

Missing: A Common Culture
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Our founding fathers disagreed with each other on many things, foremost among the arguments was that of slavery. But they all shared a common culture, a common language, a common body of scholarship in which they were all educated.

The founders comprised of what was then the elite ruling class: all of them property owners, most of them college educated, except for George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, who were self-educated.

They were all products of the European "Enlightenment," a period in which religion, which had bloodily dominated several centuries of European wars, was replaced by "reason."

The Enlightenment was a period in which colleges looked to ancient Rome and Greece, rather than Christianity, for their value system. The emphasis on Rome and Greece, and mastery of Latin and Greek, dominated higher education. Reading the works and studying the history of the Western World's first republics inspired the new elites in Colonial America to start thinking about a country not ruled by a king and aristocracy.

Rome and Greece were highly literate cultures. The Greeks began the process of accumulating advanced thought in writing, thinking about politics, forms of government, experiences of travelers (both traders and warriors), and observation replacing superstition and religious explanations for natural phenomena. They were the first to experiment with (limited) democracy in Athens, in which all property-owning males voted publicly for their leaders.

The common culture shared by all the people was provided in the theaters, which presented the plays of four great dramatists. The plays used mythological material from the past, designed to illuminate the meaning of Greek history.

Many of the stories came from the Trojan War that happened many centuries earlier and came down to them in the writing of Homer: The Iliad and The Odyssey. The audiences learned about human character, good and bad; wise and foolish (tragic) leadership; and even about gender wars, both tragic (the Trojan Women) and comic (Lysistrata).

The Greek experiment in democracy did not last long (80 years), but it was a bright light that never faded from memory of the educated classes of Europe, thanks to the Romans.

Rome followed the Greek experiment in creating a republic, but it too fell to a hereditary dictatorship, Empire. But all educated Romans shared Greek culture, thanks to the work of Greek teachers, many of them slaves, who educated Rome's elites.

Romans followed the practices of Greek literacy, producing writers on political theory, scientific knowledge, history writing, some theater (very inferior to Greek), and even an epic based on the Trojan War tales and the mythological birth of Rome.

Life in the ancient world, both Greek and Roman, was firmly rooted in this common culture. Public literacy in Rome was the greatest it had ever been until the time after the printing press.

Then, in a series of disasters and invasions, the Roman Empire collapsed, and the breakup resulted in a drastic meltdown of literacy. Christianity, which was not sympathetic to Roman culture, gave rise to a very small class of literate monks, many of them Irish converts, who saved much of the ancient learning from destruction by fanatics. Their main work, however, was creating the Medieval Christian culture shared by their kings and aristocrats. All of this leadership class, including the monks themselves, shared a common literary language of Latin. The languages of the common people broke up into mutually unintelligible dialects of Latin, or the languages of Asian invaders (Hungarian and Finnish).

What held societies together was shared culture: leaders sharing comparable educations, common religious values and practices shared by the ordinary people, and for the most part, trust in leadership. Societies began to fall apart when these elements disappeared. Trust was replaced by conspiracy theories and law and order replaced by violence and anarchy.

Religion, once a unifying culture, morphed into murderous rival sects, at war with each other, eventually descending into discredited witchcraft persecutions and Holy Inquisitions.

The European Enlightenment emerged from this chaos, deriving its material from the Roman and Greek golden ages. Our Founders studied the ancient republics and downplayed religion and superstition.

Next week: Our nation's birth.

688 words

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