



CHRIS WICKHAM

The Inheritance of Rome

A History of Europe from 400 to 1000

'Awe-inspiring ... stunning ... no review can really do this book justice: it is a superlative work' Dominic Sandbrook, *Daily Telegraph*



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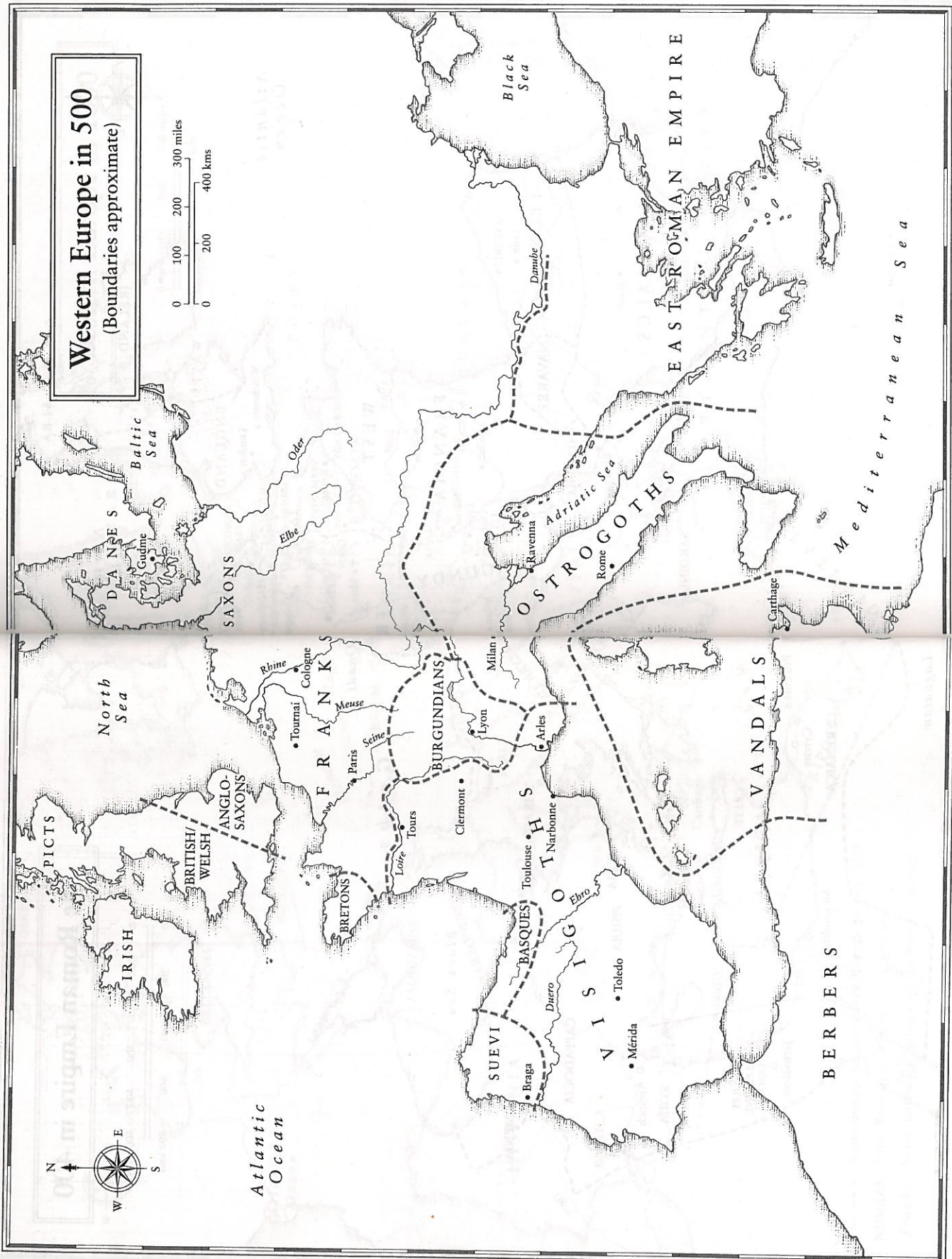
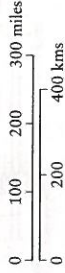
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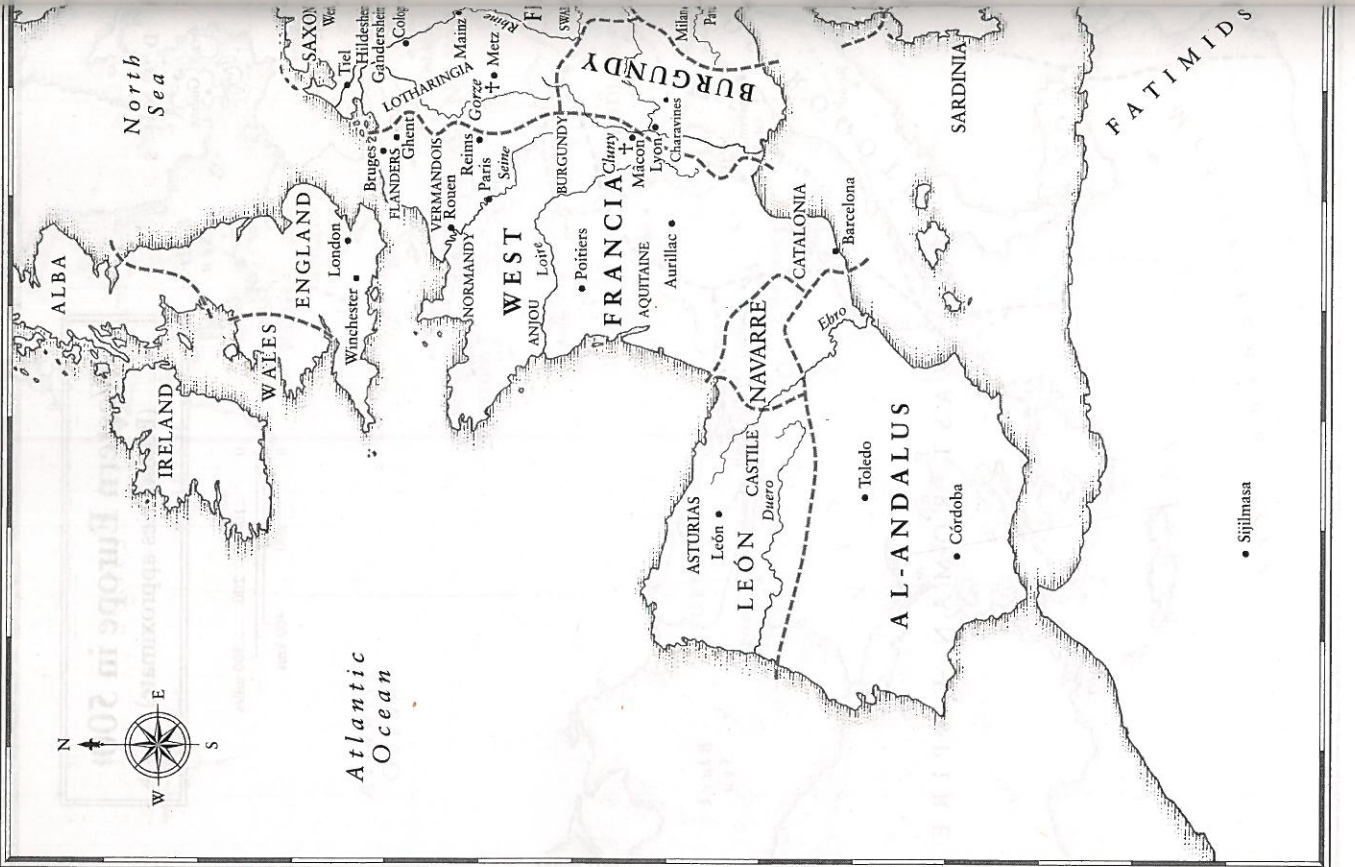
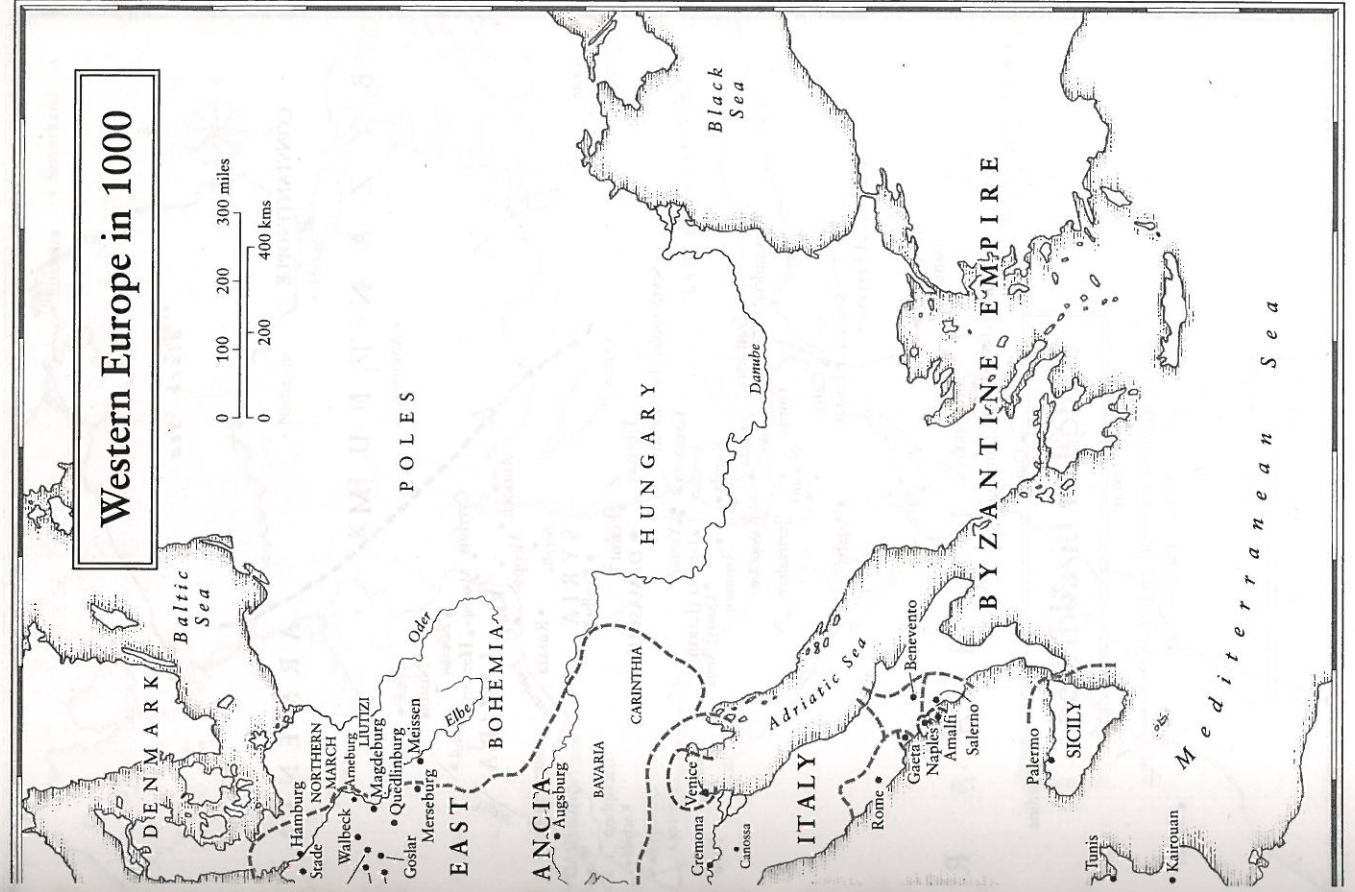
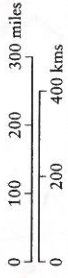


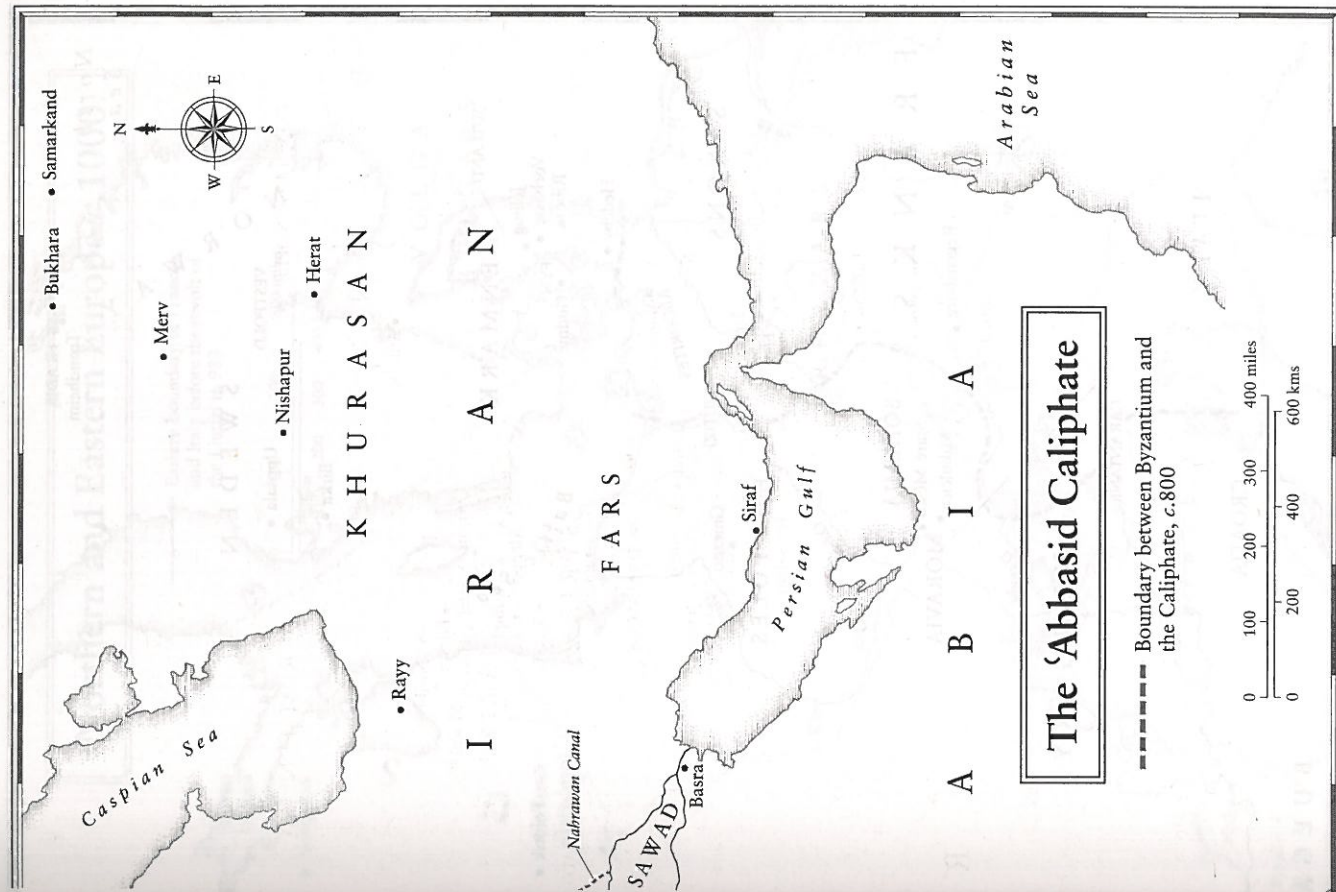
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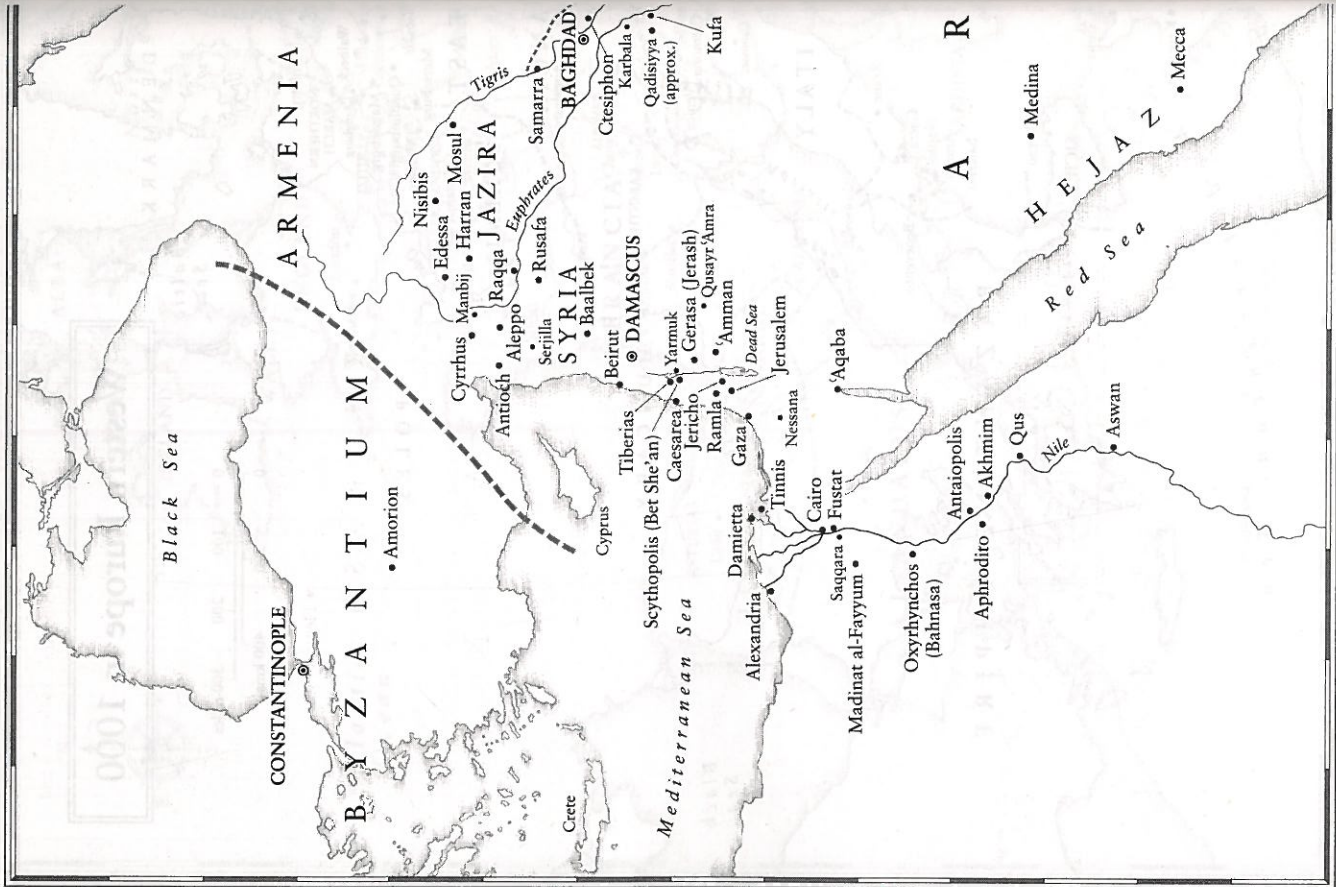
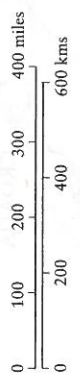
Western Europe in 1000





The 'Abbasid Caliphate

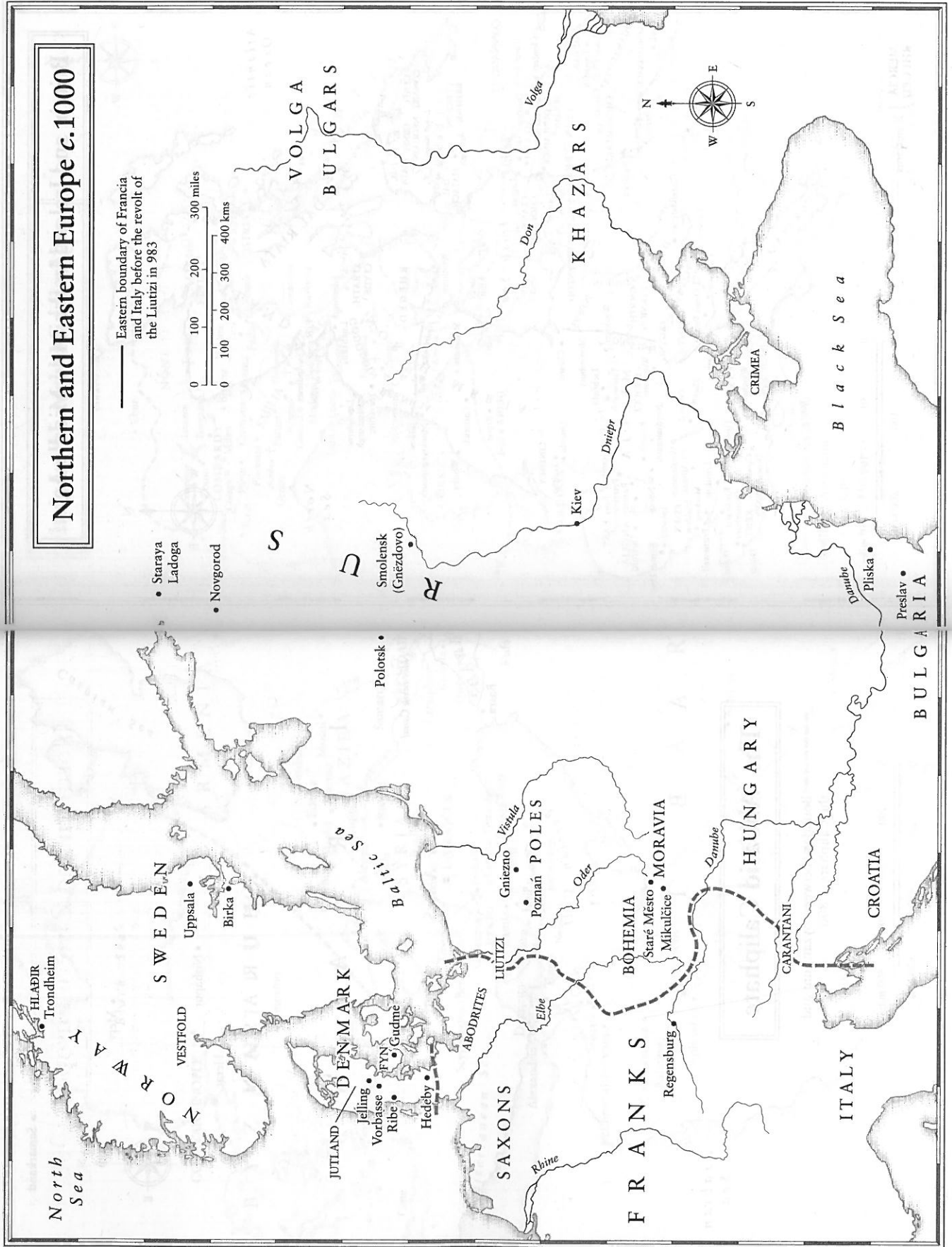
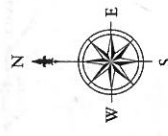
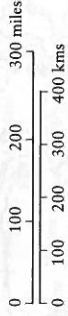
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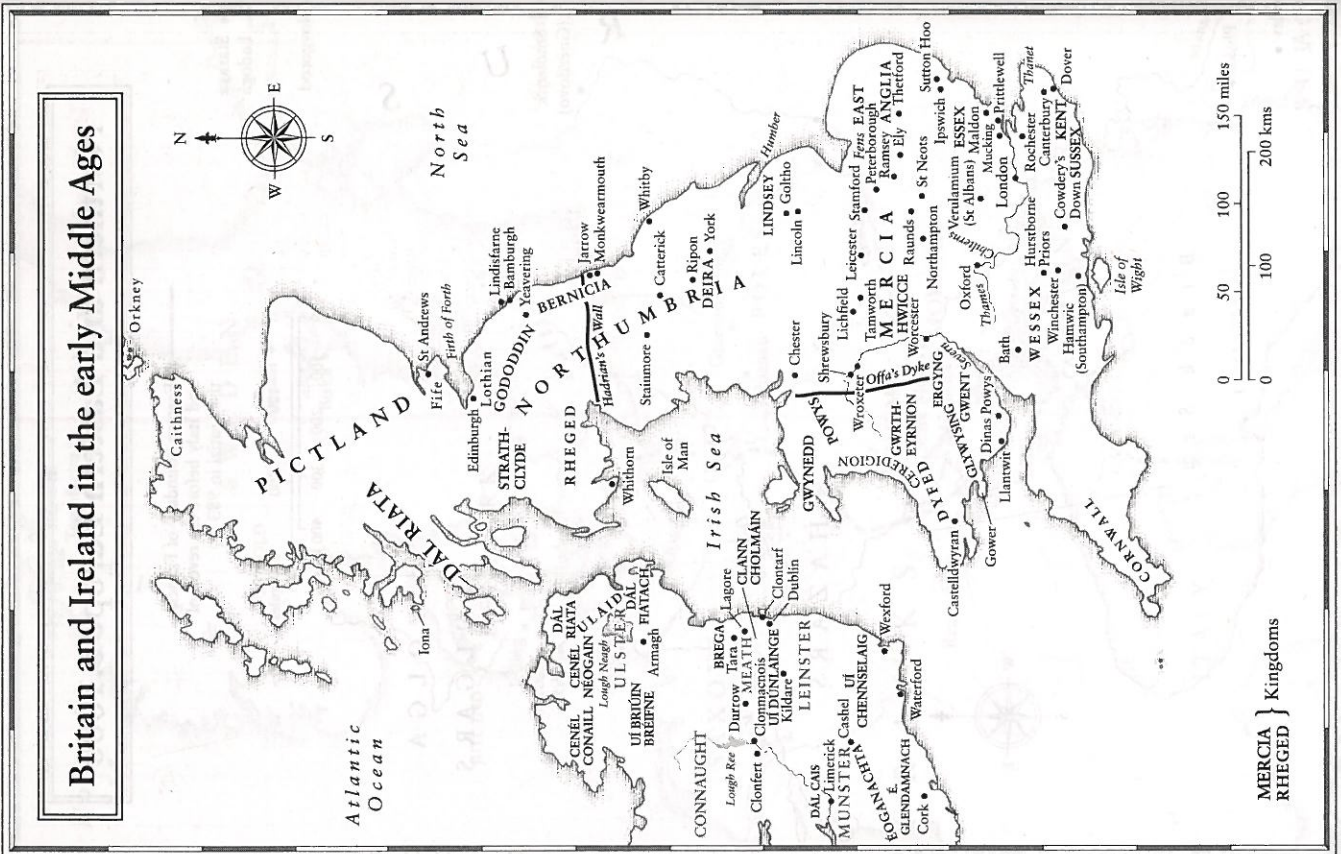
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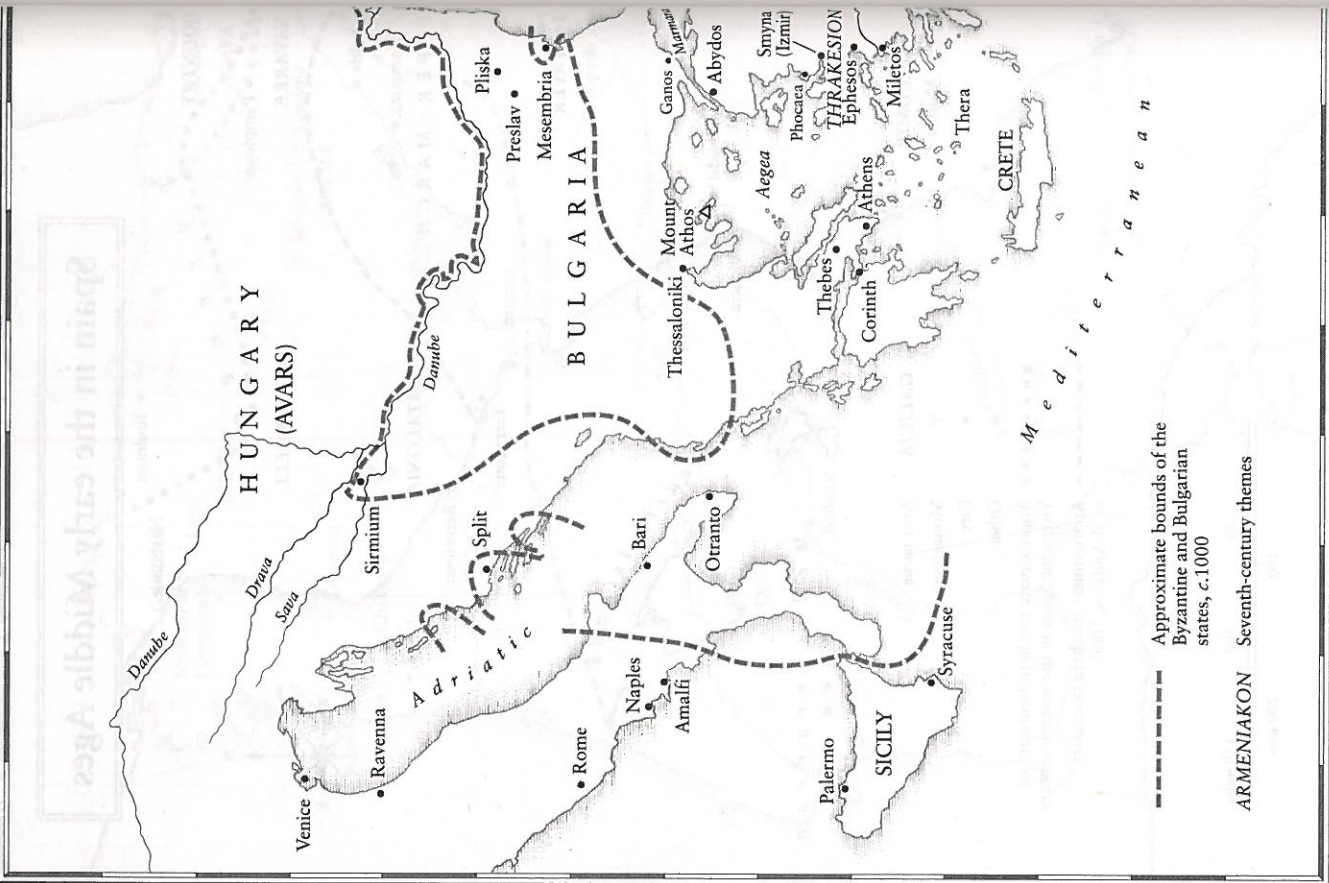
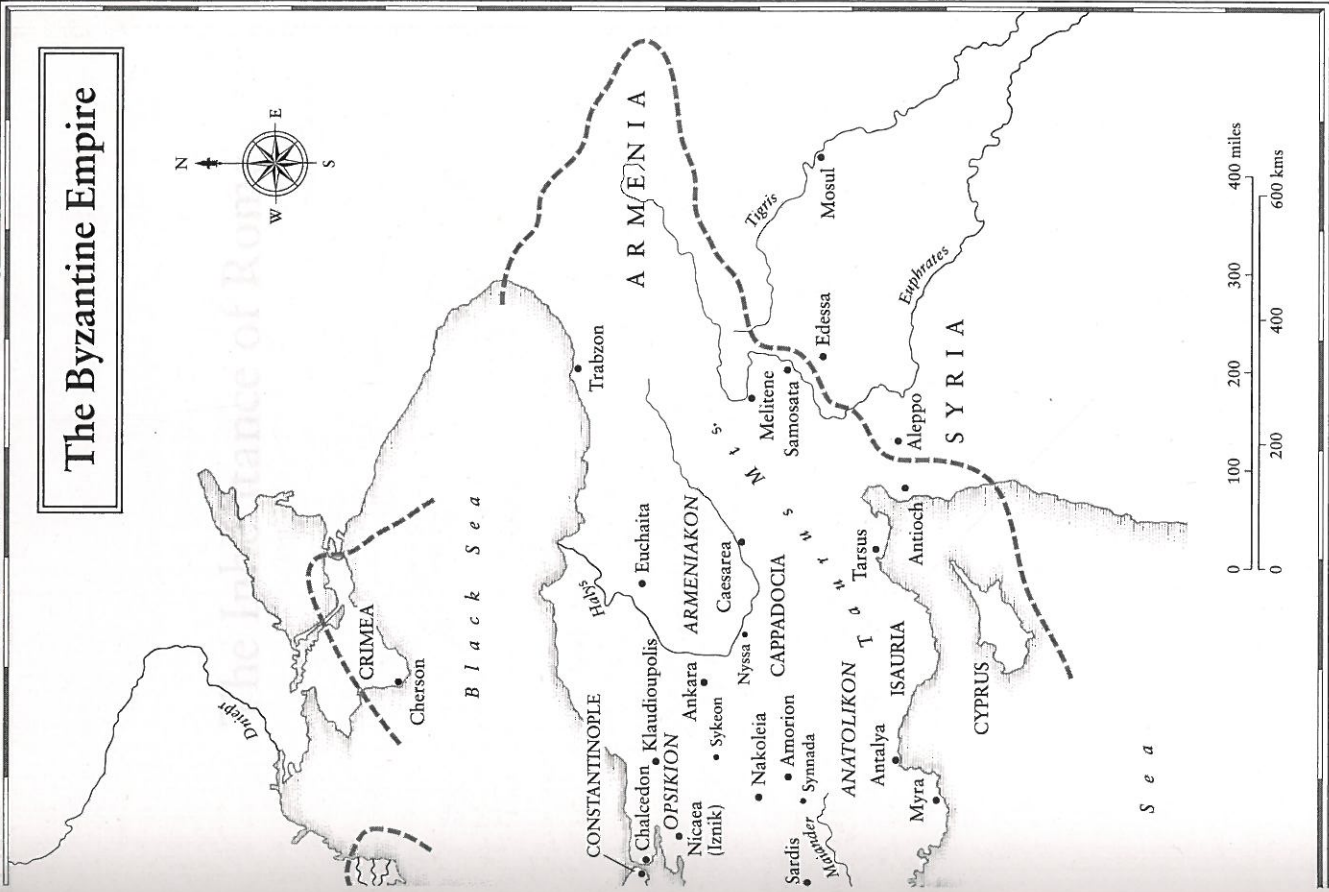
Italy in the early Middle Ages



Britain and Ireland in the early Middle Ages



The Byzantine Empire



Introduction

The Inheritance of Rome

Early medieval Europe has ever and anon, been a commonwealth of the future, whose life we read in the records of the past. It is not only in the history of the future, but in the history of the past, that we find the seeds of the future. It is not only in the history of the past, but in the history of the future, that we find the seeds of the future. It is not only in the history of the past, but in the history of the future, that we find the seeds of the future.

The early Middle Ages, the dawn of the new era, were a time of great activity and growth. The empire of the East, the Byzantine Empire, was a powerful and influential force in the world. It was a time of great activity and growth. The empire of the East, the Byzantine Empire, was a powerful and influential force in the world. It was a time of great activity and growth. The empire of the East, the Byzantine Empire, was a powerful and influential force in the world.



I

Introduction

Early medieval Europe has, over and over, been misunderstood. It has fallen victim above all to two grand narratives, both highly influential in the history and history-writing of the last two centuries, and both of which have led to a false image of this period: the narrative of nationalism and the narrative of modernity. Before we consider a different sort of approach, we need to look at both of these, briefly but critically, to see what is wrong with each; for most readers of this book who have not already studied the period will have one or both in the front of their minds as a guiding image.

The early Middle Ages stands at the origin, whether authentic or fictional, of so many European nation states that it has taken on mythic significance for historians of all the generations since nationalism became a powerful political image, in the early nineteenth century, and often earlier still. People write books called *The Birth of France*, or, more generally, *The Growth of Europe*, looking as they do so for the germs of a future national or European identity, which can be claimed to exist by 1000 in France, Germany, England, Denmark, Poland, Russia and a host of other nations if one looks hard enough. Early medieval history thus becomes part of a teleology: the reading of history in terms of its (possibly inevitable) consequences, towards whatever is supposed to mark 'why we are best' – we English, or French, or (western) Europeans – or at least, for less self-satisfied communities, 'why we are different'. The whole of early medieval English history can thus be seen in terms of the origins of the nation state; the whole of early medieval Low Countries history in terms of the origins of the commercial dynamism of the future Belgium or Netherlands. The lack of evidence for our period helps make these nationalist readings common, even today. They are false readings all the same; even when they are empirically accurate

(the English did indeed have a unitary state in 1000, production and exchange were indeed unusually active in what would become Belgium), they mislead us in our understanding of the past. This is bad history; history does not have teleologies of this kind.

Europe was not born in the early Middle Ages. No common identity in 1000 linked Spain to Russia, Ireland to the Byzantine empire (in what is now the Balkans, Greece and Turkey), except the very weak sense of community that linked Christian polities together. There was no common European culture, and certainly not any Europe-wide economy. There was no sign whatsoever that Europe would, in a still rather distant future, develop economically and militarily, so as to be able to dominate the world. Anyone in 1000 looking for future industrialization would have put bets on the economy of Egypt, not of the Rhineland and Low Countries, and that of Lancashire would have seemed like a joke. In politico-military terms, the far south-east and south-west of Europe, Byzantium and al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), provided the dominant states of the Continent, whereas in western Europe the Carolingian experiment (see below, Chapters 16 and 17) had ended with the break-up of Francia (modern France, Belgium and western Germany), the hegemonic polity for the previous four hundred years. The most coherent western state in 1000, southern England, was tiny. In fact, weak political systems dominated most of the Continent at the end of our period, and the active and aggressive political systems of later on in the Middle Ages were hardly visible.

National identities, too, were not widely prominent in 1000, even if one rejects the association between nationalism and modernity made in much contemporary scholarship. We must recognize that some such identities did exist. One can make a good case for England in this respect (the dismal years of the Danish conquest in the early eleventh century produced a number of texts invoking a version of it). Italians, too, had a sense of common identity, although it hardly reached south of Rome (of course, that is pretty much still true today), and did not lead to a desire for political unity. Geographical separation, such as that provided by the English Channel and the Alps, helped both of these, as it also did the Irish, who were capable of recognizing a version of an Irish community, however fragmented Ireland really was. In the parallel case of Byzantium, what gave its inhabitants identity was simply the coherence of its political system, which was much greater than any other in

Europe at that time; Byzantine 'national identity' has not been much considered by historians, for that empire was the ancestor of no modern nation state, but it is arguable that it was the most developed in Europe at the end of our period. By contrast, France, Germany and Spain (either Christian or Muslim) did not have any such imagery. The Danes may have had it, but in Scandinavia as a whole there is good evidence for it only in Iceland. The Slav lands were still too inchoate to have any version of identity not specifically tied to the fate of ruling dynasties. And, as will be stressed often in this book, a common language had very little to do with any form of cultural or political solidarity at all. The image of the 'birth of Europe', and the 'birth' of the great bulk of the later nations of Europe, is thus in our period not only teleological, but close to fantasy. The fact that there are genealogical links to the future in so many tenth-century polities is an interesting fact, but of no help whatever in understanding the early Middle Ages.

Even more unhelpful are the other, still older, storylines which situate the early Middle Ages inside the grand narrative of modernity itself, in its many variations. This is the narrative which traditionally relegated the whole of medieval history to simply being 'in the middle', between the political and legal solidity of the Roman empire (or else the high summer of classical culture) on the one side, and the supposed rediscovery of the latter in the Renaissance on the other. It was Renaissance scholars themselves who invented this image; since then, the storyline has undergone two major sorts of change. First, later generations – the scientists of the late seventeenth century, the Enlightenment thinkers and revolutionaries of the eighteenth, the industrialists and socialists of the nineteenth and twentieth – have claimed 'true' modernity for themselves, contesting as they did so the claims for the years around 1500 as a cusp. Conversely, in the scientific history of the last century, medievalists have sought to save at least the central and late Middle Ages from the opprobrium of not 'really' being history at all, and beginnings for common long-term European historical processes have been sought in papal reform, the 'twelfth-century Renaissance', the origins of the universities, and in the early state-formation of kings like Henry II of England and Philip II of France, that is, in the period around 1050–1200.

The result of these two developments is that an entire millennium, from the late eleventh century onwards in European history, can be seen as a continuous succession of tides, advancing ever further up the beach

of Progress; but, in this imagery, the period before it is still left unreconstructed. The achievements of the ancient world are still seen by many in a shimmering light beyond the dark sea of barbarism which supposedly marks the early Middle Ages; and the fall of 'the' Roman empire in the fifth century (ignoring its long survival in the East) is seen as a primordial failure, the reversal of which was a long and painstaking process, although a necessary foundation for whichever aspect of the modern world the observer most wishes to stress: rationalism, productivity, a global market, knowledge, democracy, equality, world peace or the freedom from exploitation.

I am in favour of most of these final ends myself; but to me as a historian the storyline still seems ridiculous, for every period in history has its own identity and legitimacy, which must be seen without hindsight. The long stretch of time between 400 and 1000 has its own validity as a field of study, which is in no way determined by what went before or came after. To attribute values to it (or to parts of it, as with those who, with the image of the 'Carolingian Renaissance', want to attach the ninth and perhaps tenth centuries to the grand narrative of 'real' history, at the expense, presumably, of the sixth to eighth) is a pointless operation. And to me as a historian of the early Middle Ages, the 'othering' of the period simply seems meaningless. The wealth of recent scholarship on the period gives the lie to this whole approach to seeing history; and this book will have failed if it appears to support it in any way.

This is because it is now possible to write a very different sort of early medieval history. Until the 1970s its lack of evidence put researchers off; and a moralizing historiography dependent on the storyline of failure saw the centuries between 400/500 and 1000 as inferior. Whatever people's explanations for the fall of the western Roman empire in the fifth century (internal weakness, external attack, or a bit of both), it seemed obvious that it was a Bad Thing, and that European and Mediterranean societies took centuries to recover from it; maybe by the time of Charlemagne (768-814), maybe not until the economic expansion and religious reformism of the eleventh century. The eastern empire's survival as Byzantium was hardly stressed at all. The nationalist origin-myths were almost all the period had going for it; they survived longer than the image of the early Middle Ages as a failure, in fact.

Most of this is now, fortunately, changed; the early Middle Ages is

not the Cinderella period any more. For a start, researchers into the period have become more numerous. In Britain around 1970 the presence of Peter Brown and Michael Wallace-Hadrill in Oxford, and Walter Ullmann in Cambridge, allowed the formation of a critical mass of graduate students in early medieval (and also late antique) history who then got jobs in the rest of the country (just before recruitment to universities clamped down with the government cuts of 1980); they have had their own graduates everywhere, as research training in history has ceased to be dominated by Oxbridge, and a further generation is coming on stream. Byzantine studies developed rapidly as well. Early medieval archaeology, over the same period, freed itself from a preoccupation with cemeteries and metalwork, and opened itself out to the 'new archaeology' of spatial relationships and economic or material cultural systems, which had much wider implications and allowed for a richer dialectic with documentary history, if, at least, the participants were willing. Outside Britain, similar groups of historians were trying to get rid of past obsessions with political or cultural 'decline' and the history of legal institutions or of the church; only in some countries, notably the United States, has the number of early medievalists increased as much as in Britain (in Germany and Italy there had always been more), but in all countries the sophistication of historical approach has increased dramatically in the last three decades. In much of continental Europe, indeed, early medieval archaeology has also been virtually invented over the same time-span; it hardly existed outside a few countries in 1970 (Britain, East and West Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland), but now a complex and up-to-date archaeology of this period characterizes nearly every country in the European Union.

Research has also become more internationalized. The project of the European Science Foundation (ESF) on the Transfers from the Roman World in 1993-8 took dozens of researchers from nearly every European country (and beyond) and put them in hotels from Stockholm to Istanbul for a week at a time to brainstorm common approaches. This did not create a 'common European' historiography, for both good and bad reasons (national assumptions and prejudices were often too ingrained; conversely, too international an approach to the subject would risk blandness); but it did mean that participants came to understand each other better, and personal friendships became internationalized. Post-ESF projects have continued to flourish over the subsequent decade, and

international work on common themes is now normal, and more organic when it happens. Broadly, the most innovative recent work among historians has often been in cultural history, particularly of high politics and political and social élites; but the more economic approach intrinsic to most archaeology, although not always taken on board by documentary historians, nonetheless allows major developments in socio-economic history too. Early medievalists were also among the first to take seriously some of the implications of the linguistic turn, the realization that all our written accounts from the past are bound by narrative conventions, which have to be understood properly before the accounts can be used by historians at all; as a result, in the last two decades nearly every early medieval source has been critically re-evaluated for its narrative strategies. The landscape of early medieval studies is thus more international, more critical, and much more wide-ranging than it used to be.

This positive picture hides flaws, of course. One is that this newly enlarged community of researchers has as yet been reluctant to offer new paradigms for our understanding of the period. I criticized this in a recent book, *Framing the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), in the specific context of socio-economic history, and offered some parameters which might work in that field. In the field of cultural and political history, it is arguable that a new paradigm is emerging, but it remains implicit rather than explicit. That paradigm sees many aspects of late Antiquity (itself substantially revalued: the late Roman empire is now often seen as the Roman high point, not an inferior and totalitarian copy of the second-century *pax romana*) continuing into the early Middle Ages without a break. More specifically: the violence of the barbarian invaders of the empire is a literary trope; there were few if any aspects of post-Roman society and culture that did not have Roman antecedents; the seventh century in the West, although the low point for medieval evidence, produced more surviving writings than any Roman century except the fourth and sixth, showing that a literate culture had by no means vanished in some regions; in short, one can continue to study the early medieval world, east or west, as if it were late Rome. This position is explicit in much recent work on the fifth-century invasions, but it affects the study of later centuries, into the ninth century and beyond, in much more indirect ways. It is rare to find historians actually *writing* that Charlemagne, say, was essentially operating in a

late Roman political-cultural framework, even when they are implying it by the ways they present him. This is a problem, however; for, whether or not one believes that Charlemagne was actually operating in such a framework, the issue cannot properly be confronted and argued about until it is brought out into the open. And it can be added that historians have, overall, been much more aware that catastrophe is a literary cliché in the early Middle Ages than that continuity – accommodation – is one as well.

A second problem is that the more attached historians become to continuity (or to ‘transformation’) rather than to sharp change, the further they diverge from archaeologists. Archaeologists see very substantial simplifications in post-Roman material culture in the fifth to seventh centuries (the exact date varies according to the region), which in some cases – Britain is one example, the Balkans another – is drastic; only a handful of Roman provinces, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, did not experience it. Bryan Ward-Perkins has recently published a short and useful riposte to a continuityist cultural history, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, which stresses the force of these archaeological simplifications. This book will, I hope, prompt debate, and also the establishment of common ground between the two traditions; as I write, it is too early to tell. But we do need to develop historical interpretations that can encompass the diversity of our evidence, both literary and archaeological. Both a highly Romanizing literary text – the *Erymologies* of Isidore of Seville (d. 636), for example – and an excavation which shows markedly flimsier buildings and fewer inhabitants than in the Roman period, as with many urban sites excavated in recent decades from Tarragona through Milan to Tours, constitute evidence about the past, and neither of them should be ignored. When the two are put together, indeed, the break-up of the Roman empire, particularly in the West, immediately comes into focus as a major shift. As we shall see in later chapters, however much continuity there was in values or political practices into the early medieval period – which there certainly was – the resources for political players lessened considerably, and the structures in which they acted simplified, often radically. The landscape of politics, society and economics looks very different in the early Middle Ages as a result. Seeing the period in its own terms entails recognizing its differences from the Roman past as much as its continuities.

One result of the implicit nature of recent historical developments is

that there are relatively few overviews of the early Middle Ages as a whole. The last survey that covered the entire period up to 1000 in English, by Roger Collins, dates back to 1991, and is largely political in focus. The recent high-quality social histories in French of Régine Le Jan, Jean-Pierre Devroey and Philippe Depreux only go up to 900, and do not include the Byzantine or Arab worlds. Julia Smith's important cultural synthesis, *Europe after Rome*, which gets closer than any other book to offering new paradigms for her field, similarly restricts itself to Latin Europe; so does Matthew Innes's recent *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300–900*. (Of all these, this last is perhaps the most similar to the present book in approach, but it only appeared in the summer of 2007, after my own draft was completed, and I have not incorporated its insights.) There are of course many works that deal with shorter time-spans, and some periods, notably the fifth century (especially in the West) and the Carolingian century, are very extensively studied; there are also many regional and national syntheses, some of which cover the whole of the early Middle Ages. But there is space for a new survey which confronts the socio-political, socio-economic, politico-cultural developments of the period 400–1000 as a whole, the period of the end of Roman unity and the formation of a myriad of smaller polities, across the whole space of Europe and the Mediterranean, the ex-Roman lands and the non-Roman lands to the north of Rome alike. That is the intention of this book.

Framing the Early Middle Ages offered some quite sharply characterized interpretations of how social and economic change could be understood comparatively, region by region, England with respect to Denmark or Francia, Francia with respect to Italy or Egypt, Italy with respect to Spain or Syria. Obviously, these interpretations will be reprised in certain chapters of this book, notably Chapters 9 and 15, and they underpin much of the rest. But here the aims are different. First, a political narrative of the period is given, which is informed, as fully as possible, by recent advances in cultural history. The social and cultural (including religious) environment inside which men and women made political choices has been an important focus in each of the chapters of the book. This book intends to be comprehensible to people who know nothing about the period, a period that has few household names for a wider public, and it takes little for granted. I have wanted, however, not only to introduce Charlemagne – or Æthelred II in Eng-

land, or Chindasuinth in Spain, or Brunhild in Austrasian Francia, or the Byzantine emperor Nikephoros II Phokas, or the caliph al-Ma'mun – but to explain the political-cultural world inside which each of them operated. This interest reflects recent historiography, of course. It also means that there is less about the peasant majority than there might have been, although peasants are far from absent. Conversely, and this is the second aim, these analyses are intended to be understood inside an economic context, derived from both archaeology and the history of documents as well. It is crucial for any understanding of political choices that some rulers were richer than others, and that some aristocracies were richer than others; more complex political systems were made possible as a result. Some traditional political histories put the actions of kings of Ireland, England and Francia, Byzantine emperors, caliphs and Roman emperors on the same level: they were not. This was a hierarchy of wealth, with the last-named at an opposite extreme to the first-named in resources and in the complexity of the state structures in which they operated. These differences lie behind even the most resolutely cultural-political issues, the Visigothic persecution of Jews, the Iconoclast controversy, or the role of intellectuals in ninth-century Francia.

The third aim has been to look at the period 400–1000, and all the sub-periods inside that long stretch of time, in their own terms, without considering too much their relationship with what came before or after, so as to sidestep the grand narratives criticized above. We begin with a still-thriving Roman empire, but only to set out the building-blocks with which post-Roman polities inevitably had to construct their environments: certainly not to lament failure, or to present a model which successor states failed to live up to. Here, as for every other society discussed, I have tried to look at political choices without hindsight. Some political figures did, indeed, make terrible choices (as when Aetius let the Vandals take Carthage in 439, or when al-Mansur's successors in Spain set off the civil war in the 1010s, or perhaps when Louis the Pious fell out with his sons in 830 in Francia: see Chapters 4, 14, 16), which had bad consequences for the political strategies they were trying to further. But in each case they did it in a socio-cultural framework which made sense to them, and it is this that I have sought to recapture, at least fleetingly, in the space at my disposal.

Above all, I have tried to avoid teleology. Any reading of the Roman

empire in the fifth century only in terms of the factors which led to its break-up, of Merovingian Francia only in terms of what led to Charlemagne's power and ambitions, of tenth-century papal activity only in terms of what led to 'Gregorian reform', of the economic dynamism of the Arab world only in terms of its (supposed) supersession by Italian and then north European merchants and producers, is a false reading of the past. Only an attempt to look squarely at each past in terms of its own social reality can get us out of this trap.

On the basis of these principles, I look in turn at the Roman empire and its fall in the West (Part I); at the immediately post-Roman polities in Gaul, Spain, Italy, Britain and Ireland (Part II); at the history of Byzantium after the seventh-century crisis of the eastern Roman empire, the Arab caliphate, and the latter's tenth-century successor states, including al-Andalus, Muslim Spain (Part III); and then, returning to the Latin West, at the Carolingian empire, its successor states and its principal imitator, England, and at the array of northern polities, from Russia to Scotland, which crystallized in the last century of our period, including a look at their aristocracies and peasantries (Part IV). Each is analysed comparatively, in the light of what other societies did with the same or similar resources, but above all in terms of its own reality, which must be the starting point of all our work. There is far less evidence for the early Middle Ages than for later, sometimes so little that we can hardly reconstruct a society at all (Scotland is an example); the reasons for this are an interesting issue in themselves, but careful source criticism can all the same allow us to say quite a lot in most cases, of which what follows is only a fairly summary account.

Early medieval history-writing is a permanent struggle with the few sources available, as historians try, often over and over again, to extract nuanced historical accounts from them. For this reason not much (and certainly not much of any interest) is generally accepted without any dispute. More than in some other periods, this period is very visibly the re-creation of its historians; and in the notes at the end of the text I have paid respect to that collective re-creation, as much as space allows. (There are no numbered footnotes in the book, so as not to interrupt the text, but the references at the end are organized page by page.) Editorial policy has meant that these references are mostly in English, however; non-English authorities have only been cited where they are

absolutely indispensable. Similarly, all sources are cited in translation, where one exists. English-language historiography is more prominent in this field than it was in 1970, but it is not at all dominant; all the same, authorities in other languages can be found in profusion in the bibliographies to the works listed.

Reading the sources in this period (as in all others) is, however, for the reasons outlined above, not at all a straightforward or automatic process. Each chapter in this book begins with a vignette, as an introduction to the feel of the society or societies to be discussed there, and these will also introduce the reader to some of the issues posed by the sources. But overall it must be recognized from the outset that it is unwise to take any source, of any kind, too literally. This is perhaps easiest to see with narratives of events, in histories, letters, saints' lives or testimony in court cases, which are all the work of single authors with clear agendas, and a host of moralizing prejudices which they tend to make very clear to the reader. The most copious of all early medieval chroniclers, Gregory, bishop of Tours (d. 594), who wrote a long history, mostly of his own century in Frankish Gaul, and also numerous saints' lives, was an active political player in his lifetime with clear likes and dislikes among his royal contemporaries (below, Chapter 5). He was also a high-level aristocrat with huge reserves of snobbery, as well as being – as a bishop – a professional moralist, with the responsibility to encourage, cajole or frighten his contemporaries into avoiding sin. We have to read everything Gregory says with these elements in mind – elements which he does not hide from us – and most historians do indeed do so. Recent work, however, has also stressed Gregory's literary crafting of his writing, which imposes hidden patterns on his superficially artless anecdotes, and in addition this work has analysed the less consciously felt limits that the genres he wrote in imposed on what he was able to write about, or how he was able to describe things. Also, of course, most of what Gregory tells us he did not witness himself, so we have to guess at the narrative strategies and at the reliability of his informants as well. Every 'fact' that we can extract from Gregory has to be seen in this set of contexts.

One might conclude, on the basis of these comments, that one could not believe anything Gregory says at all. And indeed it would be impossible to disprove such a conclusion: not least, in this case, because the absence of evidence from his period means that Gregory is the only

source for the huge majority of statements he makes about sixth-century Gaul. All the same, one has to recognize that even if all Gregory's statements were fictions – and crafted fictions, for moralizing purposes, at that – he was still writing in a realist vein. Put another way, the more he sought to moralize about his society, for an audience which had to be persuaded that his moralism spoke to them (even if it was a future audience, for Gregory's main work, his *Histories*, did not circulate in his lifetime), the more he had to anchor it in recognizable experience. So, this king or queen may or may not have executed his or her opponent in this inventive way, this bishop may or may not have bought his office and terrorized his clergy, but this is the kind of thing that people thought rulers or bishops might well have done in his society. Gregory's narratives, and those of all similar sources from Ireland to Iraq, are used here in this way: as guides to the sort of thing that *could* happen – at least in their authors' vision of the world. Often in the chapters that follow, the details of this reasoning will be skipped over; it is impossible, without writing unreadably, to introduce ifs and buts every time a source is used. But it should be understood as underlying every narrative that is cited in this book. It can be added that this also means that openly fictional sources, such as epic poems about heroes, can be used by us as well, for example, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, one of our best sources for aristocratic values in England. The problems of using such sources are not different in type from those involved in using Gregory of Tours, and indeed historians who use them have often found it easier to keep them in mind.

Legislation presents a similar problem. It might seem obvious that a law does not describe how people behave (think of the laws about speeding), but early medievalists have had to face an entrenched historiography which presumes exactly this. Modern history-writing came out of a legal-history tradition, and well into the twentieth century people wrote social history, in particular, under the assumption that if a law enacted something, the population at large followed it. If, however, this is not true in contemporary society, with all the coercive power available to the legal system, how much less could we think it was true in the early Middle Ages, when states were weaker (often very weak indeed), and the populace even knowing what legislation a ruler had enacted was unlikely in most places. Even if a legislator only wanted to describe current custom, which could sometimes be argued to be the case in the

West in the sixth and seventh centuries (though less in later periods, and still less in the Byzantine and Arab worlds), the problem would be that custom was very locally diverse, and a king in Toledo or Pavia, the then capitals of Spain and northern Italy, would not know more than those of the area he lived in, and only a restricted part of them at that. Legislation is in fact best seen as a guide to the minds of legislators, just as the writings of Gregory of Tours tell us first about what Gregory thought. Laws interact with, feed off, reality, just as Gregory's narratives do; it is not that we cannot use them, but that they are not disinterested guides to actual social behaviour.

Most of the other categories of early medieval text can be analysed and criticized in the same way, but we should pause on one important category, legal documents – for gifts or sales or leases of land for the most part, or for the registration of formal disputes, which were normally about land as well. Most or all of these were contracts, with validity in law, on which surviving court cases put considerable weight, if there were any documents available at all. If these documents are accepted as authentic (and not all are; they often only survive in later collections, not as originals, and many were forged), they could be taken, perhaps more than any other source, to be describing real events. This description is not unproblematic; even an authentic document is a highly stylized text, structured by an artificial language, as legal documents still are today, which limits what one can say in it. Even if the principals wanted to describe accurately what they were doing (which not all did; some 'sales' were in reality hidden loans of money, with the land as collateral, for example), they were restricted by the legalese their notary was accustomed to use, and this might bear little relation to the complexities of local social practices. But at least one could assume – later law courts would assume – that this piece of land, situated in village A, with these boundaries, with a tenant cultivator named B who worked it, was sold by C to D for a price of E silver *denarii*.

I would cautiously accept this rare island of certainty. The question is what one does with it. Isolated documents tell us little. We need collections of texts, which, put together, can constitute a guide, to how many people held land in A, to the financial difficulties of C (or of the category of people which C belonged to), to the size and geographical range of the properties of D, and to the differences in social structure or land price between village A and villages F, G and H. These are valuable

things to study, if we have enough material to do so (and occasionally, even in the early Middle Ages, we do). All the same, they are only partial shafts of light. We have to engage in careful argument before we can assume that A, or D, are typical of the region and period we are studying. Also, documents in this period (the situation only changes in the thirteenth century) overwhelmingly tell us about land. Except in Egypt, where desert conditions help the survival of all kinds of text, only land documents were regarded as having a sufficiently long-term future importance to be worth keeping, except by accident; social action outside the field of land transactions remains obscure. Furthermore, again except in Egypt, only churches and monasteries have had sufficiently stable histories to keep some of their archives from the early Middle Ages into the modern period (from roughly 1650 onwards), when historians became interested in publishing them. We only know, that is to say, about land which came into church hands, whether at the time of the charters we have, or as a result of later gifts to the church of properties which came together with their deeds, in order to prove title. These are different sorts of limitation from those involving the narrative strategies of writers, but they are limitations all the same, and we have to be aware of them too. What we can do within these particular constraints will be further explored in Chapter 9.

Archaeological and material evidence is at least free from the constraints of narrative. Archaeologists have indeed sometimes been dismissive of written sources (this was a trend of the 1980s in particular), which only preserve attitudes of literate and thus restricted élites, whereas archaeological excavations and surveys uncover real life, often of the peasantry, who are badly served by texts. Excavations are, however, in some respects like land documents: you can say reliable things about how individual people lived, but you need many sites to be sure of typicality, of patterns and generalities. Archaeology also has its own blind spots: you can tell what sorts of houses people lived in, what food they ate, what technologies they had access to, how spatial layouts worked, how far away the goods they possessed came from, but you cannot tell who owned their land, or what rents were paid from it. This at least creates a balance with documentary history, however. Overall, archaeology tells us more about functional relationships, whereas history tells us more about causation; ideally, we need both. And when we use them both we must bear in mind that material culture projects

meaning, too. A burial ritual is a public act, and what one buries in the ground makes a point to others; similarly, urban planning, architecture and wall-painting, and the designs on metalwork and ceramics, all convey meaning, often intentionally, which needs to be decoded and appraised with the same care we use for Gregory of Tours. Archaeology (like art history) is free of the constraints of narrative, but not the constraints of communication. We shall look at this issue in Chapter 10.

The kinds of evidence we have for different regions of Europe in different periods act as further constraints on what we can say about each. Seventh-century England is documented above all through church narratives, with a handful of laws and land documents, set against an extensive cemetery archaeology and a more restricted settlement archaeology; we can say a fair amount about ecclesiastical values and the political dynamic, and also about technology and social stratification, but much less about aristocratic values and political structures. After the 730s in England, the narratives and laws virtually cease for over a century, as do the cemeteries, but we have far more documents, and also urban excavations; we can say much more about the state, and about wider economic relationships, but much less about how kings manipulated their political environment to increase their power, or else failed to do so; important historical questions, like the failure of Mercia to maintain its century-long dominance over central and southern England in and after the 820s (see Chapter 19), remain a mystery as a result. Overall, clerics maintained a constant output of texts of locally varying kinds throughout the early Middle Ages, so that we can tell what ecclesiastics (particularly ecclesiastical rigorists) thought; but only in some periods and places did lay aristocrats commit themselves to writing – the late Roman empire, Carolingian Francia, tenth-century Byzantium, ninth- and tenth-century Iraq – so it is only then that we can get direct insights into the mind-set of secular political élites. And even in single political units we can run up against different concentrations of material. The late tenth-century Ottonian emperors had two power-bases, Saxony and northern Italy; the first is documented almost exclusively in narratives, the second almost exclusively in land charters. So we can talk about the nuance of aristocratic intrigue and political ritual in the first, and about the range of aristocratic wealth and its relationship to royal patronage in the second. The Ottonians must have dealt in both ritual and landed patronage in each, but we are blocked from seeing how.

These constraints are permanent in our period, as they also were in the ancient world. New texts are rare; only archaeology will expand in the next decades, moving the balance steadily towards what can be said from the material record. We are always limited as to what we can say, even about élites, who are at least relatively well documented in our crafted sources, never mind the huge peasant majority, whose viewpoint is so seldom visible (for some of what can be said, see Chapters 9 and 22). Hence the fact that a book of this kind covers six centuries, not one or two, as later in the series. But there is enough known, all the same, to have to select, sometimes quite ruthlessly. What follows is only a small part of what we know about the early Middle Ages. It does at least consist, however, of what seems to me essential to know.

PART I

The Roman Empire and its Break-up, 400-550

The Weight of Empire

The guilty thief is produced, is interrogated as he deserves; he is tortured, the torturer strikes, his breast is injured, he is hung up . . . he is beaten with sticks, he is flogged, he runs through the sequence of tortures, and he denies. He is to be punished; he is led to the sword. Then another is produced, innocent, who has a large patronage network with him; well-spoken men are present with him. This one has good fortune: he is absolved.

This is an extract from a Greek-Latin primer for children, probably of the early fourth century. It expresses, through its very simplicity, some of the unquestioned assumptions of the late Roman empire. Judicial violence was normal, indeed deserved (in fact, even witnesses were routinely tortured unless they were from the elite); and the rich got off. The Roman world was habituated to violence and injustice. The gladiatorial shows of the early empire continued in the fourth-century western empire, despite being banned by Constantine in 326 under Christian influence. In the 380s Alypius, a future ascetic bishop in Africa, went to the games in Rome, brought by friends against his will; he kept his eyes shut, but the roar of the crowd as a gladiator was wounded made him open his eyes and then he was gripped by the blood, 'just one of the crowd', as his friend the great theologian Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) sympathetically put it. Augustine, an uncompromising but also not a naive man, took it for granted that such a blood lust was, however sinful in Christian eyes, normal. Actually, all the post-Roman societies, pagan, Christian or Muslim, were equally used to violence, particularly by the powerful; but under the Roman empire it had a public legitimacy, an element of weekly spectacle, which surpassed even the culture of public execution in eighteenth-century Europe. There was a visceral element to Roman power; even after gladiatorial shows ended in the

early fifth century, the killing of wild beasts in public continued for another hundred years and more.

As for the rich getting off: this was not automatic by any means, as the senatorial victims of show trials for magic in Rome in 368-71 knew. But the powerful did indeed have strong patronage networks, and could very readily misuse them. Synesios, bishop of Ptolemais in Cyrenaica (modern eastern Libya) in 411-13, faced a brutal governor, Andronikos, at his arrival as bishop. Andronikos, Synesios complains in his letters, was particularly violent to local city councillors, causing the death of one of them for alleged tax offences. Synesios got him sacked, which shows that only a determined bishop with good connections in Constantinople could properly confront abuse of power – or else that a local official, whether good or bad, could fail to survive a frontal attack by a determined political opponent with his own ecclesiastical and central-government patronage network. But the patronage was crucial, and most of our late Roman sources (as, indeed, early Roman sources) lay great emphasis on it. One could not be a success without it. The Roman world was seriously corrupt, as well as violent. What looks like corruption to us did not always seem so to the Romans, at least to those who formed the élite: it had its own rules, justifications and etiquette. But corruption and its analogues did privilege the privileged, and it was, at the very least, ambiguous; an entire rhetoric of illegal abuse of power was available to every writer.

I begin with these comments simply to distance us a little from Roman political power. The Roman state was not particularly 'enlightened'. Nevertheless, nor was it, around 400, obviously doomed to collapse. Its violence (whether public or private), corruption and injustice were part of a very stable structure, one which had lasted for centuries, and which had few obvious internal flaws. Half the empire, the West, did collapse in the fifth century, as a result of unforeseen events, handled badly; the empire survived with no difficulty in the East, however, and arguably reached its peak there in the early sixth century. We shall follow how this occurred in Chapter 4, which includes a political narrative of the period 400-550. In this chapter, we shall see how that stable structure worked before the western empire broke up, and, in the next, we shall look at religious and other cultural attitudes in the late Roman world. Fourth-century evidence will be used in both chapters, extending into the early fifth in the West, a period of relative stability still, and into

the sixth in the East, for the state did not change radically there until after 600.

The Roman empire was centred on the Mediterranean – 'our sea' as the Romans called it; they are the only power in history ever to rule all its shores. The structure of the empire was indeed dependent on the inland sea, for easy and relatively cheap sea transport tied the provinces together, making it fairly straightforward for Synesios to move from Cyrenaica to Constantinople and back again, or for Alypius to move from Thagaste (modern Souk Ahras in eastern Algeria) to Rome and back. By 300 it was recognized that the empire could not easily be ruled from a single centre, and after 324 there were two permanent capitals, Rome and Constantine's newly founded Constantinople. The empire thereafter had, most of the time, an eastern (mostly Greek-speaking) and a western (mostly Latin-speaking) half, each with its own emperor and administration. But the two halves remained closely connected, and Latin remained the official legal and military language of the East until well into the sixth century.

Rome was a huge city, with a million people at its height in the early empire, and still half a million in 400, when it was no longer the administrative capital of the western empire (which was, in the fourth century, Trier in northern Gaul, and after 402 Ravenna in northern Italy). Constantinople started much smaller, but increased in size rapidly, and may have reached half a million, by now more than Rome, by the late fifth century. Cities of this size in the ancient or medieval world were kept so large by governments, who wanted a great city at their political or symbolic heart for ideological reasons. Rome and Constantinople both had an urban poor who were maintained by regular state handouts of grain and olive oil, from North Africa (modern Tunisia) in the case of Rome, from Egypt and probably Syria in the case of Constantinople, Africa and Egypt being the major export regions of the whole empire. These free food-supplies (*annona* in Latin) were a substantial expense for the imperial tax system, making up a quarter or more of the whole budget. It must have mattered very much to the state that its great cities were kept artificially large, and their populations happy, with 'bread and circuses' as the tag went – though the circuses (including games in the amphitheatres of Rome) were paid for in most cases by the privately wealthy. The symbolic importance of these cities was such that when the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410

the shock waves went all around the empire, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

This concern for the capitals was only the most obvious aspect of the lasting Roman commitment to city life. The whole of the world of culture was bound up in city-ness, *civilitas* in Latin, from which come our words 'civilized' and 'civilization', and which precisely implied city-dwelling to the Romans. The empire was in one sense a union of all its cities (some thousand in number), each of which had its own city council (*curia* in Latin, *boulē* in Greek) that was traditionally autonomous. Each city also had its own kit of impressive urban buildings, remarkably standard from place to place: a forum, civic buildings and temples around it, a theatre, an amphitheatre (only in the West), monumental baths, and from the fourth century a cathedral and other churches replacing the temples; in some parts of the empire, walls. These marked city-ness; one could not claim to be a city without them. And the imagery of the city and its buildings ran through the whole of Roman culture like a silver thread. The Gaulish poet Ausonius (d. c. 395) wrote a set of poems in the 350s called the *Order of Noble Cities*, nineteen in number, from Rome at the top to his own home town of Bordeaux at the bottom (he uses the word *patria*, 'fatherland', of both Rome and Bordeaux); he enumerated his cities by their buildings, and, in so doing, he was in effect delineating the empire itself.

Political society focused on the cities. Their traditional autonomy had meant in the early empire that being a city councillor (*curialis* in Latin, *boulētēs* in Greek) was the height of local ambition. This was less so by the fourth century, however, as the centralization of imperial government meant cities finding that more decisions were taken over their heads; the expansion of the senate and the central administration also meant that the richest and most successful citizens could move beyond their local hierarchies, and the *curia* thus became second best. City councillors became, above all, responsible for raising and also underwriting taxes, a remunerative but risky matter. Slowly, the formal structures of such councils weakened, above all in the fifth century, and by the sixth even tax-raising had been taken over by central government officials. These processes have often been seen in apocalyptic terms, for it is clear from the imperial law codes that *curiales* often complained of their tax burdens, and that some (the poorer ones, doubtless) sought to avoid office; emperors responded by making such avoidance illegal. Put that together with the trickle of literary evidence for local élites in

the West preferring rural living to city life, and an archaeology which increasingly shows radical material simplifications after 400 or so on western urban sites, and the tax burden on city councillors starts to look like a cause of urban abandonment, maybe in the context of the fall of the empire itself.

Such an interpretation is over-negative, however. First of all, it does not fit the East. Here, city councillors were indeed marginalized, and are documented less and less after around 450 (except in ever more hectoring imperial laws), but political élites remained firmly based in cities. What happened was that city government became more informal, based on the local rich as a collective group, but without specific institutions. Senators who lived locally, the local bishop, the richest councillors, increasingly made up an ad-hoc élite group, often called *prōteuorites*, 'leading men'. These men patronized city churches, made decisions about building repairs and festivals, and, if necessary, organized local defence, without needing a formal role. Nor did cities lose by this; the fifth and sixth centuries saw the grandest buildings being built in many eastern cities. Once we see this post-curial stability in the East, it is easier to see it in the West too. Sidonius Apollinaris (lived c. 430-85), whose collection of poetry and letters survives, was from the richest family of Clermont in Gaul, son and grandson of praetorian prefects, and son-in-law of the emperor Eparchius Avitus (455-6). He did not have to be a *curialis*, and largely pursued a central government career. But he ended up as bishop of Clermont, enthusiastically supporting local loyalties in his letters, including city-dwelling; and his brother-in-law Ecdicius, Avitus' son, defended the city with a private army. So this sort of commitment to urban politics did not depend on the traditional structure of city councils. Essentially, it went on as long as Roman values survived; this varied, but in many parts of the empire it continued a long time after the empire itself fell. The presuppositions of *civilitas* achieved that on their own. In the West, urban élites also had rural villas, lavish country houses where they spent the summer months (in the East, these were rare, or else concentrated in suburbs, like Daphne in the cooler hills above Antioch); but cities remained the foci for business, politics, patronage and culture. Few influential people could risk staying away from them. And where the rich went, others followed: their servants and entourages, but also merchants and artisans who wanted to sell them things, and the poor who hoped for their charity; the basic personnel of urban life.

It is possible to see the network of cities as the major element of Roman society, more important even than imperial central government. By modern standards, indeed, the empire was lightly governed, with at the most some 30,000 civilian central government officials, who were concentrated in imperial and provincial capitals (though this excludes lesser state employees, such as guardsmen, clerks, messengers, ox-drivers of the public post, who could have been ten times as numerous). When we add to this all the evidence we have for the inefficiency and poor record-keeping of Roman government, plus the time needed to reach outlying provinces of the huge empire (to travel from Rome to northern Gaul took a minimum of three weeks; an army would take much longer), we might wonder how the Roman world held together at all. But it did; a complex set of overlapping structures and presumptions created a coherent political system. Let us look at some of its elements in turn: the civil administration, the senate, the legal system, the army, and the tax system which funded all these. The shared values and rituals of the Roman political élite will then be discussed in Chapter 3, along with the growing importance of a new political structure, the church hierarchy.

The administration of each half of the empire was controlled by the emperor, the central political figure of what was, in principle, an uncompromising autocracy. Some emperors, indeed, imposed themselves politically: in the fourth century Constantine (306-37) and Valentinian I (364-75 in the West) are the most obvious examples, to whom we should add Julian (360-63), whose dramatic and failed attempt to reverse the Christianization set in motion by Constantine has fascinated historians ever since; fifth-century emperors were less impressive, but Justinian in the sixth (527-65 in the East) was as dominant as any of his predecessors, as we shall see in Chapter 4. But not all emperors wanted to do much ruling; they could simply live their lives as the embodiment of public ceremonial, as did, for example, the emperors of the first half of the fifth century. Even if they were active, aiming at an interventionist politics and choosing their major subordinates, they could find themselves blocked by poor information and the complex rules of hierarchy from making a real impact (the most active emperors usually had a military background, without direct experience in civil government). Not that most of the major officials of the empire were full-time bureaucrats, either; even the most assiduous politicians were

only intermittently in office. The empire, in a sense, was run by amateurs. But the group of amateurs at least had shared values, and family experience in many cases as well, particularly in the West, where there were more old and rich senatorial families, who were often active in politics in the fourth and fifth centuries. And their subordinates were real career officials, who committed themselves to the administration for life. It is that network of office-holders which gave government its coherence. That, and the stability of the offices themselves. The four praetorian prefectures, each with responsibility for a quarter of the empire (and with a hierarchy of provincial governors beneath them), the six major bureaux of central government and the urban prefectures of Rome and Constantinople all had their own traditions and loyalties, going back in some cases for centuries. John Lydos, who wrote an account of government in the 550s, described the praetorian prefecture of the East in which he had served, tracing the office back, impossibly, to Romulus the founder of Rome; he was very loyal to his department, for all its inadequacy and inconsistency, and he saw the whole of imperial history through its ups and downs. One had to put a good deal of effort in to change the entrenched practices and rituals of bureaucracies like these, and not many people did (one was Justinian's right-hand man, the praetorian prefect John the Cappadocian (531-41), who was thus predictably John Lydos' *bête noire*).

One instance of a leading career politician was Petronius Maximus (lived 396-455), from the powerful senatorial family of the Petronii. He seems to have entered the senate of Rome with the ceremonial office of *praetor* in 411, with particularly lavish praetorian games; he was a tribune in 415, and *comes sacrarum largitionum* for the West, one of the main financial officials of the empire, in 416-19, starting that is to say at the age of twenty - young, given the importance of the post. He was urban prefect of Rome in 420-21 and again at some point in the next couple of decades (most of these dates are approximate); in 439-41 he was praetorian prefect for Italy, probably for the second time. He was twice consul, a major honour but without formal duties, and had the coveted title of *patricius* by 445. Unusually, for a career administrator, he was briefly emperor, in 455, for two months before he was killed. In a letter a decade or so later, Sidonius Apollinaris speculates about how much Maximus must have regretted the hourly regulated rituals and responsibilities of imperial office, given the contrast with the 'leisure'

(*otium*) of being a senator. This seems surprising at first sight, but 'leisure' is partly just a manner of speaking: Maximus had long been a major political dealer, with a huge clientele (as Sidonius himself says) and imperial ambitions. We must nonetheless recognize that in the four decades of his political career he only seems to have held formal office for around ten years; he had plenty of time for *otium* as well, which indeed contemporary authors, time and again, describe as one of the characteristics of senatorial élites.

The senate had its own identity, partly separate from the imperial bureaucracy; indeed, in the West it was even physically separate, for the government was no longer in Rome. It was the theoretical governing body of the empire, as of the Roman republic four centuries before, and although the senate was by now no longer a reality, it still represented the height of aspiration for any citizen. It brought with it many fiscal and political privileges, although it was expensive to enter and participate in, given the games and other ceremonies senators had to fund. It had no formal governmental function, but high officials became senators as of right; furthermore, by the early fifth century, only the highest of the three grades of senator, the *illustres*, were regarded as full members of the senate, and the title of *illustres* was only available to officials and direct imperial protégés. The senate was thus tightly connected to government, and expanded as the administration expanded in the fourth century; but it was nonetheless separate, with its own rituals and seniority. It represented aristocratic wealth, privilege and superiority, and, although membership of it was not technically heritable, in practice the same families dominated the senate, in Rome at least, throughout the fourth and fifth centuries. All the male heirs of an *illustres* were anyway at least *clarissimi*, the lowest senatorial grade, which involved at least some privileges even after full senatorial eligibility contracted. And all the grades seem to have been regarded as *nobilis*, 'aristocratic', in late Roman parlance. This close but sideways relation to government has some parallels with that of the House of Lords in modern Britain, both before and after the reforms of 1999.

The existence of this effectively hereditary aristocracy was a key feature of the empire. Not because it dominated government; most leading bureaucrats were not of senatorial origin, even if they became senators later (Maximus was in that sense atypical) but rather because it dominated the *tone* of government. The Roman empire was unusual

in ancient and medieval history in that its ruling class was dominated by civilian, not (or not only) military, figures. Only China's mandarinate offers any real parallel. Senators regarded themselves very highly, as the 'best part of the human race' in the well-known words of the orator Symmachus (d. 402); their criteria for this self-satisfaction did not rely on military or physical prowess, but on birth, wealth and a shared culture. Birth was important (Sidonius could be contemptuous of a powerful rival, Paconius, the praetorian prefect for Gaul, because he was 'of municipal origin', that is, from a curial, not a senatorial family), although very long ancestry was less vital; even the Anicii, by far the leading Roman family in the fourth and fifth centuries, only traced their family back to the late second century. Wealth went without saying: no one was politically important in the Roman world (apart from a few high-minded bishops) without being rich. One needed wealth to get anywhere in the civil administration, as both bribes for appointments and the maintenance of a patronage network cost money, but once one was important, the perks of office, both legal and illegal, were huge. In the army, too, although it was more open to merit, all successful generals ended up rich. And the independently wealthy families of the senate of Rome, the Anicii, Petronii, Caeconii and half a dozen others, had estates throughout southern Italy, Sicily, North Africa and elsewhere, 'scattered across almost the whole Roman world', as the historian Ammianus Marcellinus said of the leading politician Petronius Probus in the 370s: these may have been the richest private landowners of all time. When two Roman aristocrats, Melania and Pinianus, got religion around 405 and sold off all their land, which provided 120,000 *solidi* (around 900 pounds of gold) a year in rents, it wrecked the property market, according to Melania's saint's life. The senatorial hyper-rich were only in Rome, however; in Constantinople senators were from the provincial élites of the East, and operated on a smaller scale. Throughout the empire, in fact, there were provincial élites, the leaders of which had senatorial status and were in line for public office; they were locally powerful, but could not match the Anicii. Sidonius was an example, and indeed the élites of Gaul seem to have been a particularly coherent group.

A shared culture perhaps marked the Roman senatorial and provincial aristocracies most, for it was based on a literary education. Every western aristocrat had to know Virgil by heart, and many other classical Latin

authors, and be able to write poetry and turn a polished sentence in prose; in the East it was Homer. The two traditions, in Latin and Greek, did not have much influence on each other by now, but they were very dense and highly prized. There was a pecking-order based on the extent of this cultural capital. Ammianus reports scornfully that senators in Rome, the supposed *crème de la crème*, only really read Juvenal, a racy and satirical poet, so by implication not the difficult texts; whether or not this was true, it was a real insult. Conversely, literary experts, such as Ausonius in the West and Libanios (d. c. 393) in the East, could rise fast and gain imperial patronage and office simply because of their writing – in Libanios' case so fast that he was accused of magic – although both were already landowners of at least medium wealth. The emperor Julian in his attempt to reverse Christianization tried to force Christian intellectuals to teach only the Bible, not the pagan classics, thus enclosing them in a ghetto of inferior prose. This failed, but the assumptions behind such an enactment clearly show the close relationship between traditional culture and social status. Some Christian hard-liners responded by rejecting Virgil, but this failed too: by the fifth century the aristocracy knew both Virgil (or Homer) and the Bible, and might add to these some of the new Christian theologians too, Augustine in the West or Basil of Caesarea in the East, both of whom were good stylists.

It is this culture which makes the late Roman empire, or at least its élites, unusually accessible to us, for the writings of many of these aristocrats survive: elegant letters or speeches for the most part, but also poetry, theology, or, in the case of the fifth-century senator Palladius, an estate-management manual. Roman literary culture used to be regarded as the high point of civilization; this belief, inherited from the Renaissance, perhaps reached its peak in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English public-school tradition, in which Virgil (and indeed Juvenal, by now seen as a more difficult author) was regarded as a basic training even for the government of India, not to speak of an academic career. This belief is less strong now; few academics know enough Latin to read Virgil (outside Italy), and even fewer politicians. It is thus easier today to see Roman literary culture as an attribute of power, rather than virtue; Roman politicians were at least as cynical and greedy as their successors, and not obviously better at ruling. But it is important to recognize its all-pervasiveness; in all the cities of the

empire, even local office was linked to at least some version of this education. The shared knowledge and values that it inculcated was one of the elements that held the empire together, and indeed made the empire remarkably homogeneous, as not only its literature but its surviving architecture and material culture show. It must finally be said that, although the Roman world left a dense legacy of institutions and assumptions to its early medieval successors, a literary education was not part of that, except in the increasingly separate career structure of the church. The culture of post-Roman aristocracies instead became military, based on the use of arms and horses, and as a result we know much less about it from the inside.

Roman law was another intellectual system that was, in principle, the same everywhere, and it acted as a unifying force. It consisted of imperial legislation, which was very extensive in the fourth to sixth centuries, and a network of tracts by earlier Roman jurists, which represented a distillation of case-law precedents and the workings-out of legal principles. To master this properly required a special training, at the law-schools of Rome, Beirut or (after 425) Constantinople, although all education involved an element of rhetoric, essential for court advocacy. Alypius spent time training at the Rome law-school in the early 380s before going with Augustine to work in Milan (where both were converted to a more thoroughgoing Christianity, and switched their career path to the church); Augustine, by contrast, although trained in rhetoric, makes it clear in his writings that he did not feel himself to be a legal expert, for his education was not specific enough. Law was not in fact at all easy to master before Theodosius II had imperial laws collected into the *Theodosian Code* in 429-38. Justinian revised and expanded the code (twice) in 528-34, and had juristic literature of the second and third centuries excerpted and systematized in the *Digest* in 530-33 as well. The *Theodosian Code* remained a point of reference in the post-Roman West, even though the laws of the post-Roman kingdoms were different; Justinian's corpus survived as the law of Byzantium, and was separately revived in the West in the twelfth century. We must, however, be careful about what such a commitment to law means. The complexity of this legal system was such that experts (*irrisconsulti*) were needed in every court, and sometimes just to draw up documents, but they may not always have been available or been fully reliable if they were. Even if legal help was accessible, courts did not necessarily judge

justly, and the rich often benefited from judicial corruption and patronage, as we saw at the start of this chapter and as many sources confirm. In Egypt, papyrus documents recording the settlement of civil disputes in the fourth to sixth centuries show a strong tendency to avoid courts altogether, given their huge expense and danger, and to go directly to private arbitration.

It would be tempting to reduce the law to its criminal dimension, with its recourse to torture, and conclude that the legal system was in practice simply an instrument of heavy-handed state coercion, the work of a public power that relied on terror because it did not have the personnel to dominate daily life in any detail. Such a temptation would be largely justified, but all the same the law was important. Egyptian arbitrations may have avoided the courts, but they refer frequently to legislation and legal terminology. Augustine was not expert in the law, but he sought to know it, for example writing to the *uirisconsultus* Eustochius for rulings. An interesting letter survives from Africa of around 400 in which an unnamed landowner chides a neighbour and former friend, Salvius, for tyrannizing the former's tenants: 'Is there one law for advocates, another for ex-lawyers? Or one equity for Rome, another for Mateur?' Salvius, an advocate from (we assume) Mateur, would presumably have thought so, and his illegalities are standard. But his correspondent had been a lawyer too; Salvius had taught him the law of tenancy, and it was this, together with the law of inheritance and possession, which the letter invokes in detail, before offering a deal. Law and its imagery were all-pervading in the empire, and we could indeed suppose that the setpiece denunciations of judicial corruption in our sources at least showed high expectations.

The Roman army was much larger than the civil administration, and was always the empire's major expense: in 400 there were some half a million soldiers, give or take a hundred thousand. These were mostly on the northern Rhine and Danube frontiers, and on the eastern frontier with Persia (the long southern border faced the Sahara, and was less vulnerable), but there were detachments in every province, acting as garrisons and as ad-hoc police. It was of course their existence that made it possible for provincial élites to remain civilian; private armies were very rare before the empire broke up. Conversely, armies were capable of imposing their own candidates for emperor, all the more easily because they held most of the weapons. This had been common in the

third century, but was much rarer in the fourth; it revived in the West in the final years of empire in the fifth, but in the East there were no successful coups until 602. Even without coups against the emperor, however, army leaders remained important in politics, and several weak emperors (such as Honorius, western emperor 395-423) had military strongmen ruling for them, who could succeed each other by violence. There was a sense in which the office of emperor was more military than the civilian bureaucracy around him, and emperors were closer to the military than to the civilian hierarchy. Generals were more likely than senior administrators to have risen from nowhere, especially if they came from frontier regions, as was very common; the Rhine frontier and the Balkan frontier in particular were heavily militarized societies, with less and less social distance between the Roman and the 'barbarian' sides of the border, as we shall see later in this chapter. This did not make them so very different from the civilian élites, as long as they were successful, as they could end up with senatorial position, civilian clients and a literary education for their children. But military leaders were less dedicated to expensive prestige buildings or the patronage of games, and senators regularly looked down on them for their lack of culture. Soldiers also moved around more than civilians did. The historian Ammianus (d. c. 395), a Greek-speaker who wrote in Latin, the language of the army, was an ex-soldier who had served on both the Persian and the Rhine frontiers, as well as spending much time in Rome.

The scale of the army and its presence everywhere, and the need to keep it properly provisioned and equipped, made it the major concern of the whole Roman state. The state had a developed system of frontier fortifications and its own food-supply lines: the distribution of oil amphorae along the lower Danube, for example, shows that the army there was supplied from the Aegean into the late sixth century. It also had its own factories for military equipment, of which thirty-five are listed, distributed all across the empire, in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, an account of the imperial military structure dating to the end of the fourth century. Perhaps a half of the entire imperial budget went on feeding and paying the army, and the logistics of army supply were the single most important element that linked all the imperial provinces together, along with the permanent need to feed the imperial capitals.

Underpinning all these structures, and making them possible, was the imperial tax system, which was based above all on a land tax, assessed

on acreage, though also buttressed by a much lighter tax on merchants and artisans, by the revenues from imperial lands and by a variety of smaller dues. In recent years some historians have reacted against an earlier image of the 'coercive state' of the late empire, taxing so heavily that land was abandoned and the economy began to break down; this revision is correct, but they seem to me to have gone too far in their arguments. Taxation does seem to have been very heavy overall: in the sixth century a small number of sources, mostly from Egypt, converge in showing that a quarter of the yield of land could go in tax, and it was more in times of extra taxation (*superindictiones*) which was assessed on top of the main tax burden. This is a very high figure for a precapitalist, agrarian society, with a relatively simple technology. But the high taxes were needed to pay the salaries of all those soldiers, bureaucrats and messengers, and to feed the capitals; they were needed to fund the enormous scale of Roman public buildings and state wealth. They also connected the different parts of the empire together physically, as grain moved northwards from Africa, Sicily and Egypt, and olive oil moved by the state (shipowners moved goods for the state as part of their tax liability). This movement of goods was essentially Mediterranean-based, as it was far easier and cheaper to transport in bulk by water than by land; Gaul, the Rhineland and Britain formed a smaller and separate network, and inland Spain, far from both sea and frontiers, seems to have been somewhat marginal. The core of the empire remained Mediterranean, and it, at least, or, rather, its two halves, were unified by the fiscal movement of goods.

A land tax cannot work properly, especially when it is high, unless assessment is accurate and collection systematic. This takes work. The state has to have up-to-date records about who owns the land; these are not easy to obtain systematically (and no easier to keep in order for easy reference), and establishing them requires a considerable amount of personnel and intrusive information-gathering. Land sales had to be publicly registered in the late empire for this reason, and such registrations can sometimes be found in the rare collections of private documents from the late empire, usually papyri from Egypt, although a few texts do survive elsewhere. And, most important, from the fourth century onwards the government issued laws to tie the peasantry, who were actually paying the taxes, to their place of origin, so that they would

not move around or leave the land, thus making tax-collection more difficult. These laws were part of a general legislative package aimed at ensuring that people essential to the state stayed in their professions, and that their heirs would do so too. *Curiales* were tied to their offices, as we have seen; so were soldiers, and the workers in state factories; so were shipowners and the bakers and butchers of Rome, who were essential for the *annona* of the capital. Even if this network of laws was regularly obeyed, which we can doubt, they make up a large proportion of the imperial codes, and they were generated by the need to stabilize the tax infrastructure of the empire. Add to that the actual collection of taxes, which could be a tense and violent moment, and was certainly undertaken by armed men, and the impact of the imperial fiscal system was continuous, capillary and potentially coercive of nearly everybody in the empire.

This intrusiveness was made worse by illegality. The rich could buy immunity corruptly; assessors and collectors certainly got rich corruptly. The victims were almost always the poor. They responded by fleeing the land (hence the laws tying them down), or by seeking protection from the powerful against having to pay taxes to the state. There are also laws against such patronage, although we have seen that patronage, too, was a stable part of the Roman political system. Most taxes were, it is true, probably paid regularly and even legally; it is striking that the Egyptian papyrus archive of the sixth-century Apion family, then one of the richest families of the Greek East and overwhelmingly dominant in their home town, the city of Oxyrhynchos (modern Bahnasa), shows them paying taxes in a very routine manner. But given the weight of tax, and the endemic injustice that marked the Roman system, it is not surprising that corruption should focus on it. Social critics, more numerous as the empire went Christian and a radical fringe of moralists gained a voice, very frequently stress fiscal oppression in their invective; only judicial corruption and sexual behaviour were as prominent. This would last as long as the empire.

Taxation thus underpinned imperial unity itself, for it was the most evident single element in the state's impact on the population at large, as well as the mainstay of the army, the administration, the legal system and the movement of goods throughout the Mediterranean and elsewhere, all the elements which linked such a large land area together. If it failed, the empire would simply break up. But in fact the empire broke

up for other reasons, as we shall see in Chapter 4. After it did so, taxation was a casualty in the West, but survived in the East. This contrast cannot be underestimated, and it underpins many of the events described in later sections of this book. All the same, fiscal breakdown was not yet predictable in 400, or even 500 in some places. In 400 the stability, and relative homogeneity, of the imperial system was not yet seen by anyone to be at risk.

So far, we have focused on the state, and the imperial political system in general. Local differences have been downplayed, and our vision has been top-down, seen from the viewpoint of administrators and the rich. Let us now look at the rest of the population, and at some of the regional differences which we can pin down in the late Roman empire.

The first thing to be stated is that the population of the empire consisted overwhelmingly of peasants: families of cultivators, who worked the land they owned or rented, and who lived off the food they themselves produced, as well as giving surpluses to landlords (if they had them) in rent, and in tax to the state. Many of them were *servi*, unfree with no legal rights, particularly in parts of the West, but the plantation slavery of early imperial Italy and Greece had almost entirely vanished by the late empire, and free and unfree peasants by now all lived their lives in similar ways. (This book will as a result not use the word 'slaves' for unfree peasants, as it is misleading; the word will be used only for unfree domestic servants, who were fed and maintained by their masters as plantation slaves had been.) In the early Middle Ages, peasants made up 90 per cent or more of the population; the proportion must have been less in the late empire, as more people lived in towns – in Egypt, exceptionally, up to a third of the total population – but could have been as much as 80 per cent, still an extremely high proportion.

Most peasants were probably the tenants of landlords. Legislators certainly assumed so, for their laws tying peasants to the land were directed to *coloni*, the standard Latin word for tenant. The huge estates of the emperor and of Roman senators, and the even greater collective landed wealth of all the provincial and curial élites, also presupposed the existence of millions of dependent tenants who supplied their rents. This was often through middlemen, *conductores*, who leased whole estates from the great landowners; but some of the latter paid consider-

able attention to managing their own estates for profit, such as the Apions in sixth-century Egypt, and Palladius, the estate-management manualist, in fifth-century Italy. Unfortunately, our evidence is not good enough to tell us how often, and where, peasants owned their own land. Egyptian papyri show that some city territories were dominated by owners of large estates, but others had a substantial landowning peasantry and much more autonomy. A good example is the territory of the large village of Aphrodito (modern Kom Ishqaw), from which many sixth-century documents survive, as we shall see shortly. The still standing late Roman villages of Syria and other parts of the eastern Mediterranean show in the best preserved cases (such as in the Limestone Massif of northern Syria: see below, Chapter 10) an architectural ambition and a homogeneity of house types that is difficult to square with tenurial dependence; there are few visible estate centres, in particular. It is generally thought, therefore, that these villages mostly belonged to independent owners.

Overall, it seems that there were more peasant owners in the East than the West, which also fits the fact that fewer hyper-rich landowners are known of in the East. In the West, by contrast, much of Italy and Africa in particular and parts of Gaul were probably dominated by landowners, and we know of more estates which included large areas; one of Melania and Pinianus' estates in Africa was 'larger than the city itself', that is to say, the city territory of the nearest town, Thagaste. (In Africa, where not all dioceses were based in towns, some estates were so substantial that they had their own bishops.) But in both West and East, even large estates were normally highly fragmented and scattered, and many consisted of hundreds or thousands of separate land parcels; there was plenty of space for peasant owners and village-level élites to exist in between them. Some tenants owned land as well, and the laws on tax-paying distinguish between *coloni* who owned some land, who paid taxes directly to collectors, and *coloni* who owned none (called *adscripiti*), who paid taxes through their landlords. The latter were much more dependent, more similar to unfree tenants (who did not pay tax: their lords paid it directly); Justinian, indeed, in one of his laws, wondered what real difference there was between *servi* and *adscripiti*. The answer probably varied regionally: tenure was certainly more flexible in Egypt, where leases were shorter, more peasants owned land, there was more wage labour and rural unfreedom was very rare; in Italy,

by contrast, there were whole estates with only unfree tenants, and rural subjection was probably greater overall.

One real difference between East and West was that peasants lived in villages much more often in the East. Some of the villages still stand, as just noted, at least in marginal areas where the land has since been abandoned to pasture or desert. But documents and archaeology both show that villages (*kornai* or *chōria*) were normal in most of the Greek-speaking world, and they could be tightly organized, with their own headmen, as in particular in Egypt. Owners and tenants lived side by side in these villages, and peasant society was, simply for that reason, relatively coherent and autonomous (eastern landed aristocrats, as we have seen, normally lived in towns), as well as potentially more fraught, as village factions fought over pasture and water rights, or over the pecking-order between the successful and the less successful that existed in every village. We know so much about the Egyptian village of Aphrodito because we have the papyrus archive of Dioskoros, son of Apollos (lived c. 520-85), who was a fairly well-off village leader there: he was sometimes its headman, as his father had been. Dioskoros had a literary and legal education, probably in Alexandria, and became a local notary when he returned; more unusually, he was also a poet, and wrote praise poems to local dukes and other officials. He is interesting for a variety of reasons. He is the best-documented village-dweller of the whole late empire; but his personal character comes across in the sources as well. Although he was certainly from the local élite, he felt threatened on all sides: by the governor of the nearest city, Antaiopolis, jealous of Aphrodito's autonomy; and by neighbours, tenants, shepherds and creditors in his own village. We have some of his lawsuits; his poems, too, often end with pleas for help; they were transactions in his extensive patron-client network. Aphrodito was not a peaceful village. We even have a double-murder investigation by a senior military official, in which the senatorial aristocrat Sarapammon and his associate, the soldier Menas, defend themselves and accuse the villagers themselves of the crime. It is clear, however, that no single person could control it, and keep down its tensions. Aphrodito was only united when it faced off other villages and threats from Antaiopolis. These fractious societies were typical of the East.

The West was different. Here, villages were rarer, except in some mountain zones; instead, as much archaeology shows, the countryside

was scattered with isolated farms and the rural villas or estate-centres of major landowners. Even the concept of the village territory was hardly present in most places; land was simply identified by its owner, and most estates had their own names. We do not have Egyptian levels of documentation here, so it is hard to tell how rural societies worked, but it is likely that they were less coherent than in the East, for there was less to bind them together. Probably the tenants of single estates had something to link them, the common experience of paying rent to a landlord or *conductor*; this did not match the coherence of village life, but it could increase local tensions. The gap between the powerful and the poor was in general wider in much of the West, in fact, and we can sometimes see its results.

One example comes from Augustine's Africa. Augustine, as bishop of Hippo, appointed his monk Antoninus in the 410s to be bishop of a subordinate diocese at Fussala, one of Africa's relatively few villages, in the hills of what is now eastern Algeria. Antoninus turned out to be a bad man – he was young and from a poor family, he was promoted too fast – and he terrorized his village, extorting money, clothing, produce and building materials. He was also accused of sexual assault. Augustine removed him, but did not depose him, and tried to transfer him to the nearby estate of Thogonoetum. Here, the tenants told Augustine and their landlord that they would leave if he came. Antoninus caused no end of trouble, even appealing to the pope in Rome (this being the context in which two surviving letters were written about him by Augustine, in 422-3). Augustine was very embarrassed, as indeed he should have been ('I did not dare look the people of Fussala in the eye'). It is interesting, however, how scared the peasants were: in their angry and bitter witnessing, even after Antoninus' removal, they would not give their names. The people of Fussala included tenants (who were interrogated without their *conductores* being present, to try to get them to relax), but probably not all of them were dependent; it is interesting, conversely, that the *coloni* of Thogonoetum were more prepared to resist Antoninus than were the villagers – illegally, too, for they were of course tied to the land by law. All the same, peasant protagonism here seems largely negative, marked by bitterness, fear and rejection. There was too much separation in this part of Africa between peasants and landlords, and more hostility between them as a result; there was no Dioskoros to mediate between the peasants and the authorities. It is not

surprising that Augustine's main fear was that the peasants would revert to the Donatist church (see Chapter 3), abandoning Catholic Christianity altogether.

Another element that was very different from place to place were the patterns of commercial exchange and artisan production. Three decades of archaeology have led to a major reevaluation of late Roman commerce, which as late as the 1970s was thought to be marginal to the economy. On archaeological sites, the density of finds of amphorae (which carried wine, oil and fish sauce above all, that is, food products) and fine pottery (a guide to other large-scale artisanal products such as cloth and metalwork) allows us to say which areas of the empire were major exporters, and where their products typically went. North African Red Slip tableware is found all over the late Roman Mediterranean; similar tableware from Phocaea on the Turkish Aegean coast and Cyprus matches it in the eastern Mediterranean as well. It evidently travelled by sea, but can be found quite far inland in Italy and in Syria and Palestine. In northern Gaul and Britain and in inland Spain it was not available in more than tiny quantities, but large-scale local production is found instead; for this reason above all we can say that those areas, although active, were separate from the main Mediterranean economic network. Cloth, always the main artisanal product, is not easy to identify archaeologically, but literary sources (including the detailed lists in the imperial *Price Edict* of 301) show that Italy, Gaul, Egypt and Syria were among the major exporters. Amphorae allow us to add African, Syrian and Aegean oil, and south Italian, Palestinian and Aegean wine. These were large-scale distribution networks, and the commodities concerned were evidently produced on a large scale as well. Indeed, the African (that is to say, above all, Tunisian) and coastal Syrian/Palestinian economies probably depended substantially on exports for their prosperity. Internationally, too, the complexity of the economies of southern Italy, the Aegean, Egypt and Palestine in particular, seems to show a dense network of inter-city and city-country exchange.

We have already seen that some parts of the empire sent much of their surplus in tax to other areas: Africa, Egypt and to a lesser extent Syria, Palestine and the Aegean. These provinces were probably in agricultural terms the richest in the empire (the climate was then much as it is today, global warming apart); and they are mostly prominent in these commercial networks as well. It would certainly be wrong to see the

archaeological distributions as signs of the tax network only; they extend to too many insignificant places for that to be the case, such as tiny settlements in central Italy or eastern Palestine. But it is likely, all the same, that commercial exchange was underwritten by the tax network. Ships left Africa for Italy every autumn, bringing state grain and oil to Rome as *annona*; doubtless they took commercial goods as well, ceramics and once again oil, the transport costs of which were thus covered by the state, and which could be sold on the other side of the Mediterranean more competitively, whether in Rome or in other ports. Egypt's commercial exports are less well known, but they probably consisted above all of cloth and papyrus, which archaeology does not pick up (Egyptian wine production was enormous in the late empire, but was of low quality, and was for consumption within Egypt only). The tax network made commerce easier, and also contributed to the commercial prominence of certain regions. When the empire began to lose its fiscal homogeneity in the West, which was when the Vandals seized the heartland of North Africa in 439, breaking the Carthage-Rome tax spine, western Mediterranean commerce began two centuries of steady involution; but the East remained politically and fiscally strong, and eastern Mediterranean commerce was as active in 600 as in 400.

The late Roman world always maintained a double face, local and imperial. Latin and Greek were far from its only languages. Proto-Welsh was spoken in Britain, Basque in parts of Spain, Berber in Africa, Coptic in Egypt, Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic/Syriac in the Levant, Isaurian and Armenian in Anatolia, and there were doubtless other languages too. Coptic, Hebrew, Syriac and Armenian had their own literatures. Local societies were at least as different then as they are now, in the range of realities that stretch from the Welsh mountains to the Egyptian desert, both as a result of their necessary adaptations to the huge differences in local ecology, and as a result of the more human-made contrasts discussed in the last few pages. On the other hand, the Roman world not only held together but increased many aspects of its cohesiveness with time. Christianization swept away many local religious traditions, as we shall see in the next chapter. Cities looked remarkably similar, in their public buildings and their layout, in different parts of the empire. The administration and the army had the same overarching structure everywhere, and the tax system affected everybody. Some cultural differences were lessening: Gaul, for example, lost its local language, Gaulish,

perhaps in the fifth century. Egypt, in particular, was much less atypical in its society and culture in the fourth and fifth centuries than it had been in the first and second; it had ceased to use its huge temple complexes and had abandoned their Pharaonic architectural style, and had even deserted its traditional beer-drinking in favour of wine. People felt themselves to be part of a single Roman world, an awareness which extended not only to city élites but even into villages, for Antoninus of Fussala had appealed to the pope in Rome for support against Augustine, and the villagers of Aphrodito appealed to the empress Theodora herself for support against the governor of Antatopolis.

This awareness of a wider community is linked in our sources, over and over again, with patronage. The patron-client relationship has existed in most societies (the lord-vassal bond of the central Middle Ages is an example), but Roman culture laid immense stress on it. Seeking help from a patron, alongside official channels, was normal. It could be stigmatized as corrupt, but often only by extreme moralists, or else by victims; most people, however, accepted its day-to-day logic. Actually, even the official channels were often expressed in patron-client terms, as with personal or collective appeals to the emperor, which were commonplace, or as with the endless, and legal, personal payments (*sportulae*) which were expected by low- and medium-level bureaucrats who might either facilitate or obstruct tax registration or a court case. The point about a patronage system of this kind is that in the end it involves everybody, and everybody can feel they somehow have a stake in the social system. They will often not get anything out of it, as with the average peasant, but they feel that they can get an element of protection from patrons, if not this time then the next. Everyone except the emperor and his most powerful subordinates needed a patron, and sometimes many. They boasted about it, too, as when John Lydos was fast-tracked as a trainee administrator by the praetorian prefect Zoticos, who was from the same province as him, and did not even have to buy his appointment. Similarly, everyone with even a modicum of local power, from Dioskoros upwards, had clients. Abinnaios, a medium-level soldier stationed in southern Egypt in the 340s, whose archive also survives, preserved requests for special favours from his subordinates, but also from friends and clients who were city councillors, priests, artisans or peasants; he was asked to arbitrate disputes, and to apprehend robbers. Little of this was in his official remit, but it was totally

normal. The Antiochene intellectual Libanios was outraged in the 390s when his tenants sought a military patron to protect them against paying him rent; he claimed that their main patron should be their landlord, but anyone in his audience would have known that was specious. A great part of the elegant letters that the educated élite wrote to each other consisted of or included recommendations for clients or requests for help. So did Dioskoros' poetry, as we have seen. Far from 'corruption' being an element of Roman weakness, this vast network of favours was one of the main elements that made the empire work. It was when patronage failed that there was trouble. Peasants in Africa who felt that the Catholic church's patronage was unavailable to them could turn to Donatism. When peasants in Egypt who had used patrons to lift some of their tax burdens in difficult years felt that this did not work, they would flee; and when the new Arab government after 640 excluded traditional rural patrons from political influence, as we shall see later, in Chapter 12, they could revolt. Above all, perhaps, when local élites in the fifth-century West ceased to believe that their traditional patrons in central and provincial government were capable of helping them, they could turn to the new military leaders of 'barbarian' tribes in their localities instead, and a major political shift resulted. We shall look at the causes and consequences of that shift in Chapter 4.

The Roman world was surrounded by 'others', whom Romans regarded with varying degrees of contempt and incomprehension, but who interacted with them in complex ways. To the east, there was always Persia, the great sister empire of west-central Eurasia, ruled between the 220s and the 640s by the Sassanian dynasty. This was a permanent threat, but a stable one: it involved only border wars, at most extending into Syria, for the two hundred and fifty years between Julian's disastrous invasion of what is now Iraq (then Persia's economic and political heartland) in 363 and the temporary Persian conquest of the Roman East in 614-28, which culminated in the siege of Constantinople in 626. The Persian state was almost as large as the Roman empire, extending eastwards into central Asia and what is now Afghanistan; it is much less well documented than the Roman empire, but it, too, was held together by a complex tax system, although it had a powerful military aristocracy as well, unlike Rome. The militarization of Persian culture extended west into Armenia, which Romans and Persians fought over but which

remained partly independent and culturally separate. The Armenians converted to Christianity in the fourth century, which separated them further from the Persians, who were Zoroastrian for the most part (although with sizeable Jewish and Christian minorities, and also local traditional religions). Zoroastrianism certainly contributed to Persian 'strangeness' in the eyes of the Romans; for example, its priests, called *magoi* in Greek or *magi* in Latin, gave their name to 'magic' in both languages, even though Zoroastrian religion favoured an abstract theology and public rituals, just as Christianity did. But it was arguably Persia's military culture and enormous respect for ancient dynastic tradition that marked it out as most culturally different from Rome, for the Roman sense of kinship could link far-flung cousins and cousins-in-law in patronage networks, but even 'old' families rarely had more than a century or two of prominence. The dynastic element helped Persian traditions survive better than Roman traditions when both were swept away, from Carthage to Samarkand, by the Arabs in the seventh century.

Rome's other borders were shared with far less organized political groups, all of which the Romans called *barbari*, 'barbarians', a conveniently vague term which I shall adopt (keeping the inverted commas) as well. To the south they faced nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in the Sahara and its fringes, mostly speaking Berber languages; for a long time these were not taken very seriously as military threats, but such groups were gaining in social and military coherence, largely as a result of Roman influence, and one tribal alliance, the Laguatan, was very aggressive at the start of the fifth century, as Synesios in Cyrenaica, among others, complains; the Vandals in Africa had trouble with Berbers later, too. The Picts and the Irish to the north and west of Britain were also a potential threat, although only to the already militarized British borderlands, especially around Hadrian's Wall (they staged a substantial invasion in 367-8). The long Rhine and Danube frontier faced tribal communities, mostly speaking Germanic languages, which historians since Tacitus in the first century had seen as a whole as *Germani*, although there is no evidence whatsoever that these peoples recognized any common bonds. The main groups along the frontier were by the fourth century the Franks on the lower Rhine, the Alemans on the middle and upper Rhine, and the Goths on the lower Danube and north-eastwards into the steppes of what is now Ukraine. Further back were Frisians in the modern Netherlands, Saxons in modern north

Germany, and Vandals and Longobards or Lombards to their east. These were the main groups, but there were dozens of others. The Quadi in what is now Slovakia and Hungary are perhaps worth mentioning, if only because, after they fought a small war against Valentinian I in 374-5, they met the emperor and argued (correctly, in fact) that their own attacks were a justified and largely defensive response to Roman aggression: this was seen by Valentinian as so insolent that he had an apopleptic fit and died. One might have a soft spot for the Quadi as a result, but they vanish from history soon afterwards: they must have been absorbed into the Hunnic empire in the early fifth century, which was based in the same area, and their probable descendants in the fifth century were called Suevoi and perhaps also Rugi.

The transformation of the Quadi is only one example out of many of one crucial feature of all these tribal communities: they were very changeable. For a start, none of them were united ethnic groups; they all consisted of smaller tribes, each with a separate leader (as with the half a dozen Gothic groups, even though the Goths were among the most coherently organized of the Germanic peoples). Historians have indeed sometimes argued that some Germanic tribes had no permanent leadership at all, only generals in times of war. This latter pattern seems less likely (if only because war was pretty common); more plausible is that war encouraged the temporary development of alliances or confederations of separate tiny tribes, each with its own permanent leader, but choosing a temporary leader for that confederation. This at least fits the Alemans of the 350s-370s described by Ammianus, whose seven kings (*reges*) united under Chnodomar and his nephew Serapio to fight Julian in 357, but the latter were also flanked by ten lesser leaders, *regales*, and aristocrats as well, 'from various *nationes*'. Did all of these *nationes* even think of themselves as 'Aleman', or is this, like 'German', just a Roman term for a much more inchoate reality? We cannot be sure, but, if the latter was so, this would at least explain the frequent name changes of the major peoples the Romans described. The problem is, of course, that the Romans wrote our only written sources (the only certainly Gothic source is Ulfilas' Gothic translation of the New Testament, although the *Passion of Saba*, about an early Christian martyr in the Gothic lands who died in 372, may have been written by a Goth too). Roman ethnography was never reliable, and was usually highly moralized, with 'barbarians', naturally inferior but often noble in their

savagery, acting as a mirror for the faults of the Romans themselves. It is highly unlikely that even Ammianus, although present on the Rhine in 357, had more than second-hand information about Aleman society and practices, and other observers were further removed still.

Certain things can nevertheless be said about the 'barbarian' groups, partly thanks to written sources, partly thanks to archaeology. The northern and southern neighbours of Rome were all mixed-farming peasant societies (except for the Sahara nomads), living for the most part in villages, with élites generally living side by side with cultivators. They were settled and stable societies; they did not normally move about. They seem, however, in all cases to be better organized by the fourth century than they had been in the early empire. The archaeology shows the slow development of material cultural differences between regions (unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if these mapped onto the ethnic distinctions between Franks, Alemans, Goths, etc., and this is in my view unlikely), and, most important, increasing concentrations of wealth: the rich in the Germanic world, and we can add the Berber world as well, were becoming richer, thus presumably showing that power was slowly becoming more stable too. This was largely the simple result of contact with the Roman empire, which was vastly more wealthy and powerful than any 'barbarian' group. A substantial proportion of the artefacts in rich graves beyond the frontier in the fourth century are of Roman manufacture, as far north as Denmark. The Romans traded beyond the frontiers; they also employed 'barbarians' as paid soldiers, in every century. As the 'barbarians' became better organized, they also became more dangerous, and the Romans had to defend themselves more carefully against them. A long frontier region developed on the northern boundaries of the empire, in which militarization was capillary, affecting much wider strata of society than was the case elsewhere: northern Gaul and the Balkans were the largest such frontier regions, but there were smaller ones elsewhere too. As 'barbarians' were used in the army and often settled in the empire, at the same time as hierarchies developed under Roman influence beyond the frontiers, society on each side of the frontier slowly became more similar: there may not have been so very much difference on one level between Valentinian, himself from the Pannonian frontier in modern Hungary, and the leaders of the neighbouring Quadi whose bold reply killed him.

This type of observation has been used by some recent historians as the

basis for an argument that nothing really changed when the 'barbarians' entered the Roman empire in the fifth century and replaced its western half with their own kingdoms. Emperors had long been drawn largely from military families on the frontier; the successor states had kings of a similar type, only from just beyond the frontier. This is a better argument than the traditional one that waves of migrating Germans overbore the weakened (because barbarized) Roman army and state; but it does go too far, all the same. There was a major *political* difference between each side of the frontier: on one side Romans ruled, on the other they did not. Julian and Valentinian could attack Alemans and Quadi precisely because they were not under Roman rule, and the latter saw themselves as structurally different from Romans, something that did not change when they invaded. Conversely, the soldiers of 'barbarian' origin largely deracinated themselves when they joined the army. Take Silvanus, a Frank by origin according to Ammianus, who was a Roman general in the 350s, as his father had been. Silvanus was falsely accused of treason in a piece of palace intrigue in 355, when based at Cologne on the Rhine frontier. He wondered what to do. Should he flee to the neighbouring Franks, his kin? He was dissuaded from this, on the grounds that the Franks would kill or betray him; he claimed the empire instead, as army leaders had often done in the past. This failed, and Ammianus was himself instrumental in having him killed. It would have been easy for Ammianus to depict Silvanus as an untrustworthy and perhaps savage outsider (he does so on other occasions, as with the Romanized Berber aristocrat Firmus, who becomes 'barbaric' when he revolts in 373). But Ammianus was instead sympathetic to Silvanus' plight, and paints him simply as a Roman soldier, and as both politically and culturally separate from the Franks beyond the Rhine; Silvanus' army training had seen to that. The major military politicians of 'barbarian' extraction who were important in late fourth-century politics, such as the Frank Arbogast (d. 394) and the half-Vandal Stilicho (d. 408), both of whom were de-facto heads of state, were similar: they were career soldiers, and operated in an entirely Roman political arena. This was normal in fourth-century politics. It was the politics of the fifth century, when some 'barbarian' military leaders fought for Rome at the head of substantial bodies of troops from their own communities, and who called themselves Goths or Franks rather than Romans, that was often different.

In the 370s the Huns appeared in the East, a nomadic people from central Asia. Ammianus depicts them in very hostile and impossibly schematic terms, as hardly human, eating raw flesh, never entering houses, living on horseback, and without rulers: the classic uncivilized 'others'. They were good fighters, all the same. They may not have been a single political group in the 370s (although they became one, for a generation under Attila, between the 430s and 454). But they destroyed the rule of at least one of the Gothic tribes, Ermenric's Greuthungi, in or before 375, and menaced others. As nomads, they were as alien to the Goths as to the Romans. As a result, the majority of another Gothic tribe, the Tervingi, sought entry to the Roman empire in 376, and so did other sections of the Goths, although others stayed north of the Danube and slowly accepted Hunnic hegemony. 'Barbarian' tribes had invaded the empire often enough in the preceding two centuries; usually they ravaged sections of one of the military zones, the Balkans and northern Gaul, and were then defeated and enslaved, absorbed or driven back. Submissive requests for entry were rarer, and the Romans, including the eastern emperor Valens (364-78), Valentinian's brother, were not sure how to handle this. They accepted the request, and the Goths, immigrating into the eastern Balkans, became in the following decades 'Arian' Christians, the variant Christianity of both their early missionary Ulfilas and, to a lesser extent, Valens himself. But Roman suspicion remained. The Goths were deprived of supplies, and soon revolted under their leader Fritigern; and Valens, underestimating them, was defeated and killed at Adrianople (modern Edirne in European Turkey) in 378. The Goths did not manage to build on this, for they were too few and in a strategically weak position, and they accepted peace in 382. By 394 they were fighting in the east Roman army, against a western usurper put up by Arbogast. But they did not become 'Roman', and remained as a separate ethnic grouping, the first group inside the empire to do so.

This sort of interpenetration became steadily more common, in particular after a larger number of 'barbarian' groups invaded the empire in 405-6, probably as a result of the steady development of Hunnic power. This did not by any means have to be inimical to Roman power structures and in the East was not; but political errors in handling 'barbarians', like those of Valens, continued after his death, and these would be more problematic. We shall see in Chapter 4 how strategic ineptness in the face of a steadily changing political situation in the end

helped to sink the western half of the empire. But the stability discussed in this chapter was not illusory, all the same, and many of the political and social patterns described here lasted long into the early medieval world.