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Over thousands of years, Europe has changed enormously. It's a fascinating story! But it's a long one, so here are just some of the highlights.

The Stone Age



Prehistoric cave paintings at Lascaux, France

The earliest Europeans were hunters and gatherers. On the walls of some caves they made wonderful paintings of hunting scenes. Eventually, they learnt farming and began breeding animals, growing crops and living in villages.



They made their weapons and tools from stone – by sharpening pieces of flint, for example.



Learning to use metals - the Bronze and Iron Ages



Several thousand years BC (before the birth of Christ), people discovered how to get different metals by heating different kinds of rock in a very hot fire. Bronze - a mixture of copper and tin - was hard enough for making tools and weapons. Gold and silver were soft but very beautiful and could be shaped into ornaments.

Later, an even harder metal was discovered: iron. The best kind of metal was steel, which was strong and didn't easily break, so it made good swords. But making steel was very tricky, so good swords were rare and valuable!



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Ancient Greece - roughly 2000 to 200 BC



An ancient Greek temple still standing today (in Athens)

In Greece about 4000 years ago, people began to build cities. At first they were ruled by kings. Later, around 500 BC, the city of Athens introduced democracy – which means ‘government by the people.’ (Instead of having a king, the men of Athens took decisions by voting).

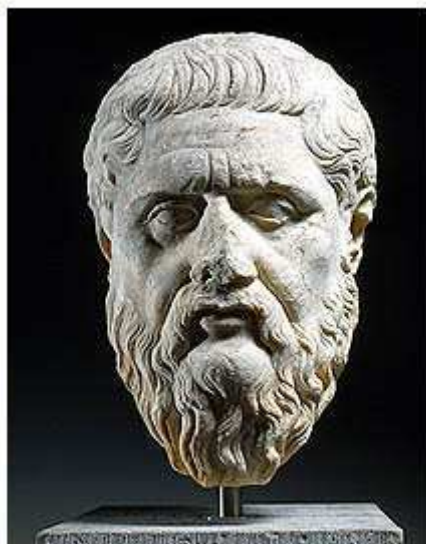
Democracy is an important European invention that has spread around the world.

Some of the other things the ancient Greeks gave us include:

- wonderful stories about gods and heroes, wars and adventures;



- elegant temples, marble statues and beautiful pottery;
- the Olympic games;
- well-designed theatres, and great writers whose plays are still performed today;
- teachers like Socrates and Plato, who taught people how to think logically;



- mathematicians like Euclid and Pythagoras, who worked out the patterns and rules in maths;
- scientists like Aristotle (who studied plants and animals) and Eratosthenes (who proved that the Earth is a sphere and worked out how big it is).



The Roman empire - roughly 500 BC to 500 A.D.
(A.D. means after the birth of Christ)



Rome started out as just a village in Italy. But the Romans were very well-organised, their army was very good at fighting and they gradually conquered all the lands around the Mediterranean.

Eventually the Roman empire stretched all the way from northern England to the Sahara desert and from the Atlantic to Asia.

Here are some of the things the Romans gave us:

- good, straight roads connecting all parts of the empire;
- beautiful houses with courtyards and mosaic tiled floors;



- strong bridges and aqueducts (for carrying water long distances);



- round-topped arches – which made their buildings solid and long-lasting;
- new building materials, such as cement and concrete;
- new weapons such as catapults;
- great writers like Cicero and Virgil.
- the Roman system of law, which many European countries still use today.



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The Middle Ages - roughly 500 to 1500 A.D. (Part 1)

When the Roman empire collapsed, different parts of Europe were taken over by different peoples. For example...

The Celts. Before Roman times, Celtic peoples lived in many parts of Europe. Their descendants today live mainly in Brittany (France), Cornwall (England), Galicia (Spain), Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In these parts of Europe, Celtic languages and culture are very much alive.



Celtic art from about the 700s AD



The Germanic peoples. Not all of them settled in Germany:



- › **The Angles and Saxons** moved to England and ruled it until 1066.
- › **The Franks** conquered a large part of Europe, including France, between about 500 and 800 A.D. Their most famous king was Charlemagne.
- › **The Goths** (*Visigoths* and *Ostrogoths*) set up kingdoms in Spain and Italy.
- › **The Vikings** lived in Scandinavia. In the 800s and 900s AD they sailed to other countries, stealing treasure, trading and settling where there was good farmland.

The Normans, or 'Northmen', were Vikings who settled in France (in the area we call Normandy) and then conquered England in 1066. A famous Norman tapestry shows scenes from this conquest. It is kept in a museum in the town of Bayeux.





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The Middle Ages - roughly 500 to 1500 A.D. (Part 2)

The Slavs settled in many parts of eastern Europe and became the ancestors of today's Slavic-speaking peoples including Belorussians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Czechs, Poles, Russians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes and Ukrainians.

After **the Magyars** settled in the Carpathian Basin in the 9th and 10th centuries, they founded the Kingdom of Hungary in the year 1000. Their descendants today live in Hungary and other neighbouring countries.



During the Middle Ages, kings and nobles in Europe often quarrelled and there were many wars. (This was the time when knights in armour fought on horseback). To defend themselves from attack, kings and nobles often lived in strong castles, with thick stone walls. Some castles were so strong they have lasted until today.

Medieval castles were built to keep out enemies



Christianity became the main religion in Europe during the Middle Ages, and churches were built almost everywhere. Some of them are very impressive – especially the great cathedrals, with their tall towers and colourful stained-glass windows.



Monks were involved in farming and helped develop agriculture all over Europe. They also set up schools and wrote books. Their monasteries often had libraries where important books from ancient times were preserved.



In southern Spain, where Islam was the main religion, the rulers built beautiful mosques and minarets. The most famous ones left today are the mosque in Córdoba and the Giralda minaret in Seville.



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The Renaissance (roughly 1300 to 1600)

During the Middle Ages, most people could not read or write and they knew only what they learnt in church. Only monasteries and universities had copies of the books the ancient Greeks and Romans had written. But in the 1300s and 1400s, students began re-discovering the ancient books. They were amazed at the great ideas and knowledge they found there, and the news began to spread.

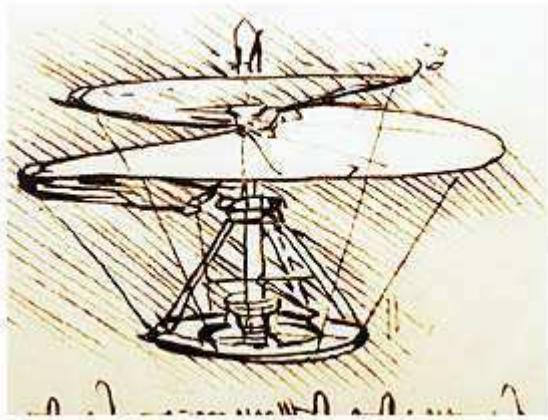
Wealthy and educated people, for example in Florence (Italy), became very interested. They could afford to buy books – especially once printing was invented in Europe (1445) – and they fell in love with ancient Greece and Rome. They had their homes modelled on Roman palaces, and they paid talented artists and sculptors to decorate them with scenes from Greek and Roman stories, and with statues of gods, heroes and emperors.



One of the world's most famous statues: David by Michelangelo



- great painters and sculptors such as Michelangelo and Botticelli;
- talented architects like Brunelleschi;
- the amazing inventor and artist Leonardo da Vinci;
- great thinkers such as Thomas More, Erasmus and Montaigne;
- scientists such as Copernicus and Galileo (who discovered that the Earth and other planets move around the sun);
- beautiful buildings such as the castles in the Loire valley;
- a new interest in what human beings can achieve.



'Leonardo da Vinci designed this "helicopter" 500 years ago!'



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Great discoveries and new ideas - roughly 1500 to 1900 A.D. (Part 1)

At the time of the Renaissance, trade with distant lands was becoming very important for European merchants. For example, they were selling goods in India and bringing back valuable spices and precious stones. But travelling overland was difficult and took a long time, so the merchants wanted to reach India by sea. The problem was, Africa was in the way - and it is very big!

However, if the world really was round (as people were beginning to believe), European ships ought to be able to reach India by sailing west. So, in 1492, Christopher Columbus and his sailors set out from Spain and crossed the Atlantic. But instead of reaching India they discovered the Bahamas (islands in the Caribbean Sea, near the coast of America).



Replicas of Christopher Columbus's ships



Other explorers soon followed. In 1497-98, Vasco da Gama – a Portuguese naval officer – was the first European to reach India by sailing around Africa. In 1519, another Portuguese explorer — Ferdinand Magellan, working for the King of Spain — led the first European expedition to sail right round the world!

Before long, Europeans were exploring the Caribbean islands and America (which they called the 'new world') and founding colonies there.



In other words, they took over the land, claiming it now belonged to their home country in Europe. They took their beliefs, customs and languages with them – and that is how English and French came to be the main languages spoken in North America, and Spanish and Portuguese in Central and South America.



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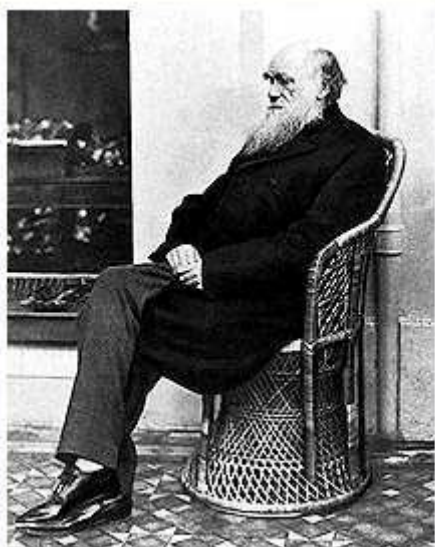
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Great discoveries and new ideas - roughly 1500 to 1900 A.D. (Part 2)

As time passed, Europeans sailed further and further – to China, Japan, South-east Asia, Australia and Oceania. Sailors returning from these distant lands reported seeing strange creatures very different from those in Europe. This made scientists keen to explore these places and to bring back animals and plants for Europe's museums. In the 1800s, European explorers went deep into Africa and by 1910 European nations had colonized most of the African continent.



Meanwhile, back in Europe, scientists were finding out more and more about about how the universe works. Geologists, studying rocks and fossils, began wondering how the Earth had been formed and how old it really was. Two great scientists, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin (in England), eventually concluded that animals and plants had 'evolved' – changing from one species into another over millions and millions of years.

Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution in 1859



In the 1700s, people were asking other important questions too – such as how countries should be governed, and what rights and freedoms people should have. The French writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that everyone should be equal. Another French writer, Voltaire, said the world would be better if reason and knowledge replaced ignorance and superstition.



This age of new ideas, called the 'Enlightenment', led to great changes in some countries — for example the French revolution of 1789, when the people decided they would no longer be ruled by kings and queens. One of their revolutionary slogans was "freedom, equality and brotherhood" – which eventually became the French national motto.



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The industrial revolution - roughly 1750 to 1880

A different kind of ‘revolution’ started in Europe about 250 years ago – in the world of industry. It all began with an energy crisis. For thousands of years, people had been burning wood and charcoal. But now, parts of Europe were running out of forests! What else could we use as fuel?

The answer was coal. There was plenty of it in Europe, and miners began digging for it. Coal powered the newly-invented steam engines. It could also be roasted and turned into “coke”, which is a much cleaner fuel – ideal for making iron and steel.

About 150 years ago, an English man called Henry Bessemer invented a “blast furnace” that could produce large amounts of steel quite cheaply. Soon Europe was producing huge quantities of it, and it changed the world! Cheap steel made it possible to build skyscrapers, huge bridges, ocean liners, cars, fridges... Powerful guns and bombs too.

The modern world - roughly 1880 until today

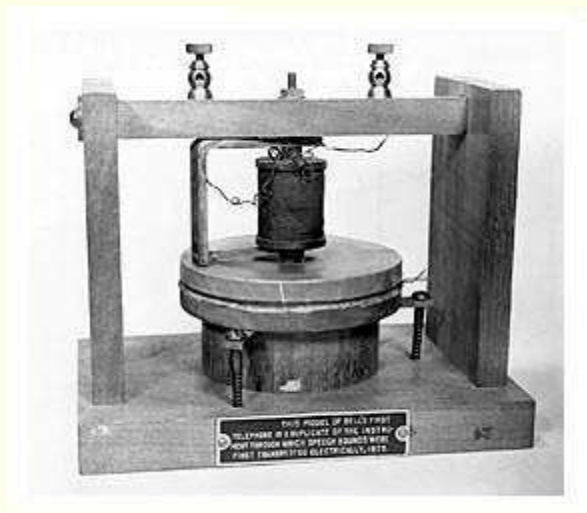
Other European inventions from the 19th and 20th centuries onwards helped create the world we know today.



For example:

The petrol engine	1886
First radio messages	1901
Bakelite, the first plastic	1909
Neon lighting	1912
Television and motorways	1920s
Radar and the biro pen	1935
Instant coffee	1937
First jet aircraft	1939
First computer	1940s

Today, roughly a quarter of the people working in Europe are producing things needed for the modern world: food and drinks; mobile phones and computers; clothes and furniture; washing machines and televisions; cars, buses and lorries and lots more besides.



About 7 out of every ten European workers have “service” jobs. In other words, they work in shops and post offices, banks and insurance companies, hotels and restaurants, hospitals and schools, etc. – either selling things or providing services that people need.



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Learning the lessons of history



A war cemetery in Flanders (Belgium). More than eight million soldiers died in the First World War alone

Sadly, the story of Europe is not all about great achievements we can be proud of. There are also many things to be ashamed of. Down the centuries, European nations fought terrible wars against each other. These wars were usually about power and property, or religion.

European colonists killed millions of native people on other continents – by fighting or mistreating them, or by accidentally spreading European diseases among them. Europeans also took millions of Africans to work as slaves.

Lessons had to be learnt from these dreadful wrongdoings. The European slave trade was abolished in the 1800s. Colonies gained their freedom in the 1900s. And peace did come to Europe at last. To find out how, read the chapter "[Bringing the family together: the story of the European Union](#)".

Test yourself
now!

