THE LEADING MEDIEVAL EUROPE HISTORY TEXTBOOK, NOW PROUDLY PUBLISHED BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

"*Medieval Europe* is readable, engaging, and highly informative, but still accessible. It provides the right balance of detailed information within an interpretive framework."

—Adrianna Bakos, *University of the Fraser Valley*

"*Medieval Europe* is the best short textbook out there. It's balanced nicely between chronology and trends; it's well organized and inclusive, especially of gender; and it's written in a no-nonsense colloquial voice."

—Lisa Bitel, *University of Southern California*

"This is a concise, readable text that is perfect for college students. It provides essential background, including information about peasant and town life, instead of just a recitation of the political highlights."

—Kristen Geaman, *The University of Toledo*

"Sandy Bardsley's additions and modifications to the text are built on the latest scholarship, and she maintains the friendly tone that previous generations of readers came to appreciate."

—Cullen Chandler, *Lycoming College*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JUDITH M. BENNETT is Professor of History Emerita at the University of Southern California and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

SANDY BARDSLEY is Professor of History at Moravian College.

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
www.oup.com/us/he

ISBN 978-0-19-006461-7
90000
9 780190 064617

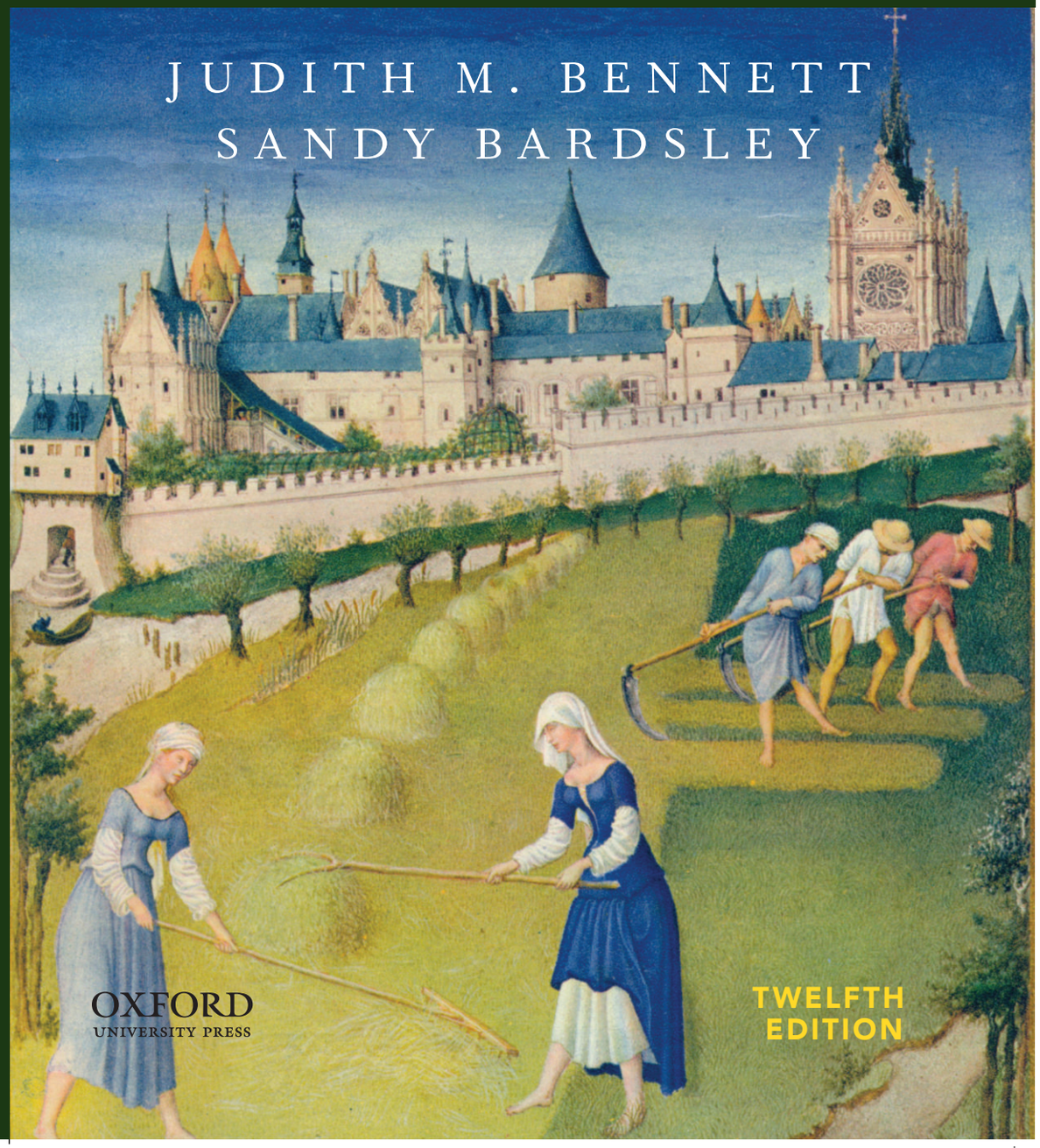
Cover Art: The Print Collector / Alamy Stock Photo
Cover Design: T. Williams

BENNETT • BARDSLEY MEDIEVAL EUROPE TWELFTH EDITION OXFORD

MEDIEVAL EUROPE

A Short History

JUDITH M. BENNETT
SANDY BARDSLEY



Medieval Europe
A Short History

Medieval Europe

A Short History

JUDITH M. BENNETT
University of Southern California

SANDY BARDSLEY
Moravian College

TWELFTH EDITION

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Bennett, Judith M., author. | Bardsley, Sandy, author.
Title: Medieval Europe : a short history / Judith M. Bennett, University of Southern California; Sandy Bardsley, Moravian College.
Description: Twelfth edition. | New York : Oxford University Press, [2021] | Rev. of: Medieval Europe / C. Warren Hollister, Judith M. Bennett. | Summary: "For five decades, Medieval Europe: A Short History has been the best-selling text for courses on the history of the Middle Ages. This acclaimed book has long been applauded for both its scholarship and its engaging narrative, and Oxford University Press is pleased to continue this tradition of excellence with a new, twelfth edition that features a new coauthor, Sandy Bardsley. The new edition offers increased coverage of race and ethnicity, more incorporation of archaeological data, and an overall streamlining of the text"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020003224 | ISBN 9780190064617 (paperback) | ISBN 9780197520116 (spiral bound) | ISBN 9780190068608 (epub) | ISBN 9780197527177 (pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Europe—History—476-1492. | Middle Ages. | Civilization, Medieval.
Classification: LCC D118 .H624 2021 | DDC 940.1—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020003224

Printing number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed by LSC Communications, Inc., United States of America

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Judith M. Bennett taught medieval history and women's history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Southern California. Educated at Mount Holyoke College and the University of Toronto, she is the author of numerous books and articles about peasants, women, and families in the Middle Ages. Professor Bennett has received several awards for her scholarly publications, and she is also an award-winning teacher. Now retired from teaching but not from writing, she divides her time between Portland, Oregon, and London.

Sandy Bardsley teaches medieval and early modern history and experimental archaeology at Moravian College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. A native of New Zealand, she attended the University of Otago as an undergraduate, where she used the fourth edition of this text, written by C. Warren Hollister. She has published books and articles on medieval women and helps run an annual conference for undergraduates on medieval and early modern studies. She has a dog called Clovis who is considerably sweeter in nature than his medieval namesake.

Until his death in 1997, **C. Warren Hollister** saw *Medieval Europe: A Short History* through nine editions. A distinguished scholar and beloved teacher, he was a founding member of the History Department at the University of California at Santa Barbara. His vision for this textbook continues to shape its form and enliven its pages.

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

Boldfaced words are defined in the glossary at the back of the book. These words are typeset in boldface at first use *only*.

BCE	Before the Common Era
CE	Common Era
b.	indicates date of birth
c.	circa, used to indicate an approximate date
d.	indicates date of death
fl.	indicates a person's active period, when they "flourished"
r.	indicates dates of reign, not dates of life

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

MEDIEVAL MYTHS

King Arthur (chapter 2)
The Flat Earth (chapter 4)
Lady Godiva (chapter 8)
Pope Joan (chapter 9)
Right of the First Night (chapter 11)
Robin Hood (chapter 12)
The Pied Piper of Hameln (chapter 14)
William Tell (chapter 15)

MAPS

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE TO THE TWELFTH EDITION

It's an exciting—if sometimes challenging—period in which to study the Middle Ages! This edition of *Medieval Europe: A Short History* appears at a time in which representations and misrepresentations of the Middle Ages are rife throughout modern culture. We think we know what happened in the thousand years of the medieval era, yet the deeper we dig, the more we realize the challenge of generalizing about this vibrant, interesting, and diverse era. As sports teams reconsider whether it is appropriate to call themselves the "Crusaders," as white supremacist groups claim the Middle Ages as the source of a "pure white" past (it certainly wasn't!), and as popular culture such as the TV series *Game of Thrones* draws references from medieval events, customs, and geography, we must appreciate anew the complexity of this age. Recent scholarship has emphasized that the medieval era was anything but monolithic and uniform. Much like our own era, it contained both religious zealots and compassionate saints, both chaotic politics and political unification, both social inequity and social justice, both tolerance and persecution. (Those interested in studying representations of the Middle Ages in the present and recent past should look at the burgeoning and exciting scholarship on medieval*ism*.)

This twelfth edition pays particular attention to Europe in its broader context—that is, to connections between Europeans and people elsewhere. Recent scientific advances have added tremendously to our ability to trace contacts in the absence of both documents and objects and to our confidence in those connections. For example, stable isotopes (elements found in bones) have enabled archaeologists to identify with relative accuracy the places where people grew up. We can tell, for example, that almost 20 percent of English medieval burial sites contain the remains of at least one individual born in North Africa. We can also learn from stable isotopes about diets and can thus measure an increase in the consumption of marine fish as communities adopted Christianity and abstained from eating red meat at particular times. DNA analysis, too, has enabled more

information about human trade and contact. We know a great deal more about the various strains of disease—particularly plague—that bounced around medieval Europe, and we can trace the origins of the bubonic plague that killed as many as a third to half of all Europeans in the fourteenth century to the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, which forms part of modern China. Over and over, these connections remind us that medieval Europe was no isolated island.

New data have not only told us about cultural contacts but also shaken other assumptions. The discovery that the bones of a tenth-century Viking warrior contained female DNA, for instance, surprised scholars who had always assumed that warfare was an entirely masculine occupation. Indeed, the sex of the warrior was not questioned by the nineteenth-century archaeologists who excavated the grave, along with many others, near Birka in Sweden. They assumed that the presence of weapons, shields, and horses indicated warriors, which in turn suggested that the bodies must be those of men. The fact that twenty-first century scholars even thought to ask the question "Might this be a woman?" reflects the era in which we live, as does the fact that this question is now answerable through DNA technology. Having discovered that she was female, we now have a multitude of new questions, many of which are again prompted by changing views in the present. Was this woman an exception to the rule, or was she representative of an unacknowledged trend? Did her contemporaries know she was female, and—if so—what did they think?

This revision owes an immeasurable debt both to C. Warren Hollister, who wrote the first eight editions, and to Judith M. Bennett, who made substantial updates and revisions for editions nine to eleven. Judith Bennett has continued to serve as consultant and advisor, and many sections of the book contain few or no changes to her clear and engaging style and content. Over and over, as I worked on revisions to this edition, I was struck by her impeccable scholarship and inimitable style. Her advice on specific matters was invariably timely and thoughtful. Nonetheless, she is not responsible for any errors, inconsistencies, or imbalances that may have crept in since the last revision: those are mine alone.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

- The Byzantine Empire and the Islamic empires each have an expanded chapter of their own.
- The social and economic changes of the Central Middle Ages are now treated in two chapters, not one: chapter 7 deals with changes in the countryside and the lives of the peasantry; chapter 8 examines changes in the towns and among the nobility. The rise of universities is also discussed in chapter 8 (previously it was located in what is now chapter 9, on the development of the papacy in the Central Middle Ages).
- Accordingly, there are two new biographical sketches: Constantine the African in chapter 4, and Cecilia Penifader in chapter 7.

- Student learning outcomes have been incorporated into the beginning of each chapter.
- And, of course, the lower price point—a major consideration for students and faculty alike—makes the book more accessible to a wider audience.

DIGITAL RESOURCES

Medieval Europe is enhanced by a robust set of digital resources. The access code that is included with all new copies provides an ebook, primary sources, quizzes, flashcards, and animated timelines and maps. These same resources are also available at www.oup.com/he/bennett12e. Students also have the option to purchase ebooks directly at Redshelf, VitalSource, and other vendors. A test-item file and PowerPoint slides are available to adopters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Debbi Gaspar, Nancy Strobel, and Donna Moyer, staff at Moravian College, for help with interlibrary loans and logistics; Monica Green of Arizona State University for her comprehensive and efficient help with the biography on Constantine the African; Cynthia Kosso, John Black, and Jamie Paxton for collegial advice and support; Susanna Throop of Ursinus College for help with material on the crusades; Cai Bardsley-Cutler and Marianne Cutler for distractions and advice, both solicited and unsolicited; anonymous readers for Oxford University Press; and particularly Katie Tunkavige and Charles Cavaliere at Oxford University Press.

I would also like to thank the reviewers of this edition for their helpful comments and suggestions—those who wished to remain anonymous as well as the following:

Adrianna Bakos, University of Fraser Valley
Lisa Bitel, University of Southern California
Martha Carlin, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee
Cullen Chandler, Lycoming College
Kristen Geaman, University of Toledo
Ben McRee, Franklin & Marshall College
Nathanael Melson, Hunter College
Janelle Werner, Bentley School

Once more, all errors are mine.
Sandy Bardsley

Introduction

There is an old-fashioned notion, long discredited yet still popularly accepted, that medieval Europe was a disastrous time. Today, the word *medieval* brings to mind such deplorable things as midnight curfews, repressive governments, and tangled graduation requirements. The Middle Ages, stretching across a thousand years from the fifth century to the fifteenth, are still viewed by some as a long, stupid detour in the march of human progress—a millennium of poverty, superstition, and gloom that divided the old golden age of the Roman Empire from the new golden age of the Italian Renaissance. During these years, as a famous historian said in 1860, human consciousness "lay dreaming or half awake." Another historian gleefully described the millennium as wrapped in "a monstrous fog, a heavy, gray, leaden fog." And to many others, the Middle Ages are simply the "Dark Ages," a long mistake wedged between Rome and Renaissance. At length, in the fifteenth century, the darkness is supposed to have lifted. Europeans awakened, basked in bright sunlight, and began thinking again. After a long medieval intermission, the Grand March of Human Progress resumed.

This Rip Van Winkle theory was first advanced at the end of the Middle Ages by Renaissance humanists who wanted to return to the triumphs of ancient Rome and by Protestant reformers who wanted to return to the earliest traditions of Christianity. For both, the medieval millennium was an obstacle, a sleeping wasteland between past glories and present hopes. Their nasty view of the Middle Ages survives some five hundred years later, but for different reasons. Because medieval people are long dead, they cannot protest if we today characterize their customs as primitive, their lifestyles as crude, and their values as horrific. Their silence offers us a safe opposite to ourselves, a bad time against which our own looks pretty good. Who, after all, would want to live in a time without electricity, running water, or computers? (But who, they might respond to us if they could, would want to live in a world plagued by nuclear weapons, global warming, and gargantuan cities?)

In any case, the Middle Ages were neither asleep nor awful, but instead were a time of constant change—so much so that Europe in 600 was vastly different from Europe in 1100 or 1400. Accordingly, this book is divided into three parts. The Early Middle Ages (c. 500–1000) span the troubled, formative centuries between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and the emergence of Western Europe as a more secure and confident civilization. For many, these centuries were a time of struggle, with low standards of living and reduced trade and communication. The Central Middle Ages (c. 1000–1300), on the other hand, embrace a period of growth: growth in population, wealth, cities, education, and territory. These centuries also saw religious reform, intellectual advance, and, alas, persecution of minority groups. The Later Middle Ages (c. 1300–1500) brought both terrible crises and dynamic creativity as people scrambled to respond to change. Between 1300 and 1350, Europe was devastated by both famine and plague, but by 1500, Europe's technological know-how, political structure, and economic organization had given it a decisive edge over all other civilizations on earth. Columbus had begun to explore the Americas. The Portuguese had sailed around Africa to India. And Europeans had developed the cannon, the printing press, the mechanical clock, eyeglasses, distilled liquor, and numerous other ingredients of modern civilization.

During the "modern" centuries that followed the Middle Ages—that is, from about 1500 to 1945—European fleets, armies, and ideas spread across the globe and transformed it. Even today, non-European countries remain deeply influenced by medieval ideas about education, government, social structure, and social justice. Universities, a medieval invention, dot the globe, and the legislative bodies that govern the United States, Mexico, Canada, Israel, Japan, and the newer democracies of Eastern Europe are, to some extent, descendants of the parliaments and assemblies of the Middle Ages. Even the communist systems that survive in China, Cuba, and North Korea are based on Western European ideas, some of which can be traced back before the time of Karl Marx to late medieval peasants who attacked their "social betters" with the slogan of a classless society:

> When Adam delved [dug] and Eve span,
> Who was then the gentleman?

In short, anyone who wonders how Western Europe helped to transform the world, for good or ill, into the global civilization that envelops us today must look to the medieval centuries for an important part of the answer. During the Middle Ages, Europe grew from a predominantly rural society, thinly settled and impoverished, into a powerful and distinctive civilization whose history helped to shape the world we now know.

In part, however, this book celebrates change as well as descent, telling a story of how medieval Europe was not just part-prologue to our own day but also just plain *different*. Many of these differences might look weird and exotic to us today. Why did medieval people imagine that monstrous races—people with no torsos, or one-legged people, or horned people—lived beyond the borders of the known world? What explains medieval flagellants who reacted to plague by whipping themselves into frenzies of religious regret? How could medieval people have found it acceptable for some to live as slaves and others as semi-free serfs? Sometimes these peculiar medieval customs survive today as, for example, in the ways some Hollywood movies depict Martians or other alien beings. Sometimes these customs have parallels in non-European cultures, such as those that accept self-flagellation as a suitable form of religious expression. And sometimes these customs—serfdom is a good example—simply died out, leaving little or no trace in our contemporary world. Even these extinct medieval customs have a place in our story, for they are fascinating illustrations of the breadth of human experiences, past and present, and they are, of course, integral parts of the medieval world that we seek not merely to observe but also to understand.

CHAPTER 1

Romans, Christians, and Barbarians

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

Identify the most important political and religious trends of the Early Middle Ages.

Explain what is meant by the "Roman Peace" and when it lasted.

Outline the beginnings of early Christianity and note the major changes in Christianity between the first and fifth centuries CE.

Relate the most important tribes of barbarian invaders and their eventual places of settlement.

Assess the reasons for the decline of the western part of the Roman Empire.

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The term *Early Middle Ages* refers to the period between about 500 and 1000, although such dividing lines are flexible and would have passed unnoticed at the time. We will linger over this half-millennium for six chapters, in which we will see one political order decay (Rome), multiple cultures blend, and three new civilizations emerge (Western Christendom, the Byzantine Empire, and the Islamic empires). Throughout the Early Middle Ages, Western **Christendom**, the focus of this book, was the weakest of the three, although it slowly gained political, economic, and social strength by the year 1000.

Rather than descending suddenly onto Europe in 500, we will approach from the perspective of two of its main components: a diverse and city-based Roman culture on the one hand and a largely agrarian barbarian culture on the other. In this chapter, we will trace the slow spread of Christianity, the invasions and settlements of new peoples, and the collapse of Roman imperial authority in the West. A drone flying over Europe in about the year 200 would have found several

quite distinct societies and settlements. The city of Rome itself was still a vast and populous place, with a population of over a million. Home to the Colosseum, theaters, temples, memorial arches, the vast hippodrome, and many other public buildings, Rome considered itself the "eternal city." Other cities built throughout the Mediterranean might appear from the air like miniature versions of Rome, with theaters, amphitheaters, and temples all built in stone. From Petra, in modern Jordan, to Leptis Magna, in modern Libya, to Mérida, in modern Spain, Roman cities served as centers of administration and tax collection. From some of these cities, aqueducts snaked into the countryside to bring fresh water to inhabitants. Yet the vast majority of Europe sighted from our anachronistic drone would have featured few stone buildings, few roads, and little infrastructure. The Romans claimed authority over a large area, but as we will see, Europe's prior inhabitants had other ideas. These inhabitants had far more in common with the so-called barbarians who were already trading across the borders of the Roman Empire and making incursions into its territory. The centuries leading to the collapse of the Roman Empire, then, involved contact (and sometimes conflict) between cultures that could hardly have been more different.

The five chapters following this one treat the centuries after 500, when the Roman Empire was carved into three successor civilizations. We will trace the story of how the eastern and southern reaches of the old Roman Empire came to be dominated by Byzantines and Muslims. Because the subject of this book is the medieval West, we will appreciate Byzantine and Islamic civilizations primarily for their influences—cultural, religious, and military—on Western Europe. We will then pick up the tale of the West, initially Rome's weakest heir. In the sixth and seventh centuries, it suffered repeated invasions, political turmoil, and economic meltdown. Illiterate, stubborn landholders led their followers in battle, fighting among themselves, against other barbarians, and eventually, against the armies of an expanding Islamic empire. In the midst of this upheaval, cities became underpopulated and ruined while the countryside suffered periodic famines and plagues.

Yet Christianity prospered. Many Christian queens, in a process now called **domestic proselytization**, brought their husbands and realms into the Christian fold. (The first time an unusual word or phrase is used, it will be marked in boldface to indicate that you can find a fuller definition in the glossary at the back.) Monks and nuns sought poorer converts among pre-Roman and barbarian peoples now settled in the West. Their monasteries were then the heartbeat of Christianity, throbbing hubs of missionary work, agricultural production, and scholarly endeavor. In a world where few others were literate, monks and nuns kept Rome's literary heritage alive by copying, preserving, and studying old Latin manuscripts. In Rome itself, the **papacy** did not exactly prosper, but

its *claims* to greater authority kept alive the ideal of a single and unified **Church**, governed, as an empire once had been, from Rome.

In the 700s, an upstart dynasty—the Carolingians—worked closely with monks, nuns, and popes to build a new empire that eventually stretched across most of Western Christendom. When Charlemagne, the greatest of the Carolingians, was crowned as "Roman Emperor" in 800, his new title evoked both the real power he wielded and the imaginative power of the legacy of Rome. But lacking large cities and an educated bureaucracy, the Carolingian empire soon collapsed amid a new wave of invaders, this time Vikings, Muslims, and Magyars. In the course of these invasions, and partly in response to them, strong administrations emerged in England and among the German-speaking heirs of the Carolingians. But in the western part of the Carolingians' old empire, their French-speaking descendants proved feeble rulers, and the burden of defense fell to local dukes and counts who fortified their lands with castles and gradually tightened their control over lesser folk. From their tough response to tough times emerged what we today call **feudalism**.

By 1000, the invasions had run their course, and in the relative peace that graced the beginning of the second millennium, peasants enjoyed better harvests, townspeople profited from expanding trade, aristocrats built bigger and better castles, and the clergy began to strengthen their Church. The Early Middle Ages began about 500 with the decay of an old and powerful civilization; it ended about 1000 with the coming of age of a new civilization, radically different from ancient Rome yet, in a sense, one of its children.

THE ROMAN PEACE (31 BCE–180 CE) AND AFTER

For the first two centuries of the Common Era, the Roman Empire was one of the largest the world had ever known. But the phrase *Common Era* refers a dating system actually unknown to the Romans and developed several centuries later. An early medieval monk tallied the years that separated his own life from the birth of Jesus, counting each as a year *Anno Domini* ("in the year of our lord"). He miscalculated—it now seems that Jesus was, in fact, born about four years before the year 1 Anno Domini—but his system stuck. Its old Christian abbreviations—BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini)—are now conventionally replaced by BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era).

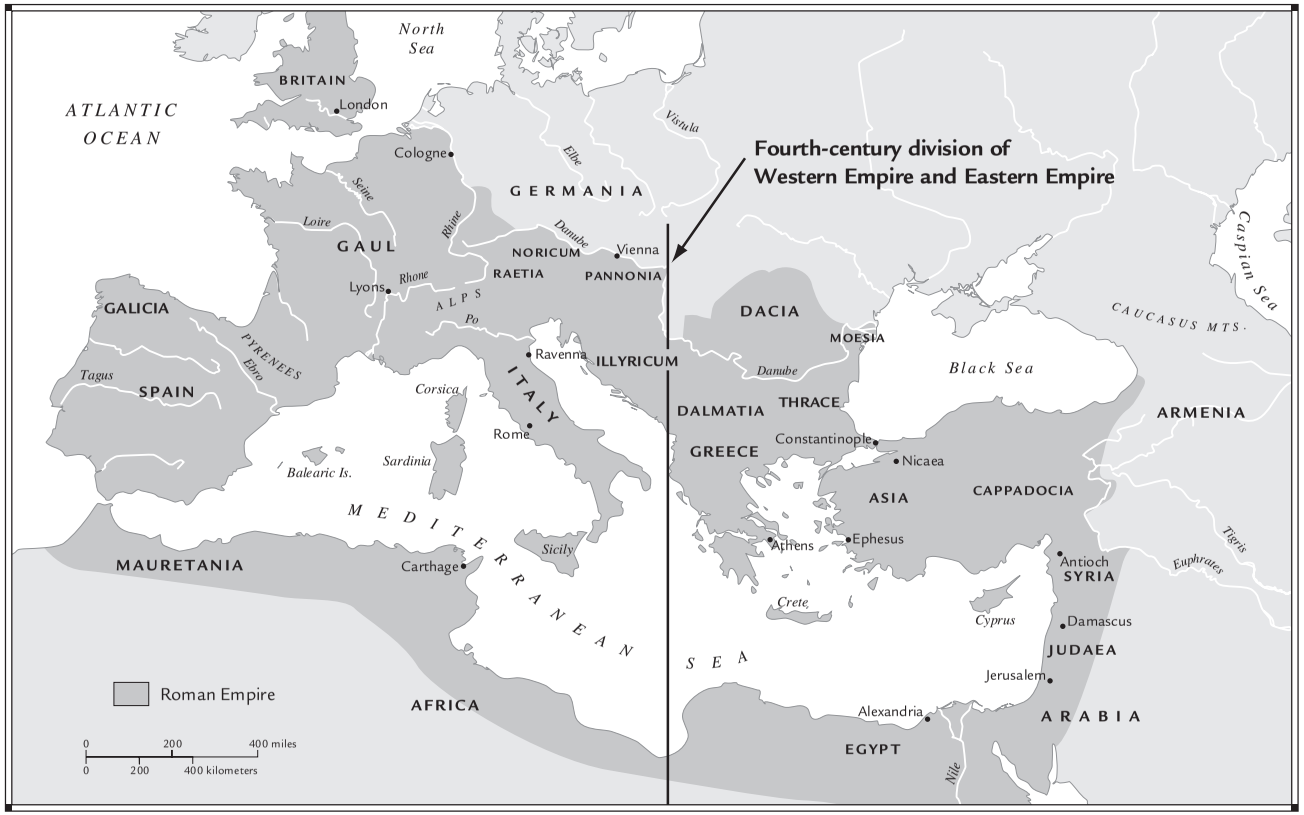
In fact, focusing on the Roman Empire—which by convention begins with the accession of the first emperor, Augustus, in 31 BCE—neglects the fact that Rome had already existed as a Republic for about 500 years. Much of its expansion happened in the third and second centuries BCE, as it grew to dominate the Mediterranean. This fast expansion brought great wealth and power back to the capital, but it did not benefit all Romans equally. New money and

power won in the provinces exacerbated long-standing tensions between aristocratic patrician families and non-noble plebeians. The last century of the Republic was one of considerable strife, dissolving into civil wars with the assassination of Julius Caesar (44 BCE).

Augustus, Caesar's grand-nephew, is credited with launching a period of political stability, the *Pax Romana* or "Roman Peace" that extended from the Euphrates River in modern Iraq to the shores of the Atlantic, and from the Sahara Desert in North Africa to the Danube and Rhine rivers of central Europe (see Map 1.1). The Empire stretched roughly 3,000 miles from east to west, about the same breadth as the continental United States today. According to best scholarly guesses, its inhabitants numbered more than 50 million (about one-sixth of the US population) and a number comparable to that of the contemporary Han dynasty in East Asia. Indeed, the Roman and Chinese empires traded along the Silk Road, a route of more than 4,000 miles that brought luxuries such as silk and spices to Roman aristocrats and took Roman glassware and jewels to Asia. But the Roman Empire was by no means uniformly rich. The eastern provinces, where commerce and civilization had flourished long before Rome, were more populous and prosperous. The southern provinces—that is, the northern coasts of Africa—provided valued resources. The northern and western provinces, on the other hand, from which medieval European civilization would emerge, were relatively poor in people and resources.

Let us take one step further backward in order to appreciate the cultural complexity of the Roman Empire. Roman culture was rich and eclectic, but it touched only a thin social layer. Many ordinary people, living in farms and villages instead of cities, continued to speak their old languages, follow their local customs, and worship their traditional deities as they had done prior to Roman expansion. In the eastern Mediterranean, this meant the survival of many languages and cultures, such as Egyptian, Hebrew, and—especially—Greek. Indeed, although Greece and its territories throughout the eastern Mediterranean had fallen under Roman *political* authority, its distinctive culture exerted such a dominating *cultural* influence that even some Romans doubted who had conquered whom. Most wealthy Romans were bilingual in both Greek and Latin, and they shared a common culture that we today call Greco-Roman.

Romans were less influenced by the peoples living in Western Europe and North Africa prior to expansion and conquest. The inhabitants of Western Europe are often known collectively as Celts, and we shall use this term here despite ongoing controversies about it. (In brief, scholars dispute whether the inhabitants of Western Europe prior to Roman expansion indeed shared a language with Celtic origins or a common culture.) From an anthropological perspective, the Celts are said to constitute the peoples of "Iron Age" Europe, and indeed,



Map 1.1 The Roman Empire during the Pax Romana

This map shows the Roman Empire at its height, c. 180 CE, when the Mediterranean was entirely encircled by Roman lands. Notice how the Rhine and Danube rivers defined the north-central boundary of Roman authority. Added to this map is a line that shows how this empire was later divided—in the fourth century—into western and eastern halves. From this division would eventually emerge medieval Europe (in the west) and the Byzantine Empire (in the east).

the metalcraft of this era (not just iron but also bronze, gold, and other metals) is intricate and fine (look ahead to Figure 2.1). They were "Roman" only to the extent that they bowed to Roman authority and paid taxes to Rome. Romans established cities throughout Western Europe—Trier, Paris, London, Barcelona, and many more—often on the foundations of a smaller Celtic village in order to collect taxes and organize administration. But the effects of Roman civilization were often shallow; when the Romans withdrew from the British Isles in the late fourth century, for instance, they left few visible traces besides walls, roads, and some declining cities.

Romans expanded their territory into North Africa following the Punic Wars between the cities of Rome and Carthage in the third to second centuries BCE. The Berber peoples of North Africa accepted Roman culture to varying degrees. Some adopted Latin and were recruited into the Roman army, while others stayed largely immune to Roman influence. North Africa was prized for its grain, olive oil, and pottery. Cities such as Carthage, the old Phoenician capital defeated in the Punic Wars, were fewer than 400 miles from the city of Rome, and much more accessible by sea than many territories of northern and western Europe.

The vast Roman Empire, then, housed many diverse people and cultures and facilitated trade and communication among them. Excavation of cemeteries from Roman-era England shows that its cities were by no means populated by Celts and Italian Romans alone. A cemetery in Southwark, in southern London, included at least four people with African ancestry, and another four Africans were buried in York (northern England). In Roman-era Winchester (southern England), one-quarter of those buried were immigrants, some of whom had traveled from as far away as Hungary. Traded goods, too, hint at broader exchanges: cities in central Tunisia in North Africa were renowned for producing a style of pottery known as African slip ware, valued for its high-quality tableware and lamps and sold throughout the Mediterranean. Trade links such as these are important because to historians, they serve as tips of icebergs for other, less tangible exchanges, such as those of ideas (including religions) and diseases.

Across this vast territory, during the centuries of the Roman Peace, the power of Rome was firm but not suffocating. The Empire was united by the power of Roman armies, the administration of Roman cities, and the loyalty of local elites. It was also united by the power of the idea of "Rome," which slowly broadened to embrace as a Roman citizen every free inhabitant of the Empire, although most never glimpsed the hills and temples of that city. Medieval people would continue to be mesmerized by the idea of Rome—its awesome power, its lasting peace, and the culture left by its philosophers, artists, and poets—and they would extend this idea beyond the confines of Roman history. In later centuries,

Greeks in Constantinople, Saxons in Aachen, and Habsburgs in Vienna would all call themselves "Roman" emperors. Even today, the legacy of Rome lingers—for example, in the arcane symbols that decorate modern currencies and in the classical architecture of Washington, DC.

The Roman Peace of the first two centuries CE was not always especially peaceful, but it was much less chaotic than what came after. During the third century, everything seemed to go wrong. **Barbarians** lurked threateningly on the borders of the Empire. Roman troops made and unmade emperors so often that (to exaggerate only slightly) a man might be a general one day, emperor the next, and dead the third. All were troubled by plagues, famines, and such extraordinary inflation that the cost of living soared 1,000 percent in just one generation.

Some Roman Emperors
Diocletian, r. 284–305
Constantine, r. 306–337
Valens, r. 364–378
Theodosius, r. 378–395

The Empire was saved, though just barely, by reform from the top in the late third and early fourth centuries. With energetic creativity, the emperors Diocletian (r. 284–305) and Constantine (r. 306–337) rebuilt the loosely governed Empire of earlier days into an autocracy supported by a huge army, many bureaucrats, and awe-inspiring emperors. The regimented government that resulted from their reforms has often been criticized, and with justice. But it enabled the faltering Empire to survive for nearly two more centuries in the West—and for another millennium in the East.

The different trajectories of West and East were, in fact, rooted in these reforms, for Diocletian and Constantine began to divide the Empire, a process of profound importance for the development of a distinctive culture in what would come to be known as the medieval West. The division began as an administrative matter, with a line drawn by Diocletian through the Balkans (where even today, East and West meet in tense confrontation) and down through the heart of North Africa (see Map 1.1). To the west of this line lay Rome, the old capital of the Empire, and a society that was more rural, less wealthy, and more vulnerable to invasion. To the east lay Constantinople, a new capital founded by Constantine, and a more urban, secure, and prosperous world. With the death of the emperor Theodosius (r. 378–395) at the end of the fourth century, this administrative division became permanent. Thereafter, Western Empire and Eastern Empire drifted apart while nevertheless sharing a common imperial past.

CHRISTIANITY

By 395, the common imperial past of Western and Eastern Empires included a common faith, Christianity. First tolerated and then embraced by fourth-century emperors, Christianity was a religion shaped by multiple sources. It was rooted in the traditions of Judaism, molded by the teachings of Jesus and his earliest disciples, and matured by the intellectual and institutional traditions of Rome. This faith would become so integral to the European Middle Ages that medieval people created a new word—*Christendom*, a Christian kingdom—to describe their world.

Jesus lived and died a Jew in the province of Judea, a once-independent state that was by then firmly under Roman control. Most Jews then lived in Judea, but some lived in Alexandria, Tarsus, Ephesus, and other cities in the eastern Mediterranean. For the people of Judea, subjection to Roman authority was a relatively new and bitter experience. For the Romans, Judea was a difficult province, politically turbulent and also, thanks to Jewish monotheism, religiously peculiar. Jesus was born into this explosive mixture of Jewish and Roman traditions around 4 BCE, and when he reached maturity, he spoke particularly to the Jewish poor. His sermons stressed love, compassion, and humility, and like earlier Hebrew prophets, he scorned empty ritual in religion. Some Jews believed that the divine authority with which he claimed to speak was verified by miracles of healing the sick and raising the dead. But others worried. To the Roman authorities, he was simply a troublemaker in a troubled province. Brought before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate on the charge of claiming to be king of the Jews, an act of treason against the emperor, Jesus was condemned in 30 CE to crucifixion, a common means of executing non-Romans.

According to the Christian Gospels, Jesus's greatest miracle was his resurrection, his return to life on the third day after his death on the cross. He was said to have remained on earth for a short period thereafter, giving solace and instruction to his disciples. He was then said to have ascended into heaven with the promise that he would return in glory to judge all souls and bring the world to an end. The earliest generations of Christians expected this second coming to occur quickly, but with time, Christians began to organize their communities for survival over the long haul.

From the beginning, most Christians not only accepted the ethical teachings of Jesus but also worshiped him as the Christ—that is, as the incarnation of God. As reported in the Gospels, Jesus had made repeated distinctions between himself and God ("the Father"), yet he also stated, "I and the Father are one." Those who followed Jesus interpreted such statements in various ways. But most Christians slowly became committed to the difficult and sophisticated notion of a Jesus Christ who was both fully human and fully divine (see Figure 1.1). If this

Figure 1.1 The Good Shepherd
No contemporary portraits of Jesus survive; the earliest date from the fourth century, when this statue was made. The "Good Shepherd" theme emphasizes the youth, simplicity, and goodness of Jesus, and it was one of the most popular images in early Christian art. Early Christians debated the nature of Jesus: Was he human (as emphasized in this image), or divine (as emphasized in images of Jesus splendidly dressed or enthroned), or both? See Figure 3.4 for a mosaic that emphasizes the dignity of Jesus.

seemed contradictory, well, that was the miracle of the thing. Most also accepted the notion of a single divinity with three equal aspects: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ was the Son, or Second Person, in a Holy Trinity that was nevertheless one God.

Early Christians and the Early Church

Christianity started small, as little more than a Jewish sect, but it was soon opened to more people and ideas. Jesus's own apostles were little influenced by Greek thought and sought to keep their faith strictly within the framework of Judaism. But St. Paul (c. 5 BCE–67 CE), an early convert who was both a Jew and a Roman citizen, succeeded in opening Christian communities to Gentiles, or non-Jews. Paul taught that Christians should not be bound by strict Jewish

dietary laws or the requirement of circumcision, which would have severely diminished Christianity's attraction to adult, non-Jewish males. Under Paul's leadership, the new faith was opened to all people everywhere who would accept Jesus as God and Savior.

Christianity was initially only one of many **mystery religions**—so-called because they promised mystical union between worshipers and divine beings—that flourished in the early centuries CE. The gods and goddesses of ancient Rome safeguarded the welfare of household and state, yet the deities of new mystery cults offered comfort for individual worries and hopes. From Egypt came the cult of the goddess Isis; from Persia came the cult of the savior Mithras; from Judea came Christianity. Roman traders and soldiers spread these ideas, so temples to Mithras have been found, for instance, in places as far afield as Britain and Syria. Some Christian beliefs and practices resembled other mystery religions: baptism, eternal salvation, the death and resurrection of a savior-god, a sacramental meal, a divine father who looked after his human family—none of these was new. Yet Christianity differed from other mystery religions in two fundamental ways, and in the intense atmosphere of worldly dissatisfaction and spiritual longing that characterized the hard times of the third century, these helped Christianity slowly triumph over its competitors. First, its founder and savior was an actual historical person; compared with the human-god Jesus, such deities as Isis and Mithras might have seemed more distant and less real. Second, the Christian god was not merely the best of many deities but the One God, the God of the Jews, unique in all antiquity in his claims to exclusiveness and omnipotence, and now detached from his association with the Jewish people to become the One God of *all* who would accept Christian baptism. Monotheism, in other words, was clear and attractive.

Some early converts to Christianity were wealthy enough to support their new faith with money and shelter. In Philippi, for example, Paul and Luke stayed with Lydia, a dealer in purple dyes, whose household became the nucleus of the town's Christian community. Lydia's prominent role was not unusual, for women were active in early Christian congregations. Yet although some rich women—and men—accepted Christianity in its earliest years, the new faith drew converts from a wide swath of Roman society, including artisans, small traders, and even the urban poor. These ordinary folk might have found it easy to accept a savior who had worked as a carpenter; consorted with fishermen, ex-prostitutes, and similar riffraff; and promised salvation to all who followed him—free or slave, man or woman. But whether rich, middling, or poor, most early converts lived in cities.

From the first, converts were baptized, a ritual whereby they were accepted into the Church, had all sins forgiven, and received God's grace. Baptism was understood as a **sacrament**, a channel of divine grace through which the recipient

was infused with the spirit of Christ. Because it erased all sins, some put baptism off until they were near death. Christians also engaged regularly in a holy meal of bread and wine that came to be known as the **Eucharist** (Greek for "thanksgiving"). These rituals sustained Christian communities, and so, too, did written texts, circulating widely by the end of the first century, that told the stories of their faith. Some of these were lost or rejected by later generations, but four—those ascribed to the authorship of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—became the Gospels, the core of the Christian New Testament. The Christian Old Testament was drawn from the Hebrew Bible: the Torah, writings of the prophets, and other sacred texts.

Nourished by rituals and writings, Christians were also inspired by holy people or **saints**. In the earliest centuries of Christianity, saints were honored in an informal process of recognition; if people thought you were a saint, you were. Most early saints were distinguished by their exceptional self-denial (chastity was especially important) or by their martyrdom. Stories celebrating the lives of saintly people added another written tradition—that of **hagiography**—to the textual treasury of Christianity. In 202, for example, a young woman named Perpetua suffered martyrdom in Carthage. The story of her Christian courage inspired its readers, advanced the victim's status as *Saint* Perpetua, and even today provides an important source for the history of early Christians. (Because saintly status is a matter of historical interest, persons recognized by the medieval Church as saints will be so noted in this textbook, usually just at first reference.)

At the same time that Christians were developing rites, texts, and saintly models to guide their faith, they also grew more organized. Most early communities met in homes, but by the fourth and fifth centuries, purpose-built churches served many communities (see Figure 1.2). A distinction developed between the **clergy** who governed the Church and administered the sacraments and the **laity** whom they served. The clergy, initiated into the Christian priesthood through the ceremony of ordination, were divided into several ranks, organized rather like a military troop. At the bottom were ordinary priests, who conducted religious services and administered the Eucharist. They were supervised by **bishops**, each of whom governed a city and its region (or **diocese**). Bishops were, in turn, supervised by archbishops, based in the more important cities, who wielded authority over all in their archdiocese. Atop this hierarchy were the patriarchs, bishops of the five greatest cities of the Empire: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and later, Constantinople. Of these five, only the bishop of Rome resided in the West. He claimed preeminence over all Christians, based on the tradition that Peter, foremost among Jesus's twelve apostles, had spent his last years in Rome and suffered martyrdom there. Peter was held to have been the first bishop of Rome—the first **pope**—and later popes regarded themselves as his direct successors. In the medieval West, the bishop of Rome's claim of papal

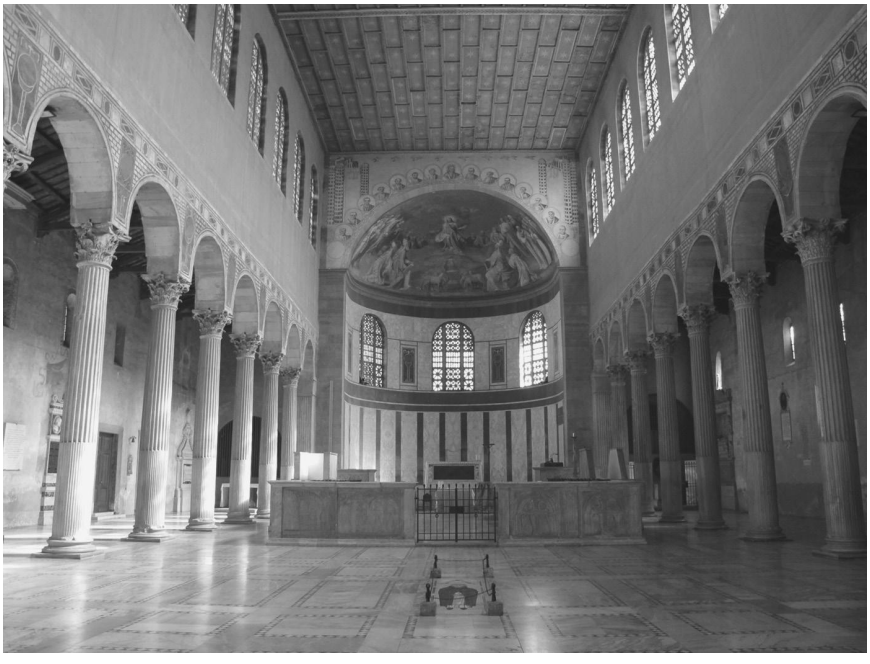


Figure 1.2 An Early Church
The nave and apse of Santa Sabina in Rome, depicted here, were begun c. 425 CE and were built in the style of a Roman basilica. In the fifteenth century, architects inspired by humanist ideals would emulate the flat roofs and rounded arches of this style (see Figure 16.3).

supremacy was readily accepted, but it became a contentious and divisive issue in papal relations with the patriarchs of the Eastern Church.

Christianity and the Empire

From the first, the Christians of the Roman Empire were a people apart, convinced that they alone possessed the truth and that the truth would one day triumph. They were eager to win new converts and were uncompromising in their rejection of other religions. In this regard, they were distinct from almost all other contemporary faiths except Judaism, for most people then readily adopted new deities without rejecting old ones. The refusal of Christians to offer sacrifices to the state gods resulted in persecution, but only intermittently. Violent purges alternated with long periods of official inaction so that most Christians lived in quiet coexistence with the pagan majority while a few met terrifying—and often unanticipated—deaths. Martyrdoms seem to have strengthened the resolve of those who survived. As Tertullian (c. 150–225) proclaimed to the pagans who persecuted Christians, "The more you cut us down, the more we multiply.

The blood of our Christian martyrs is the seed of our Church." At the beginning of the fourth century, the emperor Diocletian launched the most severe program of persecution and, as it happened, the last.

The failure of Diocletian's persecution to eradicate Christianity made it evident that the Empire had little choice but to accommodate itself to this new religion. In 313, the emperor Constantine reversed imperial policy and granted Christians official toleration. He then nurtured Christianity, as if he hoped that the new religion might provide a sort of glue to hold his Empire together. The Christian emperors who succeeded him followed his lead. They convened Church **councils** to resolve disputes among Christian beliefs and built great churches that spoke to the power of their Christian God. They replaced the combat of gladiators, which had traditionally provided savage amusement for the urban masses, with the less bloodthirsty sport of chariot racing. They abruptly ended the practice of crucifixion. They prohibited the abandonment of infants, a practice repugnant to Christians, as it had always been to Jews, that was losing support in an era of declining population. They did not, however, eliminate slavery, for it was deemed too essential to the Roman economy.

Paganism long survived, particularly in the countryside (as suggested by the word *pagan*, which derives from the Latin word for peasant, *paganus*). But it slowly withered before the momentum of an imperially sponsored Christianity. The old gods of Rome gradually shuffled offstage, and at the end of the century, the emperor Theodosius I (r. 378–395) banned their worship altogether. Christianity, an outlawed faith in 300, was by 400 the official religion of the Roman state.

Christianity and Judaism

At the same time that Christianity was developing into a separate religion, Judaism itself was also changing, for the failure of two Jewish uprisings in 70 and 135 CE devastated Judea. After the second uprising, Jews were not even allowed into Jerusalem, except for one day each year. Many left Judea, and those who remained were a minority in their old homeland. Jews resettled not only in the Eastern Empire, where Jewish communities had long flourished, but also in western cities such as Rome, Milan, Córdoba, Marseille, Lyon, and even Cologne along the northern frontier. Thanks to a long tradition of Roman respect for Jewish "ancestral law," Jews were allowed to practice their faith without harassment and even to become citizens of Rome.

In the fourth century, when Christianity grew into an imperial religion, Jews continued to be allowed to follow their faith, but somewhat more grudgingly than in the past. When Theodosius banned paganism, he explicitly extended his protection to Jews. But most early Christian theologians viewed Judaism in negative or, at best, ambivalent terms: they characterized Judaism as an old religion that had once been

useful but was now no longer justified; they saw Judaism as a flawed and even evil faith; they suggested that Judaism could be tolerated only because its "errors" were useful counterexamples to Christians. Jewish theologians had some unkind words for Christianity, too, characterizing Jesus as a magician, a rebel, or even the son of a prostitute. But Christians had the power of the state on their side. By 500, Jewish communities were established throughout the Mediterranean world, but the disinterest of pagan Rome had been replaced by Christianity's more anxious toleration.

Christianity and Classical Culture

Christianity changed Rome, and Rome returned the favor, opening the religion to Greco-Roman thought. **Neoplatonism** (so named because it was based loosely on the much earlier thought of the Greek philosopher Plato) taught of one god, a god who was infinite, unknowable, and unapproachable, except through mystical experience. This deity was the ultimate source of everything, spiritual as well as physical, although the physical world of bodies, and earth, and matter was lesser and more degraded. Neoplatonists taught that the human soul, located at a lesser stage and trapped in the human body, should seek to return, via **mysticism,** to the perfect oneness of god. The otherworldly strictness of this philosophy made it a good ally for Christians, but so, too, did its notion of a single Oneness from which all existence derived. This was easy to associate with the Christian God, and in the process, Christians incorporated into their theology Neoplatonic ideas about the soul, the role of mysticism, and the corruption of the material world.

Classical ideas about allegory provided another means for Christian theologians to intellectualize their faith, to show that it could hold its own in the highest intellectual circles. Philo of Alexandria (c. 13 BCE–50 CE), who lived in the large Jewish community in Egypt, provided an important guide on how to use allegory to reconcile scripture and philosophy. To Philo, the concrete stories of the Jewish Bible had abstract symbolic meaning—so that, for example, the down-to-earth story of Abraham's life spoke abstractly about the soul's journey from sin to salvation. Inspired by his example, Christian theologians reinterpreted their Old Testament as a text that foretold Christianity—so that, for example, the *wood* Abraham carried as he prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac in response to God's command was a prefiguration of the *cross* on which Jesus died.

While many Christian theologians embraced the interpretive possibilities of Neoplatonism and allegory, others altogether rejected intellectual attempts to explain their faith. They insisted that God so surpassed reason that any attempt to approach God intellectually was useless and, indeed, blasphemous. They particularly objected to the use of pagan ideas in explaining Christian faith. In the third century, Tertullian rebuked overly intellectual Christians in terms

that contrasted Athens (where Plato and other philosophers had flourished) with Jerusalem (the holiest site in Christianity):

> What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? … Let us have done with all attempts to produce a bastard Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition. We need no inquiring argument after knowing Christ Jesus, no logical analyses after enjoying the Gospel!

Tertullian's rejection of an intellectual approach to Christianity shocked some and appealed to others. The tension he articulated between reason and faith—between Athens and Jerusalem—still lives with Christians today. As we will see in chapter 13, it reached its medieval climax in the twelfth century when the rigorous logic of the philosopher Peter Abelard came into conflict with the loving theology of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Christian Theology and Orthodoxy

Early Christians argued incessantly about their faith. They debated the nature of Jesus (how could he be both God and human?) and the Trinity (how could three be one?). They argued about sin (were newborns tainted with original sin?), about priests (could a sinful priest administer a valid sacrament?), about Mary (was she *always* a virgin?), and about many other elements of Christian belief and practice. Most of these debates were resolved at councils, where bishops and other leaders gathered to settle Christian policy. For example, at the first great council at Nicaea (now the Turkish city of İznik) in 325, it was agreed that Christ was fully human and fully divine, a coequal member of the Holy Trinity who had always existed and always would, but who had assumed human form and flesh at a particular moment in time and had walked the earth, taught, suffered, and died as the man Jesus. Agreements such as this had the positive effect of clarifying Christian **orthodoxy**, but they also meant that anyone who disagreed was now considered a **heretic**, a Christian whose beliefs were unacceptable.

The decision at Nicaea is a case in point because it rendered heretical many barbarians whose conversion to Christianity was sponsored by **Arian** Christians. Arians (named for the African bishop Arius and not to be confused with the Nazi myth of an ideal "Aryan" race) became heretics after Nicaea because they taught that Jesus was not fully divine and, therefore, was a lesser member of the Trinity. For centuries, Arian Christians and Catholic Christians—that is, those who remained faithful to the orthodox teachings of the Roman pope, who claimed authority over all Christians (**catholic** means "universal")—would tensely share the lands of the old Western Empire.

Orthodoxy and heresy shaped the religious landscape of early medieval Europe. So, too, did the foundational work of three Christian scholars who

used their mastery of Greco-Roman philosophy to interpret Christian faith: St. Ambrose (c. 339–397), St. Jerome (c. 340–420), and St. Augustine (354–430). Since all three were busy administrators, immersed in the political and **ecclesiastical** affairs of the day, their teachings were practical as well as thoughtful. To medieval people, these three men were great teachers, known as "doctors" (from the Latin *docere,* "to teach"), whose ideas had commanding influence.

Ambrose was bishop of Milan, a great city that by the later fourth century had replaced Rome as the imperial capital in the West. He was a superb administrator, a powerful orator, and a vigorous opponent of Arianism. Perhaps his most important legacy for the medieval West was his conversion of Augustine (see more in this chapter's biographical sketch), but he was also remembered by medieval Christians for his successful assertion of the Church's moral authority over the emperor—or, indeed, any secular authority or state. When the emperor Theodosius massacred the rebellious inhabitants of Thessalonica, Ambrose barred him from the church of Milan until he formally and publicly repented. Ambrose's bold stand and the emperor's public submission established a long-remembered precedent of ecclesiastical supremacy over political leaders, especially in matters of morality.

Jerome was the most celebrated biblical scholar of his time. Although charmed by the writings of Cicero and other Romans, he was once terrified by a dream in which Jesus banished him from heaven with the words "You are a Ciceronian, not a Christian." Jerome tried to resolve the conflict by putting his mastery of Greco-Roman literature to Christian service by producing the definitive Latin translation of the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek. The result of his efforts was the Latin **Vulgate Bible,** which Christians used throughout the Middle Ages and beyond and which has served as the basis of innumerable translations into modern languages.

Biographical Sketch

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

In his *Confessions*—the first major autobiography ever written in the West—Augustine described his intellectual and moral journey from youthful hedonism to Christian piety. He did so in the form of a prayer, a confession to God, written in the hope that others, lost as he once was, might be led to the spiritual haven of the Christian Church. *Confessions* is not necessarily a full or even accurate account of Augustine's life, but it is a compelling story that has ever since influenced both the faith of Christians and the writings of autobiographers.

Augustine told of his dissolute youth in North Africa, then part of the Roman Empire. His mother was a pious Christian, later known as St. Monica (333–387). Ignoring her prayers and admonitions, the young Augustine rejected her faith. He took a mistress, who bore him a son; he studied philosophy and rhetoric; and

he drifted from paganism to dualism, skepticism, and Neoplatonism. He did not convert to Christianity until the age of thirty-two, and only then after considerable anguish and even resistance.

While teaching rhetoric in Milan, Augustine, out of curiosity, went to hear the preaching of Milan's eloquent and renowned bishop, Ambrose. Delighted by Ambrose's "charming delivery" and "soothing style," Augustine slowly found himself also moved by the *content* of Ambrose's sermons. But he was not yet ready to abandon his pleasure in wine and women. He became engaged to a wealthy heiress and parted from his mistress. But he kept his son with him—and, eventually, took up with yet another mistress. The tension between Augustine's growing faith and the worldliness of his life slowly became all but unbearable. Augustine prayed to God for deliverance from his sexual desires, but he did not pray too hard, adding, "Let me wait a little longer."

Then came Augustine's great emotional crisis in the summer of 386. It began when a friend told him about the ascetic ideals of Christian monasticism, and particularly about two young imperial officials, engaged to be married as Augustine then was, who had thrown it all away to become celibate monks. Profoundly moved, Augustine said to his friend, "What's the matter with us? What does this story mean? These two men have none of our education, yet they rise up and storm the gates of heaven while we, for all our learning, lie here wallowing in this world of flesh and blood." Augustine rushed into his garden, where he tore at his hair, beat his forehead, and collapsed in tears. He then heard a child's voice repeating: "Take it and read, take it and read." Augustine picked up his copy of Paul's *Epistles*, opened it at random, and read this passage: "No drunken orgies, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no strife or jealousy. Let your armor be the Lord Jesus Christ, and forget about satisfying your bodies with all their lusts." From that moment on, Augustine was a different man. As he put it, "The light of peace had been poured into my heart, all the shadows of doubt dispersed."

The following Easter, Bishop Ambrose baptized Augustine—to the overwhelming joy of his mother, who stood at his side. Augustine returned to his native North Africa, where he led a small religious community until he was dragged unwillingly into an appointment as bishop of Hippo. There, he produced literary and philosophical works of immeasurable importance to medieval intellectual history, including *Confessions* and, much later, *City of God*.

Always occupied with the day-to-day cares of his diocese and his Christian flock, Augustine's contribution to Christian theology arose not from intellectual abstractions but rather from the urgent issues of his day. One such issue was the survival of the Roman Empire itself. By an eerie coincidence of history, within months of Augustine's death in 430, his city of Hippo would fall to barbarian invaders, the Vandals.

Augustine (see Figure 1.3) served for decades as bishop of Hippo in North Africa, where he wrote volumes against pagan and heretical doctrines. In doing so, he managed to examine most of the central problems that have occupied theologians ever since: the nature of the Trinity, the existence of evil in a world

Figure 1.3 St. Augustine
We have no contemporary portraits of Augustine, but this fifteenth-century fresco captures his passion and intellect. During the medieval and early modern eras, early scholars such as St. Augustine and St. Jerome were often depicted in their studies, surrounded by books and scrolls.

created by a good and all-powerful God, the role of marriage and sexuality in Christian life, the special quality of the Christian priesthood, and the nature of free will and predestination. Even today, some divinity students are taught that every good sermon needs a quote from Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine, like Jerome, worried about using pagan philosophy to Christian ends but did so anyway. In Augustine's hands, Neoplatonism became the basis for a new Christian theology in which the material world was less important than the spiritual world yet was nevertheless the creation of a loving God, who remained actively at work in it. Augustine taught that God created humans with freedom to choose between good (accepting his love) and evil (rejecting it). Because of wrong choices made by Adam and Eve, he argued, humans fell from their original state of innocence and severed their relationship with God. But God repaired the relationship by assuming human form in the person of Jesus, who suffered, died, and rose again in order to restore the possibility of human salvation. To Augustine, therefore, the central goal of the Christian life was to

attain the salvation that Jesus Christ's sacrifice had made possible. Yet Augustine insisted that humans were powerless to achieve this salvation *except through divine grace*. In other words, he saw humans as incapable of finding their own way to heaven and as utterly reliant on the gift of salvation from God.

The necessity of divine grace to human salvation is a central theme of Augustine's *City of God*, in which he set forth a comprehensive Christian philosophy of history that was radically new and deeply influential throughout the Middle Ages. Rejecting the Greco-Roman notion that history repeats itself in endless cycles, he viewed history as a purposeful process of God's interaction with humanity—beginning with the creation, continuing through Christ's life and death, and terminating with the end of the world. To Augustine, the single determining force in history was human moral character, and the single goal was human salvation. True history, therefore, had less to do with politics, rulers, and states than with the war between good and evil that rages within each state and each soul. Accordingly, Augustine divided humanity into two opposing groups: not Romans and barbarians as pagan writers would have had it, but those who lived in God's grace and those who did not. The former were members of the "City of God," and the latter belonged to the "Earthly City." To Augustine, the two cities were hopelessly intertwined in this life, but their members would be determined at death—by either eternal salvation or damnation.

Augustine's teachings on marriage and sexuality also shaped Christianity for centuries to come. From the earliest days of the faith, some Christians had avoided marriage and embraced chastity, inspired both by Jesus's own example and by his words, as reported in Matthew 19:29 in the Gospels, "Anyone who has forsaken home, brothers, sisters, father, mother, wife, children, or lands for my name's sake will be repaid a hundred times over and inherit everlasting life." When imperial toleration in 313 eliminated the prospect of martyrdom by death, disciplined chastity was embraced by some as a sort of living martyrdom, and by Augustine's lifetime, some Christians took pious **asceticism** to an extreme, arguing that *all* Christians should live celibate lives. Augustine, who adopted chastity after his conversion, sharply criticized these radicals in *On the Good of Marriage*. He acknowledged that the *ideal* Christian life was a celibate life, especially as exemplified by monks and nuns who devoted themselves to celibacy, prayer, and self-denial. But this ascetic ideal was not, Augustine said, for everyone, and he argued that marriage was a good, honorable alternative. Augustine praised marriage for the children it produced, the marital love and sexual fidelity it promoted, and the sacramental grace of God by which it was created. Augustine's defense of marriage would profoundly influence medieval **canon law** on marriage-making, divorce, and birth control. For example, canon lawyers taught husbands and wives that they should not practice birth control

Map 1.2 Barbarian Settlement, c. 500

Some of the peoples shown on this map—such as the Berbers, the Suevi, and the Britons—were old inhabitants of the Western Empire, but by 500, most of the West had been overrun by barbarians who had established "successor states." The Eastern Empire remained relatively untouched by barbarian settlement.

because the production of children is an essential good of marriage. Of course, Augustine's defense also aided the simple survival of Christianity: if ascetic radicals had won the day in the early fifth century, Christians would have produced no children to sustain their faith into the next generations.

BARBARIANS AND THE WESTERN EMPIRE

While the Roman Empire was adjusting to Christianity, it was also accommodating the settlement of barbarian peoples (see Map 1.2). To us today, "barbarian" implies savagery and lack of culture, but to the Greeks and the Romans after

them, "barbarian" simply meant foreigner (someone whose language sounded like gibberish or "ba-ba-ba"). Initially, the Greeks even called the Romans "barbarians." Some historians prefer to call these new settlers "**Germanic**" rather than "barbarian," although "Germanic" can misleadingly suggest that these people shared a common heritage linked to modern Germans. Neither term is perfect. In considering the settlement of what we will here call barbarians, then, we will examine how these outsiders slowly moved into the Western Empire and, in the process, both challenged its culture and reinvigorated it.

Barbarian Customs and Institutions

Roman frontiers had always separated those who were under Roman authority from those who were outside it (see Figure 1.4). In the later fourth century, however, life on these frontiers changed, especially on the border created by the Rhine and the Danube. These two great rivers originated in the heavy annual snowfalls—and snowmelts—of the Alps. The Rhine flowed to the northwest and the Danube to the southeast. Outsiders began to press hard across these rivers in the fourth century, and Romans were more willing than before to grant them entry. Most of the pressure came from central and southeastern Europe, and across those borders came some people who spoke Germanic languages but also considerable numbers of Celts, Slavs, and even people from the Middle East. It is therefore hazardous to make broad generalizations regarding their cultures and institutions, for these varied widely. Although historians once thought each barbarian tribe represented a different ethnic group united by a common religion, language, and culture, this was not so, at least initially. The tribes were exceedingly flexible, taking form around successful war leaders, disintegrating when military fortunes declined, and then re-forming around new leaders.

Before their first contacts with the Empire, all these peoples were illiterate and, therefore, "prehistoric" because they left no written records. They preferred to build in wood rather than stone, so they also left relatively few archaeological remains. Much of our evidence comes from Roman commentaries, although these are necessarily flawed. In 98 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote *Germania,* a short book intended to criticize his fellow Romans by comparing them unfavorably with simple, upright barbarians. We can accept his description of tall, blue-eyed people with reddish-blond hair, who lived in agricultural villages and occasionally went on rampages. Less easy to accept is his description of the independence and respect accorded to barbarian women. Because women's agricultural labor freed men for hunting and war, they were certainly valued members of barbarian communities. But barbarian law codes indicate that women were regarded as lifelong minors subject to the guardianship of their fathers or husbands. Tacitus likewise exaggerated when he praised the barbarians for their chastity and virtuous behavior.

Figure 1.4 Roman and Barbarian
This second-century relief shows a Roman soldier standing firm against the strong arm and sword of a barbarian warrior. In contrast to the calm demeanor and well-constructed armor of the Roman, the barbarian warrior is depicted as wild (notice his flowing hair) and simple (notice the rustic house in the background).

Just as Romans traded along the Silk Road with India and China, they traded with the barbarians as well. Merchandise moved regularly across the Rhine and Danube. Romans were not supposed to sell weapons to barbarians, but they traded various luxury goods for which they were paid in good coin. From the late third century, the Rhine and Danube frontiers also became prime recruitment areas for the Roman army, and some barbarian bands were even allowed to settle in Roman territory and then defend it against other barbarians. With goods, people, soldiers, and even whole tribes moving back and forth across the frontier, barbarians and Romans came to know each other well. Their interactions were not always happy, but like most borderlands, the Roman frontier saw lots of back

and forth, as well as the occasional pitched battle. By the 370s, when the major migrations and settlements began, the barbarians were different from those Tacitus had described some 300 years before. They had absorbed Roman culture to a considerable degree, and many had been converted to Arian Christianity.

Some barbarians were pastoralists and moved with their herds across vast stretches of land, but many were settled into farms or villages from which they cultivated surrounding fields. Their **artisans** produced exceptionally fine metalwork, and like Romans, barbarians used iron tools and weapons. Unlike the Romans, they had few cities, and they instead organized their societies on four foundations: kinship, war-bands, law codes, and eventually, ethnicity, as expressed particularly through kingship. Each of these four was to become an important barbarian contribution to medieval civilization.

Barbarians traced descent through both parents, and as a result, kinship networks were large and fluid. Barbarians looked to family, as we do today, for nurturance, love, and companionship, but they also expected their kin to offer a protection that we now obtain from police forces and armies. If a barbarian was injured or killed, kinfolk were obliged to avenge the deed. Initially, kin were expected to conduct a **feud**—declare war, as it were—against the offender's family. Eventually, it became customary (and far less bloody) to establish a **wergild**, a sum of money that the offender could pay to the victim or relatives of the victim to appease their vengeance. Wergilds varied in size depending on the victim's sex, age, and social status (they were largest for women of childbearing age and for men highest in social status). They also varied according to injury—large payments for murder and smaller payments for lesser injuries, such as cutting off a victim's arm, leg, thumb, or finger, until in time every imaginable injury was covered, down to the little toe. There was no guarantee, however, that the payment would be offered, or that the offended kin would accept it. In such cases, blood feuds ensued. Both blood feuds and wergilds would continue far into the Middle Ages, and both spoke to the enduring importance of kinship as a source of protection and aid.

Ties of kinship were rivaled by those of the war-band, or **comitatus**, a group of warriors bound together by their loyalty to a warlord. The comitatus was a kind of military brotherhood based on honor, fidelity, courage, and mutual respect between leader and men. In battle, the leader was expected to excel in courage and prowess, thereby inspiring others to fight bravely and loyally. The comitatus was usually a subdivision of a tribe, a group whose members were bound together by their allegiance to a chieftain or king. But sometimes the leader of a comitatus won enough battles and attracted sufficient followers to lead a tribe of his own. The heroic virtues of the comitatus would persist throughout the Early Middle Ages as the characteristic ideology of the European warrior aristocracy.

Barbarians eventually found unity in law codes as well as in kinship and comitatus. Roman law was backed by the power of the Roman state, administered by the work of judges and lawyers, and applicable to all. Barbarian law was altogether different, based on **custom** and tradition, enforced by general agreement, and applicable only to those in a specific tribe. Although each tribe had its own laws, all barbarian law codes shared the primary aim of resolving disputes that might otherwise end in bloodshed and feud. Laws setting out wergild schedules—specifying who would be paid what compensation for which offense—offered one chance to end disputes before they became feuds. Laws allowing for divine judgment were another route to peaceful resolution. For people of high rank, this could be determined by **compurgation**, whereby oaths—by the accused and their "oath-helpers"—were sworn as to the veracity of a case. For ordinary people, whose oaths carried less weight, innocence or guilt was sometimes determined by a process known as **trial by ordeal**. Supervised by a priest, the accused would be required to grasp a bar of red-hot iron or take a stone from a boiling cauldron. If the hand healed properly, the accused was judged innocent; if not, the verdict was guilty. Although these legal strategies might sound bizarre today, they helped make peace among antagonists who might otherwise resolve their disputes with violence. A payment of wergild could stop a blood feud; a solemn oath-taking ceremony might cause guilty people to stumble over words or reveal the wavering doubts of supporters; ordeals offered the judgment of God, a definitive judgment that could re-knit a community torn by dispute. As we shall see, throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, the community-rooted principles of barbarian law vied for authority with the state-rooted principles of Roman law.

Bound together by kinship, comitatus, and law, barbarians eventually began to form more permanent tribal kingdoms, and they then buttressed these with fanciful tales of a shared ethnic past. An unusually gifted warrior and his kin would gather military followers to form a new tribe, rather like the formation of a new criminal gang in the United States today. Then, if the new tribe was successful in war, its leaders might claim royal status and even, if the tribe endured for several generations, descent from some divine ancestor. They also *created* ethnic origins, fabricating myths about their allegedly age-old homelands in Eastern Europe or Scandinavia. When a king died, an assembly of the tribe's warriors chose as his successor the ablest member of his family. This might or might not be his eldest son, for the tribal assembly was given considerable latitude in elections. The custom of election would persist in many former barbarian kingdoms far into the Middle Ages. Its chief consequence during the fifth century was to ensure that the tribes were normally led by clever, battle-worthy kings.

Migration and Settlement

Barbarians had long bothered the Empire. They had defeated a Roman army in the first century, and they had probed deeply into the Empire in the second century and again in the mid-third. But before the late fourth century, the Romans had always managed to drive the invaders out or absorb them into Roman civilization. Beginning in the 370s, however, an overtaxed, exhausted Empire was confronted by renewed pressures on its borders. The barbarian inrush was about to begin.

Lured by the relative wealth, productive fields, and perhaps even sunny climate of the Mediterranean world, barbarian peoples saw the Empire as something to appreciate and enjoy, not plunder and destroy. Their yearning for the fair lands that lay on the Roman side of the Rhine and Danube was made suddenly urgent in the later fourth century by the westward thrust of the Huns, a tribe of Asiatic nomads known to the Chinese as the Hsung-nu (also spelled Hsiung-nu or Xiongnu). Huns, who decorated themselves with scars and tattoos, looked terrifying and also delivered on that look, for they traveled light, rode hard, fought with deadly skill from horseback, and easily conquered one barbarian tribe after another. Detailing the migrations of each separate tribe is a little like trying to describe the interwoven strands of spaghetti, so we will focus here on some of the more significant trajectories. Keep in mind, though, their complex and interwoven nature. To archaeologists, the era from c. 300 CE to 700 CE is known as the Migration Period, since the movement and interaction of peoples is so evident in the artifacts produced in this time.

Some Barbarian Leaders
Alaric, r. 395-410
Attila, r. 433-453
Odovacar, r. 476-493
Theodoric, r. 493-526

When the Huns subdued the Goths, who then lived on the far side of the Danube, a group of survivors, known subsequently as the Visigoths, appealed for sanctuary on the Roman side. The Eastern emperor Valens (r. 364–378) was sympathetic, partly because he shared Arian Christianity with the endangered Visigoths, and in 376, he took the unprecedented step of permitting them to cross peacefully into the Empire. There was trouble almost immediately. Corrupt imperial officials cheated and abused the Visigoths, who retaliated by going on a rampage. At length, Valens himself took the field against them, but he lost both his army and his life at the battle of Adrianople in 378, a military debacle of the first order. Valens's successor, Theodosius, pacified the Visigoths, permitting them to settle peacefully in the Balkans and providing them with food and revenue in return for their loyalty

and military backing. This first story of barbarian incorporation into the Empire contains elements that would be repeated many times in the next century: a barbarian group under pressure on its eastern or northern flanks, Roman authorities agreeing to allow their immigration, subsequent conflict between barbarians and Romans, and eventual accommodation and settlement.

When Theodosius died in 395, the empire was split between his two young sons, and the western and eastern halves were never again joined under a single ruler. Not long after Theodosius's death, a skillful new Visigothic leader named Alaric launched a second pillaging campaign. In 406, the Western Empire, desperate to block Alaric's advance, recalled most of its troops from the Rhine frontier, with the result that in the cold of December, other barbarian tribes slipped across the frozen, ill-guarded Rhine into Gaul (the Roman province that included but extended beyond modern-day France). Within a couple of years, the Western emperor and his court were so defenseless that they abandoned Rome and barricaded themselves behind the impregnable marshes of Ravenna. In 410, Alaric and his Visigoths entered the old imperial capital unopposed and plundered it for three days.

The sack of Rome in 410 had a devastating impact on imperial morale. "My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth," wrote Jerome on hearing of the catastrophe, "and sobs choke my speech." Indeed, some historians have regarded it as the ending date for the Western Roman Empire. But in historical perspective, the event was merely a single milestone in its slow disintegration. Alaric died in 410, shortly after the sack, and the Visigoths moved northward into southern Gaul and then Iberia, where they established a Visigothic kingdom that endured well into the Middle Ages.

Meanwhile, other barbarian tribes, most of them newly formed, were carving out kingdoms of their own. Angles, Saxons, and Jutes from northern Europe made their way to England. A variety of other barbarian tribes, including Franks and Burgundians, settled in Gaul. The Vandals, after sliding across the frozen Rhine in 406, moved through Gaul, Iberia, and then to Africa. In 430, the year of Augustine's death, they captured his episcopal city of Hippo. Establishing a kingdom centered on the ancient city of Carthage, they then took to the sea as buccaneers, devastating Mediterranean shipping and sacking coastal cities, including Rome itself in 455. From memories of their deeds come such words as *vandalism*.

Midway through the fifth century, the Huns themselves, led by Attila (r. 433–453), the "Scourge of God," moved against the West. Attila's atrocities, although reported in hair-raising detail by Roman observers, were probably no worse than those of Roman generals. After suffering defeat at the hands of a Roman-Visigothic army in 451, Attila returned the following year, sacking and pillaging cities as he moved steadily toward Rome. There, he found a city defended not

by its emperor, who had fled, but by its pope. On the outskirts of Rome, Attila was confronted by Pope Leo I (r. 440–461), heading a delegation of Roman senators. According to one account, Pope Leo, an "old man of harmless simplicity, venerable in his gray hair and majestic clothing," was suddenly and miraculously joined by St. Peter and St. Paul, swords in their hands and clad in bishops' robes. Their appearance at this critical moment was especially noteworthy because both saints had been dead for nearly 400 years. Perhaps moved by Leo I's appeals, but more likely concerned that his men were dying from heat and plague, Attila withdrew once again from the Western Empire. He would never return. Within two years, he was dead, and the Huns were absorbed into the settled populations of Europe.

In its final years, the Western Empire, whose jurisdiction now scarcely extended beyond the Italian peninsula, fell under the control of stubborn military adventurers of barbarian birth. Emperors continued to reign for a time, but their barbarian generals were the power behind the throne. In 476, the general Odovacar, who saw no point in perpetuating the charade, deposed the last Western emperor, a boy named Romulus Augustulus, "little Augustus" (r. 474–476). Odovacar wrote to the Eastern emperor in Constantinople, claiming he did not seek to be emperor himself but merely to rule as an agent of the Eastern Empire. But the emperor in the East, Zeno (r. 474–491), had his own troubles, and Odovacar was really on his own. About a decade later, Zeno asked a group known as Ostrogoths, led by an astute king named Theodoric, to invade the Italian peninsula. When a rough peace was established after several hard-fought years, Theodoric invited Odovacar to a banquet, murdered him, and established his own rule. If Odovacar (r. 476–493) was a figure of transition between Western Empire and Middle Ages, Theodoric (r. 493–526), to whom we shall return in chapter 2, was the first medieval king.

THE DECLINE OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE

The "decline and fall" of the Roman Empire has long fascinated historians, for it involves the collapse of one of the world's most impressive empires. Of course, only half the empire collapsed, for the Eastern Empire (richer, more stable, and centered on impregnable Constantinople) survived for centuries yet to come. Many reasons have been proposed for the disappearance of the Empire's western half—no fewer than 210 different causes according to one survey. They include such factors as overreliance on slavery, the otherworldliness of Christianity, sexual orgies, and even lead poisoning. None of these makes much sense. Classical civilization began and ended with slavery. The Eastern Empire was more thoroughly Christianized than the West, yet it survived for another thousand years. The most spectacular Roman orgies occurred during the glories of the Pax Romana, not in the waning centuries of the Western Empire. One otherwise

respectable historian even proposed the bizarre idea that the fall of Rome was a result of male homosexuality, a practice that is much more easily documented in the fifth century BCE than in the fifth century CE and—if it were to be taken seriously—would be more plausibly associated with the rise of classical civilization than with its demise.

Other explanations are more convincing, although a combination of causes better explains the long and tortuous decline of imperial power in the West rather than a simple and single one. Among the various woes of the West, political, military, socioeconomic, and environmental troubles were especially acute. At a time when strong leadership especially mattered, the fifth-century Western emperors were less competent than their Eastern colleagues. For example, Valentinian III (r. 425–455) came to the throne as a child, left most decision-making to his mother Galla Placidia, and soon after her death in 450 murdered his best general and got himself murdered in return. During his long and inglorious reign, Rome lost North Africa and failed to hold most of Gaul. Such poor leadership was exacerbated by the military challenges posed by fifth-century barbarian invasions.

As if political and military troubles were not enough, the economy of the Western Empire, always relatively weak, suffered a prolonged slump in the fourth and fifth centuries. Wealthy landowners, who had long relied on the labor of slaves and oppressed peasants, had little interest in labor-saving devices or agricultural innovation. They viewed large-scale industry and commerce with similar disdain. When faced with rural poverty, declining farm revenues, runaway inflation, and high taxes, their response was self-interested and defensive. They withdrew from civic affairs, abandoned their town houses, retired to their country estates, fortified their villas, and assembled private armies to ward off marauders and imperial tax collectors alike. This reaction was to have long-term consequences: in many parts of Western Europe, aristocrats would avoid cities and prefer the countryside for the next thousand years.

Climate changes and disease may also have exacerbated the problems, even if neither explanation is sufficient on its own to account for Rome's long, slow death. During the centuries of Roman Peace, the climate was largely stable. The Nile, for instance, flooded annually in predictable ways, and rainfall elsewhere in the Mediterranean was sufficient for crops. The climate cooled, however, in the third century, and drought characterized the fourth century. Plagues, too, took their toll. In particular, the so-called Antonine Plague, carried by Roman soldiers from Asia to Europe, killed millions and may have helped curtail the Roman Peace. Smaller populations meant smaller tax bases and, thus, lower imperial revenues. Without the accompanying political, military, and socioeconomic troubles, the Roman Empire might still have recovered, but environmental concerns made everything worse.

The riddle of Rome's decline and fall will never be completely solved—and even the question itself is misleading, for imperial Rome did not literally fall. On the one hand, imperial Rome survived in the Eastern Empire another millennium. From this perspective, the changes of the fourth and fifth centuries look less like collapse and more like a strategic withdrawal from the less productive West to the wealthier provinces of the eastern Mediterranean. On the other hand, imperial Rome survived, albeit in weakened form, even in the West. Barbarians eventually became *preservers* of the Western Empire, manning its armies, defending its frontiers, and incorporating some of its achievements. As they established new states on the remains of the old Western Empire, barbarian kings relied on the advice of Roman aristocrats and the work of Roman bureaucrats. In similar ways, the Church and its bishops built on the legacy of Rome, patterning dioceses and archdioceses on Roman administrative units and stepping into the breach to take up new political and military responsibilities when imperial authority waned. Thus, it was not Rome's emperor but its bishop—Leo I—who confronted Attila outside the city in 452. In these ways and many more, some of the legacy of classical antiquity was passed to the medieval West. Europeans for centuries to come would be nourished by Greco-Roman culture and haunted by the memory of Rome. The deposition of the last Western emperor in 476 is a convenient date, but it is much less momentous than the survival, for many centuries to come, of Roman traditions in medieval civilization.

CONCLUSION

Back to our anachronistic drone from the beginning of the chapter: if we were to send it over Western Europe in about the year 500, we would find an interesting mix of peoples and places—rough barbarian warriors jostling with Latin-speaking aristocrats, once-grand cities shrinking in size and influence, Christian missionaries striving to convert both heathen barbarians and Arian ones, and in the countryside, a resettlement that sometimes mingled old and new and sometimes pushed out old families in favor of newcomers. This late antique melting pot created the European Middle Ages, and although it drew on many sources, it was mostly a synthesis of the three factors we have examined in this chapter: pre-Roman and barbarian custom, declining Roman tradition and infrastructure, and Christian religion.

For digital learning resources, please go to http://www.oup.com/he/bennett12e.

CHAPTER 2

Early Western Christendom, c. 500–700

STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, students will be able to:

Evaluate the role of the environment in shaping early medieval history.

Identify each of the three main constituent cultures of the European Middle Ages and assess the role of each.

Explain what is meant by "localism" and give examples of localism in early medieval society.

Compare and contrast the political, religious, and intellectual life of several "successor states."

Describe the development of monasticism and provide examples of variants in early medieval Europe.

Identify points of strength and weakness in early medieval intellectual life.

INTRODUCTION

By the sixth century, Roman authority in Western Europe was no more. Political unity under Rome had given way to political localism under barbarian kings and aristocrats. The Church provided an alternative sort of unity, but the umbrella of Christendom—of a dominion unified by Christian faith and obedience—was at that point little more than nice rhetoric and dim promise. Divisions between Arian and Catholic Christians still rocked some parts of the West, and in other parts, pagans were either uninterested in Christianity or had never even heard of it. The city of Rome itself lay in the West, but by 500, Western Europe had become a poor partner of a relocated Roman Empire now centered on the eastern capital of Constantinople.

Historians have often viewed the sixth and seventh centuries in the West as a dull time, a dark age, a tedious stop on an otherwise fine journey. As a result,

these centuries are sometimes regarded, as some critics recently put it, "as a corpse to be dragged quickly offstage so that the next great act of the drama of the Middle Ages should begin." Let us not be so hasty. These first centuries of the Middle Ages were hard times indeed—standards of living were low, and few buildings were built in stone—yet they were not without important developments in society, politics, religion, and thought. We might see this time, after the dust of the barbarian invasions settled, as a period in which Celtic, barbarian, and Roman cultures slowly merged to produce something different again, a culture that would gradually become distinct from the wealthier Byzantine Empire to the east.

EARLY MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

The West was tottering politically in 500, but it was not without resources. Some of the most important lay in nature itself: reasonably good climate, rich soils, plentiful forests, broad rivers, and accessible coastlines. As Map 2.1 shows, the Western European heartland consists of a huge plain of rich soil that fans from the Pyrenees and the Alps as far north as England and Scandinavia. Crossing the European heartland are several low and mineral-rich mountain ranges, a broad strip of rich loam for farming, and a remarkable network of wide rivers. These rivers connected inland settlements with the sea and with each other, aiding the movement of people, news, goods, and ideas. Most of Europe's major cities were built on riverbanks—Paris, London, Milan, Cologne, Vienna, and many others—so that even though they lay far from the sea, their docks received goods from many places and then dispersed them to smaller towns. Europe's long, irregular coastline was a further stimulus to commerce, with its huge bays, many peninsulas, and accessible offshore islands, such as Sicily, Sardinia, Britain, and Ireland.

As barbarians moved into transalpine Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries, they confronted Romans, along with a population that we today call Celts. As noted in chapter 1, *Celts* is a tricky term because it implies that all spoke Celtic languages and were closely related, whereas the reality was more complicated. Romans were mostly to be found among the wealthy and in old imperial cities. These cities were losing population and trade by the year 500, but many managed to hang on. Celts, by contrast, were mostly rural and had long inhabited transalpine Europe from the Iberian peninsula through Gaul to Britain. They were known for their skills in music, poetry, clothmaking, and metalwork (see Figure 2.1). Most were farmers, living in villages surrounded by cultivated fields. Others were traders who carried goods across Europe and built fortified towns along their routes.