The Heritage of Greece and Rome

The influence of ancient Greece and Rome on the modern world extends to a vast range of areas, including law, government, education, art, architecture, literature, history, language, and more.

Law and Government

In addition to developing the notion of democracy, the Greeks passed on the tradition of public debate of laws and issues, the use of juries, and the concept of majority rule. The Romans, themselves influenced by the Greeks, developed the notion of elected officials serving as representatives of the broader public. The word *republic*, from the Latin *res*, meaning “things” and *publicus*, meaning “people,” is used today to describe the governmental structure used in many countries throughout the world.

Many legal traditions and concepts used widely today are derived from the codification of Roman laws done under the emperor Justinian. The Justinian Code collected, summarized, and clarified laws and legal theory, based on the work of professional jurists. This new profession developed in the 200s BCE, as the vast and complex Roman Empire needed a corps of trained professionals who both knew and understood the law, but also could provide interpretation of laws in order to apply them throughout the empire. The work of these jurists contributes to the way modern legal systems work, with an understanding that laws are understood and applied through interpretation and opinion. The set of laws compiled under Justinian underlies modern legal systems throughout the Western world today.

Philosophy and Letters

The philosophical tradition of ancient Greece continued to influence thinkers in many cultures throughout history. Roman scholars and philosophers continued to debate, analyze, and write about the ideas the Greeks had explored. The European Renaissance, which lasted from the 1400s to the 1600s, was characterized by a deep interest in the works of both Plato and Aristotle. The use of Latin as a scholarly language continued well after the fall of the Roman Empire. Translations of Greek works into Latin were used by scholars in many parts of the world. Aristotle, in particular, influenced the work of many later thinkers, including the theologian Thomas Aquinas and the Muslim philosopher ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroës).

The alphabet we use today is based on the Latin alphabet, which was itself derived from the Greek alphabet. The word itself comes from the Greek letters *alpha* and *beta*. Greek literature gave rise to numerous metaphors and sayings used today. Many have their roots in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. For example, the phrase “Achilles’s heel,” meaning a vulnerable spot, comes from Homer’s story of Achilles, whose mother dipped him into the river Styx in an attempt to make him immortal. The spot where she held him, his heel, was the only part of him untouched by the waters, leaving him vulnerable in battle years later. The idea of a Trojan Horse, a deception that tricks someone into letting down their defenses, also comes from Homer’s epic. The Greek myth of King Midas, whose touch turned everything into gold, gave us the expression “the Midas touch.”
The Greek literary tradition influenced many later writers. In addition to Homer and the Greek dramatists, Greek poets, such as Sappho and Pindar, and the fables of the Greek writer Aesop shaped the literature of Europe. The works of the Roman writer Ovid helped spread both Greek and Roman myths widely. Many authors have taken inspiration from these works. Shakespeare and Dante both found inspiration in Greek and Roman writers. The Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw’s renowned *Pygmalion* is based on the Greek myth. The famous musical *My Fair Lady* is, in turn, based on Shaw’s play.

Both Greek and Latin influence not only English, but numerous other languages. Latin gave rise to the modern Romance languages: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian.