2.1

# Three core questions define the literary landscape between 500 and 1500.

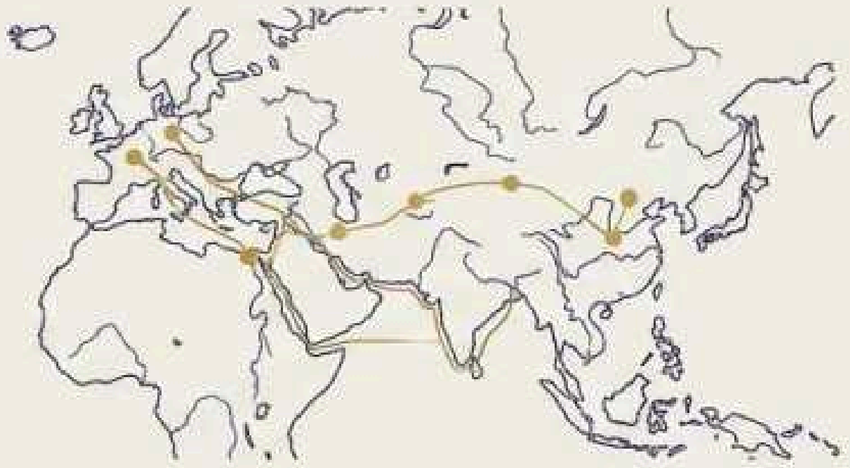


The period produced some of the most loved books in the world, born from a shift toward the voices of ordinary people.

## The Triad Compass

500–1500 CE

### Geographies



### Thematic Drives




### The Catalyst

What changes when poets write in the languages people actually speak?

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# 2.2 Beowulf navigates a stark trajectory from earthly glory to inevitable mortality.



## The Arc of Mortality




**Context**: Survives in a single manuscript from ~1000 CE.

—

**Language**: Old English (unreadable today without translation).

—

**Core Meditation**: The tension between absolute loyalty, the pursuit of glory, and the hard fact that heroes die.

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# 2.3 The heroic parallel reveals a shared European fixation on sacrifice and duty.



## Beowulf

England

Rescued from folklore by J.R.R. Tolkien's 1936 lecture, elevating the text to a serious meditation on mortality.

**Shared DNA: Loyalty and Sacrifice**

## The Song of Roland

France (778 CE, Pyrenees)

A 12th-century epic detailing a bloody battle and martial duty.

**Context**: Survives in a single manuscript from ~1000 CE.

—

**Language**: Old English (unreadable today without translation).

—

**Core Meditation**: The tension between absolute loyalty, the pursuit of glory, and the hard fact that heroes die.

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2.4



# Three pillars of Persian poetry sustained and carried the culture across centuries.

**Epic History**
(1010 CE)

**Ferdowsi & The Shahnameh**
(The Book of Kings).

50,000 couplets chronicling Iran from myth to the Arab conquest.

**Divine Mysticism**
(13th Century)

**Rumi.**

The search for God articulated through profound, mystical love.

**Enduring Lyricism**
(14th Century)

**Hafez.**

Masters of lyrics that remain deeply embedded in modern Iranian daily life and recitation.

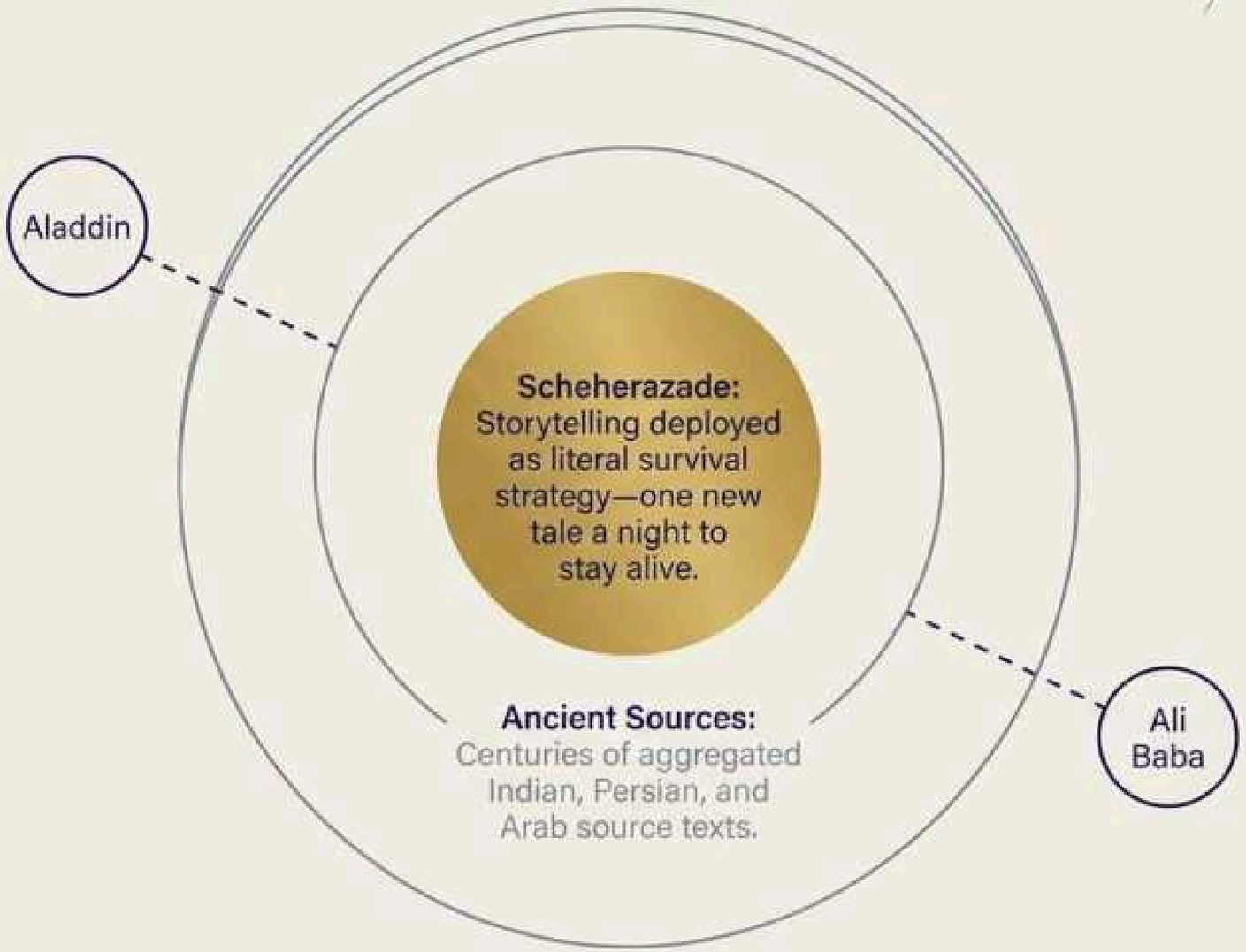
In this region, poetry was not just an art form; it was the primary vessel for preserving cultural identity.

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2.5

# The *One Thousand and One Nights* operates as an expanding architectural frame.

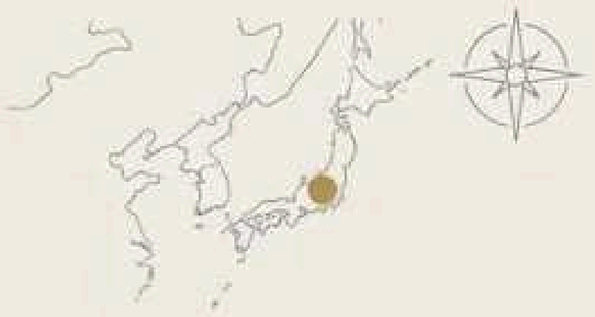





The best-known tales are absent from the earliest earliest Arabic manuscripts, entering instead through Antoine Galland's French translation from 1704.

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2.6



# Women at the Japanese imperial court pioneered distinct forms of psychological prose.

## The Narrative Arc

### Murasaki Shikibu

*The Tale of Genji* (Early 11th Century)

The story of Prince Genji, his loves, and the melancholic fading of a world of beauty. Widely considered the first novel.

## The Fragmented Lens

### Sei Shonagon

*The Pillow Book*

A curated collection of highly observant lists, fragments, and unfiltered opinions.

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2.7




# Two contrasting forces defined the Tang Dynasty's great age of poetry.

## The Wild Spirit

### Li Bai (701–762)

Thematic Focus: Wine, friendship, the moon, and unfettered freedom.

## The Moral Conscience

### Du Fu (712–770)

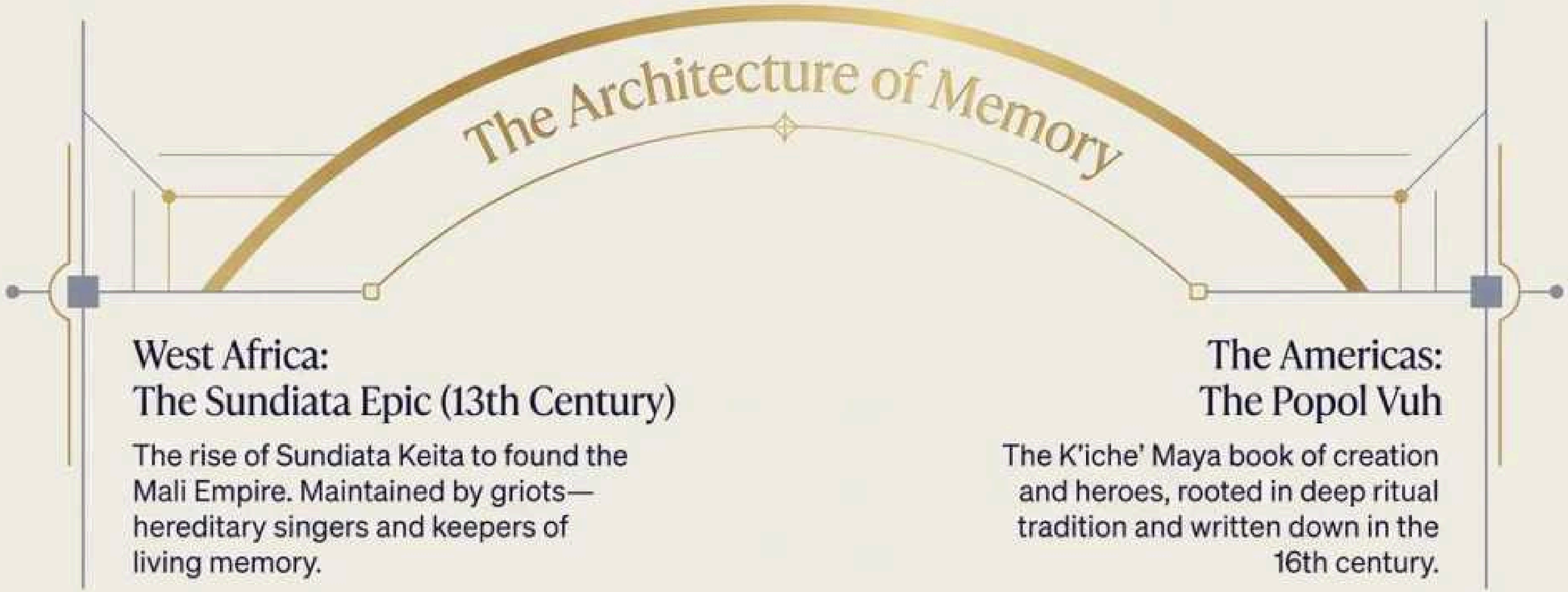
Thematic Focus: War, hunger, family, and deep moral seriousness.

Together, they act as the twin pillars of the language, extensively translated and globally revered.

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2.8

# Oral and ritual traditions form equally vital pillars of the global literary canon.




## West Africa: The Sundiata Epic (13th Century)

The rise of Sundiata Keita to found the Mali Empire. Maintained by griots—hereditary singers and keepers of living memory.

## The Americas: The Popol Vuh

The K'iche' Maya book of creation and heroes, rooted in deep ritual tradition and written down in the 16th century.

Literature exists vibrantly outside the written page through structured, musical, and ritualistic performance.

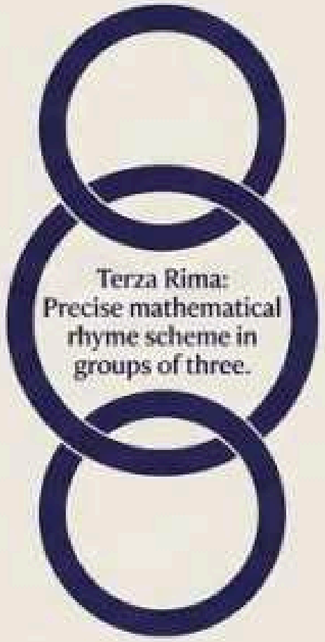
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# 2.9




## Dante engineered a radical elevation of the language of ordinary people.

### The Mechanism




### The Weight



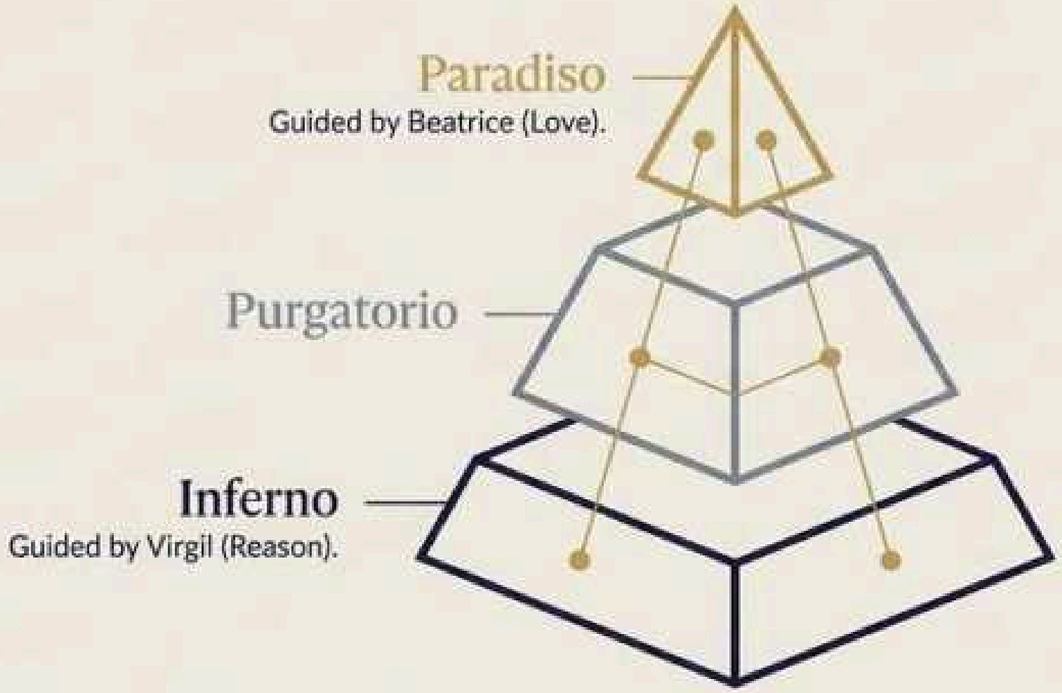

Finished shortly before Dante's death in 1321, born from the bitter experience of his 1302 exile from Florence.

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# 2.10



## The Divine Comedy acts as a towering synthesis of theology, politics, and satire.



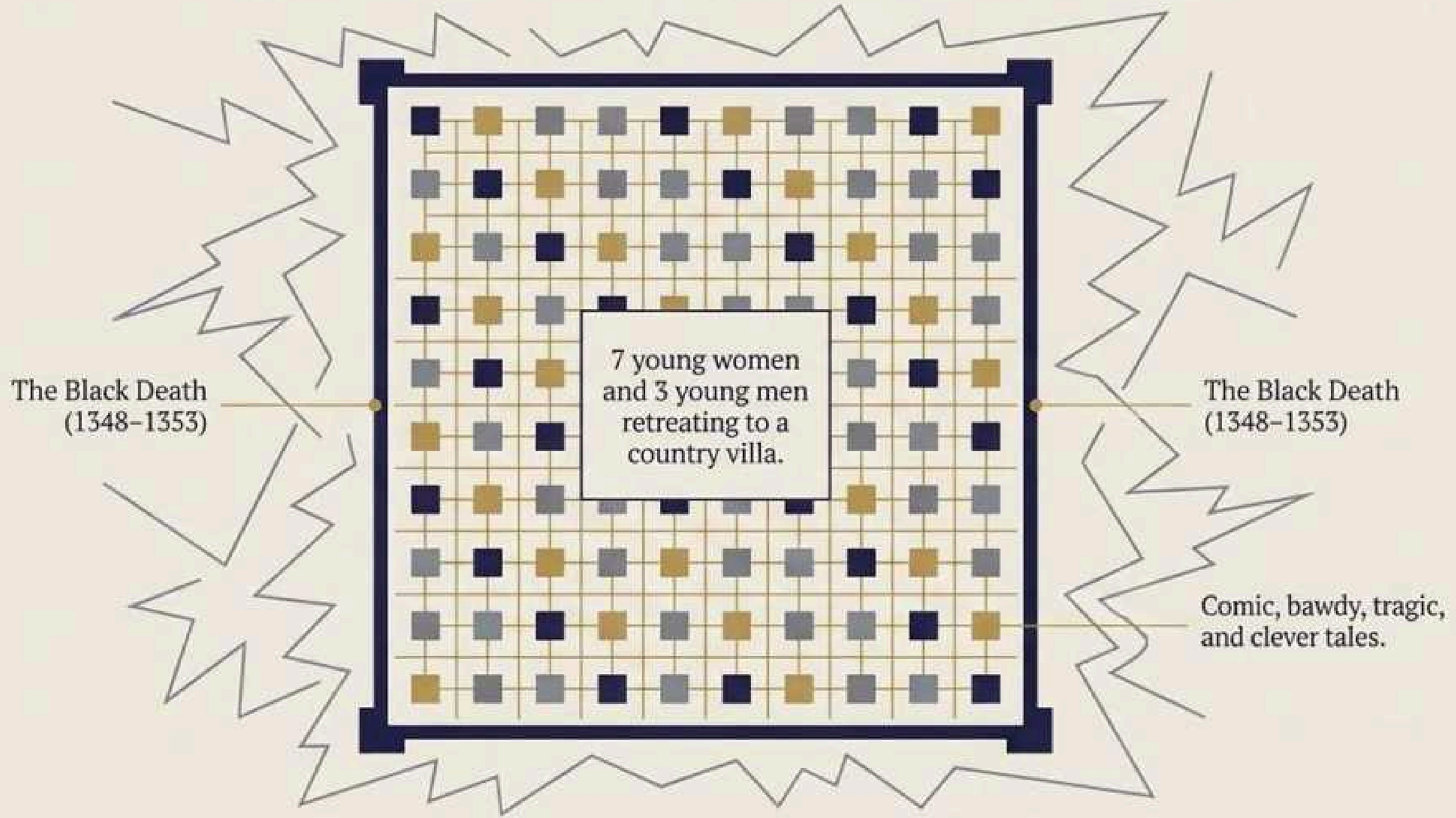

Guided by Virgil (Reason).
Defining logic: Each sin meets a fitting, precise punishment.

By populating this journey with people he actively knew, Dante fused eternal theology with immediate, stinging satire of his own age.

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# 2.11 The *Decameron* deploys narrative as a shield against physical and psychological terror.



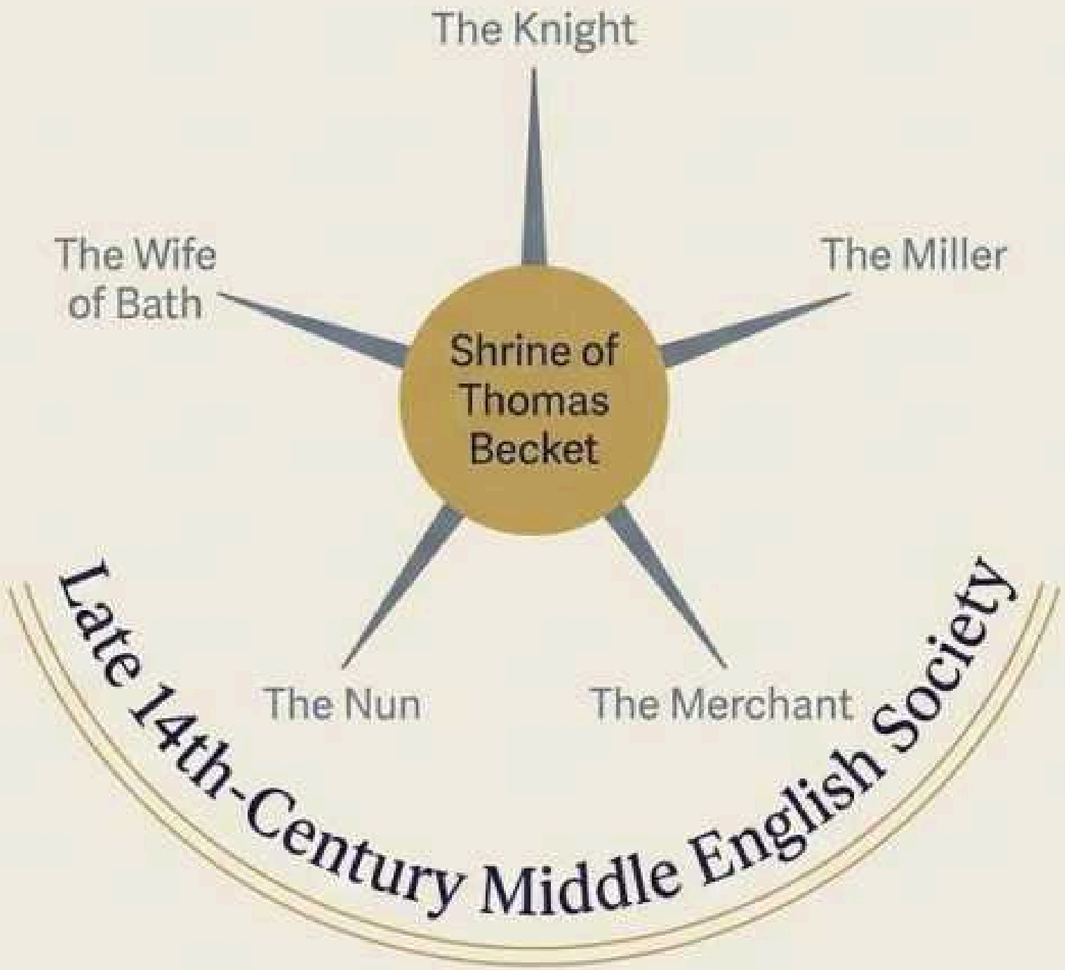




Boccaccio proved that stories can protect people from fear, establishing the ultimate model for a story inside a story.

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# 2.12

# Chaucer mapped a lively, incomplete portrait of a society in motion.

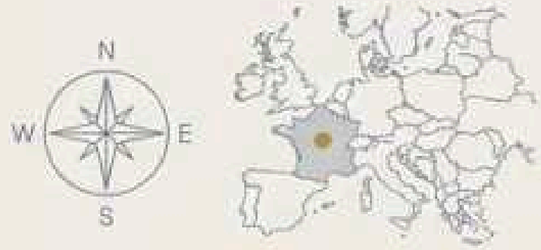




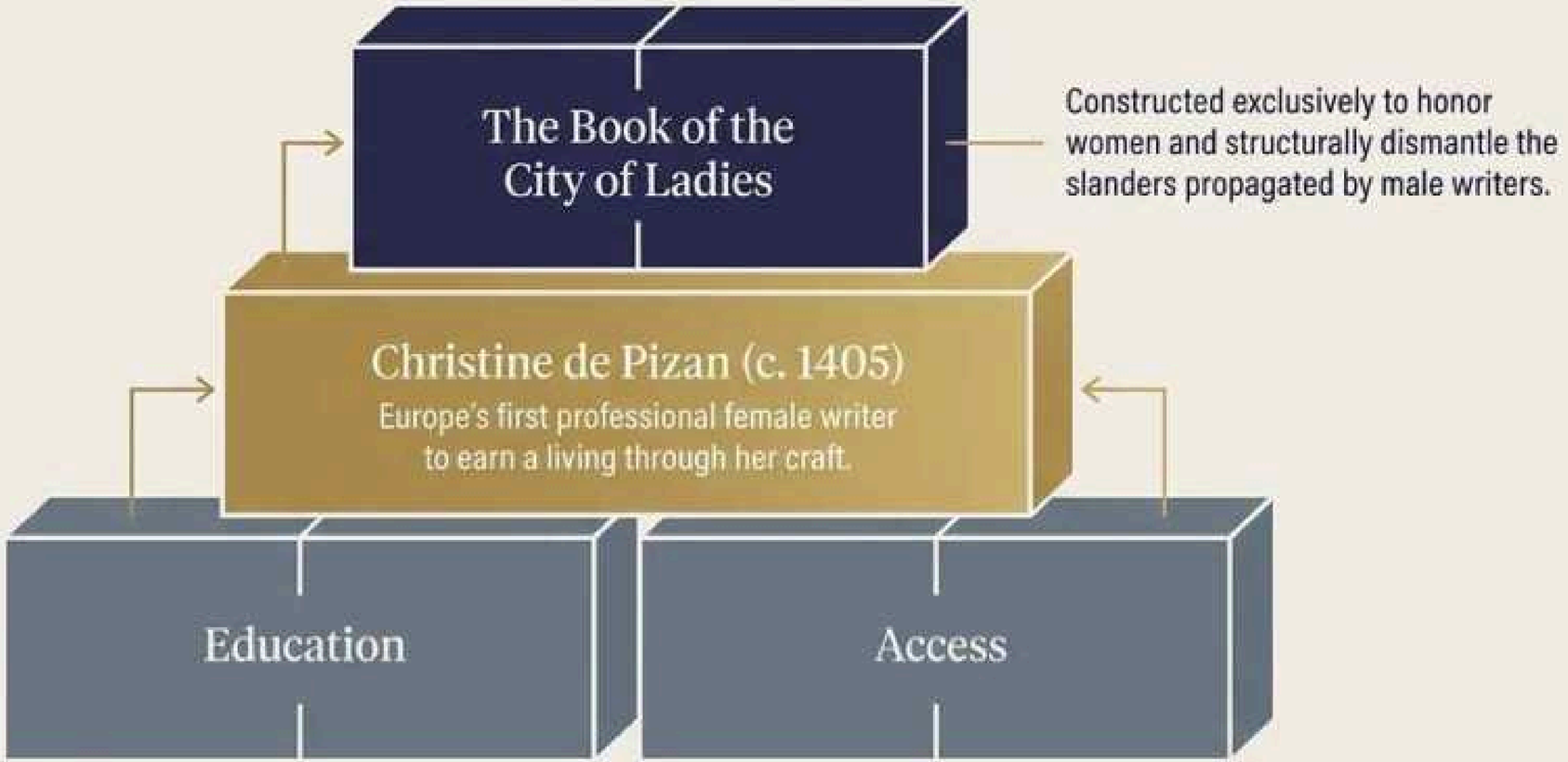

Despite being an unfinished project, this gathering of roughly thirty pilgrims remains a masterclass in capturing an entire cross-section of humanity passing the time.

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# 2.13



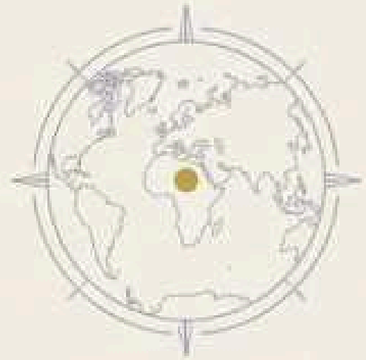

## The literary canon was strictly bound by who held access to a pen.

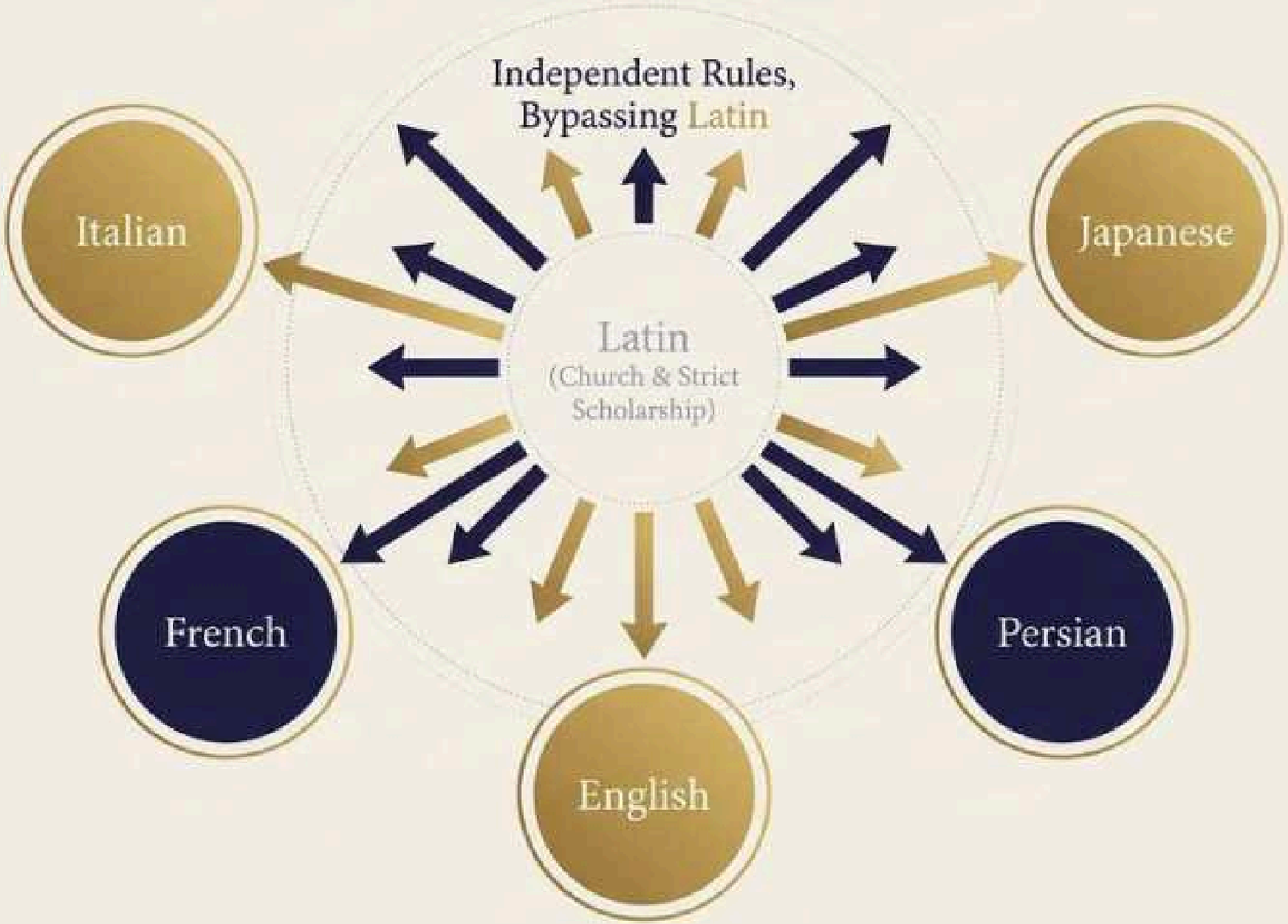



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2.14

# A deeper revolution shifted the written word from elite institutions to ordinary speech.






This shift permanently granted readers who did not know know Latin a legitimate share in the written world.

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# 2.15

The medieval era prized both the **preservation** of **memory** and the **architecture of invention.**



The Court and the Monastery → The Wider Public

**The Technique of Gathering:**
Multiple distinct voices unified into singular books.

- The Arabian Nights
- The Decameron
- The Canterbury Tales

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# 2.16 **Interrogate** the underlying **assumptions** of the medieval author.

## Assignment Card

### Step 1: The Selection
Choose a specific textual path: a canto of the Inferno, a tale from the Decameron, or a chapter of Genji.

### Step 2: The Reading
Commit to ten pages.

### Step 3: The Diagnosis
Write a concise analysis identifying exactly what the author assumed their original readers already knew.

Looking ahead: Lecture 3 will cross the threshold into the age of printing, the dawn of the theater, and the birth of the modern novel.

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