A HISTORY OF
NORTH-WESTERN
EUROPE

Robin Briggs

WILEY Blackwell

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ROBIN BRIGGS
All Souls College, Oxford

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Dedication

For Robert Franklin and Pauline Adams

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*P*REFACE

This is not a book I could ever have conceived of writing on my own initiative, and it took a great deal of persuasion before I agreed to make the attempt. No historian could possibly have a deep knowledge of the history of this crucial region over more than a millennium and a half, and the literature multiplies much faster than any feeble attempt to catch up with it, even over quite short periods of national history, let alone on all the nations involved. So this book is very largely the work of an amateur, whose professional qualifications extend only over a small part of the subject matter. If that has made the actual writing hard and rendered progress extremely slow at times, the compensation has been a licence to read many books and articles I would never have encountered otherwise, and to acquire a much fuller sense of the richness of the history under investigation. That has been fun, and usually thought-provoking, however much it has prolonged the actual production. What I have tried to provide is an analytical narrative, switching between general aspects of the scene and national history in what seemed to be a set of reasonable compromises, while often moving at a breakneck pace and offering hazardous generalisations. If the result is sometimes more of a bluffer's guide than a serious historical work, I can only plead the nature of an almost impossible task as an excuse. For all its length, the book is more of a sketch with illustrative details than a comprehensive treatment of this infinitely complex story. No reader should take what I say on trust; they should merely regard it as a first approximation and feel encouraged to follow up on my claims by further reading. I have come to feel, all the same, that the effort to abstract a brief narrative from a mass of detail is a worthwhile enterprise, and that the view from on high can have its own merits.

North-western Europe is hardly a well-defined entity, and I have played fast and loose here, treating geographical boundaries with extreme freedom. The focus throughout is on the classic region including the German lands, France, the Low Countries, and Britain, including some quite extended sections on specific states. Denmark and Switzerland have only been mentioned occasionally, although they may be thought part of the region; I hope it will not cause offence to have relegated them to the sidelines in this way, in order to achieve a more streamlined narrative. Italy and Iberia have both forced their way in at

times, when their histories were too strongly interwoven with affairs north of the Alps and the Pyrenees to be omitted, as have Russia and Poland in similar fashion. This untidy ad hoc approach made sense to me, and I hope readers will tolerate it. Another way of explaining these choices is that at the heart of the book is the decisive once for all change which brought the modern world into being. The region studied here is the one where this great shift essentially happened. It was of course preceded by a much slower evolution, which gradually created the early modern situation in which the escape from traditional limitations was possible at all, and that long history is the subject of the first chapters. Since the concept of modernity can be a controversial one, I should perhaps say that I would not myself go beyond industrial society, scientific method and global interconnectedness as its salient features. Nor do I wish to suggest that it was the sole and unaided achievement of Europeans. When some degree of Eurocentricity could hardly be avoided in a book with this title, readers would be well advised to balance the picture by turning (as a start) to Christopher Bayly's classic text in the same series, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914*, for the global changes involved.

No book of a reasonable length could offer a comprehensive or balanced treatment of such a vast subject. I did not set out with any conscious plan of what matters to prioritise, and only marginally with what to exclude. It did seem obvious that space considerations would preclude any extended coverage of the development of high culture; since I personally take a keen interest in the literature, visual arts, and music we have inherited from the European past, that is a matter of some regret to me. What may be more questionable is the relative neglect of issues concerning women and children across all those centuries, areas of the past to which I am also far from indifferent. The trouble here was I think the difficulty I felt in offering much in the way of helpful generalisations where the historical record is (for most of the period) so sparse and hard to evaluate. For example, it seems clear that as legal systems evolved towards greater complexity from the sixteenth century onwards, the formal position of women tended to worsen, with stronger exclusions formulated. At the same time, it remains very unclear how far these were genuinely applied, or whether the average woman (an impossible concept in any case) was better or worse off in any significant way. Meanwhile, some aspects of intellectual history have been foregrounded, others largely ignored, according to very subjective instincts about what is most relevant to the general story. Another historian could therefore be given the same brief and write a strikingly different book, and I am very conscious that my treatment is inevitably selective.

My heart quailed at the thought of footnoting the text; the choice here was between minimalism, and being ridiculously sketchy, or offering an unmanageable host of references. There are therefore no footnotes, and I can only offer apologies to the many historians from whom I have borrowed information and ideas without acknowledgement. Rather similar considerations apply where a bibliography is concerned. I attempted to draw up selected readings to accompany each chapter, only to become overwhelmed by the task; very long lists of books took shape, among which I could see no sensible principles for selection. The bibliographical note at the end is therefore a relatively short

list of just over a hundred books (in English) that I have myself found especially helpful and thought-provoking, books which I can recommend to anyone who finds my approach sympathetic. This note is also an encouragement to go to the obvious next level of information, where copious bibliographies may readily be found. Anyone who wants to read it all up in depth will need several lifetimes, and they will inevitably fall ever further behind the flood of new publications. One of my own first tasks once the book is in print and beyond further modification will be to clear away the piles of volumes that threaten to render my study impassable, and then to return hundreds of them to the invaluable college library without which I could never have managed at all. Oxford's superb History Faculty Library was equally crucial, but sterner borrowing limits mean that those books are already back on the shelves. Some of my very warmest thanks must go to the librarians concerned: at All Souls Norma Aubertin-Potter and Gaye Morgan, and for the University collections Isabel Holowaty, Rachel d'Arcy Brown and their assistant librarians.

I owe thanks to far too many people to list here, for conversations and practical help over many years, including the times before I was even planning this book; by its nature, just about every other historian living or dead with whom I have conversed over the last 60 years could be included. That list would be enormously long because I have had the exceptional good fortune to spend my career at the University of Oxford, which has operated as a kind of magnet, attracting leading historians from Britain, America, Europe and beyond to give lectures and seminar papers, and to spend time as academic visitors. Frequent visits to France, first as a kind of apprentice with the *Annales* school, then for research and as a Visiting Professor at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France, have further brought me into contact with most of the leading figures in the French historical scene, whose friendliness has been remarkable and heartwarming. Visits to Germany and the Netherlands have been rarer but equally instructive. Back in Oxford, exceptionally stimulating seminars run by (among others) Sir Keith Thomas, Richard Cobb, Peter Lewis, Ian Maclean, Sir Noel Malcolm, and (with me) Miri Rubin have been an indispensable part of my intellectual life. Those names identify just a few of the inspiring colleagues and friends with whom I have interacted over so many years, many of whom are now inevitably dead. Among the latter, I would just like to mention my undergraduate teachers Christopher Hill and Maurice Keen, then Sir John Habakkuk, whose advice sent me to France to become a historian of Europe in the first place. Otherwise, I trust that my many interlocutors (and the shades of those now dead) will forgive me for making my thanks general ones.

For 60 years now, All Souls College has provided a wonderfully sustaining environment in which to work, as an interdisciplinary research institution with a large Visiting Fellowships programme; the latter has brought in large numbers of the visiting historians already mentioned, to my enormous benefit. The Senior Research Fellowships funded by the College and the university Professorships and other posts (notably those in economic, medieval and military history) that confer Fellowships have had a series of distinguished holders from whom I have learned a huge amount. It would be hard to imagine a better place from which to prepare a book with such a massive range.

That support has continued, in a very generous fashion, in the years since my retirement, which happens to coincide with the research and writing for this book.

It is a special pleasure for me that the book appears in a series edited by Bob Moore, conversations with whom were inspirational during my final year as an undergraduate in 1963–4. His approach to historical investigations, and notably his willingness to challenge received opinions, has always been a model for me. Now that the book is finished, I can stop grumbling that he almost twisted my arm off to get me to write it! During the production process, Juhitha Manivannan and others at Wiley have put up with a recalcitrant author, prodded him into action and seen to it that the whole thing fits together as it should.

Anyone who is engaged in a long-term project is bound to experience ups and downs, including moments of doubt about one's ability to finish the task at all. For many years, I have been sustained through such concerns by my wife, Daphne; no thanks can really be sufficient for her untiring love and support, coupled with endless intellectual stimulation, around which my life has been built. On a second level family and close friends have also been invaluable, and I would single out Robert Franklin and his wife, Pauline Adams. From the time that Robert joined me as a Fellow by Examination at All Souls almost six decades ago we have been able to talk with great freedom on every conceivable front, and this has extended to Pauline in more recent times. That friendship has been enhanced by regular shared meals, holidays, cultural events, and common historical interests, and in gratitude for so many happy memories, this book is dedicated to Robert and Pauline. I suspect that all who know them will understand why.

My original intention was to provide a set of maps to accompany the text. A first attempt revealed the great difficulties in achieving this within the limits of monochrome maps on book-sized pages, and as a result I have decided not to include maps. The internet now offers innumerable excellent maps, which are far more helpful than anything that could have been managed here. The reader has only to look up keywords such as Roman Empire, Barbarian Invasions, Holy Roman Empire, European Colonization, and many others to have maps on the screen alongside the book.

For those who prefer historical atlases, two excellent examples are *The Hamlyn Historical Atlas* (1981) by R. I. Moore (ed.) and *The Times Atlas of European History* (1994).

[1] FROM ROME TO THE CAROLINGIANS

THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND ITS LEGACY

Few human creations have ever marked memory so strongly as the Roman empire. Its relics, above all its astonishingly durable buildings and other structures, are still physically present in some quantity across much of western Europe. Classical culture and the Latin language have proved still more enduring and influential throughout the West until very recent times. Any history of this region across the *longue durée* can hardly start anywhere else, unless it is to delve back into the long ages before written records begin. It may therefore seem rather perverse that this book should take the fall of the western empire as its starting point, rather than some earlier moment such as Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul. This choice certainly does not help with chronological precision, because only the most literal-minded would now think that the deposition in 476 of the last emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, amounted to a dramatic change. In reality the empire disintegrated very slowly over many decades, by such imperceptible stages that many among its elites hardly seem to have noticed. Historical periodisation now recognises this through the ingenious notion of Late Antiquity, a period stretching roughly from the so-called imperial crisis of the third century AD to the onset of the Carolingian age some four centuries later. The use of this era as a springboard turns out to have great advantages, because it allows us to probe the relationship between the empire and the 'barbarian' kingdoms that succeeded it and to understand many paradoxical or surprising features of this transition.

It was powerful internal dynamics, not any conscious plan, which drove Roman power to the boundaries reached in the first century AD. The essential reason why expansion then stopped was that the regions beyond the *limes* offered very little in the way of tangible rewards, while the level of social

organisation in most of them was too primitive to facilitate either conquest or control. It can also be argued that although the empire included vast tracts of territory north of the Alps, stretching to the frontier zones along the Danube and the Rhine, only Gallia Narbonensis, the southernmost part of modern France, was truly an integral part of what remained essentially a Mediterranean empire and economic system. There was indeed a remarkable level of uniformity at one level, notably in a thousand cities equipped with similar institutions and sets of public buildings, which also shared a common culture that underpinned civilian ruling elites. The association of *Romanitas* with status, wealth and power was a very strong glue holding the empire together, which worked in parallel with the devolution of most functions to provincials and the toleration of a huge variety of local arrangements. An advanced material culture, relatively well-developed communication and trade structures and an overarching legal system were further impressive aspects of the Roman world, even at its peripheries. The emperor Constantine and his successors brought a new factor into play in the fourth century with the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, possessing great potential as a cohesive force. Where Edward Gibbon famously saw this as a fatal step towards the dissolution of the empire, modern historians take a much more positive view. By this time, however, other problems had long been threatening to undermine the *pax Romana*, and we may reasonably think that one crisis or another must eventually have proved fatal.

The Roman world may have offered a strikingly good deal to its ruling elites, but the view from the underside would have been much less attractive. Slavery and other forms of personal subjection remained widespread; even if we cannot readily measure their extent, it is clear that the labouring population in general was exposed to high rates of surplus extraction. Outside a few (admittedly impressive) industries this remained a fairly primitive economy in productive terms, so the cultured lifestyles of the few rested on the enforced toil of the many. Just as significantly, so did their protection against the constant threats from outside the *limes*. All the other aspects of empire could only exist because the legions patrolled the frontiers and stood ready to contain, then repel, any serious incursions by hostile armies. The maintenance of a permanent professional army required high levels of taxation; although we know too little about tax rates and the local economies on which they had an impact, their oppressive nature is hardly in doubt. The army also lay at the heart of a command economy, because large quantities of foodstuffs, clothing, consumer goods and weapons had to be moved to the frontier zones to supply the troops and their families. It seems likely that the commercial and communications systems that sustained the urban consumer culture across the empire were to a large extent parasitic on this military exchange system. Official Roman coinage was primarily required in order to pay soldiers and run the tax system, while it is doubtful how far it provided a medium of commercial exchange for the broader economy. Many important levies were indeed made in kind. Since the state had not managed to construct anything significant by way of a borrowing facility, it was very vulnerable to short-term fluctuations in tax receipts. The only immediate technique to meet shortfalls

was debasement of the currency, a disastrous expedient from which later emperors did their best (not of course enough) to abstain.

Until sometime in the second century AD, the political and military systems had largely worked together as agencies of Romanisation. The emperors were drawn from the immensely rich senatorial aristocracy, which was primarily based in Italy, while the citizen peasantry still provided one major source of recruitment for legionaries. Dramatic changes in these arrangements can be linked to the Marcomannian Wars along the Danube frontier, which began in 166, and these conflicts in their turn must be related back to the Roman impact on 'Free Germany', the tribal societies beyond the *limes*. When the Romans first encountered this society, it was made up of small patriarchal units, which lived by subsistence agriculture and stock-raising. Low-level violence, mostly in the forms of feuding and cattle raiding, was endemic; it was almost a natural condition of existence in the Germanic world. Larger groupings, from the kindred up to the tribe, were fissile and unstable, although they provided forms of mediation that kept violence under some degree of check. A still more unpredictable element also existed, in the form of war-bands of young unattached males that formed around individual leaders. This was not at all the kind of society with which Romans were comfortable, as their occasional attempts to describe the barbarians reveal, but in its original state it was not likely to pose anything beyond modest and intermittent challenges to the military might of the empire. More serious problems arose as Roman wealth and goods flowed over the frontiers, creating much sharper social divisions, alongside a more deliberate policy of supporting client kingships just across the great river boundaries. In the absence of written sources, we can detect the movement of goods from archaeological finds and perceive that some kind of major turmoil was taking place by the later second century across virtually the whole region bounded by the Rhine, the Danube and the Baltic. Tribes and bands from the interior were on the move, pressing on the client kings and generating new confederations of unprecedented size. Large armies of barbarians repeatedly crossed the Danube, raiding as far as northern Italy, so that some twenty years of sustained military effort were required to contain them.

These were warning signs of a more fundamental shift, which would be played out over many centuries. At the start of the first millennium, the Mediterranean world was vastly more advanced in its social, political and economic structures than the lands to the north of the Alps. The conquest of Gaul and southern Britain had brought the more developed regions into the empire, even if they always remained somewhat marginal, leading to significant advances in productivity and what we think of as civilisation. Whether or not because of proximity and cross-influence, Germanic society also underwent radical changes, most of which can only be reconstructed from the archaeological evidence. In essence a considerably more intensive agriculture evolved, linked to a major upswing in the population and to the availability of surpluses that could be appropriated by warlords to fund greatly expanded retinues. More powerful kings and larger political units naturally followed, while a great increase in metalworking provided weapons and luxury goods. German confederations were still unstable, and the Romans proved skilful in exploiting this

to undermine dangerously successful leaders. In the long run, however, the empire would have to raise its game significantly if it was to keep its boundaries safe against these increasingly powerful and predatory neighbours. Such adjustments were all the more necessary because the relatively wealthy client states along the borders were themselves now targets for migratory groups from the outer regions, although these incomers would not yet have had the strength to confront Roman power directly. The character of these migrations was particular; Germanic leaders could only assemble viable armies by including warriors from the free peasantry, so dependants had to accompany their menfolk in great waggon trains. The kind of pressures that would eventually lead to imperial collapse were taking shape on a smaller scale on the periphery, contributing to extensive changes in the late empire that were driven by the frontier situation (Figure 1.1).

Over the ninety years between the assassination of the emperor Commodus (193) and the emergence of Diocletian (284–305), the balance of power within the empire swung abruptly in favour of the army, from whose ranks a long succession of largely unsuccessful emperors emerged. These men needed to buy loyalty, so resources were poured into the frontier areas, where the legions now recruited almost wholly among the local populations and from the barbarians. Diocletian's reforms brought a new period of stability, at the cost of higher taxation and the further militarisation of society north of the Alps. Although his

Figure 1.1 Porta Nigra, Trier. This impressive city gate exemplifies the grandeur of Trier as the Roman capital north of the Alps.

division of the empire into western and eastern halves was temporarily reversed under Constantine, this partial separation made sense in many ways and would soon become permanent. The armies mutated further during the fourth century to include very substantial groups of barbarian federates under their own leaders, Germanic officers who adopted Roman culture and values, then became major players in the power politics of the imperial court. No longer the agents of Romanisation, the military had become a force for the barbarisation of the empire, even if the barbarians in question saw themselves as loyal Romans. At the same time, this policy was in its own way a notable success and cannot be seen as the main reason for the gradual collapse of the empire in the fifth century.

It was again the vulnerable Danubian frontier that gave way from the 370s onward, under the intense pressure created by the appearance of the Huns, nomadic warriors who would ultimately draw (or force) many other tribes into a vast if ephemeral conglomerate under their leadership. Even when the Huns were still based in the Caucasus, their raids seem to have induced various tribal entities with previous Roman connections to migrate across the borders as large groups complete with women and children, seeking protection and employment. The last thing any of these would-be allies wanted was the destruction of the empire under whose wing they sought shelter, but their ambiguous presence would in the long run destabilise it beyond repair. The appearance of the Huns was crucial because it drove such a large number of Germanic leaders to take the enormous risk of entering Roman territory within a short time span, swamping the defences and creating an unprecedented situation. The Gothic tribes who banded together to win the battle of Adrianople (378) ultimately coalesced into a loose grouping known as the Visigoths, which a weakened empire could neither assimilate nor destroy. Although in 405–6 another Gothic force was defeated in Italy, this time simultaneous incursions across the Rhine by Vandals, Suevi, Alans and Burgundians were far more successful.

There are serious drawbacks to the idea of 'barbarian invasions', because the term risks giving rise to many false impressions. The empire was not swept away by some tidal wave of pagan Germanic tribes, bursting over the great rivers and displacing the local inhabitants. Although some of the intruding groups were certainly quite large – the Visigoths who were permitted to settle in Aquitaine may have numbered 100,000 or more, including women and children – they were insignificant when set against the indigenous populations. The biggest confederations just east of the Rhine, the Alemanni and the Franks, took little if any part in the invasions. These groups seem to have been powerful enough to protect their own territories against the migrants and were probably enjoying the relaxation of Roman pressure evident from the 390s onward, so they had little motive to take such risks. Most of those who did cross the borders were at least nominally Christian, despite a tendency to favour the Arian heresy and deny the full divinity of Christ. Nor did the invaders burn and slash their way across the whole landscape, although they plainly had very damaging effects in some areas; if significant parts of the empire suffered serious economic damage, this often seems to have resulted from longer-term exploitation by groups who only migrated at intervals. On a broad scale, there was an extensive process of assimilation; as the elites of more distant provinces lost touch with Rome, and with the patronage

system of the imperial court, their political horizons changed and narrowed. It might even be argued that the situation in some regions was little more than an extension of conditions that had long prevailed in the militarised frontier zones, with local elites brought into sharp contact with the culture of the Roman military as it had become by AD 400. A new political order resulted, as these elites formed alliances with the warlords who were the only available source of military protection. Old civil institutions ceased to mediate between the military leaders and civilian society, leaving no clear boundary between legitimate and illegitimate use of force. Groups like the Visigoths, granted an area for their support, rapidly extended their power far beyond the assigned limits. Regional capitals emerged, while the warlords sought to hold their followings together by a stress on ethnicity, reversing the value system of the Roman imperial culture. There was something very artificial about this, because the groupings were far from sealed, recruiting in a fairly promiscuous fashion as what had been separate barbarian forces sought safety in numbers, and also by deals with the existing local elites. Older notions about the ethnic origins of modern European nations are therefore simply untenable in the light of current knowledge.

The settlement of large barbarian war-bands and their camp followers within the empire could hardly be a comfortable process; the scale was unprecedented, while the men were no longer assimilated by service in the Roman armies. For several decades, the imperial leadership would only negotiate with them under duress and made intermittent efforts to eliminate them by force. This can only have worsened the position of those among whom they were encamped; the massive tax reductions granted to regions traversed by Goths and Vandals refute any suggestion that there was little by way of barbarian violence. The shock administered by Alaric and his Goths when they sacked Rome in 410 was only part of their devastating effect on the Italian heartland. Even so, from the Italian perspective, the virtual abandonment of much of the north to the invaders after that time might have looked a limited success, because there were to be no more problems of barbarian invasion or civil war until the middle of the fifth century, and barbarian federates probably seemed safer than local commanders who could use their legions in bids for the imperial title. This was of course an illusion, as became evident when a moderately successful Roman attempt to drive the Vandals and Alans out of Spain in the 420s precipitated their successful invasion of North Africa, the ultimate migration of the whole period. The loss of this crucial economic powerhouse by 439 probably marked the moment at which the western empire was past saving, with its tax revenues so reduced that its armies became a shadow of their former selves (Figure 1.2).

The Successor States; Merovingians and Others

The empire progressively broke up into smaller units, with simplified internal structures. An increasingly ghostly imperial presence did, however, persist for several decades, during which the new local rulers behaved rather like provincial

Figure 1.2 Roman wall, Le Mans. As the northern empire became unstable, city fortifications were strengthened, and extraordinarily durable walls like this one survive quite widely, as in Colchester.

governors, applying Roman law with expert advice but not issuing law codes or claiming independent sovereignty. They avoided putting their images on coins, perhaps in line with their attempts to secure recognition and support from Constantinople. When law codes did finally appear they had much to do with the interface between the newcomers and provincial society, along which a hybrid elite emerged. Then two major new powers appeared in the West at the end of the fifth century. Superficially the more impressive was the kingdom of Italy established by Theoderic the Ostrogoth after 488, at the end of another major migration by an inconvenient group of Roman allies. Everything we know suggests that Theoderic was a notably skilful politician, able to maintain a working relationship with the eastern empire while building an extensive power base in the West, which eventually extended across much of southern Gaul and Spain. Here he was able to co-opt both the native elites and other Germanic groups, while he exploited much of the old imperial rhetoric and symbolism. On the other hand, this was a largely personal creation, resting on distinctly fragile compromises. Once its leader had died (526), it would soon collapse, under the dual pressures of an internal succession struggle and an assault by the forces of the emperor Justinian. This attempt to reunite eastern and western empires would ultimately fail, but only after a long period of fighting which completed the devastation of Italy and left the peninsula politically fragmented. A more insidious process in northern Gaul saw the Franks, a

recent assemblage of Germanic tribes who had previously been mostly loyal Roman clients, move from their territories in the region of the modern Netherlands into the vacuum left by imperial retreat. Since they faced little organised opposition, this did not require the kind of concentrated migration seen elsewhere, nor a single leader, so a plethora of little Frankish kings appeared. Only from the late 470s did Clovis begin his blood-stained drive towards domination over all these rivals, to establish the Merovingian kingship (named after the alleged founder of the dynasty) that became the first durable replacement for Roman power.

Despite his defeat of the Visigoths in 507, Clovis prudently refrained from any open challenge to the Ostrogothic kingdom. Whether or not he could have guessed it, time and geography were on the Frankish side, because after Justinian's invasion of Italy no Mediterranean power would ever again have the resources or the motivation to intervene effectively north of the Alps. For brief moments over the next century, the rulers in Constantinople might have dreamed in such terms; once the Islamic conquests had reduced them to the status of a merely regional power any such notions were dead. This was a truly epochal moment, when northwestern Europe found itself free to develop its own dynamic, even if it was still far from being strong enough to reverse the ancient polarity and dominate its southern neighbours. Meanwhile the seismic movements of peoples that had brought down Rome were being followed by some highly significant aftershocks in east-central Europe. Here, where Germanic peoples had previously occupied vast territories stretching into the borderlands of modern Russia, new waves of Slav migrants pushed westwards; over three or four centuries from around 500, they were to advance as far as the river Elbe, Bohemia and the Balkans, bringing their language and their culture with them. Numerically impressive though the German migrations across the *limes* may have been, over the whole period they probably only involved numbers towards the lower end of the range between half a million and a million individuals. They had certainly not emptied the lands they left of peasant farmers or even local rulers, so largely invisible (to us) processes of conquest, domination and assimilation must have been taking place across most of the eastern sections of the Great North European Plain.

Although there were to be further important migrations over future centuries, these would only affect the ethnic and linguistic frontiers in relatively modest ways, so that the patterns established by the great shifts linked to the fall of Rome are still visible today. It is vital to understand that in none of the regions where we can know something about the process did invaders ever end up constituting a majority of the population. Modern DNA studies confirm other findings here to emphasise the extreme 'stickability' of the peasantry across the continent, perhaps even back beyond the Bronze Age. This was also true in one important region not mentioned so far, the British Isles. The collapse of *Romanitas* (notably that of cities and villas) in England and Wales was rapid and much more total than elsewhere, but this had little to do with any major incursions by Anglo-Saxon warriors. It looks rather as if old

tribal structures, co-opted rather than destroyed by the Romans, reappeared in the form of petty kingdoms which were not averse to hiring some foreign military muscle. Only very gradually, by the later sixth century, had the intruders taken over control across most of England, in the process achieving sufficient political and economic dominance to impose their language and culture on the majority. This probably required migrations amounting to no more than 10–20% of the overall population, crucially including the women-folk who had a vital role in language transfer between the generations. Scotland and Ireland, never subjugated by the Romans, retained their own native structures, as did much of Wales. For a long time to come, the British Isles would be characterised by a much higher level of fragmentation than generally prevailed on the continent, while their religious history would also follow some particular – and highly diverse – trajectories.

The transformation of Christianity from the faith of persecuted minorities in the age of Diocletian to the dominant creed of the late empire and many of its 'barbarian' clients was an extraordinary story, which cannot be retold here. What can be said is that the later history of Europe is simply unimaginable without this key development and the equally astounding fashion in which the church not merely survived but came to dominate so many aspects of the medieval West. It would perhaps be better to speak of the churches, because this was anything but a coherent or disciplined institution, in an age when the pope was little more than the bishop of the city of Rome. As changes under the late empire stripped away most of the power previously held by the civic elites, so the bishops emerged ever more clearly as the natural leaders of urban communities. Their recruitment from among the dominant local families, with its implication of wide political links and high educational standards, reinforced an authority that could also draw on sacral power and wider popular support. It seems clear that Constantine and his successors favoured Christianity precisely because of its potential to buttress authority and promote stability. Once the invaders arrived the bishops' prestige rose still higher, as the natural negotiators and intercessors for their cities. The conversion of Clovis, although undatable and shrouded in later myth, can still stand as witness to the powerful attraction the church could exert on ambitious rulers. A mystery cult that had drawn its adherents mostly from the lower strata of society had rapidly mutated into a creed for the powerful, one that aligned secular and religious hierarchies and promised military success as the reward for adherence. In the process, the emperors and their clerical allies had been driven to confront the chaotic and contradictory elements within Christian theology, which had spawned so many vicious disputes in the fourth and fifth centuries; this kind of endless debate was simply incompatible with the new role ascribed to the church. The great theologians of late Antiquity, with St Augustine at their head, sought to establish a single Christian truth to which all must subscribe. What this came to mean was the triumph of faith over reason, inaugurating many centuries when intellectual activity was constrained within theological limits.

There is a striking congruence between the regions where Latin remained the dominant language and those where Christianity prospered after the fall of Rome, with mainland Britain as the most obvious case where both went into precipitate retreat. Yet this everyday lived Christianity was a notably diverse and localised phenomenon, which tended to incorporate pagans and their customs rather than converting them outright; the High God was widely expected to co-exist with a multiplicity of other unseen powers in what amounted to a polytheistic compromise. One might even think that the churches were themselves creating such alternative sources of power on a grand scale. The saintly dead, with their specific associations and their shrines, acted as the foci for intense local loyalties. Peter Brown has shown us a world of 'fertile religious experimentation', in which the bishops guarded the reputations of 'their' saints and promoted belief in the power of relics. These bishops were also encouraging almsgiving and donations, both for communal activities and to enhance the splendours of their churches, with wealth lavished on saints who were expected to operate a magical transfer to heaven on behalf of the donors. As the old Roman civic glories faded away, the contrast between major cathedrals and churches and all other buildings must have become spectacular, with their richly decorated interiors as almost literal gateways to heaven. A rival form of sacred powerhouse was rapidly emerging, however, as monasteries and convents multiplied, embodiments of belief in the collective power of prayer as exercised by groups of holy ascetics. Royal and aristocratic women, in particular, could operate in this context to generate supernatural support for kingdoms and great aristocratic families.

As the churches became integrated with the systems of social and political power, so they attracted enormous donations, above all of land. Even if some of these were less permanent than might have been thought, so that clerical holdings might function as a kind of land-bank for kings and their great subjects, the massive enrichment of the clergy was one of the great phenomena of the age, with lasting effects. There was a close link between gift-giving and monasticism, because those who gave could benefit from holiness and enhance the symbolic glory of the sacred, while maintaining a profane lifestyle. Such relationships emphasised the aristocratic character of a religion whose principal rewards went to those who could make and reciprocate gifts, in order to obtain privileged access to the sacred. Over the sixth and seventh centuries, western Christianity took on a social and economic character it would retain into relatively modern times, while it also developed a matching theology. New ideas about sin, atonement and the other world brought with them an emphasis on the individual person and his or her fate after death. The Mass became linked to the deliverance of the soul, and confession with penance as the remedy for sin, opening the way for the slow emergence of the doctrine of purgatory. Sin and repentance as universal principles also explained the successes and disasters of kingdoms. These trends meant that the care of souls became a language of power, as lay rulers sought to demand higher standards of behaviour from the governing classes, in order to ensure divine favour. As the memory of Rome faded, it ceased to be the dominant model, in a world of warrior kingdoms that found the past of the Old

Testament much better fitted to their needs. The church promoted the ideal of a moral king who won his battles, protected his people, was just and generous and listened to his bishops.

This highly successful nexus of religion, wealth and power made Christianity irresistible to the kings of the successor states to Rome, and by the end of the seventh century the regional kings of Anglo-Saxon England would join the club. Matters were very different among the sturdily independent peasant farmers of Saxony and their counterparts elsewhere in northern Europe; here the associations of Christianity with hierarchy and control would long promote loyalty to local deities, as numerous missionaries found to their cost. The situation among the rural populations of the West is hard to assess accurately, given the absence of parish structures at a time when local churches were still very rare. Although miracle stories and other sources confirm the obvious point that peasants flocked to shrines and holy men for assistance with their problems, they would also suggest that they had resort to plenty of other more dubious sources of supernatural power. The imposition of basic Christian beliefs and practices in the countryside would largely be a work for the future, carried on over many centuries. Meanwhile the church attained an effective monopoly over education, so that clerics became essential servants for any ruler, as specialists in literacy and bureaucratic skills. One accidental but crucial result was that monastic scriptoria acted as the vital conduit through which much of the literature and philosophy of the classical world survived, as the old non-military elites vanished and took the secular educational system with them. Such copying of texts did not, however, mean that the ancient heritage was used in any positive fashion; at the most it was mined for examples that could be fitted into a Christian context.

The shift to the domination of a military aristocracy constituted a massive change in political culture, one that would last for more than a thousand years. It went along with the replacement of the Roman tax-raising state by one based on landowning elites with military obligations. This implied a much weaker state, for two major reasons. Tax-raising states are usually much richer than land-based ones, and only at certain high points could even the Frankish kings match the wealth of those Mediterranean states that had retained taxation in the Roman style. Secondly, there was the problem of controlling outlying territories and local potentates, made worse by the absence of a network of salaried officials, which led to a persistent tendency for larger units to break up. In practice, however, the successor kingdoms often found ways of compensating for these problems and proved more durable than might have been expected. The Visigothic kings who ruled in Spain and part of southern France not only permitted considerable autonomy to cities and local aristocrats, but they also adopted an elective kingship which allowed different contenders to have their turn, while the church played a vital role in promoting a degree of unity. The drawbacks of this 'light touch' monarchy only became fully apparent with the Arab invasion after 711, when the Muslim newcomers found little difficulty in exploiting internal divisions and building alliances with Christian elites. In Italy, the Gothic Wars left the peninsula in a very bad state after the middle of the sixth century, and the Lombard invaders who took control in the

north were unable to destroy Byzantine power elsewhere. Under the Lombards it was the secular ruling elites in the northern cities who remained the most potent political force, partly because noble landholding seems to have been relatively small-scale and fragmented.

The cities also generally survived in the old heartlands of the western Roman empire, maintaining a fairly sophisticated administrative system, although the tax system gradually declined and urban populations diminished. The regions north and east of the Loire and Rhône rivers, on the other hand, were more thoroughly dominated by the men of violence, whose extensive landholdings made them the richest aristocrats of their age. Northern France and western Germany were the core areas where the Merovingian kings from Clovis onwards built their power; in the process these Frankish rulers created the enduring political centrality of the Paris–Cologne axis and were the first to rule on both sides of the river Rhine. Francia was anything but a stable or united kingdom, however, so that the surface history of the 250 years between Clovis and the replacement of his dynasty by the Carolingians in 751 is a kaleidoscopic story of feuds, assassinations and rebellions. Boundaries were always shifting as kingdoms and principalities combined, then broke up, only to form new combinations. The central Frankish kingdoms of Austrasia, centred on the Moselle and the Rhine, Burgundy on the Rhône axis and Neustria, around Paris and the Île de France, were surrounded by a looser periphery of such regions as Aquitaine, Bavaria and Thuringia, often ruled by their own dukes or by royal heirs serving an apprenticeship. The rather depressing tale of violence and treachery that confronts the modern student of this period should not mislead us into exaggerating the political weakness of these long-haired kings. Much of this just represented the routine problems of dynastic politics, in an age when there was no clear rule about succession, and unreliable life expectancy always tended to throw up either too many male heirs or too few; after the death of King Dagobert in 638 a sequence of royal minorities proved particularly hard to manage. Even in these difficult years, it was a case of periodic crises that erupted amidst relatively lengthy periods of stability, largely driven by the desire of elites across the kingdoms to secure their own effective and wealthy Merovingian rulers.

A combination of extensive landholdings with income from tolls and what remained of the Roman tax system made these kings rich, although they needed to be generous with these resources to maintain the dense network of relationships with other power holders, both secular and ecclesiastical, which underpinned their rule. Tax revenues that were largely devoted to supporting royal courts were hardly essential, so tax rates eroded steadily and by the end of the seventh century the system had become too expensive and unproductive to be worth maintaining. Armies were raised by the magnates and the cities, not paid by the kings. Ultimately this had to imply a more violent style of politics, when secular aristocratic identity was now wholly military, with landed wealth supporting armed followers. If this rarely led to extended strife and heavy bloodshed, that was because conflicts between would-be rulers tended to be decided by strategic desertions among their supporters. Great magnates had good reason to be cautious, because they were well aware of the heavy

costs of maintaining what amounted to private armies; for them as for the rulers the 'politics of land' was an expensive business. This helps to explain why they proved such committed upholders of the Merovingian system, continued to see power as essentially royal, and preferred to serve kings rather than build up local hegemonies. Proximity to the ruler counted enormously, so successful kings needed to be highly visible and to travel around their kingdoms. They also held the public assemblies that both symbolised and embodied the direct links between the ruler and his free men; although in practice only the more important or the more ambitious attended, for several centuries public politics in the West would involve participation by large parts of the military class. The status of these assemblies meant that vital decisions about the succession, about war and peace and on major legal disputes were not just a matter for the kings and their immediate councillors. Aristocratic status and political ambition went together, spilling over into church affairs as bishoprics became the preserve of leading families, while monasteries grew in importance and the church was drawn deeper into aristocratic rivalries.

The Carolingian Age

One might even say that the Merovingian world rested on a set of balances that ensured the survival of a distinctly loose-jointed system, at the cost of considerable insecurity for the kings themselves. Individual monarchs were expendable for the Frankish elites, but the maintenance of kingship was essential. When the lack of strong Merovingian rulers in the later seventh century did threaten to prove dangerous, with signs of a move to a more local politics, an ingenious solution emerged. The court position of mayor of the palace developed into an alternative source of power, in the hands of the Pippinid family, originally great Austrasian nobles but later equally strong in Neustria. They somehow avoided the normal fate of such upstarts, that of being pulled down by jealous rivals, until between 714 and his death in 741 one of their number, Charles Martel, imposed himself as the effective ruler of much of Francia. Although later Carolingian propaganda certainly exaggerated the failings of late Merovingian kingship, Martel's ruthless combination of political and military strength had created the opening for a new dynasty that would develop its own distinctive style. Any trends towards localism would now be reversed, as Frankish rule and values became the basis for a new imperial power. This involved a great deal of violence in the early stages, with the forcible subjection of local elites, the elimination of opponents and the reconquest of peripheral regions. Annual campaigns marked a new stage in the domination of a warrior class, whose members sought advancement and booty. At the same time, Martel and his sons found another way of binding aristocrats to them, by exploiting the wealth of the church. So much land had passed into ecclesiastical hands by this time that it was possible to resume large amounts of it and distribute it among followers on life tenures. The church was amply compensated by the imposition of the tithe as a general obligation on the whole population, which helps to explain why a series of church councils in the 740s sanctioned the land transfers.

The surviving sources tell us a good deal about the people of the sword and the book, or at least their higher strata, so that we can understand the basic character of their world pretty well. For the people of the plough and the billhook, in contrast, the rural workers who made up the vast majority of the inhabitants of early medieval Europe, the records are desperately thin. All estimates of population size for the period are merely intelligent guesswork; a consensus view would be that by the seventh century, overall levels may have been only half of those prevailing in the late Roman empire two centuries earlier. If there was such a fall, the reasons for it are even less clear. Catastrophic events such as bubonic plague or extreme weather conditions (possibly caused by some astronomical accident) have long been suspected, and despite the mysterious silence of most of the sources, scholarly opinion now tends to identify the Justinianic Plague of the sixth century as one of the main culprits. Whatever the degree and nature of the population decline, it was matched or exceeded by that in the scale of production and the intensity of exchange. The collapse of the Roman command economy, largely driven as it had been by the needs of the great Mediterranean cities and of the standing army on the frontiers, saw a reversion to more primitive styles of local autarky. It seems likely that specialisation and inter-regional trade had developed far enough under the empire for this reversal to be unusually disruptive; in some areas it would be a long time before local craft skills re-emerged to fill the gaps.

Although the new military elites may have been land-based, outside northern Francia they seem to have been markedly less wealthy than the great senatorial families of the Roman era. Here there was a complex relationship with the position of the peasantry; was it the relative weakness of the lords which made it harder for them to extract wealth from their estates or the difficulties of such surplus extraction which weakened aristocracies? Were aristocrats more interested in the quick and easy rewards from service to kings than in the hard grind of establishing profitable dominion over peasantries? Whatever their causes, in many cases these trends opened up greater freedom of action for the rural populations and reduced the economic pressures on them. If there really were many fewer people around, then this fact would in any case have compelled lords to be more generous to their tenants and dependants, in order to prevent them moving elsewhere. The peasantry may thus have enjoyed an unusually favourable position in relative terms between the sixth and eighth centuries. On the other hand, the archaeology tells a much less positive story about living standards. Good quality consumer goods, tools and other commodities had circulated quite freely in the Roman world, within an economy where money was at least in frequent use. Time and again excavations reveal just how far down to village level these exchanges operated, then show a dramatic decline that largely coincides with the fall of the empire. The rate and extent of this decline naturally varies by region, being most rapid in Britain and more extended in most of the western Mediterranean, but the range is between the bad and the catastrophic. Some historians reckon that levels of production and exchange comparable to those under Rome would not be seen again, over any wide area, until the later Middle Ages. Standards of housing, facilities for cooking and storing foodstuffs, clothing quality and much else

deteriorated very badly, while agricultural specialisation to match crops to climate and soil fertility went into reverse. Cattle, which had been getting much bigger and therefore more productive, dropped back to the sizes typical of Iron Age Europe.

None of this can tell us whether peasants still ate better than their predecessors under the Romans, because smaller numbers and lower taxation may have compensated for declining production, but any such effects are likely to have been marginal. One linked aspect was a dramatic fall in urban populations, probably greatest in the big cities. There is little reason overall to doubt that the fall of Rome was associated with a massive regression in economic sophistication and development; too many parts of an interdependent system had been damaged or destroyed for the remainder to survive in more than vestigial form. It is quite hard, however, to avoid the impression that in economic as in political terms the Roman world had reached limits from which escape was distinctly unlikely, so its collapse did not break any clear upward trend or block obviously promising developments. Should we associate the end of the empire with a slide into violence, disorder and local conflict, as essentially military elites replaced the civilian ones the Roman order had protected? In some areas and at some times this must have been true, but the overall picture is almost impossible to reconstruct, when historians have so little evidence for the tenor of everyday life. Under its veneer of civilisation, Roman rule had been distinctly coercive for many, while most of the violence we can trace after the initial invasions was among the new ruling groups, as leaders and followers jostled for land and power. Outside some peripheral zones (arguably including Britain), there is little sign of any long-term descent into anarchy, with many local institutions continuing to function, whatever changes they may gradually have undergone. When the invaders brought – or invented – their own law codes these usually seem to have functioned in parallel with existing practices, rather than replacing them outright.

Just as the invaders had not sought the overthrow of Rome, so they displayed no obvious enthusiasm for dismantling such elements of the imperial system as had survived. This may help explain why some of those who lived during the key period of the fifth century apparently thought that not much of importance had changed. The invasions apart, most of the processes of change, profound though they were, must have been slow enough to feel relatively undramatic. The new and rather unstable polities did not, however, become Roman-style states on a reduced scale, largely because their ruling classes were essentially military; as the elite families colonised the church hierarchy the only alternative power structure largely fell under their control as well, so kings could only exercise some limited power in the localities by co-opting aristocrats who naturally had their own agendas. Fragmentation must be a permanent threat to states built around the possession of land, and it might have overtaken the Merovingian West much earlier, but for the massive impact of the Carolingian dynasty. In many respects, the Carolingian triumph began as the ultimate version of militarisation, with the state itself as the most violent exponent of the rule of the thugs. The empire of Charlemagne only achieved its territorial limits in the 790s, after many decades of virtually continuous

warfare; these dated back to the civil war of 714–19, which had seen the emperor's grandfather Charles Martel eliminate all rivals within his own family grouping and overcome the most immediately dangerous noble factions. This personal success has to be balanced against the destructive effects of the conflict on many of the allegiances and understandings that had held the Merovingian world together. Although later historians of the Carolingian dynasty would misrepresent the whole subsequent process of virtual reconquest as one of almost uninterrupted success, in reality there were many ups and downs, and serious resistance was still found in some localities almost to the end of the century (Figure 1.3).

Martel's crucial first success was to take control in the western kingdom of Neustria, where large estates and exploitation of the peasantry seem to have developed sufficiently to make both rulers and aristocrats unusually wealthy and powerful. When the Austrasian and Neustrian aristocracies came together under the new dynasty, they proved strong enough to establish their dominance over a widening area (ultimately extending from France and the Netherlands over much of Germany, then also into northern regions of Spain and Italy), building on a series of loose confederations with more local powers. The elite they formed has been compared to the Roman senatorial order as an international phenomenon,

Figure 1.3 Emperor on horseback. This emperor figure may well represent Charlemagne; the ruler on horseback was to remain a standard expression of power until very recent times.