

Foundations of Western Civilization

(48 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)

Course No. 370

Taught by [Thomas F. X. Noble](#)

University of Notre Dame

Ph.D., Michigan State University

From its humble beginnings in the great river valleys of Iraq and Egypt to the dawn of the modern world, discover the essential nature, evolution, and perceptions of Western civilization.

With these 48 lectures on the people, places, ideas, and events that make up **The Foundations of Western Civilization**, award-winning scholar and teacher Thomas F. X. Noble of the University of Notre Dame invites you to explore "Western civilization."

Grasp History Over Thousands of Years and Vast Amounts of Territory

From the latter stages of the Agricultural Revolution to the doorstep of the Scientific Revolution, your learning in this course will cover the period from roughly 3000 B.C. to A.D. 1600, when the "foundations" of the modern West come into view.

Professor Noble's goal is to offer a history of what has been truly "foundational" across millennia in the West, that most unusual of world civilizations.

"Throughout the course, we will pause to reflect on where Western civilization finds its primary locus at any given moment," he says, "but Western civilization is much more than human and political geography.

"We will explore the myriad forms of political and institutional structures by means of which Western peoples have organized themselves and their societies. These include monarchies of several distinct types, as well as participatory republics.

"Looking at institutions will draw us to inquire about the Western tradition of political discourse. Who should participate in any given society? Why? How have societies resolved the tension between individual self-interest and the common good?"

Your learning will follow a set timeline and order to cover vast amounts of territory and thousands of years:

- beginning in the ancient Near East and moving to Greece, then to Rome
- exploring the shape and impact of large ancient empires, including those of Persia, Alexander the Great, and Rome
- moving to Western Europe to watch Europe gradually expand physically and culturally

- finally, examining the globalizations of Western civilization with the Portuguese and Spanish voyages of exploration and discovery.

Discover a Treasure of Rich Historical Detail

This course rewards the desire for useful generalization and theory. But it also highlights the telling detail on which history can turn. Professor Noble's guidance allows you to comprehend the ongoing presence of the Roman Empire, the ceaseless influence of a 20-year golden age in Athens, the living struggle between Abraham's three great religions, and much more.

Professor Noble seeks to delight the mind with the "aha!" experience: "That's why we do that!" "That's where that word came from!" "That's why those people won!" (In the last revelation, metals and horses figure more prominently than social virtues.)

And the course is a lavish treasure of rich detail. Examples:

- The Greek Dark Ages (ca. 1100 to 700 B.C.) went "dark," at least in part, because the Greeks forgot how to write—the only people in human history known to have lost literacy after having once attained it.
- The architects of the Parthenon, to achieve the optical illusion of perfect straightness, subtly angled the building's columns so that, if extended, they would meet a mile and a quarter above the temple's roof—over its exact center.
- Although fewer than 200 actual books (including classical texts) survive from before the year 800, the 9th century—meaning the literate monastic establishment fostered by Charlemagne—has left us more than 6,000.
- The city of Florence, at the height of the Renaissance, had no university. (This was compensated somewhat by Lorenzo de Medici, who was spending 50 percent of the city's annual budget on books for his Medicean Academy's library.)
- Christopher Columbus, in what was perhaps a bit of "spin" from a practiced self-promoter, premised his plan for reaching the East Indies by sailing west partly on suppositions about the Earth's size that had been known to be false since Hellenistic times.

A Learning Experience Built Around Powerful Organizing Themes

This broad and panoramic series will help you pull an enormous sweep of history together into one coherent—though by no means closed—framework.

No other civilization has achieved the global reach of the West. By surveying Mesopotamia to modernity, and everything in between, you will pursue answers to the questions of what "the West" most essentially is or has been thought to be, and what makes it distinctive among other world civilizations—not necessarily better in all ways, but surely unique.

Professor Noble walks you through history as it develops, taking into account such themes as ecology, geography, and climate; government and economics; religion; work and leisure; philosophy; literature; art and architecture; and even virtues, values, and aesthetics.

You will find everything from a thumbnail sketch of the Assyrians (cruel practitioners of state terror) to a detailed analysis of how the Roman constitution worked. For example, the word "veto," which means "I forbid," was literally shouted into the Senate chamber by Roman tribunes listening from just outside the door.

In addition to such detailed, anecdotal information, another one of the ways in which you will gain a more vivid sense of the past from these lectures is the large number of memorable sketches of individuals and great works of Western culture. You will:

- ponder the view of life in the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*
- review the impressive amount of historical information preserved in the *Iliad*
- listen to selections from the great poets of ancient Rome, including not only Virgil and Ovid but Sallust, Juvenal, and Martial
- encounter amazing figures such as Charlemagne's lieutenant Theodulf, who was not only a bishop but an imperial diplomat and administrator, a theologian and scholar of the Hebrew Bible, a poet, and an architect who designed an exquisite chapel at Germigny.

The Importance of Material Factors

Professor Noble is careful never to neglect the important impersonal environmental and technological factors that also shape history.

You will examine how a sustained period of favorable weather around the 10th and 11th centuries allowed western Europe to become more populous, found and rebuild cities, increase trade, and go from being a target of outside invasions by Vikings, Huns, Mongols, and Arabs to launching incursions of its own. These came to be known as the Crusades, and they began in 1095.

And delving even deeper into the story, you will learn how so seemingly humble an item as the ordinary horse collar contributed so powerfully to this trend, that if it were not for the invention of the horse collar, there may have been no Crusades at all.

Illuminating Questions about Familiar Categories

Professor Noble suggests that many conventional historical categories and concepts can obscure as much as they reveal. By setting aside these ideas, you can open your mind to a broader and perhaps more accurate picture of history.

Did the Roman Empire really "fall"? What did people at the time experience? What exactly was being reborn in the Renaissance? Is it historically accurate to speak of the "Protestant Reformation"? Why do we think of the Middle Ages as just that—i.e., a time somehow sandwiched between two other (and presumably superior) times? Did the brilliant intellectuals and writers who clustered around the court of Charlemagne see it that way?

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. "Western," "Civilization," and "Foundations"
2. History Begins at Sumer
3. Egypt—The Gift of the Nile
4. The Hebrews—Small States and Big Ideas
5. A Succession of Empires
6. Wide-Ruling Agamemnon
7. Dark Age and Archaic Greece
8. The Greek Polis—Sparta
9. The Greek Polis—Athens
10. Civic Culture—Architecture and Drama
11. The Birth of History
12. From Greek Religion to Socratic Philosophy

Part 2

13. Plato and Aristotle
14. The Failure of the Polis and the Rise of Alexander
15. The Hellenistic World
16. The Rise of Rome
17. The Roman Republic—Government and Politics
18. Roman Imperialism
19. The Culture of the Roman Republic
20. Rome—From Republic to Empire
21. The Pax Romana
22. Rome's Golden and Silver Ages
23. Jesus and the New Testament
24. The Emergence of a Christian Church

Part 3

25. Late Antiquity—Crisis and Response
26. Barbarians and Emperors
27. The Emergence of the Catholic Church
28. Christian Culture in Late Antiquity
29. Muhammad and Islam
30. The Birth of Byzantium
31. Barbarian Kingdoms in the West
32. The World of Charlemagne
33. The Carolingian Renaissance
34. The Expansion of Europe
35. The Chivalrous Society
36. Medieval Political Traditions, I

Part 4

37. Medieval Political Traditions, II
38. Scholastic Culture
39. Vernacular Culture
40. The Crisis of Renaissance Europe
41. The Renaissance Problem
42. Renaissance Portraits
43. The Northern Renaissance
44. The Protestant Reformation—Martin Luther
45. The Protestant Reformation—John Calvin
46. Catholic Reforms and "Confessionalization"
47. Exploration and Empire
48. What Challenges Remain?