The legacy of classical antiquity is an obvious place to begin an account of the origins of the idea of Europe, which has often been traced back to Greek and Roman antiquity. But the nature of that relation is far from clear as is the question of the relation of the ancient civilizations to what later became known as Europe, a notion that was more or less unknown to the ancients. Any consideration of the legacy of antiquity needs to take account of the fact that the very notion of a classical age was a product of a later era and the relation to antiquity has not been constant. The Christian tradition commenced with a break with what it regarded as a pagan epoch, while the Renaissance looked to the recovery of certain elements of the classical age and the Enlightenment sought to distance the modern age from the ancient civilizations and their legacy, seeing as it did in Benjamin Constant’s formulation in 1819, a fundamental discord between the ‘liberty of the ancient and the moderns’.

In our own time we often hear claims that Europe derives its common culture from Greek and Roman civilization. It would appear that the legacy of antiquity has been marked by ruptures as well as continuities to the extent that the very notion of a ‘Greco-Roman’ civilization is questionable. A closer look at the civilizations of antiquity reveals less a picture of unity than one of diversity and of transnational movements. It is now increasingly recognized that the European heritage as it emerged out of these civilizations was formed not in isolation, but out of borrowing, re-appropriating and mixing from different societies.

This chapter presents the argument that rather than speak of a single European civilization we should instead see Europe as formed by a civilizational constellation whose classical roots were shaped by Athens,
Rome and Jerusalem. The argument is also sceptical of the alternative view that a clash of civilizations emerged in antiquity or the argument that these civilizations were inconsequential for modernity. While not denying the significance of early rivalry between Greece and Persia, to take the most well-known example, the Mediterranean world was one in which the different cultures were deeply intermeshed due to trade, migration and conquest. Conflicts belonged to this, but it is not possible to postulate a primordial conflict that provided the foundation for later ones. Ancient conflicts did not predetermine later ones; there was no path-dependency, but variation based on common origins and subsequent processes of homogenization and integration established structuring forming processes that gave to Europe its cultural and societal shape.

Greek civilization and hellenism

It has generally been considered that European civilization begins with classical Greek culture in the fifth century BCE, a century in which Socrates and Pericles lived. In rejecting sacred kinship at an early stage, the ancient Greeks made the most important breakthrough. The Greeks established the political community of the polis in which a uniquely political domain was institutionalized and which has often been regarded as the beginning of democracy and the republican tradition of the self-governing political community. The modern republican interpretation, as reflected in the writings of Hannah Arendt, saw the Greek polis based neither on the state nor on the private world of the household, but on the public domain of citizenship (Arendt 1958). Although its claims to be a democracy in the modern sense of the term must be greatly qualified, the Greek polis established the notion of the individual as a citizen defined as a status based on rights. It can be seen as having given birth to the conception of political community based on civic solidarity and opposition to despotism. These characteristics are probably more significant than a general notion of democracy, for the ancient Greek city states were highly exclusionary. However, since history – understood as the unfolding of a structure – is largely the accumulation of unintended consequences, the Greek political imagination was an important source of democratic ideas and political innovation (see Arnason et al 2013).

Greek culture and society was not a homogeneous world. The notion of a classical age was a later invention and while it is possible to speak of a Greek civilization, this was highly diverse and influenced by