

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

With upwards of 12 million inhabitants, the greater metropolitan area of Paris is home to almost 19% of France's total population (central Paris counts just under 2.2 million souls). Since before the Revolution, Paris has been what urban planners like to call a 'hypertrophic city' – the enlarged 'head' of a nation-state's 'body'. The urban area of the next biggest city – Marseilles – is just over a third the size of central Paris.

As the capital city, Paris is the administrative, business and cultural centre; virtually everything of importance in the republic starts, finishes or is currently taking place here. The French have always said '*Quand Paris éternue, la France s'en rhume*' (When Paris sneezes, France catches cold) but there have been conscious efforts – going back at least four decades – by governments to decentralise Paris' role, and during that time the population, and thus to a certain extent the city's authority, has actually shrunk. The pivotal year was 1968, a watershed not just in France but throughout Western Europe.

Paris has a timeless quality, a condition that can often be deceiving. And while the cobbled backstreets of Montmartre, the terraced cafés of Montparnasse, the iconic structure of the Eiffel Tower and the placid waters of the Seine may all have some visitors believing that the city has been here since time immemorial, that's hardly the case.

EARLY SETTLEMENT

The early history of the Celts is murky, but it is thought that they originated somewhere in the eastern part of central Europe around the 2nd millennium BC and began to migrate across the continent, arriving in France sometime in the 7th century BC. In the 3rd century a group of Celtic Gauls called the Parisii settled here.

Centuries of conflict between the Gauls and Romans ended in 52 BC, with the latter taking control of the territory. The settlement on the Seine prospered as the Roman town of Lutetia (from the Latin for 'midwater dwelling', in French, Lutèce), counting some 10,000 inhabitants by the 3rd century AD.

The Great Migrations, beginning around the middle of the 3rd century AD with raids by the Franks and then by the Alemanii from the east, left the settlement on the south bank scorched and pillaged, and its inhabitants fled to the Île de la Cité, which was subsequently fortified with stone walls. Christianity (as well as Mithraism; see [opposite](#)) had been introduced early in the previous century, and the first church, probably made of wood, was built on the western part of the island.

INVASIONS & DYNASTIES

The Romans occupied what would become known as Paris (after its first settlers) from AD 212 to the late 5th century. It was at this time that a second wave of Franks and other Germanic groups under Merovius from the north and northeast overran the territory. Merovius' grandson,

TIMELINE

3rd century BC

Celtic Gauls called Parisii – believed to mean 'boat men' – arrive in the Paris area and set up a few wattle-and-daub huts on what is now the Île de la Cité. Here they engage in fishing and trading.

52 BC

Roman legions under Julius Caesar crush a Celtic revolt led by Vercingétorix on the Mons Lutetius (now the site of the Panthéon) and establish the town of Lutetia.

AD 845–86

Paris is repeatedly raided by Vikings for more than four decades including the siege of 885–86 by Siegfried the Saxon, which lasts 10 months but ends in victory for the French.

MITHRA & THE GREAT SACRIFICE

Mithraism, the worship of the god Mithra, originated in Persia. As Roman rule extended into the west, the religion became extremely popular with traders, imperial slaves and mercenaries of the Roman army and spread rapidly throughout the empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. In fact, Mithraism was the principal rival of Christianity until Constantine came to the throne in the 4th century.

Mithraism was a mysterious religion with its devotees (mostly males) sworn to secrecy. What little is known of Mithra, the god of justice and social contract, has been deduced from reliefs and icons found in sanctuaries and temples, particularly in Eastern and Central European countries. Most of these portray Mithra clad in a Persian-style cap and tunic, sacrificing a white bull in front of Sol, the sun god. From the bull's blood sprout grain and grapes and from its semen animals. Sol's wife Luna, the moon, begins her cycle and time is born.

Mithraism and Christianity were close competitors partly because of the striking similarity of many of their rituals. Both involve the birth of a deity on winter solstice (25 December), shepherds, death and resurrection, and a form of baptism. Devotees knelt when they worshipped and a common meal – a 'communion' of bread and water – was a regular feature of both liturgies.

Clovis I, converted to Christianity, making Paris his seat in 508. Childeric II, Clovis' son and successor, founded the Abbey of St-Germain des Prés a half-century later, and the dynasty's most productive ruler, Dagobert, established an abbey at St-Denis. This abbey soon became the richest, most important monastery in France and became the final resting place of its kings.

The militaristic rulers of the Carolingian dynasty, beginning with Charles 'the Hammer' Martel (688–741) were almost permanently away fighting wars in the east, and Paris languished, controlled mostly by the counts of Paris. When Charles Martel's grandson, Charlemagne (768–814), moved his capital to Aix-la-Chapelle (today's Aachen in Germany), Paris' fate was sealed. Basically a group of separate villages with its centre on the island, Paris was badly defended throughout the second half of the 9th century and suffered a succession of raids by the 'Norsemen' (Vikings).

CONSOLIDATION OF POWER

The counts of Paris, whose powers had increased as the Carolingians feuded among themselves, elected one of their own, Hugh Capet, as king at Senlis in 987. He made Paris the royal seat and resided in the renovated palace of the Roman governor on the Île de la Cité (the site of the present Palais de Justice). Under Capetian rule, which would last for the next 800 years, Paris prospered as a centre of politics, commerce, trade, religion and culture. By the time Hugh Capet had assumed the throne, the Norsemen (or Normans, descendants of the Vikings) were in control of northern and western French territory. In 1066 they mounted a successful invasion of England from their base in Normandy.

Paris' strategic riverside position ensured its importance throughout the Middle Ages, although settlement remained centred on the Île de la Cité, with the *rive gauche* (left bank) to the south given over to fields and vineyards; the Marais area on the *rive droite* (right bank) to the north was a waterlogged marsh. The first guilds were established in the 11th century, and rapidly grew in importance; in the mid-12th century the ship merchants' guild bought the principal river port, by today's Hôtel de Ville (city hall), from the crown.

1066

The so-called Norman Conquest (and subsequent occupation) of England ignites almost 300 years of conflict between the Normans in western and northern France and the Capetians in Paris.

1163

Two centuries of nonstop building reaches its zenith with the start of Notre Dame Cathedral under Maurice de Sully, the bishop of Paris; construction will continue for more than a century and a half.

1253

La Sorbonne is founded by Robert de Sorbon, confessor to Louis IX, as a theological college for impoverished students in the area of the Left Bank known as the Latin Quarter, where students and their teachers communicated in that language exclusively.