



## THE CLASSICAL HERITAGE

When modern scholars divide European history into segments for convenience of study, the usual division is ancient, medieval, and modern, with ancient further subdivided into Greek and Roman. A further subdivision is now usefully made which breaks the late Roman Empire and the first medieval centuries into its own era, called Late Antiquity. Scholars living in the time of the Middle Ages would have seen no such divisions. They could not have seen themselves living between two ages, which is what the etymology of the word "medieval" means—a word used only since the eighteenth century. More important, in many crucial ways they did not see any distinct break between themselves and their classical forebears. In fact, elements from classical antiquity were taken over, modified, and used to such an extent that in some areas of thought the legacy of classical antiquity is as important to the Middle Ages as the Judeo-Christian heritage.

The ancient Greeks were the "inventors" of more elements of Western civilization than any other people. We credit them with creating drama, both tragedy and comedy; historical writing, especially associated with Herodotus and Thucydides; democracy as it evolved in Athens; many types of poetry, from the Homeric epics to Sapphic lyrics to the odes of Pindar; styles of monumental architecture—the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian orders; and several branches of philosophy, including political philosophy, ethics, metaphysics, and much of what is now classified as natural science. This is a staggering list. But in some ways the single most important legacy of ancient Greece to Western civilization generally and the Middle Ages in particular is the influence of its two greatest philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) lived in Athens within a generation of each other. Aristotle was Plato's student, although he wrote as much in reaction to his teacher as in continuity with Plato's thought. Much as he departed from the doctrine of his master, however, the two shared a number of important presuppositions about the nature of philosophical inquiry.

Perhaps the most important of these is that both wrote in opposition to a prevalent philosophical skepticism, that is, to a mode of philosophical inquiry that held that truth was ultimately relative and that human reason was at best a faulty guide for answering questions about the nature of reality. For both Plato and Aristotle the doctrine that truth is relative was philosophically untenable, so much so that it is not inaccurate to view the thought of both men as an extended critique of philosophical relativism. This alone made both thinkers extremely congenial to the philosophers of the Middle Ages, who believed that truth existed and that, within certain limits, it was knowable. It is hardly surprising, then, that the two most influential figures in the entire history of Western philosophy should likewise be the most influential to the portion of the Western tradition called the Middle Ages. The historian David Knowles has described this influence in especially emphatic terms. Speaking of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in particular, he says that "it is possible to say that almost all the leading ideas of medieval philosophy, with the partial exception of that branch of it later known as natural theology, were identical with, or were directly derived from, ideas put into currency at Athens between 450 and 300 B.C."<sup>1</sup>

The philosophy of Plato has become a model for all subsequent philosophies that find reality in a realm beyond the senses. By positing the doctrine of "forms" or "ideas," Plato answered the question of what abiding reality might exist beyond the seemingly endless flux of the world of things and suggests ways that humans might get a glimpse at it. This doctrine is often taken to assert that any individual object existing in this world was only an appearance, an approximation to the real exemplar, or "form," which existed in a world beyond the senses. Since true reality exists in a suprasensible world, everything that exists in the sensible realm is merely its reflection. Analogously, in the realm of ethics, he was concerned with the same problem—how to account for stability in a world of seeming change. He asked what constant reality might lie behind any individual action that could be considered good or just. To cite an example Plato uses in the *Republic*: How can telling the truth and lying in different situations both be understood as just acts? Behind these individual actions he saw timeless ideas of "the good" and of "justice," of which individual actions were the dim reflections. Thus, he is, in both his metaphysics and his ethics, "the father of those who have held that Soul or Spirit or Mind is the only reality, of those who regard all movements and activity as ultimately intellectual, of those who find the true life of the human spirit in an upward striving toward the Divine."<sup>2</sup> Plato was not only concerned with the unchangeable and unchanging reality that gives meaning to the flux of existence, but also with the relationship between the world of the senses and the world of ideas, that is, with the process by which one might move from the world of the senses to the world of intelligible reality. He was thus the father of a tradition of mystical ascent to God subsequently developed by such pagan Neoplatonist

thinkers as Proclus and Plotinus and Christian Neoplatonists such as Pseudo-Dionysius (see chapter 7). This tradition was later incorporated into the large body of mystical writing in the Middle Ages.

Ideas that can be traced back to Plato formed the fabric of philosophical thought in the Middle Ages, so much so that the entire period can be described philosophically as Platonic. What must be kept in mind, however, is that this influence, profound and all-pervasive as it unquestionably was, remained largely indirect, transmitted to the Middle Ages through some pagan Neoplatonists of late antiquity and through Christian Neoplatonic writers such as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. Few of Plato's writings were directly known. In fact, of the twenty-six Platonic dialogues, only one, the *Timaeus*, was known to Western Europe during most of the Middle Ages; and that dialogue, dealing as it does with the creation of the universe and its mathematical form, was in some ways not typical, although it was of great importance, especially to the twelfth-century group of Neoplatonist philosophers connected with the school of Chartres. Much of medieval science is a reflection on the *Timaeus*. Later in the Middle Ages two more dialogues, the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, came to be known. But Plato's influence was profound even where he was no more than a name, a wellspring from which philosophers, theologians, and mystical writers continued to draw.

Aristotle, like Plato, formulated a system that described the nature of reality and dealt with the problem of change, but his approach was significantly different. If Plato is the philosopher of the realm of the ideal, Aristotle is the philosopher of everyday experience. For Aristotle, philosophy begins in the realm of sense experience, and his analysis of the nature of being remains within the realm of experience. From the senses, he argued, the mind is able to apprehend the essence of a thing—that which makes a thing what it is—through a process of abstraction. He postulated that all being, which can be known first through the senses and then understood by the mind through the process of abstraction, can be understood as a combination of "matter" and "form." Matter is the element that gives a substance its individuality; form is the element that gives it universality. In other words, it is the form of a substance that determines what species, or general classification, a given substance belongs to. The form of a substance would determine, for example, that a certain object is a chair, the matter would determine that it is this particular chair. Aristotle used the relationship between matter and form to account for the multiplicity in the visible world—the same problem of things coming into existence and going out of existence that caused Plato to formulate the doctrine of ideas. If this relationship between matter and form is properly understood, then it can be seen that

if things are regarded not as being but as becoming or changing, then matter is the potential element, susceptible of a multiplicity of forms in succession,

whereas form is the actuality; the relationship between matter and form, potentiality and actuality, therefore, extends over the whole range of being from prime or pure matter, which cannot be perceived and which has no independent existence, to pure form which is the last and purest matter to come into being at the other end of the scale.<sup>3</sup>

These distinctions between matter and form, potentiality and actuality, became keystones of Thomas Aquinas's philosophy of being in the thirteenth century, especially in seeking to define God, to list God's qualities, and to delineate the distinctions between creator and created (see chapter 11).

Other areas where Aristotle's thought has especial importance in the Middle Ages, chosen from the almost unthinkable large range of his accomplishments, are in the realms of ethics, political theory, logic, and science. In ethics and political theory, Aristotle begins with experience, with the actual observation of people in their relationships with each other in communities. In ethics, his analysis of virtue remained influential in the Middle Ages and well beyond. Virtue for Aristotle is located in the mean between two extremes,



Two details of a painting, probably by Lippo Memmi, of the glorification of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Santa Caterina, Pisa. Fourteenth century. In these details, Aristotle (L) and Plato (R) show their books to Thomas Aquinas, thus indicating the saint's intellectual indebtedness to the greatest philosophers of classical antiquity. The writing in Plato's book is not visible to the viewers, perhaps suggesting that medieval thinkers got their knowledge of Plato indirectly rather than through reading his works.

between an excess and a defect. The virtue of generosity, for example, would consist in avoiding the excesses of prodigality and miserliness. The virtue of courage lies between foolhardiness and cowardice. One of the many medieval thinkers to make direct use of this definition of virtue was Dante, who uses it graphically in his punishment of the hoarders and the wasters in *Inferno* 7. Aristotle's political theory had a tremendous impact in medieval Europe beginning in the thirteenth century.

Aristotle's belief that humans are by nature political (i.e., they live in an organized society) and that the state is a positive force in bringing about the good life (rather than only being a necessary evil whose purpose is to keep order) had a great impact in both the theory and the practice of statecraft. Aristotle's view of the state provided ammunition to secular rulers against claims of ecclesiastical interference and supremacy, and was a major element in the defeat of the idea of a universal Christian monarchy ruled by the pope in the thirteenth century. Thomas Aquinas's political writings were also derived directly from Aristotelian principles. Aristotle's system of formal logic was also taken over by twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers seeking to order and synthesize centuries of tradition and a huge number of texts that often seemed to contradict one another. The great twelfth-century compilation of the Church's law, that is, canon law, which remained authoritative for centuries, was organized according to principles of Aristotelian logic, and works of theological synthesis such as the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas were only possible because of the reintroduction of Aristotelian logic.

Aristotle's scientific works were accepted as correct, and although some minor adjustments to and improvements on Aristotle's description of the natural world were made during the Middle Ages, his basic principles—such as that of a geocentric universe in which the heavenly bodies circled the earth embedded in crystalline spheres that were moved by the *primum mobile* (the outermost of these spheres)—remained authoritative in the Middle Ages and well into the seventeenth century. Aristotle's emphasis on discovering the final cause of events—that is, their ultimate purpose—remained the central concern of natural scientists in the medieval period, at least until the fourteenth century, thus limiting the scope of scientific inquiry and subordinating science to theology because all discussion of the final cause of anything led toward God, the creator of all. Though not the only scientist revered in the Middle Ages (the astronomer Ptolemy and the physician Galen were both important), Aristotle was the preeminent authority in the fields of astronomy, physics, and biology.

For much of the Middle Ages, Aristotle, like Plato, was not known directly. Boethius translated some of his writings on logic c. 500 C.E., but for the most part, his works were not known in Western Europe from the eighth to the twelfth century. Compared with Plato, his influence was relatively minor

until his works became known through Latin translations c. 1200; from then on, Aristotle's influence was enormous. It is often argued in fact that the change from an essentially Platonic philosophic perspective to an essentially Aristotelian one is the crucial turning point in the history of medieval and indeed Western speculative thought. What must be kept in mind in describing this change, however, is that the Aristotelian system was more an addition to than a substitution for Platonism. Even in such an Aristotelian thinker as Thomas Aquinas, Platonic elements remain large and significant.

What was true of Plato and Aristotle in the Middle Ages was also true of most of the other achievements of the Greeks: they were not known firsthand. Medieval writers venerated Homer—Dante calls him the sovereign poet—but none of the writers who praised him had ever read more than the few lines of the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* that Cicero and other Latin writers had quoted. They knew Homer by reputation, and they knew the story of Troy from the Latin prose versions of two writers known as Dares and Dictys (the version of Dares probably came from the sixth century C.E., that of Dictys from the fourth century C.E.). Furthermore, it was through Latin examples that so many of the other poetic forms that the Greeks developed were known to the Middle Ages. Catullus, Horace, and Ovid provided models for the lyric, rather than Pindar or Sappho. The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes and Menander were also unknown; for the Middle Ages the models of classical drama came principally from the tragedies of Seneca and the comedies of Terence. The models for the writing of history came not directly from Herodotus and Thucydides but from Sallust, Livy, and the biographer Suetonius. In architecture too, Greek styles were mediated through Rome. As the Romans had primarily borrowed and modified the Corinthian order of architecture from the Greeks, it was that decorative order that was most widely used in the Middle Ages. Since one can say that most of the Greek influence on the medieval period came from Roman adaptations of the Greek originals, a major legacy of Rome to the medieval world and beyond was the transmission and transformation of the achievements of the Greeks.

If one considers those Roman writers whose influence was significant, the list would vary depending on which part of the Middle Ages was examined. But it would be a long list, consisting of most of those authors who are now studied by students of Roman literature, but also consisting of writers such as Lucan and Statius—no longer studied widely in our own time but extremely influential to medieval writers. If one were forced to choose from among them, Cicero, Virgil, and Ovid would be most indicative of the types and range of the influence of the Latin classics on the Middle Ages. All three, figures of genius worth studying for their own sake as well as for their subsequent influence, were thorough students of Greek models.

Cicero was a statesman, writer, and political figure of the first century B.C.E. Both in form and in content his writings were studied and imitated more than those of any other prose author. He was considered the master of Latin rhetoric, and thus his mode of expression was a model for students in monastic and cathedral schools, who learned Latin by a conscious imitation of classical models. Anyone who became a professed monk or a university student was exposed to Cicero; and even where the influence of his thought was not significant, educated clerics of the Middle Ages assimilated his sentence structure and his manner of expression. However, he was important for more than his prose style. Augustine, writing more than 400 years later, credits Cicero with activating his own search for wisdom and thus ultimately for God in the *Confessions*. Cicero's stoic philosophy, adapted from the philosophical school that originated in Athens in the third century B.C.E., spoke of the need for humanity to conform to natural laws. This philosophy provided support for a Christian concept of natural law and for Christian ideas about the family of humanity. As one example of this aspect of Ciceronian influence, his writings on friendship served directly as models for twelfth-century writings on monastic friendship; Aelred of Rievaulx's *On Spiritual Friendship* was modeled on Cicero's treatise *On Friendship*.

The following passage is from "The Dream of Scipio," a fragment of a longer work by Cicero entitled *On the Republic*. Although most of the text of *On the Republic* was lost to the Middle Ages, the fragment concerning Scipio's dream survived as an independent work, together with a commentary by the fourth-century writer Macrobius, and was among Cicero's most influential writings. In this passage, the Roman patriot and hero of the Punic Wars, Scipio Africanus, takes his grandson to "a certain place in heaven ... assigned to all who have preserved, or assisted, or improved their country, where they are to enjoy an endless duration of happiness."<sup>4</sup> The grandfather uses this as an opportunity to inculcate a love of virtue in his grandson:

"Consequently, should you renounce hope of returning to this place where eminent and excellent men find their reward, of what worth is that human glory which can scarcely extend to a small part of a single year? If, then, you shall determine to look on high and contemplate this mansion and eternal abode, you will neither give yourself to the gossip of the vulgar nor place your hope of well-being on rewards that man can bestow. Virtue herself, by her own charms, should draw you to true honor...."

When he [grandfather] had finished I said: "Truly, Africanus, if the path to heaven lies open to those who have deserved well of their country, though from my childhood I have ever trod in your and my father's footsteps without disgracing your glory, yet now, with so noble a prize set before me, I shall strive with much more diligence."

"Do so strive," replied he, "and do not consider yourself, but your body, to be mortal. For you are not the being which this corporeal figure evinces; but

the soul of every man is the man, and not the form which may be delineated with a finger. Know also that you are a god, if a god is that which lives, perceives, remembers, foresees, and which rules, governs, and moves the body over which it is set, just as the supreme God rules the universe. Just as the eternal God moves the universe, which is in part mortal, so does an everlasting soul move the corruptible body."<sup>5</sup>

A heavenly abode as the reward for virtue and the belief that the soul is immortal are two central concerns in this passage that were easily absorbed into the medieval Christian universe. In its original context, Cicero is referring specifically to political virtue—he is discussing the reward of the good statesman—but thinkers in the Middle Ages interpret the passage more broadly, that is, as applying to virtue in general. The dream vision, the dream as a mode of illumination, anticipates scores of dream-vision poems in the Middle Ages, with Macrobius's commentary on Cicero being one of the most important sources for the interpretation of various kinds of dreams, their natures, sources, and significance. The setting of Scipio's dream, the heavens, as a vantage point from which to view the earth and its strife and as a place to compare the harmony that exists above with the chaos below, also became a medieval commonplace. As one example of the continuing influence of this work, Chaucer, writing at the end of the fourteenth century, draws directly from the "Dream of Scipio" at the beginning of the *Parliament of Fowles*.

The second writer is Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.), a poet who lived during the beginning of the Roman Empire. His epic poem *The Aeneid*, itself modeled on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* of Homer, was both in form and in content as much a model for poetry in the Middle Ages as the writings of Cicero were for prose. The poem describes the journey of Aeneas from the ruins of Troy to the shores of Italy, where he begins the foundation of Rome. His journey to Rome includes his stop at Carthage, where he recounts the fall of Troy (Book 2), including most memorably the Trojan horse and Sinon's betrayal. He has a tragic love affair with the Carthaginian queen Dido (Book 4), and takes a trip through the underworld to see his father (Book 6). All of these episodes exercised great influence on the imagination of the writers of the Middle Ages. Dido became an important character in medieval as well as later literary history. The trip to the underworld was a direct model for Dante, whose *Inferno* uses the geography, setting, and even some characters of Virgil's underworld. In Dante's political treatise, *Monarchy* the *Aeneid* is likewise his most frequently quoted classical authority and provides key arguments for his ideas of relationship between ecclesiastical and temporal authorities and his belief in world government. The following passage from the *Aeneid* (Book 6), the meeting of Aeneas and Dido in the underworld, illustrates the conflict between private desires and public duty that is at the heart of the poem:



Among them was Phoenician Dido, who was roaming in the broad wood with her wound still fresh upon her. Troy's hero found himself near to her and as soon as he recognized her dimly through the shadows, like one who early in the month sees or thinks that he sees the moon rising through the clouds, his tears fell and he spoke to her in the sweet accents of love: "O Dido, unhappy Dido, was the news, then, true which was brought to me, that you had perished, had taken the sword, and trodden the path to its end? Ah, could I have been the cause of your death? By the stars, by the high Gods, I swear by any truth there may be in the depths of the earth, that it was not by my own will, your Majesty, that I departed your shores; but rather was I imperiously forced by that same divine direction which compels me now to pass through the shadows in this world of crumbling decay under deepest night; and I could not have known that my leaving you would have caused you so terrible a grief. Stay your step and withdraw not from my sight. Whom do you seek to escape? My speaking to you now is the last indulgence which fate can give me." By such words Aeneas tried to soften her, and invited tears. But in her the anger blazed and grimly she glared, holding her gaze averted and fixed on the ground; she was no more moved by what Aeneas had begun to say than if she had been hard flint or a standing block of Parian marble. At length she flung herself away, and, in hatred still, fled back into the shadows offered her by the wood, where Sychaeus, her husband in former days, had sympathy for her distress and matched his love to hers. Aeneas was shocked by her unjust fate; and as she went long gazed after her with tearful eyes and pity for her in his heart.<sup>6</sup>

The journey of Aeneas to his true home had strong resonances with the medieval Christian concept of pilgrimage. Augustine's spiritual autobiography, the *Confessions*, moves from Carthage to Rome, no doubt in direct and conscious imitation of the journey of Aeneas. In the Middle Ages, continuing a tradition developed in late antiquity, commentaries were written on the *Aeneid* that allegorized the journey of Aeneas as the journey of the soul seeking wisdom. Among the most important of these medieval commentaries was that of Bernardus Silvestris, writing in the twelfth century. Such commentaries contributed to Virgil's enormous reputation as a sage in the Middle Ages. He was regarded as a prophet as well, a pagan who anticipated the truths of Christianity, in large part because of a Christian interpretation of the following passage from his fourth Eclogue.

Now is come the last age of Cumaean prophecy: the great cycle of periods is born anew. Now returns the Maid, returns the reign of Saturn: now from high heaven a new generation comes down. Yet do thou at that boy's birth, in whom the iron race will begin to cease, and the golden to arise all over the world, holy Lucina, be gracious; now thine own Apollo reigns. And in thy consulate, in thine, O Pollio, shall this glorious age enter, and the great months begin

their march: under thy rule what traces of our guilt yet remain, vanishing shall free earth ever from alarm?<sup>7</sup>

In the Middle Ages, people were sure they recognized a prophecy of Christ's incarnation in this passage. Furthermore, the fact that Virgil was writing at the time of Augustus, in whose reign Christ was born, supported this interpretation. It was regarded as no mere coincidence.

The third writer is Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), who also lived during the reign of Augustus, though a generation after Virgil. It was Ovid's version of the stories and legends of the gods and heroes of classical mythology that came down to the Middle Ages, allowing them to become part of the storehouse of imaginative energy for subsequent literature. His long narrative poem, the *Metamorphoses*, tells the stories of the classical gods and heroes from creation to his own time, linking them through the theme of change. For example, in the story of the rape of Europa, Jove changes from his divine form to a bull in order to seduce the maiden Europa more easily. The story of Pygmalion, from Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, was as popular to the Middle Ages as it has continued to be in our own time:

When Pygmalion saw these women, living such wicked lives, he was revolted by the many faults which nature implanted in the female sex, and long lived a bachelor existence, without any wife to share his home. But meanwhile, with marvelous artistry, he skillfully carved a snowy ivory statue. He made it lovelier than any woman born, and fell in love with his own creation. The statue had all the appearance of a real girl, so that it seemed to be alive, to want to move, did not modesty forbid. So cleverly did his art conceal its art. Pygmalion gazed in wonder, and in his heart there rose a passionate love for this image of a human form....

The festival of Venus, which is celebrated with the greatest pomp all through Cyprus, was now in progress, and heifers, their horns gilded for the occasion, had fallen at the altar as the axe struck their snowy necks. Smoke was rising from the incense, when Pygmalion, having made his offering, stood by the altar and timidly prayed, saying: "If you gods can give all things, may I have as my wife, I pray—" he did not dare to say: "the ivory maiden," but finished: "one like the ivory maiden." However, golden Venus, present at her festival in person, understood what his prayers meant, and as a sign that the gods were kindly disposed, the flames burned up three times, shooting a tongue of fire into the air. When Pygmalion returned home, he made straight for the statue of the girl he loved, leaned over the couch, and kissed her. She seemed warm: he laid his lips on hers again, and touched her breast with his hands—at his touch the ivory lost its hardness, and grew soft; his fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface, just as the wax of Hymettus melts in the sun and, worked by men's fingers, is fashioned into many different shapes, and made fit for use by being used. The lover stood, amazed, afraid of being mistaken,

his joy tempered with doubt, and again and again stroked the object of his prayers. It was indeed a human body! The veins throbbed as he pressed them with his thumb. Then Pygmalion of Paphos was eloquent in his thanks to Venus. At long last he pressed his lips upon living lips, and the girl felt the kisses he gave her, and blushed. Timidly raising her eyes, she saw her lover and the light of day together.<sup>8</sup>

With Ovid, thinkers of the Middle Ages were forced to wrestle with the problem of whether stories that were obviously not literally true were dangerous or whether they could be valuable. Could the story of Pygmalion, let alone the stories of Jove and his amorous adventures, hold anything of value for medieval Christians? Although Ovid and other writers of imaginative literature continued to be regarded in some quarters as highly suspect, they were defended by the concept of the "beautiful lie," the idea that a poet weaves an outer coat that, however fanciful, covers an inner truth. False stories could teach true doctrine. Though the debate continued throughout the Middle Ages, this defense allowed imaginative literature to continue to draw on the resources of the classical poets. When a story such as Pygmalion was retold in the Middle Ages—as it was at the end of the long allegorical poem called *The Romance of the Rose* (c. 1285)—it was often utilized for purposes quite different from the original. Sometimes the stories were moralized and given explicitly Christian meanings; sometimes they were given contemporary applications by writers who saw in them meaning for their own time, just as Virgil and Ovid themselves took stories and legends that originally came from the Greeks and made them applicable to their age. Although writers felt free to make these stories their own, freely changing their purpose as well, poets in the Middle Ages (and beyond at least as late as the nineteenth century) simply assumed an awareness of classical mythology. Authors such as Jean de Meun (author of the second part of *The Romance of the Rose*), Dante, and Chaucer drew deeply from Ovid in their own poetry. Ovid's work, like Virgil's, also became the subject of allegorical commentaries.

Historical writing, as in classical times considered a branch of literature, was important in the Middle Ages. Like the other literary genres discussed here, the language and themes of Roman historical writing were taken over by the historical writers of the Middle Ages. While today many scholars consider Tacitus (c. 55–c. 120 C.E.) as the greatest historian of Rome, he was almost unknown in the Middle Ages. Livy (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), the great historian writing in the Age of Augustus, was highly respected in the Middle Ages, although he became even more important to the republican writers of the Renaissance. However, two other Roman historians were also quite well known and imitated. The first is the imperial biographer Suetonius (c. 69–c. 140 C.E.). Despite his scandalous stories of the emperors, his twelve imperial biographies were important models for medieval secular biography, most noticeably Einhard's account of the life of Charlemagne. The other historian of great importance is Sallust (86–34 B.C.E.),

a contemporary of Cicero whose two extant works have strong moral overtones. This is precisely the reason Sallust was so popular in the Middle Ages, for history was perceived as a branch of ethics whose purpose was to teach moral lessons by providing positive and negative exemplars. The tendency of modern historians to avoid moral judgments and not to assign praise or blame would have been totally foreign to medieval writers of history as well as to ancient writers such as Sallust. Moreover, history was considered to be a part of the study of rhetoric in ancient Rome and the Middle Ages. Thus, the literary conventions of history did not encourage simple narrative of literal truth but rather allowed and encouraged some rearrangement and embellishment of the facts in order to make the moral clear. These elements of ancient historiography combined with those of biblical historical writing in the Middle Ages to allow for exaggeration and distortion of the facts (as contemporary historians would perceive them). Because of our modern, more "scientific" and "objective" view of history, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have tended to disparage medieval historical writings. Only if we recognize the purposes and conventions of those texts can we appreciate the greatness of historians such as the Venerable Bede or Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Sallust and Suetonius were contemporaries of many of the events they wrote about and even eyewitnesses to some of them. The belief that contemporary history was the most creative and the most useful form of historical writing existed in the ancient world and continued in medieval historical writing. Writers such as the Venerable Bede and Gregory of Tours begin their work in the distant past, believing that an understanding of the past was crucially important, but they also carried these works through to the present to concentrate on the events of their own time.

A second important legacy from Rome to the medieval world was its law. Although the Greeks had theorized extensively about the nature of law, the science of jurisprudence was really invented during the growing complexity of the late Roman Republic. One of the products of this new science was a carefully defined concept of the state. Furthermore, philosophers of the same period, borrowing from the Greeks, developed a highly sophisticated theory of natural law. During the period of the Roman Empire, the largest and most complex state that had yet existed in the West, it was necessary that the numerous laws of the Empire be codified, that is, ordered and organized so that they could be a unifying factor in an empire that at one point in time during the second century C.E. stretched from the Irish Sea to the Persian Gulf. Ironically, the greatest law codes were compiled as the Empire was breaking up. In fact, the most important codification of Roman law occurred after the fall of the Empire in the West. Commissioned by the Byzantine emperor Justinian (r. 527-65), his code remained the basis of Byzantine law for almost a thousand years (see chapter 5). This code not only was a great compilation of laws but also contained commentaries on the law by the greatest Roman

jurists. For several centuries the Justinian Code remained unknown in the West, although early medieval kings used the less complete fifth-century Theodosian Code extensively. In the twelfth century, however, the Code of Justinian was rediscovered in the West. From that time on, emperors quoted directly from it in objecting to ecclesiastical authority; kings used it as a model for constructing their own legal systems; Church lawyers were inspired to codify the Church's canon law. Much of the language of early parliamentary documents in England and elsewhere was drawn from Roman law; even the common-law system in England owes much more to Roman law than has sometimes been acknowledged. The medieval dependence on Roman law is an important legacy of the Middle Ages to modern times; as late as the nineteenth century, the Justinian Code was used as a model both in Europe and America.

A third legacy from Rome to the Middle Ages was the idea of empire. Rome was neither the first power to have a large empire nor the first to consider the benefits of a world governed from one center. Alexander the Great had conquered much of the world and had talked of universal human brotherhood. However, it was the Romans who built on this notion and who passed it on. And most important, it was the Romans who institutionalized it. Alexander's empire was his personal conquest; when he died the empire was divided. The Romans ruled a vast empire from the late republican period (first century B.C.E.) until the disintegration of the Empire in the West (in the fifth century C.E.) and the fall of Constantinople in the East (1453 C.E.). Thus, an idea was combined with a process of institutionalization. The Romans in fact considered ruling as their chief skill and as their destiny. The ideal of Rome as ruler is nowhere better exemplified than in Book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Consider what Aeneas's father says to his son during the visit to the underworld, when Aeneas comes to learn his own destiny and hence the destiny of Rome:

Others, for so I can well believe, shall hammer forth more delicately a breathing likeness out of bronze, coax living faces from the marble, plead causes with more skill, plot with their gauge the movement of the sky, and tell the rising of the constellations. But you, Roman, must remember that you have to guide the nations by your authority, for this is to be your skill, to graft tradition onto peace, to show mercy to the conquered, and to wage war until the haughty are brought low.<sup>9</sup>

This is of course more a statement of the ideal of Roman rule than its reality, but it was a passage known, quoted, and believed in the Middle Ages, an ideal that no one was ready to dismiss lightly.

The concept of empire far outlived the reality of a unified Mediterranean world. By the end of the fourth century there was a permanent split in the Roman Empire between the Latin West and the Greek East. In the East, the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople (who would have referred to themselves

simply as Roman emperors) regarded themselves as the true heirs of the Empire, seeing their city as a new (and Christian) Rome. And indeed, as we will see later, in both splendor and power the new Rome had outstripped the old by this time. However, with the rise of Charlemagne, the Empire was reconstituted in the West into what we have come to call the Holy Roman Empire. It appeared for a time that the emperors in the West who succeeded Charlemagne would continue to be rulers in fact as well as in theory, but this did not come to be. However, long after the Empire ceased to be the most important political power in Western Europe, there were those who still looked to the emperor as the *de jure* head of the West. Dante placed his hopes in the reestablishment of the Empire's authority in the West in his treatise *Monarchy*, written between 1315 and 1320. In the *Inferno*, he placed Brutus and Cassius on either side of Judas at the very bottom of hell because they had assassinated the first emperor, Julius Caesar, and thus had tried to subvert Rome's destiny to rule. In the middle of the fourteenth century, long after the emperors had ceased to be a major political factor, a famous fresco by the painter Andrea da Firenze depicted the



Cross of the Holy Roman Emperor Lothar. Aachen, Germany. Ninth century. This imperial cross contains an ancient cameo of the Roman Emperor Augustus (d. 14 C.E.). Its position in a medieval cross suggests continuity between the Empire of ancient Rome and the reconstituted Empire begun by Lothar's grandfather, Charlemagne.

emperor as the highest political authority in the West. The actual boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire changed often in the Middle Ages, but the claim can be made that the Empire lasted in some form until 1806. In the East, after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the rulers in Moscow claimed to be heirs of the Roman imperial tradition and saw Moscow as the third Rome; they even took the title of the emperors—caesar, or in Russian, czar (see chapter 5).

A fourth legacy from Rome is the Latin language; for as we have already implied in our discussion of Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, and the Roman historians, Latin remained a living language throughout the Middle Ages, a mark of continuity with the classical past. Indeed, Latin served as the international language of the European Middle Ages. It was the language of the Church and thus of virtually all religious writing, including the liturgy. It was the language of the universities and the schools, and thus of all philosophical writing. (In the later Middle Ages, students in the Oxford colleges were fined if they were caught speaking anything but Latin within their colleges' precincts.) It was the language of literature, at least until the late Middle Ages when there was a shift toward the vernacular languages—Jean de Meun wrote in French, Dante in Italian, Chaucer in English. Though learned by imitation from models of Roman prose and poetry, Latin continued to change throughout the Middle Ages. Vocabulary expanded as many Germanic words were incorporated into the language; and style, syntax, and grammar changed as well. The influence, moreover, was reciprocal; Latin style, syntax, and vocabulary also influenced the vernacular languages: modern English, for example, has a large number of Latin-based words although it is a Germanic language. Yet these very changes were a sign of the vitality of the language, allowing for the expression of what was unique and original in medieval culture, from early Christian hymns to the writings of Thomas Aquinas and beyond. As in so many other areas, medieval people borrowed language from classical antiquity but adapted it to their own needs. It can be argued that it was the revival of classical Latin as the ideal in the Renaissance that gradually turned Latin into an artificial language. In trying to eliminate all postclassical accretions and to imitate Cicero directly in their own writings, Renaissance humanists in fact contributed to its demise.

To a great extent, the achievements of biblical and classical thinkers took place independently of one another. The Greek historian Herodotus, for example, traveled throughout the Near East, writing extensively about the Egyptians and Persians while hardly mentioning the Jews. Yet by the time he made his journey, the Pentateuch was complete, and the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah were already recorded. By the time of Augustus, there were Jewish settlements throughout the Mediterranean, and the Old Testament had been translated into Greek. Nevertheless, writers such as Virgil remained largely ignorant of Jewish history and literature. However, with the spread of

Christianity beginning with Saint Paul, the two cultures began to interact with one another; Paul himself was a Jew, a Christian, and a Greek-educated Roman citizen. In philosophy, in the concept of empire, in literature, law, language, art, and architecture, the classical heritage is one of the wellsprings of medieval culture. The next two chapters will examine the spread and development of Christianity by emphasizing the beginnings of the interaction of biblical and classical cultures and values.