CHAPTER V

Europe in Transition

THE fourth to the seventh centuries mark the decline of the ancient world and the birth of the mediaeval. At the beginning of this age of transition the Roman Empire, though shaken by the crises of the third century, still stood firm and fast. At the end of the period a shattered and broken world was beginning a slow and painful process of reconstruction. During these centuries the western half of the Empire was lost to the Germanic invaders, who succeeded in establishing kingdoms of their own on its soil. From their capital at Constantinople the Eastern Roman emperors defended their realm from invasion and created a power which was strong enough under the emperor Justinian (527–565) to challenge the Germanic states of the West and to recapture from them part of the lost Roman territory. Enormously strengthened by Constantine’s conversion, Christianity consolidated its victory over paganism, became first the dominant and then the only legal religion of the Empire, and in time won over the barbarians. Among its followers the church created a firmer discipline by defining its doctrines more precisely and by building an efficient administrative organization. The development of monasticism strengthened the church at a
time when its energies were being consumed in resisting the growth of heretical movements. The hostility which Christian writers and thinkers manifested toward classical culture as something rooted in the detested paganism slowly abated as the pagan gods themselves disappeared. Through Christianity the heritage of classical culture was transmitted to the mediaeval world.

The Empire Restored

Constantine the Great had been hailed in an imperial edict as “restorer of the human race, extender of the Empire and of Roman dominion, founder of everlasting security.” With his predecessor Diocletian he had staved off the disintegration of the Empire and had given it a stability which it had not known for at least three-quarters of a century. An army of functionaries now administered the state more efficiently and more ruthlessly, and Rome’s soldiers ably resisted Persians and Germans. Yet order and security were short-lived, and when Constantine died in 337, Roman history unrolled once more against that dark background of tension and turbulence which had characterized the third century. The defenses against the Germans and Persians were permitted to crumble while rival aspirants fought each other for the throne. For many Romans, apathy about the present crisis, a nostalgia for the golden past, or a preoccupation with a future located not in pagan Rome but in the heavenly city of the Christian church took the place of confidence in the Empire’s power.

Scarceley had Constantine been laid to rest when civil war broke out among his heirs. For sixteen years the Empire was distracted by their feuds, until finally one of his sons, Constantius, succeeded in defeating his rivals and
gaining sole rule for himself (353–361). But his power was threatened by rebellion and the familiar menace of barbarians and Persians. His successor Julian died fighting on the Persian front in 363, and within a year the Empire was divided between an eastern and a western ruler.

Strong governments had long held in check the centrifugal pull of cultural differences between East and West. With the progressive weakening of the imperial regime, however, these differences became an important factor in the division of the Empire, which was undertaken voluntarily by some emperors for reasons of policy or was forced upon others by their rivals. Thus in the fourth century the ultimate split between a Western and an Eastern Roman Empire was foreshadowed. Nevertheless, in theory the Empire remained united, and it was the ambition of the more energetic and aggressive rulers to translate into reality the ideal of a single state.

**The Battle of Adrianople**

Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries the emperors fought desperately to protect their realms from the advancing waves of barbarians. The Eastern Empire escaped the worst ravages, but the Western Empire, less fortunately situated, was finally destroyed. For at least two centuries Rome had fought the barbarians on the Rhine-Danube frontier and more recently in far-off Britain, but the real beginning of the Germanic invasions occurred in 378, when two-thirds of the Roman army of the East, the ablest generals, and the emperor Valens himself were destroyed by the Visigoths in the battle of Adrianople.

“Only night put an end to this irreparable disaster, the consequences of which will long weigh upon the destinies
of the Empire.” So wrote the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, who terminated his account of Roman history with this battle. He found its only parallel in Greek and Roman history to be the battle of Cannae, the terrible defeat which the Romans suffered in the war against Hannibal six centuries earlier. And Ammianus’ judgment has been accepted by Gibbon and other historians, who see in Adrianople a turning-point in history, a watershed between the ancient and mediaeval worlds. The battle did more than expose the weakness of Rome to the barbarians and encourage them to return to the attack again and again, for never afterward did they leave Roman soil. Adrianople marks also a revolution in the history of warfare. The infantry upon which Rome had primarily depended for centuries and with which she had conquered the Mediterranean world had proved no match for the Gothic cavalry in this battle. Henceforth for many centuries cavalry units, whether German or Roman—for in time the Romans learned the lesson—were to play a major role in warfare. In military tactics, too, the Middle Ages were foreshadowed in the declining Empire.

Theodosius the Great

Only with difficulty did Theodosius the Great (378–395), on his succession to the throne, rebuild an army and force a peace upon the plundering hordes. But as the price of peace the Visigoths and their kinsmen, the Ostrogoths, were settled on abandoned lands within the Empire as self-governing allies (foederati) with an obligation to furnish troops for the Roman army in return for fixed subsidies. Clearly the Germanic tribal chieftains’ taking an oath of loyalty to the emperor and the payment of troops in land
anticipated the feudal relationships of the Middle Ages. Fraught with more consequence for the moment was the establishment of a mass of Germans, a compact nation in effect within the Roman state. No longer was the Danube a safe frontier, and within a century the barbarians occupied the territories of the Western Empire.

In 394 Theodosius brought the whole Roman Empire under his control. An able administrator, a distinguished general, and a doughty champion of Christianity, Rome's last great emperor strove valiantly to preserve the Empire, but the old evils remained unchecked and even multiplied. The remedies for Rome's ills which Constantine had employed to advantage at the beginning of the century were no longer efficacious, and Theodosius' successes proved ephemeral. With his death in 395 the Roman Empire was permanently divided into Eastern and Western Empires. Whatever the devices employed thereafter to preserve the fiction of imperial unity, the Empire was clearly partitioned into two independent states by the end of the fourth century.

The Rule of the Generals

The majority of Theodosius' successors in the West ruled in name only, for the effective power now belonged to the generals, whose armies consisted largely of men who, like themselves, were of barbarian origin. Dangerous as the practice was of entrusting the safety of Rome to barbarians, the emperors seemed unable to find another solution. Hard pressed by the invaders, they needed soldiers and they recruited them among the very people they were trying to keep out of the Empire. The loyalty of these troops was at best dubious. The soldiers followed their generals and the generals were often more concerned with wielding political
power than in defending an empire to which neither they nor their men were attached by tradition or sentiment. Indeed, barbarian chieftains—the Visigoth Alaric is a striking example—fought Rome on occasion in an effort to wrest from the emperor a high military office; so strong still was the prestige of Rome, so greatly did the barbarians covet Roman titles and powers.

Some German generals, to be sure, fought valiantly and faithfully against the invaders: Stilicho the Vandal, at the beginning of the fifth century, was a tower of strength against the Visigoths, and half a century later the Sueve Ricimer defended Rome against the Vandals. But their military power tempted them to make and unmake emperors, and Rome suffered as she had in the disastrous third and fourth centuries from internecine rivalries and wars, intrigues and conspiracies, Romans against barbarian invaders, barbarians against other barbarians, German generals against Roman administrators, generals against emperors, East against West. Small wonder then that the barbarians were able to cross the frontiers and to range almost unchecked deep within the Western Empire.

The Sack of Rome

In 410 Visigothic invaders marched through the streets of Rome, which had remained inviolate in the eight hundred years since the Gauls had sacked the city. Under the leadership of Alaric, their first king—who had won his rank in the decade or so after Adrianople, had simultaneously held high military office under the Romans, had fought for Rome, and fought and intrigued against her—the Visigoths moved into the heart of the Italian peninsula, took Rome by siege, and pillaged the great city. Although Ravenna in northeastern Italy had become the capital of the Western Empire
in 404, the magic of Rome’s name was undiminished and Romans everywhere were shocked by the reports of the calamity. Far away in Bethlehem, St. Jerome lamented when he heard the news from refugees: “The lamp of the world is extinguished, and it is the whole world which has perished in the ruins of this one city.”¹ In Africa, St. Augustine wrote his greatest work, The City of God, to explain the disaster and to refute the charge that a city which had triumphed over its enemies as long as the pagan gods were worshiped had succumbed at last because its rulers had accepted Christianity. The Goths withdrew from Rome as quickly as they had come, but in 455 Rome was once more sacked by barbarians, this time by the Vandals from Africa.

The End of the Western Empire

The whole West was in utter chaos. The frontier provinces were lost; Picts, Scots, and Saxons overran Britain, from which Roman troops had been withdrawn around 400; Gaul swarmed with Franks, Burgundians and Alemanii, Huns, Visigoths, and Vandals; Spain with Suevi, Vandals, and Visigoths; Africa with Vandals. This was the grim situation which St. Jerome described early in the century; it became worse as the century advanced: “Time has dried our tears, and save for a few old men, the rest, born in captivity and siege, no longer regret the liberty of which the very memory is lost. But who could believe that Rome on her own soil fights no longer for her glory, but for her existence, and no longer even fights, but purchases her life with gold and precious things?”²

¹ Jerome, Commentary on Ezekiel, I, Prologue.
² Jerome, Letters, CXXIII, 17.
Thus the Western Empire fell apart, and by the end of the century all the provinces and Italy itself were ruled by German kings. In 476 barbarian mercenaries deposed the last Western Roman emperor, a boy whose name, Romulus Augustulus, by a strange irony recalled the founder of Rome and the founder of the Empire. In his place they elevated Odoacer, a fellow German. This episode marks the formal end of the Western Roman Empire, although barbarian leaders had for years exercised effective power there. But even after 476 the fiction of imperial rule was maintained. With the disappearance of the Roman emperor of the West, the Eastern emperor claimed to be the source of authority, and his overlordship was recognized at least nominally by the new Germanic kings of the West who sought to gain from Constantinople acquiescence in their rule. In the eyes of their Roman subjects they thereby acquired a measure of legitimacy and shared the prestige which still attached to the name of the Roman Empire.

For nearly three hundred years the Romans had suffered from civil war and disorder, economic distress, a lowering of moral standards, a sense of futility—in short, all the symptoms of decay which have been analyzed in earlier chapters. The last century of the Western Empire only accentuated these evils. True, for some contemporaries Rome still seemed to shine with undimmed luster. In her darkest hour pagan and even Christian writers exulted the grandeur and the glory of Rome and her historic mission of uniting mankind under the Roman peace. Yet the weight of other evidence makes clear the desperate plight of Rome’s subjects long before they were overwhelmed by the barbarians.

The old evils and abuses remained and new ones ap-
peared. The emergency legislation of Diocletian and Constantine was made permanent as the crisis continued and indeed worsened because of the very remedies employed. The army, made up now largely of barbarians, continued to play a sinister role in politics, while from behind the throne the generals dictated the policies of many of the emperors. An already swollen, wasteful, and corrupt bureaucracy was expanded in order to provide enough officials to keep men in the hereditary classes and occupations to which they were bound. Thus the state tried to secure the labor and the money needed to support the complicated structure of defense and administration. For most Romans there was scant hope of escape from their crushing responsibilities, from what an imperial decree described as “the inexorable compulsion of the laws by which everybody is bound to submit his own fortune without exemptions due to office or privilege, in order that the public interest may not suffer any injury or loss, and to render such bodily service as his father’s or ancestor’s status or his own may require.”

Flight to other classes and other occupations, to the army, the civil service, the church, to the wilderness or the desert, all these loopholes were blocked by imperial legislation. Hope and enterprise vanished, despair and apathy took their place. There was little incentive or will to resist the barbarian invaders.

Beginnings of Feudalism and the Manorial System

However desperate the plight of large segments of the population, some individuals and classes enjoyed power, prestige, and prosperity. We have seen that the generals who had effective control of the Empire were a familiar

*Codex Justinianus, X, 71, 4.*
part of the scene in the fourth and fifth centuries. Many of them were of German origin and all of them depended upon barbarian troops bound to them by ties of personal loyalty. These army commanders, who resembled feudal lords of the Middle Ages, were a potent force in the Later Roman Empire.

Exempt, too, from the general decline were the landed aristocrats who lived on their great estates as virtual rulers. The weakness of the emperors and the disorders arising from civil war and invasion enabled them to acquire enormous power. They built their estates through imperial gifts, by forcible confiscation and seizure, by taking over waste land and abandoned farms, and by offering protection to small farmers in return for land. Powerful enough to escape the payment of taxes and to evade municipal responsibilities, they became, in effect, feudal lords with financial and judicial control over their tenants and occasionally with private armies of their own. Despite the opposition of the central government, whose fears were aroused by the growing independence of these landed aristocrats, they continued to increase their vast holdings. Their fortified villas, forerunners of mediaeval manors, were like islands of security and prosperity in the turbulent fourth and fifth centuries.

Most men were much less fortunate than the relative handful of generals and landlords. The class of small independent landowners whose decline had been steady now virtually disappeared. Those who survived earlier vicissitudes voluntarily turned over their farms to wealthier landlords who could provide protection against barbarians or relief from grasping tax collectors. They relinquished their freedom of movement and were bound permanently to the
soil, which they now worked as tenant farmers or *coloni*. The land which they surrendered they received in the form of a *precarium*, that is, they enjoyed its use during their own lifetime and their children might in turn cultivate the land under the same arrangement. Meanwhile, in return for their services, landless farmers gained the protection of landlords, and under the name of *patrocinium* the old Republican system of client and patron was revived in an extreme form. Thus a long step was taken toward the mediaeval institution of serfdom. But while some farmers at least achieved a measure of security in this way, others, uprooted and desperate, formed themselves into bands of outlaws who waged war against the landlords and the government and even gave help to the barbarians.

*Decline of Trade and the Urban Middle Class*

The decline of the urban middle class, accelerated by the crises of the third century and the remedies prescribed by the emperors, gained momentum. The burden of municipal office-holding which its members had long been forced to assume was crushing, and by the fourth century the imperial autocracy closed nearly every avenue of escape from this form of bondage. The middle class suffered also from the spread of large estates or villas which produced in their own workshops most of the necessities of life. Yet though trade declined sharply it did not cease. There were still manufactured goods and even natural products which villas could not make or produce themselves. There was still a flourishing trade in luxury goods from distant lands: silks, spices, jewels, incense, and ivory for those who could afford them or for the church, which required them.

While barter tended to supersede money as a means of
exchange, there was no complete reversion to a barter economy and money continued to circulate in the remaining channels of trade. Some taxes were now collected in goods and some imperial functionaries were similarly paid in kind. But the state still collected various revenues, made some payments in cash, and issued a sound gold and silver currency which circulated at least among the wealthy. During the fourth century, moreover, emperors distributed to their troops and supporters quantities of gold and silver confiscated from pagan temples. The release of these stores of precious metals may have stimulated a depressed economy temporarily, but it also created inflationary prices and thus accelerated the decline.

At the end of the fourth century the situation of the middle class deteriorated sharply. Seaborne commerce suffered from the raids of Vandal pirates from North Africa and overland trade through the abandonment of Roman roads and the chaos caused by barbarian invasions. Most important, however, was the policy of the imperial government which, as the law codes show, overburdened the urban middle class and in the end destroyed that class and the industry and commerce which its members had fostered. It is one of the ironies of the history of the age that the emperors were forced to appoint in various cities special officials, the so-called defenders of the city, to keep the demands of their own tax collectors within bounds.

The decline of trade and manufacturing entailed the economic ruin of the cities which had been flourishing centers of Roman life in the West. As their populations shrank, the towns themselves contracted in area and became little more than centers for the transaction of imperial or ecclesiastical business. In the Later Empire, for example, in Gaul
and Britain, new walls were built to enclose cities which had contracted to a quarter or less of their former size. Rome itself was no longer the proud and populous capital of a world empire, although it did acquire a new importance as the seat of the papacy. The barbarian invasions then completed the ruin of many of the western cities. Buildings became shabby and neglected, when they were not destroyed by wandering hordes; the poverty of the cities and of their inhabitants militated against the use of public and private funds for new construction. As the cults which they had served were outlawed, pagan temples fell into ruin or were converted into churches. Theaters and amphitheaters, public baths, aqueducts, all the amenities of Roman town life, decayed with the cities which they had served. Roman civilization had been essentially urban; mediaeval civilization was to be essentially rural. With the decline of the towns the general level of civilization was lowered and western Europe began to assume its mediaeval aspect.

**Origins and Society of the Barbarians**

We have seen that among the gravest of the problems confronting the Roman emperors from the time of Marcus Aurelius was the defense of the frontiers against barbarians. As Rome’s powers of resistance weakened, the Germanic peoples pushed into the Empire, and on the territories of the western half which they helped to destroy they built their own kingdoms. Who were these wandering peoples? What were the consequences for European history of their victory over Rome? How much of the Roman institutional heritage did they accept and preserve?

For at least six hundred years before the German invaders
took possession of the lands of the Western Empire, the Romans had known them in peace and in war. Since the early Germanic peoples had no written literature of their own, we depend primarily upon Roman writers and archaeological evidence for our knowledge of them. We may supplement the information gleaned from these sources by drawing inferences from Germanic institutions and practices which survived into later times. In his *Commentaries on the Gallic Wars* (c. 50 B.C.), Julius Caesar writes briefly about the character and the customs of the Germans, but our chief source is the *Germania*, a short and generally reliable essay written in A.D. 98 by the Roman historian Tacitus. From him we have a fascinating, if somewhat idealized, picture of the appearance of these tall, red-haired, blue-eyed Germans, their character, their warlike manner of life, and their primitive institutions.

Of their early history we know little. The original home of one group seems to have been in Scandinavia, while others dwelt along the shores of the Baltic between the Elbe and Oder Rivers. They lived or camped in rude huts which were grouped in small villages cleared out of primeval forest or set on ground high above surrounding marshlands. Seminomadic, pastoral peoples, they gained a livelihood by keeping herds and flocks, by hunting, and by raids on their neighbors. Rarely did they stay for many years in one place, but migrated from region to region in a search for food to maintain their expanding population. Gradually they spread out over a larger area. One group, made up of such tribes as the Franks, Alemanni, and Saxons, moved westward from the Baltic area and in time dispossessed the Celtic peoples of western and northern Germany. By about 200 B.C. they reached the Rhine, and a century later they
were established along the upper Danube and posed a serious threat to Roman security. By his Gallic campaigns in the 50's of the first century B.C. Caesar fixed the Rhine as the Roman frontier, and the western Germans could advance no farther. An increasing number of them had turned meanwhile to a settled agricultural life and had modified their institutions to meet the changing needs of a farming folk. At the same time Roman merchants introduced them to the goods and the manners of the more civilized Romans.

Between the sixth and the third centuries B.C. other German tribes whose original homes were in Scandinavia crossed the Baltic and settled between the Oder and Vistula Rivers. These East Germans, principally the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Vandals, made their way gradually to the south and east, to the lower Danube and the shores of the Black Sea. They clung much longer than their western kinsmen to the nomadic way of life and were still essentially a pastoral folk in Tacitus' time, two centuries or so after the West Germans had begun to adopt the more sedentary habits of an agricultural people.

Among the Germanic peoples who abandoned their earlier nomadic ways society was divided into four classes: nobles, freemen, serfs, and slaves. Birth and property determined nobility, and only nobles and freemen might own land, but war and hunting were their usual occupations and farming was left to those who were unable to fight: women, old men, serfs, and slaves. Like the early Romans, the Germans had a strongly patriarchal society with the family as the core. The family was held responsible for offenses committed by one of its members. Murder, which was not regarded as a capital crime, could be compensated by the
payment of a fine or *wergeld* to the family of the victim. Unless such satisfaction were made, however, all the members of the offending family were in danger of death by the blood feud. One of the most important elements in German society was the *comitatus*, a band of fighting companions bound by inviolate ties of personal loyalty to a chief who maintained them in return for their fighting services. From this institution, among others, mediaeval feudalism developed.

For purposes of military and political organization the village community formed the basic unit. Above the village was a hierarchy of larger territorial divisions: hundreds, counties, tribes, and, when kingship developed, kingdoms. The freemen in the village constituted the assembly, and in the hundreds and counties there were similar assemblies which met periodically in peacetime to consider civil affairs. In time of war or when mass migrations were undertaken, all the fighting men of the tribe or kingdom made up an assembly. Elected chiefs, marked out by qualities of leadership and courage, were originally at the head of the tribes, but by Tacitus’ time the Germans had accepted hereditary kingship. As in other ancient communities, the role of the priests was also very important. They presided over the worship of deities who personified the forces of nature, practiced rites of divination, and helped to dispense a justice based upon a rudimentary law.

*The Barbarian Invasions*

For at least five centuries before the barbarian hordes swarmed into the western provinces the Romans had been aware of the danger of having on their frontiers these truculent and restless tribesmen, who were attracted by the
wealth of the Empire, its fertile fields and rich cities. In the last years of the second century B.C. they invaded Gaul and northern Italy, but the victories of Marius forced them to turn back. A half-century later Caesar's legions halted the Germanic tribes threatening Gaul, but the menace remained, and Augustus, the first Roman emperor, tried to create a safer frontier by conquering and annexing all the territory between the Rhine and Elbe Rivers. When the barbarians inflicted a humiliating defeat on his army, the Romans retired to the Rhine and established their northern defenses from that river to the Black Sea along the course of the Danube. Thereafter, save for limited annexations of territory, notably the addition of Dacia, the Romans were content to maintain this boundary. Until the reign of Marcus Aurelius the Roman system of defenses was strong enough to keep the barbarians from breaking into the Empire, and except for border incidents and skirmishes, barbarians and Romans coexisted peacefully.

From Marcus' time the Germans tried again and again to push their way across the frontier. The Marcomannic Wars were only the first in a series of costly wars waged by Rome in order to prevent the forcible entry of the barbarian hordes. Henceforth the Empire was on the defensive, and one of its major problems in the disastrous third century was to maintain its integrity against these wandering tribes. We have seen how during that century the northern defenses had collapsed and the barbarians had surged into the frontier provinces and beyond. Only the brilliant victories of the soldier-emperors, Claudius Gothicus and Aurelian, had saved the Empire from destruction. The Gothic danger was averted, but only temporarily, and on the frontiers, contracted after the abandonment of
Dacia, the presence of the Germans always reminded the Romans how precarious were the dikes which they had raised against them. The floods came in the following century, and all the efforts of the Romans were powerless to keep them from inundating the Western Empire and threatening the Eastern Empire.

The barbarians had no blueprint for conquest, and, so far as we know, no desire to overthrow the Roman Empire. For centuries they had been migrating in search of new lands, since with their rudimentary system of agriculture they were unable to reduce enough of the forest and swamp areas which they inhabited to provide them with sufficient food for an expanding population. Until the last quarter of the fourth century the Romans were generally able to contain them, since the movements of the Germans were isolated and unco-ordinated and the Roman defenses strong enough to keep them out. Now the pressures became sharper as the Germans themselves felt the thrust of a still more barbaric people. Pushing in panic upon the Roman frontiers, they discovered the weakness of the Empire and advanced until they gained most of western Europe.

*The Role of the Huns*

The great invasions were set in motion around 375 by the appearance of the Huns, who had swept westward two decades or so earlier from the steppes of central Asia into eastern Europe. These mounted nomads, repulsive in appearance, savage and restless in manner, terrified Germans and Romans alike. Because of an extraordinary mobility which enabled them to make whirlwind raids here and then there, their numbers were greatly exaggerated. Nevertheless, they were a formidable host, and their attacks drove
the panic-stricken Germans across the Roman frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube. The first to feel the impact of the Huns were the Ostrogoths, who were pushed back of the Dniester River around 370 and overwhelmed in 375. Then the Visigoths, unable to defend themselves, obtained permission to settle on Roman territory south of the Danube. But outraged by the highhanded treatment given them by the Roman officials who were charged with their reception, they rose in rebellion, pillaged the countryside, and in the battle of Adrianople in 378 annihilated a great Roman army and then overran the whole Balkan Peninsula. Rome had suffered one of the most disastrous defeats in her history.

Racked by domestic difficulties, the Western Empire was unable to offer effective resistance to the advancing barbarians. The Eastern Empire, shielded by the sea and the strategic location of Constantinople and protected by stronger armies and even more by a subtle diplomacy of bribes and threats, escaped the brunt of attack, which was diverted westward. The Rhine and Danube defenses now crumbled under the irresistible pressure of the barbarians, and the German hordes, Vandals, Alemanni, Ostrogoths, Burgundians, and Franks, flooded into the Empire. The weak Western Roman emperors withdrew to their new capital at Ravenna and left German commanders like Stilicho and Ricimer to defend Italy. A century after Adrianople the Visigoths controlled Spain and part of Gaul; the Ostrogoths Italy; the Franks and Burgundians shared the rest of Gaul; the Vandals ruled Africa, and the Angles and Saxons were conquering Britain. The West had fallen.

While the Visigoths, Vandals, and other Germanic groups were creating their kingdoms in the Roman West,
the savage Huns, who had driven the Visigoths to seek safety behind the Roman frontiers in 375, broke down all opposition. When in 450 the Romans refused to pay them further tribute, the Huns started a relentless conquest of Europe which carried them from the lower Danube to Gaul. Visigoths and Romans joined forces to stem their advance, and in 451 at the battle of Campus Mauriacus, near Troyes in Gaul, the Huns were defeated and turned back. Two years later, with the death of Attila, their dread leader, their empire collapsed and they ceased to threaten Europe. The advance of the Germanic nations, however, continued unchecked.

**German Rule in the West**

The Germans had not set out to destroy the Empire; what they wanted from Rome was land and protection from their own enemies. Pressure of the Huns had forced the Goths to begin that peaceful migration into the Empire which turned into attack and forcible entry and conquest. Once the weakness of Rome was exposed, the invasions began. Actually the number of invaders was relatively small. The smaller groups ranged from 25,000 to 50,000; the larger groups from 80,000 to 120,000, of whom only 20 per cent were fighting men. In some of the pitched battles between Romans and Germans, therefore, as few as 10,000 to 20,000 men were engaged on either side. The invaders as a whole represented perhaps no more than 5 per cent of the Roman provincial population whose lands they appropriated and among whom they settled. But the Roman armies were largely barbarian in composition and fought only halfheartedly, and Rome's citizens had neither the will nor the capacity to resist. Rome succumbed not
so much to the barbarian invasions as to that internal malady which has been described in the preceding chapter.

By the beginning of the sixth century the barbarians were firmly established in the lands of the Western Roman Empire. In a little more than a century they had crossed the Rhine and the Danube and created their own states in the western provinces. What had been the nature of the invasions? What was the fate of the Roman and provincial population? Aside from the immediate destruction of Roman control in the West, what were the results of the clash of the two peoples?

_Invasion by Infiltration_

The Roman Empire was not overwhelmed by a sudden catastrophic invasion of German hordes. There were, to be sure, several occasions in the past when large German forces had defeated Roman armies and moved into Roman territory. But in general the barbarian occupation was a slow process of infiltration which had been going on ceaselessly for several centuries. The Roman government itself had settled large groups of barbarians in the frontier areas, enrolled thousands of them in the army, and accepted whole tribes as allies who promised in return for grants of land to guard the frontier against other Germans.

There were peaceful contacts as well as warlike relations between the two neighboring peoples. In the frontier districts Romans and Germans lived side by side, and each came naturally to have some knowledge of the other. Roman merchants crossed the border into German lands in search of new markets and fresh sources of supply and introduced the barbarians to Roman products and ways. Neither the German immigrants nor their kinsmen across
the frontier were more than superficially Romanized, but their manner of life was altered as a result of these contacts. The rough edges of German culture were rubbed smooth by Roman influence, and Roman culture itself changed subtly as increasing numbers of Germans were absorbed into the Empire. Thus the two cultures had begun to blend to a considerable extent even before the period of mass migrations.

Economic Activity

With thousands of people on the march, with fighting and bloodshed, there was inevitably enormous material damage and destruction and a disruption of the normal way of life. Men were slain, cities ravaged and looted, villas destroyed, fields untilled, flocks and herds carried off. Economic activity was paralyzed and conditions as a whole were chaotic until the invaders settled down and established their states.

Trade and commerce, already declining in the Later Roman Empire, as we have seen, suffered a still more serious setback, and urban life decayed. Some Roman cities were abandoned by their terror-stricken inhabitants; others survived merely as convenient centers for the transaction of civil and ecclesiastical administrative affairs. In agriculture, however, there was a recovery as the once pastoral and nomadic barbarians settled down and turned to farming. The system of large estates owned by nobles and worked by *coloni* was adopted by the invaders, who largely replaced the Romans as landowners. Thereby an important element of the institutional heritage of Rome was transmitted by the Germanic conquerors to the mediaeval world.
Coalescence of German and Roman Culture

Although Roman and barbarian now lived side by side, each influencing the other, there were serious obstacles to cultural coalescence. The two peoples had different origins, languages, religious beliefs, political and social institutions; they stood on different levels of cultural development. But in general the Germans admired and respected Rome, displayed a tolerance and forebearance toward Roman ways, and made a determined effort to preserve Roman civilization. Instead of imposing their own culture upon the conquered Romans, they allowed them to retain many of their own laws and institutions. Hence the two peoples lived together more or less amicably, each with their own laws, language, and religion, until a process of cultural fusion brought them more closely together and blurred the distinctions. In short, Roman civilization was greatly weakened, but it was not destroyed.

One source of hostility between Romans and Germans was the difference in religious beliefs. At the time of the invasions most of the Germans had become Christians, having been converted soon after 340 by Wulfilas, or Ulfils, a Goth who had lived in Constantinople as a hostage and had there been ordained as a bishop. Wulfilas, the so-called “Apostle of the Goths,” translated the Bible into Gothic for his people, and despite opposition, Christianity spread widely among them. Wulfilas, however, had belonged to the Arian sect whose beliefs were condemned at the Council of Nicaea. Having originally accepted this heretical form of Christianity, the Germans retained it long after it had been rejected by the majority of Romans. Thus religion widened the gulf between the two peoples. In Gaul, how-
ever, the Franks, under their king Clovis, accepted orthodox Christianity at the end of the fifth century and the union of Germanic conquerors and Gallo-Roman subjects was facilitated.

In the course of time the invaders took over more and more of the institutions and customs of the conquered Romans: administrative practices and devices, the municipal system, taxes, Roman law and law courts, the Latin language for governmental purposes and literary expression, the orthodox Christian religion. Most important of all, they accepted the imperial ideal, the belief in the power and the glory of Rome and the Roman Empire. It is significant that such powerful German rulers as Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths in Italy, and Clovis, king of the Franks in Gaul, took legitimate title to their lands from the Roman emperors at Constantinople, the only emperors now that the Western Empire had ceased to exist. In other ways, too, the new masters of western Europe demonstrated their acceptance of the imperial tradition. For them the Roman Empire, the western half of which they themselves had helped to destroy, had never really perished; Rome was still the Eternal City. Given a new meaning in the church and in the Holy Roman Empire of the Middle Ages, the belief in the survival of Rome remained a potent force, perhaps the most important part of the Roman legacy to the mediaeval world.

*The Fusion of Roman and Germanic Elements*

Although never complete, there was a fusion of the two cultures, the later Roman and the German. In effecting the synthesis, the Christian church played a major role, adapting itself to the new situation, sometimes exercising in those
troubled times the only effective political authority, tempering the roughness of the barbarians, and helping to civilize them by introducing them to Roman culture. Learning, literature, and art suffered during the chaotic years of the great invasions, but they did not die. While it was principally the church which kept ancient culture alive, the German kings themselves, and especially Theodoric of Ostrogothic Italy, preserved the framework and much of the content of Roman civilization. Whatever their faults and weaknesses from the point of view of the golden age of Latin literature, such writers as the philosopher Boethius and the scholar-administrator Cassiodorus in Ostrogothic Italy, the encyclopedist Isidore of Seville in Visigothic Spain, the poets Sidonius Apollinaris and Fortunatus in Gaul, and the historian of the Franks, Gregory of Tours, show the abiding strength of the classical tradition. In the magnificent mosaics of Italy and in the jewelry of Gaul and Spain, Roman influences also predominated. Europe suffered heavy losses, and a large part of the civilized world reverted to barbarism during this age of transition. But much of the Roman cultural heritage was salvaged and accepted by the German conquerors of western Europe and preserved by them for later generations.

The Eastern Roman Empire

The Western Roman Empire perished and in its place the German kingdoms were established. The Eastern Roman Empire, however, survived, and for a thousand years, from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, flourished as a great world power, stable when western Europe was anarchic, civilized when the West was groping its way out of the darkness of the early Middle Ages. In their capital at Con-
Constantinople, as heirs of Augustus, the eastern emperors strove to uphold the Roman imperial ideal. To them the western world, the Slavic world, and the Moslem world owe a large debt for their zealous preservation of the heritage of classical antiquity. But the Eastern Roman Empire was more than a guardian of the classical tradition. Out of their own genius, from Greek, Roman, Oriental, and Christian elements, its people created the rich and brilliant civilization which is called Byzantine after Byzantium, the older name of Constantinople.

Constantine the Great had chosen a magnificent site for his new capital. Here in Constantinople, as Gibbon says, "The prospect of beauty, of safety, and of wealth were united in a single spot." Controlling the land route from Europe to Asia and the sea route from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, protected by the sea on two sides and fortifications on the third side, the city was easy to defend and remained unconquered for over a thousand years. Equally well situated for trade, Constantinople became the most prosperous city of the mediaeval world. Until its capture by the Turks in 1453 this great cosmopolitan city was a beacon light of Graeco-Roman culture.

The Division of the Empire

Constantine ruled over a united Roman Empire and his successors sought to maintain that unity. But when Theodosius divided the Empire between his two sons in 395, the separation into a western and an eastern empire, foreshadowed by Diocletian's administrative division a century earlier, was definitely established. The distinction between a Latin West and a Greek East was increasingly marked, as Greek tended to supplant Latin as the official language in
the East, and as differences developed within the church in the two regions. In theory, however, the Empire remained one and indivisible, and to the abiding strength of that belief in a single empire may be attributed the grandiose project of the emperor Justinian (527-565) to reconstitute the Empire by winning back from the barbarians the lost western provinces.

Although the Eastern Empire escaped the brunt of the barbarian attacks and suffered less than the West, its territories were also ravaged by successive hordes of invaders: Visigoths, Huns, Ostrogoths, and Slavs and Bulgars later. It had, moreover, the task of defending its eastern frontiers against Persia. Like the West, the East had internal weaknesses inherited in part from the Later Roman Empire: palace intrigues and revolts, weak emperors, insubordinate generals who were often of barbarian origin, corrupt civil servants, and mercenary armies levied among the barbarians. Despite these weaknesses, the Eastern Empire successfully resisted the barbarians, bribed them to move elsewhere or drove them off. However great the threat, Constantinople remained an impregnable bastion of the state. But there were other elements of strength too: a conciliatory foreign policy toward Persia, which for a time relieved the pressure on the eastern frontier and enabled the emperors to concentrate on western problems; an important reservoir of fighting men in Asia Minor; a generally efficient bureaucracy; prosperous cities and a flourishing industry and commerce which helped to finance the government. So the East was able to weather the worst storms of the fourth and fifth centuries, and in the sixth century to take the offensive under the emperor Justinian.
Justinian

Fifty years before Justinian mounted the throne in Constantinople the last Western emperor had been deposed and German kings ruled in his place. Although Justinian was a Roman emperor, his control extended only to the Adriatic. The western provinces seemed irretrievably lost. Yet so intense was his belief in the divinely inspired mission of a Roman emperor that he set himself resolutely to reconquer these provinces and to restore imperial unity under his rule. The attempt was only partially successful and the cost very high. But never again was a Roman emperor to rule over as wide an empire, an empire which once more stretched along the western shores of the Mediterranean. Whatever his failure, then, Justinian may be regarded as one of the greatest figures of Europe in the age of transition.

The splendid mosaics in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna give us a vivid portrait of Justinian and his empress, Theodora. The personalities, the characters, and the achievements of the imperial couple are presented even more graphically by Procopius, a contemporary historian. Justinian was a vain and stubborn ruler, ambitious for power and glory, and tireless in his autocratic concern for administrative, military, and theological problems. In his various enterprises he was supported by his brilliant and beautiful wife Theodora, who rose from humble origins and a scandalous past to become until her death in 548 his ablest assistant and virtually co-ruler.

The recovery of the lost provinces of the West was a goal of the imperial policy which Justinian pursued with grim determination. Not long after his accession he commissioned
Belisarius, his best general, to reconquer Africa from the Vandals. In 533, after a year's fighting, Africa was again a Roman province, but revolts and mutinies prolonged the war until 548, when Roman authority was made secure. Meantime, in 535, Belisarius began the recovery of Italy from the Ostrogoths, and by 540 Gothic resistance was broken. But when Belisarius was withdrawn, the Goths under their king Totila rose in revolt and drove the Roman garrisons from nearly the whole peninsula. Not until 554 was Roman authority re-established in Italy by the brilliant Eastern Roman general, Narses. The country was all but devastated after the long years of war and Rome itself a shambles from siege, capture, and recapture. Southern Spain and the Mediterranean islands were also reconquered by Justinian's generals, but no more was attempted, if indeed the emperor had ever proposed to retake all the lost territory. Gaul remained firmly under Frankish control, most of Spain under the Visigoths, and Britain under warring barbarians.

Justinian's plans for westward expansion could only be accomplished if the eastern and northern frontiers were stabilized. Since he had only limited resources of men and money, the corollary of an aggressive policy in the West had to be a defensive one elsewhere. This the emperor tried to establish by erecting a strong system of walls and fortifications, by bribing and subsidizing barbarians and Persians, and by a devious diplomacy which was designed to keep his enemies at war with one another. The policy was costly and unsuccessful and wars had to be fought in the East as in the West. Huns, Slavs, and other barbarians broke through the Danube defenses and overran the Balkan Peninsula, although they were kept away from Constantinople.
Meanwhile, the provinces on the eastern frontier suffered heavily from Persian raids and full-scale fighting. Justinian’s program of reconstituting the old Roman Empire resulted in no lasting gain in the West, jeopardized the heart of the Empire which was in the East, and imposed an almost intolerable burden upon his hard-pressed subjects.

*The Problem of Heresy*

The re-establishment of political unity was only one part of the emperor’s program. “Governing under the authority of God,” as he expressed it in his laws, Justinian regarded it as equally his duty to achieve religious uniformity in his domains. Indeed, religion and politics were two facets of the same imperial policy, and the Vandal and Ostrogothic wars were waged not merely to regain lost provinces, but also to free the orthodox church from domination by heretical Germans. Both in the West and in the East force and persuasion were employed against the surviving pagans and various groups of heretical Christians. Against paganism, which drew its devotees chiefly from the educated classes, Justinian struck a mortal blow by closing the Academy and the Lyceum, the philosophical schools of Athens which had maintained an unbroken tradition of pagan learning from the days of their founders, Plato and Aristotle. Against heretics in Africa and Italy he proceeded aggressively, once these lands had been reconquered.

The most serious problem, however, was presented by the Monophysite Christians in the provinces of Egypt and Syria. Ostensibly their heresy was concerned with the definition of the nature of Christ (see page 127). But the Monophysite heresy was also a rallying point for those who were discontented with the imperial regime. The controversy
became one aspect of a growing political, economic, and cultural conflict between the native population of Egypt and Syria and the Graeco-Roman ruling class, whom they regarded as alien oppressors. For Justinian, the Monophysite problem was baffling: the attempt to satisfy their demands, as urged by Theodora, placated the eastern provinces but antagonized the orthodox elements in the Empire, especially the papacy, and jeopardized the success of the imperial foreign policy in the West. The emperor wavered between persecution and appeasement of the Monophysites and sought formulas of compromise. In the end he failed to satisfy the eastern provinces, which were increasingly disaffected, or the western provinces, which were alienated by his concessions to heretics.

More successful was his encouragement of missionary activity, which carried both Christianity and the culture of the Eastern Roman Empire from Constantinople to regions far outside the Empire and eventually endowed the Slavic peoples of Russia and the Balkans with a rich legacy of Byzantine art, literature, and learning. Byzantine culture is, in fact, an essential basis of the civilization of the Slavic world.

Justinian’s absolutism in the sphere of ecclesiastical affairs, his attempts to legislate for the church, his interest and active participation in doctrinal disputes, in short, his effort to treat the church as a department of the state, is sometimes called “Caesaropapism.” That term, which implies that the emperor was head of the church as well as of the state, may be inaccurate, but it serves nevertheless to underscore his conviction that his powers transcended those of any other person or institution. Although to a large extent Justinian controlled the church in the East and made
it an organ of the state, the stubborn resistance of orthodox Christians to his efforts to reach an accommodation with the Monophysites indicates that the church was by no means completely subservient to his will.

The Cost of Imperial Government

Justinian’s rule was absolute, but he needed help to govern a great and even growing empire. His administrative machinery was a version of the complex bureaucracy which he inherited from the Later Roman Empire, expanded by a host of high ministers and lesser officials in a hierarchy of rank and position. An army of civil servants assisted these officials. But as in the Later Empire, corruption was rife, offices were bought and sold, only a fraction of the taxes reached the treasury, and all the efforts of the emperor to introduce administrative reforms failed.

The root of the evil was his constant need for money. His costly wars and diplomacy, his extravagant building program and elaborate court life, could only be paid for by increasingly higher levies. Regardless of his subjects’ inability to pay or the venality of the officials, money had to be raised. All this strained the economic structure of the realm. The treasury was exhausted, the currency debased, and still taxes were multiplied. As in the Later Roman Empire, the burden lay heaviest on the humbler classes of peasants and city-folk; the great landowners were able to escape the demands of the state.

From the very outset of Justinian’s reign there was widespread antagonism to his fiscal policies. The famous Nika Riots of 532, so-called from the slogan Nika or “Conquer!” shouted by the mobs, were a sudden explosion of pent-up dissatisfaction with the government. The riots began as a
quarrel between the factions which supported rival chariot-
eers in the races held in the hippodrome. But since these
circus factions represented at the same time conflicting reli-
gious and political views, the Nika Riots soon became an
open rebellion which threatened the safety of the emperor
himself. Only by the iron courage of Theodora was Jus-
tinian kept from abdicating and were the riots finally
quelled. He undertook fresh reforms, but none was effec-
tive as long as his need for money remained pressing. By
the end of his reign the army was dangerously reduced, the
fortresses were neglected, and the Persians and barbarians
were kept out of the Empire only by heavy bribes for
which more money had to be found. The western con-
quests, incomplete in any event, exhausted the state. When
after Justinian's death in 565 the Lombards advanced into
Italy, the Eastern Empire was too weak to prevent these
new German invaders from establishing a kingdom there.
Within a century, too, most of the other western conquests
were abandoned to the armies of Islam, while in the East,
Egypt and Syria offered no firm resistance to conquest first
by the Persians and eventually by the Arabs.

Justinian's vaulting ambitions brought the Eastern Ro-
man Empire close to ruin. His conquests were ephemeral,
his religious policy a failure. But Justinian is remembered
less for these failures than for two magnificent achieve-
ments: a code of laws, which preserved for later genera-
tions in the West as well as the East the finest product of the
Roman genius, and the Church of St. Sophia, the greatest
monument of Byzantine art.

Corpus iuris Civilis

For more than a thousand years the Romans, through
their assemblies, magistrates, emperors, and lawyers, had
been fashioning a system of law which was designed to ensure justice for the individual and stability for the state. In its conservatism Roman law reflected the Roman character itself, but as the Roman character was molded by changing circumstances, so the law was modified to meet new situations created by the historical development of Rome: the acquisition of an empire and successive changes in her government, economy, and society. Civil law, which applied to Roman citizens, had broadened out in time to include the concept of a law of nations, as the Romans recognized an obligation to provide justice for noncitizens as well as citizens in their world-empire and as they realized that other legal systems, the laws and customs of other peoples, might be tapped to furnish a basis for a wider law than their own. From the time of the Late Republic a succession of brilliant lawyers had studied the law, given interpretations of it, and sought the principles underlying it. They had tempered its firmness with fairness, and rendered it more flexible, more equitable, and more humane. Through the influence of Stoic philosophy the Romans came to have a vision of a still broader and more fundamental law, a law of nature lying back of civil law and the law of nations. Here, however imperfectly glimpsed, was the law existing in nature not for Romans alone or for Greeks or Germans, but for all men everywhere and always. The lawyers, many of whom were Stoics, looked behind Roman law and sought to approach that law of nature of which manmade law was only an approximation. Paradoxically it was in the autocratic Later Empire that Roman law became more humane, more equitable, and more universal under the impact of these intellectual interests and of Christianity itself.

Long before Justinian’s time the great period of creative activity in Roman law had ended, but much remained to be
done if it were to be a living and usable force. Not only was there a great mass of legal enactments going back to early Republican times and continued by the emperors, but there were also the interpretations of the law, made by such jurists as Ulpian, Papinian, and Paulus, which had become an intrinsic part of Roman law. The general structure of the law was sound and impressive, but in detail it was ambiguous, repetitious, and obsolete—a natural result of its long development. The lawyers had often rendered contradictory interpretations, and successive emperors had issued conflicting enactments. An attempt had been made by Emperor Theodosius II to create some order out of this chaos, and his Theodosian Code (438) at least codified and clarified the edicts of the emperors beginning with Constantine, and in time it provided the barbarian kingdoms with a basic code for Romans in their dominions. Much still remained to be done, however, if a path were to be cut through the tangled thicket of law. Soon after his accession to the throne Justinian undertook the task as one phase of his program of administrative reform. To accomplish it he appointed a commission of distinguished lawyers, who produced the Codex Justinianus, a revised and systematic code of all imperial laws which were still in force. Justinian's Digest or Pandects, published soon afterward, provided a harmonious and usable compilation of the vast literature of legal interpretations made by the jurists. The Institutes was designed to serve as an elementary textbook for students of law, and the Novellae included laws issued by Justinian after the publication of the Codex.

In his great work of systematizing and crystallizing the law, Justinian wrought not merely for his time but for the ages. The Corpus Iuris Civilis, as his codification came to
be called, preserves in living form Rome's greatest heritage. It is a permanent record of Rome's equity and justice and a guide to thought and action for later generations.

The Church of St. Sophia

The magnificent Church of St. Sophia remains today, nearly 1,500 years after it was erected in Constantinople by order of Justinian, one of the world's priceless treasures. The vast dome floating in mid-air, as it were, the pillars and walls of colored marble and the glowing mosaics which pick up and reflect the flood of light from the windows, all create an unforgettable impression of harmony, splendor, and beauty. Like the Corpus Iuris Civitis, St. Sophia endured long after Justinian and the Eastern Roman Empire. These two achievements epitomize the mission of that empire: to preserve the legacy of the ancient world—whether in art or law—and to blend the classical with the Christian.

Problems Confronting the Christian Church

Underlying all else in this age of transition in the East and the West, in the Roman Empire and the Germanic kingdoms alike, was the hard bedrock of the Christian church. By the end of the fourth century the church was triumphant, but it had to face and solve a number of problems. Some were posed within its ranks by the very fact of its success; others were presented from outside by the events of the period. So the church had to develop an administrative organization adequate for a rapidly growing institution and in some measure capable of dealing with problems which were once the concern of the state, but which were now, in the vacuum created by the decline of the Western Roman Empire, the concern of the church.
The increasing need for a centralized organization which could provide solidarity and cohesion led to the creation of a hierarchical government for the church and to the rise of the sovereign papacy. The conquest of the West by barbarians who had already accepted the Christian religion or were soon to do so meant that Christianity was no longer coterminous with the Roman world, but had become a supernational religion. The church had, therefore, to determine its relations with a host of separate states, Roman and German. As the ties which bound East and West weakened, the church found it more difficult to maintain unity in its own ranks. In the face of spreading heresy a firm statement of Christian doctrine had to be made. Here the church Fathers, the great theologians and spokesmen of the early centuries, played a major role in combating heresy and in stating clearly the orthodox belief, while church councils provided authoritative rulings on disputed questions. Finally, as the church grew in numbers, strength, and wealth, what seemed to be its increasing worldliness disturbed many of the faithful, and some tried to escape the world and its ways by adopting ascetic practices. The development of the monastic movement presented the church with the problem of controlling and directing these impulses and tendencies.

**Paganism**

In spite of the victory of Christianity in the fourth century, staunch supporters of the pagan gods were still to be found among the country folk, who were traditionally conservative, and among intellectuals and aristocrats, who had been reared on a literature which was rooted in paganism. It was during the reign of an emperor who was both an
aristocrat and an intellectual that paganism enjoyed a brief revival. Soon after he became emperor, Julian (361–363), the so-called Apostate, rebelled against the Christian faith and tried to replace it by a pagan religion which incorporated some of the institutions and practices of Christianity. At the same time he took discriminatory measures against the Christians by means of which he hoped to destroy their religion. His pagan cult, with its blend of pagan and Christian practices and Greek philosophy, had, however, little real vitality, and the reasons which had won men to Christianity were as cogent as before. This final attempt to infuse new life into the old religion failed, and Julian's paganism died with him. The temples of the gods were soon closed or were converted to other uses or fell into ruin. By the end of the century legal toleration of paganism ceased and sacrifices to the pagan gods were prohibited as treasonable. The Roman Empire was now officially an orthodox Christian state, although paganism lingered in some circles until Justinian's time. But the death blow had been given long before, and all that remained of paganism were some practices which were adapted to Christianity and, more important, pagan literature and learning, in which the church Fathers were steeped and from which they borrowed not only many of the basic concepts of their thought, but the very modes of expression.

Development of Church Organization

In the early days of the Christian church a simple rudimentary organization sufficed for the separate communities of believers. Now that Christianity was victorious and claimed its converts everywhere in the Roman and barbarian world, a more elaborate ecclesiastical organization was
needed to give it strength and unity. Quite naturally the church, which had come into being and won its victory within the frontiers of the Empire, modeled its organization upon the highly developed system already in existence in the Roman world and adapted to its own needs Roman methods, practices, and institutions. Distinctions between clergy and laymen had developed very early, and these tended to harden as the clergy assumed leadership over laity. Within each city the bishops emerged as the church’s chief administrative officials. The Roman scheme of provincial administration was also adopted, and when problems concerning Christians of a whole province arose, the bishops met in the provincial capital under the leadership of the metropolitan or archbishop of that city. Thus Christianity became an institutional religion with an administrative machinery which reproduced that of the Empire.

In the absence of a strong government the church stepped into the breach and began to discharge civil functions. As municipal government decayed, the bishop’s prestige and power grew and he often became the leading person in the city. Not only did he have authority in the realm of religious affairs, but he came to possess recognized rights of civil jurisdiction. In this role he served as an effective counterweight to the arbitrary power of the imperial bureaucracy and protected men from oppression by the government. So, too, the church alleviated the distress of the poor and provided hospitals and orphanages, in short, assumed many of the functions exercised in the days of Rome’s prosperity by the imperial or municipal government. The church had increasing resources for the performance of these charitable works, for in 321 Constantine had decreed that it could accept gifts and legacies. Al-
though this wealth enabled the church to perform a variety of social services, it also posed fresh problems, which became acute as the patrimonies of the church swelled through the generosity of the faithful.

The Bishop of Rome

Early in the history of the church the bishops of Rome acquired great power and influence, and in time a succession of able bishops pressed their claim to sovereign power over the whole church. In part this was the logical outgrowth of the process of development by which the ecclesiastical organization was modeled on that of the Roman Empire. The capital of the Empire was appropriately enough regarded by many as the capital of the church, and just as the bishops of provincial capitals were considered as more important than other bishops, so the bishop of the imperial capital enjoyed special prestige. But a more important basis for the claim for the primacy of the Roman bishops or popes was the Petrine tradition, that is, that Christ had delegated sole and supreme authority to the apostle Peter, traditionally regarded as the founder of the church at Rome, and that the bishops of Rome, as apostolic successors of St. Peter, therefore possessed supreme authority over the church. The famous passage in Matthew 16:18–19 was quoted in support of the claim: “Thou art Peter [Petros], and upon this rock [petra in Greek] I will build my church.” Although there was initial opposition from certain bishops elsewhere, the bishop of Rome won increasing acceptance as head of the church, and by 381 his primacy was officially recognized by the church council of Constantinople. Rome, no longer the capital of the Empire, was now the capital of the Christian church. In the vacuum
created by the transfer and eventually by the fall of the imperial government in the West, the popes became more active in the administration and even in the defense of the city and achieved a sovereignty which extended from ecclesiastical to civil affairs.

The power of the papacy was greatly strengthened, and, indeed, the foundations of the mediaeval papacy were established by a series of able leaders: by Pope Leo I (440–461), who vigorously proclaimed the Petrine Doctrine; by Pope Gelasius I (492–496), who defended the theory of the supremacy of the church over the state; and finally by Pope Gregory the Great (590–604), who brought the whole orthodox Christian world in close connection with the See of Peter. While the Eastern Roman emperors were less willing than the German rulers of the West to recognize the supremacy of the popes, they co-operated with them and in many practical ways demonstrated their acceptance of papal supremacy. Thus by the sixth century the mediaeval conception of the dominant role of the papacy was solidly established.

Heresies

Even before it won its victory in the Roman world, alarming cracks had appeared in the structure of the church as controversies arose over the nature of Christian doctrine. Constantine had attempted to deal with the most dangerous of these disputes, the Arian controversy, which concerned the problem of the nature of Christ. Many Christians had accepted the teachings of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, that God and the Son were of like, but not identical, substance. Others, following Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, held that God and the Son were of the same substance and
insisted that the Arian teachings relegated Christ to a secondary place. Although the theological questions were abstruse and complex, the controversy inflamed public opinion, especially in the East, and threatened to split both the church and the Empire into two irreconcilable parts. Constantine therefore tried to settle the question at the church council which met at Nicaea in 325. Here the teachings of Athanasius were proclaimed as orthodox and the Nicene Creed, which embodied them, was accepted, while the Arian views were condemned as heretical. Even though it was supported by the emperor, the publication of the Creed did not produce uniformity of belief, and many persisted in the Arian heresy or, like the German invaders of the Empire, were converted to Arian Christianity.

Disagreements about the nature of Christian doctrine continued despite the efforts of the church and sometimes the state to end controversy and to establish a universal Christian creed. The fifth-century heresies, which flourished chiefly in the Eastern Empire, were supported by those groups in the population which were already alienated from the government for political, social, economic, and cultural reasons. Hence, as the account of Justinian's reign has shown, it was difficult to heal the rifts that developed between Constantinople and the provinces of Syria and Egypt. Moreover, the problem was complicated because of the widening gap between the East and the West. A settlement which satisfied the eastern provinces alienated the church in the West, and a solution pleasing to Rome intensified the disruptive factors in the East. The Nestorian heresy, which stressed the human element in Christ, and the Monophysite heresy, which seemed to deny the human and to emphasize the divine element, were the chief heresies
which plagued the Eastern Roman emperors. Nestorianism was proscribed by a church council and most of its adherents chose the path of exile, but Monophysitism proved less tractable, and the emperors, notably Justinian, could find no formula which would satisfy Constantinople, the eastern provinces, and the church at Rome. Persecution failed, as did compromise, and only the loss of Egypt and Syria settled the problem by removing the dissident elements. The price of religious uniformity was high, but by the end of the sixth century there was a net gain. A greater degree of cohesion had been won by separating the orthodox from the heretics, and in the course of the controversies the church had been compelled to define the articles of its faith clearly and forcefully.

The Monastic Movement

The church was called upon to solve another thorny problem in this age of transition: how to control or to guide the monastic movement which was spreading rapidly from its original home in the East to the West. Conditions within and outside the church were responsible for the popularity of monasticism. By flight to the monastic life men tried to escape or at least to bear more easily the evils of the Roman world, in which they were insecure, overburdened, and overtaxed. Among the monks were men who had been victimized by the absolutist Roman government, persecuted as Christians by a still pagan Empire, or in later times ruined by barbarian attack. Others sought in the solitude of the monk’s life escape from what seemed to them to be the increasing worldliness of the church. In the desert or in lonely and inaccessible places they looked for peace and quiet where they might shun temptation, meditate and
pray, and attain a life of holiness. For them the monastic life seemed the best path to salvation.

Monasticism had its origins in Egypt, where many chose to live as hermits in the desert or in the swamplands of the Nile Delta. But there were others who believed that only by mortification of the flesh through extreme ascetic practices could they demonstrate the ardor of their faith. The classic example is St. Simeon Stylites, who lived for some thirty years atop a pillar. A reaction to such extremes came, however, and the cenobitic or community form of monastic life superseded the anchoritic or solitary life of the hermit.

Monasticism soon spread from Egypt throughout the eastern Roman provinces. For these monastic foundations St. Basil (330–379) drew up a series of Rules which even today regulate monastic life in the Greek Church. His Rules stressed the importance of labor by the monks and, by minimizing the older emphasis upon harsh ascetic practices, gave monasticism a sane direction. Meanwhile the Roman emperors, who had first opposed the movement because it seemed to provide men with a means of escape from those civil and military obligations upon which the state depended, made their peace with monasticism.

The monastic ideal also spread from Egypt to the West and won acceptance, thanks largely to the work of St. Jerome. But the greatest figure of western monasticism was St. Benedict of Nursia (480–543), who drew up the Benedictine Rule for the government of the monastic community which he founded at Monte Cassino, near Rome. His practical code fixed for monks the three cardinal rules of poverty, chastity, and obedience, established an ordered life of labor and prayer, and provided methods for the administration of monasteries. For western monasticism the
Benedictine Rule came to be the accepted model, as St. Basil's Rules were for the East.

By their example the monks focused attention upon the other-worldly elements in Christianity. But Basil in the East and Benedict in the West made the monks aware of a part which they could play in the world, a role which would strengthen and not destroy their spiritual resolve. They became active missionaries who carried Christianity beyond the frontiers of the old Roman Empire. They maintained and improved old techniques of agriculture and helped to teach them to the barbarians. By founding libraries and by copying classical and Christian texts, they were largely responsible for preserving the literature and the learning of Greece and Rome.

The Conflict of Christian and Pagan Culture

Christianity had come into being and had spread in a pagan world. Its converts were drawn increasingly from those for whom Latin and Greek were native languages; in time its teachers and missionaries were men who knew the literature and philosophy of the classical world. Although a Christian education and literature developed, in the early centuries reliance was inevitably placed upon classical literature and learning. An obvious danger lurked here, that Christians might be corrupted or subverted by exposure to these pagan influences. What then was to be the attitude of the church? A clash of cultures, a struggle between two traditions, compromise, adjustment, and reconciliation: this in brief is the cultural history of the troubled age of transition. By the sixth century the conflict was fairly well resolved, not by the victory of a new
Christian culture over the older classical, but by a synthesis of the two cultures.

We have seen earlier that the decline of the Empire was reflected in the decline of pagan literature. The death of the pagan gods, who had loomed so large in ancient literature, removed one source of inspiration. But a more important deterrent to literary activity was the political, social, and economic crisis. Writers could seem to find little in their own society worth telling. Rhetorical adornment cloaked a poverty of ideas, and form rather than content became of supreme importance. On the whole pagan literature in the Later Roman Empire was pedantic and imitative, dull and colorless; it had reached a dead end. There were, however, exceptions in the fourth and fifth centuries. The poetry of Claudian and Rutilius Namatianus, heavily freighted though it is by rhetorical flourishes, is illuminated by flashes of talent and inspiration; while the history by Ammianus Marcellinus, who wrote in the latter half of the fourth century, is in the great tradition of Livy and Tacitus.

Long before this, confidence in science and reason had waned. Philosophy failed to attract or to hold men, and they turned instead to the mystery cults or to personal religions which appealed not to reason but to faith and emotion. Philosophy blended with religion and became scarcely distinguishable from it. In science, as in philosophy, no fresh creative work was accomplished. The uncritical compilations which were produced were crude and inadequate, but they represented much of the store of knowledge inherited by the early mediaeval world. So, too, the grammatical and rhetorical works of the period, notably the writings of Donatus, served the Middle Ages as stand-
ard textbooks and played an important part in the preservation of ancient learning.

In contrast to the pagan writers of the Later Empire the Christian writers seemed to have fresh inspiration and enthusiasm. Their religion provided them with a theme which was vital and stimulating; new ideas, new interests, and new spirit gave point and meaning to what they wrote. In place of an essentially materialistic message Christianity offered a spiritual one addressed to all men and not merely to intellectuals or aristocrats. Christian authors, unlike their pagan contemporaries, regarded it as their function to teach and persuade rather than to please and entertain. Even before the victory of the church in the fourth century, therefore, Christian literature had begun to show more originality and vigor than the pagan. In controversy with the defenders of paganism and with heretics in their own ranks Christian authors sharpened their weapons and acquired greater skill. Eventually Christian literature superseded the pagan, but not before it accepted its heritage.

A synthesis of the two cultures was effected only after a long and bitter struggle. The sharp contrast between pagan and Christian culture at first seemed to militate against any reconciliation or compromise. Pagan intellectuals scorned Christian writers as crude and unlettered flouters of pagan traditions. Christian authors in turn condemned much that they found in pagan literature: its allusions to gods and myths, its sensual appeal, its rationalism and materialism, even its style, which seemed to seduce and corrupt. The question which Tertullian asked in the second century, “What have Athens and Jerusalem in common?” epitomizes the Christian attitude. Christian writers suffered pangs of conscience, but they continued to cherish classical
literature. St. Jerome portrays their mental conflict in his account of a dream in which Christ reproached him: "You are a Ciceronian, and not a Christian: where your treasure is, there is your heart also." 4

*Synthesis of the Two Cultures*

A process of assimilation took place in the course of time; Christian writers accepted much of the classical tradition and employed it as one of the pillars upon which they erected the Christian culture of the Middle Ages. As Romans, they wrote and spoke in Latin or Greek. In the early centuries they were educated in Graeco-Roman schools, where pagan authors were the staple of instruction. They were thoroughly conversant with pagan literature and learning, and their thought and writings were naturally cast in a classical mold. They based their theological arguments on ancient philosophy and presented them in the familiar modes of ancient rhetoric. Eventually the Christians established their own schools, but the instruction offered in them stemmed from the classical. Inevitably Christian writers, whether brought up in classical or Christian schools, showed the influence of an education which was basically classical. They read Cicero, Virgil, Seneca, and other pagan authors, respected them and quoted them. Thus the two traditions, the classical and the Christian, were reconciled and harmonized in this age of transition, and out of the fusion medieaval culture arose.

St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, and St. Augustine are the most distinguished but not the only Christian writers of the period which saw the decline of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the German kingdoms. Jerome (347–

the most learned of the Latin Church Fathers, is best known for his monumental translation of the Bible into Latin, but he produced translations of other works as well, scholarly commentaries on the Bible, and a whole library of theological treatises. In all his writings Jerome made it abundantly clear that he was both “Ciceronian” and “Christian.” Although Ambrose (337–397) is best known for his practical administration as bishop of Milan, he was also a writer of distinction whose works show the strong influence of the classical authors upon a learned Christian. Even more marked was the impress of a classical education upon Augustine (354–430). His *Confessions*, which describes his own conversion, is one of the greatest of all spiritual autobiographies, and his *City of God*, which was inspired by the capture of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, is a magnificent account of universal history presented in terms of the contrast between the two cities, the transitory, earthly city of the world and the eternal, heavenly city of God.

The Christian poets, too, were stimulated by their classical training. Indeed, the poetry of Ausonius in the fourth century and of Sidonius Apollinaris in the following century is essentially pagan in inspiration or at least full of classical allusions. Even in the Christian hymns of Prudentius of Spain (348–405) the forms and techniques are still classical, although his ardent Christian faith gives these lyrical poems an intensity and sincerity which pagan poetry had lost.

Literary works of merit were still produced during the chaotic fifth and sixth centuries, when the Western Empire was overthrown and the Germanic kingdoms were founded. However debased the currency of classical learning and
literature in the German realms, it continued to circulate. Boethius and Cassiodorus in Ostrogothic Italy, Gregory of Tours in Gaul, Isidore of Seville in Spain, and other writers kept alive the literary traditions which they inherited from the ancient world.

The conflict between pagan and Christian letters was resolved earlier in the East than in the West; indeed, it was never as intense. On the whole, the ancient tradition was cherished in the Greek East, and the sermons, theological tracts, poetry, and history produced there were indebted to pagan models for their style and thought. In so brief an essay we can only point to a few of the leading Greek writers—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus—who laid the foundations of Christian theology in the East during the fourth century; the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius (265–338), to whom the mediaeval world, West and East, was indebted for providing the techniques of historical writing as well as valuable historical data; and Procopius, the historian of Justinian’s reign, the last of the great historians of the ancient world. As the Empire was sundered culturally as well as politically, the Greek language and literature all but vanished in the West, but in the Eastern Roman Empire the strength of the Hellenic tradition was demonstrated for a thousand years by a succession of Greek writers.

Assimilation in Art and Architecture

In general, those characteristics which we have observed in the literature of a dying paganism and of a triumphant Christianity can also be seen in art. The decline of the Empire was accompanied by a decline of old standards in art. Architects, sculptors, and painters were less and less in-
fluenced by classical canons of taste and technique. Where earlier artists had been concerned with moderation and balance, the artists of the Later Empire tried to achieve their effects by colossal size, whether of buildings or statues, bright and even garish colors, and a profusion of ornament and decoration. Nevertheless, the art of the period cannot be condemned as wholly decadent; on the contrary, in those very centuries something like an artistic renaissance occurred. As in literature, so in art, Christianity provided a new creative impulse, a new purpose, and new themes. As the church emerged triumphant, it needed places of worship worthy of a victorious religion; it called for statues, paintings, and mosaics to represent the Christian symbols and the central figures of Christianity, to teach the faith, and to narrate the Bible stories and the history of the church. No more than the Christian writer could escape the influence of pagan literature could the Christian artist avoid making use of the familiar forms, methods, and techniques of the pagan world of art. The older artistic forms were adapted to Christian uses and given a new vitality and a new spiritual meaning by the religious fervor of Christianity. Thus the Christian artists preserved the classical tradition and transformed it into the artistic traditions of the Byzantine East and the mediaeval West.

For the style of the churches the architects turned not to Roman temples, which were too small, and tainted besides with pagan associations, but to the basilica, a long rectangular building which the Romans had used successfully for law courts and other public business. They converted this basic form to Christian uses, varied it by adding main and subsidiary apses, aisles, and transepts, adorned it with ornate columns and capitals, arches, and decoration.
For the plan of their baptistries and churches the architects borrowed from Roman and perhaps Oriental domed structures, but they used these models in an original and creative manner. Whatever the style of architecture, the builders tried to demonstrate their devotion to their faith by painting, sculpture, and, above all, by magnificent mosaic pictures and decoration. In all these artistic forms they learned from Roman models and prototypes. In the minor arts too, in ivory carving, glassware, metalware, engraved stone, and jewelry, we see the same blending of the classical and the Christian, although other influences came in from the Orient and the barbarian world.

Synthesis of Roman, Germanic, and Christian Elements

We have traced through the age of transition the development of the three major elements out of which the civilization of the Middle Ages was fashioned. By the end of the period a rough and tentative synthesis of the old and the new, the Roman, Germanic, and Christian, had been achieved in the art and literature, in the politics, economy, and society of the western world. The synthesis is mediaeval civilization.

The world at the end of the sixth century was immensely altered. The Roman Empire had long before split into the Eastern and the Western Empires. The Western Empire in turn had disintegrated into the German kingdoms. But the Christian church gave men a common loyalty and a devotion to a single institution transcending empires and kingdoms. Through the Eastern Roman Empire, the German states of western Europe, and above all the church, mediaeval Europe received the institutional and intellectual heritage of the ancient world.
CHAPTER VI

The Roman Legacy

THE story of the rise and decline of Rome has stirred the imagination of mankind. In the thousand years of her history Rome, originally a small farming community, had emerged first as master of Italy and finally as ruler of the western world. Her people had consolidated the Empire under the Roman peace and buttressed it for centuries by an efficient system of administration and defense. Latin culture had been modified as a result of exposure to intellectual and artistic crosscurrents from the Graeco-Oriental parts of the Empire, and out of an amalgam of Oriental, Greek, and Roman elements the Romans had created a civilization of high order. The Roman achievement was magnificent; the Roman failure to meet the challenge presented by new experiences and to solve the problems posed by fresh responsibilities was disastrous.

By A.D. 600 peace and unity were shattered and the Roman Empire had disintegrated. In the four centuries from Marcus Aurelius to Justinian the Empire experienced civil war and anarchy, barbarian invasions, and political and economic crises. The Western Empire ceased to exist, and upon its territories the Germanic peoples created their kingdoms. Eastern Roman emperors still ruled from their