CONTENTS

Introduction xiii
Note on the Translation lxxv

IDEAS FOR THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY OF MANKIND

PART ONE

Preface 3

Book 1 8
   I. Our Earth Is a Star among Other Stars 8
   II. Our Earth Is One of the Middle Planets 10
III. Our Earth Underwent Many Revolutions before It Became What It Is Now 14
IV. Our Earth Is a Sphere That Rotates on Its Axis and Moves around the Sun in an Oblique Direction 16
V. Our Earth Is Enveloped in an Atmosphere and in Contention with Several Celestial Bodies 19
VI. The Planet That We Inhabit Is a Mountain of Rock That Rises Up over the Surface of the Waters 21
VII. The Mountain Chains Made Our Two Hemispheres the Scene of the Most Remarkable Variety and Change 28

Book 2 31
   I. Our Terrestrial Globe Is an Immense Workshop for the Organization of Exceedingly Diverse Beings 31
   II. The Vegetable Kingdom of Our Earth in Relation to Human History 33
### CONTENTS

III. The Animal Kingdom in Relation to Human History 39

IV. Man Is an Intermediate Creature among the Animals of the Earth 43

---

**Book 3** 46

I. Comparison of the Structure of Plants and Animals in Relation to the Organization of Man 46

II. Comparison of the Several Organic Forces Operative in the Animal 52

III. Examples of the Physiological Structure of Several Animals 58

IV. On the Instincts of Animals 62

V. The Advancement of Creatures to the Association of Several Ideas and to a Peculiar and Freer Employment of Their Senses and Limbs 65

VI. Organic Difference between Human Beings and Animals 69

---

**Book 4** 73

I. Man Is Organized for the Faculty of Reason 73

II. Retrospect from the Organization of the Human Head to the Inferior Creatures Approximating Its Form 84

III. Man Is Organized for Finer Senses, for Art, and for Language 87

IV. Man Is Organized for Finer Instincts and Hence for Freedom 91

V. Man Is Organized for the Most Delicate Health, yet at the Same Time for the Greatest Durability, and Consequently for His Dispersal across the Earth 96

VI. Man Is Formed for Humanity and Religion 99

VII. Man Is Formed for the Hope of Immortality 106

---

**Book 5** 107

I. A Series of Ascending Forms and Forces Prevails in Our Earthly Creation 107

II. No Force of Nature Is without an Organ; the Organ, However, Is Never the Force Itself, Which Operates by Means Thereof 110

III. The Nexus of Forces and Forms Is neither Retrograde nor Stationary, but Progressive 113

IV. The Realm of Human Organization Is a System of Spiritual Forces 116
Our Humanity Is Only Preparatory, the Bud of a Future Flower 121
VI. The Present State of Man Is Probably the Connecting Link between Two Worlds 125

PART TWO

Book 6 133
I. Organization of the Peoples Living Near the North Pole 133
II. Organization of the Peoples on the Asiatic Ridge of the Earth 138
III. Organization of the Finely Formed Peoples of This Region 143
IV. Organization of the African Peoples 147
V. Organization of Mankind in the Islands of the Tropics 153
VI. Organization of the Americans 155
VII. Conclusion 163

Book 7 165
I. Though Mankind May Appear in Such Various Forms throughout the World, They Belong to One and the Same Species 165
II. The One Species of Man Has Acclimatized Itself Everywhere on Earth 169
III. What Is Climate, and How Does It Affect the Formation of Man's Body and Soul? 174
IV. The Genetic Force Is the Parent of All Forms on Earth, Which the Climate Affects Either Adversely or Beneficially 179
V. Concluding Remarks on the Conflict between Genesis and Climate 185

Book 8 190
I. The Sensibility of Our Species Varies with Its Forms and Climate; But It Is a Human Employment of the Senses That Everywhere Leads to Humanity 190
II. The Imagination of Men Is Everywhere Organic and Climatic, but Everywhere Guided by Tradition 196
III. The Practical Understanding of Mankind Has Everywhere Developed in Response to the Demands of a Particular Mode of Life; but Everywhere It Is the Flower of National Genius, the Offspring of Habit and Tradition 203
### CONTENTS

IV. The Sensations and Instincts of Men Are Everywhere Adapted to the Conditions in Which They Live and to Their Organization; But Everywhere They Are Governed by Opinions and Habit  
209

V. The Happiness of Man Is Everywhere an Individual Good; Consequently It Is Everywhere Climatic and Organic, the Offspring of Practice, Tradition, and Habit  
219

Book 9  
225

I. For All That Man Fondly Imagines That He Produces Everything from Himself, yet He Depends on Others for the Development of His Faculties  
225

II. The Particular Means of Forming Man Is Language  
231

III. All the Arts and Sciences of the Human Species Have Been Invented by Means of Imitation, Reason, and Language  
238

IV. Governments Are Orders of Men, for the Most Part Established on the Basis of Inherited Tradition  
242

V. Religion Is the Oldest and Most Sacred Tradition in the World  
249

Book 10  
255

I. Our Earth Is Specially Formed for Its Living Creation  
255

II. Where Was Man Formed and Where His Most Ancient Abode?  
257

III. The Course of Culture and of History Furnishes Proof That the Origin of the Human Species Was in Asia  
262

IV. Asiatic Traditions on the Creation of the Earth and Origin of Mankind  
267

V. The Oldest Written Tradition on the Beginnings of Human History  
271

VI. Continuation of the Oldest Written Tradition on the Beginnings of Human History  
276

VII. Conclusion of the Oldest Written Tradition on the Origin of Human History  
282

PART THREE

Book 11  
287

I. China  
288

II. Cochin-China, Tonkin, Laos, Korea, Eastern Tartary, Japan  
296

III. Tibet  
298
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>Hindustan</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>General Reflections on the History of These States</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Babylon, Assyria, Chaldea</td>
<td>312</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Medes and Persians</td>
<td>314</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Hebrews</td>
<td>319</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Phoenicia and Carthage</td>
<td>324</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Egyptians</td>
<td>330</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Further Ideas on the Philosophy of Human History</td>
<td>336</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book 13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. The Situation and Population of Greece</td>
<td>346</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Language, Mythology, and Poetry of Greece</td>
<td>347</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. The Arts of the Greeks</td>
<td>352</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Greeks</td>
<td>356</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Scientific Endeavors of the Greeks</td>
<td>362</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. History of the Revolutions in Greece</td>
<td>369</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. General Observations on the History of Greece</td>
<td>375</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Etruscans and Latins</td>
<td>387</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. The Establishments by Which Rome Arrived at Political and Military Ascendancy</td>
<td>388</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Conquests of the Romans</td>
<td>394</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. The Decline of Rome</td>
<td>399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Character, Sciences, and Arts of the Romans</td>
<td>405</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. General Observations on the Fate and History of Rome</td>
<td>411</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book 15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Humanity Is the End of Human Nature, and with This End God Put the Fate of Mankind in Their Own Hands</td>
<td>423</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. All Destructive Forces in Nature Must Not Only Yield, in the Course of Time, to the Preservative Forces, but Must Themselves Ultimately Promote the Consummation of the Whole</td>
<td>425</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Mankind Is Destined to Pass through Various Degrees of Culture; but Their Enduring Welfare Is Founded Solely and Essentially on Reason and Equity</td>
<td>429</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By the Laws of Their Inner Nature, Reason and Equity Must, in the Course of Time, Gain a Greater Foothold among Mankind and Promote a More Enduring Humanity 442

A Wise Goodness Presides over the Fate of Mankind; Hence There Is No Nobler Dignity, No Purer or More Lasting Happiness Than to Work in Concert with It 448

PART FOUR

Book 16 457
   I. Basques, Gaels, Cymry 458
   II. Finns, Latvians, and Prussians 464
   III. The German Peoples 466
   IV. Slav Peoples 470
   V. Foreign Peoples in Europe 472
   VI. General Remarks and Conclusions 475

Book 17 479
   I. The Origin of Christianity, together with Its Fundamental Principles 480
   II. Propagation of Christianity in the East 488
   III. Progress of Christianity in the Greek Lands 496
   IV. Progress of Christianity in the Latin Provinces 504

Book 18 511
   I. The Kingdoms of the Visigoths, Suebi, Alans, and Vandals 511
   II. Kingdoms of the Ostrogoths and Lombards 517
   III. Kingdoms of the Alemanni, Burgundians, and Franks 523
   IV. Kingdoms of the Saxons, Northmen, and Danes 530
   V. The Northern Kingdoms and Germany 536
   VI. General Remarks on the Establishment of the German Kingdoms in Europe 541

Book 19 547
   I. Roman Hierarchy 548
   II. Effect of the Hierarchy on Europe 554
   III. Secular Protectors of the Church 559
CONTENTS

IV. Kingdoms of the Arabs 564
V. Effects of the Arab Kingdoms 571
VI. General Reflections 578

Book 20 580
I. The Commercial Spirit in Europe 580
II. The Spirit of Chivalry in Europe 586
III. The Crusades and Their Consequences 592
IV. The Culture of Reason in Europe 599
V. Institutions and Discoveries in Europe 606
VI. Concluding Remarks 610

Appendix: Plan for the Concluding Volume of the Ideas (1788/89) 613

Notes 615
Index 693
Preface

Ten years ago, when I published the little tract *This, Too, a Philosophy of History to Form Mankind*, the titular *Too* was intended to be anything but an expression of *anch’io son pittore* (I, too, am a painter).* Rather, it was supposed, as indicated by the subtitle “Contribution to Many Contributions of this Century” and the subfixed motto,* to sound a note of humility; that the author, far from claiming that the work was a complete philosophy of the history of our species, was instead merely pointing, amid the many beaten tracks trodden so often before, to a small footpath, which, though neglected, was perhaps worth mentally exploring. The writings quoted here and there in the book were sufficient to show the well-worn routes that the author wished to avoid; and so his essay was meant to be nothing more than a pamphlet, a *contribution to the contributions*, as indeed its outward appearance proved.

The work was soon out of print, and I was encouraged to bring out a new edition; but this new edition could not possibly venture before the eyes of the public in its old guise. I had observed that a few ideas in my opuscule had been taken up in other works, without mention of my name, and given a scope that I had not intended.* The humble “Too” was omitted; and yet with the handful of figurative terms—the infancy, boyhood, virility, and old age of our species—that were applied and applicable to but a few nations on the earth, it had never occurred to me to trace a highway by which the *history of culture*, to say nothing of the *philosophy of the whole of human history*, might be surveyed with confident step. What nation on earth does not have its own culture? And how far short would the plan of Providence fall, were every individual of the human species fashioned for what we call culture and ought often to call refined frailty? Nothing is more indeterminate than this word, and nothing more deceptive than applying it to entire nations and epochs. How few are cultivated in a cultivated people? And in what does this merit consist? To what extent does it promote their happiness? The happiness, that is, of individual men: for the conceit that whole states as abstractions can be happy when all their individual members are suffering is a contradiction; or rather, a word void of sense that even at first glance reveals itself to be such.
For the book to have been in some degree deserving of its title, it ought to have begun much deeper and drawn a much wider circle of ideas. What is human happiness? To what extent does it obtain here on earth? To what extent does it obtain anywhere, given the great diversity of all terrestrial beings and especially of men, in every system of government, in every climate, in every revolutionary change of circumstances, times, and the span of an individual life? Is there a yardstick by which these different conditions might be measured, and has Providence reckoned on the well-being of its creatures in all these situations as on its ultimate and principal object? It was necessary to examine all these questions, to pursue and consider them through the helter-skelter of ages and constitutions, before bringing out a general conclusion valid for the whole of mankind. Here, then, was a wide field to traverse and profound depths to plumb. I had read pretty much everything that there was to read on the subject: and since my youth, every new book published on the history of mankind, in which I hoped to find contributions to my grand task, seemed to me like a treasure unearthed. I was gratified that in recent years this philosophy rose to greater prominence, and I took advantage of every resource that fortune sent my way.

An author who presents his book to the public, be it good or be it bad, lays bare a part of his soul; provided that it contains thoughts that, if he did not invent them (for these days how little that is truly new remains to invent?), he at least found and made his own; indeed, which for years he inhabited as though they were the property of his heart and mind. He not only reveals what matters were occupying his mind on certain occasions, what doubts troubled him in the course of his life and by what means he resolved them; he also reckons on some, perhaps but a few, congenial souls for whom these or similar ideas were important in the labyrinth of their years (for otherwise what would be the attraction of becoming a writer and sharing with an unruly multitude the secrets of his heart?). With these he converses invisibly and communicates to them his sentiments, as he, when they have advanced beyond him, expects in return their better thoughts and instructions. This invisible commerce of hearts and minds is the sole and greatest benefit of the printing press, which otherwise would have brought as much harm as good to literary nations. The author fancied himself in the circle of those who actually took an interest in what he was writing and from whom he wished to entice their sympathetic and nobler thoughts. This is the finest reward that writing can bestow, and a well-intentioned man will delight more in what he awakens in the reader than in what he himself said. Whoever remembers how opportunely this or that book, or even this or that idea in a book, has sometimes come his way; what pleasure it gave him to find another spirit, though distant yet very near in his activity, on his own or a better track; how often one such idea haunts us for years and leads us onward: he will consider an author, who speaks to him and
shares his innermost being, not as a hireling but as a friend, who steps forth to
confide even his unfinished thoughts, so that the experienced reader may think
in concert with him and bring what is imperfect closer to perfection.

With a theme like mine—namely, the history of mankind, the philosophy of
their history—such humanity on the part of the reader is, I believe, an agreeable
and primary duty. He who wrote this was a human being, and you who read
are also a human being. He might err and indeed perhaps has done so; you have
knowledge that he does not and could not have. Use, then, what you can and
recognize his good intentions; do not stop at censure, but amend and continue
his work. With feeble hand he laid the foundation stones for a structure that only
the centuries can and will complete; happy, when one day these stones are cov-
ered with earth and forgotten like him who carried them there, when on them,
or even in some other spot entirely, a still more beautiful edifice shall be built.

But I have inadvertently wandered too far from my original intention: it was
supposed to be the story of how I came to treat this subject and then later re-
turned to it with quite different duties and preoccupations. Even in my early
years, when the fields of science still glistened in their morning glory, the en-
joyment of which the noonday of life denies us, the thought often occurred to
me: whether, since everything in the world has its philosophy and science, should
not what concerns us most closely, the history of mankind in general, have its own
philosophy and science? Everything served to remind me of this question: meta-
physics and morals, physics and natural history, and especially religion. God,
who has ordered the whole of Nature by measure, number, and weight;* who
in accordance therewith has established the essence of things, their form and
connections, their course and conservation [Erhaltung], so that from the uni-
verse to the grain of dust, from the force that moves suns and planets to the
gossamer of a spider’s web, there is but one wisdom, one goodness, one power
that prevails; he who in man’s body and in the faculties of man’s soul contrived
everything so wondrously and divinely that, when we dare to reflect from afar
on the Only Wise,* we lose ourselves in an abyss of his thoughts—would this
God, I asked myself, wholly abstain from his wisdom and goodness in the
destination and appointment of our species and have here no plan? Or would
he wish to conceal that plan from us, when in the lower creation, with which
we are less immediately concerned, he has revealed so many of the laws that
govern his eternal design? What is the human species as a whole but a flock
without a shepherd? Or in the words of that plaintive sage: “And makest men
as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?”*
Or had they no need to know the plan? I well believe it: for what man is able
to survey even the least design of his own life? And yet he sees as far as he is
meant to see and knows enough to guide his own steps. Nevertheless, is not
this very ignorance made the pretext for great abuses? How many there are who,
because they discern no plan, flatly reject the possibility that a plan might actually exist or at least contemplate it with a timorous shudder and a mixture of doubt and belief. They strenuously refuse to regard the human species as an ant heap, where the foot of someone stronger, who is himself a giant insect, tramples thousands, annihilates tens of thousands in their grand and petty undertakings, where the two greatest tyrants of the earth, Chance and Time, sweep away the entire heap without a trace and leave the now vacant spot for some other industrious collective, which one day will also be swept away without a trace. Proud man refuses to regard his species as such an earthly brood, as the prey of all-conquering decay. And yet do not history and experience assail him with this image? What whole is ever brought to completion on earth? And what is whole upon this earth? Is time, then, not ordered as space is ordered? Both, after all, are the twin offspring of one Fate. The former is full of wisdom, the latter full of seeming disorder: and yet man has evidently been so fashioned that he seeks order, that he beholds a speck of time [Fleck der Zeiten], that posterity builds on the past: to this end he has memory and recollection. And does not this process, in which one age builds atop another, make the whole of our species a gigantic edifice, where one takes away what the other has laid down, where what ought never to have been erected still stands and in centuries everything falls into ruin, beneath which fainthearted men live all the more confidently the greater its fragility? I do not wish to continue such a sequence of doubts and pursue man's conflict with himself, with other men, and with the rest of creation. Suffice it, I searched for a philosophy of the history of mankind wherever I could.

And did I find it? May the work before you, but not yet its first volume, be the judge. This contains only the foundation, consisting partly in a general survey of our place of habitation, partly in an examination of the various organizations that, below us and around us, enjoy the light of our sun. I hope that no one will think this path too circuitous or too tedious: for as there is no other way that permits the destiny of mankind to be read from the Book of Creation, so it cannot be traveled with too much care or deliberation. He who would prefer metaphysical speculations, and these alone, can arrive at them by a shorter cut; but I believe that such speculations, divorced from observations and analogies of Nature, are an aerial excursion that seldom leads to any goal. The progress of God in Nature, the ideas that the Eternal One has actively displayed to us in the sequence of his works: they are the sacred tome, the letters of which I have spelled and will continue to spell—less than an apprentice, to be sure, but at least faithfully and eagerly. Were I so fortunate as to impart to one of my readers something of that sweet impression that I, with a conviction I cannot describe, have received of the inscrutable Creator's eternal wisdom and goodness: this conviction would be the trusty thread equipped with which, in the course of this work, we might venture into the labyrinth of human history. Everywhere the great
analogy of Nature has led me to truths of religion that I was obliged to suppress, though only with effort, because I would not race ahead of myself but instead proceeded step by step, remaining faithful only to the light that gleams forth from the hidden presence of the Author in his works. It will be all the more pleasing for me and for my readers when, following our path, we see this obscure glow eventually blaze like flames and shine like the sun.

Let no one be confounded because I occasionally personify the name of Nature. Nature is no self-existent being; rather, God is all in his works: yet I would not defile this most hallowed name, which no grateful creature should mention without the profoundest respect, by a use so frequent that I could not always furnish it with the proper sanctity. He for whom the word “Nature” has been debased and emptied of meaning by the various scribblings of our age ought to think instead of that almighty power, goodness, and wisdom and in his soul name that invisible being that no earthly language can name.

The same applies to those occasions when I speak of the organic forces of creation: I do not suppose that the reader will take them for qualitates occultas, since we see their effects clearly before us. I knew no plainer or more definite term by which to refer to them. I shall reserve for the future a fuller discussion of this and several other matters that I could only hint at here.

And yet I am pleased that my schoolboy composition will appear at a time when, in so many of the individual sciences and fields of knowledge on which I was obliged to draw, the hands of masters are laboring and collecting materials. I am certain that these will not disparage but rather seek to better this exoteric attempt of a stranger to their arts: for I have always observed that, the more real and exact a science, the less likely are those who cultivate and love it to waste their energies in vain wrangling. They leave the war of words to the merely word-wise. In most points, my book shows that a philosophy of human history cannot yet be written in the present age, but that perhaps it will be written at the end of our century or millennium.

And so, Great Being, you invisible, exalted genius of our species, I place at your feet the most imperfect work that ever a mortal wrote and in which he dared to follow your footsteps and your thoughts. Its pages may be scattered by the wind and its letters turn to dust: and so too will the forms in which I glimpsed your traces and the formulas with which I sought to express them for my human brethren. But your thoughts will endure: gradually you will divulge more and more of them to your progeny and exhibit them in ever more glorious figures. Happy, when these pages are swept away by the river of oblivion and more luminous ideas live in the souls of men.

Weimar, April 23, 1784

Herder
INDEX

Abbasids, 568, 569, 570
Abipones, 199, 202
Abbt, Thomas, xxiii, xxiv, xxxii
Abgar V, 490
Abraham, 325
Abyssinians, 148
Acansa, 162
Achaean League, 380, 402
Achard, Franz Carl, 20
Achilles, 320
Adair, James, 156
Adam, 171, 282
Adelung, Johann Christoph, xxxix, lii–liii, lixiv
Ægean Sea, 349, 350, 364, 594
Aemilius Paullus, 380
Aeneas, 392
Aeschylus, 374, 384
Æthelberht, 531
Aetolian League, 380, 402
agriculture, 24, 208–9, 264–65, 279, 288–89, 316, 339, 585
Alans, 459, 469, 516
Alaric, 503, 511–12, 513
Alaric II, 512
Alba Longa, 392
Albigenses (Cathars), 490, 600–1
Alboin, 520–21
Alcibiades, 386
Alcuin, 530
Alemanni, 523–24
Alexander the Great, lxiv, 244, 303, 317, 321, 324, 333, 343, 346, 361, 378–79, 381, 383, 386, 420, 441, 495
Alexandria, 333, 373, 408, 496–97, 503
Alfred the Great, 532–33
Alfur, 154
Ali, 571
Al-Ma’mun, 491, 569
Alphabet. See writing
Alps, 29, 36, 257, 332, 401, 457, 462, 518, 520
Amalfi, 584, 609
Amazon River, 29
Ammianus Marcellinus, 473
Ancus Marcius, 393, 417
Andes, 204
Angilbert, 530
Anglo-Saxons, 530–33
animal kingdom, 39–42; comparative anatomy of, 43–45; circulatory system in, 49–50; digestive and reproductive organs in, 46–49; organic forces in, 52–58; relation of body to head in, 84–86; viviparity in, 50–52
anthropology, xv, xvii, xxii, xxv, xxviii, xxxviii, lxxvi, 103, 142, 150, 163, 164
Anziki, 150
apes, 73–76, 81, 85–86, 167, 168
Arabs, 145, 150, 169–70, 194, 315, 474, 551, 565–69, 582, 603, 609; influence of on the spirit of chivalry, 587–88; language and culture of, 574–77; reasons for the success of their conquests, 570–71
Arakan/Arakanese, 141, 296
Aratus of Sicyon, 380
Arbaces, 319
Archimedes, 400
architecture, 315–16, 338, 360–61, 417–18; Gothic, 563, 564, 608
Arctic, 17, 28, 133–38, 200, 260, 464; peoples of, 133–38
Arianism, 513, 519, 549
Ariovist, 467
Aristophanes, 384, 385
Aristophanes, 384, 385
Aristotle, 315, 318, 335, 370, 372, 373, 374, 384, 417, 575–76, 577, 602, 603
Armenia, Armenians, 475, 492
Arnulf of Carinthia, 465, 539
Arthur, Arthurian legend, 463, 590
arts and sciences, 239–41, 317, 372, 433–34, 445–46, 598–99; first practiced in Asia, 265–66, 307, 313–14; in Germany, 540; in medieval Europe, 607–8; their origin in religion, 251. See also fine art
Asia Minor, 349, 350, 460
Assam, 141
Assassins, Order of, 571
Assyria, Assyrians, lix, 312, 314, 315, 319, 432
astronomy, 265, 317, 339, 577
Ataulf, 512, 514
Athens, 360, 361, 366, 367, 368, 376, 377, 380, 385, 422, 438, 329
atmosphere, 175–76, 255, 273
Attila, 473, 516, 517–18, 549
Augustine, Saint, 489, 509–10, 602
Augustus (Gaius Octavius), 388, 407, 410, 412, 416, 420, 459
Ausones, 388
Averroes, 226
Babel/Babylon, lix, 312, 313, 314–17, 326, 432
Bacon, Francis, xxvi, 178, 237, 239
Bacon, Roger, 609
Baghdad, 491, 569, 570
Bailly, Jean Sylvain, 265, 307
Bajau, 154
Bancroft, Edward, 160
Basques, 458–59
Battel, Andrew, 74
Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb, xxviii
Baumgarten, Siegmund Jakob, xxiii
Bayer, Gottlieb Siegfried, 21
Belshazzar, 318
Belus, 313, 316, 318
Benedictines, 510, 557
Berbers, 148, 570
Bergman, Torbern Olof, 30
Berkeley, George, lxxii, 88
Bernard, Saint, 562, 593
Bernier, François, 143
Black, Joseph, 20
Black Sea, 137, 145, 262, 312, 388, 447, 465, 466, 469, 471, 476, 502, 541, 549, 581, 584, 594, 595, 610
Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich, xxiii, xliii, 81
Böckmann, Johann Lorenz, 21
Boerhaave, Herman, 20
Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus, 416, 452, 519
Bogomilism, 490, 600
Bolingbroke, Henry St John, Lord, 385
Bombay, 303
Boniface, Saint, 550
Boniface VIII, pope, 557
Bonnet, Charles, xl, xliii, xlv–xli, xlvi, xlvii, l, 106
Bont, Jacob de, 73
Bosnia, 470
Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne, xix
Boyle, Robert, 20
Brahma, 488, 490
Brahminism/Brahmins, 193, 266, 302–6, 308, 309
brain, 58, 84, 117, 225; comparison of human with that of animals, 76–82
Brazil, 160
Brennus, 460
Britain, 309, 310, 331, 460, 462, 531, 533, 535
Brittany, 462, 463, 590
Bruce, James, 148
Brutus, Marcus Junius, 410, 412, 451
Bruyn, Cornelis de, 163
Bry, Theodore de, 163
Buddha, Buddhism, lix, 289, 298–301, 305, 309, 490
Buffon, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de, xxxvii, xxxviii, xlv, xlvi, xlvii, li, 14, 41, 43, 65, 74, 277
Bulgaria/Bulgars, 465, 470, 473, 478, 600
Bulharans, 145
Bunsen, Christian von, xv
Burgundians/Burgundy, 469, 524–25
Burke, Edmund, lxvi
Burmans, 141
Burnet, Thomas, xxxiii
Büttner, Christian Wilhelm, 262
Byzantine Empire/Byzantium, 473, 474, 499–503, 511, 583, 594, 595
Caesar, Gaius Julius, 387, 399, 403, 404–05, 406, 407, 410, 411, 412, 414, 416, 417, 420, 440, 460
Californians, 170–71
caliphs/caliphates, 567–69
Cambyses II, 320–21, 333, 341
Camper, Petrus, 53, 58, 85–6, 151, 358
Cannae, 401
cannibalism/cannibals, 24, 88, 94, 102, 119, 150, 211, 253, 446
Carion, Johann, xix
Carthage, Carthaginians, 333, 334–35, 394, 401–2, 432, 458
Carver, Jonathan, 156
Caspian Sea, 25, 137, 144, 145, 297, 312, 323, 447, 502
Cassiodorus, 519
Catherine the Great, xviii
Catiline (Lucius Sergius Catilina), 407, 420
Cato the Elder (Marcus Porcius Cato), 408
Celts. See Gaels, Gauls
Cervantes de Saavedra, Miguel de, 588
Césares, 162
Ceylon, 26, 28, 299, 490
Chaldea/Chaldeans, 278, 283, 312, 315, 318
Chambers, Ephraim, xx
Charlemagne, 459, 471, 521, 522, 525, 527–30, 531, 534, 538, 539, 549
Charles Martel, 525
Charondas, 381
China/Chinese, lvii, lx, 23, 140, 267–68, 288–96, 299, 308, 309, 310, 312, 435, 438, 439; economy of, 288–89; education of, 292; filial piety of, 289, 292; influence on neighboring countries, 296–98; language and literature of, 291, 294; moral science of, 295; national character of, 290–91; resemblance to Egypt, 295, 336, 338; science of, 293
chivalry, 541, 542, 609; and the Crusades, 595–96; in France, 588–91; as German institution, 586–87; influence of Arabic culture on, 587–88; in Spain, 588. See also knights
Christianity, 300, 324, 327–28, 329, 421, 470, 474, 478; accomplishments of in Europe, 554–55; in Asia, 488–96; and episcopal authority, 507–8, 513, 514, 515, 566, 567; founding principles of and their perversion, 482–87; in Germany, 540; in the Greek-speaking world, 496–503; and historiography, 485; and humanity, 479, 483; in the Latin world, 503–10; and martyrdom, 505–7; and mysticism, 604; and Neoplatonism, 496–98; in Scandinavia, 537–38; and the state, 499–503
Christians of Saint John (Sabians), 488, 496
Christians of Saint Thomas, 496
Cicero, Marcus Tullius, xlvi, 407, 415, 416, 420, 452
Circassia/Circassians, 144, 145
cities, 208, 211, 241, 315, 333, 597, 606–7, 608
Clement of Alexandria, 497
Cleomenes, 377
Cleopatra, 403
clergy. See priests
climate, 17, 28, 36, 122; consequences of
moving to a new, 186–89; influence on
imagination, 196–203; influence on
mental and physical characteristics of
mankind, li, 151–53, 175–79, 181–83; influence on sense perceptions, 191–95; relation of plants or animals to, 41, 68, 85, 181
Clotilde, 524
Clovis, 525, 526–27
Cnut, 533, 534
coast. See geographical features
Cochin-China, 296
Code of Justinian, 522
Colden, Cadwallader, 156
Colyeridge, Samuel Taylor, xv
Commerson, Philippe, 161
Condillac, Étienne Bonnot de, xxi–xxii
Confucius, 289, 295, 299
Conrad, 539
Conrad III, 593
Constant, Benjamin, xiv
Constantine I, 484, 487, 500
Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, 501
Constantine the African, 603
Constantinople, 466, 477, 485, 500, 501, 502, 503, 517, 519, 568, 583, 584, 592, 593, 594
Cook, James, 142, 156, 212
Copernicus, Nicolaus, 8
Cordilleras, 22, 24, 29, 161, 178
Coree, 173
Cornutus, Lucius Annaeus, 416
Cranz, David, 171, 196
Crassus, Marcus Licinius, 403
Crawford, Adair, 20
creation, 113–5, 429
creation myths: Chaldean, 278; Chinese, 267–68, 278; Egyptian, 277; Hindu, 268–69; Mosaic, 271–84; Phoenician, 270; Tibetan, 268, 278, 298; Zoroastrian, 277–78
Croatia, 470
Crusades, 474, 556, 558, 583, 584, 591, 592–95; consequences of, 595–99
Cudworth, Ralph, xliii
Cullen, William, xliii
Curonians, 465–66
Dalai Lama, 298, 490, 491
Dalmatia, 470
Damascus, 568, 570
Dampier, William, 154, 155
dance, 195, 352, 355, 356
Danes, 471, 532–33, 534, 535, 537
danz, Johann, xxvii
Darius Hystaspes, 322
Darius the Great, 321, 323, 381, 382, 435
Daubenton, Louis-Jean-Marie, 44
David, 326, 330
degeneration, li, 142, 147, 177, 178, 181–3, 185, 186, 232, 279
de Guignes, Joseph, 307
Deioces, 319
Delisle de Sales, Jean-Baptiste-Claude Izouard, 307
Deluc, Jean-André, 21
Deluc, Jean-André, 21
Demosthenes, 385, 415
Descartes, René, xxxiii, xliii, 14
despotism, 244, 246–48, 250, 266, 295, 319, 320–22, 343, 428, 436, 446, 500, 556; of the soul, 579, 570
Diderot, Denis, xlviii
Dioecles, 381
Diodorus Siculus, 71, 190, 252, 336, 347
Dionysius I of Syracuse, 371
Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 374
Dioscorides, 577
D’Israeli, Isaac, xxi
Dnieper River, 471, 473, 550, 581, 610
Dobrizhoffer, Martin, 188, 194, 199
domesticated animals, 41, 86, 92, 206–8, 238, 260, 264
Don River, 469, 470, 472, 581, 610
Draco, 365
Dürer, Albrecht, 183

earth: atmosphere of, 19–20; change and diversity as characteristic of, 16–19; formation of, 14–16, 31–33, 113–14, 255–57, 430 (see also creation; creation myths); history of life on, 114–15, 258–59, 443; mountain systems of and their effect on life, 21–30; northern and southern hemispheres of, 28–30; place in solar system, 8–13, 20–21
Eastern Roman Empire. See Byzantine Empire
Ecbatana, 312
Edda, 469, 537
Edessa, 491
Edgar, 533, 535
Edmund, 533, 535
Edward the Confessor, 534
Eichhorn, Johann Gottfried, xxiii

Einhard, 530
elasticity, 44, 52, 56, 135. See also organic forces
electricity, 14, 19, 20, 21, 27, 42, 49–50, 112, 176, 177, 259, 272
elephant, 58–59
Encyclopédie, xx, xxvi
Ennius, Quintus, 416
Epictetus, 416, 452
epigenesis, xli–xliv, 111
equity, xlvi, lxx, 102–03, 386, 416, 436, 439, 444, 442, 446, 449, 451, 604
Ernesti, Johann August, xxxii
Eskimo, 136
Ethiopia, 320, 336, 408
Etruria/Etruscan, 387, 388–91, 400, 401, 415
Euclid, 372, 577
Eudocia, 516
Euler, Leonhard, xxxiii
Euphrates, 279, 280, 312, 314, 316, 317, 325, 326
Euric, 512
Euripides, 384
Evander, 392
Exarchate of Ravenna, 520, 521, 549
extraterrestrial life, 12–13
Falkner, Thomas, 161
family, 242, 247, 249
language of, 352, 373, 495; moral formation of, 362–64; oratory of, 368; philosophy and science of, 369–75; poetry of, 353–56, 357, 384, 415; political history of, 375–81; seat of culture of, 350–51; settlement of, 349–50; wars with Persia, 321, 377

Greek Empire. See Byzantine Empire


Grolierus, Hugo, xlvii

Guarani, 194

Guicciardini, Francesco, xix

guilds, 540, 545, 564, 607–8

Gundobad, 524

Gypsies, 330, 475

Hales, Stephen, 20

Haller, Albrecht von, xxxvi, xlv, 52, 77n, 79, 165

Hamann, Johann Georg, xxxii, xxxiii, xxxvi, xxxvii–xxxviii

Hamilcar, 335

Hannibal, 335, 399, 401, 420, 459

Hanseatic League, lxix, 564, 581

happiness, 219–24, 241, 246, 247, 253

Harold Harefoot, 534

Harthacnut, 534

Hartknoch, Johann Friedrich, xxxvi, lxvi

Hesiod, 350, 359

Heyne, Christian Gottlob, xxiii, xxxii, xxxvi, xxxv, xxxviii, xxxix, 3

Hindus, 143, 268, 303, 305

Hindustan. See India

Hippocrates, 146, 176, 358

history, xxviii–xxvii, 374, 413–14; Herder on, xxvii–xxvii; laws of (see nature, laws of); progress in, 423–25, 443–47; use of, 452

Hobbes, Thomas, lii

Holy Roman Empire, 521, 539–40, 549, 560

Holy See. See papacy

Homer, 320, 346, 353–55, 357, 358, 360, 374, 383, 385, 394, 461, 469

Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), 416, 420

Hottentots, 149, 167, 173, 205, 253


Hume, David, xxi, xxii, xxiii, xxix, xxx, xxx–xxxi, xxxiv, 503n

Hungary, 465, 560, 561

Huns, 469, 470, 473, 478, 517–18

hunters/hunting, 24, 204–5, 216, 243

Hutcheson, Francis, xlvii

Huygens, Christian, 9, 11

Hyphasis, 303

Iberians, 388, 459

Iceland, 469, 470, 533

Igorots, 154

Illyria, 388, 460

INDEX 699

Hebrew Poetry, 326n; This, Too, a Philosophy of History to Form Mankind, xxxiii–xxxvi, xxxvi, xxxix, 3

heresy, 487, 488–89, 497, 513, 549, 599–602

Hermann, 467

Herodotus, 303, 319, 346, 374

Herschel, Frederick William, 384

Heruli, 469, 518

Hesiod, 350, 359

Heyne, Christian Gottlob, xxiii, xxxii, xxxv, 350

hierarchy, 266, 327, 489, 493, 509, 513, 515, 578–79, 610. See also papacy

hieroglyphs, 263, 264, 291, 293, 294, 318, 324, 339–40

Hindus, 143, 268, 303, 305

Hindustan. See India

Hippocrates, 146, 176, 358

history, xxviii–xxvii, 374, 413–14; Herder on, xxvii–xxvii; laws of (see nature, laws of); progress in, 423–25, 443–47; use of, 452

Hobbes, Thomas, lii

Holy Roman Empire, 521, 539–40, 549, 560

Holy See. See papacy

Homer, 320, 346, 353–55, 357, 358, 360, 374, 383, 385, 394, 461, 469

Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), 416, 420

Hottentots, 149, 167, 173, 205, 253


Hume, David, xxi, xxii, xxiii, xxix, xxx, xxx–xxxi, xxxiv, 503n

Hungary, 465, 560, 561

Huns, 469, 470, 473, 478, 517–18

hunters/hunting, 24, 204–5, 216, 243

Hutcheson, Francis, xlvii

Huygens, Christian, 9, 11

Hyphasis, 303

Iberians, 388, 459

Iceland, 469, 470, 533

Igorots, 154

Illyria, 388, 460

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imagery, 79, 128, 198–203, 304, 345, 356
India, Indians, lix, 23, 143, 192, 193, 280, 299, 301–7, 311, 312, 438
Indus, 280, 303, 317
Innocent III, pope, 557
Inquisition, the, 555, 601
instinct, 65–69, 91–92; and arts of animals (Kunsttriebe), 62–65; of nutrition, 46–47; of propagation, 47–48; of self-preservation, 209–10
invention, inventions, 238–42, 609–10
Ireland, 460, 461, 487, 531, 534
Irritability, 52, 56–7, 83, 135, 137. See also organic forces
Irwing, Karl Franz von, xxv, xxvii
Iselin, Isaak, xxv–xxvi, xxviii, xxxiv, xxxix, lvii
Islam, 324, 328, 492, 566–71; consequences of, 573; schism between Sunni and Shia in, 571
islands. See geographical features
Jacobi, Friedrich, lv
Jagas, 24, 150
Japan/Japanese, 140–41, 297–98, 299, 309, 310, 330
Java, 296–97
Jerome, Saint, 510
Jerusalem, 312, 326, 403, 466, 488, 496, 593
Jesuits, 188, 289, 295, 309
Jesus Christ, 479–80, 482, 487, 490
Job ben Solomon, 173
John Chrysostom, 384, 501
John of Plano Carpini, 598
John the Grammarian, 568
Johnson, Samuel, xxvi
Joshua, 328
Judaea, 421, 479, 480–81, 488, 496
Justinian, 502, 520. See also Code of Justinian
Justin Martyr, 497
Kaffirs, 24, 149, 266, 572, 573
Kalm, Pehr, 187
Kalmyks, 138, 168, 194, 300, 518
Kamchadals, 141–42, 168, 200, 208, 249, 352
Kames, Henry Home, Lord, xxii, xxv, xxxix, xxxix
Kant, Immanuel, xv–xvi, xxv, xxxvi, xlii, xliii, xlvi, l, liv–lv, 9, 11
Kashmir, 143, 146, 178, 281
Kepler, Johannes, lv, 8, 14
Khazars, 465, 473, 517
Kiev, 471, 533
Kircher, Athanasius, 11
Knights/knightly class, 394, 463, 515, 542, 555, 560, 561, 586–87, 590, 591, 596. See also chivalry
Koran, 328, 566, 567, 570, 573–74, 575
Korea, 297, 299
Koryaks, 141–42
Kurds, 315, 569, 570
La Brosse, Guy de, 74
Lambert, Johann Heinrich, 11, 21
language, 88–90; and feeling, 236; and invention, 238–41; and national traditions, 236–37; oldest in Asia, 262–63; and reason, 232–35; and religion, 249–50; and writing, 237–38
Laos, 296
Lao Tse, 289, 299
Lapland/Laplanders, 136–37, 464
Larramendi, Manuel de, 459
Lars Porsena, 391
Latin, 387, 413, 415, 421
Latin League, 392
Latvians, 465–66, 477
Lavater, Johann Christian, xxxv
Leeuwenhoek, Antonie van, xlii
Leeuwenhoek, Antonie van, xlii
Leeuwenhoek, Antonie van, xlii
Leeuwenhoek, Antonie van, xlii
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, xxxvi, xlii, lviii, 62, 128, 237
Léry, Jean de, 160
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, xxvi, lii
Library of Alexandria, 403, 496, 568
Library of Pergamum, 403
Linnaeus, Carl, xxxvii, xlii, lxiii, 36n, 37, 43, 259
lion, 59–61
Lithuanians, 465
Livy, 414
Lobo, Jerónimo, 148
Locke, John, xlvii
Lombards, Lombardy, 520–23, 549, 583, 585
Louis VII, King of France, 593, 596
Louis IX, King of France, 594
Louis XIV, King of France, 596
Louis the Pious, 529, 530, 537, 539, 559
love, 17, 35, 51–52, 68, 100, 101–2, 123, 124, 135, 185, 193, 212, 216–17, 222
Lovejoy, A. O., xli, xlii
Lucretius, 416
Lucullus, Lucius Licinius, 403, 404, 407
Ludolf, Hiob, 148
Lulofs, Johann, 30
luxury, 317, 327, 391, 408–9, 446, 502, 570
Lycurgus, 364, 365–66, 370
Lyonnet, Pierre, 56, 63
Macedon/Macedonians, 321, 399, 402
Machiavelli, Niccolò, xix
Mackintosh, William, 143
Macpherson, James, 459
magnetism, 174
Magyars, 465, 470, 472, 539
Malebranche, Nicolas, xlii
Malpighi, Marcello, xlii
Mamertines, 401
Mamluks, 341, 349, 393, 595, 598
Manchus, 290, 297, 298
Mani/Manichaeanism, 489, 510, 599–600, 604
mankind: their adaptedness to particular localities, 169–73; birthplace of, 259–61, 262–67; brain of, 81–83; compared with apes, xlvi, 85–86, 168; consciousness and cognition in, 117–21; considered as plants, 34–36, 48; creation of, 275; their destination in the next world, 121–29; their destination in this world (see humanity); education of, 226–27; effect on climate, 178; erect posture of, xlvi–xlvi, 70–72, 97; freedom of, xlvi, 93–95; health and disease in, 96–98, 219–20; inequalities among, 245–46; instincts in, 91–92; lifespan of, 98–99; love among, 99–100; modes of life among, 203–9, 282–83; pacific nature of, 99, 211, 279; as pinnacle of creation, 258–59; reason in, xlvi–xlvi, 92–3; relation of sexes among, 212–14; relation to other species, 43–45, 67–68, 76–82; religion as product of their organic structure, xlviii, 103–5; sense organs of, 87–88; sociability of, 210–18, 226; speech organs of, 88–90; species character of, 261; sympathy in, 100–2; unity of, 165–69; varieties of, 1–1, 133–64, 257–58
Mandingos, 149
Manetho the Egyptian, 325
Marathas, 23
Marbod, 467
Marcomanni, 467
Marcus Aurelius, 416
Marius, Gaius, 387, 394, 399, 403, 407, 410
Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius), 403, 407, 412, 452
Martinet, Jean-Florent, 48
martyrdom/martyrs, 482, 483, 485, 487, 505–7, 508, 513, 548
Maupertuis, Pierre Louis Moreau de, xxxiii
Mayer, Tobias, 21
Medes/Media, 312, 318, 319, 326
Medicus, Friedrich Casimir, xlii
Mediterranean Sea, 26, 146, 312, 320, 330, 331–32, 342, 379, 408, 428, 476, 502, 516, 580, 581, 582, 585, 584, 595, 607, 610
Meiners, Christoph, xxiii, xxvi
Melchthon, Philip, xix
INDEX

Mendelssohn, Moses, xxiv, xlvii
Merck, Johann Heinrich, xxxiii
Mesrop, 492
Metellus Macedonicus, Quintus Caecilius, 402
metempsychosis, xlviii–xlx, 300, 301, 303, 305–6, 345
Mexico/Mexicans, 156, 159, 162, 188, 207, 266, 339, 487
Michaelis, Johann David, xxiii, xxxii
military orders, 596–97
Millar, John, xxii, xxxix
Milton, John, 385
mineral kingdom, 15, 20, 31–32, 43, 108, 123
Minos, 364
monarchy, 244, 266, 319, 320, 333, 343, 373, 541–44, 596, 597, 605, 609
monasticism/monkishness, 299, 300, 305, 323, 487, 490, 493, 495, 499, 500, 510, 513, 531, 556, 557, 559, 562, 564, 602, 608
Monboddo, James Burnett, Lord, xlv
Mongolia, 476
Montesquieu, Charles de Secondat, Baron de, xx, xxv, xxix, liii, lviii, lx, lxvi, 175, 248
Moors, 149, 183, 515, 588, 594
Moscati, Pietro, 97
Moses, xxxii, 277, 278, 325, 327, 328, 329, 330, 366
Moses of Chorene, 492
mountaineers, 23, 144, 150, 245, 300, 314, 319, 322, 378, 379, 387, 390, 404, 462, 477
mountains. See geographical features
Mountains of the Moon, 22, 24, 257, 261
Muhammad, 200, 491, 551, 565–67, 571, 572, 575, 576
Mummius, Lucius, 380, 402
muscular force, 44, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 63, 67, 77, 83. See also organic forces
music, 195, 236, 251, 293, 313, 351, 352, 355, 356, 389, 471, 510, 563
Naples, 474, 536, 561, 585
nature, scale of, xli–xlili, xliv–xlvi, 107–9, 111, 115–16
nature-worship, 200–1, 353
Nebuchadnezzar, 315, 316, 326, 333, 343
Negrillos, 154
Negros. See Africa, peoples of sub-Saharan regions of
Nemesis, lxii–lxiii, lxx, 440
Nero, 504
nerve-fluid, 115, 117
nerves, nervous system, 48, 49–50, 52, 53, 57, 63, 76–8, 79, 80, 91, 100, 113, 115, 117
Nestorianism, 490–92
New Holland, New Hollander, 26, 154, 178, 252
New Mexico, 21, 158
Newton, Isaac, xxxiii, xxxvi, 9, 14, 94, 328
Nietzsche, Friedrich, xv, xviii
Nimrod, 244, 314
Nineveh, 312, 313, 314, 317
Ninus, 315
Normans/Northmen, 469, 533–36, 538, 551, 589–91
North Pole. See Artic
North Sea, 476, 607
Novgorod, 470, 533
Numa Pompilius, 392, 393, 417
Numantia, 387, 403–4
Odin, 537, 538
Odoacer, 518–19
Odysseus, 320
Opitz, Gottfried, 169n
Oracle of Delphi, 363, 377, 378
organic forces, 52–58, 111; relation of to mind and instinct, 61, 67, 115–16
Origen, 497
Ossian, 217, 355, 461, 469
Ostrogoths, 469, 519–20, 549
Otfrid von Weißenburg, 237, 574
Otto I, 539–40, 559
Oxus, 280
Pagès, Pierre Marie François, Vicomte de, 133n, 158, 159, 219
palingenesis, lix, lxix–lxxii, 231, 246
Pallas, Peter Simon, 30, 44, 139, 142, 260
Pannonia, 460, 465, 471, 517, 520, 525, 528
papacy, 489, 490, 508–9, 521, 522, 544, 547–51; and the arts and sciences, 562–64; and the Frankish kings, 526, 528–29; political character of, 551–54; supposed benefits to Europe of, 555–58; supremacy of over temporal rulers, 559–62. See also popes
Paraguay, 160, 188
Parashurama, 269
Parrhasius, 462
Parsees, 269, 277, 324
patriotism, 173, 327, 330, 354, 367, 384, 393, 412, 415, 438, 452
Paul, Saint, 481
Paulus, Lucius Aemilianus, 402
Pausanias, 357
Pauw, Cornelis de, 307
Pechenegs, 465
Pegu, 399
Pelagius, 510
Pelagians, 349–50, 366, 388, 390
Pepin, 521, 527
Pergamum, 379
Pericles, 360, 377, 381, 385, 386
Perrault, Claude, 44
Persepolis, 312, 322
Persia, Persians, 23, 144, 319–24, 377, 378, 432, 491, 574, 575
Persian Gulf, 317
Persius (Aulus Persius Flaccus), 416
Peru, Peruvian, 24, 29, 30, 160, 161, 162, 188, 198, 204, 207, 264, 266, 471, 487
Pesserais, 96n, 158, 161
Peter, Saint, 508, 547, 553
Peter the Hermit, 592
Petrarch, Francesco, 589
Phidas, 357, 384
Philip of Macedon, 377–78, 383
Philip II Augustus, 593
Philopoemen, 380
philosophy of man. See anthropology
Phoenicians, lix–lix, 312, 330–34, 432, 438, 458
physiognomy, 183–84, 237
Pindar, 359, 360
Pinto de Sousa Coutinho, Luís, 160, 162
piracy, 350, 360, 364, 402, 462, 464, 516, 534, 556, 581
Pisa, 584
Placidia, 512, 514
Plants. See vegetable kingdom
Plato, 364, 369, 370, 371, 372, 444, 452
Plautus, 416
Pliny the Elder, 96, 252, 357, 416–17, 418
Pliny the Younger, 506
Plutarch, 419
Pocock, J. G. A., lxv
poetry, 352, 352–55, 374, 415–16, 588–89, 590
INDEX

Polo, Marco, 598
Polybius, xix, lxii, 374, 375, 398
Pompey (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus), 399, 403, 407, 410, 411, 440
Pompey, Sextus (Sextus Pompeius Magnus), 410
Pompey Trogue, 347
Pope, Alexander, xxxiv
popes: Gregory the Great, 510, 522–23; Gregory VII, 535, 549, 557, 592; Leo I, 518; Leo IV, 532; Stephen II, 521; Sylvester II, 563; Victor I, 548. See also papacy
Portuguese, 151, 186, 573, 583, 609
Praetorian Guard, 410
preformationism, xliii–xliv, 55, 106, 111
Prester John, 491
Priestley, Joseph, xxxvi, 20, 110
priests/priestly class, 250, 298, 299, 302, 339–49, 398, 544, 486–87
Provençal/Provence, lxix, 459, 575, 588–89, 590, 600
Prussians, 465, 470, 471, 529, 537, 561, 597
Ptolemaic dynasty, 373, 496
Ptolemy, 16, 577
Pufendorf, Samuel, xxvi
Puri, 303
Pyrenees, 36, 332, 401, 404, 457, 458, 459, 541, 575, 588, 590
Pythagoras, 369, 370
Quesnay, François, lviii
Quito, 24, 178, 261
race, l–li, 168–69
Raymond VI of Toulouse, 601
Réamur, René Antoine Ferchault de, 63
Red Sea, 25, 330, 331, 337, 342, 572
Reformation, the, 601, 602
regeneration of limbs, 55, 57
Reimarus, Hermann Samuel, 62
religion, 103–05, 230, 234, 249–54, 288, 289, 397–98. See also Buddhism; Christianity; Hinduism; Islam; Zoroastrianism
republic/republicanism, lxix, 333, 335, 365–67, 374, 376, 401, 581, 583, 585, 606
retaliation, law of, 405–11, 450
Richard I, 593
Robertson, William, xxi, xxiii, xxxiv, 503n
Robinet, Jean-Baptiste, xliv
Rogers, Robert, 156
Roland, 459
Rollo, 534, 535
Rome/Romans, lxii–lxii, 303, 313, 361, 368, 380, 381, 387–88, 391, 394–422, 432, 435, 438, 441, 459, 460, 462, 473, 477, 512; art and architecture of, 417–18; art of war and military of, 394–99, 410; character of, 411–13; and Christianity, 482, 504, 548; civil wars of, 407; constitution of, 394, 405–7; decline of, 405–11, 467, 525; eloquence of, 414–15; expansion of, 399–405, 407; foundation of, 392–93; and German tribes, 467; historians of, 413–14; laws of, 421, 422; learning of, 416–17; literature of, 415–16, 420; meaning of in human history, 419–422; philosophy of, 416; plebs, 394, 405, 406; religion of, 398; republic of, 396, 406; sacking of, 466, 511, 516; senate of, 394, 395, 404, 405, 406, 407, 410; slavery in, 408; spread of luxury in, 408–9; women of, 413. See also papacy
Rømer, Ludewig Ferdinand, 172
Romulus, 366, 393, 394, 395, 398, 405, 408, 417, 419
Romulus Augustus, 518
Rosamund, 521
Rösel von Rosenhof, August Johann, 63
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, xxv, xlv, xlvi, liii
Russia, Russians, 295, 473, 533, 558–59, 579
Sabines, 392, 392
Saladin, 569, 593
Sallust, 414
Samnites, 391, 400
Samoyeds, 137
Sanchuniathon, 270
Sassuria, Horace-Bénédict, 30
Saxons, 462, 469, 471, 529, 537, 538. See also Anglo-Saxons
Schiller, Friedrich, xxxvi
Schlosser, Johann Georg, xlviii–l
Schlözer, August Ludwig, xxiii–xxiv, xxvi, xxxii–xxxiii, xl
scholasticism, 372, 576, 602–3, 604
Scipio Aemilianus, Publius Cornelius, 399, 402
Scipio Africanus, Publius Cornelius, 335, 397, 399, 401, 404
Scipio Asiaticus, Lucius Cornelius, 403
Scotland, 461
Seleucids, 379
Semiramis, 244, 313, 315, 318, 331
Semler, Johann Salomo, xxxii
Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, 416
sensation, 57–58, 79, 115. See also organic forces
senses, 66–67; effect of climate on, 190–95; hearing, 194–95, 199–200; sight, 194; smell, 194; taste, 193–94; touch, 191–92
Serbia, 470
Sertorius, Quintus, 404
Servius Tullius, 393, 405
Sesostris, 244
s’ Gravesande, Willem Jacob, 20
Shaftesbury, Ashley Cooper, Earl of, xxxvi, xlvi, liii, lxii
Shakespeare, William, 385
shamanism, 200–1
shellfish, 32, 45, 46, 55–56, 256
Siam/Siamese, 296, 299, 310; king of, 196
Siberia, 28, 41, 97, 166, 260, 476
Sicily, 334, 335, 401, 535, 588, 589
Sidon/Sidonians, 312, 332, 333
slaves/slavery, 172, 408, 433
Slavs, 470–72, 477, 537, 539
sloth, 45, 61, 284
Society Islands, 348
Socrates, 367, 370–71, 385; 388, 452
Soemmering, Samuel Thomas, 53
Solomon, 327
Solon, 365, 366, 370
Sonnerat, Pierre, 269
Sophists, 371
Sophocles, 374, 384
soul, 117–21; immortality of, xlvi–lxix, 105–6, 109–10, 112–13, 252
Soulaive, Jean-Louis Giraud, 30, 36n
Spain/Spanish, 388, 403–4, 458, 512–16, 569, 588–89, 603
Spalding, Johann Joachim, xxiv–xxv
Sparmann, Anders, 150, 172
Sparta, 367, 376, 377, 385, 438
Spartacus, 408
Spinoza, Baruch, xxxvi
Stahl, Georg Ernst, xliii
state, lv–lvi; 247–48, 343; religion and, 344, 499–503
Stephen I of Hungary, 561
Stewart, Dugald, xxii
Strabo, 323, 334
Subanon, 154
Suebi, 459, 467, 468, 512
Suhm, Peter Frederik, 470
Sulla, Lucius Cornelius, 380, 387, 396, 399, 402, 403, 407, 408, 410, 411, 412
Sulzer, Johann Georg, 237
Swammerdam, Jan, xliii, 63
Swedenborg, Emanuel, 11
Symmachus, 519
Tacitus, 414, 461
Tahiti, 338
Tancred, 534

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Tarquin (Tarquinius Priscus), 393, 417
Tarquin the Proud (Tarquinius Superbus), 391, 393, 417
Tartars, 137–38, 140, 144, 186, 192, 218, 266, 287, 300, 458, 468, 472, 492, 495, 509, 528, 539, 543, 565, 575
Tartary, 25, 37, 138, 200, 262, 297, 332, 457, 475–76, 517, 577, 584, 598, 610
Tartessos, 331
Tasso, Torquato, 593
Tehuelche, 161
Terence, 416
Tertullian, 509
Tetens, Johann Nicolas, xiv
Teutonic Knights, 465, 596–97
Thebes (Egypt), 321, 336
Thebes (Greece), 367, 376, 385
Theodelinda, 523
Theodosic, 502, 519–20
Theodosian Code, 512
Theodosius, 501, 511
Thrace, 349, 350, 378, 379, 460, 511
Thucydides, 374
Tiber, 392, 420
Tibet, Tibetans, lviii–lix, 141, 268, 298–301, 309
Tigris, 312, 314, 317
Timberlake, Henry, 156
Toaldo, Giuseppe, 21
Tonkin, 296, 299
Torghuts, 294, 297
Totila, 520
tradition, 199–202, 227–28, 345, 450; arts and sciences as, 240; government and, 242–49; language and, 232, 237; religion and, 249–54
Trembley, Abraham, xlii
Tristram Shandy, 475
Triumvirates, 406, 407, 410
tropics, 153–55
Troy, Trojans, 350, 388, 392, 394, 443, 459
Tullius Hostilius, 392, 393
Tupinambá, 160
Turkmen, 146, 315
Turks, 145, 470, 474, 569, 570, 571, 583, 584, 593, 594, 595
Turpin, 459
Tyre, 312, 333
Tyson, Edward, xlvi, 73, 74
Ulfilas, 502, 574
Ulua, Antonio de, 162
Umayyads, 491, 568, 569, 571
universities, 564, 602, 608
Ural mountains, 257
usury, 329, 581
Uzbek, 144–45
Vandals, 468, 469, 516–17
Varenius, Bernhard, 30
Varro, Marcus Terentius, 416
vegetable kingdom, 33–34, 36–39, 47, 54–55, 66
vegetation, 54–5, 57, 108. See also organic forces
Venice, 503, 582–83, 584, 594, 595
Vidaurre, Felipe Gomez, 161
Vinea, 470, 537
Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro), 416, 420
Virgatus, 404
Vishnau, 268, 269, 283
Visigoths, 469, 511–14, 516, 518, 519, 525, 549
vital force, 180–83
vital heat, 50–51, 78, 80, 97, 112, 258, 279
vitalism, xlii–xliv
Voltaire, xx, xxi–xxii, xxiii, xxix, xxxiii, xxxiv, xl, lvii, lxvii, lxviii, 15
Wafer, Lionel, 159
Wales, 462–63
Weikard, Melchior Adam, xviii
Western Roman Empire, 473, 511
Wezel, Johann Karl, xxxviii

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Wieland, Christoph Martin, xxxvi
wild children, 70–71, 88, 228
wild men, xlv, 70, 87, 167
William of Ockham, 603
William of Rubruck, 598
William the Conqueror, 533, 534, 535
William the Conqueror, 591
Willis, Thomas, 78
Wilson, Alexander, 20
Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, xxiii, xxx, lx–lxi, 360
Wolff, Caspar Friedrich, xliii–xliv, 53
Wolofs, 149
women, 96, 211–16, 540–41

Wrisberg, Heinrich August, 53
writing, 237–38, 263–64, 291, 316, 318, 332, 390, 478

Xenophon, 319, 320, 374, 377, 378
Xerxes, 321, 334, 377, 381, 435

Zaleucus, 381
Ziegenbalg, Bartholomäus, 304
Zimmermann, Eberhard August Wilhelm, 41, 164
zoophytes, 48, 49, 50, 55, 66, 84, 107
Zoroaster/Zoroastrianism, 269, 277–78, 322–24, 599