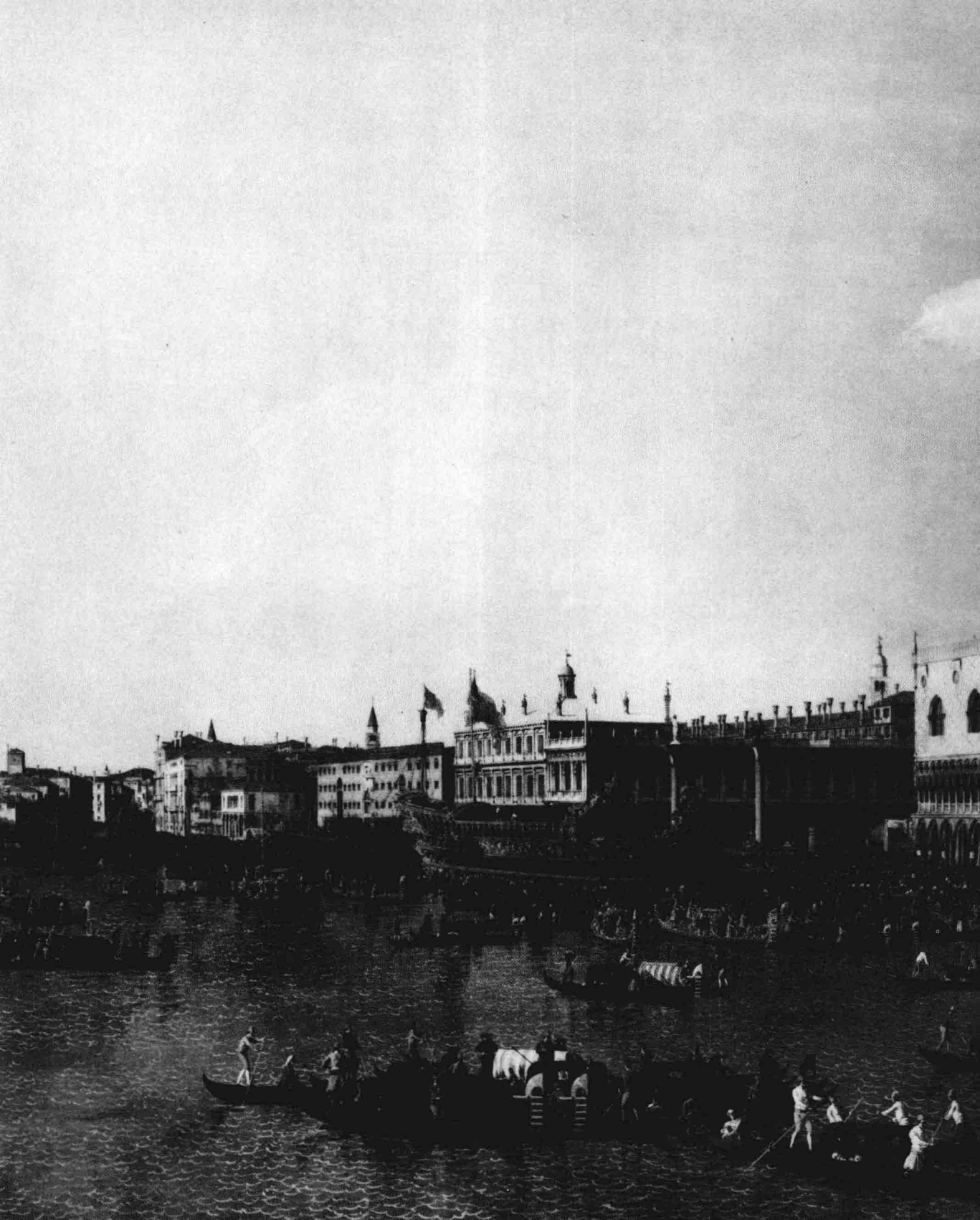
A revised instructor's guide, written by Rosemary M. Wakeman of the University of California, Davis, is available to accompany the text. The guide is the source of many thought-provoking discussion questions as well as an abundance of objective test questions.

I am deeply grateful to the many professors and students who have sent me their comments on the book. Such constructive advice has been not only helpful in itself but reassuring that many have shared the delight in Western cities that led me to conceive so unconventional a text.

In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the extremely valuable suggestions I have received from colleagues all over the country in the preparation of this edition. I am most grateful to Patricia Branca, Carnegie-Mellon University; Allen D. Breck, University of Denver; Ronald E. Coons, University of Connecticut; Robert Davis, Chaffey College; George Drake, The Colorado College; Richard W. Hull, New York University; Eugene E. Kuzirian, University of Texas at El Paso; Marvin

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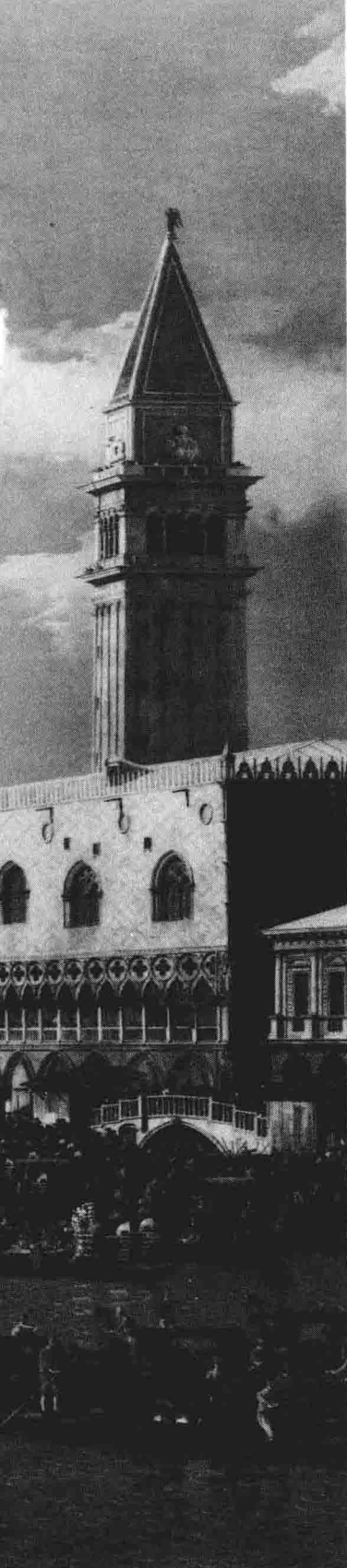
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## INTRODUCTION: CIVILIZATION AND THE CITY

Cities have been a major driving force in the development of Western civilization. Humanity's highest achievements, Sophocles proclaimed in his play *Antigone*, are "language, and wind-swift thought, and city-dwelling habits." The city, from the time of its earliest appearance some ten thousand years ago, has focused and magnified human energies in the task of mastering the environment, enriched our understanding by providing a multiplicity of human contacts, and provided the stimulus to the highest creativity in all forms of science and art. It has at the same time been responsible for many of the darkest features of Western civilization—the spoliation of the environment; the coercion of vast numbers of individuals by governments, armies, and economic exploiters; the exclusion of vast segments of the population from intellectual and social advancement; and perhaps even the glorification of war. The city has always been at the extremes of the Western experience.

In recent years, the process of urbanization has been explored with considerable success by a wide range of social scientists, including the urban geographer, the political scientist, the sociologist, the social anthropologist, the economist, and the historian. Their findings have thrown much light on such basic concerns as the impact of population growth, the spatial patterns of city development, the occupational structure of cities at varying stages of development, class relationships, family structure and mores, the functioning of political systems, and relationship to environment. All of this is enormously helpful to historians of civilization. But

View of Venice, by Antonio Canaletto (1697–1768) (Courtesy of the National Gallery, London)

historians must always remember the one task that distinguishes them from the other social scientists: to respect the uniqueness of each period of civilization.

This book seeks to meet that challenge by focusing on the achievements of the great cities of Western civilization. Over half of the book is devoted to studies of fourteen cities at the height of their creativity. Several questions have been asked about each city. To analyze the city's economic and social structure, we ask first the most basic question, *How did the city produce its wealth?* The city was a provider of services—religious, governmental, legal, military, and commercial. It was a manufacturer of goods, by artisans in the preindustrial age and by factory workers after the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century. And often it was an exploiter, using military force to acquire the economic wealth of others.

Second, we ask, *What social relationships developed inside this economic system?* We shall be interested in the distribution of wealth, the status accorded to birth or profession, the relationship between classes, the extent of mobility within the social structure, and the distinctive ways of life developed within each stratum of society.

Third, we turn to the political superstructure to ask, *How did the citizens conceive the relationship of the individual to the state in theory and carry it out in practice?* Underlying all political systems is a theory or theories of government, though these assumptions are not always explicitly formulated. In times of dissatisfaction with an established political system, theorists construct new formulas based on their own conception of human nature and the ideal form of state; and as we shall see, these theories are occasionally put into practice, usually as the result of revolution. Political theory will therefore accompany the analysis of the distribution of power within the city and, since most of these cities are also capitals, within the state.

Fourth, we consider, *How did the city spend its wealth?* The consumption habits of different social classes have been subject to a vast amount of detailed research, and it is increasingly possible to recreate the way of life of the less privileged classes as well as that of the elite. Public expenditure as well as private must be assessed, especially that used for the beautification of the city or the improvement of its amenities; but we must also consider the waste of a city's resources, from military adventuring to the ravaging of the natural surroundings.

Fifth, we examine the city's intellectual life, asking, *To what goals was the intellectual activity of its citizens directed?* In cities as multifaceted as these, we must emphasize the most salient features of each city's contribution to the intellectual advance of Western civilization, such as the contribution of Athens to philosophy and drama, of Rome to law, and of Vienna to music. But in each case the contribution of the environment of the city must be explained: why Paris was a magnet for Europe's theologians in the thirteenth century and for its artists and writers in the late nineteenth century; why tiny Lisbon could attract the continent's cartographers and



maritime technologists; why Berlin could be transformed in months from the center of military science to an incubator of avant-garde artistic talent and then in an even shorter time back to its military preoccupations.

Finally, we ask, *How did the cultural and scientific achievements of the city reflect the citizens' conception of human nature, of God, and of beauty?* Much of this creation was the possession of an elite, but that is hardly a reason for excluding it from a history of civilization. Hence, we shall consider what the Parthenon tells us of the Greek concept of beauty, how a Botticelli Venus reveals the Florentine conception of the divine, how Newton's laws of motion justify a naturally ordered universe.

City and countryside, however, cannot and should not be isolated from each other. As late as 1800, only three percent of the world's population lived in cities of more than 5,000 people; and even in 1950, only thirty percent did so. Throughout the development of Western civilization, most people have lived on the land; and the city has always depended on the countryside for food and raw materials. We are therefore concerned throughout the book with the life of the rural population as well as the urban, with agrarian technology and the nature of bulk transportation of agricultural products, with the social structure of the countryside and its impact upon the city, and with the needs, values, and aspirations of the inhabitants of the countryside. We must consider the farms of the Roman *campagna* as well as Rome, the decaying aristocratic estates as well as prerevolutionary Paris, the turnips and clover of the agricultural revolution as well as the cotton mills of Manchester.

This book is undisguisedly enthusiastic about cities, with a few notable exceptions. I only wish that one could show the same admiration for all the urban creations of Western civilization that Wordsworth did for London, one bright morning at the beginning of the last century:

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
This city now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendor, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802."