



Launima Nagatu, *Tapa Cloth*, Mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tonga, South Pacific

# *A little about Dates...*

## **How long has our calendar been around?**

Today is 8/27/15 or Thursday, August 27, 2015.

Traditionally understood as two-thousand and fifteen years (give or take a few) after Jesus Christ is believed to have been born. But if Jesus used a calendar, it would not have been the one we use.

Our calendar is called the Gregorian calendar and was instituted by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. There are many other calendars. Quite a few societies have used calendars linked to the years their kings ruled. And there are numerous calendars, beyond the Gregorian calendar, that are still in use today. For example, 2012 equates to 1434/35 in the Islamic calendar and 5772-73 in the Jewish calendar (both are lunar, based on the cycles of the moon).

# B.C. or B.C.E.?

- Many people use the abbreviations B.C. and A.D. with a year (for example, A.D. 2012). B.C. refers to "Before Christ," and the initials, A.D., stand for Anno Domini, which is Latin for "In the year of our Lord." This system was devised by a monk in the year 525.
- A more recent system uses B.C.E. which stands for "Before the Common Era" and C.E. for "Common Era." This newer system is now widely used as a way of expressing the same periods as B.C. and A.D., but without the Christian reference. According to these systems, we count time backwards Before the Common Era (B.C.E.) and forwards in the Common Era (C.E.).

# Circa?

- Often dates will be preceded with a "c." or a "ca." These are abbreviations of the Latin word "circa" which means around, or approximately. We use this before a date to indicate that we do not know exactly when something happened, so c. 400 B.C.E. means approximately 400 years Before the Common Era.

# Why 2015 is in the 21st Century?

- We live in the 21st Century, that is, the 2000s. Similarly when we say "20th Century," we are referring to the 1900s. All this because, according to the calendar we use, the 1st Century included the years 1-99 (there was no year zero), and the 2nd Century, the years 100-199. Similarly, when we say 2nd Century B.C.E. we are referring to the years 100-199 B.C.E.
- Within our calendar, we also have a tendency to find portentous meaning in the millennial years, that is, in the years 1000 and more recently, 2000.

# A Brief Intro into Western Culture

- History has no natural divisions. A woman living in Florence Italy in the 15th century did not think of herself as a woman of the Renaissance. Historians divide history into large and small units in order to make characteristics and changes clear to themselves and to students.
- It's important to remember that any historical period is a construction and a simplification. Below are some important basics to get you started. As we review this timeline, please keep in mind that equally momentous developments have occurred in Africa, Asia, the Americas and in the Pacific.

## **Prehistoric (before c. 3000 B.C.E.):**

The term “prehistoric” refers to the time before written history. In the West, writing was invented in ancient Mesopotamia just before 3000 B.C.E., so this period includes visual culture (paintings, sculpture, and architecture) made before that date. The oldest decorative forms we can recognize as art come from Africa and may date back to 100,000 B.C.E. In contrast, the oldest cave paintings known are about 40,800 years old, and although we used to think that only our species, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, made art—anthropologists now speculate that Neanderthals may have made at least some of these very early images.

The Neolithic revolution, one of the most profound developments in all of human history, occurs during the Prehistoric Era. This is when our ancestors learned to farm and domesticate animals, allowing them to give up their nomadic ways, and settle down to build cities and civilizations.

## Ancient (c. 3000 B.C.E. to c. 400 C.E.)

- This period includes the great early civilizations of the ancient Near East (think Babylonia), ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, the Etruscans, and the Romans— everything that comes after the invention of writing and before the fall of the Roman Empire. Keep in mind the disintegration of the Roman Empire took centuries, but to simplify, c. 400 will do.
- It was during this period that the ancient Greeks first applied human reason to their observations of the natural world and created some of the earliest naturalistic images of human beings. This period is often credited with the birth of Western philosophy, mathematics, theater, science, and democracy. The Romans in turn created an empire that extended across most of Europe, and all the lands that surround the Mediterranean Sea. They were expert administrators and engineers and they saw themselves as the inheritors of the great civilizations that came before them, particularly, Greece and Egypt (which they conquered).
- It's important to remember that although history is often presented as a series of discrete stories, in reality narratives often overlap making history both more complex and more interesting. For example, it was also during the Roman Empire that the historical figure we now call Jesus Christ lived. Jesus and his apostles were Jewish men living in what is today Israel, but which was then part of the Roman Empire.



## Middle Ages (c. 400 C.E. to c. 1400 C.E.)

- The first half of this thousand-year period witnessed terrible political and economic upheaval in Western Europe, as waves of invasions by migrating peoples destabilized the Roman Empire. The Roman emperor Constantine established Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) as a new capital in the East in 330 C.E. and the Western Roman Empire broke apart soon after. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the Byzantine Empire (with Constantinople as its capital), flourished.
- Christianity spread across what had been the Roman Empire, even among the migrating invaders (Vandals, Visigoths, etc.), and the Christian Church, headed by the Pope, emerged as the most powerful institution in Western Europe, the Orthodox Church dominated in the East.
- It was during this period that Islam, one of the three great monotheistic religions, was born. Within little more than a century of the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 C.E., Islam had become an empire that stretched from Spain across North Africa, the Middle and Near East, to India. Medieval Islam was a leader in science and technology and established some of world's great centers of learning (i.e. Cordoba). Islamic culture played an important role in preserving and translating ancient Greek texts at a time when much of the knowledge created during the ancient world was lost.

## Middle Ages conti.

- Petrarch (a writer who lived in the 1300s) described the early Medieval period as the "Dark Ages" because to him it seemed to be a period of declining human achievement, especially when he compared it to the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The "Middle Ages" got its name because Renaissance scholars saw it as a long barbaric period that separated them from the great civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome that they both celebrated and emulated.
- Medieval society was organized into clearly defined strata. At the top was the king. Below were lesser nobles. These lords in turn, ruled over peasants and serfs (the vast majority of the population). Serfs were laborers who were permanently bound to work the land owned by their lord. The basic unit of this system, known as Feudalism, was the lord/vassal relationship. The vassal would provide labor (in the fields or in battle) to the lord in exchange for land and protection. Mobility between strata was very rare.
- Of course, the thousand years of the Middle Ages saw the creation of many great works of art and literature, but they were different from what Petrarch valued. The works of art created in the Middle Ages were largely focused on the teachings of the Church.

- It is important to remember that during the Middle Ages it was rare that anyone except members of the clergy (monks, priests, etc.) could read and write. Despite expectations that the world would end in the year 1,000, Western Europe became increasingly stable, and this period is sometimes referred to as the Late (or High) Middle Ages. This period saw the renewal of large scale building and the re-establishment of sizable towns. Monasteries, such as Cluny, became wealthy and important centers of learning.
- Within the Middle Ages, there are subdivisions in art history, including Early Christian, Byzantine, Carolingian, Ottonian, Romanesque and Gothic. When we look closely at much of the art and politics of the 1,000 years of the Middle Ages, we find a complex and ongoing relationship with the memory and legacy of the ancient Roman empire and this is the foundation for the Renaissance.