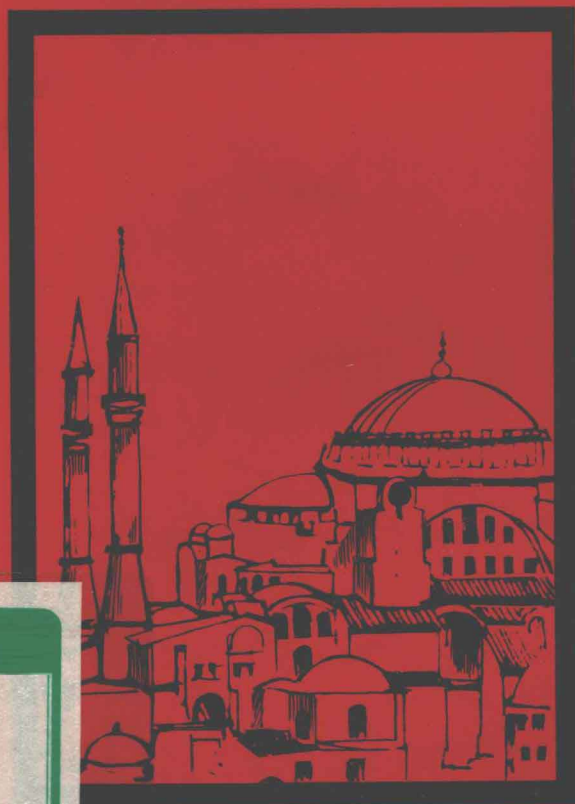


HEIRS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

RICHARD E. SULLIVAN



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PRESS

Heirs of the Roman Empire

RICHARD E. SULLIVAN

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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Cornell University Press

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The Development of Western Civilization

*Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from
Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present*

Edited by Edward W. Fox

*Professor of Modern European History
Cornell University*

HEIRS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

By RICHARD E. SULLIVAN

Foreword

THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is impera-

tive that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series was to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each was written by a recognized scholar and was designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then on a relatively more detailed knowledge of

its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor is in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight

in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life's work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial co-ordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

In this essay, *Heirs of the Roman Empire*, Mr. Richard E. Sullivan has reviewed the centuries of transition between the ancient and mediaeval worlds. The Carolingian period has long been recognized as the origin of Europe as we know it, but it has usually been treated by historians as a unique development independent of external influences. Mr. Sullivan has attempted to explain the critical changes which took place in Western Europe during these centuries in the context of the Roman-hellenistic world, in which not one but three new societies were taking shape, separately and yet in strangely similar and even interacting ways. Only against the dazzling background of Byzantium and Baghdad can the primitive simplicity or future promise of Charlemagne's court at Aachen be appreciated.

The unusual range of materials covered in this survey of three highly specialized fields has called for considerable consultation with other scholars. Both author and editor wish to express their gratitude to Mr. Deno J. Geanakoplos, Mr. R. Bayly Winder, and Mr. Karl F. Morrison for many

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EDWARD WHITING FOX

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HEIRS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Contents

Foreword, by Edward Whiting Fox	v
Introduction	i
I Successors to Roman Civilization	9
II The Revival of the West	55
III Internal Division within the New Civilization	110
Conclusion	157
Chronological Summary	164
Suggestions for Further Reading	167
Index	171

Introduction~~~~~

IN 593 or 594 Pope Gregory I wrote the following lament on the state of the world:

What is there new, I ask, of delight in this world? Everywhere we observe strife; everywhere we hear groans. Cities are destroyed, fortresses are turned over, fields are depopulated, the land has returned to solitude. There is no farmer in the fields, nor hardly any inhabitants in the cities. The survivors, poor dregs of humanity, are daily crushed down without cessation. And yet the blows of divine justice have no end, because among the blows those guilty of evil acts are not corrected. Some are carried off to captivity, some are left limbless, some are killed. Again I ask, my brothers, what is there left of delight? If we love a world such as this, it is not because we love its joys, but its misfortunes. See what has befallen Rome, once mistress of the world. She is worn down by great sorrows, by the disappearance of her citizens, by the attacks of her enemies, by numerous ruins. Thus we see brought to fulfillment what the prophet [Ezekiel] long ago pronounced on the city of Samaria.

After making the proper allowance for Gregory's very human inclination to magnify the troubles of his own day, these few sentences provide an acute observation on the condition of the civilized world at the end of the sixth cen-

tury and on the feelings of sensitive men toward the situation.

Gregory's warning to his readers to "see what [had] befallen Rome, once mistress of the world," points by implication to the existence of two conflicting trends disturbing society in his time. There were present in the Mediterranean basin institutions and ideas that had descended directly from the era of Rome's greatest power. These vestiges created in the minds of some of Gregory's contemporaries the illusion that Rome's civilization still persisted. But there were equally clear signs that something had "befallen" old Rome, that the remains of Roman civilization had lost much of their vitality amidst the play of new forces. An understanding of the history following Gregory's pontificate requires a grasp of the interplay of the old and the new.

One of the chief sixth-century vestiges of the older Roman civilization was the survival of Roman imperial government. In Gregory's time there still reigned one who called himself *imperator* and *augustus*. His capital was at Constantinople, the seat of the imperial government having been moved from Rome in 330 by Constantine, not as an admission of the dissolution of the Roman Empire but as a means of coping more adequately with its problems. Some of the emperor's far-flung territories had been invaded by Germanic tribes, but these successful forays of the barbarians in no way persuaded most of the inhabitants of the Roman world that Rome had "fallen." The barbarians, concentrated chiefly in the West, were incorporated into the empire as allies of the Roman government and in this capacity admitted the overlordship of the emperor at Constantinople. Just prior to Gregory's pontificate the Emperor Justinian (527-565) had repossessed some of the western provinces from their German rulers, demonstrating

dramatically that Rome still lived on even if its center was on the Bosphorus and even though some lands had been irretrievably lost to the barbarians. The emperors of the sixth century moreover continued to manage the affairs of state according to traditional political usages. They commanded the imperial legions in defense of the empire, deported themselves with all the pomp and ceremony clinging to their ancient office, and performed the numerous acts designed to assure the peace and prosperity of their subjects. The emperors still directed a well-organized bureaucracy, collected a considerable income, regulated the economic and social life of a large population, all of which combined to make the Roman emperor an important figure in the Mediterranean world.

Another apparent bond of unity joining the peoples of the Mediterranean basin was Christianity. After a long struggle, during which the followers of Christ adapted their faith to the needs of the Roman world, Christianity finally received the recognition of the Roman state early in the fourth century. By the end of that century it had become the state religion, and the Roman Empire had become a "Christian Roman Empire." In spite of bitter quarrels within the body Christian, the new religion provided a powerful unifying force in the Mediterranean world of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries; its dogma, ritual, and organization served as a common ground upon which men of different origins could and did meet.

Finally, there still persisted at the end of the sixth century a significant remnant of the cultural heritage of the Graeco-Roman past, another powerful force inducing men to think that the ancient world lived on. The literature, philosophy, art, and architecture of the classical period still played a vital role in the lives of educated men every-

where around the Mediterranean. Standards of excellence, style, and beauty were still measured by Graeco-Roman models. Especially important to the continued survival of that cultural heritage was the fact that the Christians found it necessary to appropriate pagan ideas to elucidate and buttress their theology. Even the rudest shock of the barbarian invasions could not overpower completely the cultural legacy of the classical past.

So it was possible and even partly justified for some of Gregory's contemporaries to believe that Roman civilization in its political, religious, and cultural aspects still survived to bring "delight in the world," to form the basis for a cultural entity encompassing the Mediterranean world. Yet Gregory's lament reflected the awesome fact that numerous afflictions gnawed at the remnants of Roman civilization, raising grave doubts in contemporary minds about Rome's ability to avoid complete and final destruction. Scholars disagree about the duration of the sickness besetting Roman civilization and about the exact moment of final crisis, but certainly there were strong indications that the situation was desperate at the end of the sixth century.

The political condition of the Roman Empire furnished cause for anxiety. Although the emperors reigning in Constantinople claimed authority over all the lands of the old empire and actually exercised it in some areas, their real power did not equal their claims. In the West several Germanic peoples were firmly entrenched in territories once part of the Roman Empire and ruled with almost total disregard for the claims of supremacy of the emperor in Constantinople: the Franks in Gaul and western Germany, the Visigoths in Spain, the Lombards in Italy, and the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. These Germanic masters seldom provided peaceful and stable government such as once had

characterized the Roman imperial regime. When Gregory complained of destruction and misery, he was actually referring to the devastations caused in Italy by the Germanic Lombards, who after 568 challenged the Roman emperors for control of the peninsula. The disorder and conflict in the West must have raised serious doubts in the minds of any who still entertained the idea of the persistence of Roman civilization. As a consequence of the independence of the Germanic masters of the West it has become traditional in discussing the political history of the sixth century to speak of an "Eastern Roman Empire" rather than a "Roman Empire." Even in the East the imperial power was beset with formidable problems. The most serious was that of defense against the Persians, Slavs, and Avars. The imperial government encountered increasing difficulties in mustering money and manpower to meet these threats. For all its glorious tradition and exalted claims the Roman Empire in the sixth century was not the empire of old.

Nor was there anything like religious unity in spite of the fact that Christianity had become the religion of almost all the people of the Mediterranean basin. For in the generation of Gregory I the seamless garment of Christ was rent in many directions. Several important ecclesiastical officials contended for headship of the Christian body; among the most insistent claimants were the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch, all of whom adopted some form of the title "patriarch" to indicate their exaltation over other bishops. The quarrels engendered by these claims, especially bitter between Rome and Constantinople, were often exacerbated by differences in ritual usage that set one group of Christians apart from others. But most divisive of all were the doctrinal disputes that raged in the Christian world. Chief among these was

the long-standing disagreement over the exact nature of the Trinity and of Christ. This dispute originated in the fourth century and during succeeding generations had spawned numerous Christian sects. The emperors at Constantinople, claiming to be heads of the church and wishing to maintain unity, sought repeatedly to define a compromise position but only succeeded in creating greater dissension. The whole complex of organizational, ritualistic, and dogmatic divergencies set Christian against Christian and belied the contention that faith in Christ held men together in a common society of believers.

The much vaunted cultural unity was similarly turning from fact to fiction. The day when the ability to use both Latin and Greek with facility distinguished the educated man of the Mediterranean world had already passed. Gregory the Great could not speak Greek although he was certainly well educated by the standards of the West. And during the sixth century Greek began to replace Latin as the language of imperial administration in Constantinople, thus adding official sanction to a language barrier which already divided the intellectual life of the Mediterranean society. In the West the influence of barbarian Germans made it increasingly difficult to maintain ties with classical Latin culture. More and more the monasteries tended to become the only refuge where any semblance of literary and scholarly activity could be sustained. The monks, dedicated primarily to the service of God, were often highly selective in their views toward classical culture, tending to save only those things that seemed to them to promote piety. In the extreme eastern areas of the old Roman world, there was a resurgence of those particularistic cultural traditions of Egypt, Syria, and Persia which had made such notable contributions to what we now call Graeco-Roman culture,