

Introduction

There is an old-fashioned notion, long discredited yet still popularly accepted, that medieval Europe was an historical disaster. Today, the very word "medieval" brings to mind such deplorable things as midnight curfews, foreign governments we dislike, congressional committees, and tangled graduation requirements. The Middle Ages, stretching across a thousand years from the fifth century to the fifteenth, are still viewed by some as a long, aimless detour in the march of human progress—a thousand years of poverty, superstition and gloom that divided the old golden age of the Roman Empire from the new golden age of the Italian Renaissance. During these thousand years, as a famous historian once said (in 1860), human consciousness "lay dreaming or half awake." The Middle Ages were condemned as "a thousand years without a bath" by one well-scrubbed nineteenth-century writer. To others they were simply "the Dark Ages." At length, sometime in the fifteenth century, the darkness is supposed to have lifted. Europe awakened, bathed, and began thinking and creating again. After a long medieval intermission, the Grand March resumed.

Historians today no longer believe in this Rip Van Winkle theory. Generations of research have shown that during the Middle Ages society was constantly changing, so much so that the Europe of 1300 was vastly different from the Europe of 600. Historians now realize that medieval Europe was intensely creative during the centuries following A.D. 1000. By the close of the Middle Ages—by about 1500—Europe's technology and political and economic organization had given her a decisive edge over all other civilizations of the earth. Columbus had discovered America; the Portuguese had sailed around Africa to India; Europe had developed the cannon, the printing press, the mechanical clock, eyeglasses, distilled liquor, and numerous other ingredients of modern civilization.

During the "modern" centuries that followed, from about 1500 to 1945, European fleets, armies, and ideas spread across the globe and transformed it. Even today, independent non-European countries remain deeply influenced by European ideas about science, medicine, economics, politics, and social justice. The legislative bodies that govern the United States, Mexico, Canada, Israel, Japan, India, and many other non-European states are descendants of the parliaments and assemblies of medieval Europe. And the Communist systems of China, Russia, Cuba, and elsewhere are similarly based on Western European ideas, some of which can be traced back before the time of Karl Marx to the Christian radicalism of the Middle Ages. In 1381, for example, rebellious English peasants attacked the established social order with the slogan of a classless

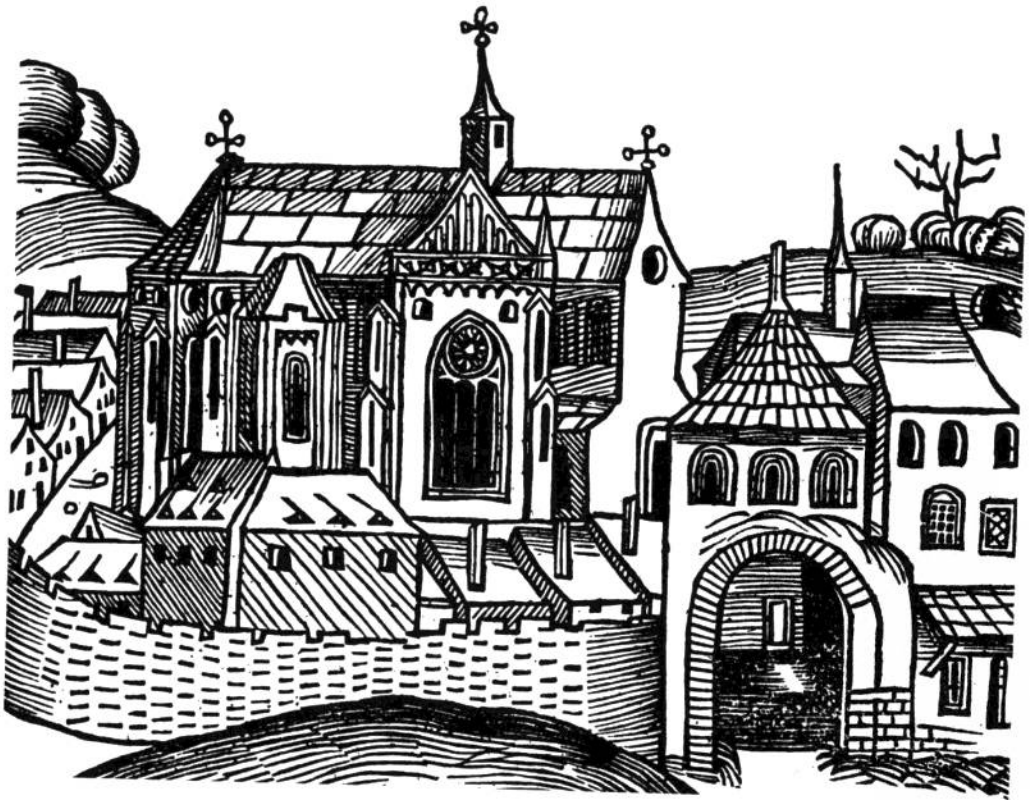
society: "When Adam dug and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?"

In short, anyone who wonders how Europe was able to transform the world, for good or ill, into the global civilization that envelops us today must look to the medieval centuries for an important part of the answer. For during the Middle Ages, Europe grew from a primitive rural society, thinly settled and impoverished, into a compelling civilization. It is this story that our book will tell.

PART ONE

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

The Birth of Europe



THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES: AN OVERVIEW

This book is divided into three sections. The first, "The Early Middle Ages," spans the troubled, formative centuries between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West and the emergence of Western Europe as a major civilization—growing in population, wealth, territory, and cultural creativity. By the end of the fifth century the Western Roman Empire had disintegrated; by the mid-eleventh century the revival of Western Europe was well underway. Accordingly, the term "Early Middle Ages" refers here to the period between about A.D. 500 and 1050, though such dividing lines are of course arbitrary and would have passed unnoticed at the time.

Rather than descending suddenly from the sky onto Europe in A.D. 500, we will approach it on foot from out of the Roman past. Looking briefly at the Roman Empire at its height, in the first and second centuries A.D., we will then explore the ways in which Roman civilization was transformed during the third, fourth, and fifth centuries. The Christianization of the Roman Empire will receive particular attention because Rome's conversion to Christianity was of decisive importance to the future of Europe, both western and eastern. We will trace the collapse of Roman imperial authority in the West, the Germanic invasions, and the establishment of Germanic kingdoms across the regions of Western Europe and North Africa once ruled by Rome. With this running start we will have arrived at A.D. 500.

Roman civilization gave way to three successor civilizations, three heirs: Byzantine, Islamic, and Western European. Since the subject of this book is medieval Western Europe, the other two inheriting civilizations will receive only a chapter each. These chapters will stress the influence of Byzantine and Islamic civilization on the emerging culture of Western Christendom.

The Early Middle Ages witnessed repeated invasions of the West, accompanied by political and economic turmoil. Illiterate, hard-bitten landholders led their retinues in battle, often in losing causes, against Muslim armies of the expanding Islamic empire. More often, the warrior-landholders of Western Christendom fought among themselves. Western cities became underpopulated and ruinous, while the countryside suffered periodic famines and plagues along with the ravages of war. Nevertheless, Christianity gradually expanded as monks carried their missionary work into pagan Germany, the Netherlands, and Anglo-Saxon England. Monasteries, planted in the wilderness, became centers of prayer, agricultural production, and learning—outposts of civilization where the Latin literary heritage of ancient Rome was kept alive through the copying and study of old manuscripts.

Around A.D. 700 a new Christian dynasty, the Carolingian, began to extend its authority over France, western Germany, and, later, northern Italy. Working closely with the Church, the Carolingians built an empire that eventually

stretched across most of Western Christendom. Charlemagne, the greatest of the Carolingians, assumed the title "Roman Emperor" in A.D. 800. But lacking large cities and an educated bureaucracy, Charlemagne's empire was fragile. It collapsed during the 800s amidst a new wave of invaders: Vikings, Muslims, and Hungarians. In the course of these invasions, and partly in response to them, strong kingdoms emerged in England and Germany. In France where the monarchy long remained feeble, the burden of defense fell to dukes and counts, who fortified their lands with castles and gradually tightened their control over lesser landholders.

By about 1050 the invasions had run their course. The Muslims were in retreat. The Vikings and Hungarians had adopted Christianity and become participants in Western civilization rather than predators of it. Cities were growing once again in the west European heartlands and commerce was increasing. The Church was entering a period of reform and spiritual renewal, and literacy was spreading.

This revitalization can be described (crudely but conveniently) as the coming of a new era. The Early Middle Ages began with the decaying of an old and powerful civilization and ended with the maturing of a new one, radically different from ancient Rome yet, in a sense, her child.

Chapter 1

Rome Becomes Christian

THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF ROME

During the first and second centuries A.D. Rome was at the height of her power. Roman emperors ruled in relative peace over an immense realm that encircled the Mediterranean Sea and bulged northward across present-day France and England. Not all of them ruled wisely; several of Rome's "golden-age" emperors were decidedly dull-witted and a couple of them were (to put it charitably) mentally ill. The first-century emperor Caligula used to have his favorite horse wine and dine at imperial banquets and made plans to have the beast raised to the office of Roman Consul. (The project was cut short by Caligula's assassination.) And the less said about the emperor Nero, the better. But a number of the emperors were able and far-sighted, and even under the worst of them the imperial government continued to function. Roman legions guarded the far-flung frontiers, paved roads tied the provinces to Rome, and Roman ships sailed the Mediterranean and Black Seas, rarely troubled by pirates or enemy fleets. Scattered across the Empire were cities built in the classical Roman style with temples, public buildings, baths, schools, amphitheaters, and triumphal arches. Their ruins are still to be seen all around the Mediterranean and beyond—in Italy, France, Spain, England, North Africa, the Balkans, and the Near East—bearing witness even now to the tremendous scope of Roman political authority and the tasteful uniformity of Roman architecture.

The Empire extended about 3000 miles from east to west (the approximate length of the United States). According to the best scholarly guesses, its inhabitants numbered between fifty and a hundred million, heavily concentrated in the eastern provinces where commerce and civilization had flourished for thousands of years. Egypt, Israel, Mesopotamia, and Greece had all fallen by now under Roman authority, although Greece exerted such a dominating in-

fluence on Roman culture that Romans could express some doubt as to who had conquered whom.

To the east Rome shared a boundary with the Parthian Empire, which gave way during the third century to a new and aggressive Persian Empire. But elsewhere Rome's expansion from the Mediterranean Basin was halted only by the Arabian and Sahara Deserts, the Caucasus Mountains, the dense forests of Central Europe beyond the Rhine and Danube Rivers, the barren highlands of Scotland, and the Atlantic Ocean. In short, the Roman frontiers encompassed virtually all the lands that could be reached by Roman armies and cultivated profitably by Roman landowners.

Economic and Social Conditions

Notwithstanding the elegance of Roman cities, the imperial economy was based primarily on agriculture. By the first and second centuries A.D. the small family farms of the Roman past were giving way across much of the Empire to large estates owned by wealthy aristocrats and tilled by slaves or half-free peasants. Although the products of Roman farming varied considerably from region to region, the principal crops of the Roman Empire were grain, grapes, and olives—the so-called “Mediterranean triad” that had dominated agriculture in the Mediterranean Basin for countless generations. Grain (chiefly wheat and barley) and grape vines were cultivated throughout most of the Empire. From these the Romans produced two of the basic staples of their diet: bread and wine. Olive trees were also grown in abundance, though their vulnerability to cold restricted their cultivation to the frost-free lowlands around the Mediterranean Sea. The inhabitants of the Mediterranean Basin used olive oil in the place of butter, which was favored by the Germanic tribes to the north but turned rancid in the southern heat.

Through much of Italy grain production had been giving way to the raising of sheep and cattle, and the fertile wheat-growing provinces of Egypt and North Africa had by now become the primary suppliers of bread for the teeming populace of Rome (perhaps 700,000). Such specialization in agriculture was made possible by the Roman Peace—the *Pax Romana*—that linked distant provinces into a single political-economic unit and safeguarded the Mediterranean sea lanes.

The culture of Rome's “golden age” captivated the historians of past centuries. Never, they wrote, was the human race so happy as in the great days of the Empire—the first and second centuries A.D. They viewed Rome's decline and fall as the supreme historical catastrophe, the triumph of barbarism and religion. Today historians see the matter quite differently. Roman classical culture was impressive but it was also narrowly limited, shared only by the Empire's upper-crust. And although all inhabitants benefited from the Roman





Peace, the great majority of them were impoverished and undernourished, and vast numbers were enslaved.

Such conditions persisted throughout the "golden age" and beyond, not as economic misfortunes that might be remedied by anti-poverty programs but as the means necessary for the functioning of great estates, mines, and wealthy households. The leisured lives of the Empire's elite, and the very survival of the imperial economy, depended on the muscles of slaves and poor laborers, who constituted eighty to ninety percent of the total population.

Nor was the Roman Peace as peaceful as one might think. Germanic tribes hammered repeatedly at Rome's frontiers and often penetrated them, while deep within the Empire towns and countryside suffered a degree of local violence and mayhem unimaginable today. The Roman provinces of the "golden age" were drastically underpoliced and undergoverned. The professional administrative class of the entire Empire numbered less than a thousand.

Roman women, even the wealthiest, were forbidden to hold any political office. By long tradition they were expected to stay home and obey their husbands, but many Roman wives declined to meet these expectations. Indeed, in the Empire's later centuries women acquired considerable independence with respect to marriage, divorce, and the holding of property, and upper-class women were often well educated. The Roman father, however, was the master of his family and exercised the power of life or death over his newborn children. If he liked their looks he let them live; if they seemed scrawny or deformed, or if the father already had enough children (particularly female children), they were cast out to die of exposure. This custom of infanticide was yet

CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATER EMPIRE

All Dates A.D.

- 205-270: Plotinus
 - 235-284: Height of the third-century anarchy
 - 306-337: Reign of Constantine
 - 325: Council of Nicaea
 - 330: Founding of Constantinople
 - 354-430: St. Augustine of Hippo
 - 376: Visigoths cross Danube
 - 378: Battle of Adrianople
 - 378-395: Reign of Theodosius I
 - 395: Final division of Eastern and Western Empires
 - 410: Alaric sacks Rome
 - 430: Vandals capture Hippo
 - 451-452: Huns invade Western Europe
 - 440-461: Pontificate of Leo I
 - 476: Last western emperor deposed by Odovacar
 - 481-511: Clovis rules Franks, conquers Gaul
 - 493-526: Theodoric the Ostrogoth rules Italy
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another brutal consequence of Rome's marginal economy: the Empire could not afford excess mouths.

The imperial economic system provoked no general rebellion because the lower classes knew no better way of managing an empire. Virtually all ancient civilizations were afflicted by mass enslavement, impoverishment, malnutrition, internal violence, the suppression of women, and the killing of unwanted infants (although the religion of the Hebrews prohibited infanticide). In these respects Roman imperial civilization was no worse than the others, and in the larger cities, where public baths and free bread were available, it was significantly better. Life in Rome's "golden age" could be pleasant enough if one were male, adult, very wealthy, and naturally immune to various epidemic diseases. But if this was humanity's happiest time, God help us all.

THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES

Anarchy and Recovery

During the third century conditions grew still worse. Invading tribes broke through the frontiers again and again, forcing cities to construct protective walls and threatening for a time to tear the Empire to pieces. Imperial survival depended increasingly on military defense, and the Roman legions, well aware of that fact, made and unmade emperors. Roman armies repeatedly battled one another for control of the imperial office until (to exaggerate only slightly) a man might be a general one day, emperor the next, and dead the third. No less than nineteen emperors reigned during the calamitous half-century between 235 and 285, and all but one were murdered or killed in combat. With political anarchy came social and economic breakdown. The cost of living soared 1,000 percent between A.D. 256 and 280, and growing numbers of soldiers and administrators obliged the government to levy higher and higher taxes on its peasants and townspeople. Many fled their homes and jobs to escape the tax collector. The "golden age" had given way to what one third-century writer described as an "age of iron and rust."

The Empire was saved, though just barely, by a series of warrior-emperors of the late third and early fourth centuries. By tremendous military effort they threw back Germanic and Persian armies, recovered the lost provinces, and restored the old frontiers. They also took measures to arrest the social and economic decay and to reconstruct the Roman administration on authoritarian lines. These measures have often been criticized, and with some justice. But they enabled the faltering Empire to survive for nearly two more centuries in the West and for over a thousand years in the East.

The two chief architects of the new policy were the emperors Diocletian (284-305) and Constantine (306-337). Under their regimes the loosely gov-

erned Empire of earlier days was rebuilt into an autocracy supported by a huge army and bureaucracy. Workers and peasants were tied by law to their jobs and frozen into a hereditary caste system. The status of the emperor himself assumed godlike proportions. Borrowing from Greek and Persian court ceremonial, the new emperors employed all the known arts of costume, make-up, and drama to make themselves appear majestic. Everyone had to fall prostrate in the emperor's presence, and Constantine added the touch of wearing a diadem on his head. Back in the first and second centuries, emperors had striven to work harmoniously with the political institutions of the former Roman Republic—the Senate, the civic magistrates—which during the “golden age” continued to enjoy much prestige but little independent power. Under the new regime of Diocletian and Constantine the Senate was drained of authority while the emperor became *dominus et deus*—“lord and god.” The imperial dignity, so debased during the third-century anarchy, was now exalted in every possible way.

The New Religious Mood

Amidst the invasions and economic crises of the third century and the rigid autocracy of the fourth, the upper-crust civilization of classical Rome began giving way to styles and hopes that had long been percolating among the Empire's masses. As these subterranean ideas floated to the surface, the elegant, worldly culture of the “golden age” became more mystical and impressionistic. Fundamental changes occurred not only in court ceremonial but also in such areas as literature, philosophy, and art.* Underlying them all was a basic shift in religious outlook that shaped the intellectual world of the late Empire and the civilizations that would later succeed it.

Tormented by growing economic hardship and insecurity, the urban poor of the third and fourth century Empire turned more and more from the boisterous and unlikely gods of the Greco-Roman Olympic cult—Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Minerva and the rest—to compelling new religions that offered release from individual guilt and the promise of personal salvation and eternal life. These new “mystery religions” originated in the older, eastern cultures that Rome had absorbed into her empire. From Egypt came the cult of the goddess Isis, from Persia came the cult of the savior Mithras, from Asia Minor came the worship of the Great Earth Mother, and from Palestine came Christianity.

The gods and goddesses of Olympus survived for a time but in profoundly altered form. For during the third century, all that was vital in the pagan cults

*Late Roman art is discussed on pp. 39–40 and illustrated on pp. 42–44. Art lovers are welcome to look ahead; others can be patient and read on.

was incorporated into a new philosophical scheme called Neoplatonism (based loosely on the much earlier thought of the Greek philosopher Plato). Neoplatonism was the creation of the third-century philosopher Plotinus, one of the most influential minds of the Roman imperial era. Plotinus taught the doctrine of one god, who was infinite, unknowable, and unapproachable, except through a mystical experience. This god was the ultimate source of everything, spiritual and physical. All existence was conceived of as a series of circles radiating outward from him, like concentric ripples in a pond, diminishing in excellence and significance as they grew more distant from their divine source. Human reason, which the Greeks had earlier exalted, now lost its fascination, for at the core of reality was a god that lay beyond reason's scope.

Plotinus and his followers regarded the multitudes of pagan gods and goddesses as crude but useful symbols of the true Neoplatonic god. Though poorly suited to the deepening mood of otherworldliness, the pagan cults were given new life by the overarching structure of Neoplatonic philosophy. They were themselves brought into line with the trend toward mysticism and monotheism. The distinction between Jupiter and the new eastern deities was steadily blurring.

CHRISTIANITY

It was in this supernatural atmosphere that the Christians converted the Roman Empire. Some of their beliefs and practices resembled those of older and competing religions: baptism, eternal salvation, the death and resurrection of a savior-god, the sacramental meal, human brotherhood under a divine father—none of these was new. Yet Christianity was more than a recombination of old beliefs, more than simply another of the mystery religions. It differed from them above all in two fundamental ways: (1) its founder and savior was an actual historical personage: compared with Jesus such mythical idealizations as Isis and Mithras would have seemed faint and unreal; (2) its god was not merely the best of many gods but the One God, the God of the Hebrews, unique in all antiquity in his claims to exclusiveness and omnipotence, and now detached by Christianity from his association with a chosen people to become the God of all peoples.

Jesus had lived and died a Jew. He announced that he had come not to abolish Judaism but to fulfill it. In his earliest biographies, the four Gospels, he is pictured as a warm, magnetic leader who miraculously healed the sick, raised the dead, and stilled the winds. His miracles were seen as credentials of the divine authority with which he claimed to speak. His ministry was chiefly to the poor and outcast, and in Christianity's early decades it was they who accepted the new faith most readily. He preached a doctrine of love, compassion, and humility; like the earlier Hebrew prophets he scorned empty formalism in reli-

gion and favored a simple life of generosity toward both friend and enemy and devotion to God. He did not object to ritual as such, but only to ritual infected with pride and divorced from love of God and neighbor. In the end he was crucified (a common form of execution at the time) for criticizing the complacency of the established Jewish priesthood and claiming to speak with divine authority. The enthusiasm of his following seems to have alarmed Roman provincial officials, who may have feared a national Jewish uprising.

According to the Gospels, Jesus' greatest miracle was his resurrection—his return to life on the third day after his death on the cross. He is said to have remained on earth for a short period thereafter, giving solace and instruction to his disciples, and then to have ascended into heaven with the promise that he would return in glory to judge all souls and bring the world to an end.

From the beginning, Christians not only accepted Jesus' ethical teachings but also worshiped him as the Christ, the incarnation of God. In the Gospels, Jesus distinguishes repeatedly between himself—"the Son of Man"—and God—"the Father"—but he also makes the statement, "I and the Father are one." And in one account he instructs his followers to baptize all persons "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Hence, Christianity became committed to the difficult and sophisticated notion of a single divinity with three aspects. Christ was the "Son" or "Second Person" in a Holy Trinity that was nevertheless one God. The doctrine of the Trinity produced a great deal of theological controversy over the centuries. But it also gave Christians the unique advantage of a single, infinite, philosophically respectable God who could be worshiped and adored in the person of the charismatic, lovable, tragic Jesus.

The Early Church

The first generation of Christianity witnessed the beginning of a deeply significant process whereby the Judeo-Christian heritage was modified and enriched through contact with Greco-Roman culture. Jesus' own apostles were little influenced by Greek thought, and some of them sought to keep Christianity strictly within the ritualistic framework of Judaism. But St. Paul, an early convert who was both a Jew and a Roman citizen, succeeded in steering the Church toward a more encompassing goal. Christians were not to be bound by the strict Jewish dietary laws or the requirement of circumcision (which would have severely diminished Christianity's attraction to adult, non-Jewish males). The new faith would be open to all people everywhere who would accept Jesus as God and Savior—and open to the bracing winds of Greco-Roman thought.

St. Paul traveled far and wide across the Empire, winning converts and establishing Christian communities in many towns and cities of the Mediterranean Basin. Other Christian missionaries, among them St. Peter and Jesus' other

apostles, devoted their lives as St. Paul did to traveling, preaching, and organizing—often at the cost of ridicule and martyrdom. Their work was tremendously effective, for by the end of the apostolic generation Christianity had become a ponderable force among the impoverished townspeople of Italy and the East. Within another century it had spread through most of the Roman Empire. The urban poor found it easy to accept a savior who had worked as a carpenter, had surrounded himself with fishermen, ex-prostitutes, and similar riffraff, had been crucified by the imperial authorities, and had promised salvation to all who followed him—free or slave, man or woman.

From the first, Christians engaged regularly in a sacramental meal of bread and wine that came to be called the "eucharist" (the Greek word for thanksgiving) or "holy communion." It was viewed as an indispensable channel of divine grace through which the Christian was infused with the spirit of Christ. By means of another sacrament, baptism, one was initiated into the fellowship of the Church, had all sins forgiven, and received the grace (moral strength) of the Holy Spirit.

As Christian historical documents become more common, in the second and third centuries, the organization of the Church begins to emerge more sharply than before. These documents disclose an important distinction between the clergy, who govern the Church and administer the sacraments, and the laity whom they serve. The clergy, initiated into the Christian priesthood through the ceremony of ordination, were divided into several ranks: the most important were the bishops, who served as spiritual leaders of Christian urban communities, and the ordinary priests, who conducted religious services and administered the eucharist under a bishop's jurisdiction.* The most powerful of the bishops were the metropolitans or archbishops of the more important cities, who supervised the bishops of their districts. Atop the hierarchy were the bishops of the three or four greatest cities of the Empire: Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and later Constantinople. These leaders, known as patriarchs, governed the Church across vast areas of the Mediterranean world.

In time the bishop of Rome came to be regarded more and more as the highest of the patriarchs. His preeminence was based on the tradition that St. Peter, foremost among Jesus' twelve apostles, had spent his last years in Rome and suffered martyrdom there. St. Peter was held to have been the first bishop of Rome—the first pope—and later popes regarded themselves as his direct successors. Nevertheless, the establishment of effective papal authority over

*The Latin word for bishop is *episcopus*, from which is derived such English words as "episcopal" (having to do with a bishop or bishops) and "Episcopalian" (a member of the Anglican communion in America, belonging to a church governed by bishops). One medieval writer referred slightly to a bishop's concubine as an *episcopissa*, but since medieval bishops were supposed to be chaste, the term was very seldom used.

even the Western part of the Church was to require the efforts of many centuries.

Christianity and Classical Culture

Medieval and modern Christian theology is a product of both the Jewish and the Greek traditions. The synthesis began not among Christians but among Jews, especially those who had migrated in large numbers to the Greco-Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria. Here Jewish scholars—in particular a religious philosopher of the early first century A.D. named Philo Judaeus—worked toward the reconciliation of Jewish Biblical revelation and Greek philosophy that was to influence both Jewish and Christian thought across the centuries.

Following the lead of Philo Judaeus, Christian theologians strove to demonstrate that their religion was more than merely an appealing myth—that it could hold its own in the highest intellectual circles. Plato and the Bible agreed, so they argued, on the existence of a single God and the importance of living an ethical life. But as Christians explored their faith more analytically they began to differ among themselves on such difficult issues as the nature of Christ (how could he be both God and man?) and the Trinity (how can three be one?). Some opinions were so inconsistent with the majority view that they were condemned as “heresies.” As questions were raised and orthodox solutions agreed on, Christian doctrine became increasingly specific and elaborate.

The early heresies sought to simplify the nature of Christ and the Trinity. One group, the Gnostics, insisted that Christ was not truly human but only a divine phantom—that God could not have degraded himself by assuming a flesh-and-blood body. Others maintained that Christ was not fully divine, not an equal member of the Trinity. This last position was taken up in the fourth century by a group of Christians known as Arians (after their leader, Arius), who spread their view throughout the Empire and beyond.

The orthodox position lay midway between Gnosticism and Arianism: Christ was fully human and fully divine. He was a coequal member of the Holy Trinity who had always existed and always would, but who had assumed human form and flesh at a particular moment in time and had walked the earth, taught, suffered, and died as the man Jesus.

Christianity and the Empire

From the first the Christians of the Empire had been a people apart, convinced that they alone possessed the truth and that the truth would one day triumph. They were eager to win new converts and uncompromising in their rejection of all other religions. They were willing to learn from the pagan world but unwilling ever to submit to it. Consequently, Christians were often objects of suspicion and hatred. Their refusal to offer sacrifices to the state gods resulted



Rome: Church of Santa Sabina (begun A.D. 425): nave and apse.

in imperial persecution, but only intermittently. Violent purges alternated with long periods of official inaction. The persecutions could be cruel and terrifying, but they were neither sufficiently ruthless nor sufficiently sustained to exterminate the whole Christian community, and martyrdoms only strengthened the resolve of those who survived. (The pagan emperors might have learned much from Christian inquisitors of sixteenth-century Spain on the subject of liquidating troublesome religious minorities.) The most severe imperial persecution, and the last, occurred at the beginning of the fourth century under Emperor Diocletian. By then Christianity was too well entrenched to be destroyed, and the failure of Diocletian's persecution made it evident that the Empire had little choice but to accommodate itself to the Church.

A decade thereafter Emperor Constantine undertook a momentous reversal of imperial religious policy. He himself became a Christian convert, and in 313