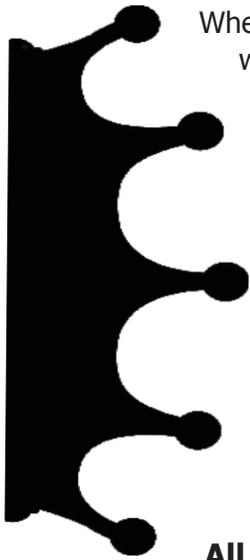


Rule By One

Name: _____



When the Founders sat down to frame a government for the United States, they wanted a system that put the government's power in the hands of the people. Only a few governments like that had ever existed, and the two main examples—the Roman Republic and the Greek city-state of Athens—had flamed out nearly two thousand years before. Government "by the people, for the people" simply wasn't a thing throughout most of human history. What was a thing? **Monarchy**—a system where one person holds supreme governing power over an entire society. But this was a system the Founders definitely did not want. Our Founders were European, specifically English, and Europe has a long history of monarchical rule. (Say it slow: mon-AR-kih-cull. It's the adjective form of monarchy.)

All About...KING!

Most historical monarchies were **absolute**, meaning the king or queen alone held supreme power and authority. We call this being **sovereign**. Even still, it's hard to do everything yourself—even if you want to—so it's been common for monarchs to assign authority over certain things to other people. Picture a school principal who can't possibly do every job in the school herself.

She needs to have a staff. There are lots of jobs in a monarch's government, but because the monarch is sovereign, he or she has final say and gets to decide who keeps their job and who gets fired. Of course, in the old days when monarchs ruled supreme, sometimes it was just easier to kill a disloyal employee instead of firing them. (In other words, don't step out of line!)

As you can imagine, quality of life in a monarchy depended on the monarch. A monarch who cared about the people and wanted to be fair could create a tolerable society, while a monarch who was greedy, cruel, mentally unstable, or all three, could make life a nightmare. What's more, the bad policies of an ineffective monarch could even cause problems for the entire country. For example, if a monarch's policies made it harder for people to earn a living, the country and everyone in it could experience horrible declines in wealth and resources. Monarchy could easily lead to **tyranny**, a rule that oppressed the people through cruel or unreasonable means of control.

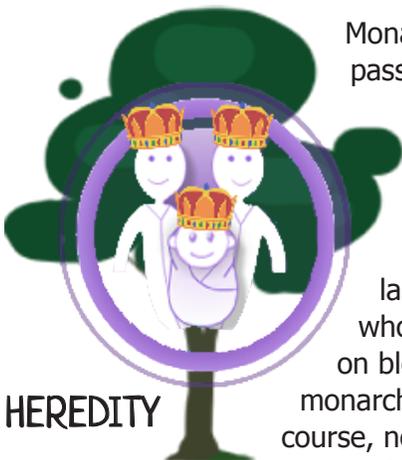
A KING BY ANY OTHER NAME...

We usually think of monarchs as kings or queens, and that's what they're often called. But those aren't the only titles a monarch might have. The *pharaohs* of Egypt, the *emperors* of the Roman Empire and China, and the *tsars* of Russia were all monarchs.



The Royal Tree

Monarchs are usually chosen according to their family tree. This ritual of passing the crown from one generation to the next is a way to establish a government's **legitimacy**. For a government to be legitimate, the people have to accept the leader and believe that he or she has the right to rule. This is usually accomplished through tradition and heritage. The most common monarchical system throughout history was a male-only line of monarchs, where the new monarch was the last monarch's oldest living son. There was usually a back-up plan for who would fall next in line if the monarch didn't have any sons, also based on blood and a person's place in the royal family tree. In several European monarchies, the oldest daughter got the throne if there were no sons. Of course, none of this was an obstacle to a really power-hungry person with their eye on the throne.



HEREDITY

Rule By One

Name: _____

A Game of Thrones

For example, Richard III of England should only have become king if his brother, King Edward IV, had no children. But when Edward died, he had two young sons. The oldest was also named Edward and was only 12 years old. Even so, he was immediately crowned king. Shortly after that, Richard took young Edward into custody and got himself named "lord protector," which is kind of like a guardian—except as lord protector, Richard controlled the government. Soon, Richard claimed that his dead brother's marriage had been invalid all along. Not everyone believed this story, but whether it was true or not was irrelevant. The claim itself meant that Edward's two sons were not eligible to become king, so Richard was crowned King Richard III. Not long after, the boys disappeared. To this day, nobody knows for sure what happened to them.



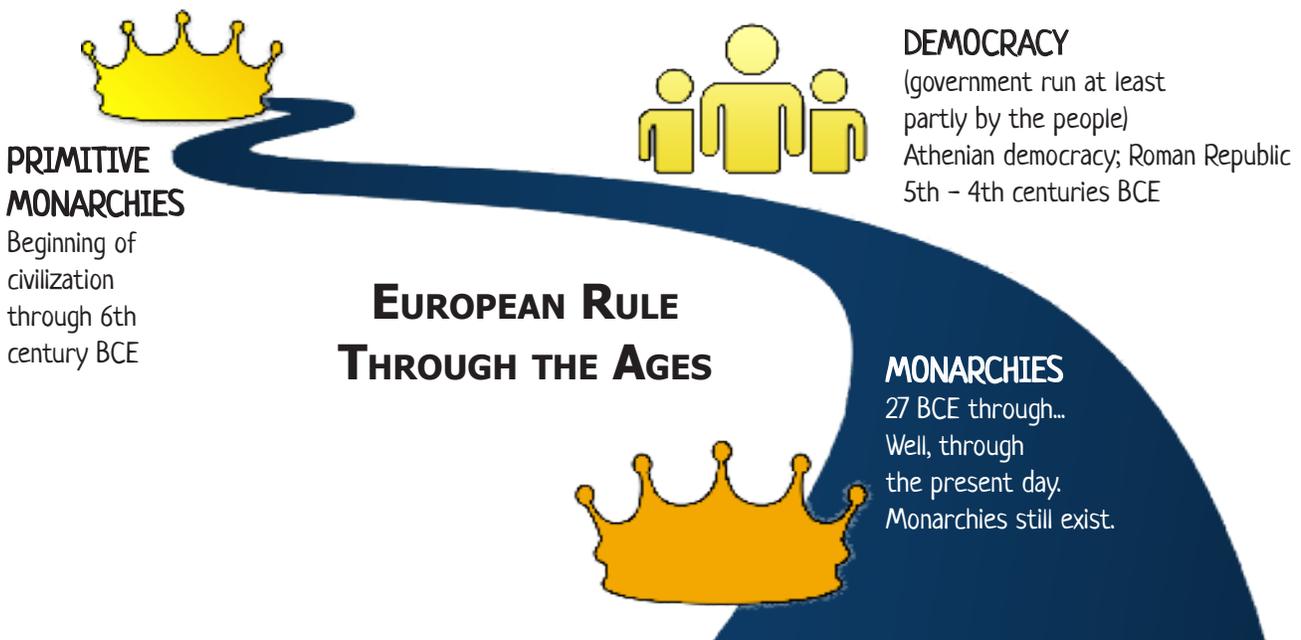
King Richard III of England
Society of Antiquaries, London
Source: commons.wikimedia.org

From Monarchy to Democracy... and Back Again

Absolute monarchy doesn't sound too appealing by today's standards, so why was it historically the most common form of government? There's no tidy answer to that, but you can think of it in terms of one word: *Power*.

Imagine what it must have been like thousands of years ago when people lived in **nomadic tribes**, tribes that moved from place to place. They didn't do all that moving because they enjoyed traveling—they did it to find enough resources to support themselves. But what happened when two groups wanted the same lush, green valley for their sheep in the winter? War is what happened. And somebody in the group—a great warrior, usually—would have led the fighting. When life is all about fighting to keep hold of resources, then the person with the most success at leading the group to victory has a lot of power. That person is celebrated and respected by the entire tribe and feared by those he has conquered. In this case, people agree to follow the biggest and strongest because they are the biggest and strongest. Eventually, the families of the big and strong were recognized as the leaders, and leadership was passed down from father to son. Most likely, this was how monarchy began as a form of government. Leadership translated into power, and people don't let go of that easily.

In the tiniest nutshell, the history of European rule looks like this:



Rule By One

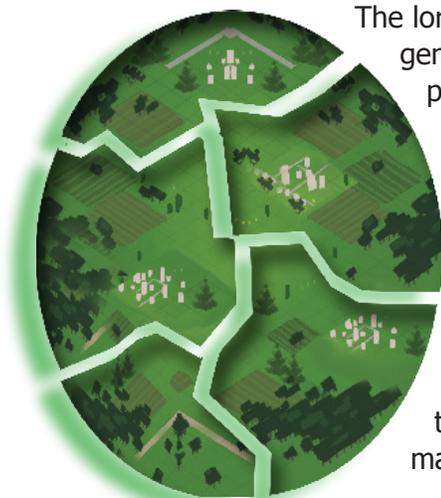
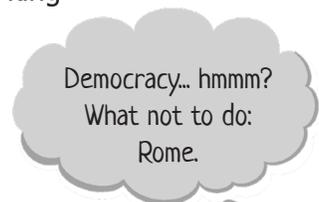
Name: _____

It's more complicated than this, of course. Before the Roman Republic, "rule by the people" was pretty much limited to the city-state of Athens in Greece. Even when the Roman Republic covered most of Europe, there were parts it didn't include—such as modern-day England. Those parts had their own government systems that were generally led by monarchs. Nomadic tribes farther east in Europe were ruled by kings during that entire time as well. When the Roman Republic began to fail, monarchy returned, but not because people were like, "We Love Monarchies!" It was because a power-hungry government official in the Roman Republic managed to take over the entire government for himself. You might even recognize his name: Julius Caesar. Caesar conquered the Republic and ruled as a dictator. After his rule, the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire. As an empire, the government officially became a monarchy, and the king was called an emperor. By the time the Roman Empire started to fall apart a few hundred years later, it covered almost all of Europe. So think about it: Do you remember what happened a few hundred years ago? Neither does anybody else. At the time, the people probably knew as much about forming a republic as you do about government in the 1400s.



So. Many. Kingdoms.

So when the Roman Empire ended around the year 500 CE, Europe didn't suddenly become an every-man-for-himself **anarchy**, where no one is in control—or everyone is, depending on how you look at it. Why not? Because a Roman emperor couldn't do all the jobs in the Roman Empire himself. (Remember this?) All across the empire, and before its fall, the emperor employed landowners, who were sometimes called "lords," to govern their land and the people on it almost like a small kingdom. (We're talking about lots of land, not land the size of an average lot in the suburbs. Think more like the size of the entire suburb.) Without anyone in the Roman government to answer to, those who held local power just... kept holding their power. They became like little monarchs. This shift marked the beginning of what we now call the Middle Ages, which is also called the medieval period.



The lords fought with each other, made alliances with each other, and generally waged power struggles for the next few hundred years. A powerful lord would conquer his neighbors and set up a monarchy for a time. And later, his descendants would be conquered, and the people would be under the control of a different family of monarchs. This didn't affect the everyday life of most people. (How often do you think the average person sat down for dinner with the king?) They continued to consider themselves to be French, German, Polish, etc., regardless of their leader at the moment. After a few hundred more years, all the small kingdoms eventually gelled into a system of larger kingdoms, solidified into countries like England, France, and Spain. By the time the United States was founded, Europe was almost entirely made up of powerful countries governed by monarchs.

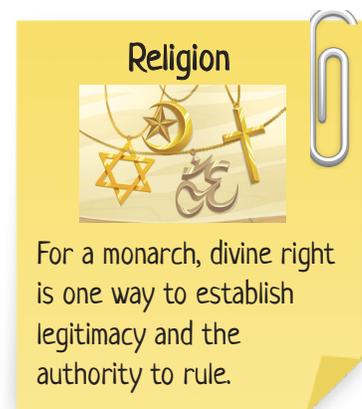


May It Please the King... And the Church

By the Middle Ages, the Christian religion had taken a firm hold in Europe. The Catholic Church was basically the only organized Christian religion at that time—and it was very organized. The head of the church was called the **pope** (and still is), and he lived in Rome. The church had a large structure of officials below the pope, and these officials were spread out in churches all across Europe. Back then, belonging to a religion wasn't like it is today, where you have a choice about what religion you want to follow or whether you want to join a religion at all. Everyone in a society generally followed the same religion (with a few exceptions), and it was so deeply woven into society it was more of an obligation than a choice.

In medieval times, almost all Europeans belonged to the Catholic Church—including the monarchs. The church was a large, powerful institution that many people felt more connected to than their king or queen. People who are religious (and most everyone was back then) tend to interact with the church regularly. The only government officials people interacted with regularly were the tax collectors, and no one likes taxes! So if there was a power struggle between a monarch and the pope, it wasn't always guaranteed that the people would support their king or queen. Monarchs held the sovereign governing power in their own territories, but the pope was considered the monarch of all Christians.

So... what did that mean? Was the pope sovereign over monarchs? You might say they had a combination of church and state. (*Whaaat?*) But this was nothing new. For most of human history, societies believed in some kind of link between their ruler and the god or gods they worshiped. This was true in Greek and Roman culture, where honoring the gods played an important role in government as well as daily life. Many Roman emperors—Julius Caesar, for example—were officially recognized as gods after they died. Europeans from the 15th century on generally believed that a monarch's power came from God. This concept was known as the **divine right of kings**. If a monarch's authority came from God, then obeying the monarch wasn't just a civic duty—it was part of a person's religious duty to God. Religion was very much a part of government, and monarchs often had a spiritual role in the church as well as a governing role. At the same time, monarchs could be and often were tyrants who used their power in cruel, oppressive ways against the people.



Looking Forward

Monarchy still reigned supreme well into the 1700s. One reason is that the monarchs had **authority**, or the right to make decisions, because most people viewed their rule as legitimate. And a second reason is obvious: Questioning their authority might have upset the monarch, and upsetting the monarch was never a wise move! So when our Founders looked around after America secured its independence, monarchy, tyranny, and religion were pretty much all they could see. There weren't many other existing forms of government for them to compare. Luckily, they didn't let that stop them. They knew what wasn't going to work: Total absolute power residing in a single individual. They feared that unlimited concentration of power could lead to a repeat of everything they'd just fought to escape. Instead, they borrowed the best influences from their English government, lessons from the democracies of ancient Athens and Rome, and put a lot of ideas from political philosophers throughout Europe to work to create the government you know today.

