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 crossovers 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
capital at Constantinople, but over a greatly shrunken empire. The physical decline of Rome was accompanied by a deterioration of her civilization as the ancient structure of thought weakened. The Roman gods, who had been closely identified with Roman civilization and with the state itself, were vanquished by Christianity, whose victory heralded a new epoch.

**The Survival of the Empire**

Confronted by all the profound material and spiritual changes which constitute the phenomenon described as the decline of the Roman Empire, one may well ask not why that empire declined, but rather how it was able to endure for so long. There were weaknesses in the Empire, as we have seen, but there were obviously also enormous reserves of strength. The unity which Rome imposed upon the Mediterranean world and the administrative system and the law which held the Empire together enabled her to resist for a long time the forces of disintegration. These institutions which served Rome so well endured as an important part of the Roman legacy. Roman civilization as a whole was greatly altered, but it survived the crises of the Later Empire and lived on as an integral element of mediaeval and modern civilization. Rome’s triumphs and successes were canceled by her failure, but what she accomplished in diverse areas of endeavor was not lost. In the long perspective of history the survival of Roman civilization, the heritage which generation after generation has accepted, is perhaps more significant than the decline of Rome.

Rome's genius was essentially practical, and it was pre-eminent in the domain of administration that the Roman legacy was greatest. The Greeks had failed to achieve
political unity and had exhausted their strength in interstate warfare; the Romans, on the contrary, succeeded in building a world-state. By force, diplomacy, and sometimes by chicanery—one may not gloss over the story—the Romans unified the ancient world. For a congeries of antagonistic and mutually warring states Rome substituted the *Pax Romana*, safeguarded by an army, but secured even more by law and by a variety of administrative devices fairly and efficiently applied. The solidly founded political system which Rome extended over her vast empire was the institutional heritage which she bequeathed to later ages.

*The Chief Legacies*

To the Eastern Roman Empire, which continued Rome's rule over a reduced area, to the barbarian states which took the place of the Western Roman Empire, and to the Christian church, Rome handed on the practices of government. The Eastern Roman emperors who ruled in almost unbroken sequence until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 accepted and maintained Roman principles of statecraft, and the German kings of western Europe likewise found in the Later Roman Empire a model for their absolute rule. They retained many of the features of the Roman administrative system: Roman imperial offices and perhaps municipal institutions, Roman titles and symbols of authority, the Roman system of public finances, Roman coin types, and above all, Roman law. From Rome too during these centuries the church received its basic organization, administration, and law. In the East and the West, church and state accepted the rich institutional heritage of Rome and thus perpetuated the ideals and traditions of the Roman state.

More important than any of these administrative prac-
tices was the Roman legacy in the realm of political ideals: common citizenship, political unity, a well-organized state living under law. Whatever the forms of government in their long history, whether monarchy or republic, the Principate of the Early Empire or the absolute, bureaucratic rule of the Later Empire, the Romans showed a virtual passion for these ideals. Long after the decline of the Empire they endured as Rome's major bequest to the world.

Roman citizenship had been extended to more and more of the inhabitants of the Empire until by the time of the emperor Caracalla (A.D. 212) it was almost universally held by free men. There were divisive forces which sundered East and West and separated the provinces from each other and from Italy itself. Nevertheless, in the great age of the Roman Empire a unified state was created out of peoples of different origins, and within the broad area of imperial unity local diversities of language, religion, customs, and institutions were tolerated. This was the achievement praised in the days of Rome's greatness by the Greek orator Aelius Aristides: "You have made the name of Rome no longer that of a city but of an entire people." It impressed the Christian poet Prudentius and his pagan and Christian contemporaries even in the period when Rome was in manifest decline: "A common law made them equals and bound them by a single name, bringing the conquered into bonds of brotherhood. We live in countries the most diverse like fellow-citizens of the same blood dwelling within the single ramparts of their native city and all united in an ancestral home." ¹

The Concept of a Universal Society

The ideal of a common citizenship in a unified world was cherished centuries after it had passed out of the realm of practical politics. Although a single Roman Empire was replaced by separate German kingdoms in the West and by an Eastern Roman Empire in Constantinople, men clung tenaciously to their belief in the eternity of the Roman Empire. Long after the living memory of Rome’s centralized rule was lost, and when, in fact, the growth of feudalism made such rule impossible, the ideal continued to have an irresistible appeal. The coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800 and of Otto the Great in 962 are concrete manifestations of the persistent conviction that the Roman Empire had never perished and that imperial might had not decayed but had been transferred to other monarchs. However slight may have been the actual strength of the Holy Roman Empire in its history of a thousand years, it was a witness to the evocative power of Rome’s name. So, too, the mediaeval ideal of a Respublica Christiana, a commonwealth represented by the church, was essentially the Roman tradition of universality modified by Christian thought.

Roman Law

The Roman law, the instrument and the symbol of her unity, was Rome’s greatest achievement. The acceptance of this legacy by the Middle Ages gave both church and state a basis for their own systems of law and helped to civilize Europe by spreading widely the principles of equity and humanity which were embodied in the structure of the law. Roman law did not share the fate of the Empire. The
barbarian conquerors retained both Roman law and law courts for their Roman subjects, and for their fellow Germans they harmonized Roman law and legal concepts with their own law and customs. In the Eastern Roman Empire, Roman law and legal theory, as crystallized in Justinian's great codification, remained in force for almost a thousand years. In the East and West during the Middle Ages the church erected canon law, its own legal system, upon Roman foundations.

Thus Roman law remained a vital force in the centuries after the decline of the Empire. Then at the end of the eleventh century interest in its principles was rekindled by the study of Justinian's Corpus Iuris Civilis at Bologna in Italy, and before long the law became a major subject of study in the universities of Europe. By the sixteenth century Roman law was increasingly applied in the European courts of law, and it served as the basis for the legal systems of the states of continental Europe and their overseas colonies. It still performs its ancient mission of binding together disparate peoples, for a large part of the western world employs Roman law today. Even where legal systems, such as the common law of the English-speaking peoples, are not Roman in origin, many of their fundamental concepts are derived from Roman law and the very terms used to describe them are of Latin origin. Property, contract, agent, testament, judge, jury, crime: the terms and the legal and juridical concepts which they denominate are Roman.

Through its application Roman law has exercised a continuous influence upon the development of the law of the western world, but the underlying concepts of Roman law have equally influenced jurisprudence, philosophy, and pol-
itics. We have seen how from the time of Rome's earliest legal code, the Twelve Tables (c. 443 B.C.), the harshness of the law was steadily modified. Under the impact first of Stoic philosophy and then of Christianity a greater emphasis was placed upon human rights and social justice, and the law became ever more enlightened. When the Roman jurists broadened their understanding of civil law to something like a "law of nations" and eventually to a kind of "natural law," they forged the link which binds Graeco-Roman and modern concepts of the rights and duties of the individual.

It is, however, not only in administration and law that the vitality of the Roman institutional heritage is apparent. The large estates or villas of the Later Empire, which were cultivated by half-free coloni, continued into the Middle Ages, and by a fusion of Roman and German elements became the manorial system of that period. Similarly the late Roman system of holding land under the protection of a strong landlord influenced feudal methods of land tenure in mediaeval Europe. Nor did the instruments by which Rome long maintained a flourishing urban life die. Even in the darkest period of the Middle Ages many Roman roads, although neglected, continued to be used. While Roman cities became impoverished and shrank in area and population, the more important ones never disappeared, but survived at least as centers of ecclesiastical administration and for such trade as existed. Today, fifteen hundred years after the end of the Western Empire, the traveler in Europe moves along the routes of ancient Roman roads and visits cities which have had a continuous history from antiquity to the present moment.
The Cultural Heritage

To Rome's practical skill as administrator and lawgiver we owe the preservation and dissemination of classical culture, for it was within the frame of institutions which they created that the Romans fashioned their culture by a synthesis of Greek, Oriental, and Roman elements. But for these institutions Roman culture and with it much of Greek culture might not have survived.

Rome's native culture had been changed as a result of her contacts with the Greeks of southern Italy and Sicily and eventually by her acquisition of the Greek East. The culture of her new subjects in the eastern provinces was Greek, and Roman culture itself was soon so thoroughly permeated with Hellenic elements that it may more accurately be described as Graeco-Roman. Roman schools began to offer a system of education which was essentially Greek. Greek literature, philosophy, and rhetoric were eagerly studied at Rome and became acknowledged models for Roman writers. Most of the literary forms employed by Roman authors, much of their imagery and symbolism, their mythology, the very meters of their poetry, were borrowed from the Greeks. Roman artists and architects adapted Greek canons and techniques of art and architecture to their own needs and made them an integral part of the Roman heritage to western civilization. By unifying and by Romanizing the ancient world the Romans enabled their culture, of which the Greek element was so important a part, to spread throughout the Mediterranean basin and western Europe. Strong enough to outlast the collapse of the Empire, Graeco-Roman civilization was preserved by
the new states of western Europe, the Eastern Roman Empire, and the church.

Latin, the Language of Western Civilization

To the civilization which they developed the Romans contributed many distinctively Roman elements. Chief among these was the Latin language, which gradually replaced the native tongues of Rome’s subjects in the western half of the Empire and which in time the German conquerors adopted as their own language of administration and literature. It was in Latin that the western church Fathers wrote; it was into Latin that St. Jerome translated the Bible; it was in Latin that for centuries poets, historians, and theologians wrote their works. The church in the West used Latin for its ritual and for its official documents, as it does even today. As the language of literature, learning, and law during the Middle Ages, Latin was in effect an international language which recognized no frontiers in the West. In contrast, therefore, to all the centrifugal forces of the period, Latin served as a bond of unity.

For a thousand years after the disintegration of the Empire, Latin survived as the leading, and for much of that time the only, language of literature. For learning and law it was supreme until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although Latin has been superseded by the modern languages for most scholarly and scientific purposes outside the church, it remains today an important part of the school curriculum wherever the European educational tradition prevails. Thus the key to the treasures of Latin literature has been handed down from generation to generation.

Even when Latin was no longer a regular means of com-
munication, its influence remained strong. It was out of the popular or Vulgar Latin spoken by the common people of the Roman Empire that the Romance languages—Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Roumanian—gradually came into being during the Middle Ages. Moreover, such non-Latin languages as English contain a high proportion of words derived from Latin; in fact, it has been estimated that from half to two-thirds of the words commonly employed in English are of Latin origin. To Latin the English-speaking peoples owe a large part of their philosophic and scientific vocabulary as well as many of the words by which they denote political, social, and economic institutions. The very scripts used in mediaeval manuscripts were Roman in origin, and the Roman alphabet itself was adopted by the Romance, Celtic, and Germanic languages, several of the Slavic tongues, and by other languages such as Hungarian, Finnish, and Turkish. Clearly the Latin language is one of the greatest and most enduring of Rome’s many bequests to western civilization.

For nearly two thousand years men have regarded Latin literature as a very precious part of their inheritance from ancient Rome. Despite their fears that they might be corrupted by them, the church Fathers of the early centuries read and studied Latin authors and by their own example showed how classical literature might be put to Christian uses. Even in the darkest period of the Middle Ages the ancient authors were not forgotten. In the monasteries, the centers of learning at that time, the monks copied and preserved the texts of classical authors, while in the newly established states of western Europe, Germanic kings were often active patrons of Latin letters. Throughout the Middle Ages the
literature of ancient Rome remained a fundamental part of the course of study in the schools. When in the later Middle Ages the universities were founded, Latin literature was one of the staples of instruction. Either in its own right or by helping to shape the vernacular literature which eventually superseded it, Latin literature remained a vital force throughout the mediaeval period. With the Renaissance there came not a rebirth but an intensification of interest in a literature which had suffered vicissitudes but whose study had never been abandoned. Latin literature is read today by fewer people than in the past. It is, however, so firmly embedded in the western cultural tradition that it still yields a dominating influence. Scarcely a branch or genre of writing in the modern world can be named which has not to some extent been molded by the work of a Roman author. Cicero helped to fashion the language and thought of the western world, Seneca the philosophy and tragedy, Plautus and Terence the comedy, Virgil and Horace the poetry, Ovid the mythology.

The Roman legacy in architecture and art has been equally rich. Not only was Roman architecture a prime factor in the development of the ecclesiastical architecture of the Middle Ages, but it largely determined the plan of mediaeval secular buildings. The arch, the dome, and the vault—forms of construction which the Romans either developed out of their own creative genius or else made peculiarly their own—have had a continuous life in the East and the West from ancient times to our day. In painting, sculpture and the minor arts, too, Roman standards of craftsmanship and canons of taste have contributed immensely to the establishment of an artistic tradition in western civilization.
The Church as Heir of Rome

However great the Roman institutional and cultural heritage may be, it is overshadowed by one contribution which the Empire, by the very fact of its existence, made to western civilization. It was in the Roman Empire that Christianity came into being and finally won supremacy. The *Pax Romana*, the peace which Rome gave to the ancient world, facilitated the spread of Christianity and made possible the translation into reality of the ideal of a universal religion. When the political unity of the Roman world was destroyed, a new spiritual unity, represented by the church, took its place and served as a binding force for the Middle Ages.

In its triumph the church did not reject the past, but built upon Roman foundations and within the frame furnished by the Roman Empire. From Rome the church inherited its institutions, its organization, its administrative system, and its law. From Rome the church in the West received the Latin language, a potent instrument of unity. Latin literature and learning gave a higher intellectual quality to Christianity, and Roman art furnished the basic forms for Christian art. By accepting and making its own this rich Roman heritage, the church built a bridge between the ancient world and the modern.

Western civilization rests upon Greek, Roman, and Hebrew-Christian foundations. To Rome we owe an incalculable debt for building a great civilization in which was incorporated and preserved the Graeco-Oriental culture which she herself inherited and for providing a setting into which Christianity, her own heir, could come into being. For more than two thousand years the western
world has been taught and inspired by Rome. Deeply rooted in western civilization, Roman ideals and practices still bear witness to the magnificent achievement of Eternal Rome.