



THE WEST AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF ROMAN AUTHORITY

In his monumental work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Edward Gibbon declared that the second century C.E. was the best time to have been alive in all of history. Gibbon exaggerated, but there surely is much to support his position. An empire relatively free of foreign attack or domestic crises stretched from the wall of Hadrian—roughly the border between England and Scotland—to the Persian Gulf, encompassing the entire Mediterranean and parts of three continents. To those alive at the time, it may well have seemed that this huge empire and its way of life would last forever. Yet, beginning in 180, the Empire suffered through a century of political instability; and although in the next century the powerful emperors Diocletian (r. 284–305) and Constantine (r. 312–37) carried out major reforms that probably prolonged its life, they failed to return the Empire to its unchallenged military position or its earlier quality of life. Following the death of Constantine, the story of the Empire in the West is one of almost constant defensive war and political disintegration, until in 476 its last emperor was deposed almost without notice or immediate impact.

The second century, Gibbon's age of prosperity and stability, was not without its unresolved problems. One of them was the method of imperial succession. In the first eighty years of that century, the emperors were all handpicked successors of their sonless predecessors, all competent administrators and generals. However, Marcus Aurelius (d. 180) chose to leave the Empire to his incompetent son Commodus, whose excesses led to his assassination and ushered in a century of political instability, highlighted by frequent military coups. Moreover, Marcus Aurelius was forced to fight Germanic invaders along the Danube frontier, and though he was essentially successful, the Germans

continued to exert pressure along that hard-to-defend northwestern border of the Empire until their large-scale migrations began in the fourth century. A plague during Marcus Aurelius's reign had a significant impact on agriculture, trade, and the army. The resulting shortage of soldiers offered a temptation to the Germanic tribes to raid the Empire across the Rhine-Danube frontier, which was almost irresistible when combined with the fact that the Roman generals and their armies frequently left border posts to march on Rome and claim the imperial title. In fact, Rome never solved the problems brought about by a decline in population, and the Empire's eventual collapse was to a significant degree a result of Rome no longer having a population adequate to make its various economic and political systems work.

A century after Marcus Aurelius, the Empire appeared to enter a new period of stability under Diocletian, a peasant who rose to power through the army. In his twenty-one-year reign, he was able to renew and reorder the Roman state. Because of the shortage of soldiers and the threat of generals desiring the imperial title, the army was reorganized; non-Roman citizens, including many Germans in the West, soon became its main element. The Empire was divided into two administrative parts, with Diocletian and a "junior emperor" administering each of the two halves. To ensure stability and production of necessary products, the emperor forced people to remain fixed in their professions and to train their children to succeed them; many farmers were required to remain on the land even if they could not make enough money to live. The Empire entered a new period in other ways as well: court ceremonies became more elaborate, and the emperor became a more remote figure, surrounded by eunuchs from the East. When he appeared in public, he wore jewel-encrusted clothes and shoes. Toward the end of his reign, Diocletian became convinced that Christianity was a serious obstacle to the consolidation of the Empire, and he carried out the great persecution described in chapter 3.

With the retirement of Diocletian in 305 came a struggle to determine his successor. In the West, Constantine became emperor after the battle of Milvian Bridge in 312. Although best known for his conversion to Christianity, he is also an important figure in the political history of the Empire, retaining Diocletian's reforms and making further changes in the structure of the army. He also decided to build a splendid new city in the East in his own honor. Choosing the site of the old Greek city of Byzantium, located on a narrow strait connecting the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, he erected Constantinople. By the end of the century, it had become the administrative capital of the Empire in the East, a new and a Christian Rome, whose story we have described in chapter 5.

After the death of Constantine, there were no long periods of peace or stability in the Western part of the Empire. It was invaded almost continuously, especially by Germans. One of the most significant events of the fourth century was the showdown between the Germanic Goths and the imperial forces at Adrianople in the Balkans in 378. The emperor Valens was killed, and the

the battle the Goths and later other Germanic tribes were pretty much able to live and loot within the borders of the Empire at will. From Adrianople until the extinction of the western part of the Empire in 476, the German invasions and the brief but important invasion by the Huns under their brilliant leader Attila dominate imperial history. During this period, both the Goths and the Vandals sacked the city of Rome; Western emperors were often little more than puppets of German generals; violence and rapine were practiced by both German and Roman armies; and the Germans hired by Rome to fight other Germans often turned against their employers. It was a military, political, economic, and religious (the Germans were either Arian Christians or pagans) crisis that the Empire could not solve. By the end of the fifth century, the Roman Empire existed only as an idea and a memory in the West, although the political events of the fifth century had almost no direct effect on the culture of the Roman Empire.

GERMANIC CULTURE AND SOCIETY IN THE WEST

Many Germanic tribes appear and disappear in the records of their movement into the Roman Empire; the most important are those that were the successors of the Romans as the rulers in the West. In the fifth century, the Vandals, who were Arian Christians, occupied Latin-speaking North Africa and came in constant conflict with its Catholic population. One should recall that Augustine's city of Hippo was under Vandal attack at the time of his death in 430. The Byzantine emperor Justinian defeated the Vandals, his first military campaign in the West. However, Byzantine rule lasted only about a century, as we have seen. By 700, the armies of Islam had dispossessed the Eastern Empire of North Africa. Most of the Iberian Peninsula came under the control of the Visigoths, Arian Christians who became Catholic only in 587, probably for strategic rather than purely religious reasons. Despite a reasonably high level of prosperity and cultural development in the seventh century, the kingdom fell quite rapidly to Muslim invaders from across the Mediterranean in 711–13.

The Romans abandoned Britain, on the periphery of the Empire, in 410 when all available soldiers were needed closer to its heart. The island's Roman-Christian heritage was damaged and to a large extent driven underground by a series of invasions, which had already begun before Roman withdrawal. Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (pagan Germanic tribes from the southern shore of the North Sea) first raided and then began to settle in England, eventually conquering all but the western and northern extremities of Britain. The Anglo-Saxons did not subdue the romanized Celtic Christian population easily, however. About 500, a Celtic military victory slowed the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain by perhaps as much as fifty years. Centuries later, stories of one of the Celtic

leaders traditionally called King Arthur mixed with Celtic folklore and became an important source for the new vernacular literature of the twelfth century (see chapter 11). The Anglo-Saxons did eventually defeat the Celtic Britons, and many of them fled to Cornwall and Wales, where Christianity and their Celtic heritage and language survived. Modern Welsh is a direct descendant of the language of these Britons.

Many Germans beginning in the third century entered the Roman Empire as employees—soldiers hired to defend imperial borders against other Germans. Thus, there were many partially Romanized Germans in the Empire in late antiquity. Other Germans entered as invaders; for example, many came in 406 when the Rhine River froze, making entry into Roman territory easy. The Franks originally entered the Empire in the pay of Rome and came to control the northern part of Gaul before 500. By the middle of the sixth century, they had wrested control of southwestern Gaul from the Visigoths and southeastern Gaul from the Burgundians, thus ruling what is now roughly France plus Germany west of the Rhine. The Franks were pagan until the baptism of their able King Clovis (d. 511) as a Catholic. Although the Frankish kingdom suffered from interminable civil wars, often splitting into virtually independent kingdoms upon the death of a king, the dynasty of Clovis, the Merovingian dynasty, ruled at least in name until 751. From the mid-seventh century on, however, Merovingian kings were almost without exception feeble in both mind and body, and the rule of the kingdom soon passed de facto to the family that had made itself the hereditary mayors of the palace, later called the Carolingians. It was the Carolingian mayor of the palace, Charles Martel, who defeated the Muslims at the important battle of Tours-Poitiers in 732–33; his son Pepin (whose son was Charlemagne), with papal approval, took the crown from the Merovingians in 751.

Odoacar (sometimes Odoacer), the German general who deposed the last Roman emperor in Italy in 476, belonged to a small tribe. In 493, he was defeated in battle by Theodoric the Ostrogoth (d. 526), who, despite his Arian Christianity, had the support of the Catholic emperors in Constantinople. Theodoric's court was centered in Ravenna, the last imperial capital in the West, and contained men of great genius, including Boethius and Cassiodorus. However, Ostrogothic rule in Italy did not long survive Theodoric; Justinian, investing enormous resources in the enterprise, conquered Italy in a series of destructive wars that severely damaged its central economic and cultural position. Despite Justinian's efforts, Byzantine rule lasted no longer than had the Ostrogothic; beginning in 568, three years after his death, the Arian Lombards invaded Italy from the North and quickly captured virtually all of northern and central Italy save Ravenna and Rome. These Lombards eventually became Catholic while nevertheless remaining political enemies of both the pope and the Byzantine Empire; they ruled most of Italy until 774, when Charlemagne took their iron crown for himself.

Not all Germans moved into the Roman Empire. To the east of the Rhine were Germanic peoples such as the Saxons and the Bavarians. They remained pagan until the eighth century, when missionary activity in the first half of the century and Charlemagne's armies in the second brought Christianity and the culture that accompanied it. To the north, in Scandinavia, were other Germanic peoples, who remained pagan until some of them, known to us as Vikings, invaded and settled in Britain and the Frankish kingdom, where they accepted Christianity in the ninth and tenth centuries. Shortly thereafter, missionaries brought Christianity to the inhabitants of Scandinavia itself.

The culture and society of the Germans and the ideas and institutions they brought with them into the Roman Empire are in some ways more difficult to describe with precision than the process of migration. Historians are hampered by the fact that Germanic cultures were not written cultures until they came into contact with the Roman world, and especially with Christianity. Thus, the earliest written records about the Germans come from Roman authors. In the second century C.E., the great Roman historian Tacitus described their customs. Although he was more interested in teaching his own society moral lessons than objectively describing German customs, and although he perceived the Germans in Roman terms, Tacitus's descriptions are nonetheless useful. Here his comments describe the military character of Germanic society:

To abandon your shield is the basest of crimes; nor may a man thus disgraced be present at the sacred rites, or enter their council; many, indeed, after escaping from battle, have ended their infamy with the halter.¹

They transact no public or private business without being armed. It is not, however, usual for anyone to wear arms till the state [a Roman concept that Tacitus here applies to a very different culture] has recognized his power to use them. Then in the presence of the council, one of the chiefs, or the young man's father, or some kinsman, equips him with a shield and a spear.²

Tacitus also explains the personal relationship between a chieftain and his warriors:

When they go into battle, it is a disgrace for a chief to be surpassed in valor, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valor of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief, and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief.³

This martial quality and sense of personal loyalty between chief and vassal became important elements of medieval society, elements vital to a proper understanding of such important literary works as *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland* and to the kinds of relationships usually described as feudal.

The military character of Germanic society posed the same difficult problem of cultural assimilation that the conversion of Constantine had earlier, for

Christianity in its origins was essentially pacifist. As late as the fourth century the most popular saints included men who refused to fight in the army or who left the military in order to pursue lives of holiness, for example, Saint Sebastian and Saint Martin of Tours. Although Ambrose condoned violence and Augustine developed a theory of the just war, the Church hardly glorified violence, let alone to the extent that the Germans did. When Germans such as Clovis accepted Christianity, they saw Christ not as the Prince of Peace but as a warrior god; that is, they accepted him in terms they understood and interpreted his life and teachings in ways seemingly different from their original intent. Any time two different sets of values are brought together in a society, both are ultimately changed. During the time of the Germanic kingdoms, legends of warrior saints such as Saint George were created. We can thus speak of the "Germanization" of Christianity as well as of the Christianization of the Germans. Though the Church came to tolerate and sometimes even encourage violence, as late as the tenth and eleventh centuries it also organized peace movements to try to diminish the violence within Europe. Only in the twelfth century, the heyday of the Crusades did the acceptance and even glorification of violence become an integral part of the Catholic tradition.

Germanic law differed in many essentials from Roman law. In particular, Germanic law was personal while Roman law was territorial. A Lombard was judged by Lombard law no matter where he was—who a person was determined the law that governed him. Any person within the boundaries of the Roman Empire was subject to Roman law no matter what group he belonged to—where a person was determined what law governed him. The surviving law codes of the Germans—the codification and publication of law was itself a Roman borrowing, as was the Latin in which they were written—contain elements of both personality and territoriality, but ultimately the Roman principle won out.

The idea of the state was an integral part of Roman law and Roman political philosophy; the Germans, however, had no conception of the state. A Germanic king did not perceive himself as the ruler of all the people within a clearly defined territory but rather as the leader of a group of free warriors. The land a king controlled was treated as personal property and usually divided among his male heirs. It was centuries before the Roman idea of the state fully replaced the Germanic idea of kingship.

Germanic law allowed blood feuds: it permitted an injured family to seek revenge against the offender's family. Obviously, this was a custom that led to a great deal of violence, often escalating to become a serious problem of tribal unity and even survival. To mitigate this problem, the Germanic tribes, borrowing from the Roman system of fining the one guilty of a crime, developed the wergild, the money value of a person that was to be paid wholly or in part to the injured family, depending on the nature of the crime. The following selections from Rothair's Edict of 643, the earliest surviving laws of the

Lombards, illustrate the use of the wergild in conjunction with the Roman system of fines:

49. On cutting off noses. He who cuts off another man's nose shall pay half of that one's wergild as composition [compensation].
50. On cutting off lips. He who cuts off another man's lip shall pay sixteen soldi as composition. And if one, two or three teeth are thereby exposed, he shall pay twenty soldi as composition.⁴

Not every person's wergild was the same, as is clear from a list of penalties for murder in the early sixth-century Burgundian Code:

Then the guilty party shall be compelled to pay to the relatives of the person killed half his wergild according to the status of the person: that is, if he shall have killed a noble of the highest class, we decree that the payment be set at one hundred fifty soldi, i.e., half his wergild; if a person of the middle class, one hundred soldi; if a person of the lowest class, seventy-five soldi.⁵

Germanic law was localized, putting much of the responsibility for justice on small groups—the family and the neighborhood in particular—to report crimes and to swear to a person's innocence. Out of this Germanic sense of local responsibility eventually come both the grand jury, a body to inquire and gather evidence, and the trial jury, a body to determine innocence and guilt. Both developed in medieval England.

On occasion, Germanic law called for trial by combat to determine guilt, or even trial by ordeal; for example, a suspect's guilt or innocence would be determined by requiring the suspect to hold a bar of red-hot iron until it burned the hand. If the burn healed, the person was innocent; if it did not, the person was guilty. These primitive methods of judgment, which were understood to be God's judgment, survived in some parts of Europe until the thirteenth century, a time when Roman law was once again being studied. In literature, one finds trial by combat in the twelfth-century *Song of Roland*.

When the Germans entered the Empire, they brought not only their political and social institutions but also their languages and cultures. In areas where Roman influence remained the greatest—modern Italy, France, and Spain, for example—vernacular languages developed from Latin, although they were not unaffected by Germanic tongues. But in England, Germany, and Scandinavia the vernacular languages were and indeed still are Germanic. Thus, the very medium of thought and expression in a large part of Europe in the Middle Ages came from the Germans. In art, Germanic elements of style, especially the tendency toward abstraction, exerted a strong influence throughout the Middle Ages, the abstract quality of early medieval art contrasting with the more realistic art of the Roman Empire. The Germanic style, which is evident in such striking interlace designs as the treasure from the Anglo-Saxon Sutton Hoo burial ship, later blended with elements from the Celtic and classical

traditions to produce much of the great manuscript illumination and sculpture of the Middle Ages. Stories from the heroic Germanic past, its gods and heroes, are another important transmission. These stories too blended with other traditions, as in the fruitful synthesis of pagan and Christian in Old English poetry, seen in such poems as *Beowulf*, "The Dream of the Rood," "The Wanderer," and "The Seafarer." Stories from Germanic mythology also became incorporated into such Christian literary forms as saints' lives. Even the modern English names for the days of the week come from Germanic mythology.

The Germanic peoples looked to their past as preserved in oral tradition to find a model for the way things should be. They believed that law, for example, had been perfect in their past but was obscure and corrupt in the present. Thus, good law was to be discovered, not made. Although they sometimes allowed for new laws to be created by inventing a past for them, it was not until the revival of Roman law in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that new laws could consciously be legislated. The idea that one had to find truth by looking to the past and stripping away modern accretions found resonances in both the Christian and classical traditions, in which people looked back to the Garden of Eden or the Golden Age. These three traditions thus reinforced one another in the Middle Ages. The decline of the world since the golden days is a concept of singular importance in medieval literature and historiography.

The collapse of the Roman Empire in the West ushered in a period of violence and chaos, a decline of culture and literacy, as well as other woes. The following text from a letter dated 473 of Sidonius Apollinaris, a Roman living in Gaul, suggests the experience of the Germanic invasions:

There is a rumor that the Goths have moved their camp into Roman soil; we luckless Arvernians are always the gateway to such incursions, for we kindle our enemies' hatred in a special degree; the reason is, that their failure so far to make the channel of the Loire the boundary of their territories between the Atlantic and the Rhone is due, with Christ's help, solely to the barrier which we interpose. As for the surrounding country, its whole length and breadth has long since been swallowed up by the insatiate aggression of that threatening power. But we have little confidence that our reckless and dangerous courage will be supported by our hideously charred walls, our palisades of rotting stakes, our battlements worn by the breasts of many a sentinel; our only comfort is in the aid of the Rogations [prayers for deliverance said in procession] which we introduced on your advice.⁶

Sidonius's despair of victory without supernatural intervention is eloquent testimony to the effect of the invasions on the Roman population. However, we also need to remember that the Romans were hardly a gentle and peaceable folk, either in their military campaigns or in the punishment of their own citizens—martyrdom stories of Christians by Roman governors providing examples of the latter.

Perhaps the most famous statement of political and cultural decline following the destruction of the Roman Empire in the West comes from the late sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours, himself of Roman lineage:

Gregory
of
Tours

A great many things keep happening, some of them good, some of them bad. The inhabitants of different countries keep quarreling fiercely with each other and kings go on losing their temper in the most furious way. Our churches are attacked by heretics and then protected by the Catholics; the faith of Christ burns bright in many men, but it remains lukewarm in others; no sooner are the church-buildings endowed by the faithful than they are stripped bare again by those who have no faith. However, no writer has come to the fore who has been sufficiently skilled in setting things down in an orderly fashion to be able to describe these events in prose or verse. In fact in the towns of Gaul the writing of literature has declined to the point where it has virtually disappeared altogether. Many people have complained about this, not once but time and time again. "What a poor period this is!" they have been heard to say. "If among all our people there is not one man to be found who can write a book about what is happening today, the pursuit of letters is really dead in us!" I have often thought about these complaints and others like them. I have written this work to keep alive the memory of those dead and gone, and to bring them to the notice of future generations. My style is not very polished, and I have had to devote much of my space to the quarrels between the wicked and the righteous.⁷

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Gregory vividly describes one example of the cruelty of the age, in this case inflicted upon the Franks by another Germanic tribe called the Thuringians:

Hostages were exchanged and our Franks were ready to make peace with them. The Thuringians murdered the hostages in all sorts of different ways. They attacked our fellow-countrymen and stole their possessions. They hung our young men up to die in the trees by the muscles of their thighs. They put more than two hundred of our young women to death in the most barbarous way: they tied their arms round the necks of their horses, stampeded these animals in all directions by prodding them with goads, and so tore the girls to pieces; or else they stretched them out over the ruts of their roads, attached their arms and legs to the ground with stakes, and then drove heavily-laden carts over them again and again, until their bones were all broken and their bodies could be thrown out for the dogs and birds to feed on.⁸

As stark as the story of violence and destruction is, it is equally important to realize that the Germanic kings were not seeking to destroy Roman civilization so much as to make it their own. Of course their perception of the Roman tradition was through Germanic eyes; nevertheless, much of the change that took place with the coming of the Germans was not intended to be destructive. For example, Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks, sought to legitimize his authority by receiving Roman titles from the emperor in Constantinople and imitating imperial largesse:

Letters reached Clovis from the Emperor Anastasius [of Constantinople] to confer the consulate on him. In St. Martin's church he stood clad in a purple tunic [the imperial color] and the military mantle, and he crowned himself with a diadem. He then rode out on his horse and with his own hand showered gold and silver coins among the people present all the way from the doorway of St. Martin's church to Tours cathedral. From that day on he was called Consul or Augustus.⁹

As early as the sixth century, the Merovingians created a myth that traced the origins of the Franks back to Troy, giving themselves a common and thus equal ancestry with the Romans. In the following text, the author makes clear Theodoric the Ostrogoth's attempt to continue the traditions of Rome:

He so governed two races at the same time, Romans and Goths, that although he himself was of the Arian sect, he nevertheless made no assault on the Catholic religion; he gave games in the circus and the amphitheatre, so that even by the Romans he was called a Trajan or a Valentinian, whose times he took as a model; and by the Goths, because of his edict, in which he established justice, he was judged to be in all respects their best king. Military service for the Romans he kept on the same footing as under the emperors. He was generous with gifts and the distribution of grain, and although he had found the public treasury nothing but a haystack, by his efforts it was restored and made rich.¹⁰

One of the most important steps in the process of the integration of the Germans with those whom they conquered was their acceptance of orthodox Christianity. The change from Arianism to Catholicism was a turning point in the history of both the Visigoths and the Lombards, but even more important to the history of Europe was the conversion of the Franks and the Anglo-Saxons from paganism to Catholic Christianity. According to tradition, the conversion of the Franks was initiated by the conversion of their king Clovis, a story Gregory of Tours deliberately parallels to Constantine's conversion nearly two centuries earlier:

Finally war broke out against the Alamanni and in this conflict he [Clovis] was forced by necessity to accept what he had refused of his own free will. It so turned out that when the two armies met on the battlefield there was great slaughter and the troops of Clovis were rapidly being annihilated. He raised his eyes to heaven when he saw this, felt compunction in his heart and was moved to tears. "Jesus Christ," he said, "you who Clotild [Clovis's wife] maintains to be the Son of the living God, you who deign to give help to those in travail and victory to those who trust in you, in faith I beg the glory of your help. If you will give me victory over my enemies, and if I may have evidence of that miraculous power which the people dedicated to your name say that they have experienced, then I will believe in you and I will be baptized in your name. I have called upon my own gods, but, as I see only too

clearly, they have no intention of helping me. I therefore cannot believe that they possess any power, for they do not come to the assistance of those who trust in them. I now call upon you. I want to believe in you, but I must first be saved from my enemies." Even as he said this the Alamanni turned their backs and began to run away....

King Clovis asked that he might be baptized first by the Bishop [Remigius]. Like some new Constantine he stepped forward to the baptismal pool, ready to wash away the sores of his old leprosy and to be cleansed in flowing water from the sordid stains which he had borne so long. As he advanced for his baptism, the holy man of God addressed him in these pregnant words: "Bow your head in meekness, Sicamber. Worship what you have burnt, burn what you have been wont to worship."¹¹

The mention of leprosy refers to a legend that Constantine was miraculously cured of the disease upon his baptism. Gregory's description of Clovis's baptism shows how ritual and splendor helped convert the Germans to Christianity:

Conversion of Clovis The public squares were draped with coloured cloths, the churches were adorned with white hangings, the baptistry was prepared, sticks of incense gave off clouds of perfume, sweet-smelling candles gleamed bright and the holy place of baptism was filled with divine fragrance.¹²

The conversion of Clovis meant the conversion of the Franks: according to Gregory of Tours, three thousand of Clovis's warriors were baptized the same day. The Roman population that the Franks governed was Christian, and thus the Franks had long been in contact with Christianity. But there was little or no instruction in the faith for most Franks; there were simply mass baptisms. Therefore, their formal conversion did not immediately make the Franks thoroughly Christian; nor did it make them forsake their old gods, their sacred places, or their magic.

Gregory of Tours, in his *Glory of the Confessors*, gives us a rare glimpse at how the process that we see in the conversion of King Clovis took place less spectacularly and more gradually in the countryside. Gregory explains how a local bishop began the process of turning pagans (the Latin word *paganus* means someone who lives in the countryside) into Christians:

At a fixed time a crowd of rustics went [to a lake near the town of Javols] and, as if offering libations to the lake, threw [into it] linen cloths and garments that served men as clothing. Some [threw] pelts of wool. Many [threw] models of cheese and wax and bread as well as various [other objects].... [T]hey brought food and drink, sacrificed animals, and feasted for three days.... Much later a cleric from that city [of Javols] became bishop and went to the place. He preached to the crowds that they should cease this behavior lest they be consumed by the wrath of heaven. But their coarse rusticity rejected his preaching. Then, with the inspiration of the Divinity, this bishop of God built

a church in honor of the blessed Hilary of Poitiers at a distance from the banks of the lake. He placed relics of Hilary in the church and said to the people: "Do not, my sons, do not sin before God! For there is [to be] no religious piety to a lake. Do not stain your hearts with these empty rituals, but rather acknowledge God and direct your devotion to his friends."...The men were stung in their hearts and converted. They left the lake and brought everything they usually threw into it to the holy church.¹³

In all likelihood, Gregory provides a "speeded-up" account of the conversion of this particular group of peasants, and even after their conversion they continued to practice their rituals, albeit in a different place and to honor a different deity. Since the traditional religions recognized many gods, the use of saints and sometimes the invention of saints' stories eased the transition from polytheistic to monotheistic religious practices.

If this amalgamation of pagan and Christian occurred more or less haphazardly in the kingdom of the Franks, it was given a theoretical basis and papal approbation by Gregory I (the Great) in a letter of 601 that he addressed to the missionaries he had sent to convert the Anglo-Saxons:

[We] have come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them, and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking more readily to their accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God. And since they have a custom of sacrificing many oxen to demons, let some other solemnity be substituted in its place, such as a day of Dedication or the Festivals of the holy martyrs whose relics are enshrined there. On such occasions they might well construct shelters of boughs for themselves around the churches that were once temples, and celebrate the solemnity with devout feasting. They are no longer to sacrifice beasts to the Devil, but they may kill them for food to the praise of God, and give thanks to the Giver of all gifts for the plenty they enjoy. If the people are allowed some worldly pleasures in this way, they will more readily come to desire the joys of the spirit. For it is certainly impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap. It was in this way that the Lord revealed Himself to the Israelite people in Egypt, permitting the sacrifices formerly offered to the Devil to be offered thenceforward to Himself instead. So He bade them sacrifice beasts to Him, so that, once they became enlightened, they might abandon one element of sacrifice and retain another. For, while they were to offer the same beasts as before, they were to offer them to God instead of to idols, so that they would no longer be offering the same sacrifices.¹⁴

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Gregory's instructions. We have already observed that ideas from Greco-Roman culture were adapted to Christian use and have shown how Jerome and Augustine justified this practice, but theirs was a rather different situation. Greco-Roman culture was the highly sophisticated culture of the Roman Empire within which Christianity originated and grew. Gregory here allows customs and practices from a foreign, nonliterate culture to be adapted to Christian use. This clearly aided further missionary activity to the Germans and later to non-Germanic peoples as well: even in the sixteenth century, some Catholic missionaries to America and India based their work on the theory of conversion that Gregory had enunciated almost a millennium earlier. Gregory's instructions also ensured the survival of elements of pagan culture that would have otherwise been neglected or destroyed. A poem such as *Beowulf* probably survived because a pagan story had been Christianized. The traditional Yule log ceremony still practiced in some churches in England was originally a pagan Germanic custom.

Missionaries encountering Anglo-Saxon customs associated with purification after childbirth sent this question back to Pope Gregory shortly after their arrival: "How soon after childbirth may she [a mother] enter churches?"¹⁵ The question itself is instructive, showing that the problems they encountered were more concerned with daily activities and common practices than with abstract matters of theology. Gregory's answer is also instructive:

As to the interval that must elapse after childbirth before a woman may enter church, you are familiar with the Old Testament rule: that is, for a male child thirty-three days and for a female, sixty-six. But this is to be understood as an allegory, for were a woman to enter church and return thanks in the very hour of her delivery, she would do nothing wrong.¹⁶

One discovers from this text how the allegorical method of scriptural exegesis which Augustine made popular in the West gives Gregory the opportunity to deal effectively and creatively with problems that arose in a world quite different from that of Palestine in biblical times and yet remain faithful to a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

The writings of the Venerable Bede (673–735), our main source for the conversion of England, show that the missionaries to England made use of art and ritual much as Remigius had done a hundred years earlier with Clovis and the Franks:

But the monks were endowed with power from God, not from the Devil, and approached the king carrying a silver cross as their standard and the likeness of our Lord and Saviour painted on a board. First of all they offered prayer to God, singing a litany for the eternal salvation both of themselves and of those to whom and for whose sake they had come.¹⁷

Only after this ceremony did the missionaries preach the word of God to King Ethelbert of Kent.

The missionaries also benefited from the fact that like Clovis, Ethelbert had a Christian wife who played a major role in his conversion. Women were also important to the development of Christianity in England generally. Some evangelized directly while others established nunneries that were centers of Christian learning. Marrying a Christian woman to a pagan remained an important means of conversion of powerful men and their families. Neither the dedication of missionaries nor the wisdom of Gregory the Great was sufficient to ensure immediate conversion. Ethelbert of Kent refused to force his subjects to become Christians. Traditional societies do not easily change their religion. Moreover, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms often reverted to paganism after the death of a Christian king or in response to a disaster such as loss in battle or a bad crop. In fact, when Ethelbert of Kent died, he was succeeded by his pagan son. Gradually over the course of the seventh century, however, England became a Christian land. One reason for the ultimate success of Christianity was the continuing close link between the papacy and England. Until the Norman conquest in 1066, England's chief contact with the continent was not with the Frankish kingdom across the English Channel but directly with Rome. Up to the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, there continued to be a special relationship between England and the papacy.

The papacy sent more than men to England; it also sent the materials necessary to establish Christianity there:

They [envoys from Rome] brought with them everything necessary for the worship and service of the Church, including sacred vessels, altar coverings, church ornaments, vestments for priests and clergy, relics of the holy Apostles and martyrs, and many books.¹⁸

It was important for the English church to learn not only the language of Christianity but also the form of its liturgy. Thus, a famous Roman cantor was sent to England:

Benedict [Biscop, abbot of Wearmouth] received Abbot John and conducted him to Britain, where he was to teach his monks the chant for the liturgical year as it was sung at Saint Peter's, Rome. In accordance with the Pope's instructions, Abbot John taught the cantors of the monastery the theory and practice of singing and reading aloud, and he put into writing all that was necessary for the proper observance of festivals throughout the year. This document is still preserved in this monastery, and many copies have been made for other places. John's instruction was not limited to the brethren of this monastery alone; for men who were proficient singers came from nearly all the monasteries of the province to hear him, and he received many invitations to teach elsewhere.¹⁹

The papacy continued to provide learned leaders for the infant English church:

Theodore of Tarsus [c. 602–90] was the first archbishop whom the entire Church of the English obeyed, and since, as I have observed, both he and

BEDE

QUADRIVIUM

Hadrian were men of learning both in sacred and in secular literature, they attracted a large number of students, into whose minds they poured the waters of wholesome knowledge day by day. In addition to instructing them in the holy Scriptures, they also taught their pupils poetry, astronomy, and the calculation of the church calendar. In proof of this, some of their students still alive today are as proficient in Latin and Greek as in their native tongue.²⁰

With the coming of Christianity to England came Latin and to some extent even Greek culture. The Church established schools and libraries, giving England a sophisticated written culture. By the eighth century, English schools were probably the best in Europe, producing the Venerable Bede, arguably the greatest historian of the Middle Ages and the most learned man in Europe at the time, and Alcuin, chief architect of educational reform on the continent under Charlemagne.

England developed a thriving Latin culture; however, unlike other Germanic people, the English also developed a written vernacular. The missionaries had brought not only a religion and a culture but also the vehicle for the transmission of the existing traditions of the Anglo-Saxons. The earliest surviving text in Anglo-Saxon is the laws of Ethelbert of Kent. Bede reproduces in his history a poem of Caedmon in Anglo-Saxon (Old English) dating from 680. This written vernacular culture, flourishing throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, produced not only such poems as *Beowulf* and the "Dream of the Rood" but also translations of such seminal Latin works as Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*.

Anglo-Saxon Christianity did not develop solely from the Roman tradition. Irish monks had arrived in the north of Britain in 565 with their own distinct form of Christianity, the product of a unique cultural synthesis. In the fifth century, Ireland, never a part of the Roman Empire, embraced Christianity, thanks to the efforts of Saint Patrick. But in some ways Christianity in Ireland developed quite differently from Christianity inside the territory of the Empire. First, Latin, never spoken in Ireland, had to be learned in order to understand Christian culture (the Bible, the liturgy, the writings of the Fathers). Since Latin was always a learned language in Ireland, it was not subject to as much change as it was in those areas under the control of the Germans. Latin thus remained most classical in a part of the world that had never been subject to Rome. Second, Ireland, organized by clans, had no cities, so there were no natural centers to establish bishops. Consequently, Ireland came to be organized monastically rather than episcopally, and bishops there were usually subordinate to their abbots. Third, the Irish monks practiced a zealous and somewhat extreme asceticism.

One peculiarity of this monastic Christianity was the peregrination: a monk would simply set off as a wanderer by land or sea, going where God took him. This literal exile from one's home, a symbol of life on earth as an exile from one's true home in heaven, is a partial explanation for Irish missionary

activity in England and on the continent. The following text is from Jonas's life of Saint Columbanus (c. 550–615), an important Irish missionary. It illustrates the close connection between exile and pilgrimage on the one hand and missionary activity on the other:

After he had been many years in the cloister, he longed to go into strange lands, in obedience to the command which the Lord gave Abraham: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, into a land that I will show thee." ... Having collected a band of brethren, St. Columban[us] asked the prayers of all, that he might be assisted in his coming journey, and that he might have their pious aid. So he started out in the twentieth year of his life, and under the guidance of Christ went to the seashore with twelve companions. Here they waited to see if the mercy of the Almighty would allow their purpose to succeed, and learned that the spirit of the all-merciful Judge was with them. So they embarked, and began the dangerous journey across the channel and sailed quickly with a smooth sea and favorable wind to the coast of Brittany [in what is now northwestern France but not under Merovingian rule at the time]. Here they rested for a while to recover their strength and discussed their plans anxiously, until finally they decided to enter the land of [Merovingian] Gaul. They wanted zealously and shrewdly to inquire into the disposition of the inhabitants in order to remain longer if they found they could sow the seeds of salvation; or in case they found the hearts of the people in darkness, go on to the nearest nation.²¹

As Celtic missionaries arrived on the island of Britain, some serious conflicts developed between the two traditions—Roman and Irish—over such issues as the dating of Easter. In 663–64, the Synod of Whitby, held at a double monastery (one with separate parts for men and women) and presided over by the abbess, resolved all disputes in favor of the Roman practices, and gradually the Irish themselves began to adopt Roman practices and eventually the Rule of Saint Benedict for their monasteries. However, Celtic Christianity had a great impact upon the development of the Church in England. In addition to reinforcing the high level of scholarship brought from Rome, the Celtic style of manuscript illumination became the basis for the English style. In the seventh century, Irish monks on the continent sought to reform the Church there and built a series of monasteries as far south as Bobbio in Italy. These monasteries gradually accepted the Rule of Saint Benedict, but their strict asceticism and high level of scholarship influenced continental monasticism.

The Irish monks developed a unique penitential system. In the early Church adult baptism was the norm, and thus the forgiveness of sins committed after baptism was not a central pastoral issue. Serious sinners were banned from the community until they performed public penance, and this ritual usually could not be repeated. However, with the triumph of Christianity and the growth of the practice of infant baptism, forgiveness for sins committed after baptism and reconciliation of the sinners with God and with their communities became

tremendously important. A general confession and absolution became common on the continent. Irish monks, however, adopted a system of private confession to a priest who assigned a specific penalty to the sinner. Books called penitentials, containing the proper penalties for a great variety of sins, were compiled for use by confessors. The following is an example of an assigned penalty:

A [priest] or a deacon who commits natural fornication, having previously taken the vow of a monk, shall do penance for seven years [usually by performing weekly fasts and other works during this time period]. He shall ask pardon every hour; he shall perform a special fast during every week except in the fifty days (between Easter and Pentecost).... He shall at all times deplore his guilt from his inmost heart, and above all things he shall adopt an attitude of the readiest obedience. After a year and a half he shall take the Eucharist and come for the kiss of peace and sing psalms with his brethren, lest his soul perish utterly through lacking so long a time the celestial medicine.²²

The following articles concerning negligence toward the consecrated host provide an insight into the great number of contingencies these penitentials deal with:

1. He who fails to guard the host carefully, and a mouse eats it, shall do penance for forty days.
2. But he who loses it in the church, that is, so that a part falls and is not found, twenty days....
7. One who vomits the host because his stomach is overloaded with food, if he casts it into the fire, twenty days, but if not, forty days.
8. If, however, dogs consume this vomit, one hundred....
19. He who acts with negligence towards the host, so that it dries up and is consumed by worms until it comes to nothing, shall do penance for three forty-day periods on bread and water.
20. If it is entire but if a worm is found in it, it shall be burned and the ashes shall be concealed beneath the altar, and he who neglected it shall make good his negligence with forty days [of penance].
21. If the host loses its taste and is discoloured, he shall keep a fast for twenty days; if it is stuck together, for seven days.²³

One can see from the following articles how the Church in Ireland dealt with the details of daily life in terms of sin and punishment. These rules show how elements of the purity laws of the Pentateuch influenced the system and also illustrate ways in which the society was being thoroughly Christianized. Even dealing with a mouse or an incontinent cat had religious overtones!

12. He who gives to anyone a liquor in which a mouse or a weasel is found dead shall do penance with three special fasts.
13. He who afterwards knows that he has tasted such a drink shall keep a special fast.

14. But if those little beasts are found in the flour or in any dry food or in porridge or in curdled milk, whatever is around their bodies shall be cast out, and all the rest shall be taken in good faith....
18. Whoever eats or drinks what has been tainted by a household beast, namely, the cat, shall be healed with three special fasts.²⁴

The Irish penitential system was adopted in England and on the continent in the eighth and ninth centuries. It remained an integral part of the Church's system of pastoral care for several centuries, although alternative ideas about penance developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that focused more on intent than action and are a direct ancestor of Catholic practice today. Great preachers of repentance in the Middle Ages, such as Francis of Assisi, operated largely within the context of this system. When the system was abused—and it often was—the abuse was pointed out by reformers and poets such as Dante and Chaucer. Penance in virtually the form created by the Irish monks was defined as one of the seven sacraments of the Church before the end of the Middle Ages.

The Irish missionary zeal, brought to both Britain and the continent, became integrated into Anglo-Saxon Christianity and was largely responsible for a succession of English missionary monks to the continent from the end of the seventh to the middle of the eighth century. Of these the most significant is Saint Boniface (originally known as Wynfrith, 680–754), a man extremely important in the development of the medieval world for many reasons. First, he brought Christianity to the Germans east of the Rhine. Boniface had placed himself under the direct authority of the pope before embarking on his mission and thus brought the new church in Germany into the same kind of close relationship with Rome that England enjoyed. His approach to missionary work came out of the tradition Gregory the Great had established for missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons a century before. An English bishop sending advice to Boniface explains how to convert the Germans in a manner that was consistent with Gregory's admonition:

And so I have with affectionate good will taken pains to suggest to Your Prudence a few things that may show you how, according to my ideas, you may most readily overcome the resistance of those uncivilized people. Do not begin by arguing with them about the origin of their gods, false as those are, but let them affirm that some of them were begotten by others through the intercourse of male with female, so that you may at least prove that gods and goddesses born after the manner of men are men and not gods and, since they did not exist before, must have had a beginning. Then when they have been compelled to learn that their gods had a beginning since some were begotten by others, they must be asked in the same way whether they believe that the world had a beginning or was always in existence without beginning. If it had a beginning, who created it? Certainly they can find no place where begotten gods could dwell before the universe was made. I mean by "universe"

PENITENTIALS

Dialectic

not merely this visible earth and sky, but the whole vast extent of space, and this the heathen can imagine too in their thoughts. But if they argue that the world always existed without beginning, you should strive to refute this and to convince them by many documents and arguments.... Do they think the gods are to be worshiped for the sake of temporal and immediate good or for future and eternal blessedness? If for temporal things, let them tell in what respect the heathen are better off than Christians. What gain do the heathen suppose accrues to their gods from their sacrifices, since the gods already possess everything? Or why do the gods leave it in the power of their subjects to say what kind of tribute shall be paid? If they are lacking in such things, why do they not themselves choose more valuable ones? If they have plenty, then there is no need to suppose that the gods can be pleased with such offerings of victims.²⁵

Thus, conversion began with already existing beliefs; the entire statement is based on the premise that the Germans should be reasoned with rather than marched into the river for mass baptisms like Clovis's warriors. Although Boniface constantly struggled with pagan survivals and revivals, and was martyred by pagans in Germany in 754, much of Germany was essentially Christian by the time of his death. What Boniface could not eradicate by word and example Charlemagne destroyed in a series of wars by the end of the century.

In 742, Boniface turned his attention to the Frankish kingdom. With papal support and the aid of a reform-minded Carolingian mayor of the palace, he set out to renew the Frankish church, placing it more firmly in the sphere of papal influence and Roman practice. He realized that there were dangers in a reform sponsored and enforced by a layman, but he also knew that without such support the Church had little power to enforce its decrees:

Without the support of the Frankish prince I can neither govern the members of the Church nor defend the priests, clerks, monks, and maids of God; nor can I, without orders from him and the fear inspired by him, prevent the pagan rites and the sacrilegious worship of idols in Germany.²⁶

However, lay sponsorship and enforcement of ecclesiastical reform meant a greater degree of lay control over the Church and use of its property for secular ends.

The decrees of one Frankish synod that Boniface supervised suggest the range of problems in the Church; these are particularly interesting in light of the fact that the Franks had by this time been Christian at least in name for almost two and a half centuries:

We have decreed, according to the canons, that every bishop within his own diocese and with the help of the count, who is the defender of the Church, shall see to it that the people of God perform no pagan rites but reject and cast out all the foulness of the heathen, such as sacrifices to the dead, casting of lots, divinations, amulets and auguries, incantations, or offerings of animals,

which foolish folk perform in the churches, according to the pagan custom, in the name of holy martyrs or confessors, thereby calling down the wrath of God and his saints, and also those sacrilegious fires which they call "Niedfeor," and whatever other pagan practices there may be.²⁷

The close link forged between the papacy and the Franks largely through Boniface had enormous political consequences. In 751, Boniface anointed the Carolingian Pepin as king of the Franks on behalf of the pope. This special relationship between the new Frankish dynasty and the papacy led directly to the pope's coronation of Pepin's son Charlemagne as Roman Emperor in the year 800.

GREGORY THE GREAT AND THE PAPACY

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the papacy found itself in a weak position because most of Western Europe was ruled by either Arian heretics or pagans. The popes were forced to look toward Constantinople for protection and support despite theological and cultural differences between East and West. While the Byzantine emperor Justinian was bringing Italy under his rule, the bishops of Rome rejoiced. However, Justinian continued to support the patriarch of Constantinople, in opposition to the papal claim of universal jurisdiction. Furthermore, Justinian's conquests were not permanent, for as we have seen, in 568 the Arian Lombards began to overrun most of Italy, and Byzantine preoccupation with its Balkan and eastern borders and later with Muslim incursions into its territory precluded further significant military involvement in Italy.

At the end of the sixth century, in a period of papal impotence in Western Europe and of an unstable relationship between the papacy and the Byzantine Empire, came the pontificate of Gregory I, known as the Great (r. 590-604), often called the founder of the medieval papacy. Gregory, a monk with a well-deserved reputation for holiness at the time of his election, accepted and, in fact, furthered Leo the Great's claims of papal authority. In a letter to the bishop of Alexandria, he brought the three most important Petrine texts together to put forth a claim of universal papal jurisdiction:

For who can be ignorant that holy Church has been made firm in the solidity of the Prince of the apostles, who derived his name from the firmness of his mind, so as to be called Petrus from petra. And to him it is said by the voice of the Truth, "To thee I will give the keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19). And again it is said to him, "And when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). And once more, "Simon [i.e., Peter], son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Feed My sheep" (John 21:17). Wherefore, though there are many apostles, yet with regard to the principality itself the See of the Prince of the apostles alone has grown strong in authority.... For he himself adorned

Papa

the See to which he sent his disciple as evangelist. He himself established the See in which, though he was to leave it, he sat for seven years.²⁸

Gregory had spent time in Constantinople as a papal ambassador before his election and had come to doubt that the papacy could count on imperial help. Thus, his policy was to make the papacy independent of Byzantium. For example, he made peace with the Lombards without informing the emperor. He also took charge of provisioning and defending the city of Rome so that it would not be dependent upon an imperial army.

We have already seen how Gregory's missionaries in England assured papal influence there and later helped to strengthen papal authority throughout northern Europe through the work of men such as Boniface. Related to his desire to spread Christianity was his concern for the education of people who were already at least nominally Christian. Concerned that his flock was worshiping paintings in church, the bishop of Marseille had ordered their destruction. Gregory's prohibition of this order presents the theory of the use of art in Christian instruction that became standard in the Middle Ages:

For to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be adored is another. For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold it, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read. Hence and chiefly to the nations, a picture is instead of reading. And this ought to have been attended to especially by thee who livest among the nations, lest, while enflamed inconsiderately by a right zeal, thou shouldst breed offense to savage minds. And, seeing that antiquity has not without reason admitted the histories of saints to be painted in venerable places, if thou hadst seasoned zeal with discretion, thou mightest undoubtedly have obtained what thou were aiming at, and not scattered the collected flock but rather gathered together a scattered one; so the deserved renown of a shepherd might have distinguished thee, instead of the blame of being a scatterer lying upon thee.²⁹

This statement of Gregory's—echoing once again the theme of moving from visible to invisible—became the dominant attitude of the Church toward art in the Middle Ages. Christian art flourished in the West with little opposition before the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and in the High Middle Ages richly decorated Romanesque and Gothic churches were in a real sense the books of the laity (see chapter 11).

Gregory's writings were of enormous importance for the Middle Ages. He was regarded as one of the four Latin Doctors, along with Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. Perhaps his best-known work in the Middle Ages was Pastoral Care, a standard manual of conduct for bishops and later more directly applicable to the work of parish priests. As the title suggests, Christ and his representatives, the bishops, are seen as shepherds. This image, which Gregory employs

effectively in the letter quoted earlier, comes, of course, from the Gospels. The Good Shepherd was the most common depiction of Christ in the art of the catacombs and in churches built immediately following the conversion of Constantine. Bishops, as Christ's representatives on earth and as successors of the apostles, should be shepherds of their flocks in imitation of Christ the Good Shepherd. Gregory's achievement was to address the question of what it meant to be a good shepherd in a world quite different from that of the Bible. A passage from *Pastoral Care* demonstrates Gregory's development of the pastoral image and its application to the episcopate:

Further, there are some who investigate spiritual precepts with shrewd diligence, but in the life they live trample on what they have penetrated by their understanding. They hasten to teach what they have learned, not by practice, but by study, and belie in their conduct what they teach by words. Hence it is that when the pastor walks through steep places, the flock following him comes to a precipice. Therefore, the Lord complains through the Prophet of the contemptible knowledge of pastors, saying "When you drank the clearest water, you troubled the rest with your feet. And my sheep were fed with that



Mosaic of Christ the Good Shepherd. Tomb of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy. Fifth century. The theme of Christ as the shepherd keeping watch over his flock becomes for Pope Gregory the Great the model for clergy to imitate. The photograph of the Beatus initial (p. 82) is another way that the image of Christ the Good Shepherd was understood in the Middle Ages.

4
Latin
Doctors

which you had trodden with your feet, and they drank what your feet had troubled" (Ezek. 34:8).³⁰

The image of bishop and priest as shepherd remained central to theologians such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century and John Wyclif in the fourteenth. And later, when poets ridiculed wicked and greedy clergy of their own time, they turned to Gregory's *Pastoral Care*. Chaucer's description of his ideal priest, the Parson, in the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*, uses Gregory's description of a good shepherd almost verbatim. Dante criticizes the popes in his own time with such phrases as "lawless shepherd."

Gregory was also known throughout the Middle Ages for his great work of biblical exegesis, the *Moralia* (i.e., an exposition of the moral level of biblical interpretation as defined by Augustine) on the Old Testament book of Job. In it Augustine's approach to Scripture is made more accessible. The following passage illustrates the movement from visible to invisible, using the Old Testament figure Job as a prefiguration of Christ:

Moralia on Job Allegory

For when the light of a candle is kindled in the dark, the candle, which causes other objects to be seen, is first seen itself. And so, if we are truly endeavoring to behold the objects which are enlightened, it is necessary for us to open the eyes of our mind to that Lightening which gives them light. But it is this which shines forth in these very discourses of blessed Job, where the shades of allegory too have been driven away, as though the gloom of midnight had been dispelled, a bright light as it were flaming across them. As when it is said, "I know that my redeemer liveth, and in my flesh I shall see God." Paul had doubtless discovered this light in the night of history, when he said, "All were baptized in Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual meat, and all drank the same spiritual drink. But they drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them, but the Rock was Christ." If then the Rock represented the redeemer, why should not the blessed Job suggest the type of Him, since he signified in his suffering Him whom he spoke of in his voice? And hence he is not improperly called "Job," that is to say "grieving," because he sets forth in his own person the image of Him, of Whom it is announced long before by Isaiah, that He Himself "bore our griefs." It should be further known, that our Redeemer has represented himself as one person with Holy Church, whom He has assumed to Himself. For it is said of Him, "Which is the head, even Christ." And again it is written of His church, "And the body of Christ, which is the Church."³¹

In Gregory's *Dialogues*, a series of conversations about holy men and women, one book is devoted to the life of Saint Benedict. It helped to set a pattern for later works of hagiography, together with Athanasius's life of Saint Antony and Augustine's *Confessions*, and was in large part responsible for spreading the fame of Benedict and his rule (see chapter 8). Another of Gregory's achievements was his codification of Church liturgy and music. Perceiving the need for some unity in the order of Church services, he

established a basic pattern for the liturgy and compiled chants appropriate for the various services and seasons. Although he probably wrote none of these himself, they, and others written later in the same style, have come to bear his name, Gregorian chant. And the Gregorian Caten.

Gregory's writings became widely known almost immediately, his place as one of the great saints of the Church assured. Nevertheless, during the seventh century, his goal of papal independence from Byzantium remained unrealized. In fact, it was more than a century before the papacy's influence north of the Alps encompassed much more than the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. One reason for the revival of Gregory's policies was the election of Gregory II in 715. This second Gregory, who had also lived in Constantinople before his election, chose his papal name purposefully, and his accomplishments made him a worthy successor to his namesake. It was he who commissioned Boniface to convert the Saxons and other Germanic peoples.

By the middle of the eighth century, the Germans and Franks had close ties to Rome while Roman relations with Byzantium continued to deteriorate. In 751, Pope Zacharias supported Pepin's taking of the Frankish crown. Two years later, with the Lombards threatening Rome and the Byzantine emperor unwilling to send help, Pope Stephen II called upon Pepin, who successfully came to the defense of Rome. After this formation of a Frankish-papal alliance, the popes were never again dependent on the emperor in Constantinople. Western Europe became politically, culturally, and religiously independent of the East, through the alliance of the Frankish monarchy and the papacy. This alliance is one of the most important contributions to the birth of Europe.

INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENTS

Gregory of Tours, in the passage quoted earlier, was surely right when he described his age as one of general educational and intellectual decline. However, this should not be taken to mean that the era was without writers of sophistication and influence. Gregory the Great is only one of several writers in the three centuries following the end of the Roman Empire in the West who can be called, along with Jerome and Augustine, founders of the medieval world view.

Boethius (c. 480–524), statesman and philosopher, was minister to the Ostrogothic king Theodoric. He fell into disfavor, lost his position, and later lost his life when he was accused of plotting against Theodoric. His most important work, the *Consolation of Philosophy*, is one of the central texts of the early Middle Ages, a work remaining influential throughout the medieval period and beyond. More manuscripts of the *Consolation* survive than almost any other work of the Middle Ages. It was translated into Old English by King Alfred the Great; into German by Notker; into French by Jean de Meun, author of the *Romance of the Rose*; into Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer; and into

Early Modern English by Queen Elizabeth I. Scarcely an educated person in Europe from the sixth to the eighteenth century would have been without a deep knowledge and love of the work. A good rule of thumb in the late Middle Ages is that the greater the writer, the more profound the effect of Boethius on his work. Consequently, an understanding of the *Consolation* is essential for a proper understanding of Dante and Chaucer.

His subject, as one surmises from the title, is the kind of consolation that philosophy can provide, a subject that no doubt springs from his experience as an exile and prisoner. Although he was not under the immediate threat of death when he wrote the *Consolation*, he writes about the fall of a statesman from high position, and from his own fate he generalizes. The *Consolation* is about the instability of fortune. In both external and internal structure, the work was highly influential. The *Consolation* was written in five books, each consisting of alternating sections of verse and prose. The five-book structure of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is one example of a later work modeled on the *Consolation*. The internal structure of the work is even more suggestive to later writers; it can be charted by the growth of the speaker, Boethius the exile and prisoner, as he laments his fate in Book 1, is educated by Lady Philosophy throughout the central books, and has gained an understanding of the ways of God by Book 5. This movement from ignorance to knowledge resonates throughout the literature of the Middle Ages, establishing a pattern repeated over and over in narrative poetry. Lady Philosophy, comforting and enlightening Boethius, performs for him the very function that Dante's guides perform in the *Divine Comedy*. The seemingly overwhelming task of approaching the *Comedy* for the first time can be greatly simplified by seeing there the same pattern as in the *Consolation*—of a man moving from ignorance to knowledge. Dante the pilgrim, no less than Boethius the exile, starts out by asking the wrong questions, begins to ask the right ones, and finally learns some answers. This movement is also the pattern of the saint's life, containing the conversion from self to God; of the dream vision, in which the dreamer falls asleep and is enlightened by his dream; and of first-person narratives such as *Piers the Plowman* and quest romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Even the writings of medieval mystics show the same movement of the speaker from ignorance to knowledge.

The *Consolation's* most well-known and influential image is that of Fortune and Fortune's wheel. An important step in Boethius's education is to learn to move from immersion in what changes to contemplation of what is permanent. Explaining to Boethius why he should not lament the loss of his earthly fame and possessions, Lady Philosophy says to him:

"What is it, my friend, that has thrown you into grief and sorrow? Do you think you have encountered something new and different? You are wrong if you think that Fortune has changed toward you. This is her nature, the

way she always behaves. She is changeable, and so in her relations with you she has merely done what she always does. This is the way she was when she flattered you and led you on with false happiness. You have merely discovered the two-faced nature of this blind goddess. Although she still hides herself from others, she is now wholly known to you. If you like her, abide by her conditions and do not complain. But if you hate her treachery, ignore her and her deceitful antics. Really, the misfortunes which are now, such a cause of grief, ought to be reasons for tranquility. For now she has deserted you, and no man can ever be secure until he has been forsaken by Fortune.

"You have put yourself in Fortune's power; now you must be content with the ways of your mistress. If you try to stop the force of her turning wheel, you are the most foolish man alive. If it should stop turning, it would cease to be Fortune's wheel."³²

Fortune and her wheel provide an image for the proper medieval attitude toward worldly goods. Anything material such as money or property, or any worldly pleasure, such as food or sex, is incapable of fully satisfying anyone because it is only partial. As the *Consolation* states at a later point:

The good is defined as that which, once it is attained, relieves man of all further desires. This is the supreme good and contains within itself all other lesser goods. If it lacked anything at all, it would not be the highest good, because something would be missing, and this could still be desired.³³

To see any of Fortune's goods—those subject to Fortune's wheel—as the highest good is seriously to misunderstand the nature of reality. What is subject to change is incapable of bringing full satisfaction. Or, to express this same idea in the language of Augustine, to put one's trust in worldly possessions is to mistake means for ends. Whenever the wheel of Fortune appears in medieval art or medieval literature, it suggests these related concepts: the instability of all earthly possessions and the folly of putting one's trust in them. The reference to Fortune's wheel at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* provides a reminder of the instability and mutability of all attempts at governance in our unstable world, including Arthur's Round Table. Fortune's wheel is an image that dominates the structure of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, whose movement from "wo to wele [happiness], and after out of joie" re-creates one complete turning. The image is also responsible for medieval definitions of comedy and tragedy: when the wheel makes a downward turn, moving from good fortune to bad, it describes a tragedy; when the wheel makes an upward turn, moving from bad fortune to good, it is a comedy.

Boethius's education also consists of learning that people are responsible for their actions. The problem of fate and free will, a crucial philosophical concern during the Middle Ages, is explored at length in the *Consolation*. Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that humans have free will, but she adds that

Pro. 1.1.11

wheel of Fortune

those who have been blinded by passion are unable to see clearly, and hence unable to choose clearly:

Free Will
VS
Predesti-
nation

"Human souls, however, are more free while they are in contemplation of the divine mind, and less free when they are joined to bodies, and still less free when they are bound to earthly fetters. They are in utter slavery when they lose possession of their reason and give themselves wholly to vice. For when they turn away their eyes from the light of supreme truth to mean and dark things, they are blinded by a cloud of ignorance and obsessed by vicious passions. By yielding and consenting to these passions, they worsen the slavery to which they have brought themselves and are, as it were, the captives of their own freedom. Nevertheless, God, who beholds all things from eternity, foresees all things in his providence and disposes each according to its predestined merits."³⁴

This passage contains the substance of the central problem. If God sees all things, and if whatever he foresees must take place, how can one's will really be free? If the outcome of human events does indeed depend on humans' free choices, the outcome must be uncertain, or as Boethius would put it, not necessary. If this is so, how can God foresee them? Boethius's answer to this dilemma begins in the perception of the radical difference between two ways of knowing, human and divine:

"This is an old difficulty about Providence," Philosophy answered. "It was raised by Cicero in his book on divination, and has for a long time been the subject of your investigation, but so far none of you had treated it with enough care and conviction. The cause of the obscurity which still surrounds the problem is that the process of human reason cannot comprehend the simplicity of divine foreknowledge. If in any way we could understand that, no further doubt would remain."³⁵

The difference between what is above and what is below forms one of the major thematic concerns of the *Consolation* and is responsible for some of its most memorable and influential imagery.

Providence
+
Fate

Then, as though she were making a new beginning, Philosophy explained: "The generation of all things, and the whole course of mutable natures and of what is in any way subject to change, take their causes, order, and forms from the unchanging mind of God. This divine mind established the manifold rules by which all things are governed while it remained in the secure castle of its own simplicity. When this government is regarded as belonging to the purity of the divine mind, it is called Providence; but when it is considered with reference to the things it governs, it has from very early times been called Fate....

"Some things, however, which are subject to Providence are above the force of Fate and ungoverned by it. Consider the example of a number of spheres in orbit around the same central point: the innermost moves towards the

simplicity of the center and becomes a kind of hinge about which the outer spheres circle; whereas the outermost, whirling in a wider orbit, tends to increase its orbit in space the farther it moves from the indivisible midpoint of the center. If, however, it is connected to the center, it is confined by the simplicity of the center and no longer tends to stray into space. In a like manner, whatever strays farthest from the divine mind is most entangled in the nets of Fate; conversely, the freer a thing is from Fate, the nearer it approaches the center of all things."³⁶

This difference between divine and human knowledge leads to the conclusion that divine foreknowledge is not really foreknowledge at all; since God exists out of time, it is more accurately described simply as knowledge. What humans see as past, present, and future is all present to God. This distinction helps to solve the problem of fate and free will, but Lady Philosophy also suggests that part of the problem is due to the limits of human reason.

A final way of suggesting the importance of Boethius to the Middle Ages is in other images from the *Consolation* that become commonplace in medieval literature. When Lady Philosophy first comes to Boethius, one of her complaints is that he has forgotten his "native country." He has, in other words, mistaken his life here on earth for his true home. This formulation, so close to the scriptural and Augustinian ideal of life as a pilgrimage, is repeated throughout the Middle Ages. In one of his short poems, Chaucer uses it practically word for word. Boethius's early questions about his condition are all so wide of the mark that Lady Philosophy is not convinced that he is capable of understanding her wisdom. Returning his questions with a question, she implies that he may be too gross to understand a spiritual message:

"Do you understand what I have told you," Philosophy asked, "have my words impressed you at all, or are you like the ass which cannot hear the lyre? Why are you crying? Speak out, don't hide what troubles you. If you want a doctor's help, you must uncover your wound."³⁷

Another image in this passage is that of Lady Philosophy coming to Boethius as a physician to cure his malady, resonating with the New Testament portrayal of Christ as a spiritual physician. Throughout medieval literature, doctors are called upon to cure maladies that are not exclusively physical.

Lady Philosophy is one in a long line of illustrious allegorical ladies in medieval literature and history. The allegorical figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga, church and synagogue, appear frequently in medieval art and literature, as does Sophia, the allegorical personification of wisdom. Francis of Assisi will marry Lady Poverty in the thirteenth century. The use of a human figure to represent an abstract idea is also present in another work of the fifth century, Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* (c. 430), a work similar to the *Consolation* not only in form (it also uses alternating



Sculpture of an Ass Playing a Harp. Church of Saint Paraize, France. Twelfth century. This is the visualization of an idea deriving from Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy. A beast that can play the lyre but not understand the music thus became a powerful metaphor for spiritual deafness in the Middle Ages.

TRIVIUM / QUADRIVIVM

prose and verse sections), but in the extent of its influence. The work is a treatise on the seven liberal arts, personified as characters in a mythological story. Following a classical tradition that can be traced back as far as Isocrates in the fourth century B.C.E., Martianus divides the seven into groups: the trivium, consisting of grammar, rhetoric, and logic; and the quadrivium, consisting of music, astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry. The liberal arts appear at the marriage of Mercury and Philology as the handmaidens of Mercury. The marriage was traditionally taken to symbolize the union of eloquence and learning, that is, the union of the trivium and the quadrivium. For the next thousand years, Martianus's work was to be one of the most widely read in Western Europe, ensuring that the seven liberal arts became the educational core of the medieval schools. Their centrality was further strengthened by the approval of Martianus's schema in the writings of Cassiodorus (c. 485–580); he was an official at the court of Theodoric the Ostrogoth and later established a monastery at Vivarium, where classical as well as Christian texts were studied and copied. The revival of the seven liberal arts became the key to the educational reforms of the Carolingian Renaissance in the eighth century. Their study (with emphasis on the trivium, and especially on grammar and rhetoric) became the foundation of monastic education throughout the Middle

Ages. They were central to the educational system developed in the cathedral schools in the twelfth century. From the time of the Carolingian Renaissance to the end of the Middle Ages, personifications of the liberal arts were also an important subject in art, their depiction on the facade of Chartres Cathedral being perhaps the best-known example.

We have already examined excerpts from the writings of the historians Gregory of Tours and Bede. Gregory (539–94), bishop of Tours, came from a Roman family and was an important adviser to the Merovingian kings. Though deploring much of their cruelty, he supported the Franks because of their orthodox Christianity. His long *History of the Franks*—about six hundred pages in the newest English translation—begins with creation but concentrates on the events of his own lifetime. By adopting this strategy, Gregory places the story of the Franks in a universal framework and also claims for his own time the heritage of both biblical and classical traditions. This practice is repeated throughout the Middle Ages whenever kingdoms and cities claim Trojan and Roman origins or visits from the apostles and other biblical saints from Joseph of Arimathea (England) to Mary Magdalen (France). Gregory's *History of the Franks* is filled with palace intrigue, grotesque punishments, religious charlatans, miraculous cures, and rebellious nuns. His narrative and descriptive powers maintain the reader's interest and provide details of life in the early Middle Ages that are available from no other source. In the final analysis, however, he lacks the sophisticated organizational and analytical skills of his Anglo-Saxon counterpart.

Bede spent part of his childhood and all his adult life as a monk of Jarrow in the north of England. His *History of the English Church and People* is perhaps the most significant piece of historical writing in the entire medieval period. The work focuses on England from the time of the arrival of the Roman missionaries and magnificently unfolds the story of the establishment of Christianity there. His descriptions of the most important events such as the conversion of King Ethelbert of Kent and the Synod of Whitby plus the sharply and sympathetically drawn portraits of kings, bishops, monks, and nuns are unforgettable. Bede was also the author of numerous scientific works, biblical exegesis, and hagiography, and his writings were widely known throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. He is, for example, the only English person Dante places in his *Paradiso*.

The Visigothic kingdom also produced an author of the greatest importance—Isidore of Seville (560–636). He was the historian of the Visigoths and an important compiler of Church law, but he is most famous for his encyclopedia, called the Etymologies. Isidore attempted to assemble no less than all human knowledge. Drawing mostly from classical Latin authors, he put together what became a standard reference work for the Middle Ages. The table of contents gives a sense of the work's scope:

Gregor
of
Tours

Bede

Isidore
of
Seville

- BOOK I: Grammar
 BOOK II: Rhetoric and Dialectic
 BOOK III: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy
 BOOK IV: Medicine
 BOOK V: Law; Divisions of Time and Chronology
 BOOK VI: Books of the Bible and Their Interpreters; Canons; Ecclesiastical Offices
 BOOK VII: God; Angels; Saints
 BOOK VIII: The Church and the Sects
 BOOK IX: Languages; Races; Kingdoms; the Army; Citizens; Kingship
 BOOK X: Etymological Word List
 BOOK XI: Men and Fabulous Monsters
 BOOK XII: Animals
 BOOK XIII: The Universe and Its Parts
 BOOK XIV: The Earth and Its Parts
 BOOK XV: Buildings and Lands
 BOOK XVI: Stones and Metals
 BOOK XVII: Agriculture and Botany
 BOOK XVIII: War; Games; Pastimes
 BOOK XIX: Ships; Building Materials; Dress
 BOOK XX: Food and Drink; Furniture³⁸

The *Etymologies* was widely used for reference even where the Latin authors from whom Isidore derived his information survived; having so much in one book was convenient. For example, many of the fabulous creatures carved in the twelfth-century Church of Saint Mary Magdalen in Vézelay, which were originally described by the Roman naturalist Pliny, were probably known in Vézelay through Isidore. In some cases, Isidore's sources did not survive. Consequently, he himself became an important source for the transmission of classical culture to the Middle Ages.

The *Etymologies* derives its name from the fact that Isidore provided the origins of the words and names he wrote about. The idea that the etymology of a word says something about the essence of the object or person it names remained a popular and forceful concept throughout the Middle Ages. The following example, fancifully explaining the origin and meaning of the name Gregory, comes from the thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives called *The Golden Legend*:

Isidore MADE UP etymologies

The name Gregory (Gregorius) is formed from grex, flock, and gore, which means to preach or say, and Saint Gregory was preacher to his flock. Or the name resembles egregarius, from egregius, outstanding, and gore; and Gregory was an outstanding preacher and doctor. Or Gregorius, in our language, suggests vigilance, watchfulness; and the saint watched over himself, over God, and over his flock—over himself by virtuous living, over God by inward

contemplation, over the flock by assiduous preaching—and in these three ways he merited the vision of God.³⁹

One other author will complete our list of the seminal writers of the period. He has come to be known as the Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth century), since in the Middle Ages the writings of this anonymous Greek-speaking monk were wrongly attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian whom Paul converted to Christianity according to Acts 17:34. In order to appreciate these writings and their influence, it is necessary first to discuss the origins of Christian mysticism.

Mysticism assumes that the highest goal of humans is union with God through contemplation and that this goal is possible while we are still on earth. The achievement of this union is not dependent on striving toward God so much as on God opening up to us. This union is to be sought and found



Detail of Sculpture of People from the Ends of the Earth. Church of Mary Magdalen, Vézelay, France. Twelfth century. The dog-headed men depicted here are part of a sculptural program showing Christ sending the apostles to convert all the world's people. Ideas about what people at the ends of the earth were like came from the Roman writer Pliny (first century C.E.). Isidore of Seville drew heavily from Pliny, and the artist at Vézelay probably had Isidore rather than Pliny as his direct source.

neither in intellectual activity nor by attempting to learn and understand all that God has revealed, but rather by turning inward. People can at best ready themselves for this direct contact by emptying themselves of any desires, activities, and predispositions that prevent the total detachment in which God might make his presence known. The tradition of Christian mysticism can be traced to early Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332–95), often considered to be the founder of Christian mysticism, and beyond that to those points in the scriptural tradition in which God's presence is directly encountered. Thus, Christ's apparition to Paul on the road to Damascus, together with Paul's statement that he journeyed to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2–4), become the most important examples of mystical experience in the New Testament, just as Moses seeing God directly on Mount Sinai becomes its exemplar in the Old. From the time of the Fathers the tradition then stretches forward through a whole line of thinkers and writers throughout the Middle Ages: Augustine, who devotes a great deal of his writing to the meaning of contemplation; the twelfth-century school of Saint Victor in Paris, whose most famous writers, Hugh and Richard, present the main tenets of Christian mystical tradition in both devotional and analytic terms; Bernard of Clairvaux, perhaps the most important and influential mystical writer of the Middle Ages; Bonaventure, a mystic who in the thirteenth century became the most important academic synthesizer of the Franciscan mystical tradition; and Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century Englishwoman who is perhaps the most well known in the English-speaking world of a great many important medieval female mystical writers.

In the fifth century, most likely in Syria, the mystical works associated with the name Pseudo-Dionysius were in fact composed. They were first introduced in the West in the ninth century through Latin translations by John Scotus Eriugena (c. 810–75). Pseudo-Dionysius was a speculative theologian whose writings were thought to be another embodiment of his mystical gifts. A thirteenth-century account of the life of Dionysius the Aeropagite, assumed to be the author of these works, connects his life and his works as follows:

It is said that Paul revealed to Dionysius what he, in ecstasy, had seen in the third heaven, as Dionysius himself seems to insinuate in more than one place. Hence, he discoursed upon the hierarchies of the angels, their orders, ranks, and functions, so brilliantly and clearly that you would not think he had learned all this from someone else, but that he himself had been rapt to the third heaven and there he had looked upon all he described.⁴⁰

His description of the kinds and attributes of angels in his work *The Celestial Hierarchies* became standard for much of the Middle Ages, finding its way into such important later works as Bonaventure's *Mind's Road to God*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the mosaics of the dome of the Baptistery in Florence, and the portals of many Gothic cathedrals. His description of the

Mary
vs
Martha

universe as an emanation from God allowed him to see in all creation vestiges of divine attributes, and he develops from this what comes to be called the doctrine of analogy. According to this doctrine, the reality of a given entity can be described in terms of the kind and amount of Divine Being it possesses. Pseudo-Dionysius was a most important channel through which this aspect of Neoplatonic thought was transmitted throughout the Middle Ages. This doctrine was enormously influential: in the development of the mystical tradition; in the thought of such an "unmystical" thinker as Thomas Aquinas, who wrote commentaries on the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and who incorporated the doctrine of analogy into his own work; and in providing the theological basis for the Gothic style (see chapter 11).

In *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius describes the knowledge that can be obtained from reading Scripture and proceeds from there to talk about the relation of the universe to its creator:

We learn of all these mysteries from the divine scriptures and you will find that what the scripture writers have to say regarding the divine names refers, in revealing praises, to the beneficent processions of God. And so all these scriptural utterances celebrate the supreme Deity by describing it as a monad or henad, because of its supernatural simplicity and indivisible unity, by which unifying power we are led to unity. We, in the diversity of what we are, are drawn together by it and are led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God.

They also describe it as a Trinity, for with a transcendent fecundity it is manifested as "three persons." That is why "all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is and is named after it." They call it Cause of beings since in its goodness it employed its creative power to summon all things into being, and it is hailed as wise and beautiful because beings which keep their nature uncorrupted are filled with divine harmony and sacred beauty. But they especially call it loving toward humanity, because in one of its persons it accepted a true share of what it is we are, and thereby issued a call to man's lowly state to rise up to it. In a fashion beyond words, the simplicity of Jesus became something complex, the timeless took on the duration of the temporal, and, with neither change nor confusion of what constitutes him, he came into our human nature, he who totally transcends the natural order of the world.

This is the kind of divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the hidden tradition of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with scripture. We now grasp these things in the best way we can, and as they come to us, wrapped in the sacred veils of that love toward humanity with which scripture and hierarchical traditions cover the truths of the mind with things derived from the realm of the senses. And so it is that the Transcendent is clothed in the terms of being, with shape and form on things that have neither, and numerous symbols are employed to convey the varied attributes of what is an imageless and supra-national simplicity. But in time to come, when we

Scriptures
give us
analogies
for
understanding
God

are incorruptible and immortal, when we have come at last to the blessed inheritance of being like Christ, then, as scripture says, "we shall always be with the Lord" [1 Thess. 4:17]. In most holy contemplation we shall be ever filled with the sight of God shining gloriously around us as once it shone for the disciples at the divine transfiguration. And there we shall be, our minds away from passion and from earth, and we shall have a conceptual gift of light from him and, somehow, in a way we cannot know, we shall be united with him and, our understanding carried away, blessedly happy, we shall be struck by his blazing light. Marvelously, our minds will be like those in the heavens above. We shall be "equal to angels and sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" [Luke 20:36]. This is what the truth of scripture affirms.

But as for now, what happens is this. We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies, we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one. We leave behind us all our own notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, preexisted all the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of it nor can it at all be contemplated since it surpasses everything and is wholly beyond our capacity to know it. Transcendently it contains within itself the boundaries of every natural knowledge and energy. At the same time it is established by an unlimited power beyond all the celestial minds. And if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent, then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge.⁴¹

One can extract from this passage the core of Dionysius's thought. The created universe is a ladder that leads humans back to God. In this, Dionysius is clearly in the Pauline-Augustinian tradition, seeing the visible universe as a means to reach its invisible creator. Much of Dionysius's work, like that of Augustine, can be seen as a gloss on Romans 1:20, and this scriptural text is quoted, significantly, in *The Divine Names*. Within this framework, however, he emphasizes the radical and total separation between creature and creator. We have the traces of God through his creation; they should lead us back to God. But it is impossible to talk about God as he really is from what we know about these traces. We should be led to the contemplation of God as our ultimate goal, but this experience is not describable by humans while on earth. It is an experience that is so above anything here that it is both ineffable and incommunicable. Traces are left in the language we use so that we attribute certain qualities to God, but the actual experience of God is above even language itself, since, as he implies in the last sentence, language belongs to the existing world, the world of being, and "that which is beyond all being must be transcendent above all knowledge." The paradox that Dionysius explores is that even while we are meant to take the attributes of God as far as we can, we must recognize that our journey toward God is accompanied by an infinitely large gap between what these attributes tell us and the reality of God

that as finite creatures we cannot know. We affirm things about God only to deny their ultimate applicability. Hence, the way to God in this tradition is primarily a way of negation, what comes to be called "apophatic" theology. Dionysius also says in this passage that we are to use "whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God." Following Dionysius's lead, a whole taxonomy of mystical imagery developed in the Middle Ages, in which Christ was seen in such guises as a lover-knight (see chapter 9), as a mother, and as a bridegroom. *Why there are windows in Gothic ch*

Perhaps the most important of those words attributable to God is "illumination." God is illumination, for we know from John's Gospel that Christ is the light of the world, coming into the world and dispelling the darkness. In the Middle Ages, light becomes a most important source of order and value here on earth; by the doctrine of analogy, the more a substance is infused with light, the more it resembles God as an image of its creator. Though the reality of God's illumination is above human comprehension, light, the purest substance, is the most important trace that leads us back to God. The influence of Dionysius's thought was limited during the Early Middle Ages, in part because his Latin translator John Scotus Eriugena was also a figure of limited influence. But during the High Middle Ages the effect of this theology of light was of the highest importance. As Otto von Simson says in *The Gothic Cathedral*, "for the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, light was the source and essence of all visual beauty."⁴² This beauty was not a quality independent of or added to a substance's other qualities, but was rather an insight into a substance's very nature because it suggested the degree to which that substance partook of Being itself. Thus, the luminosity that is the characteristic of mosaics, manuscript illuminations, and stained glass windows is an attempt to re-create the celestial harmony. The beauty of light also explains why, again in von Simson's words, "in the philosophical literature of the time, as in the courtly epic, no attributes are used more frequently to describe visual beauty than 'lucid,' 'luminous,' 'clear,'"⁴³ Most important, light is the key to the aesthetic of Gothic cathedrals and to another "cathedral" in light, Dante's *Paradiso*. Light shining through the windows of Gothic cathedrals portrays the celestial city; the opening lines of the *Paradiso* prepare the reader for the visions of light to follow: "The Glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and reglows in one part more, and in another less."⁴⁴

The first attempt to translate these principles of light aesthetics into architectural form was in the Abbey Church of Saint Denis, near Paris, under the direction of its famous abbot, Suger (c. 1081–1151). It was believed in the Middle Ages that Dionysius, the follower of Paul as described earlier, came to France and was martyred by beheading. After the beheading, "Instantly, the body of Saint Dionysius stood up, took his head in its arms, and, with an angel and a heavenly light leading the way, marched two miles, from the place called Montmartre, the hill of martyrs, to the place where, by his own choice and by

God's providence, he rests in peace."⁴⁵ That place, of course, was later the site of Suger's church; the relation between the place and the doctrine informing the building of the church was by no means considered accidental.

The period discussed in this chapter was clearly an end to many centuries of Roman rule in the West, but it was also a beginning. This era of destruction, chaos, and cultural decline was also one of creativity, synthesis, and even genius. The traditions that came together often clashed, bringing confusion and bloodshed. But the Roman Empire that disappeared in the West in 476 was not the empire of Augustus or of the second century; it was, rather, a totalitarian, oppressive, and inefficient empire whose demise was an opportunity to start over, to create a new civilization. Although that civilization did not begin to congeal and flourish until the reign of Charlemagne (r. 768–814) or perhaps even later, without the experimentation, dedication, and inventiveness of people in the centuries immediately following the collapse of the Empire, it could never have come into being. More than most periods of history, this was indeed an age of transition, perhaps even the greatest age of transition in the history of Western civilization.

PART 3



THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES