Philosophical Reflections on Antiquity

Historical Change

Paul Fairfield

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Part I

Transitions

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Chapter One

Introduction

On Universal History

How does one know a country, and who knows it best—one who patiently walks down every road in every city, encountering its people one by one, traveling every region of ground and so knowing it particular by painstaking particular, or the aviator flying high above it? The former, most will reply, and there is some truth in this. Knowing any human phenomenon well requires a familiarity with a great many particulars gathered over time and a rejection of any generality that would distort by oversimplifying. A country, any country, is complex and comes to appear ever more so the better we know it. Everything human is like this. To know much of anything is to know it in its complexity, for if there is any one quality that best describes human experience in its various modes, it is this one. The world we live in is no longer nature, or not primarily, but culture, and it is mysterious, multifarious, and ambiguous to the core—and it has no core but only aspects and more aspects, some new and some old but none that constitutes an essence.

The same holds for historical knowledge. The particular holds a certain authority here, and it is on its trail that historians find themselves in the course of their everyday work. What happened, what led to it, what followed from it, what does it signify, and how do we know? What becomes here of the universal? Is it banished as a bit of naivete, a stereotype perhaps? Consider our aviator. It is difficult to deny that from their vantage it is possible for matters to come into view in a wholly different light, one that is relatively removed from particulars and that strives for comprehensiveness. It is a very different country from the window of an airplane than walking its streets, yet it is also the same country. An avid cyclist will often insist that if one wishes to know a country then theirs is the superior form of travel. The aviator is

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unlikely to make this claim, but we know from experience that there is a knowledge to be had from there as well, a macro perspective that can be difficult to reconcile with the micro but that produces an illumination of its own.

This is what the philosophy of history has understood from its inception, albeit imperfectly—indeed so imperfectly that we may wish to refuse words like understanding and knowledge altogether in speaking of a discipline that has ventured on such grand flights of speculation as those found in the writings of an Augustine of Hippo, a G. W. F. Hegel, or a Karl Marx. The philosophy of history, and specifically a speculative philosophy of universal history, may be said with some justification to be over, wedded as it has long been to metaphysics, politics, and more dubiously still, theology. At the same time, however, a story has come down to us about human history that in one form or another continues to pervade contemporary thinking about who we are, where we have been, and where we may be going. This narrative had its inception in the ancient world and, in the fashion of anything that is passed down through centuries, has been transformed this way and that to suit the preferences of the time. While philosophers of history have been its principal custodians, it has also grown deep roots in common sense thinking and is highly resistant to challenge even while its grounds remain elusive. It is the story of the onward march of our species through its myriad trials and tribulations, the rise and fall of civilizations, and cultural and historical changes that are unlimited but also ordered, or so the story goes. The road is dark, frequently mystifying and peculiar in the extreme, but it is one road and it has a destination and a meaning. It contains many a bad stretch; deadening sameness, lengthy detours, and cul de sacs are plentiful, but so too are stretches that are accelerated and open, where things happen faster than the mind can absorb.

Let us look at this story more closely. If the term "philosophy of history" itself originated with Voltaire, the line of questioning it pursues began over two thousand years prior, in both Greek and Hebrew texts in which thinkers in both traditions speculated on the past as they knew it and whether in the bewildering array of events anything resembling a pattern, an order, or general structure could be glimpsed. Their responses differed profoundly from Voltaire and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, but where they did not differ is in answering this question in the affirmative. Human history, so many of these thinkers believed, is intelligible in light of an underlying and more or less law-like order, such that the meaning of any given event is explainable either as a consequence of a law or as in some way in conformity with some larger design. There is a logic of history, they maintained, and the business of philosophers and historians alike is to render it explicit and to trace its workings.

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The philosophy of which Voltaire spoke emerged from an older theology of history which extends to early Hebrew and Christian texts in which the record of human events constituted no mere chronicle of particulars but a sacred narrative culminating in a fulfilment. There is a unity to history, a beginning, middle, and end structure which biblical texts render visible and which theologians and philosophers would make explicit. Augustine is an especially noteworthy figure here, although he was not the first thinker in this tradition to speak at least implicitly of a teleological order to be discerned in the grand scheme of existence. History has a plan, the author of which is not of this world, and the end of which is the salvation of humanity. Jewish-Christian messianism, prophesy, and eschatology are central notions here, as is a distinction between secular and sacred history. The latter was invisible to the unfaithful but fully intelligible to the believer as a depth structure continually playing itself out beneath the surface of ordinary life. History, to make a long story short, originates with Genesis and culminates in the city of God triumphant over sinful humanity. The meaning of every episode in history is its relevance to the world to come and its contribution to either salvation or damnation. This is history in the grand style; no mere exercise in empiricism, this mode of thinking is theological, moral, and prophetic. Jesus of Nazareth, on this extraordinarily influential account, represented a decisive break with the past and initiated a new era of history, setting in motion the beginning of the end of time. Past and present alike are a preparation for a specified future, one that releases us from the eternal repetition of the same.

While it is a stretch to claim that the Bible itself contains a philosophy of history, the tradition that followed it began speaking of this in a way that would have mystified the Greeks. Redemption is the meaning of history, the eventual coming of the kingdom of God, where again Augustine conceived of this as sacred, not secular, history, and the hope that it held out mapped in no significant way onto profane life. Salvation was not an hypothesis but a meaning and a purpose, more spiritual undertaking than matter of fact. By the middle ages, history would be periodized in eschatological terms. Joachim of Fiore, for instance, in the twelfth century divided the epochs into three—the age of the father (before Jesus), the son (the Christian era), and the holy ghost (the coming kingdom)—where the orientation is futural and transcendent. The meaning of the past is the fall, which was followed by several dimly lit centuries before the time of Jesus. The essential division in history is between the time before and following one who would transform time and point the way to a glorious future. As Augustine viewed it, Jesus introduced hope into the world, an altogether new stance toward the future according to which historical change is not a veneer but affects the deepest aspect of our existence. Real transformation is now possible, forward movement in historical time in conformity with a divine plan. The historical process contains both a transcendent logic—the struggle between worldly and

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divine cities—and a central event—the turning point that was the appearance of a savior. History is now in motion and it is universal (a history of humanity), epochal, and providential. From the fall to the last judgment, mortal humanity travels through time with destination and purpose.

Crucial to Augustine and later medieval thinkers was the rejection of ancient metaphysical views in which the human being is inseparable from a cosmos and time itself is not linear but cyclical. A humanity that is metaphysically of a piece with this world and bound up with a recurrent temporal cycle, he believed, has no hope and is effectively a prisoner of its time and place. Nothing decisive can change for it, and above all there is no redemption. The promise that Christianity held out required a new and radically un-Greek conception of history. Greek historians and philosophers commonly regarded time as recurrent in the sense that it is without absolute beginnings and endings and that change, while not illusory, constitutes particular variations on timeless themes. The Greeks were intimately acquainted with change; natural, environmental, and social conditions all involved a large measure of flux, and any notion of the human being as apart from its world and master of its fate violated their experience. Yet to the Greek mind there was also a permanent order to the world, a realm of being and a temporal rhythm that were unchanging and knowable if one inquired behind the visible and contemporary. Only what is permanent seemed properly knowable, and it was there to be seen provided one employed the methods of rational thought. Mathematics, astronomy, and metaphysics seemed to grasp objects that were unchanging and therefore intelligible while history concerned itself with a sea of endlessly shifting particulars. A philosophy of history was impossible for the reason that philosophy, defined as a pursuit of knowledge rather than opinion, dealt exclusively with the unchanging and absolute. Change, contingency, and particularity being marks of imperfection, even poetry, since it is concerned with the universal, seemed more philosophical to Aristotle than a historical knowledge that dealt only with individuals.

Yet notwithstanding this, Greek and Roman thinkers commonly subscribed to a conception of history as radically repetitive and circular in structure, echoing natural rhythms of generation and corruption, sunrise and sunset, seasonal variation, and so on. Nature was the model for history, where change is incessant but not chaotic. States rise and fall as night follows day, with a constancy that precludes the absolutely new from appearing. The new is a variation on the old, part of an eternal cycle that is without beginning and end. The ancients saw nothing bleak in this and would have regarded later notions of teleology and progress as naive and irreligious. Roman historians, appropriating the Greek view, were no pessimists, although to a Christian like Augustine they would appear so. Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, the Pythagoreans, Plato, Livy, Tacitus, Seneca, Virgil, Marcus Aurelius, and others agreed that the future can confidently be expected to resemble the

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past, not in the sense of denying movement but again on the model of natural change. The same patterns are played out century upon century and advance toward a goal about as much as does the succession of seasons. This is not sacred history but a conception derived from observation of history as they knew it. Nor is it deterministic; historians relate what has occurred and what is likely to recur, but the knowledge they gain is empirical, probabilistic, and impossible to separate from legend or myth. Historical inquiry uncovers no deep, metaphysical meaning but continual variation on recurring elements. There is a moral dimension at work here as well: history is a teacher, and the lessons it imparts hold prescriptive value for the future. Also deserving mention here is the widespread belief among ancient writers in a golden age in the past from which the present can only be regarded as a deterioration. This notion is more legend than theology (although the distinction itself in Greek thought is far from clear) and goes back prior to Homer, who gave it canonic form. The present is not superior to the past but the reverse, a time of widespread cultural and moral decay. The heroes of Homeric legend were without contemporary peers, common sentiment had it.

To Augustine and the tradition that followed him, the Greek view of history was a formula for resignation. The savior was not a new Moses but a being absolutely without precedent and who made possible an altogether new conception of time. So far from constituting a golden age, the past was mere preparation at best and moral vice at worst. As Augustine's disciple Paulus Orosius wrote in the early fifth century, "but now I have discovered that the days of the past were not only as oppressive as those of the present but that they were the more terribly wretched the further they were removed from the consolation of true religion."[1] Early modern philosophers of history largely sided with the Augustinian conception over the Greek, but with a difference. By the early eighteenth century, in the celebrated controversy regarding the ancients and the moderns, salvation history had run its course, as had the older theory of world cycles. Both were finished, or so it appeared.

There is a sense in which medieval eschatology was dead, and there is a sense in which it was not but was transformed and secularized into the modern doctrine of progress, no trace of which is to be found in the ancient world. Once again history has a meaning, but it is nothing theological. The Jewish-Christian propensity for waiting would be replaced by a worldly optimism that the conditions of human life and knowledge were capable of improvement in the here and now, and more than this, they were destined for as much. The historical process unfolds according to a law of progress, and it is this, in a word, that defines the significance and the goal of history. Philosophy during the Enlightenment period liked to think big, and when it turned its gaze toward the record of human endeavors from the endless stretches of prehistory to the present it marveled at the latter and the latter alone. Likely there was never a century that thought so well of itself as the eighteenth

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(unless it was the nineteenth), and what it prided itself on most was its knowledge. This, a near consensus had it, had advanced steadily and dramatically from the ancient and medieval periods of darkness, mythology, and superstition to the maturity of modern science, mathematics, and philosophy, all of which represented a radical departure from the past.

As J. B. Bury noted in his admirable study of the history of this idea, "the Progress of humanity belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality. It is true or it is false, and like them it cannot be proved either true or false. Belief in it is an act of faith. The idea of human Progress then is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing . . . in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely."[2] To say that the intellectual atmosphere of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries inclined toward optimism and self-confidence is an understatement, and it was in this atmosphere that the notion of a secularized providence gained ascendancy in the minds not only of philosophers but of historians, scientists, literary figures, social reformers, and the culture at large. While the idea was the offspring of early modern science and philosophy, Bury correctly described progress as closer to an article of faith than a provable hypothesis. The list of believers reads like a who's who list of the intellectuals of this era.[3] Rationalists, empiricists, idealists, and positivists all emerged from this atmosphere and in one way or another shared its faith, as did the lion's share of historians. By this time the idea that progress was an unstoppable force and unconditional law of history had become something of an axiom, again less empirical or rational hypothesis than a faith any serious questioning of which would have been intellectually indecent. Every age has its faith as well as its nonbelievers—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche—and progress, in a word, encompassed the spirit of the times, a belief in the perfectibility of human beings and a confidence that our condition in general was changing not only quickly but decidedly for the better.

History was on the march, and by the middle of the nineteenth century its great symbol was the London Exhibition of 1851. A speech given by the Prince Consort articulated widespread sentiment: "Nobody who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of our present era will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end to which indeed all history points—*the realisation of the unity of mankind*. . . . The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are rapidly vanishing before the achievements of modern invention, and we can traverse them with incredible ease; the languages of all nations are known, and their acquirements placed within the reach of everybody; thought is communicated with the rapidity, and even by the power, of lightning. On the other hand, the *great principle of*

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division of labour, which may be called the moving power of civilisation, is being extended to all branches of science, industry, and art."[4] The idea received its most important philosophical exposition in the writings of Hegel, whose *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* stand in the tradition of Augustine's *City of God*. Some things had changed, of course. Hegel's teleology was neither theological (or not explicitly) nor sacred but metaphysical and was analyzed into three stages. History is a rational process that unfolds dialectically toward the gradual attainment of freedom, where this means "nothing but the recognition and adoption of such universal substantial objects as Right and Law, and the production of a reality that is accordant with them—the State."[5] In his famous formula, the ancient civilizations of the far and middle east represent the childhood of humanity, where only one was free; then came its adolescence, the Greek and Roman period in which some were free; that all are free by nature and must become so in fact does not occur to minds until the mature period of modern Europe, a continent that, as he proclaimed, "is absolutely the end of history."[6] Marx's dialectical materialism further refined the idea, as did liberal progressivists, positivists, and others, each asserting in its own way that theirs was a time of transition which could be both historically traced and rationally managed but not stopped. "You cannot stop progress," popular sentiment had it. Like the onward march of a vast Tolstoyan army, there is necessity here, even while the grounds for this idea remained elusive.

Such is the nature of faith—more conviction than evidence, even while it marched under the twin banners of science and enlightenment. History had reached a turning point: the long medieval period was over, the cloud of superstition had passed, and our whole way of life was being transformed by science and technology to serve the cause of human happiness. Like the miracle that was ancient Greece, as R. G. Collingwood remarked, "[t]he sunrise of the scientific spirit was, from the point of view of the Enlightenment, a sheer miracle, unprepared in the previous course of events and uncaused by any cause that could be adequate to such an effect."[7] No right-thinking person could have longed for a prior age since all that was good in the past had been retained and refined. This is the ethos of modern science, and if the idea could not be demonstrated in any rigorous way, the anecdotal evidence of forward motion appeared more than satisfactory: scientific discoveries, improvements in technology, a philosophical age of reason, the industrial revolution, utilitarian institutions, practical conveniences, and to all appearances a general improvement in quality of life. What was there not to be optimistic about, even before Charles Darwin demonstrated that *homo sapiens* had evolved to its present height and can be expected to continue an upward trajectory stemming from its pre-*sapiens* origins?[8]

The relation between progress and evolution is ambiguous. Popular conceptions tend to conflate them, although this is a mistake traceable more to

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Spencer than the author of *The Origin of Species*. Spencer was an optimist and believed that the model of evolutionary biology applied readily to society. Had Darwin himself not ended his famous work on precisely this note: "And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection."[9] Spencer amplified the point: "Now we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous is that in which Progress essentially consists."[10]

A tree that is mature in years will often grow shoots that are of the same substance as the parent but which in time may grow into a distinct entity, and the metaphor is not a bad approximation of the relation of progress and evolution. The latter, of course, is a biological hypothesis, but it was quickly extended across the human domain in its entirety, including everything falling under the headings of history, culture, and knowledge. From its nineteenth-century inception, human evolution in more than a biological sense partook of the same fundamental orientation as the older notion of progress—perhaps the most pervasive and deeply rooted conception of modern times—while eventually branching off into a distinct notion. Both ideas connote a process of development that is natural, gradual, governed by laws, and that tends, either largely or entirely, away from a condition designated as in one manner or other deficient (primitive, undifferentiated, simple, pre-this or proto-that) and toward a state to which some higher value is assigned. More than occasionally, the latter coincides with the present historical moment or an optimistically projected future. In biology itself, as Michael Ruse points out, "many if not most evolutionary biologists today would say that all of this talk about biological progress really is past history"; indeed, "today no reputable evolutionary biologist, certainly no Darwinian biologist, believes in biological progress."[11] The same cannot be said of cultural-historical evolutionists. In this movement, the idea of progress is so entrenched that even when efforts are made to combat it, like Sigmund Freud's return of the repressed it reappears in new form and with undiminished force. Teleology more often remains in the background of this literature than emerges into the foreground, but that this old conviction may be discerned at the very least between the lines in the discourse of cultural evolution as well as a host of disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, philosophy included, is difficult to deny. It has long characterized the common-sense outlook of the modern western world where it remains more an article of faith than a prov-

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able hypothesis. Whether regarded as a scientific matter or more generally as part of the intellectual atmosphere of our times, teleological history today is alive and well. Theological in origin, it continues to exercise such a profound hold on contemporary thinking that questioning it anew may be in order.

Is there a logic of historical change—and if so, does the story we have recounted, in however abbreviated a form, succeed in capturing it, whether we are speaking of teleology in its Augustinian, Hegelian, Marxian, evolutionary, or any other variant? If the forms are many, the idea is largely the same: history has an order and it is on the move, in a direction that is identifiable and largely desirable, and knowing where we stand in historical time means charting our location on a line that extends from the origin of our species, our culture, or what have you, to an anticipated future. There is a right side of history and a wrong side, a vanguard and a dustbin, and it is prudent to know the difference—so the narrative goes. Let us not attack a straw man: it is not the case that the notion of teleological history today amounts to an orthodoxy or is lacking critics. Indeed, for over a century a good deal of cold water has been poured on the idea of progress in particular, and nonbelievers are not rare. My intention is not to deny this but to note that the persistence of this narrative, its capacity to retain its hold on the modern mind by continually transforming itself—be it in theological, metaphysical, scientific, technological, political, or other terms—is among the more remarkable facts of our time.

Many a religious idea of ancient or medieval origin has survived into the modern period by becoming secularized in one form or another—brought into conformity with the vocabulary and preferences of the era while preserving the idea's salient features—and the story of universal history of which I have been speaking is among them. There is a good deal to say about each of its variants and critiques of one will not always apply to others. Whether cultural evolution or dialectical materialism is merely Augustinian salvation history in new guise, thus remaining vulnerable to much the same criticism, may well be questioned. I suspect it to be true but will not press the point here. Instead I shall express four reservations about the narrative surveyed above, all of which will inform and be elaborated upon in the inquiry that follows.

My first reservation concerns the subject of universal history itself. Who or what is this? *Homo sapiens* is an intelligible object of scientific knowledge, but what of its historical-cultural counterpart? Does it exist—if what is meant by this is a metaphysical being that transcends the vicissitudes of time and place, some essentialist notion of humanity? Philosophers, anthropologists, and scholars from a variety of fields and representing numerous schools of thought have advanced an avalanche of criticism toward this idea for well over a century, yet some version of it is presupposed in every variant of this story. On phenomenological grounds I am sympathetic to at least

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some of these criticisms, and while it would take us too far afield to rehearse them here the implication seems to be that, as Clifford Geertz expressed it, "the image of a constant human nature independent of time, place, and circumstance . . . may be an illusion, that what man is may be so entangled with where he is, who he is, and what he believes that it is inseparable from them. . . . Whatever else modern anthropology asserts . . . it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist."[12] The human being regarded not biologically but historically is entirely embedded in a lifeworld, indeed is constituted by it, rendering problematic any notion of a determinate being ("man," "human nature," "civilization," or what have you) progressing or evolving through the ages in anything like the way an individual passes from one stage of development to the next. The ancients, whatever else we may wish to say about them, were not children.

Second, teleology requires a *telos*, some point of view or standard from which to compare one age to another, for progress is a judgment of both fact and value. On what basis could we compare an entire era to another but from the standpoint of our own ways and preferences?[13] The point need not be politicized—that any perception of movement forward or backward is symptomatic of an historical counterpart to ethnocentrism. My reservation is not political but historical-philosophical: however unavoidable the standpoint of the present may be for scholars who themselves belong to history, it is also arbitrary in assigning a sequence of stages or order of rank to the time periods and cultures with which historians are concerned. There is no principled basis on which to compare classical architecture to Gothic, platonism to positivism, the city-state to the nation-state, and so on. Some particulars are commensurable—certain forms of technical knowledge, for instance—but these do not add up to a sum from which we might compare entire ways of life. To cite Bury once more, "some standard must be planted in the universal flux to furnish a guide for determining directions," and aside from the standard of where we are and what we care about, none exists.[14] Unless we rise above history and see the whole from a location outside of it, the judgment of progress, evolution, or development cannot but mean the measure in which a given era resembles our own.

My third reservation concerns the notion of causality. Explanation in this field of inquiry is often conceived on the model of natural science, essentially answering the question of why a given event happened in much the way that causes are spoken of in physics. The causes of the fall of the Roman empire were _____, where the blank is meant to be filled in with something a natural scientist would recognize as a cause (Aristotle's efficient case). Is any historical occurrence actually like this, or does the notion of historical explanation need to be reconceived? Our narrative speaks of progress or evolution as a

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law or something resembling it, a force propelling human collectivities through time, as gravity compels objects to fall, only to some end. It is doubtful that history is governed by laws if the word connotes an empirically discoverable force having causal power over events or the actions of individuals. Even if some form of determinism were true (and the hypothesis itself is impossibly speculative), demonstrating that a particular actor was caused to carry out a specific action by a specific cause, in more or less billiard-ball fashion, is impossible—and if it were possible on a micro scale, in the case of an individual, showing this on a macro scale would be infinitely more complex and again, without resorting to Promethean flights of speculation, impossible. Historical events no more have causes in this sense than individual actions do, unless it can be shown that law-like regularities of some empirically knowable kind are the true engine of history. A more plausible view is that when "why" questions arise in this discipline we are looking not for causes but for reasons, motivations, influences, and meanings. Historians are rather good at identifying these, even while often misdescribing them as causes, due mostly to the legacy of early modern theories of history which today defy credulity. There are reasons why the Roman empire fell—numerous reasons, most of them small and all of them contingent—and not one of them bears any relation to a law. Knowledge of causes makes prediction possible, and historical prediction is always dubious.

Finally, while human history is rife with changes both large and small, it is unduly speculative to suppose we could compress the manifold into any simple teleological structure or developmental trend of the kind of which we have been speaking. Questioning whether in the nearly infinite complexity of history some semblance of order may be discerned is not out of bounds provided we are neither proceeding in a spirit of apriorism, working with too simple a model, nor making the evidence fit the theory. From its inception, theorists in this field have committed each of these errors and with some frequency, yet this should not deter us from inquiring again whether any rough patterns, recurring themes or tendencies, show themselves amid the complexity. If there is a logic of history, we shall not expect it to be any simpler than the beings who enact it, and human beings are the opposite of simple. To describe history as a complex system may already be simplistic; it seems to resemble a system about as much as a person does, or nature. Is there any unity here, some underlying structure that allows us to speak not merely of a sea of particulars but of a universal history in some more limited sense of the term? Let us not prejudge the matter but look and see, and with no expectation of the kind of clarity that philosophers often overvalue and read into phenomena rather than find in them.

An example of the kind of speculation we must avoid is the following: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would,

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without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws."[15] The author is Edward Gibbon, arguably the greatest historian of the eighteenth century, and the lengthy text from which this passage is taken still rewards the patient reader, albeit not here. The assumption is that happiness is one, and that it is an unchanging and measurable value that we may use as a yardstick in comparing peoples and ages. So conceived, happiness is a bloodless abstraction. Nor is it possible to compare an ostensible "dark age" to a period not so described without resorting to groundless supposition. What is a dark age? It is a time in which the historical record is thin to nonexistent, and usually with an implication of cultural poverty of one kind or another. The early middle ages have long been spoken of this way, in contrast to the high period referred to by Gibbon. If what makes a dark age dark is an absence of historical knowledge, on what basis could we attempt a comparison? In the narrative of progress, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment put an end to over a thousand years of darkness, yet apart from a faith that still resonates with Augustinian theology it is perfectly mysterious how such a proposition could be known. The habit, as old as the discipline itself, of distinguishing periods into higher and lower sheds more light on the storyteller than the story.

I suspect the main reason history has long been conceived on this model lies not in the evidence but within our own experience of life as directional and purposive, as unfolding not arbitrarily but in terms of strivings, projects, and a process of growth which is then read into the larger human story. Whether we are speaking of an individual or a culture, it can appear that events unfolded as they did not as a contingency but with necessity, however this is an illusion. Historians regularly show us that things did not have to happen that way, no law or causal power made it so but a contingency which itself rests on a contingency. If we are thinking not theologically but empirically, as Wilhelm Dilthey pointed out over a century ago, "there are no experiments that enable us to ascertain under what circumstances a historical event would not have taken place."[16] Water must boil when heated, but nothing in history is like this—or nothing could be proven necessary in the absence of a law or experiments of the kind to which Dilthey referred. To our knowledge, we were neither destined nor caused to opt for agriculture, or religion, or mathematics. We opted for these things and others like them for reasons which themselves obey no laws. Laws of history are retrospective

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projections which are belied by the boundless complexity and variability of all things human. We have no basis to believe that culture itself, or any given aspect of it, is a product of evolutionary causes. Natural selection or adaptation, to our knowledge, did not make it so—or any attempt to demonstrate this would require one to embark upon a course of speculation that would make Hegel himself blush. Far more plausible is the view, as Barry Allen expresses it, that "[c]ultivating knowledge [culture generally] is not something we 'evolved' to do, but something we discovered we *can* do, superbly, because of how we *did* evolve."[17]

There is no doubt that human beings have adjusted to our natural and cultural environments and gained immeasurable knowledge over the course of the last several thousand years, but between this and the story of humanity as one large Bildungsroman there is a great deal of space. The depiction of a metaphysical entity walking through history as an individual walks through life—developing and maturing, becoming increasingly educated or differentiated—is not borne out by the evidence. The historical discipline is no more free of ideological obfuscation than any other, but there remains a certain prioritizing of particulars over universals and of evidence over theories which does it credit. Intelligibility is not created by regarding events as raw material for simple schemes of the kind that philosophers have often devised, whether to serve a theological or political program or on the basis of inadequate historical knowledge. Nor is it created, however, by forswearing universals altogether. Understanding in general emerges from regarding an individual within a contextual frame which affords a sense of the whole, for anything regarded in isolation is mute. Hence the need for theory, for any concepts that are likely to create the kind of intelligibility we are seeking are not self-evident but must emerge, as any credible universal does, from the individuals themselves, imaginatively regarded. We understand an era as we know a country, which is by looking up and down by turns, surveying particular after particular, not in themselves but alternately from a micro and a macro perspective until some overall conception emerges which, we may hope, casts more light than shadow. We walk down road after road, comparing one with another, searching for connections, resemblances, and differences, recurring themes, patterns, and tendencies, and striving for a view that is comprehensive but faithful to the complexity of what we see.

It is a different kind of intelligibility that the philosophy of history seeks, an order of understanding that is not fundamentally different from what historians seek but that strives for greater comprehensiveness and, if possible, universality. The qualification is important. We ought to assume at the outset neither that any larger conception of the historical process is there to be seen nor the reverse but look and see. Whether the process is itself one, whether universal history is an intelligible notion, and whether there is a logic of historical change are questions best answered not in the abstract but

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with constant reference to specific events of the past such as they are currently known. Making sense of our historical past is not unlike making sense of human beings—enigmatic and contradictory, complex and mysterious to the core, but perhaps not wholly unknowable provided an advanced tolerance for ambiguity and an acceptance that things might be and not be what they are at the same time and in the same sense.

Historians themselves are often disinclined to this order of abstraction, being occupied continually with the minutiae of their subject, but it remains that the minutiae themselves do not speak until they are brought within a framework that is contextual and conceptual, and as an increasing number has recognized, which has the structure of a narrative. Scholars in this field are storytellers, and this includes those who think of themselves as hard-nosed empiricists or even positivists, who insist that all theoretical speculation is out of order and that the facts must speak for themselves. Facts, if they exist, do not speak but are spoken for by historians who bring with them a framework of interpretation which is largely presupposed. Their meaning emerges within an organizing scheme of one kind or another, some synthesizing notions without which the facts themselves defy understanding. As Geertz recommended to his fellow anthropologists not to renounce theory but to limit themselves to "short flights of ratiocination" and to "[s]eek complexity and order it," so may we urge that in interpreting the past we fashion universals and narratives that are less grand of scale than what would have satisfied a Hegel, a Comte, or a Marx, while still enabling us to look up from the sea of particulars.[18]

If historical knowledge is structured as a narrative, as Hayden White and numerous others have ably demonstrated, understanding an event involves regarding it not in isolation but as part of a larger phenomenon, specifically as contributing to a sequence of events which carries the interpreter along in the manner of a literary work. Whether it be large or small, an historical change is a turning point in a narrative—a departure, reaction, or variation on what preceded it—and one that is never totalizing. It is a twist in a plot that is ongoing and not the complete break that we often imagine. As all stories do, history contains relative beginnings, middles, and endings, but these terms are pluralized and never absolute. The birth of ancient Greece was no miracle or total departure from the past, and its ending was equally far from complete and left most of its cultural elements standing but in altered form. Its decline was as partial as the fall of Rome, both of which were transition periods on the model of chapter endings in a larger narrative. Understanding an event of this kind as well as the myriad smaller happenings with which history is replete involves what Paul Ricoeur called a "synthesis of the heterogeneous" by means of emplotment, an operation of imaginative thought in which some followable thread enables us to see an event as belonging to a larger temporal sequence. "By means of the plot," as he expressed it, "goals, causes, and

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chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action."[19] This is how meaning emerges and, like all storytelling, it is inexhaustible. The fall of the Roman empire is a story that must be told and retold; Gibbon, no matter how lengthy his book, did not—could not by the nature of the thing—pronounce the last word, and the texts that continue to appear on the subject continue to shed light by partially reconfiguring the plot, often to good effect. The hypothesis is not anti-empirical, as to many of its critics it appeared. The claim that historical knowledge is a form of narrative interpretation entails not that scholars in this field simply make it up or are not beholden to the evidence but that to be beholden in this way means precisely to save the phenomena by holding them together in a configuration that is at once empirically rigorous and richly imaginative (the two are not at odds). Whether the stories that historians tell are found in the events themselves or imposed on them is a false dichotomy; discovery and invention in this form of knowledge are impossible to separate.

Our aim in what follows is not to expound this claim but to pursue a line of questioning regarding the thematic content of history so conceived, specifically as it concerns turning points in the narrative. Stories contain themes, an aboutness quality in terms of which they may be understood, and these themes—recurring patterns and tendencies, partial uniformities, and undercurrents—need not and ought not be inflated into causal laws or essentialist structures. It may appear either that the story of our species is of one long march toward some *telos* or other or the antithesis—that there is no unified story here at all but boundless particularity—but this is an illusion. To interpret history is not to compress the manifold into a simple scheme, yet flying to the opposite extreme merely solves one problem while creating another, which is to leave us feasting on scraps that defy understanding. The historical record is the opposite of straightforward; it is intricate, multifaceted, convoluted, conflicting, ever shifting, and utterly contingent, yet unintelligible it is not. Our aim as philosophers of history is not to discern a formula but to find some philosophical resources with which to shed some partial light on the human story, knowing that every light casts a shadow and that total illumination is a dream we shall not realize. Some conception of universal history may yet be possible, and if it is, we shall require a different conceptual nomenclature than what has come down to us in the tradition, one that rejects teleology and causal laws utterly while identifying threads of narrative and thematic tendencies which afford some semblance of unity.

What will not emerge in the inquiry that follows is a recipe for either historical optimism or pessimism. We are equally removed from the cheerful progressivism of a Condorcet and the gloomy turn of mind of a Spengler for the reason that the weight of the evidence inclines toward neither attitude, or perhaps both simultaneously. Optimism and pessimism seem more like anticipations than justifiable conclusions; the things themselves may be viewed

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either way. One with an eye for teleological advance will find as much to confirm the anticipation as one with a fondness for narratives of decline and fall, decadence and dark ages. One can see it that way, and the opposite, depending on what part of the picture draws one's attention, what question one is asking, and what one is determined to find. The philosopher of history must seek a more comprehensive view. We are asking what has happened and what, if any, light this sheds on what is happening to us, for achieving historical self-understanding remains among the most fundamental tasks of philosophy. We are inquiring into the logic of historical change while concentrating on two great ages of transition, both at considerable remove from our time, in search of some thematic unity. The present historical moment has often been described, sometimes with optimism and sometimes the reverse, as an age of transition of one kind or another, but whether there is any truth in this is presently unknowable since we lack the necessary perspective. Historical judgments require a retrospection that is forever unavailable in the present. What historians do have today is an impressive knowledge of the time periods of which I shall be speaking in what follows, the transitions that were early Greece and late antiquity, the ostensible birth and death of the ancient western world. My hope is that a careful examination of these periods may bring to light some philosophical understanding of the dynamics of change. Whether there is any universality to be seen in the manifold of particulars is our question, and answering it will require us to travel about as many roads as one wishing to know a country. The inquiry is laborious, but what will emerge from it is a conception of historical order as an incessant ebbing and flowing, not of the absolute but of some undercurrents that are fundamental to the kind of beings that we are.[20]

To locate my argument within the modern philosophy of history, let me briefly clarify its relation, first, to Marx and Marxism and, second, to Foucault and postmodernism. Among modern theorists, Marx has had perhaps the most enduring influence on the philosophy of history, and his impact on historians themselves continues to be profound. Marxism in one form or another remains pervasive within the human sciences generally, in spite of the innumerable criticisms that have been directed its way for well over a century. As Mary Fulbrook writes, "Whatever one makes of it, either intellectually or politically, the multi-stranded theoretical tradition collectively known as Marxism has provided a major paradigm for twentieth-century historians, whether as template or foil. It has occupied different places in the western academy at different times . . . but it has been hard to ignore as an intellectual force."[21] Marx's ideas have been interpreted and reinterpreted in a thousand ways by a thousand writers, rendering it a difficult task to describe exactly what a Marxian philosophy of history is. "[T]he central tenets of Marxism," Tony Judt notes, ". . . are so much a part of modern historical writing that it is hard to say what is and what is not 'Marxist.'"[22] For our

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purposes, let us characterize as Marxist a conception of history that is an appropriation of Hegelian teleology, which speaks of economic materialism, class struggle, and scientific necessity, which posits stages leading toward an identifiable political condition, and which supposes that there is a single driving force of civilizational development. While many varieties of Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers place different glosses on each of these ideas, my concern is not with all of that but with locating the conception of history that will emerge in this book with respect to the Marxist tradition, and the answer can be stated briefly. My disagreement with Marx and Marxism goes more or less all the way down. The evidentiary basis for any view of history as teleological, mono-causal, law-like, structuralist, or predictable is very weak indeed, and political fervor should not lead us to mistake a single aspect for an essence. When we are speaking of the larger course of human events over a few thousand years, we do need to paint in broad strokes, but reductionism must be avoided. The matter is far too complex to compress into a simple tale of political economy, no matter how scientific-sounding the rhetoric.

Speaking of politicization, Michel Foucault and postmodernism have also had a sizeable impact on contemporary philosophy of history, and the set of views that one finds under this general heading I take far more seriously than Marxism. This movement of sorts is even more difficult to encapsulate, but recurring themes include a skepticism toward teleology and grand narratives, an accent on contingency, power and its inseparability from knowledge, the primacy of narrative and rhetoric, and the significance of literary construction over causal explanation and the objective presentation of facts. As Brian Fay writes, "Postmodernists have vigorously attacked the idea of a 'metanarrative' such as provided by Marxism or Christianity in which a subject such as 'humanity' progresses through a series of coherent stages along the way to some final end of self-fulfillment. They attack the very idea of humanity as a central subject, and they emphasize the accidental and constructed character of any form of human identity. . . . [T]hey argue that *every* historical occurrence or agent is marked by discontinuity, accident, and variability. There is no central subject present over time in any event, nor is there an inherently intelligible process which a putative subject undergoes. Everything is marked by a merely momentary 'identity,' by contingency, and by a plethora of meanings."[23] Historians are storytellers and sometimes genealogists, more akin to novelists than scientists. Moreover, as one scholar adds, "[t]he historian does not find or discover her narrative; she constructs it" in a process that "involves distortion and the imposition of generic plot structures . . . on the sequence of past events."[24] The watchwords of postmodern philosophy of history include genealogy, constructivism, fragmentation, contingency, power/knowledge, totalizing discourse, and *epistemes*. For Foucault in particular, power is a "ubiquitous metaphysical principle"[25]; it "is diffuse, all-pervading and not localised anywhere."[26] Foucault emphasized the primacy

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of accidents and points of discontinuity and rupture. As one scholar puts it, "At the head of his list of objections stands 'the postulate of continuity.' This entails a set of loosely defined but functionally clear concepts such as 'tradition,' 'influence,' 'development,' 'evolution toward a normative stage,' 'mentality,' and 'spirit of the age' that are familiar to anyone working in the field. It is common for the history of ideas to appeal to such concepts as explanations when, Foucault believes, they are too vague to explain anything in particular. Instead, he counsels an intellectual asceticism that would set such a priori notions aside and begin with a population of dispersed events."[27] Foucault's skepticism was directed as well toward the evolutionary notion, as he stated, "that history must be a long linear story often punctuated with crises, that the discovery of causality is the *ne plus ultra* of historical analysis, and that there is a hierarchy of determinations extending from the strictest material causality to the more or less flickering glimmer of human freedom."[28]

The debate between postmodernists and older-school empiricists may be getting stale. Much of this debate bears upon the place of universals in historical interpretation, and it is on this issue that I part company with many postmodernists toward whom I am otherwise largely well disposed. The skepticism that this set of writers has expressed over the last several decades has often been well taken, particularly as it has come to bear upon notions of teleology, biological reductionism, development, linearity, necessity, causal and apolitical explanation, and any concept of a unitary structure driving the process of historical change. All of these ideas are well lost, although as so often happens with intellectual trends I suspect something of an overcorrection has occurred. The pendulum has swung from empirical discovery to narrative construction, ostensibly value-neutral explanation to excessive politicization, continuity to disruption, unity to fragmentation, and universality to particularity. Especially questionable is the opposition between interpretive construction and empirical discovery. In the background here is Nietzsche's notion of interpretation as a perspectival and artificial arrangement that includes a sizeable element of "forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, investing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpreting," although it is doubtful that Nietzsche took his constructivism quite as far as some postmodern writers do.[29] Nietzsche applied his skepticism to "the faith in opposite values" itself, and this includes the opposition between construction and discovery.[30] For Nietzsche, interpretation, historical or otherwise, is neither pure discovery nor pure invention but a creative synthesis of the two. A century later, postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Hayden White, Dominick Lacapra, Frank Ankersmit, and Hans Kellner would speak of genealogy and narrative as constructivist notions in a stronger sense. For postmodernists (many of them), the past is pure construction; as Willie Thompson states, it "*is* essentially nothing other than what historians

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write."[31] White articulates the point as follows: "Histories . . . are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not, however, immanent in the events themselves; they exist only in the mind of the historian reflecting on them."[32]

This may be overstating matters. "The mind of the historian" or anyone else is indeed implicated in history, and thoroughly so. The case for this has been convincingly made not only by postmodernists but by hermeneutical philosophers from Nietzsche and Dilthey to Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur, and especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, and while I shall not rehearse their arguments here, the conception of consciousness as in some sense a product of history informs a great deal of contemporary philosophy of history, including that which I shall defend in what follows.[33] The case for narrative as the historian's primary form of knowledge has also been convincingly made over the last few decades by postmodern writers in particular, but again often in a way that seems an overcorrection of the empiricism and objectivism that they rightly wish to get past. Historians are storytellers, but the stories they tell are not (or should not be) pure fabrications but arise from the things themselves. Phenomenologically speaking, the past exists simultaneously "in the mind of the historian" and in the events themselves, in much the way that universals are not mere inventions of the mind which are projected onto particulars but emerge from a careful perception of the latter. Construction (idealism) or discovery (empiricism) is a false dichotomy; the historian's experience is not of doing one or the other but of following a trail of events and evidence which pulls one along in a certain direction. The story that one constructs and tells also tells itself and needs to be told in the sense that it is not fabricated out of whole cloth but is indicated or implied by the evidence. The storyteller is not wholly free but is beholden to phenomena to which one must in some (highly ambiguous) sense be faithful. Historians are simultaneously imaginative and rigorous; the two qualities are not opposed any more than universals exist in an oppositional relation to particulars.

Where I take issue with some postmodernists is on the question of constructivism, which is best seen as one part of a complex story, as well as on a couple of related issues concerning universals and continuity. In both historical interpretation and the philosophy of history, universals have been tasked over the centuries with several functions. I share postmodernists' skepticism of the first, which is to afford some large and usually teleological structure (theological, metaphysical, political, cultural, or quasi-biological) for the subsumption of specific events or causal laws which form a basis for historical explanation or indeed prediction and which are alleged to have been empirically discovered. A second task is to describe meanings, tendencies, and thematic repetitions of a less grand and more impressionistic kind, and if universals of the first sort are well lost, the second are not but are necessary

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conditions of historical understanding. The latter are often implicit or assumed, even among the skeptical, and there is no historical understanding without them. There is no micro-history without macro- and vice versa. The bare historical particular, if it exists at all, is unintelligible without a concept of one kind or another with reference to which the interpreter may negotiate their way through the hermeneutic circle. The question is not whether to employ concepts at all but which ones, since it is in the interplay of universal and particular that historical interpretation occurs—and also whether such universals are pure constructions or, as I maintain, arise phenomenologically from the things themselves or from the manifold of particulars with which the historian is constantly confronted.

When postmodern ideas began to take hold within the historical disciplines in the 1970s and '80s, skepticism was the order of the day, but the resultant triumph of particularity, discontinuity, and rhetoric turned a breath of fresh air into an overreaction. The trouble now, as one historian sums it up, is that "[a]t present we are in danger of seeing rhetorics behind every tree."[34] We are in danger as well of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, as any talk of universality, continuity, or discernible patterns and repetitions in the course of the human past is jettisoned along with the metanarratives to which they may bear little or no resemblance.[35] Skepticism of philosophy of history in the grand style—that which resonates with Augustine, Hegel, or Marx—is as fashionable among practicing historians as among postmodern theorists, and it has won the day. What remains questionable is the possibility of universality in a more chastened form, and here my approach owes more to hermeneutics than its postmodern relative. Among the central problems of hermeneutics are the relation between the universal and the particular and the nature of historical consciousness. "For Gadamer," the leading representative of philosophical hermeneutics of the second half of the last century, "the relation between universality and particularity is not vertical or hierarchical, but rather lateral and circular. For this very reason," as Saulius Geniusas writes, "his universalism is nonessentialist and nonhegemonic, yet of a normative kind, allowing for the possibility of a philosophical critique of existing practices."[36] Gadamer spoke of the relation between universality and particularity as "the heart of the hermeneutical problem," and it might also be described as the heart of the philosophical-historical problem: how to surpass the false opposition between the tired universalism of old and a somewhat reactionary postmodern particularism.[37] There is no understanding the particular without the universal, and the latter itself, when it is not a bloodless abstraction or a castle in the air, is no pure construction but arises from the phenomena.[38] By the same token, historical narratives neither "exist only in the mind of the historian" nor are unearthed empirically in fully objective form. Historical consciousness is thoroughly implicated in history and the conceptual framework that belongs to it, and it also strives for an

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understanding and a self-understanding that is partial, rhetorical, and critical. As Ankersmit has noted, "It makes eminent sense to say that both subject (the historian) and his object (the past) belong to one historical world. This basic thought was the source of inspiration for all of hermeneutics from Herder and Friedrich Schleiermacher down to Hans-Georg Gadamer. To mention just one aspect: in historical inquiry it is impossible to clearly demarcate the subject (the historian or, more generally, anyone living in the present) from the object (the past)."[39] The same may be said of particulars and universals: the relation between them is capturable in terms of what Gadamer called "belonging." It is not the case that in historical interpretation, a bare particular (some determinate and pre-existing fact) is encountered and subsumed under a universal that is separate and apart from it. Universals, including narratives, are neither objectively given nor constructed in a vacuum but come into being in the back-and-forth with particulars; neither exists in fully constituted form apart from the other, and neither construction nor discovery is a phenomenologically adequate notion. Historical understanding is a *mélange* of generalities and particulars, narratives and story elements, plot lines and meanings, tendencies, patterns, repetitions, overlapping similarities, partial continuities, and limited differences, all of which must be configured and reconfigured by historians who are as much inventors as discoverers. If empiricists underestimate the creative element, postmodernists and constructivists sometimes err on the other side, and it is important that we do neither. "Narrative," as David Carr (following Ricoeur) points out, "is a 'synthesis of the heterogenous' in which disparate elements of the human world—'agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results, etc.'—are brought together and harmonized. Like metaphor, . . . narrative is a 'semantic innovation' in which something new is brought into the world by means of language."[40]

History is dynamic—continuous and discontinuous, transforming and recurring, surprising and unsurprising, and in every case contingent—and any understanding of it must match its complexity. The tendencies, patterns, and thematic regularities that are the stuff of philosophical reflection are not aprioristic but arise from historical inquiry, both the practice of interpretation and the record of the past itself. Any universals and narratives must emerge from the phenomena and not be imposed on them. As Fay recommends, "issues in the philosophy and theory of history are best explored by taking real and substantive bits of historical prose for examination, and working out ideas in and through these examples."[41] We shall spend some time in what follows drawing upon historians' accounts of a good many particulars in ancient and early medieval western history—to ensure that abstract reflection is phenomenologically grounded and to avoid the grand flights of speculation that we have seen too often before. The picture that emerges is one in which lines do not run parallel but overlap, intersect, clash, shade into each other,

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resemble and differ from each other, and repeat themselves in a multitude of ways. The better historians have an eye for such complexities and so must the philosopher of history.

The argument that follows takes a clue from Nietzsche's remark in *On the Genealogy of Morals* regarding the origin of Christian morality: "It was in *this* sphere then, the sphere of legal obligations, that the moral conceptual world of 'guilt,' 'conscience,' 'duty,' 'sacredness of duty' had its origin: its beginnings were, like the beginnings of everything great on earth, soaked in blood thoroughly and for a long time. And might one not add that, fundamentally, this world has never since lost a certain odor of blood and torture?"[42] Nietzsche's point is characteristically overstated, but the truth in his remark is apparent not only in the origin "of everything [and everyone] great on earth"—think of the various characters in history who came to be known as "the Great" (we shall meet several of them in what follows)—but the ordinary course of events no less. His term for this phenomenon is "will to power," and in the story that he told it is utterly pervasive in human history and human existence. I shall not be using Nietzsche's terminology or following his analysis closely, however when we survey the larger course of history and particular turning points within it, the drive for one or another form of predominance—ascendancy, power, coercion, violence, whatever one wishes to call it—appears about as ubiquitous as he claimed it was. If we wish to understand the human past, we must begin here.

We do not end here, however. I shall take a second clue from Ricoeur, who has stated: "*violence is the opposite of discourse*. If we were not convinced in this, violence would not be a problem. A being who speaks and who by speaking pursues meaning, a being who has had experience of discussion, that is, of the search for agreement by means of language—it is for such a being that violence is a problem. Violence and discourse are the two opposite poles of human existence. . . . Violence is always the interruption of discourse: discourse is always the interruption of violence. A violence that speaks is already a violence that is trying to be in the right, that is exposing itself to the gravitational pull of Reason and already beginning to renegue on its own character as violence. The prime example of this is that the 'tyrant' always tries to get discourse on his side. The tyrant, for Plato, is the opposite of the philosopher, the man of rational discourse. But in order to succeed tyranny has to seduce, persuade, flatter; it has never been the dumb exercise of brute force."[43] What Ricoeur spoke of as "opposite poles of human existence" might better be characterized as a spectrum at one end of which is the drive for predominance and at the other the phenomenon of interlocution—discourse, conversation, knowledge—for the two show abiding tendencies not only to occur together but to intend—to run contrary but also to interrelate and become entangled, to be about, and lead into—one another, not as a contest of good and evil but as summer always already intends winter and

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vice versa, and where dualism is replaced with a more organic conception not dissimilar to the ancient Chinese conception of yin and yang, these other seeming opposites which lead invariably into one another. There are no true opposites in human affairs, and to see this we need look no further than the historical record. The picture that emerges is no simple morality tale or anything that might issue in a political manifesto. It is exceedingly complex, vague, contradictory, and ever changing, a kaleidoscope of actors, motivations, dynamics, and intentionalities running in a thousand directions, even while the larger picture is not chaotic.

How to conceptualize historical change will be the topic of Chapter 2. There I outline a theoretical nomenclature that attempts to describe, however impressionistically, the enduring phenomena that are interlocution and its seeming antithesis, the struggle for predominance, and the endless back-and-forth that plays out between them. History, as the Greeks knew, exhibits enormous repetition, but the sense in which this is so must be clarified. The second chapter undertakes this conceptual task while the chapters of Part II take a closer look at the birth of the ancient western world, with an eye toward particular developments in the social, political, and intellectual history of early Greece. This transitional period affords a clue to the logic of transition itself and little resembles the dictionary definition of a temporary interim between two stable states. Part III turns to the period of late antiquity and the transition into the middle ages. Here again what shows itself in the social, political, and intellectual history of the time are similar themes to what we discuss theoretically in Chapter 2 and in a more historical light in the chapters of Part II.

NOTES

1. Paulus Orosius, *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, trans. Irving Woodworth Raymond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 30.

2. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Growth and Origin* (New York: Dover, 1960), 4–5.

3. Blaise Pascal, Voltaire, Francis Bacon, Christian Wolff, Marquis de Condorcet, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, the Encyclopaedists, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schelling, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G. W. F. Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Adam Smith, Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, among others. Speaking of the term "teleology," Henning Trüper writes: "Invented by Christian Wolff in 1728, with Diderot's *Encyclopédie* and the philosophy of Kant as its most powerful transmitters, teleology soon projected itself into the furthest corners of philosophical discourse. Wolff's placid definition held that we 'might call Teleology' that 'part of natural philosophy which explains the ends of things, and which thus far lacks a name, even if it is most ample and useful.' Some two millennia after the Greek philosophers had begun to discuss the status of the explanation of something by reference to an end, goal, aim or purpose, the issue was antique. . . . As opposed to the dry technicality of the *causa finalis* or the *conatus* (inherent tendency or direction, a Leibnizian term), 'teleology' promised the *future* achievement of a well-ordered doctrine, a disciplined *logos* with a clearly and distinctly defined ambit, and a 'most ample and useful' application. In a word, teleology became a project. The very

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term expressed a conviction about what philosophy had so far failed to achieve but would, soon, amend. Even if the future course of the development of thought was not known in detail, the sense of direction was clear. In an oblique and imbalanced manner, Wolff coupled history and teleology." Henning Trüper, "Introduction: Teleology and History: Nineteenth-Century Fortunes of an Enlightenment Project" in *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, eds. Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

4. Theodore Martin, *The Life of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort* vol. 3 (Boston: Adamant Media Corporation, 2001), 247. Throughout this book all italics in quoted material are in the original.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 2004), 59.

6. Ibid., 103.

7. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 80.

8. "[A]lthough Darwin did not explicitly authorize a teleological view of human cultures and of human history in the *Descent of Man*, both the tenor of his arguments and the colonial context in which they were made tended to bolster teleological narratives concerning the relation between so-called 'primitive' and 'advanced' cultures." Angus Nicholls, "Against Darwin: Teleology in German Philosophical Anthropology" in *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World*, eds. Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 92.

9. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 459.

10. Herbert Spencer, "Progress: Its Law and Cause" in *Westminster Review* 67 (1857), 246.

11. Michael Ruse, *The Philosophy of Human Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 111.

12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 35.

13. As Michel de Montaigne noted in the sixteenth century, "I am prepared to forgive our own people for having no other model or rule of perfection but their own manners and behaviour, for it is a common failing not only of the mob but of virtually all men to set their sights within the limitations of the customs into which they were born." Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin, 2003), 331.

14. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, xxix.

15. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 53–54.

16. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, trans. Ramon J. Betanzos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 268.

17. Barry Allen, *Knowledge and Civilization* (Boulder: Westview, 2004), 171.

18. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 24, 34.

19. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), ix.

20. The phrase is altogether too grand and metaphysical, yet something akin to a philosophical anthropology (a nascent one perhaps) may be discernible here. If the human being, regarded either individually or collectively, is in a fundamental sense what it does and has done over the course of time then it may well be history that offers the best vantage from which to understand this most enigmatic of beings.

21. Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.

22. Tony Judt, "Chronicles of a Death Foretold" in *After the End of History*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Collins and Brown, 1992), 115.

23. Brian Fay, "Introduction: The Linguistic Turn and Beyond in Contemporary Theory of History" in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 6.

24. Noël Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative" in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 35.

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25. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1987), 48.

26. Willie Thompson, *Postmodernism and History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 87.

27. Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason: A Poststructuralist Mapping of History* vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6. The same author writes: "Foucault came to be known as the 'philosopher of discontinuity.'" Ibid., 9.

28. Foucault, *Dits et Écrits* vol. 1, eds. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 582.

29. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969), III sec. 24, p. 151.

30. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), sec. 2, p. 10.

31. Thompson, *Postmodernism and History*, 1. See especially Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *The Practical Past* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Dominick Lacapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) and *Understanding Others: Peoples, Animals, Pasts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983) and *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); and Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

32. White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 27. Carroll outlines White's constructivism as follows: "Narrative coherence, then, is an *imposition* on the historical past. Moreover, the patterns of narrative coherence thus imposed upon (or constructed out of) a collection of historical events are *conventional* (rather than, say, realistically motivated). This inventing, distorting, constructing, imposing, constituting, meaning-making (signifying), and convention-applying activity are all acts of the imagination (in contrast, one supposes, to some more literal information-assimilating process)." Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative," 38.

33. The literature is vast, but see especially Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989).

34. Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1994), 14.

35. As Perez Zagorin writes of Ankersmit, "Another of Ankersmit's prescriptions tells historians that they can no longer deal with big problems or seek to reconstruct or discover patterns in the past. . . . All that now remains for them to be concerned with are micro-subjects and 'historical scraps.'" Perez Zagorin, "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations" in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 202.

36. Saulius Geniusas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's Concept of the Horizon and Its Ethico-Political Critique" in *Hermeneutic Philosophies of Social Science*, ed. Babette Babich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 209.

37. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 310.

38. Randall Collins makes this point as follows: "There is no such thing as purely narrative history. It is impossible to recount particulars without reference to general concepts. Nouns and verbs contain implicit generalizations ('another one of *those* again'). Even proper names are not as particularistic as they might seem, for they pick out some entity assumed to have enduring contours over time and contain an implicit theory of what holds that 'thing' together. . . . To impose a name, whether abstract or particular, is to impose a scheme of what hangs together and what is separated from what." Randall Collins, *Macrohistory: Essays in Sociology of the Long* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13.

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39. Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 16.

40. David Carr, "Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity" in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, eds. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), 139–40.

41. Fay, "Introduction: The Linguistic Turn and Beyond in Contemporary Theory of History," 1.

42. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II sec. 26, p. 65.

43. Paul Ricoeur, *Main Trends in Philosophy* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 221.

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Chapter Two

Nomenclature

In the shadow play that is human history, many shadows enjoy a relatively brief career while others are more enduring and manifest themselves in form after form. The ancient adage that history repeats itself is well borne out by the evidence—not in every detail, of course, but in rough patterns, enduring tendencies, and recurring themes that reflect the being of the subjects of history themselves and that are played out century upon century, sometimes in ways that are readily apparent but more often beneath the surface of everyday life. Undercurrents one might call them. They are not laws or causes in any grand sense, one that is suggestive of mechanics, necessity, or eternity, but tendencies. History tends to work in certain ways, to exhibit a kind of logic, and to describe that logic as ambiguous is an understatement. By logic I do not mean an orderly system of rules but a disorderly play of shadows in which knowledge is elusive but not wholly beyond reach. Historians after all do know certain things, and some of what they know rises above the level of the particular. It is this with which I am concerned, those—loosely speaking—patterns, undercurrents, and tendencies that afford some semblance of order or structure to the endless sea of particularity with which the historical record presents us.

Historical change is cognizable, provided that we have an eye for ambiguity and a will to look beneath surfaces. We are not in the land of clear and distinct ideas but of details upon details, some of which appear to come from out of the blue while others bear traces of what has come before. Some universals do emerge from the particulars, provided that we are thinking not in the spirit of apriorism but phenomenologically, historically, and philosophically, that is, that we are not imposing categories upon the phenomena but really allowing the phenomena to speak to us. History, to be understood, must be listened to, regarded not with an agenda but with an imagination.

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Historians are storytellers as well as empiricists of a kind, and the narratives they recount turn upon themes, repetitions, and something resembling an order. The human story is roughly intermediate between a boundless cacophony and an onward march. These are the Scylla and Charybdis between which we must navigate.

We begin with an hypothesis. History has the structure of a dialectic. I hasten to add that this is not the dialectic of a Hegel or a Marx. It is not a formula, it has no stages, and it has little to no predictive value. It is not remotely teleological. To speak of it as dialectical here means that it has a back-and-forth structure, where the two poles of the dialectic are what I shall refer to as predominance and interlocution. The dialectic itself leads nowhere but to more of the same—but in limitless variation, shifting hues, and vague resemblances, none of which rise above the level of approximations. The endless ebb and flow of power and persuasion is never far from the surface of historical life and animates so much of what takes place there that it is no exaggeration to speak of it as the basic structure of historical change. Transitions constitute but relative turning points in a dialectic that is without absolute points of origin or ending and whose structure resembles the rising and falling of tides. The ancients were correct, at least partially: natural processes of generation and decay, the changing of seasons, or the turning of night into day afford a rough model for history. All is repeated, but with a difference. No two days are alike, not completely, but relatively they may be. Historical lines do not run parallel but form a circle of resemblances, affinities, and analogues, new variations on themes that are anything but. This is part of what makes the study of history so poignant: the revelation that "twas always thus" and "the more things change, the more they stay the same" are, in the realm of human affairs, fascinatingly and soberingly true. Were I prone to exaggeration, I would say that change does not exist. However, I am not prone to exaggeration, so shall have to speak more measuredly: change does exist, however not in absolute terms but in the form of continual variations on themes, tendencies, and patterns that are old and in some instances universal.

Among these themes, none is more enduring or fundamental than conversation and its seeming opposite: violence, self-seeking, and the competition for ascendency. Except when regarded as abstractions, these two phenomena—interlocution and predominance—are never visible in pure form or apart from the other, but rather intend and lead into one another. The play between them is where the drama of history lies. It is no tale of good and evil or anything remotely simplistic; this must be emphasized. The phenomenon of interlocution crucially bears upon ideas, knowledge, and reason. The cloister, the classroom, and the library are called to mind while the natural setting of the other is the battlefield. What could the two have in common, these opposites of human existence whose very definitions indicate a contradiction and

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an absence of common ground? My hypothesis is that history is this common ground, and that every chapter of it is suggestive of their incessant interplay.

The world of ideas or the life of the mind is often spoken of as the great engine of history, and there is truth in this. The difficulty is that there is also truth in the proposition that coercion is such an engine. If history can be said to have a driving force, it would appear to have two: ideas and their apparent antithesis, for when we read history, what do we see but these two in constant combination, and always presided over by the Roman goddess Fortuna? It is overstating it to say that the two are one, but where in history one finds the former, one finds the latter not far behind, between the lines perhaps or on the reverse side of the coin. The inseparability of knowledge and power is a matter that Michel Foucault ably brought to our attention and Friedrich Nietzsche before him, although the account that follows is beholden to neither figure. Violence indeed is the great opposite of persuasion, but does it not also belong to its essence or perhaps trail it as a shadow? Historically regarded, these opposites are two aspects of a unified phenomenon, and the play between them is as constant as it is contingent.

Other major themes will emerge as well and warrant a good deal of analysis in what follows. History, as the ancients well knew, exhibits enormous repetition, the continual reiteration of ideas and tendencies, none of which appears *ex nihilo* and a great many of which show a propensity toward legitimation of some factional interest or human grouping of one kind or another, most often at the expense of another. There is a continuum here, varying shades of grey which overlap and blend into each other while remaining in some ways distinct. We are back to the play of shadows, and the continuum they form is of what I shall be referring to as predominance, legitimation, reiteration, and interlocution, atop all of which stands fortune. These are not depth structures but again rough patterns, recurring themes, impressionistic notions, and tendencies. Let us look at each of these in turn.

PREDOMINANCE

Any serious attempt to understand the dynamics of historical change or indeed history itself must begin here. What made it possible for the Roman empire—a geographically massive territory, marked by enormous diversity of culture, language, ethnicity, and belief—to persist for centuries, or for the Greeks to exert the profound and enduring influence that they did? Why did monotheism come to prevail over polytheism in the early centuries of the common era or in the time of Muhammad? On what foundation were systems of government built anywhere in the ancient world? What accounts for the rise and fall of empires, the spread of ideas, or the influence of a thinker or a system of thought? What factors were in play in the birth and the death of

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classical civilization, or in the transitional periods that were the emergence of Greece and the collapse of the Roman empire? To hazard an answer to any such question, or to a myriad of smaller questions of this kind, without explicit focus on the topic of which I now speak is naive.

Making this case will require a good deal of evidence, and the chapters of Parts II and III provide this in some detail. For now, let us consider an hypothesis of which many will require little convincing: there is no understanding history without power, and more specifically without examination of the drive, so ubiquitous in human existence, for some form of predominance, ascendency, or hegemony. The imperative to expand an historical actor's sphere of influence, be it in the realm of ideas, politics, economics, or what have you, is the closest thing to a constant that we find in the pages of human history, and it works in many ways. Coercion, violence, and war are a few, but more often such overt methods are not taken but others far more subtle. No sinister motivation need be at work here, and any general ethical statement regarding this should be suspended. Naked force falls under this heading, however it is the constant tendency of human force not to run naked but to clothe itself in the garb of legitimacy. Predominance is a demand that does not go unchallenged or unquestioned, and must redeem itself in the eyes of the powerful and ideally of all. "The prime example of this," as Ricoeur noted, "is that the 'tyrant' always tries to get discourse on his side. . . . But in order to succeed tyranny has to seduce, persuade, flatter; it has never been the dumb exercise of brute force."[1] The relation of human force and interlocution is internal and dialectical, as two poles of a continuum between which history records an incessant back and forth. Human force has an intentional structure. It is about something, for something; it is purposive and imbued with meaning. It acts with an end in view, and the end is typically a predominance over a competitor, a rival, or a foe in the accomplishment of an end. Persuasion is not foreign to it. The hypothesis is philosophical, but demonstrating it is no *a priori* exercise and can only be done with constant reference to the historical record.

I begin in ancient Rome. This study limits itself to Greco-Roman civilization for two reasons: first, the kind of knowledge we are seeking requires a good deal of retrospection, and of an order that is unattainable in any interpretation of the modern period; second, there is a wealth of scholarship in this general field, and far more than was available when the theory of progress took hold. More revealing than the question of why the empire fell is why it did not. What held it together from the time of Augustus to Augustulus, a period of some five centuries—fifteen in the eastern empire? Any satisfactory answer will need to be complex and, as is always the case when questions of this magnitude arise, historians disagree. Where they agree, however, is on the theme with which I am presently concerned.

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It has rather a lot to do with power—not (or not mainly) in the form of brute coercion but something far more nuanced and more human. Political cohesion and stability on this scale is not achieved by the sword alone, however it is beyond dispute: the sword was an ever-present factor in the life of the empire throughout its history. This included its first two centuries, the so-called "Roman peace" (*pax Romana*), which was indeed peaceful but Roman style. The logic of the empire was expansion, not only for the glory of Rome but for practical reasons. Gaining territory provided needed land and resources, a solution to population pressures in Rome, relief from fear of powerful neighbors, and political ascendency in the Mediterranean. The imperative was to widen the sphere of influence in matters large and small, not only at the level of state action but in the lives of the people. As Peter Brown observes, "We are in a world characterized by a chilling absence of legal restraints on violence in the exercise of power. . . . Violence surrounded men of the elite at every level of their lives. They grew up in households where slavery had remained a domestic school of cruelty. An institution maintained by the lash, slavery generated a distinctive pathology of power. When the doctor Galen wrote on the illnesses of the soul in the second century, the passion that bulked largest in his treatment was anger, exemplified by the blind rage of the slave owner."[2]

The image of Rome as a bloodthirsty oppressor is a caricature, of course, and while a stranger to violence it was not, the order that it achieved was made possible and sustained by a network of aristocratic persuasion and pull. The class system remained as absolute as in Greek times. A civilized society without it was as unthinkable as one without slavery and war, but predominance over the foreigner and the abject was also inseparable from education and cultivation (*paideia*). Restraint was regarded as a mark of an admirable ruler no less than an iron will, a facility with persuasive speech and learning appropriate to a member of the elite. A good governor was no villain but was under normal circumstances amenable to persuasion and inclined to moderation. Collusion with the aristocracy was always imperative, an ability to navigate an always complex system of alliances and factions all vying for ascendency. An entire social system of preeminence and privilege mirrored that of the empire itself, which for centuries maintained its hegemony through a combination of pragmatism, effectiveness, persuasion, and force—qualities that the Roman genius had a tendency to run together. More detailed analysis of this point will be provided in the chapters of Part III.

The triumph of the Christian religion provides another clear example of our theme. Here again the details will emerge later, but for now: what made it possible for this improbable movement to become in time the official religion of the empire? Centuries of polytheist tradition are not easily overturned. Were the people no longer satisfied with the gods of old? Had the gods become moribund perhaps, pale in comparison with the one God of the

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Christians? Had the people throughout the far-flung reaches of the Mediterranean world been transformed by the teachings of Jesus or the moral example of the martyrs? In some measure they were, but explanations of this order do not begin to do justice to one of the most significant transformations in thought and way of life ever seen in the western world. As a rule, people do not easily part with their divinities, and the transition from polytheism to monotheism was fraught from the beginning with complexity, difficulty, and more than occasionally violence. What happened?

It has rather a lot to do with power once gain. This will become a familiar refrain: a climate of violence, or the potential for this, was never far from the surface in this general period. It was not always overt, of course, and had countless mild manifestations. Their combination, when pointing in a single direction, does not compel an outcome in billiard ball fashion, but it does create a certain probability, and in time the swords did come into alignment. At first, as everyone knows, they were aligned by the Roman state against the Christians, a story that has been told, retold, and embellished in the extreme for 2,000 years. We shall examine some of the details of this story later, but for now it will suffice to note that the empire took a far more relaxed view of Christians than the latter would claim in the centuries that followed. The state religion was polytheism, and it was welcoming of a great variety of divinities that were recognized in disparate regions of the empire, including the God of the Jews and the Christians—provided a similar tolerance and recognition of the gods of their fellow Romans. It was the monotheists who were intolerant. Their determined opposition to the gods and vehement refusal to offer the traditional sacrifices looked like an atheism that risked incurring the wrath of the gods. Martin Goodman notes, "From the point of view of non-Christians, such opposition to pagan worship was both noticeable and reprehensible. . . . Christian martyrs were killed not so much for their championing of Christ as their refusal to worship other gods. If indeed some Christians were the first individuals in the ancient world to preach, not that gentile pagan idolatry was foolish (as did Epicureans and Jews), but that it was immoral, the antagonism of pagan society to their teachings is hardly difficult to comprehend."[3]

Confrontation was inevitable and the swords were drawn—first against the atheists and later against the other atheists. Some Christians were killed, although the frequency and numbers involved would be exaggerated, and in time they would return the favor. The eventual ascendency of the new religion owed more than a little to the conversion of the emperor Constantine, a spiritual transformation that owed more than a little to the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Religion and warfare, coercion, or something very much like it were constant companions in the ancient world. The triumph of the new religion was not unrelated to the persecutions many of its representatives carried out against their former oppressors, only more effectively. Once Christianity became the religion of the state, more than a few bishops as-

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serted the right to destroy pagan temples and sacred sites or to use whatever methods proved necessary for the salvation of souls. The art of persuasion was exercised, some of it gentle and some of it not, and all within a context of sectarianism and strife. Violent clashes between Christian and polytheist factions occurred, persecutions and counter-persecutions, until a victor emerged—a religion of love, it was said, which was also rather adept with the sword.

Countless examples illustrate the point. The above two are among the more obvious, and many others will emerge in what follows. The drive for predominance is so utterly apparent in human affairs that proving the point scarcely requires effort. Gibbon remarked that "the history of nations" is largely carved in "paths of blood," and the statement is only mildly exaggerated.[4] Power, authority, and class division are such pervasive themes throughout the ancient period that there is no understanding any location or specific time within it without attention to them. Greek civilization was explicitly aristocratic, and its history is the history not of the ordinary citizen but of the great and the powerful. Being Greek was itself a distinction. "Throughout the Hellenistic world," as William V. Harris writes, "there was a power assumption on the part of the Greeks, well indicated by their strange abstention from learning foreign languages, that what was Greek was best; in fact the assumption may have applied with especial strength to language."[5] Why learn the language of barbarians? The very word "barbarian" meant a being that was incapable of language, something intermediate between a Greek and a beast. One language and one culture predominated, in the opinion of the Greeks anyway.

Greek civilization was structured from the beginning by a system of class and authority. This largely rural, agrarian society was dominated by an urban elite, the great inventors of democracy who carefully distinguished those who could participate in the political life of the city-state from those who could not. Cultivation, education, and bloodlines established the basis of a social hierarchy that was highly resistant to challenging. The Roman republic and empire alike divided its citizens into three classes: public officeholders, a financial class, and the remainder, a general pattern that would repeat itself with minimal variation throughout the ancient period. Centralization, authority, factionalism, and the struggle for preeminence were everyday facts of life.

Political authority varied between early forms of direct democracy, aristocracy, and autocracy, but throughout the variations was the predominance in some form or other of an urban elite, a network of factions, alliances, and egoisms that tended toward centralization and personal rule. Checks and balances existed, but the usual pattern through these centuries was of concentrated political authority that worked in collusion with the upper classes. A system of patronage and mutual egoism combined with public spiritedness

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and aristocratic dignity, while rulers, including the emperor himself, ideally were not mere tyrants but men of refinement and judgment who could be trusted in some measure not to abuse their considerable power. A system of upper-class authority persisted through changes in political forms and institutions, and it was a system that early Christians did not alter but employed to their advantage.

Authority was not limited to powers of the state, of course. It was exhibited in a great variety of forms, including the curious figure of the philosopher. Through the Roman period, as Brown remarks, this unusual character "almost always belonged to the notable class and shared in their *paideia* to a high degree. They represented a 'typical blend of philosophy, rhetoric and divine learning.' But the philosopher's way of life was pointedly different. He was held to owe nothing to ties of patronage and friendship. He was a man who, by a heroic effort of the mind, had found freedom from society. For that reason, he carried his right to *parrhésia* [free speech] in his own person. He could address the great directly, in terms of a code of decorum and self-restraint that he himself exemplified to the highest degree because he was uncompromised by political attachments." Often a recluse, the philosopher, in the popular imagination anyway, was something of a free spirit, beholden to no one, and a "privileged counterpart to those who exercised power."[6] Wisdom and virtue gave him an authority that entitled him to intervene in public life, to be a voice of reason in a system of angry self-seeking, and to exhibit rare courage in the face of the ruler. In time this personage would be replaced by the bishop and the martyr, Christian figures who claimed an authority that owed less to rulership than a reputation for uncommon virtue. The image of the man of God, exhibiting Christ-like majesty while remaining a man of the people and lover of the poor, exercised a powerful hold and would continue to do so through the middle ages. The moral purity of the martyr and the authority of the bishop displaced the philosophers while partaking of their substance. By late antiquity the emperor would listen to the holy man in the way he once listened to the pagan lover of wisdom, but on a larger scale. The bishop's preeminence owed in part to his moral authority and not a little to the power of the church. Militant religiosity gained favor, not least among the lower classes whose metaphysical standing was now elevated, if not their life circumstances. Bishops were sure to include representatives of the poor among their retinue and to exercise persuasion with reference to stories of persecution and martyrdom which sanctified the elimination of rivals. In the period after Constantine persecution became "the defining narrative of Christianity's formative history," as Thomas Sizgorich puts it, "a history of desperate defense of an imperiled community by inspired individuals whose capacity and willingness to face terrifying violence preserved the one community of God upon the earth."[7]

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From the powerful to the abject, one lived in the ancient world by assuming one's place in a system of authority and class, negotiating privileges and obligations, and avoiding the wrath of superiors. The violence and absolutism of this world should not be overstated, but the potential for both was a constant presence amid the general struggle for influence and predominance that characterized this vast period.

LEGITIMATION

Ancient historians held little interest in what is called social history. It was the deeds of the powerful and the destinies of the great that drew their attention, events of political and military history that transpired under the watchful eyes of the gods. For Thucydides it was the struggle for power on which history primarily turns, and it is an opinion well supported by the evidence. His overall assessment was typical of the period: history moves on the pattern of nature, with continual variation on the same themes. Beneath the things that change are things that do not but that show themselves in endless multiformity, and none more so than the human appetite for predominance. The future, on the ancient view, can confidently be expected to resemble the past. Six centuries after Thucydides, Marcus Aurelius would express the point this way in his *Meditations*: "Consider the past; such great changes of political supremacies. You may foresee also the things that will be. For they will certainly be of like form, and it is not possible that they should deviate from the order of the things that take place now: accordingly to have contemplated human life for forty years is the same as to have contemplated it for ten thousand years. For what more will you see."[8]

Neither the study of history nor the philosophy of it affords a knowledge of the future, and the themes that show themselves from one age to the next are not a blueprint for what will or must be but a record of what has been. The cyclical structure of nature, for ancient thinkers, affords a model for history, and it can be predicted that summer will follow spring. The problem is that nothing in human history is like this. Whether the future will be "of like form" with the past is a question for prophets. Our concern lies with the interpretation of the past and the recurring themes and tendencies that are played out time and again through the centuries. During the time period that is in question here, Thucydides appears correct: the vying for ascendency is a basic structure of history, yet the point requires considerable qualification. The image of brute coercion marauding its way through civilizations and ages is a distortion. The predominant, whether we are speaking of individuals, collectivities, nations, or ideas, marched with a sword in one hand and, typically, a book in the other. This claim did not go uncontested but required

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some fig leaf of reason to redeem it in the minds of the people—and, of course, some more than others.

To endure, power requires legitimation. I have suggested that human force is internally related to interlocution and persuasion, where this runs the gamut from philosophical reasoning to sophistry and everything in between—negotiation, mutual self-seeking, rationalization, propaganda, and manipulation in a myriad of forms. Legitimation is strategic, and without it the drive for predominance enjoys at best a brief career. This is not an *a priori* hypothesis, and the historical evidence will emerge as we proceed. For now, let us continue to paint in broad strokes before turning to more detailed analysis in the chapters that follow.

Power does not operate by force alone but, if it is to succeed, must seek justification in some form. It seeks this by appealing to whatever ideas hold currency in a given time and place, most often religious, economic, political, or moral ideas or some strategic combination of the same. There need be no sophisticated ideology involved, but a shrewd mix of pragmatism, religion, propaganda, reputation, lineage, skill in managing factions, and of course force makes for a persuasive combination. Political rulers needed this, and when successful spared no effort in finding it. The same can be said of religious movements or indeed any historical agent that seeks any kind of ascendency. The sword alone will not suffice, or not for long.

Respectability must be gained, and when good reasons are unavailable, bad ones will do, but reasons in some shape or form there must be. The emergence and eventual hegemony of the Christian movement is again a case in point. A new religion requires legitimation, and if it is to overturn centuries of tradition, a great deal of it. The Mediterranean world knew many divinities. What would possess it to renounce them for one? Adherents needed to be won and at all levels of Roman society. How was it accomplished? The narrative, naturally, is complex and took a few centuries to unfold, but the ascendency it gained owed much to miracle stories, proselytizing, propaganda, ambition, authority, and credulity. Miracles of healing found a receptive audience and effectively out-competed their polytheist predecessors together with similar stories of wonders and blessings that the God of the Christians bestowed on the faithful. Many a bishop embarked on ambitious building campaigns, erecting churches to replace the traditional temples. There were works of charity along with banquets and other public benefits made possible by the church's increasing wealth and prestige. All of this had an effect well prior to Constantine's conversion, and on a population that was often not slow to accept certain ideas. "One feature of the time," A. D. Nock writes, "was a marked credulity. Anything reported on any authority was to the man of education possible and to the man in the street probable or even certain. The parody of this attitude in Lucian's *Lover of Lies* is not exaggerated. We have only to look at the letters of Pliny, and to read his story

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of the dolphin which took a boy to school, or glance at the writers known as *paradoxographi* who told of miracles and other unnatural history. The recording of wonders and epiphanies in temple inscriptions was an old Greek practice"—and it was carried to new heights by the followers of Jesus.[9]

Credulity in any period is a difficult commodity to measure, but it appears not to have been in short supply during the transition to monotheism in its Jewish, Christian, and Islamic forms. Each had its sword and its book, a combination that proved strategic in eliminating opposition and gaining legitimacy. Political actors adopted a similar method. An example (among the myriad available) is the Flavian dynasty which ruled the Roman empire from the ascension of Vespasian in 69 A.D. to the death of Domitian in 96. The former's rise to power was chaotic, coming in the midst of civil war during the year of the four emperors. The general's claim to the emperorship was contested and required swift legitimation in the manner that was customary in imperial politics. Having been declared emperor by his troops, Vespasian's faction required a propaganda campaign which achieved results by boasting—and exaggerating the importance—of his suppression of rebellion in Judaea, a victory of minor importance to the empire until suitably embellished. Military prowess, for the glory of Rome and in the name of the gods, spelled legitimacy, and this questionable general of common birth used this claim to rationalize what was essentially an overthrow of his rival, the short-lived emperor Vitellius. Ending unpopular policies of the recently deceased Nero and ensuring the grain supply from Egypt to Rome also consolidated his hold on power.

This is a minor but typical instance of how the appetite for power in the ancient period worked in constant combination with the imperative for legitimation. Many other examples illustrate a recurring pattern, as we shall see. The trappings of democratic rule concealed a reality of usually benevolent (and sometimes surprisingly competent) dictatorship. Roman nobility disliked dictators and maintained an often tenuous but determined grip on the senate. Memories of the Roman republic endured and tyranny had an efficient solution: assassination. This, of course, had been the fate of Julius Caesar, the celebrated general who had removed the autocrat Sulla and eventually assumed dictatorial powers for himself before meeting an unkind fate. This man assumed power by force but was no thug. He legitimized his rule in accordance with Roman customs and governed with an acuity that was characteristic of him. He too had a fighting creed—republicanism—until the other republicans did him in.

The great rulers all had this and even the mediocrities sought it—a fighting creed, which by no coincidence was the same creed that found general favor in a given time and place. Constantine was hardly the first to have his "In this sign, conquer." Only the sign had changed; the rest conformed to a pattern. Ascendency was gained not through force alone but legitimation.

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The values and norms that prevailed needed to be respected, and when they were not, a solution was ready to hand. Constantine's sword and halo was no paradox but a job description. Legitimation—some more or less sellable amalgam of existing norms and the striving for predominance—is as much of a force driving historical change as is power itself. It is an imperative that the preeminent appear to have understood for as long as history records. It is their deeds that ancient historians saw fit to recount, not the lives of the undistinguished. Their deeds received the blessings of the gods and drew divine favor for the community. The real power always lay with the army; they needed to be appeased no less than the upper classes, however appeasing either required more than an appeal to egoism alone. The gods and conventions were not to be crossed, or not flagrantly and not for long. Flouting either spelled *hubris*, and the ancients well knew what followed from this.

Much of the business of historical change lies here, in the always complex interplay of the drive for ascendency and its rationalization. An important factor in this interplay is the topic to which I now turn.

REITERATION

That the historical process contains not a little repetition was as known to Greek and Roman thinkers as it is to us. The evidence for this seemed incontrovertible to ancient historians, and so much so that, as we have seen, any notion of teleology would have struck them as ludicrous as well as impious. My argument follows in kind, although I shall leave aside the notion of piety and argue that the most potent method by which legitimacy was achieved was not only to connect with existing norms but more specifically to repeat particular ideas and practices in new forms, to heed precedents and follow along in an identifiable cultural pattern. Historical events are novel variations on received themes, and as such lead in no direction but to more of the same. New ideas and undertakings justify themselves by being linked to the past, presented as a continuation and an appropriation of something that came before, and where the rule is borrow and vary. Absolute novelty does not exist, and this includes "the Greek miracle." The Greeks were not miracle workers but master borrowers, cultural appropriators on a large scale whose genius was not to create *ex nihilo* but to synthesize and refine cultural elements that were either indigenous or, more often, imported. They were not alone in this. The Romans did the same and followed in the wake of their Greek predecessors in the manner of a diligent student. No servility is intended here, nor any spirit of apriorism. The hypothesis is that legitimation is won principally through the reiteration of received cultural elements, often

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with the necessary minimum of variation, and it will need to be borne out by the evidence.

The details will emerge as we proceed, but for now let us look at a few relatively clear cases in point. I shall be speaking of a culture, following Geertz, as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [let us say human beings quite generally] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[10] As definitions go, this one is rather good, at least for our purposes here. Reiteration refers to the more or less novel repetition or appropriation of the kind of symbols, concepts, and meanings of which Geertz was speaking. (I do not employ the concept of "memes" for the reason that the kind of cultural elements that are in question do not reproduce themselves in unaltered form on the biological model of genes but are revised, on however small a scale, in every instance of their transmission and repetition. They are also bearers of meaning, something decidedly intangible and interpretable, and accordingly contestable and inexhaustible.) Once again, it is strategic. How did Roman polytheism, whose gods every republican and imperial ruler before Constantine needed to appease, come to prevail? What grounded it, and from where did their religious ideas and their gods come? They were largely borrowed from the Greeks, as were so many other Roman cultural elements. Where did the Greeks get them? How is it, for example, that Greek religion conceived of the relation of myth and reason in quite the way that it did—as intimate, virtually indistinguishable acquaintances which the philosophers would slowly begin to question? On what basis did such notions prevail in the period of archaic Greece?

Being honored by time was highly persuasive throughout this general period. Lineage, pedigree, and tradition were a powerful grounding for any proposed innovation or, better, alteration. Better the old than the new. The golden age lay in the past, in the time of Homeric legend wherein distinctions between literal and symbolic, fact and fiction, *mythos* and *logos* are not easily drawn. The earliest philosophers themselves were also poets, and while the ostensible transition "from *mythos* to *logos*" that they would attempt created some separation between the two, this was no crossing of the Rubicon but a gradual and partial transformation. Myth itself, for as far back as it can be traced, has never been without its reasons any more than the rationality of Greek philosophers and scientists was differentiated entirely from the mythical and the poetic. Myth is not literal. Asking whether the Greeks believed in their gods is like asking whether Juliet "really" said, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" She did say this; she also did not. The question whether they really believed all of that is anachronistic and misses the point of ancient mythology.

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Homer was the great teacher of the Greeks, and the philosophers were no exception. Plato's ambivalence about the poets is well known, but even here we do not find any total rejection or departure from the mythical but a partial and limited emergence from the old forms. The earliest philosophers were also students of Homer, while Homer himself (or themselves) was not the originator but the recorder of oral legends that were recovered from Greek tradition. Absolute points of origin are not to be found here but gradual transformations of earlier transformations and a trail that does not end but becomes unfollowable. Greek myth exhibited considerable continuity with its forebears, including the understanding or the sense of myth itself. Ancient myths should never be read literally, as this is almost certainly not how the Greeks themselves, particularly the more educated, took them. Their legends exhibited no chasm between symbolic and literal any more than the earlier stories on which they drew. The Greek sense of myth appears to be an appropriation and a reiteration of its predecessors in the ancient world, with a degree of variation that is difficult to measure. Myth is inseparable not only from reason but from ritual, the organized enactment of meanings that bore far more on human experience than supernatural entities. The truth in ritual and myth was less (perhaps not at all) metaphysical than existential and ethical. The mysteries at Eleusis, as Karen Armstrong points out, were not likely a Greek invention, in the sense of something that is without precedent, but a reiteration: "In the Neolithic period too, the myths and rituals of passage helped people to accept their mortality, to pass on to the next stage, and to have the courage to change and grow."[11] The same can be said of a great many of their stories, heroes, and divinities themselves. The story of Persephone and Demeter is likely a neolithic appropriation. Herakles and Artemis both likely date back to the paleolithic era. Many of their gods have a decidedly Egyptian aspect, and so on. Nock notes that "the Hellenistic taste for the exotic" found expression in "the philosophic tendency to find concealed wisdom in all or any non-Greek traditions," including those farther east. "Similarities have been noted between the mysticism of Plotinus and Buddhism, and influence is possible, but must at the moment remain very questionable. . . . Cultural contact is shown by Indian borrowings in astrology and art, . . . but the only certain debt of Greece to India is in folk-tale, above all in animal fables, and here Greece received what it did early, certainly by the third century B.C., perhaps by the fifth, and it is possible that Persia was the intermediary."[12]

The Greek propensity for reiterating, borrowing, and refining cultural elements wherever they found them would be echoed by the Romans who appropriated wholesale Greek cultural forms. The examples again are numerous and include the venerable figure of the bishop of late antiquity. This personage was at once a living reminder of Jesus of Nazareth and a continuation of the Greek ideal of *paideia*, a Christian successor to the aristocracy of

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old and by no means their nemesis. Christians were still called upon to become educated in the Greek manner, but now as a preparation for religious salvation, while the bishop served in the role formerly occupied by the sage, the poet, and the rhetorician. The change they affected left most of the existing order standing. As Brown writes, "Like stones shaken in a sieve, the upper classes of the cities took on a new complexion: the Christian bishop and his clergy were more prominent than before. But the same stones remained, if redistributed in a different pattern."[13] A little violence helped the process along, but this too was no innovation in the Roman world but a tried and true method of persuasion. The Christian church was merely good at it and outcompeted their adversaries with a determined shrewdness.

In a great many ways the Romans repeated and recycled far more than they invented. Neither science, technology, the arts, nor philosophy took any great forward strides on their watch—which is not to say that Roman civilization was lacking in these departments but that large-scale changes did not materialize. Their genius for military and imperial politics was itself a reiteration of Greek and hellenistic times, and even the exploits of Julius Caesar had their model in Alexander the Great. Of course, neither Alexander nor any other Greek created the notion of empire, which again can be traced back about as far as one cares to go in the history of our species. Collingwood took the somewhat uncharitable view that the Romans "did singularly little to advance knowledge on any of the paths that the Greeks had opened up. It kept alive for a time the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies without developing them; only in Neoplatonism did it show any philosophical originality. In natural science it did nothing to surpass the achievements of the Hellenistic age. Even in applied natural science it was extremely weak. It used Hellenistic fortification, Hellenistic artillery, and arts and crafts, partly Hellenistic and partly Celtic."[14] Collingwood's point is well taken, albeit exaggerated. Where did he imagine the Greeks obtained these things? The myth of the Greek miracle made it seem as if they conjured them out of thin air. They did no such thing. Nor, as we shall see, did all the various cultural achievements of the ancient world come crashing down in the transition into late antiquity and the middle ages, as the decline and fall narrative has long had it. Once again the pattern we see is continual reiteration of received forms, sometimes at an accelerated pace and sometimes more slowly, and legitimation by this means.

INTERLOCUTION

I have suggested that the relation between our next theme and the striving for predominance is internal and dialectical, and it is an hypothesis to which I now return and approach from the other end of the spectrum. Regarded as

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abstractions, the two notions seem as mutually opposed as anything in human existence. Regarded historically, they are inseparable and lead into each other in a dialectic that is unceasing and directionless. Where in history one finds the former, one finds the latter—and one finds them everywhere. The play between them encompasses much of the stuff of historical life and of historical change in particular.

Half a century ago, Michael Oakeshott began speaking of human culture as "the conversation of mankind," and it is a metaphor that has been repeated rather often since then.[15] The art of speaking and listening, the exchange of ideas, and the interchange of voices are suggestive of an elemental phenomenon of our existence. My concern here is not Oakeshott's own formulation of the idea but the appropriateness of the metaphor, or something like it, to the dynamics of historical transformation. Change here resembles the turn in a conversation that is spontaneous, unpredictable, and ongoing. The conversation that is an historical phenomenon and not a false idealization is never without its opposite—violence—but is connected to it as to a shadow. The larger picture of history resembles in important ways the model of a (real) conversation in which the play of ideas and the search for knowledge combine in ever-changing ways with conflict, irrationality, and manipulation—an underlying structure encompassing not only the art of conversation in an academic sense but forms of interlocution in which ideas and cultural elements of a great many kinds are brought into association. Indeed, to say "brought into" relation or placed on speaking terms is already a distortion since relationality belongs to them from the beginning and defines them. The meaning of a given element is precisely its contribution to a larger framework, a system of thought, or a way of life. Context affords meaning, and it is the ongoing context of something like conversation that brings an historical event into relief, seeing it not as an isolated episode but as a continuation, a response, or a reaction to what came before, as an anticipation or a forerunner of what follows it, or as in some way part of a configuration and temporal sequence. It conforms to a pattern here, departs from it there, repeats this and reverses that, but in each case its intelligibility lies in its contribution to an interlocutionary order.

Conversations are multifarious. They may be more or less free, larger or smaller in scope, short-lived or enduring, specialized or popular, theoretical or practical, and any number of things, but the suggestion here is that at a fundamental level of analysis we may well speak of the conversation of humanity as a kind of unity encompassing all of the above. Philosophy itself is a conversation begun—insofar as anything ever begins—by the Greeks and extending into the present, a history of individual writers who read and were influenced by other writers, who responded to their predecessors and their times, and who stood in a tradition, and much the same can be said of the history of the arts, science, religion, culture, or any of their specialized

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tributaries. Each is a history that integrates disparate phenomena into a larger universality which neither advances nor retreats but changes, rather as a conversation or a road takes a turn that is neither for the better nor the worse; it is simply a turn, a change in preference perhaps or some novel variation. Movement in historical time is neither forward nor backward, and if the marching army metaphor is invoked then it is one that, amid the sound and fury, marches in place and carries us neither closer to the absolute nor further away.

History does not march, nor does a culture, but transforms itself by a logic that is not teleological but interlocutory or at once intersubjective, responsive, repetitive, rhetorical, agonistic, imaginative, unifying, and more than occasionally coercive. The phenomenon appears to be universal and to extend as far back in time as history records. Already in human prehistory we find a myriad of artifacts which interrelate and build on other artifacts, which are passed down and traded, refined and replaced, and which integrate human beings into a culture. As Allen expresses it, "the artifacts and practices (and local differences) of culture are the major expression of precisely what it is 'in our nature' to do: surround ourselves with artifacts, built and maintained by an economy of conventions and socially complementary action through which we remake our environment more or less densely. That's culture. It's everywhere there have been human beings over the last 40,000 or more years."[16] Culture is supported by, or indeed is, a configuration of artifacts—ideas, symbols, language, beliefs, attitudes, practices, technology, meanings—which are passed down between generations and refashioned in the same process that keeps them alive. From prehistoric times, "the strength of culture," as Ruse notes, "is that a good idea can be shared and spread. Change can occur quickly."[17] It does so when a particular artifact for one reason or another catches on and prompts some realignment in the culture or conversational turn that is larger in scale than what is usual, which is slow and piecemeal transformation.

A key theme here is networkability, a term connoting the capacity of an idea or cultural element to spread, establish relations, or produce effects that can seem radically disproportionate to its source. Change can appear to happen from out of the blue, and while the appearance is illusory—from nothing, as the Greeks knew, comes nothing—it occasionally happens that an idea, event, or chance occurrence creates such a disruption that the network as a whole must adjust itself to the new reality. A new idea, if it catches on at all, usually does so slowly and brings about no major modification of the culture, but it can also take hold quickly and produce dramatic and lasting consequences. Relatively sudden turns do happen even while gradual change remains the norm and continuity in any case remains. Transitional periods exhibit turns of a more dramatic kind, however the point is often exaggerated and the impression given that a particular episode caused such violent uphea-

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val that it must be utterly without precedent. History contains many surprises but no miracles, and while a given occurrence will sometimes initiate a cascading effect that is dramatic and unforeseeable, conversational continuity remains.

It bears emphasis that the interlocution of which I speak is neither an exercise in pure reason nor the opposite but an intermediate phenomenon which warrants the description of a conversation that is not always (perhaps never) especially well ordered. Civility itself is often far to seek in the struggle for hearts and minds, whether we are speaking of political persuasion, religious, aesthetic, or any other. Any cultural element becomes more by being shared, exchanged, refined, or otherwise taken up into an economy of artifacts, and it is the condition of any living culture to remain in some measure open to challenge both from within and without. Received elements are not frozen in time but are interpreted anew by each generation and brought into new combinations that suit the preferences and requirements of the time. Interlocutors in this general process do not always have the same agenda and often speak past each other, but the larger picture remains one of shared participation in a way of life and of a struggle that is had in common.

What held societies together in the general period that we are describing, or indeed throughout the long ages that preceded it? Biological matters, here as always, hold a certain authority, but this is not sufficient. *Homo sapiens* does not live on biology alone but is a cultural being through and through. Even force relations in the realm of human affairs are inseparable from meanings that are in every case socially shared and negotiated in the ongoing conversation that is a culture. A turn within it is often misjudged as advancing or retreating depending largely on its bearing upon the present, and should be regarded in the context of its time as arising from and leading to a particular set of cultural conditions which bind human beings into an historical community. Examples from early human history include the agricultural (10,000 BC, varying widely by region) and urban (4,000–3,000 B.C.) revolutions as well as the inventions of the Phoenician alphabet (around 1,200 B.C.) and Greek coinage (600 B.C.), the significance of which in each case lies in what it led to in the transformation of culture. Speaking of the first example, Chris Gosden writes, "Living together in large numbers would have confronted people with new social problems. Mobile hunter-gatherers living at low densities can cope with conflict and difficulty through dispersal: they can walk away from an argument. Several hundred people living in close dependency cannot do this. Ian Hodder sees the main thing that was domesticated with the Neolithic as not plants and animals, but society itself. Hodder feels that if there was a revolution associated with the Neolithic it was a revolution in symbolism, with house forms, stone carving, burial, pottery (when this arises) all carrying complex forms of decoration and meaning that were quite new and were aimed at helping cope with tensions between men

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and women. Settling down gave gender relations a new form and birth and death new values as entry into and exit from the community."[18] The transition, very gradually made, from hunting and gathering to agriculture represented more than a dietary change but a conversational one of which "domestication" is not a bad description. The formation of cities carried the process further and bound human beings together on a larger scale and in qualitatively new ways, as did inventions of the kind just noted. As the natural habitat of human beings is no longer nature but culture, life becomes increasingly organized around artifacts of a great many kinds, ideas, social practices, and inventions that lead to more of the same in an expanding network of relations. Coinage and the alphabet likewise did not "change everything"—nothing ever accomplishes this—but they did make possible new forms of artifactual exchange and set in motion a larger series of events and cascading effects which in time brought about a significant turn in the pattern of interlocution.

Language, knowledge, and myth are crucial here, and while the search for absolute origins is a lost cause, evidence suggests that all three were decisive factors in the early history of our species. Gosden suggests that "[f]ull humanity arose through a special combination of bodily abilities, the world of things and the dimension of language, all of which combined in modern form for the first time around 40,000 years ago."[19] Where the life of the mind was concerned throughout this long period, extreme gradualness appears the norm for the likely reason that intellectual change requires a plurality and an interchange of ideas, a larger community of conversation in which cultural elements can combine and produce effects that relative isolation renders a slow process. The establishment of a common artifactual network through much of Europe and Asia, with important local variations, was of central importance in the early emergence of cultures. Orally transmitted myth, for instance, perpetuated a common attitude that bound human beings and communities together for enormous stretches of time and in a way that can appear mystifying from our historical vantage. It was not only the narratives themselves but the prevalent attitude toward them that is of note here. From prehistory through the Greek period, myth and ritual's claim to truth was accepted with tranquility and did not conflict with what a later standpoint would recognize as knowledge. History and philosophy both emerged from this early genre in which binary distinctions of true and false, fact and fiction were not drawn in the ways that Greek thinkers would come to prefer.

Common knowledge, stories, and attitudes held societies together and continued to do so through the Greek and Roman periods, as we shall see as we proceed. For now, let us consider briefly two examples of the phenomenon of which I have been speaking. Throughout this period a primary form of interlocution was what the Greeks called *paideia* (education) and its Roman reiteration, *humanitas* (civilization). This was a form of upper-class educa-

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tion and cultivation that bound together the notables of this general lifeworld into a shared conversational community. No real space separated the language of culture and power, and in the Roman imperial period this language was an important factor in holding the far-flung regions of the Mediterranean world into a unified society. "'Distance, the First Enemy' of all extended empires," Brown writes, "worked ineluctably to produce faction at the center and a perpetual wavering along the fringes of the imperial system."[20] Centralization was imperative and could not be maintained by military means alone. What was required was a common cultural inheritance, and it was Greek culture that accomplished this. Its possession was a badge of distinction for Roman aristocracy and placed its membership, scattered throughout a vast territory, on speaking terms both with each other and with a real or imagined cultural past. As we have seen, Roman power required legitimation, and this was achieved in significant part by the promised spread of civilization and peace. Greek remained the language of culture while Latin was the common language of state and everyday life. An education in rhetoric in particular ensured that members of the ruling elite could share a common manner of speech that was formal, graceful, and exacting, and teachers of this art were held in high esteem. Both the style and content of such speech mattered greatly and emperors themselves were expected to have mastered its performance.

A performance it was, but its importance throughout this period of Roman history should not be underestimated and well exceeded the possession of literacy. The latter form of knowledge as well played a role in the conversational network of the ancient world, although for the ancients the abilities to read and write alone did not spell civilization the way that a broader *paideia* did. The elite regarded themselves, as so often in human history, as an oasis of civility—a civility of knowledge, practices, manners, wealth, lineage, but above all of discourse—in a cultural desert which itself bordered on a world of barbarism not much above the order of animal life. Literacy was part of this picture, although its possession was limited everywhere in the ancient world to a relatively small minority, depending on how exactly the term is defined. Mass literacy in any sense of the word did not exist, nor did the ability to read, write, or otherwise deal with written texts collapse altogether in the transition into the medieval period. If we take what Harris calls "craftsman's literacy" and "scribal literacy" as standards—the capacity to employ the written word for basic commercial, financial, or administrative purposes—the best approximation (although reliable evidence is limited) is that at no period in either Greek or Roman times did more than perhaps ten percent of men and a significantly lower percentage of women achieve literacy, while if we define the term to connote the ability to compose texts or to read Homer the figure would be lower still, particularly in rural areas. Even in classical Athens, literary ideas continued to circulate orally far more than

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on papyrus scrolls. "The school systems of Graeco-Roman antiquity," the same author writes, "were for the most part quite puny. By the fifth century B.C. schools had certainly become a commonplace feature of Greek town life. . . . In the Hellenistic era the more advanced kind of Greek city did in fact try the remarkable innovations of subsidized and even universal education. Such schemes apparently faded away under Roman power, and nowhere, under the Roman Empire, was there any elaborate network of schools," although here again evidence is limited.[21]

Writing, for the Greeks, was a barbarian import and its uses were mostly at some remove from what they considered high culture. Its main purposes were practical: record keeping, taxation, publishing laws and treaties, signage and labeling, contracts and wills, announcements and proceedings, coinage, and so on. It served as a class marker, was valuable for one intent on a career in civil bureaucracy, and brought a certain level of authority, but the communication of ideas was largely dependent on an ability that mattered far more throughout the ancient period than reading or writing. A capacity for oral communication and memory, learning by heart, reciting with accuracy and expression, and persuasive speech that drew upon the masters of old were highly prized and signified authority more than anything else. It was literacy in this form that was the cultural cement of the period.

It was not only the roads that held the Roman empire together but a shared tradition, written but especially spoken and remembered, which was taken up and continued through the centuries of Greek and Roman times. While to speak of "classical civilization" as a unity is an oversimplification and a distortion, it remains that the general lifeworld and time period of which we are speaking was bound together by a discourse that reinforced a pattern of predominance. Whether we speak of a conversation of humanity, a "textual community,"[22] or what have you, the vital matter is that we can think of an historical community and the transformations within it as exhibiting an interlocutionary structure in which cultural elements are circulated and exchanged, a tradition is perpetuated, and ideas of a myriad kinds are encompassed in a network of communication, persuasion, and coercion.

FORTUNE

In the time of Augustine it made sense for a Christian writer to hypothesize that history—sacred history, at any rate—was moving in an identifiable direction, that it contained a teleological structure which afforded some grounding for speculation about end times. In the early modern period it again made sense for a scientific age to speak of the progress of knowledge and of the species itself amid the vicissitudes of human existence and the rise and fall of civilizations. The persuasive force of both ideas was a function far

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less of the evidence than of the larger worldview from which they arose, and the flights of speculation to which they gave rise seemed grounded by the same means. When an idea or artifact of any kind arises out of and seems to reflect the larger spirit of the times, evidentiary standards may be very low indeed while posing little obstacle to its success. Evidence for linearity and teleology in history has always been weak. At bottom the idea is theological, and the dearth of evidence, whether we are speaking of its overtly religious or secular iterations, reflects this fact. It is speculative, and indeed impossibly so, an expression of spirit far more than reason. For Augustine it was grounded in hope while its modern formulations reflect the optimism that pervaded so much of early modern science and philosophy rather than any demand for rigor which both also expressed, albeit not here. It captures an attitude, one that emerges from a time period and its worldview, and attitudes of this kind are often impervious to reasons.

Historical speculations in general, however, need not be, and those that I venture here are intended neither as conjectural flights of the same order nor dogmatic certainties but as exploratory and experimental. Our questions are elusive and speculation is the land that we are in, yet it remains that an evidentiary basis is as much in order here as in any field of philosophical investigation. If there is a logic to be discerned in the large course of history, it is not one of linear and causal order but an endless back and forth between what look like opposites and that in human experience are anything but. History forms a continuum between predominance, legitimation, reiteration, and interlocution, each of which is a short step from the next and all of which interpenetrate in a shadow play that is unceasing and directionless. Its transformations are an ebbing and flowing of themes that are endlessly repeated and varied and which vie for ascendency. There are periods in which the appetite for power in relatively (never absolutely) naked form reigns with relative supremacy over any conversation of humanity, and there are other times in which matters are reversed, but again relatively and also temporarily. The interplay between these poles is governed by no law but a Roman goddess by the name of Fortuna—Tyche to the Greeks—who was often said to be blind.

If history has a first principle, it is contingency, but in what sense of this term? The claim that any large forces, causes, laws, or teleological structures direct the general course of events is not borne out by the evidence, and it is doubtful that it could be even were the hypothesis true. So far as may be ascertained, historical occurrences are not inevitable outcomes of purported causes but products of circumstances that are highly particularistic and in every case dependent upon other circumstances. Nothing in the human past had to be. It turned out that way—for reasons, but in a sense not of causal forces or rules but of circumstances that are unforeseeable, happenstance, and usually small. *Homo sapiens* did not have to opt for farming, or lan-

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guage, or mathematics. We came to prefer them, for one reason or another, but not in conformity to a law. Some preferences are a Rubicon from which there is no going back and others, far more numerous, are temporary phenomena, but in either case we are speaking of what human beings opted for in a particular time and place, for reasons that are often opaque to us and which in retrospect can look like inevitabilities, but this is an illusion. Whether everything in history happens for a reason depends on what kind of reason we are looking for—large or small, necessary or contingent, general or particular, one or many. If the latter in each of these pairings then it may indeed; if the former then show us the evidence.

The intent of each of the following chapters is to ground and flesh out the philosophical hypotheses of this chapter, including a general conception of history as presided over by a logic that is dialectical, recursive, particularistic, continuous, and above all contingent. What kind of continuity and contingency is this? To speak of continuity here means that while history contains many a turning point, these are points in a road that is enduring and unending. Deeper than revolution is continuity, the sheer onwardness of events which lead nowhere in particular but to more of the same and which leave most of the received ways standing, often in altered form. Biological continuity is a factor here and is perhaps the most telling reason why the old expression that begins "plus ça change . . ." is true. This is not to say that "human nature" is one and is unchanging. I am prepared to bid adieu to human nature in a metaphysical sense, but biology must be reckoned with. This has not changed in any appreciable degree for some 50,000 years ("behavioral modernity"), and this should not be lost sight of when we speak of historical continuity. The term intends neither conservatism nor determinism but a gradualism and a perpetual movement through time in a one-thing-leads-to-another fashion, without absolute ruptures but for death. In the history of culture, successiveness is the norm, origin and cessation the exceptions—if they exist at all—and the three notions are overlapping shades of grey on a screen that is also grey. Continuity and contingency as I shall speak of them are circular in a way that is reminiscent in part of the Greek and Roman conception of historical time. The great model for ancient historians, as we have seen, is nature, the ever-changing yet enduring, unpredictable yet cyclical world of repetition and variation, where new wine is continually poured into old bottles while the whole process unfolds under the unseeing eyes of Fortuna. Contingency is not random, but it is blind. It has no designs and stands neither with nor against human beings but, in a manner of speaking, above us. An historical occurrence arises not because it was made to but because of other occurrences in an infinite regression. Variables rise and fall depending sometimes on natural causes and at other times on anthropogenic factors, yet in any event there is an incessancy to history, an ongoing succession of events that are not inevitable effects but vicissitudes of fortune. We

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are not the masters of our fate, and if Greek historians took the idea in a deterministic direction we need not follow suit. History lacks necessity and all fatalism is yet another speculative leap that is best avoided. To speak of continuity and reiteration implies some form of circularity, the continual coming to be and passing away of things in a kind of cyclical or rhythmic structure. In the realm of human affairs, linearity and randomness do not exist. This the Greeks understood while jumping too readily to the opposite conclusion based on a false opposition between inevitability and chance while coming down decisively on the side of the former. The same idea would become symbolized in the middle ages by fortune's wheel, where the fate of humanity is fully beyond our control and the fates of individuals and civilizations rise and fall like the hands of a clock, by a pattern that is blind but formalizable.

I wish to retain the blindness and dispense with formalization, and also periodicity. We neither control time nor dance on strings but manage what comes in the best way that we can, without a formula or any basis for prediction. Fortune provides and takes away, as she likes, and there is not much to be done about it but deal. In the drama of human history, things happen that were unforeseen and unforeseeable, but they also harken back and echo what came before, only in a new form. The ancients took the idea in an ethical direction: if we cannot control fortune, we can at least control the self and learn to bear misfortune with courage. There is much in this to be recommended, although ethics is not our concern here. History on my reading of it is dialectical not in the sense that it comprises discrete stages that lead in any formal way from point A to point B or conforms to a blueprint but in the perennial back and forth of a continuum whose variables interrelate according to no law but contingency. The whole escapes our control while exhibiting continuity and cyclicality, not according to any tidy formula (such as Oswald Spengler's sequence of monadic civilizations that rise and fall with reassuring predictability) but as a refrain to which we return again and again, or a habit. Fortune's blindness is not that of chance, lacking all rhyme or reason, but of the habits with which history is replete. There is intentionality at work here in the limited sense of tendencies and relations, not purposes, master plans, or anything grand of scale. Habits, commonalities, and refrains permit of exceptions; they are partial and limited uniformities, not laws, but they show themselves with stubborn regularity, for good or for ill, and never in the same way twice. The same events or whole periods are not repeated, and to speak of periods at all is dubious. Insofar as there is a pattern to be seen here, it is convoluted—complex in the extreme, but not random. Nothing here is grand. Contingency is small, particularistic, as predictable as the wind, and non-conspiratorial. That is a cornucopia in Fortuna's hands and the blindfold remains in place. She has been known to be capricious but not malevolent, and while it would be good to have this goddess and history

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itself on your side, there is precious little to be done about it. The ancients' dream of escaping its dictates never did come true, but this is not ominous.

The form of historical consciousness that I have sketched must be grounded in the phenomena, and indeed a great many of them. To know a country one must walk down many roads, and the intention of the chapters of Parts II and III is to travel a good many. The chapters address social, political, and intellectual history in turn, beginning with the transitional period of early Greece, followed by an analysis of late antiquity, two turning points long—and not altogether accurately—regarded as the rise and fall of the ancient west. Universals, when they are not false idealizations, arise from particulars, and if the philosopher's stock in trade is the former, we require the services of the historian in speaking of the latter. We shall be calling upon a good many historians in what follows, however our inquiry is not in history proper but in philosophy of history, and our questions bear upon the universal and the particular in combination. Historical understanding lies in the constant interplay between them, if it is to be found at all.

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18. Chris Gosden, *Prehistory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 71.
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Part II

The Birth of the Ancient World

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Chapter Three

A Miracle Story

On Social History

An old hypothesis has it that ancient Greek history, this "birthplace of the west," is divisible into four periods: proceeding in order, the dark, the archaic, the classical, and the hellenistic. It is a rise and fall story, from an obscure beginning to a collapse which in time would lead to a new beginning in Roman civilization. Our dates are as follows: the Greek dark age followed the mysterious collapse of Mycenaean civilization and spans from the twelfth to the eighth centuries; the archaic period followed until the emergence of the classical age in 480 B.C., the date of the Greek defeat of the Persians. The hellenistic era followed the classical and began in 30 B.C. Further divisions are possible, but I shall ignore those as it is the bigger picture that we must hold in view. The narrative structure is teleological but with a surprise ending which itself precedes a happy sequel and indeed, if one follows long enough, a series of sequels. It is also a miracle story. This great blossoming of civilization, including its art, science, politics, philosophy, and higher culture, had something of an immaculate conception, surpassing everything that had come before by an incalculable measure. Classical Athens in particular constituted at once a high point and a caesura, and if the evidence bears out the first point it does not bear out the second.

From nothing comes nothing. It was the Greeks who taught us to see this, and their own case illustrates the principle perfectly. It is not to be doubted that the achievements of the classical Greek world in a great many fields were beyond impressive; indeed the point could hardly be overstated. Classical Greece, not limited to Athens, may well be seen as a kind of culmination, yet it is no detraction to note that a great many—likely a large majority—of the cultural elements that they brought to new levels of mastery were bor-

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rowed both from their archaic and dark-age predecessors and from numerous foreign cultures which the Greeks insisted on calling barbarian, a word later appropriated by the Romans. The Greeks were master borrowers—in just about every aspect of culture that one cares to name—and this was a good part of their genius. *Sui generis* classical Greece was not, and nor was its archaic predecessor. The error of the miracle story arises from simple ignorance regarding what made this general era possible and what was the transitional period that was archaic Greece. Our hypothesis will be that while ancient Greek civilization changed dramatically, the logic of this change was nothing miraculous but may be conceived in ways that we have analyzed in abstract terms and must now illustrate concretely.

A good deal of contemporary historical and archaeological scholarship has revealed the extent to which, as one writer puts it, "throughout antiquity, the cultural exchanges between Greece and the older civilizations of western Asia and northern Africa were close, deep, and continuous."[1] The dark age itself, to use an increasingly antiquated term, appears not to have been the cultural wasteland it was long considered—one that followed upon the destruction of the palace civilization of the Mycenaean era, possibly brought on by the arrival of Dorians from the north and west and lasting for several barren centuries. In time the palace-state would be replaced by the city-state, and numerous other innovations would appear in this general time period which put the old narrative into question. Ancient thinkers themselves and folk memory spoke of an age of turmoil that succeeded the Trojan War but not of a dark age or radical break following upon the collapse of the palaces. The evidence of a Dorian invasion, or series of migrations, is inconclusive, however most scholars continue to maintain that their arrival either brought about or followed the end of the Mycenaean era. The notion of a backward step, from the height of the former era to a period of wretched primitivism, is difficult to verify and a relatively thin archaeological record is not sufficient to this conclusion. "Advance" and "retreat" are judgments of value which empirical inquiry, especially in this early period, has a hard time sustaining. This has not deterred many from characterizing the two centuries in particular between 1200 and 1000 as a civilizational low point, however when the evidentiary basis is sparse it is best to resist conclusions of this kind. We are on more solid ground in the archaic period which is often spoken of as a cultural renaissance, but again this is a dubious characterization. "From darkness to dawn" followed by the great noontime of the fifth and fourth centuries is how the old story goes, and it will be our argument in what follows that this is a simplification and a distortion. For about as far back as it is possible to go in the history of this region, what we find is nothing miraculous, linear, or teleological but a complex picture which the chapters of Part II endeavor to sketch with respect to early Greek social, political, and intellectual history. The picture of classical Greece that emerges is a culmination

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that was centuries in the making, which drew heavily upon its predecessors and neighbors, whose talent was for synthesis rather than invention, and whose underlying dynamics were not qualitatively different than what preceded or succeeded it.

There is a tendency to speak of regression in any period when the historical or archaeological record thins out, as it does in the period covering approximately 1200 to 700 B.C., but the tendency is a consequence less of the evidence than of the progress doctrine. What we find, speaking quantitatively, is less material culture, from which the qualitative inference is quickly drawn, yet when the progressivist assumption is removed the conclusion is removed with it. Life went on, much as it had for centuries; a basically agricultural way of life persisted along with traditional crafts and trades, populations—always difficult to quantify in ancient history—waxed and waned along with migrations, wars, and societal interchanges of various kinds. The pace of change through these centuries was slower overall than in the classical period, but to infer either from this or from a relative scarcity of archaeological finds that the centuries in question, as one historian has said, "are almost without history" is spurious.[2] They may (or may not) have lacked much to excite historians—those, at any rate, who prize the dramatic over the prosaic—but they no more lacked history than any other period. One of the greatest philosophers of history of the twentieth century, Karl Jaspers, introduced the concept of an "axial period" extending from about 600 to 300 B.C., and argued that this era constituted nothing less than an "overall modification of humanity" and a great "spiritualisation" of the species which contrasted radically with anything that had come before. In his enthusiasm for this golden age of sorts he perpetuated an old habit of maligning its predecessor in ways that are impossible to justify. The pre-axial age, he asserted, was characterized by an "unquestioned grasp on life"; the human being was "enclosed within himself" and beholden to false certainties that effectively deadened the mind. Jaspers' existential diagnosis of the dark and archaic ages was grim indeed, and the sudden turning of the world's axis "is in the nature of a miracle, in so far as no really adequate explanation is possible within the limits of our present knowledge."[3] Here is a typical example of a thinker getting carried away by a philhellenism that we would be wise to temper. Golden and dark ages alike exist only in the minds of idealists, even while such notions are something of a constant in human history. "Virtually every culture past or present," as Arthur Herman notes, "has believed that men and women are not up to the standards of their parents and forebears. . . . [I]n the seventh century B.C., the poet Hesiod saw the entire cosmos governed by a process of generational decay, beginning with a golden age when gods ruled and men lived in peace and harmony, followed by a silver age, and finally an iron age when men are forced to live by the sweat of their brow and suffer their fate. . . . '[I]ron Age' is also the transla-

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tion of the *Kali Yuga* of Hindu and Vedic religion, the last and worst of all human epochs. . . . Similar myths appear in Confucian China; among the Aztecs, Zoroastrians, Laplanders, and numerous Native American tribes; and in Icelandic and Irish sagas, not to mention the Book of Genesis."[4]

The following analysis proceeds from too low an altitude to speak of golden, fallen, axial, final, or similar ages, all of which notions are well lost. There is no miracle here but a narrative of change in which themes of interlocution and predominance, continuity and contingency present themselves in endless variation.

AGRICULTURE

Among the innumerable discoveries, inventions, and cultural achievements that preceded the Greeks and were passed down to them well prior to the classical period, we may mention the following. We find flourishing Babylonian, Indus, Egyptian, Minoan, Mycenaean, and other civilizations all witnessing an acceleration in the communication of ideas and artifactual exchange, and none existing in splendid isolation. We find domestication of the horse and donkey already in the fourth millennium. The first cities were also appearing in fourth-millennium Mesopotamia along with organized government, large-scale architecture, and the arts of writing and metallurgy. By the third millennium parts of the near east had bronze and copper, wheeled vehicles, ploughs, bricks, glass, sophisticated pottery, some chemical technology, shipbuilding, dams, dyeing, and the ability to work with sizeable stone. International trade and contacts gradually increased along with iron use by the beginning of the first millennium. Important to mention as well are the nomadic pastoralists of the Eurasian steppe—a region that, as David Anthony points out, "is often regarded as a remote and austere place, poor in resources and far from the centers of the civilized world. But during the Late Bronze Age the steppes became a bridge between the civilizations that developed on the edges of the continent in Greece, the Near East, Iran, the Indian subcontinent, and China. Chariot technology, horses and horseback riding, bronze metallurgy, and a strategic location gave steppe societies an importance they never before had possessed." They invented the horse-drawn chariot with two spoked wheels and standing driver around the end of the second millennium and had bitted horses by the middle of the fourth. A second and slower kind of mobility came from horse-drawn wagons which were used for the transportation of goods and as mobile homes and which also came into use in the fourth millennium. The proto-Indo-European language was likely spoken by these groups beginning some time between the fifth and third millennium, while "[b]etween about 2300 and 2000 BCE the sinews of trade and conquest began to pull the far-flung pieces of the ancient world together

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into a single interacting system."[5] The agricultural or neolithic revolution, which included the domestication of large mammals, had occurred in the near east far earlier, by around 8000 BC following the end of the last ice age, and gradually displaced the hunting-gathering economy of the earlier paleolithic. An economy and a way of life centered around the cultivation of the soil and animal husbandry prevailed throughout the ancient and medieval world, and classical Greece was no exception. When we speak of any period of Greek history prior to the industrial revolution, we are speaking of a basically agrarian society the great majority of whom were farmers. Agriculture was an esteemed occupation and land ownership through the centuries in question was the primary basis of wealth. Most owned several acres of land, and poor soil quality made for modest yields. Wealthy landowners were few, but the acquisitive drive was common among agriculturalists large and small. The prevalent aim transcended subsistence or self-sufficiency; it was, like so much of Greek culture, competition and acquisition. An agonistic ethos seems to have been the norm, and not only among the elite. An appetite for profit and luxury had been the norm well prior to the classical period, and a family's standard of living was expected to be at least comfortable. Hesiod's remarks about hunger and poverty can mislead us. "In classical Greece," as Hans van Wees points out, "everyone who could not afford to live off the labor of others was deemed to be in 'poverty,' and Hesiod may have used the term in the same sense. . . . When Hesiod warns against hunger, he is thinking not so much of literal starvation, but of a more metaphorical 'hunger': the relative deprivation of those outside the ruling class. *Works and Days* thus addresses a farmer who owns a sizable estate and employs at least half a dozen laborers, free and slave; the poem tells him to devote himself to work in order to maintain his property and independence. The question is why a hymn to the virtues of toil was meaningful and important to a landowner at this economic level. The answer is that he faced a competing ideology of leisure, as well as intense rivalry for wealth." Ideology is a suitable term here: ownership of land and livestock brought independence, prosperity, and prestige. The goal was always to supervise others more than to labor oneself, to own and to produce as much as possible, and to sell the surplus for profit. The same historian just cited adds: "The conventional 'primitivist' image of masses of peasants seeking only self-sufficient subsistence, presided over by elites without interest in anything as vulgar as making money, seriously misrepresents the economic world of archaic Greece."[6] The division between peasant and aristocrat was no grand dichotomy. The competitive drive characterized both, as did the desire for conspicuous consumption. Displays of public benefaction and wealth, of course, were beyond the means of smallholders, but some luxury goods were not and were widely purchased. The myth of the abject farmer one step away from indigence may be time-honored among urbanites, yet it is a myth all the same.

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Greek society from the dark through the hellenistic ages was largely rural with varying sizes of villages and cities. Agriculture throughout these centuries and for many thereafter did not change much, and this was no failing. Their methods and their technology worked well—or were found to work well, at any rate, by the people who employed them. Farming was not intensive by modern standards, of course, but it enabled a level of economic comfort for Greek families virtually all of which were strongly tied to agriculture. They paid taxes and/or dues, employed basic tools, consumed a healthy diet, lived a limited life span (again by modern standards), and were largely neither affluent nor poor. The main crops were barley, wheat, flax, olives, figs, grapes, and legumes while animal husbandry—primarily goats and sheep—crop rotation, manuring, and fallowing were practiced throughout these centuries. The basic way of life also remained largely unchanged. What varied from household to household was not the manner but the scale of life; landholdings, workforce (free and slave), and prosperity varied in quantity, but the usual pattern of life was to set out in the morning from one's home in the village toward the fields and to return at the end of the day. Famine was infrequent, although many undoubtedly struggled to make ends meet and malnutrition was not rare.

CITIES

While post-Mycenaean villages were tightly knit and varied in population, larger urban centers began to emerge at a pace that was gradual and variable by region. The archaeological evidence is far from uniform, but the basic change in this complex picture is from a series of kingdoms centered around a palace to an array of cities differently structured and bearing a new self-image. The city was coming to be conceived as the center in contrast to a rural periphery, where the distinction was hierarchical, somewhat oppositional, and rooted in class. It conceived itself as the political, military, economic, religious, and cultural nucleus while the countryside was increasingly regarded as a cultural backwater. Urbanites and their intellectual representatives were more than a little enamored with a way of life that in their imagination contrasted strongly both with the ways of the peasant and with other societies, rivalries between which were quick to form. For their part, rural dwellers seem to have looked with some animosity upon their urban counterparts as well, decrying the vices and excesses of a way of life that was inclined to become disconnected from the natural rhythms of the countryside. The city was often viewed from outside as a site of petty squabbling, vicious self-seeking, and indolence in contrast to the down-to-earth and industrious farmer. Snobbery issued in both directions, although the cities had the intel-

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lectuals which largely explains why this ideological distinction reproduced itself in the way that it did.

The city, in the minds of its inhabitants anyway, was the center of civilization. Well prior to the classical era, it was a natural home for the elite and exuded a confidence and an importance that was unquestionable. Its institutions and buildings became standardized and included fortifications, temples and shrines, and a central *agora* which in many ways became the heart of the city. The *agora* was more than an economic marketplace and setting for the assembly but a social meeting place where people from all walks of life gathered for purposes ranging from intellectual discussion to gossip and everything in between. It was here that merchants and traders would sell their wares, political issues could be discussed, court sessions would be held, games would be played, and social intercourse in its myriad forms would take place. The *agora* came to be viewed as an oasis of civility and was found in every Greek city of the archaic period and beyond along with the institutions just noted. As much as a cultural center, the Greek city from the beginning was a military one whose city walls and acropolis or citadel rendered it optimally defensible from attack or siege. Buildings were arranged no longer around a royal palace but a marketplace which was also the political and religious heart of the city. Temples could be found there as well as in rural areas where they would be placed to indicate territorial divisions. As Robin Waterfield writes, "many of these temples remained in use for the rest of antiquity; the sacred landscape of Greece was laid down in the Archaic period," and included an array of shrines and other sacred sites.[7]

The archaic city was remarkable for its sense of order and uniformity. Large and small urban centers alike contained the same constellation of public buildings and institutions: in addition to the *agora* and temple were the above-noted city walls and citadel, gymnasium, stadium, theater, and administrative structures while the street design also showed an identical rectangular pattern whether in Greece proper or any of its colonies. When possible, they were located on or close to the sea which served both a defensive and an economic purpose. Emerging city-states were typically small in size, usually under one hundred square kilometers including an urban center and rural catchment area and with a population in the hundreds. They were also numerous; one scholar estimates that "in the year 400 BC the Greek world was home to at least 862 independent city-states or *poleis*, the vast majority of them located in and around the Aegean basin. . . . Contact and exchange between these densely clustered maritime *poleis* was extremely easy," and from an early date.[8] The eighth century saw a sharp increase in the scale and number of cities and the trend continued through the period leading up to the classical. The larger ones—Athens, Sparta, Thebes, Corinth, Argos, Syracuse, Samos, Chios, Miletus—rivaled their near-eastern counterparts in population and complexity, albeit not in age. Southern Mesopotamia and

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Egypt had built cities by around 4000, although the city-state, conceived as an autonomous military and administrative region of variable size, was a Greek phenomenon which began to take form in the eighth century and prevailed until the Roman period. Greek cities had begun to develop specialized economic functions by about 600 while remaining, like all ancient cities, basically agricultural.

MEDITERRANEAN NETWORK

A compelling case has been made for conceiving a great deal of the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions through the archaic period as what Irad Malkin has called "a small Greek world." As his study reminds us, "Plato famously compares Greeks to frogs living around a pond"—a pond the Romans would later refer to as "our sea." Unlike the latter, what was salient in the former case was its decentered quality. Even Athens was no Rome, in the sense of an administrative, military, and cultural center but one of innumerable city-states dotting the sea coasts of territories separated by great distances but linked from an early date by a vast network of commercial, political, and related ties. Malkin applies recent work in network theory in analyzing early Greek history and shows how well prior to the classical period, "[a]s the Greeks and Phoenicians . . . explored maritime routes, traded, and established *emporia* and territorial colonies, cultural borrowings among themselves and the native populations soon transcended any particular point of trade or settlement to create a network that crisscrossed the spaces of the ancient Mediterranean."[9]

The hypothesis is not limited to trade, but let us begin here. Throughout the centuries in question, we are speaking of an economy that was at once agricultural and maritime. Many of the trade routes themselves extend from the second millennium and saw considerable expansion by the ninth century with developments in Phoenician seafaring and in the eighth and seventh with similar developments in Greece. Commercial links steadily increased despite threats of weather and piracy, and in archaic times gave rise to an economic system that was truly international in scope. Mycenaeans and Minoans had also made notable advances in seafaring, and by the eighth century we find "various, multidirectional flows of goods, ideas, artistic and architectural conventions, immigrants, and religious contacts along the nodes of this Greek network [which] came to constitute Greek 'civilization.'"[10] The movement of goods between the various microregions of the Mediterranean—a sea that is not especially difficult to navigate—readily promoted the spread of ideas and cultural artifacts of various kinds. The aristocracy were especially fond of imported luxury goods and were not opposed to sending raiding parties to foreign ports—slaves, livestock, and precious metals being the

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most prized booty. Be it through trade, brigandage, or war, resources were there to be had, and as the rivers in Greece were unnavigable and travel by road was difficult, seafaring became the preferred means of commercial and other travel from an early date.

Coinage facilitated trade and tax collection and appeared in mainland Greek cities by the seventh century, having been borrowed from its probable inventor, Lydia. Its subsequent spread throughout the Mediterranean world and the middle east was swift and again increased the flow of goods throughout the known world, the center of which was understood to be the sea. Archaic Greek traders reached destinations from the Black Sea to western Europe and formed alliances in which more than economic goods were traded and borrowed. Trade with Phoenicians and Egyptians was particularly extensive while "the main centre of trade in the eastern Mediterranean was always Syria, the natural link between Egypt, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor."[11]

Coinciding with commercial activity was colonization which began in earnest in the eighth century and continued through the sixth. Greek colonies formed along trading routes and included both new city-states, which were independent while maintaining close ties to the cities from which they derived, and agricultural settlements which were more numerous than the former and eased population pressures at home. The quest for new territories was indistinguishably economic and military and was well in place prior to the classical era. These were not unoccupied lands and their inhabitants suffered the fate of colonized peoples everywhere. The Greek conscience was untroubled by this, the latter being barbarians (*barbaros*) who were unable to speak Greek and of little account. The notion itself extends from the archaic period, although it was not until the Greco-Persian wars of the fifth century that the notion of the barbarian came into common use.

While the notion of the foreigner/barbarian was obviously unflattering, more significant is the nature and extent of foreign, and specifically eastern, influence that is clearly detectable in this period and which continued through the centuries of classical Greece. Foreigners, and specifically those who did not speak the Greek language, had long been regarded as lesser beings, as they would by the Romans, yet civilizations to the east and south left profound and lasting marks upon Greek culture from an early date. Archaeologists often refer to the eighth and seventh centuries in particular as an "orientalizing" period in which Greek material culture exhibits striking and large-scale borrowings from their Egyptian and near-eastern counterparts. Documenting the full extent of this is not possible here, but some more important examples in the artistic field include the introduction of a new pottery style that replaced an earlier geometric sensibility with exotic animal and plant motifs which were incised with fine detail. "Both the technique and the imagery of these new vase-types derive directly from the pottery and

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metalwork of the Levant and Near East," as Simon Price and Peter Thonemann point out. Additionally, "[t]he influence of north Syrian bronze-work can be seen on Crete . . . in an extraordinary collection of bronze shields and symbols from the cave of Zeus on Mt. Ida. These bronze objects, with animal-head bosses and circular friezes depicting Assyrian-style hunting scenes, may actually have been made by immigrant Syrian artisans. However, there can be no doubt that most oriental-style bronzes in Greece were made by Greek craftsmen imitating eastern styles." Another obvious import was the standing male statue form (*kouroi*), "life-size or larger, always naked, facing forward, with one foot slightly advanced," which was appropriated from Egypt together, quite possibly, with monumental temple architecture in the seventh century.[12] Many Greeks, including scholars, at this date appear to have been settling or traveling to Egypt and the consequences for Greek culture were profound. The libraries, statuary, jewelry, pottery, and mythology they encountered all carried influence even as, as one Greek thinker proudly expressed it, "let us take it for granted that whatever Greeks receive from foreigners they improve in the end."[13] The writer was Plato and, cultural snobbery aside, his point was that when Greeks appropriated ideas from other cultures, as very often they did, typically they revised what they borrowed and synthesized it with their own tradition, much of which, of course, was itself a result of older appropriations. Cultural borrowings of this order were by no means unidirectional. The Egyptians, for instance, had likely come under significant Mesopotamian influence by the third millennium, and it is generally a mistake to look for absolute origin points for much of anything in the realm of culture. Archaic Greeks were borrowers and were borrowed from in turn, and much the same can be said of the societies with which they were in contact. Such is the nature of a network; interactions were omnidirectional and complex, varying in extent and speed, and almost indistinguishably economic, intellectual, and military. Cultural preferences and fashion were in every case contingent and fickle, sometimes in the extreme, and the Greeks at this point in history were no different in this respect.

LANGUAGE AND ALPHABET

Among their appropriations of this period, perhaps none had more enduring importance than the alphabet. "The arrival of the alphabet in the Greek world," as one historian has put it, ". . . was the impetus for a cultural and intellectual revolution. Indeed, it has been characterized as a, if not *the*, seminal moment in the development not only of Greek society, but also of western civilization. 'Without writing,' [Walter] Ong observes, 'the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form.

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More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.'"[14] This may be overstating it—intellectuals' reverence for the written word does not logically entail a prejudice, however stubborn, against "il-" and "preliterate" cultures—but it is no exaggeration that the introduction of the alphabet was a catalyst that would make possible momentous and unforeseeable changes in Greek culture. An obvious instance is the potential rise in literacy. The Greek alphabet was more readily learnable than its pictographic and ideographic predecessors, although like all ancient cultures Greece throughout these centuries would remain primarily oral and "literacy," a term with several definitions, would remain limited to a small percentage of the population. A probable rise in literacy, however modest, coincided with an expansion in the uses of Greek writing. Prior to the alphabet, writing was largely restricted to administrative purposes and to a class of scribes employed by states and merchants. The alphabet's arrival made possible a much wider set of purposes for the written word, and it spread quickly throughout the Greek-speaking world. The Greek alphabet was not an indigenous invention but an import from the Levantine coast of the Mediterranean. Contact with Phoenician traders likely precipitated a wholesale appropriation of their alphabet in about the eighth century, although whether it was the Phoenician alphabet or the Aramaic or Hebrew and also the date have been debated. What is clear is that it originated in some branch of north-west Semitic script and was adopted by Greeks some time around 800. In typical fashion it was not imported unrevised. The Phoenician alphabet contained no vowels; these were to be implied by the context. The Greek innovation was to add vowel symbols for a, e (long and short), i, o (long and short), and u, a significant but not altogether radical revision.

As for the language itself, Greek is one of numerous ancient languages believed to have derived from an earlier and common ancestor. Proto-Indo-European was a language or family of languages believed by many to have originated in the steppelands of eastern Europe around the fifth millennium and to have been spoken by small societies of farmers and herdsmen who would have inhabited much of Europe and western Asia. We have noted that the distinction Greeks began to draw in the archaic period between themselves and barbarians turned primarily upon language even as the Greek language itself was as much an import as their alphabet. The Greek language appears to have arrived in the Greek mainland and Crete by the Mycenaean period in the second millennium, presumably displacing its predecessor. Indeed, "with very few exceptions, Indo-European languages displaced the languages of nearly all the regions into which they spread."[15] A popular hypothesis has it that proto-Indo-European split off into discrete language communities with the gradual migrations of these steppe peoples to parts east and west, although much of this remains conjectural.

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WRITING AND LITERATURE

The practice of writing itself was as much a barbarian import as the Egyptian papyrus sheets on which archaic and classical Greek writers were practicing their craft for a growing range of purposes. The story of Greek literature begins with Homer, a somewhat legendary eighth- or seventh-century Ionian bard about whom little is known. According to the traditional story (parts of which may well be untrue), he wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which recount the heroic saga of the Trojan War and its aftermath and draw upon perhaps four centuries of oral narrative. No single-minded genius, he would have belonged to a tradition of storytellers who spoke or perhaps sang about legends that were hallowed by time and which every bard would repeat and alter to suit the tastes of an audience or the storyteller. If the legends themselves were received, Homer's innovation was to compose them into epic poetry that was written down. His art was not to create poetry out of thin air but to formalize and canonize centuries of oral history into a form that any reader of Greek could comprehend. The *Iliad* in particular would become known not to the aristocracy alone but to virtually all free Greeks, and the worldview that it expressed took profound hold of the Greek mind. "Oral epic," as one scholar states, "created a heroic past for a particular group in society and glorified its values; since the Homeric poems established themselves as the bible of the Greeks, the ethic they portray had a permanent influence on Greek morality. It is essentially a competitive ethic, expressed in the words of Glaucus, 'always to be best and pre-eminent over others, and not to shame the seed of my fathers.'"[16]

Homer did not write in a vacuum; neither the values, the worldview, the poetic conventions, nor the stories themselves sprang fully formed from his forehead but were received elements which it fell to him to synthesize and transmit in alphabetic script. Greek poets were many and the better ones were honored and their writings preserved, from the great epic poets Homer and Hesiod to the more numerous writers of lyric verse, elegies, epigrams, iambus, and other forms that all preceded the classical era. As a couple of historians write, "The roots of lyric poetry extend far back in time to folk songs created for specific occasions such as harvests, weddings, funerals, and coming-of-age rituals, or to hymns, fables, drinking songs, and love songs—everything, in other words, that pertained to communal and private life. With the advent of literacy, such poems could be preserved and circulated; poets could attain not merely local but Panhellenic fame, by competing with their more carefully crafted songs composed and polished in writing."[17] Until the classical era, nearly all Greek writing that has come down to us is in poetic form, while the invention of prose toward the end of the archaic period seemed better suited to more technical forms of knowledge such as medicine, history, rhetoric, and philosophy.

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As for written systems themselves, their invention does not appear to have triggered any sudden revolution in social or intellectual history, or not that was discerned at the time. Their historical importance would become visible at a later date. Writing in Mesopotamia can be traced to the fourth millennium and was well established in Egypt by the third, and while professional scribes were greatly esteemed the scribal tradition that developed in these places and elsewhere in the middle east was limited in its functions. "For centuries," Hans Nissen notes, "writing was hardly ever used except for recording economic procedures, until it was finally used to make short votive inscriptions. It was only in the middle of the third millennium B.C. that, owing to changes in the system of writing, writing evolved into an instrument that made possible the reproduction of complicated texts."[18] As the tradition spread, writing was applied gradually to law codes, tomb and temple inscriptions, statues, and papyrus in addition to inventories and administrative purposes. Literature was a later development, the practice being for a long time the preserve of scribes employed primarily by political authorities to serve the interests of the state. Archaic Greek merchants likely adopted the practice along with the alphabet from their Phoenician counterparts, and writing became popular in the Greek world by the eight and seventh centuries. Writers themselves were largely urban aristocrats and their works became the medium of a shared tradition extending well beyond Greece itself. By this time professional scribes, poets, playwrights, and eventually prose writers were becoming more common as the uses of this art became diversified. By the end of the archaic era, prose writing seemed to fulfill the purposes of informational and analytical knowledge better than poetry had, while the forms of it that would be mastered in the classical period had already emerged prior to 500.

BOOKS, LIBRARIES, EDUCATION

Among the conditions that made the literary achievements of the fifth and fourth centuries possible are the Greek writing system and a freedom of spirit which allowed various kinds of authors to draw upon, respond to, and criticize one another in a growing network of interlocution. Writers of drama, history, science, philosophy, mathematics, law, and medicine could draw freely upon their peers in an economically stable, politically non-theocratic, and invariably competitive environment. As book writing became the fashion, ideas could circulate broadly and the legends of old could be adapted, modified, and questioned in new ways and for a wider audience. By the end of the fifth century books written on imported papyrus rolls were available at affordable prices in Greek markets and circulated widely. The book itself had originated far earlier, in third-millennium Mesopotamia, and "[b]y the first

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millennium BC the technology of books was broadly similar, cuneiform tablets apart. Papyrus scrolls remained the dominant medium until late antiquity, but were always supplemented by texts written on parchment or linen, with shorter less permanent notes on pottery ostraka or wooden tablets and monumental writing on stone and occasionally bronze."[19] We may speak of the beginning of a book culture at this time, making it less than surprising that the epic poets chose to write down the stories that had been passed down to them for centuries. Scrolls were broadly available in urban markets, easily copied, and an effective means of preserving and transmitting ideas. They could also be collected and sometimes were, particularly in the centuries that followed.

Monumental libraries such as the famous one at Alexandria are not to be found in archaic Greece. Even in fourth-century Athens libraries were small collections held either in private hands or in schools. The institutional library was unknown until hellenistic times, although something resembling it had existed in Egypt and elsewhere for centuries. Temple libraries could house significant collections which served at once religious and political purposes. Sacred writings could be collected and preserved while enhancing the reputation of its founder. Nowhere in the ancient world was scholarly or high cultural endeavor separable from the drive for prestige and power, and libraries were no exception. Book collections were symbols of elite learning and political authorities, ever anxious for legitimation, often competed to accumulate, translate, and copy books in ever increasing quantities as would various cities of hellenistic Greece in a later period. The Alexandrian library was likely the largest and certainly the best known library of the ancient world, but it was not unprecedented in the regions of which we have been speaking. "The care invested," Greg Woolf writes, "in amassing the huge collections, like those of the Hittite kings at Hattusas and of Assurbanipal at Nineveh, suggests libraries were already central to these cultures. Epic poetry, religious texts and royal decrees and letters featured in all these contexts, alongside administrative documents of various kinds."[20] Aristocratic cultures were as overtly competitive in the realm of culture as on the battlefield and the growing book culture was another realm in which preeminence could be sought.

Much the same can be said of education. In the archaic period this practice was the preserve of private tutors and small schools and was available to the affluent alone. From its earliest adoption, writing was the fundamental component of Greek formal education together with the epic poetry of Hesiod and especially Homer, for centuries the great teacher of the Greek world. As the book roll became the great repository of knowledge, it became the heart of education as well and would remain so for centuries to come. Reading, writing, and public speaking would become the central elements of Greek and later Roman education (*paideia*) with the important exception of

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Sparta. Schooling there was no less important than it was in any of the other city-states of Greece, but the Spartan education system, as one might expect, was oriented less around book learning and rhetoric than toward martial prowess. It was also compulsory, but what it shared with its fellow Greeks was an aristocratic ethos bent on cultivating temperance, moderation, and the drive to excel. The hallmark of an educated man—the education of girls and women was largely restricted to the domestic realm—for centuries was the well-read and well-spoken aristocrat who could recite Homer, bring a lawsuit, and argue in the assembly with eloquence. The democracy that would emerge called for a certain kind of citizen, and education was a training for a particular kind of citizenship.

ARISTOCRACY

There is no understanding Greek society from the archaic period through the hellenistic and beyond apart from this notion. The Greeks did not invent the concept of aristocracy, but from an early date it would pervade every aspect of archaic culture. Disdain for the abject and the foreign was nothing new or unique to the Greeks of this period, and indeed they were sometimes on the receiving end of this attitude. "The Egyptians in particular," Jacob Burckhardt notes, "regarded the Greeks as unclean and surely not only because they ate beef, as Herodotus supposed; the Greeks returned the compliment by preening themselves on their taste for wine as opposed to the Egyptian for beer."[21] Thus were national pecking orders determined, and an order of rank applied equally to those within Greek society. Foreigners to the north or east were invariably thought of as lesser species for one reason or another, while well prior to the classical period Greek and near-eastern societies took the short step from the existence of agricultural surpluses to class divisions which were far more than economic. Economic predominance led invariably to a claim to preeminence in other domains of social life and in time to an ethos that was ubiquitous in the Greek world.

The Mycenaean and Homeric eras had been unmistakably hierarchical as well, if not altogether in the same sense. The older kingdoms were ruled by individual strongmen whose political and military position was inseparable from their affluence. Homeric society was also dominated by notable individuals whose heroism had a decidedly martial and divine aspect. Greek aristocrats of a later date were neither heroes in this sense nor kings but an economic and cultural counterpart which owed much to its predecessors. The nascent aristocracy of archaic Greece consisted in many of the same families who had owned the most and the best land in Mycenaean times and who survived the collapse of the palaces with their holdings relatively intact. Wealth and family membership were the primary conditions of aristocratic

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membership, and by the ninth and eighth centuries archaeological finds reveal opulent burial sites containing jewelry, statuary, pottery, and other luxury goods which clearly distinguished their occupants from the ordinary lot of human beings. By the seventh century we see "a fierce competition for public honor and a raw, undisguised drive for riches scarcely ever again equalled in ancient times."[22] The competitive drive was not new, but archaic Greeks carried this timeless imperative to new heights and into virtually all aspects of their existence.

Aristocracy was an ethos and not only a social philosophy. The one thing needful for rich and poor alike was to excel, be it in the acquisition of land and property, in war, conspicuous consumption, or some form of cultural achievement. The examples are many and include an individual's choice of occupation. The aim here was not to maximize economic gain by any and all means but to choose a form of work that was at once profitable and worthy of an aristocrat. "In this hierarchy of occupations agriculture almost always held a place of its own at the top of the scale and was sharply distinguished from other economic activities. For most the ideal was represented by the landowner, free, independent and capable of providing for himself."[23] Trade and manual labor under the employment of another was held in far lower esteem, the idea being that to work for another was to be in a sense enslaved to them. Far better is the landowning aristocrat who works for himself and is self-sufficient, who is beholden to no one and is in a position to undertake acts of public benefaction. The agonal spirit of Homeric legend made itself visible in economic and cultural life generally. The ideal was always to excel. A good man or woman was good at something—an occupation, an art, or a practice of whatever kind. Virtually anything in archaic Greece could be and was made into a competitive struggle where the aim was to best all challengers and win glory for oneself or one's city. This did not change in the centuries that followed. Land ownership being the main source of wealth in an agricultural economy, the struggle for preeminence turned in significant part upon quality and quantity of land owned as well as livestock, particularly horses. These brought status, as did a good marriage—where the latter was determined more by economic than emotional considerations.

Elites controlled and profited from the land, yet the contest for status went beyond this. They needed to win the favor of their peers and outdo them in some area of social or cultural activity, from owning luxury goods to patronizing the arts, political participation, warfare, and generally exhibiting the virtues of their class. As van Wees points out, "Competition for wealth was not confined to landowners: 'potter resents potter and joiner joiner; beggar envies beggar and bard bard' [Hesiod]. The rewards of rivalry among craftsmen and other specialists could be great, because wealthy individuals and entire communities competed for their services. . . . By the end of the archaic age, diviners, healers, poets, sculptors and painters travelled across the Greek

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world, commanding high wages and achieving fame far beyond their own communities."[24] Non-aristocrats largely accepted the values of their superiors and imitated their actions to the extent that they could. One area in which this was not possible was warfare. This was the preserve of elites who had both the time and the resources to engage in the virtually constant and generally pointless warfare with rival states which pervaded so much of Greek history. Whether the scale was large or small, armed conflict was endemic throughout these centuries and participants needed to see to their own provisions and supply their own armature and horses, which was beyond the means of the lower classes. The Greek propensity for war was one with the love of competition and glory, and there was a necessity to it. Plato would later remark, "in cold fact all states are by nature fighting an undeclared war against every other state," making this a point of principle rather than sheer utility.[25] Honor demanded it, and the drive for ascendancy on the battlefield was impossible to separate from preeminence in cultural affairs. "Warfare and civilization," as Chester Starr sums it up, "developed hand in hand in historic Greece."[26] The remarkable cultural achievements of archaic and classical Athens, to take an obvious example, were made possible by the naval power that city commanded.

The imperative to be the best (*aristos*) manifested itself in leisure activities as well, for instance in the characteristically Greek practice of the drinking party or *symposium*. Here again was a contest and a ritualized activity the purpose of which was not to enjoy a bit of banter but to outduel one's opponents in the conversational art. Rules governed the order of events, how the speakers were to conduct themselves, how much water was to be added to the wine, and afforded some formality that combined with the festivity of the evening. The practice was an opportunity for the symposiasts to display the intellectual acumen that their education would have imparted and again in a competitive setting. Travel was another leisure activity which again archaic Greeks managed to turn into a contest. A trip to Egypt, for example, was more than a sightseeing tour but an occasion for the practice of elite gift exchange. This custom involved an elaborate show of hospitality and gift giving on the part of an aristocratic host, with an expectation of reciprocity should the latter return the visit at a later date. There being no inns, archaic aristocrats needed to find lodging in the houses of their peers, and "guest friendship" required a generous outlay of more than room and board.

The Greek mind managed to combine two ideals that to us can appear as opposites: aristocracy and democracy. The first was an ethos that was visible about everywhere one cares to look throughout the classical and pre-classical eras. Predominance in this worldview was not an expression of mere self-seeking but was an aristocrat's estimate of their rightful due. It was based on an appeal to equity (*isotes*), not mathematical equality, as was democracy itself. Both notions were based upon an appeal to due proportion and the

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equitable distribution of honors and power. Injustice in an agonistic culture consisted not in having less than others but in having less than one's rightful share, and where this was measured by well-known norms. Elites needed to act the part, in leisure and in war, and any who excelled were sure to demand their reward.

CLASSES AND SLAVERY

In an agricultural economy, prestige was a function of land ownership first. The ideal was always to own and control land in such quantity that one could delegate manual labor to others and gain leisure time for elite pursuits. Farming was a noble occupation but also hard work, and the latter was best done by others under the landowner's watchful supervision. The basic pattern would not change throughout the centuries of which we are speaking, nor would the basic class structure which is a regular feature of agricultural societies.

The structure itself would have appeared utterly given to rich and poor alike, and the institution of slavery was no exception. Human beings in this worldview fall naturally into economic and political divisions of citizen and non-citizen, free and unfree, and so on, in a system that varied little and was highly resistant to change. Aristocrat, peasant, and slave would remain the basic categories with some relatively minor variations. The interesting case of Sparta comprised a relatively small group of full citizens (peers or *homoioi*) who engaged in neither farming nor trade, beneath which were two large divisions of subjects: small communities of relatively free *perioikoi* who enjoyed some citizenship rights, including land ownership, while having no say in government affairs, and the helots (*heilôtai*) who were unfree subjects of the state. Robert Garland notes, "Helots, who were state-owned, were required to till the land and pay half their produce to their masters. It was this arrangement that left Spartan citizens free to discharge their military duties, and it is no exaggeration to state that the Spartan way of life was more dependent on its slave force than any other Greek community of which we have detailed knowledge. We have no means of determining the size of the helot population, though some scholars estimate that there were seven times as many helots as citizens."[27] The situation in Athens differed some, where the population was divided into citizens, metics (migrants), and slaves. These legal classifications did not necessarily reflect profound differences of social class or lifestyle, however. Athenian citizens were largely native-born; foreigners were seldom granted full citizenship rights but for the most part lived as metics, people of varying origins who settled either temporarily or permanently in Athenian territory while being forbidden from owning land. They were largely free but, unlike citizens, were required to pay a tax on

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their person (citizens paid taxes only on their property) and to have a citizen-patron to represent them in legal matters. By the classical period, metics were free to engage in non-agricultural economic activities and to amass a degree of wealth while remaining barred from political participation. They did not form a middle class—a category one finds nowhere in the ancient world—but were a vital part of the Athenian economy and a welcome presence while remaining decidedly second-class residents.

Slavery was a constant of Athenian and all Greek societies, although some differences can be discerned. In Athens this group rarely participated in warfare and could be bought and sold, unlike Spartan helots. In the main they were captured as prisoners of war and were used in a wide variety of occupations from manual labor to domestic service. An average household in Athens would contain likely a couple of slaves while the affluent might have ten times that number. The origins of this practice are shrouded in obscurity, but it appears to have been in place by the eighth century and to have become increasingly widespread through the classical period. It was never seriously questioned, including by the philosophers. For centuries it went without saying that in the aftermath of war the victors could do what they wished to the conquered and that destroying a city and either killing its occupants or taking them as slaves was a fact of life and indeed a necessity. Slaves had no rights, and while their legal status was uniform they did not constitute a true social class and performed much the same services that metics did.

THE ARTS

The term "archaic" (*archaios* connotes ancient) generally designates not only an early but a formative and primitive condition of an artifact or culture that succeeds it in time and ostensibly exceeds it by some qualitative measure. Thus the main source of interest in archaic Greek history is often thought to lie in its being a long and somewhat tedious preparation for the classical, and the arts are no exception. In keeping with the general narrative, archaic Greek art is the childhood of the classical, with hellenistic being its old age. As with Greek history generally, art attained its prime in the fifth and fourth centuries and the periods on either side of these are developmental stages of a somewhat lesser order. This old story rests upon aesthetic evaluations that are notoriously difficult to sustain, yet it persists in one form or another and is often tinged with teleology. A better way of conceiving it is that "between 800 and 300 BC," as Robin Osborne has stated, "Greece moved from being recognizably part of the art world of the Near East to pioneering an approach to the representation of the human body which not only set it apart from the east but which has made it a reference point for naturalistic figurative art in the west ever since."[28] The archaic period found Greek sculptors, architects,

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painters, poets, potters, and so on (there is no ancient Greek word for either artist or art) borrowing heavily from their near-eastern counterparts and slavishly following none of them but again imaginatively synthesizing aesthetic elements and techniques to suit their own taste. Art works were not displayed in galleries or exhibitions but placed within settings that often had a public function. Sculpture depicting gods, for example, was found at sacred sites while statues of athletes would be located at the sights of games. Eastern influence in the early period is often discerned, most notably perhaps in religious and other statuary in which a human figure's overall form and bearing was Egyptian but for its being freestanding and nude. Statues of divinities sought to represent power, proportion, and majesty, and in most ways were in keeping with religious and aesthetic ideas that were widespread in the ancient world. By the eighth and seventh centuries monumental sculpture based on near-eastern and Egyptian examples was being created but in hybridized and perhaps also freer style, the city-states of Greece being somewhat less theocratically inclined than these other societies. Archaic Greek artists may have been more experimental, not in the sense that they were creating art works in a cultural vacuum—clearly, they were doing no such thing—but in rearranging received ideas and incorporating them with some innovations of their own, and in time branching off in a different direction. Other examples of the phenomenon include tripod cauldrons, bronze bowls and bowl attachments, and decorative motifs such as sirens and griffins, all having been imported by the eighth century. Many such objects were cultural affectations and display items for the wealthy, created by artists who themselves were competing for prestige and patrons and who were beginning to sign their work. Conventions were strict but not so strict as to preclude innovation or some way for individual artists to distinguish themselves from their competitors, while their customers also engaged in contests of ownership. The depiction of athletes in bronze and marble was a notable innovation which appeared in Olympia in the sixth century. The customary stiffness of religious sculpture was being replaced by movement and representations of struggle and victory. The sense of life was becoming dynamic, grand, and agonistic while the gods themselves were depicted in ways that were increasingly realistic and inspiring. The richness of Homeric legend was being represented with multiple subjects locked in battle and displayed in architecture, pottery, and painting.

The same pattern is visible in the tableware, pottery, and jewelry of the period. "Earrings, hairpins, necklaces (fastened tight around the neck), pendants, bracelets, diadems, and rings were frequently worn by well-to-do women. They were made from a variety of materials, but the commonest were gilt terra-cotta, copper, and lead. More expensive items were made of silver and gold, though it is noteworthy that few pieces of gold jewelry have survived from the Archaic Period. . . . The only item of jewelry commonly

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worn by men was the signet ring, which was used to put a seal on private documents and merchandise as a mark of ownership."[29] Orientalizing influence is apparent here again, and again a good deal of the findings come from areas where interaction with eastern traders was most extensive, in the southeast Aegean. Regarding pottery—an art to which archaeologists have sometimes attached exaggerated importance—examples have been found from the eighth millennium and by the sixth it was being manufactured in various societies from Egypt to Persia. Greek pottery from the early second millennium is in the submycenaean and subsequently protogeometric styles; the latter featured increasingly elaborate, especially circular, patterns and led by around 900 to the geometric style where linear, angular, triangular, zigzag, and meander designs prevailed. By the eighth century, animal and human figures were being featured with increasing representational precision, likely under eastern influence but gradually again modifying such influences to suit Greek sensibilities. Archaic pottery was painted in the black figure style, where subjects were painted in black against a background of unpainted clay. Toward the end of this period this would be replaced by the red figure style which essentially reversed this—figures either unpainted or depicted in white against a black background. Painters in both styles competed to produce increasingly complex designs while wall painters were doing much the same at the same time. Such changes in style do not fit any teleological or developmental scheme but were aesthetic preferences driven by nothing more causal than taste and fashion.

In architecture again we find Egyptian and near-eastern ideas being imported and interpreted in moderately original ways well prior to the classical period. The quintessential Greek temple was no sudden innovation but had clear precedents in the Mycenaean palaces of the mid-second millennium. Several centuries prior to this, monumental temple construction was well established in Mesopotamia and Egypt and in styles to which the Greek bore more than a passing resemblance. Large-scale temples appeared in Greek cities by 700, with smaller prototypes about a century prior. An apparent modification in seventh-century building materials saw temple architects shifting from wood and brick to marble and limestone, having learned from their Egyptian counterparts the art of working with large blocks of stone. The change in materials owed more to the availability of stone quarries in Greece and the dearth of forests than any sudden evolution from the primitive to the advanced. The basic functions of these temples did not change from century to century and from nation to nation. They were to legitimate political power by advertising a ruler's piety and public-spiritedness and, inseparable from this, to provide a house for the gods on whose favor a state and its rulers depended. In the forecourt stood the alter upon which sacrifices would be offered to the god dwelling within the temple building while inside would be found a statue of the relevant deity along with various other sculptures and

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art works, votive offerings, and other of the god's valuables. The same architectural style would characterize lesser public buildings as well—halls, clubhouses, and so on, albeit on a more modest scale.

The Doric architectural order which we find represented in the Athenian Parthenon among so many other sites is of early date and may have been inspired by either Egyptian or Mycenaean forms, although its exact origins are unclear. It is the earliest of the three classical orders and "came into existence over a period of about two generations, from the end of the seventh until the early sixth centuries B.C."[30] Existing alongside it was the Ionic and, later, Corinthian orders which were distinguished principally by their column forms and entablatures. The Doric and Ionic orders underwent a good deal of modification through the sixth century and were largely independent of each other. The rules that comprised each seem not to have been as rigidly applied as the term "order" might suggest, as architects were free to experiment and to combine both styles as they saw fit.

Finally, while less is known of Greek music than some other arts, it was intimately connected from an early date to both dance and poetry and had a strongly occasional significance. Different musical forms from religious hymns to paeans, dithyrambs, marching songs, and funeral dirges had considerable social importance as did public processions, festivals, and ceremonial occasions in which music was commonly performed. The lyre and flute were the principal instruments and may well have been imports from the east. As with the other arts, appropriation, synthesis, competition, and some experimentation are regular features of Greek music, the basic elements of which are traceable to the archaic period.

GAMES AND FESTIVALS

Agonal struggles and celebrations were so much a part of archaic Greek culture that it is no surprise they raised sporting events to a new level of social importance. It was a short step from Homeric legend to the cult of the individual athlete battling for supremacy against his aristocratic peers at organized games and for no reward but prestige. To prevail in an *agon*—and what did they not turn into one?—was an ambition that drove many a young man in the quest for physical fitness and athletic predominance. Robert Garland writes, "The adoration of the human body found many outlets. Greek art, especially sculpture, gave it uninhibited expression. It was the Greeks who first identified the naked human body as the primary object of artistic attention. No less important, physical perfection was exemplified through competitive athletics, which occupied a central place in a number of major festivals. The apparent assumption was that the gods, who themselves exemplified physical perfection on the divine plane, took delight in observing their

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human counterparts."[31] Participation in sporting festivals was reserved for aristocrats; they alone could afford the leisure time and the cost of training and, often, horses needed to compete at these events. Commoners were too busy laboring to train for international competitions, the first of which was held at Olympia in 776 (the date is contested) and repeated every four years thereafter. These were supplemented by three other competitions—the Pythian games at Delphi, the Isthmian at Corinth, and the Nemean, each of which began between 582 and 573 and was repeated every two or four years. The four games formed a circuit for athletes and audiences, and all four were associated less with cities than religious sites. All sports were individual and performed naked: wrestling, boxing, racing, pentathlon, and horse and chariot racing. Team sports were unknown, although as the prestige of the games increased athletes began to compete on behalf not only of themselves but of their home cities, and so adding a communal flavor to the festivities. The general temper remained aristocratic and intensely competitive, with athletes often praying for death over defeat.

The games were serious business, and so were various other festivals which again were an opportunity for elites to gather, compete, and forge ties: "International festivals were good places to form or renew guest-friendships. But primarily they were celebrations of aristocratic class solidarity and venues for elite display . . . and legitimation."[32] This last notion can never be lost sight of; the legitimacy of an aristocratic family, class, and way of life lay in its nobility and kinship with the gods, and festivals were an opportunity to put on display whatever claims to preeminence one cared to make. Recreational, religious, athletic, dramatic, and agricultural festivals were celebrations and contests for renown as well as occasions for the aristocracy throughout the Greek world to exchange information and reinforce social bonds. At a local level too, games on a lesser scale would be held at the gymnasium which every Greek city had. The aim of the competitors here as well was not only to win but to exhibit a nobility of form, for prestige lay here as well. Whether festivals were athletic or religious, local or panhellenic, they were important occasions for a society in which the practice of public celebration was highly valued and deeply rooted.

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CEMENT

If there is a single realm in which ancient Greek culture exhibits the greatest continuity, it is religion. This deeply religious society preserved their ancestral customs without major modifications until the arrival of Christian monotheism, and even then its eventual demise was extremely protracted. The combination of myth, ritual, festival, and social cement appears to have satisfied the spiritual needs of Greeks for many centuries, with few expres-

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sions of discontent. Many sanctuary sites extend from the bronze age and many others were constructed during the archaic era, coinciding with the creation of new city-states and the formation of the Mediterranean network. "In every *polis* of the early archaic period," François de Polignac notes, "the sanctuary was the one place where monumental architecture was erected, on whatever scale the community could manage. The sanctuary thus became the principal place of communication between the human and the divine worlds, being a part of both at the same time, clearly defined, securely established, and highly valued as a result of the collective effort that had gone into its construction." The eighth century in particular witnessed sanctuary and temple construction on a large scale throughout the Greek world, and the multiplication of religious sites coincided as well with increasingly lavish sacrificial offerings. The preceding dark age being evidentially thin, no comparisons can be inferred between Greek religious life in these centuries with the archaic period. What we may say is that by the eighth century religious sites had become plentiful throughout the Mediterranean and "the three constituent elements of the 'classic' Greek sanctuary were elaborated: the altar, the temple, . . . and the precinct wall, which marked out the sacred area."[33] Sanctuaries commonly marked frontiers both between the realms of the sacred and the profane and between city-states, with many being placed in rural areas near political borders.

The content of Greek myth did not radically change through these centuries, with many divinities representing dimensions of the human and natural world as they would in a great many ancient polytheistic cultures. We shall return to this topic in Chapter 5, but for now let us note that there was no Greek word for religion and however we understand this phenomenon it was not removed from everyday human existence but pervaded life in its various dimensions. The gods were numerous and ubiquitous, and their deeds were recounted in no sacred text but in a great many myths none of which should be conceived as doctrines in a later monotheistic sense of the term but as *mythos*, narratives of inspiration and edification which afforded wisdom without dogma. Whether they were literally believed in and by how many are disputed questions which we shall table for the time being, but myths were passed down orally for some centuries before Homer and Hesiod took up their pens. Even then, myths had no canonical form but varied from city to city and century to century and were presided over by no institutional priesthood. There was an eclecticism in the selection of deities a given city-state or individual would venerate and a ready acceptance of new or foreign gods. We can imagine a hodgepodge of legends, rituals, and divinities of various origins in a spiritual landscape in which what mattered was outward action more than inward belief.

The gods themselves have been divided into two categories, the Olympian and the chthonian. The latter were divinities of the earth and, as W. K.

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C. Guthrie writes, “have two primary functions: they ensure the fertility of the land, and they preside over, or have some function or other connected with, the realm of the souls of the dead.” The chthonian gods were numerous, often regional, and as bound up with the earth and the life it bears as the pastoralists who venerated them. They were less universalizable than the deities who dwelled with Zeus in the clouds atop Mount Olympos. This latter group formed the Homeric pantheon which in the archaic period was reduced to twelve. “First and foremost,” the same scholar notes, Zeus “is the god of the sky and weather whom all Indo-European peoples acknowledged under names variously derived from the same root. This root originally meant ‘to shine,’” and when Greek migrants arrived in the Aegean this sky god was part of the tradition that accompanied them.[34] In the time of Homer, the plethora of divinities would assume a form that would endure through the classical period and beyond.

Equally fundamental to the Indo-European religious tradition was the ritual of animal sacrifice which would become a vital element of Greek polytheism as of ancient religion in so many cultures. Piety lay less in any private state of mind or belief than in the dignified performance of public acts, chief of which was the blood sacrifice in which the sacrificer, with the assistance of a priest, would offer a domestic animal to the gods in hopeful exchange for some act of divine reciprocity. The inedible parts went to the gods while the meat was consumed by the assembled crowd. Pouring libations on the earth served a similar function while processions, dancing, and similar activities were also invested with religious meaning. Such acts carried a social significance which should be emphasized. Religious stories and rituals throughout these centuries cemented bonds between Greeks both on local and panhellenic scales, and this was a good part of their importance. This was always true of ancient polytheism. Athena was the patron goddess and protector of all Athenians, and her veneration by the people as a whole was part of the meaning of Athenian citizenship. Every city-state had its patron deity, and visitors to a city were able to demonstrate their piety by offering a sacrifice to its divine protector. Additional to this, as we shall see in Chapter 4, religion had a vital political dimension which is impossible to disentangle from the social and cultural. Greek religion had a personal dimension, yet this may have been secondary to its more communal aspect. It was undogmatic and nonevangelical, but it also had little patience for nonconformists.

GREECE AND ROME

By the hellenistic era, the Mediterranean network had come increasingly under the influence of Greek civilization and education, owing to the com-

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mixture so often encountered in the ancient world of cultural greatness and military power. By the second century B.C., Alexander's empire was a memory and indications were that Rome would soon follow suit. By the time of the Roman conquest of Greece, Italy itself had been steeped in Greek culture for some time, making the conquest itself more a political-military event than a social-cultural one. Hellenization took root not only across the vast territories that Alexander's armies conquered but in parts west as well, creating a basically Greek interlocutionary world the political center of which would become Rome but the cultural heart of which would remain Greece. Horace famously wrote, "Greece captured has taken captive the savage victor and brought the arts to rustic Latium." As Martin Goodman explains, "From at least the late third century BCE, Romans tended to see themselves, and all the world, through Greek categories of historiography, ethnography and myth. Their art, architecture, sculpture, poetry, drama, rhetorical techniques, philosophical traditions and even some of their religious practices had all been borrowed to some extent from Greece. Romans knew this well, and it had come about largely because in the process of conquering the Greek world from the late third century BCE Roman aristocrats had become uneasily aware of the poverty of their own martial, agrarian culture in contrast to a complex civilization which had matured during centuries of settled urban prosperity."[35] Extensive ties had been established between Greece and Rome by the fourth century, and while the cultural influence was not unidirectional, the larger picture of what took place through these centuries across vast regions of the known world at the time is best summarized in the word hellenization.

Whether by means of the book or the sword, Greek civilization would cast a shadow that far exceeded the Aegean and the hellenistic era, while classical Athens in particular would come to be viewed in Roman times as the summit of cultural achievement. Greek would become the language of higher culture and the standard by which Rome and the territories it conquered would measure themselves. Throughout the Mediterranean network philhellenism became a mark of sophistication for centuries, with Greek education—literacy, Homer, rhetoric—as the model for all others to follow. Even as the Roman machine passed over the city-states of Greece, the trail of destruction was not total. Rome's practice was to conquer and to absorb, to establish political hegemony while recognizing Athens as a cultural center second to none. In what would become a habit, Roman armies plundered Greek lands, taking back to the capital a great many of its goods and artifacts as the spoils of war and often as loot to be displayed in a triumph for a conquering general. Parts of Greece were devastated, but in the longer term the relation between conqueror and conquered was nothing simple or one-way.

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The conversation that the Greeks had not invented but taken up and taken further than their archaic and pre-archaic predecessors would be taken up again by the Romans and with considerable deference to the Greek model. The cities of classical Greece would remain the prototype, their architecture, literature, philosophy, science, art, and education all serving as the standard to which an emerging empire needed to measure up. Roman predominance combined with a culture envy which the new power would struggle mightily to overcome but with limited success. As Daryl Lehoux writes, "Cicero, like Pliny the Elder and many other Latin authors, did not see themselves as merely commenting on, clarifying, or popularizing Greek originals. They saw themselves as building on them, and building something considerable at that. To quote Cicero, '[I]t is not that one could *not* learn philosophy from Greek writings and teachers, but it has always been my opinion that we Romans found out everything for ourselves more wisely than the Greeks did, or else improved the things we got from the Greeks.'"[36] Cicero was protesting too much and the sentiment itself he likely borrowed from Plato (see note 13), with improvement no doubt. He himself had studied rhetoric and philosophy in Greece, as did Julius Caesar and a great many Roman aristocrats, and as the new empire grew it spread Greek culture more widely than Alexander had managed. Roman civilization practiced a great deal of imitation, appropriation, and refinement of Greek ways as the Greeks themselves had done a few centuries prior and as medieval societies would as well in a pattern that would repeat itself time and again. The high point that was Rome appeared no more from out of the blue than the city-states of classical Greece had. Cultural elements of a myriad kinds were received and partially altered, synthesized and repeated century upon century in a pattern that did not fundamentally change, even as cultures and societies themselves gradually did.

NOTES

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13. Plato, *Epinomis* 987d5–e1, trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr., in *Plato: Complete Works*, eds. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). *Epinomis* is generally recognized as spurious; ancient authors attribute it to Philip of Opus, whom they also credit with having transcribed Plato's text of *Laws* from the stored wax tablets to papyrus. I thank Jeff Mitscherling for bringing this to my attention.
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Chapter Four

Power and Reason

On Political History

The same miracle story that came into question in Chapter 3 has long held currency in the history of Greek politics. A longstanding narrative has it that the classical Greeks' invention of democracy constituted a radical and unprecedented forward step in the history of western political institutions, and that what it replaced was not only undemocratic but static and oppressive. One typical textbook remark expresses the point as follows: "To describe in measured tones the Greek achievements in the fifth century B.C. is well-nigh impossible, for never in the history of the world have so few people done so much in the space of two or three generations. Impressive in itself, the classic era was also a seminal influence for all later western civilization." The preceding era, the same historian writes, "from 1200 to 900 is a dim and dreary one," as can be said of the next few centuries before the sudden democratic revolution at around the end of the sixth century.[1] Not much happened, and what did made for a bleak picture.

What the birth of democracy represented, on this telling, was a transformation from the basically unchecked power of kings and warlords to a sophisticated and rational model of political organization, one from which we may draw an interrupted but otherwise unstoppable developmental line toward democratic politics in its modern forms. The account is teleological and, a logical corollary of this, patronizing in its view of pre-classical Greece (sometimes classical as well). "It appeals," as Anton Powell puts it, ". . . to normal human vanity and to the easy presumption that modern is best," a common if groundless supposition not limited to historians.[2] So significant was this development that it seemed to warrant description as a new period or stage in world history. A Rubicon had been crossed and a triumph achieved,

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the implications of which are with us still. Our purpose in what follows is not to reject this story in its entirety but to divest it of its triumphalism and its teleology. The summit was perhaps less high, the valleys less low, than the old telling had it. It is a story of achievement but not sudden revolution or invention *ex nihilo*. The Greeks were borrowers and synthesizers, not miracle workers, and in the realm of political affairs the transformation they affected was at once a new phase in "the conversation of humankind" and a story of aggressive self-seeking and will to power on a grand scale.

What was ancient Greek politics like in the centuries before the democratic revolution, and was it a revolution? Recurring patterns do show themselves when we assess archaic and dark-age Greece as well as various neighboring and earlier civilizations in the Aegean and near-eastern world. The larger picture of the first few millennia B.C., insofar as they come into view at all (and sources throughout this long period are always limited), typically features some prominent personage—charismatic individual, chieftain, king—holding the reins of power while surrounding himself with a retinue of notables and wealthy aristocrats. Whether a divinity himself, a friend of the divinities, military strongman, or a combination thereof, power flowed from the top down in political orders that were characterized by authority (let us not say authoritarianism), frequent warfare, migrations, and empire building, whether on a large or small scale. By the third millennium we see a differentiation of social classes, conquest and imperialism, religious legitimation, the appearance of royal courts and civil bureaucracies, and extensive interactions between states, varyingly peaceful or hostile. Around 2000 we see the movement of Indo-European groups from the steppelands to far-flung regions of Europe and the Mediterranean through the middle east to India and a fairly consistent pattern of military kingship. "It was generally assumed," as Jacob Burckhardt states, "that in primeval times sovereignty was exclusively in the hands of kings. That was the only kind of rule conceivable among the tribes as long as they were moving about and migrating. But even when a tribe settled down, the royal sway might well have continued for quite a while."[3] Much the same pattern is visible in civilizations large and small throughout the ancient world until certain city-states of Greece began opting for a different model. At the bottom of the political order were slaves and peasants, classes of laborers and agriculturalists variously free or unfree upon whom the whole order rested. Notions of oppression and unbridled aggression should be tempered; a king who paid no mind to the welfare of his people could expect retribution. His rule was contingent on the will not only of the gods but of the aristocracy of which he was a part along with military prowess, diplomatic and administrative competence, and an ability to persuade the people to recognize his authority and carry out his commands. A successful monarch needed to be adept as a commander and to be persuasive, in dealings with both his people and his peers in neighboring states. By the third and

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second millennia, kings were entering into treaties with one another, negotiating alliances, and overseeing interstate trade. It was not a job for thugs but for individuals who, if they expected to last, needed to be adept in several realms of activity and to cultivate relationships with peers and subjects alike. Politics through the centuries in question was personal and usually small in scale, and this would not fundamentally change in the transition to democracy.

Absolutism, theocracy, oligarchy, and similar ideological terms are best avoided in interpreting the political structures of such early societies as the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Hittite, Minoan, Mycenaean, Persian, and so on, as well as dark-age and archaic Greece. The reality was always more complex than any such category can capture, and the same can be said of classical democracy. The world that Homer described was ruled by monarchs in a way that was consistent with other polities of that time period, but the poet's aim was never simply to report on the political institutions of the era. As well, what the "from kingly power to aristocracy to democratic rationality" story overlooks is that already by Homer's time the basic trajectory that classical, including political, culture would follow was well in place. The seeds of Greek democracy had been sown by the so-called dark age, when autocrats ostensibly ruled the land and the people languished. The hypothesis "that in societies such as those of 'Dark Age' Greece, 'sovereign power' is likely to have resided in the hands of the 'demos' in some form," as G. E. M. de Ste. Croix points out, has stronger and weaker forms; he himself prefers a weaker formulation, that "rulers, whether kings or aristocrats, could not afford to go too far in opposition to the will of the great majority of their subjects, and might . . . consult the common people, or at any rate the army, before they took some step which might not be effective without their cooperation."[4] Call it "nascent," "proto-" or "primitive" democracy as one likes, but our point is that this revolution, if one wishes to characterize it as such, did not appear from nowhere but emerged in much the way that ideas and cultural artifacts in general do, which is organically, gradually, and on ground that had been prepared in advance. Pre-classical Greek political arrangements were relatively simple, traditional, and personal; kings and aristocrats predominated in a loose confederation of states that variously interacted with and borrowed from one another while vying invariably for supremacy.

THE *POLIS*

We have spoken already of the *polis* which prior to the archaic era had emerged slowly on the mainland, islands, and colonies of the Greek world. Not a Greek invention, the city-state had appeared earlier in Mesopotamia

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and in the eighth century was appearing elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. An expanding network of trade, culture, and diplomacy was connecting city-states within and without the Greek world, although we can also speak of fragmentation between the numerous political units, many of them small, that had taken form in this early period. Geography was an important factor; surrounded by sea and mountains, small urban centers predominated, interaction between which was greatly facilitated by seafaring.

The typical early Greek *polis* prided itself on independence while much of the near east was moving toward empire and larger scale centralization. The city-state was indistinguishably a social, cultural, and political unit at the same time that it came to assume a more or less common form: a small urban center surrounded by agricultural territory and villages, a large majority of whose population were always farmers. It emerged slowly out of the tribal kingdoms of former times while bearing clear traces of its predecessor in both its institutions and its way of life. The average city-state resembled a modern county or township in terms of scale, and its population and political complexity were likewise limited. If Athens and Sparta are the best known, they were far from typical: "About 80 per cent of the thousand or so cities in the classical Greek world had a territory of not more than 200 square kilometres, . . . whereas only thirteen had more than 1,000 square kilometres. . . . Among those were Athens, with 2,600 square kilometres, . . . and Sparta, with 6,200 square kilometres, . . . both larger than any other city on the Greek mainland."[5] By the classical era it had come to seem to theorists like Plato and Aristotle the natural form of political association for human beings who were understood to be both rational and civilized, two notions that in their terms were inseparable from the life of the city. Civilization for the Greeks had come to signify not only education and sophistication but also a degree of political consolidation and standardization amid the plurality. Intellectuals, as we have seen, were typically urbanites who looked down their noses at occupants of the countryside even while economies remained agricultural and the life of the *polis* depended on a symbiosis of urban and rural life.

The layout of cities became increasingly uniform, with an urban nucleus surrounded by agricultural regions, while within the city itself one could expect to find the same set of public buildings and structures wherever one went in the Greek world. City walls, a central marketplace, port, council chambers, administrative buildings, an acropolis, temples, statuary, a gymnasium and theater were becoming standard, although a good part of Greece would remain organized along tribal (*ethnos*) lines which lacked an urban center. The *polis* was in some fashion or other a self-governing citizen-state which by the eighth century had replaced monarchical governing structures with ones organized by and around citizen-aristocrats. One-person rule what gradually superseded in the centuries following the disappearance of the Mycenaean palaces by an authority that was distributed among the larger

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landowners of a region who adopted the custom of rotating political offices annually. The transition was likely eased by gradualness and the fact that a small territory would have comprised a limited number of families and larger kinship groupings that were in some measure interrelated and closely knit. Forming a *polis* entailed formalizing bonds that were long established and highly valued while the distribution of authority was an early and likely readily acceptable iteration of the idea of ruling and being ruled in turn.

Being a citizen meant having a say in the public affairs of one's city-state, thus less to be a bearer of rights than a participant, in a measure contingent on one's socio-economic standing, in a tightly woven network of decision making, administration, and dealings with neighboring states. Interaction between Greek states and their near-eastern counterparts increased dramatically through the ninth and eighth centuries and countered a tendency toward particularism which is readily discernible through this period. Local patriotism and rivalry between autonomous political units were longstanding habits in the Greek world, where contests for supremacy assumed so many forms.

AFFILIATIONS

Group affiliations in the archaic period transcended family and *polis*. Commercial ties gained in importance and extent while in many other ways social and political relations became increasingly complex. The most studied case is again Athens, and what we see through the centuries of the pre-classical period are political arrangements that are at once dependent upon personal allegiances and group memberships which overlapped and strongly conditioned an individual's sense of citizenship. Robin Osborne summarizes the point this way: "The Athenians grouped themselves into permanent or semi-permanent corporations in a number of different ways. These groups were founded on a wide variety of criteria—locality, descent, combinations of locality and descent, common occupational interests, common religious interests, mutual assistance in primarily financial matters, common military service, and so on. An individual Athenian might belong to a large number of such groups, and in these groups he would associate closely with a wide range of sorts and conditions of men. Some groups were by definition made up solely of citizens, others included metics and foreigners. . . . Some included women and slaves."[6]

The basic social unit was invariably the *oikos* or household. This was not limited to the nuclear family but included all the occupants of an individual home—typically father and mother, children, other dependents, and slaves—in addition to any livestock and the estate itself. The family was part of a larger kinship group known as a *genos* which traced its ancestry to some common personage or divinity. Also extending beyond immediate kin was

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the *phratry* (from which we get the word "fraternal"). This was a larger brotherhood which in the archaic era was the basis of Athenian citizenship and extended from the dark age and perhaps the Mycenaean period. While membership in a *genos* was limited to aristocrats, every Athenian male belonged from shortly after birth to a *phratry* in which kinship ties were loose but important for both religious and legal purposes. In a case of homicide, for instance, it was expected that a member of the victim's *phratry*—of which Athens alone included about thirty—would seek justice on behalf of the victim. Essentially a large, extended family, the *phratry* celebrated a young man's preparation for military participation and entry into adulthood without constituting a formalized political unit.

Eventually, traditional ties of kinship would be superseded by artificial affiliations of tribe and *deme* which assumed more explicitly political, legal, and military purposes. Athens and the surrounding territory of Attica contained 139 or 140 *demes*—districts or villages—each of which contained an assembly and mayor, performed its own religious ceremonies, and in some ways represented a state within a state. Naming customs included an important role for the *deme* as well, as an Athenian citizen would, after Cleisthenes' reforms, be identified as A, son of B, of the *deme* C. Many *demes* were of ancient origin but became formalized during this period of emerging democracy in an attempt to differentiate civic from blood ties. Adding to the complexity was the tribe (*phyle*)—another association of early origin which began to assume a more civic function. "Tribes too had elected and allotted officials, ran their own finances and had their own cults. But what gave tribes their identity was that they were the unit of military service."[7] An increasingly complicated system saw each of the *demes* contained within ten tribes—an increase from the traditional four from which Greeks in general had long regarded themselves as descendants, and a term that carried an ethnic connotation stemming ultimately from the division of Dorian and Ionian populations. Athenians believed themselves of Ionian descent while Spartans claimed to stem from the Dorian invasion.

The overall picture is complicated and overlapping, but the point is that archaic Greek citizenship and identity were slowly transitioning from kin-based to civic associations in ways that exhibited considerable continuity with a time-honored past and that reinforced and formalized a highly corporate sense of selfhood which tied one profoundly to a place, a class, an economic and military function, and to a larger *demos* in addition to older kinship affiliations. Participation in community life was entirely bound up with personhood at the same time that we can begin to speak of an emerging individualization in the nascent democracies of this period.

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AN EMERGING ETHOS

In Athens, the word *dēmokratia* did not to our knowledge appear prior to the later sixth century, but the larger phenomenon of which it was an expression can be traced much further back. Its exact origins are, of course, debated and turn, as such disputes so often do, upon definitions and varying tolerance of ambiguities and similarities which extend several centuries prior to the classical age. The post-Mycenaean period witnessed a slow transformation from a political order dominated by kings to an aristocracy and the first, to our knowledge, inklings of popular rule. We are speaking of a process spanning the greater part of a millennium, not of a sudden revolution during the sixth or fifth century. If we understand democracy not only as a particular set of political and legal institutions but more broadly as a way of life and an ethos in which decision-making authority belonged no longer to the one but to the many—the *demos*—then the new outlook can be found emerging gradually through the centuries spanning the end of the palace period through the archaic. It was a change in thinking that began—insofar, that is, as such changes ever "begin"—with the appearance of an aristocratic outlook which replaced the notion of a polity as centered around the royal palace to one that revolved around a broader spectrum of elite society, in particular the major landowners of a given city-state. Kings were either disappearing or becoming weakened as power became dispersed among their emboldened aristocratic peers, none of whom was clamoring for democracy even while affecting a piecemeal transformation that would lead in its direction.

Greek democracy did not appear as a consequence of either popular revolution or a movement among intellectuals or theorists, and indeed quite the contrary. If we can speak of a movement here at all, it is one that proceeded at a slow pace from the one to the many, and where the many were not actually that many. The Homeric world depicted attitudes, values, and a general worldview that were neither monarchical nor democratic but aristocratic, explicitly hierarchical, and rooted in long tradition. The principal actors were not the common people but heroic personages disinclined toward obedience and who were entirely bent on proving themselves first among their fellows. This uncompromising bunch were competitive, fearless, and warring, and the outlook that they represented did not restrict itself to a single class. Aristocracy was a way of thinking to which landowners and farmers alike could in some way participate. It expressed an agonistic spirit, a love of excellence and striving that was not limited to political power-seeking. It was not a leveling doctrine—it was not a doctrine at all—but it produced a leveling effect on Greek society which in time would pave the way for democratic reforms. Kurt A. Raaflaub and Robert W. Wallace articulate this point as follows: "in early Greece political and military equality, the personal independence and autonomy especially of 'middling' citizens, the Greeks' refusal

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to subordinate themselves to patrons, overlords, or abusive aristocrats, the characteristic openness and tolerance of individuals' opinions and choices, and personal freedom as balanced by a strong egalitarian commitment to the community: all of these qualities lay at the root of Greek democracy."[8] They lay at the root of aristocracy as well, and for several centuries indications are that a constellation of beliefs, attitudes, and values would pass from the aristocratic element to the larger citizenry, more as a cultural outlook than a political ideology. It was relative equality that was sought—nothing absolute but a value of proportion and due measure. Aristocrats saw themselves as nobles, an embodiment of excellence and higher culture while remaining first among relative equals, and it was an attitude that rubbed off among their fellow Greeks. Social bonds were coming to be conceived not in terms of domination and subjection but in more reciprocal terms, where all were seen as playing a role in a common project which itself aimed to achieve an equilibrium of social elements. The relative predominance of elites was their rightful due, by their lights anyway, in an order that no longer had need of a warrior-monarch but had attained a level of stability and prosperity. "The emphasis," Jean-Pierre Vernant writes, through this long transition "was no longer on a single person who dominated social life, but on a multiplicity of functions that opposed each other and thus called for a reciprocal apportionment and delimitation."[9]

In the realm of economics, the aristocratic attitude expressed itself in the competition for personal wealth, in politics in the jockeying among elites for power and position, and in various other domains in the conscious striving for status and reputation. One could call this individualism, yet it was inseparable from a sense of community and public spiritedness that appears to have been deeply rooted through every period of Greek history. Homeric heroes and later democratic reformers alike believed themselves to be serving the *demos* and the gods, not themselves alone, and social hierarchies that persisted appeared to lack an alternative. The class structure was not carved in stone and aristocratic authority was likely less imperious than in neighboring kingdoms. The dislike of obedience was not limited to major landowners, and if the latter were inclined toward haughtiness the common citizens were not far behind. Relative equality was slowly gaining purchase, likely by imperceptible degrees, and was mixed with its opposite: a system of slavery that made the very idea of the equality of citizens possible. In principle, any Greek citizen could achieve virtue or excellence, including in the realm of public debate, and when popular assemblies began to form in the archaic period there were no grounds to limit participation to the well born. The dates are sketchy, but in the case of Athens—not necessarily a typical case but the best known—"we can be fairly confident that there was already a popular Assembly (*ekklesia*) in the seventh century, though before Solon it excluded the lowest economic group, the *thetes*."[10] Its role would have been limited in

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a political order that was basically aristocratic (*aristoi* connoted best) or oligarchic (*oligoi* meant few), but again the larger picture suggests a gradual dispersal of power among landowning elites and a wider spectrum of society. A certain conservatism prevailed in a system that served the elite, but political power had to legitimate itself with constant reference to the people's interest. Aristocratic authority that showed callous disregard for the *demos* could expect consequences well prior to the emergence of explicitly democratic institutions. As Wallace writes, "already in our earliest sources non-elites display self-confidence, egalitarianism, and individualism; they spoke out, acted as they thought right, and balanced community needs against their own intense feelings of freedom, self-worth, and independence."[11] Sources through the archaic era are always limited, but the phenomenon does not appear to have been exclusive to Athenians. Even Sparta, while never a beacon for egalitarianism, had its assembly and a written constitution that spoke of the equality of citizens and the limits of state power.

The emerging democratic ethos did not lack defenders, although it did lack theorists. Even classical Athens found its foremost political thinkers engaging in scathing critique of a democracy which by this time had become well established. No theoretical elaboration or philosophical defence of its institutions survives. "The philosophers attacked democracy; the committed democrats responded by ignoring them, by going about the business of government and politics in a democratic way, without writing treatises on the subject."[12] What democratic politics lacked in intellectuals it did not lack in reformers.

DEMOCRATIC REFORMERS

Democracy was never any kind of unified system spanning the city-states of Greece but was characterized by particularism and regional variations at the level of institutions and laws beneath which lay a relatively unified way of life. Eric Robinson plausibly argues that "by the middle of the sixth century *demokratiai* had formed in a number of city-states, though the thinness of the evidence precluded certainty about exactly how many there were or which had come first."[13] In the case of Athens, an important early figure was Draco, of whom little is known but for the fact that around 622–620 he set about to create a legal code the content of which may not have been especially new but that contained the noteworthy innovation of being written down. This had the effect of formalizing laws, most of which were likely traditional, and also transferring legal knowledge from the preserve of magistrates to the general citizenry. His code also brought homicide under the jurisdiction of the state, transforming it from an essentially private dispute between kinship groups to a matter of public interest and control.

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A more important figure was Solon, whom many later Athenians would regard as the founder of democracy in their city on account of his reforms of 594/93, the general effect of which has long been characterized as transforming an oligarchic order into a democratic one. The description is a simplification; the old order was left standing and the elite remained elite, but the aim of his reforms was to appease lower classes that had been demanding measures to ease their economic plight and in particular to resolve the issue of debt bondage. By the year of Solon's archonship, civil war was brewing between Athenian farmers—always a sizeable portion of the population—and the ruling aristocracy whom the former were accusing of exploitation and greed while lacking legal recourse. Solon's reforms represented less "the birth of democracy" than a response to a crisis which he was elected to mediate in a way that would assuage the *demos* while leaving most of the old order intact. This he accomplished through a series of measures that included the abolition of all debts, a ban on selling Athenians into slavery, a significant expansion of public participation rights in the assembly and law courts, an easing of legal penalties stemming from Draco's period, a reorganization of social classes into four based on agricultural production, and a new standard for political rights of property rather than kinship. The power of the aristocracy was clearly reduced yet only to the extent necessary to defuse the crisis. An exercise in radicalism it was not, and while Solon's constitutional measures included a more powerful assembly and people's court, the consequences for the major landowning families were not dramatic. A plausible case can be made that the latter were as well served by Solon as the common citizenry. The revolutionary element was frustrated by Solon's preference for compromise over violence and his refusal both to become tyrant and to redistribute land. Democratic politics as he practiced it was not an ideology but an exercise in diplomacy, a method of resolving conflict between antagonistic forces and of giving each their rightful due. The judgment of one historian that "Solon himself was no democrat" since he opted "to take a middle road of compromise" is an exaggeration; what he was not was a political rationalist and extremist.[14] Giving each citizen their due was a political entailment of a common Greek idea, one that held that the proper arrangement of something bore upon due measure and avoiding extremes.

Before the end of the sixth century Cleisthenes would follow suit, bringing about further democratic reforms while again refusing the role of revolutionary. The goal remained gradual reform toward popular rule if not indeed conservatism as by 508/07, the year of his archonship, democracy had already taken root. Under his leadership the assembly became still more powerful while he also created a council of five hundred citizens—the main purpose of which was to organize the agenda for assembly meetings—of whom fifty were elected by lot by each of the ten tribes which he also created. The reorganization of the tribes served at once to consolidate Cleis-

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thenes' power, enfranchise a larger portion of the citizenry, and weaken particular groupings in favor of the *demos* as a whole. The system he put in place would not fundamentally change for two and a half centuries and effectively made "[r]hetorical skills—the ability to persuade mass audiences— . . . of critical importance to the practice of Athenian politics."[15] By the middle of the fifth century Pericles had already inherited a system and an ethos that was democratic and that rewarded the oratorical capacity at which he excelled while seeing no contradiction between democracy, imperialism, and indeed tyranny. A general and aristocrat, he was re-elected annually from about 445 until 429, the year of his death, and wielded great authority over the assembly. In the words of Thucydides, "in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen," and the mandate he was given included turning Athens into an empire.[16] This man of culture and war oversaw the construction of the Parthenon, the most ambitious and costly temple in Greece, while leading Athens into a war with Sparta that was pointless and unwinnable. "I declare that our city is an education to Greece," Pericles declared in his much-celebrated funeral oration, long regarded as the foremost articulation of Athenian democracy and, suitably enough, a speech delivered in the context of war.[17] Even tyranny was not yet seen as antithetical to the democratic spirit; if it served the *demos* to be ruled by a tyrant—an official with either unlimited power or enough to override the council and assembly—then tyranny it was, as the example of Peisistratus and his son illustrates. This man came to power in the sixth century by force but remained there for thirty-six years, a feat that could not have been sustained by military force alone. Whether any of these characters were friends or enemies of democracy is not an either/or proposition. They were allied with the *demos*—more or less—and if it pleased the citizens to lurch toward empire or one-man rule then lurch it did.

INSTITUTIONS

"Continuity and development," writes Oswyn Murray, "are both present in the growth of the machinery of government from the primitive warrior assemblies of Homer to the classical city-state."[18] This appears to be broadly true of the Greek world, although so much of the focus has always been on Athens. What we see in the archaic period are rudiments of democratic politics which resist easy classification while being widespread and roughly consistent across a large number of states. General tendencies at the level of principles included the piecemeal decentralization of power, the weakening of kings and the rise of the aristocracy, the gradual and partial wresting of control by the broader citizenry, election by lot and for fixed periods, a system of checks on power, the codification of laws, and a wide latitude for

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citizen participation. None of this was new in the time of Draco or Solon. Their contributions appear more as continuations and accelerations of ideas that were already well established in a good part of the Greek world than as inventions. Formalized law codes extend from the time of Hammurabi in Mesopotamia while elected officials and some kind of people's assembly also appear from an early date. By the time any of the Greek *poleis* come into view, state power was fairly limited, officials were being elected and checked by other officials, and a council and assembly had begun to hold the reins.

These early or near-democracies placed a certain skepticism upon the wisdom of individual officials and insisted on limiting powers and terms of office—often to one year—for elected magistrates. States possessed no permanent civil service and took steps to prevent the emergence of a governing clique chiefly by means of the assembly. While I share Roger Brock and Stephen Hodkinson's view that "we should be cautious about seeing democracy everywhere" among the Greek city-states, or specifically "that whenever we find a citizen assembly or decrees of the people . . . there is a democracy," the assembly became perhaps the foremost institutional expression of the democratic ethos which emerged from this early period.[19] One would look in vain for a litmus test for which states were and were not democratic, but with this qualification the people's assembly became the principal decision-making institution across a great many cities that thought of themselves as democracies and may be regarded as a necessary, not sufficient, condition of such a polity. The transition from the archaic to the classical period saw a gradual transference of authority to an assembly in which all citizens in principle could participate directly and which a great many did. In Athens about six thousand regularly—about forty times a year—attended assembly meetings where issues involving the state religion—temple construction, festivals, sacrificial practices, and so on—war and diplomacy, ostracism, finance, and related matters were debated and decided upon. Most in attendance would have been urban dwellers, rural farmers having further to travel and being largely occupied with agricultural tasks.

An aristocratic council was a separate body, the principal tasks of which appear to have been to prepare an agenda for assembly meetings and to make recommendations which assembly members were free to follow or refuse and likely followed in most cases. It served an executive function as well, carrying out policies approved by the assembly, supervising officials, overseeing festivals, maintaining public buildings, and so on. Council members in Athens needed to be over thirty years of age, and to prevent cliques from gaining control no citizen could serve on this body for more than two years in a lifetime. The administration of justice also came under the power of the *demos* in the creation of law courts. Solon's reforms had provided that any Athenian could bring charges in a public action and prosecute a case before a rather large—201 or more—jury of citizen volunteers, each of whom also

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had to be over thirty. There were no lawyers or judges in a legal system that strived for maximal openness and participation by full citizens of the *polis*.

These institutions existed in some form through a major portion of the Greek world. Even Sparta, Athens' long-time rival, had a citizens' assembly to check the power of their two kings and oligarchic council. Whether Sparta or any number of other Greek states are describable as democracies is a matter upon which historians have long disagreed, although the definitional question is not our concern here. The larger point is that this constellation of institutions—assembly, council, and courts—came into prominence in the greater part of Greece in one fashion and time or another in the general period of which we have been speaking. Its appearance was no miracle but was piecemeal, contingent (often in response to a crisis), and never unmixed with democracy's ostensible antitheses—oligarchy, aggression, slavery.

SPEECH, CITIZENRY, AND OSTRACISM

Democratic politics awarded a certain priority to free debate. The idea was that power and decision making needed to be brought within the limits of reason, the *logos*, and that the days when a ruling elite could govern without being in some way answerable to the larger *demos* were behind them. While lacking theoretical articulation, this was the basic idea that took shape through the archaic era and began to take institutional and legal form by the sixth century or perhaps prior. Vernant argues persuasively that from the very beginning of the city-state, "[t]he system of the *polis* implied, first of all, the extraordinary preeminence of speech over all other instruments of power. Speech became the political tool par excellence, the key to all authority in the state, the means of commanding and dominating others. . . . Speech was no longer the ritual word, the precise formula, but open debate, discussion, argument."[20] The ethos and the practice were rhetorical, open, and likely unruly. If we speak of rational persuasion and free discussion here, we may wonder just how free and rational political speech was likely to have been, whether the ostensibly formal variety that was associated with the assembly or the everyday conversation of the *agora* or marketplace which was the veritable heart of the city. What democracy represented, according to the theory, was an egalitarian, agonistic yet rational, method of government in which all citizens were not only free but in some degree expected to participate. More broadly, we can speak of the democracy of this time as a way of life that prized interlocution over force. Some space would have surely separated the theory from the practice, and idealism is always an obstacle to historical understanding—yet with this qualification, Vernant's point about "the preeminence of speech" holds a degree of validity. Perhaps more fundamental than the kind of debate that would have taken place in the assembly

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was what was happening in the *agora*. "The Dark Age agora had been only the place where the assembly met; in the Archaic period it became the marketplace and public space of the city and therefore of the whole city-state. People gathered there to barter, exchange news and gossip, or conduct official business."[21] Located usually at or near the center of the city, the marketplace served at once commercial, social, cultural, political, legal, and religious functions and was indispensable to the life of the city. It was the civic and social hub of the *polis*, and the mode of activity that one might have expected to see there can be likened to a conversation, if not of humankind then of the citizenry, and which we can imagine as at once rational and, let us say, spirited.

Basic to any democratic polity is the issue of who the citizenry were and were not, and in the case of all the city-states of which we know, citizenship had conditions which restricted full rights of participation to a smallish subset of the population. In most Greek societies, excluded were women, males under the age of either eighteen or twenty-one, slaves and former slaves, and immigrants. In Athens a man had to be registered at age eighteen with a hereditary *deme*, and Pericles added the condition that both a man's parents (it had been just the father) needed to be Athenian to qualify for citizenship, which resulted in no more than ten percent of the population of classical Athens being citizens out of a total population of perhaps 120,000. Jennifer Gibbon notes, "All citizens shared the same duties and privileges: 1. they were free from direct taxation; 2. they had the right to own land; 3. they were protected by the law, and could bring prosecutions and serve on juries; 4. they had full political rights."[22]

This golden age of democracy also included the curious practice of ostracism. In the archaic period, it was a common occurrence in Greek politics for rival factions to develop within the ruling group and for members of one faction to send members of another into exile, effectively banishing their opponents in an overt power play, and the practice did not fundamentally change under democracy. What did change was the innovation of legal ostracism, which again was a consequence of elite factionalism, but one that was now formalized. The measure was introduced likely by Cleisthenes in part as a method of dealing with would-be tyrants and likely to serve the more general purpose of containing power struggles which could threaten to get out of hand. The archaic politics of inter-factional rivalry and exile could become violent, and ostracism was a way of reigning in matters under the auspices of democracy. For an individual to be ostracized, a meeting of the Athenian assembly had to be convened and a minimum of six thousand votes cast by writing an individual's name on potsherds (*ostraka*). The one receiving the most votes was sent into ten-year exile while retaining his citizenship. Sara Forsdyke points out that "ostracism was a relatively moderate form of exile by ancient standards" and "was contrasted to (what democrats repre-

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sented as) the arbitrary and immoderate use of expulsion by non-democratic regimes."[23] It served as a warning to the overly ambitious and was preferable to more overt power plays that were a staple of aristocratic politics throughout this period. These factional disputes could be vicious, and different *poleis* were attempting to manage them in different ways, likely none of which was more stabilizing or more cunning than Cleisthenes' method.

Tempting as it is, we should not imagine Greek democracy as riven by contradictions—free versus unfree, elite versus common, political participation versus exile—but as a way of dealing with conflict and an ethos in which the citizens, always a small subset of the population, held ultimate decision-making authority in some fashion or other and subject to a host of qualifications. What can appear to a modern observer as a mass of contradictions is better spoken of as a common and not exclusively ancient blending of some matters which modern theorists would seek to differentiate more clearly but which in the conditions of the times were as divisible as yin and yang. Free speech and ostracism are abstract antitheses from the vantage of modern political theory, but to say this sheds no light. The reality was no contradiction but one of many curious blendings which were the stuff of everyday democratic politics. As Forsdyke's study of the phenomenon shows, "the revolution by which the [Athenian] democracy was established was a direct outcome of a particularly violent episode of intra-elite politics of exile. In brief, during the revolution of 508/07, the Athenian masses intervened decisively in the struggle between rival elite groups. By placing its support on the side of one elite group and driving the other into exile, the demos . . . asserted its control over decisions of exile. Furthermore, since political power and the power to expel one's opponents were one and the same in archaic Greece, the action of the demos in taking over decisions of exile was equivalent to its assumption of political power."[24] It is no exaggeration to interpret free speech, ostracism, relative egalitarianism, and democracy itself as pragmatic responses to internecine conflicts and other conditions of the times, an attempt to keep the lid on social dynamics that often threatened to boil over into civil war.

WAR

Speaking of war, it is a further curiosity that the emergence of democracy did little to curtail a phenomenon that was ubiquitous through so much of ancient history. The larger picture does not reveal democracy as any grand solution to this age-old problem but again as a contingent and pragmatic experiment in bringing this under the control of an assembly whose inclination toward war was not noticeably weaker or stronger than older monarchic or aristocratic orders had been. Archaic and dark-age "warlords" formed no contrast

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with democratic peacemakers even while we speak of democracy as an attempt, however successful, to place a lid on a rather hot pot.

If we go back to the Mycenaean period, the available evidence suggests an often violent struggle for predominance among the small kingdoms of the early Greek world, with shifting alliances, temporary truces, and a pronounced tendency to war something of a constant, and the description holds about equal validity through the several centuries that followed, although here again evidence is limited. It is no mystery that historical writing itself focused quite so single-mindedly and from the beginning on this phenomenon, rather as if the human story itself is in the first instance the story of this. Political-military history remains for many something of a tautology, and while I do not share this view it is difficult to overstate how central military conflict is in every period of ancient history, Greek and otherwise. Even at the height of classical democracy, "Athens was almost always at war during the fifth century and permanently so from 431 to 404 BC."[25]

Ancient warfare was a brutal business. In the pages of Homer it is often described as ritualized and tactical, more a contest of individuals than a mass engagement and in which the aim was more often to win a tactical victory over one's enemy than to destroy them. The concept of total war was unknown and rules of warfare did exist, but by no means should we imagine this as a genteel affair. The city-states of Greece were regularly at war with one another, as were neighboring civilizations for as far back as history records. Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and other near-eastern societies were known for their ruthlessness on the battlefield and for seeking the complete annihilation of their enemies but for any who could be taken into slavery. Indeed, slaves throughout the ancient period were largely captives of war. The Greeks were reluctant both to enslave their fellow Greeks and to breed war captives and so, in a society that believed itself economically dependent on slavery, needed a steady supply of unfree labor which only foreign wars could provide. Partly for this reason, international strife was a constant as well as a regular preoccupation of historians. There were other reasons: piracy, the need for agricultural land, territorial disputes, and the competition for military dominance were endemic, and for untold centuries it was accepted that the vanquished in war could expect no mercy.

Athens itself both prospered from war and in the end succumbed to it. The two preeminent powers among the city-states were Sparta and Athens, the latter largely on the strength of its navy, and while the two were able to cooperate in repelling the Persian invasion of 480/79, the alliance was precarious and short-lived. Attempts at unification and alliance such as the Hellenic and Delian leagues were invariably fraught with disputes, whether internal or external, and ended up repeating old cycles of expansion and conflict. The tendency to war, whether civil or international, was unstoppable for long, and the contribution of democratic politics was never to put an end

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to it but only to subject it to the will of the assembly. Civil war could be subtle or unsubtle, but inter-factional disputes were as much the business of day-to-day democratic politics as inter-*polis* ones and could be just as unsavory. It has often been thought an irony that, in the words of one historian, "[t]he boundaries of the fifth century"—this high point of "cultural advances, . . . great economic progress and political evolution"—"are marked by two great sets of wars—quite different in type and, unfortunately, markedly dissimilar in their effects," these being the Persian and Peloponnesian wars.[26] The judgment of irony I would dispute; that this entire period led to Philip and Alexander is nothing surprising but more like an organic development and continuation of a trajectory that is about as old as the species.

MILITARY MATTERS

No student of history will be startled to learn that military matters played a sizeable role in the transition from the archaic to the classical era. The emergence of democracy had a lot to do with what was taking place on the battlefield as well as a fortuitous discovery of silver at Laurium. "There was a tendency," as Carey remarks, "in ancient Greece for political power to reflect military importance," a tendency surely not unique to ancient Greece but that warrants highlighting.[27] We have noted that through the centuries of the archaic period and prior, politics and warfare were an aristocratic business. The two, we may well say, were one—in the sense that they were ultimately inseparable and rested in the hands of a particular segment of the population. This would not change with the advent of democracy, although some matters would.

Let us take a closer look at the Persian war. This conflict has often been regarded through an ideological lens as not only a military but a kind of cultural-political victory in which democratic Greece repelled a militarily superior and politically undemocratic aggressor. It was a triumph for democracy, the story goes, if not a broader attestation to the preeminence of Greek civilization in the Mediterranean and near-eastern world. The Persian invasion of 480/79 began badly for the Athenians, whose city was largely destroyed before Greek forces were able to regroup and expel the invader in a victory that must be regarded as improbable. The Persian empire, led by Xerxes, was sizeable, rich, and expansionist while its western neighbor looked like a divided and beatable opponent. Formidable on land and sea, Xerxes' forces overran a good part of the Greek world only to be defeated decisively in a sea battle at Salamis and a pair of subsequent land battles. The Greek victory at sea was especially important and, as Waterfield notes, "the battle was one-sided: over the course of a long day, the Persians lost over two hundred ships, while the Greeks lost about forty and more than made up for

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those losses, in terms of hulls, by the numbers they captured."[28] The Greek victory was surprising, and while Sparta provided a good deal of the leadership it was the Athenian fleet that has long been thought the decisive factor: "in the absence of a Greek fleet," Herodotus wrote, "it is easy to see what would have been the course of events on land. . . . It was the Athenians who—after the gods—drove back the Persian king."[29]

I would make a couple of observations here. What Herodotus and so many others have viewed as an historic victory for democracy contributed enormously to the prestige of Athens in particular while owing a great deal both to Sparta and to fortune. There is little doubt that Spartan participation in the defence of Greece was a necessary condition of its success, and to describe Sparta's political system as democratic at this or any time is at best half true. The outcome of this war was equally traceable to the workings of Fortuna in the form of the discovery in 483 of a major deposit of silver at the mines at Laurium. Ordinarily the profits of such a find would have been distributed widely among the Athenian population, but in this instance a politician by the name of Themistocles, having successfully orchestrated the ostracism of his opponents, persuaded the assembly to invest in its navy on a rather large scale: two hundred warships or *triremes* was a formidable force in combination with a fortified naval base at the port of Piraeus. A *trireme*, likely a Phoenician invention, required a crew of close to two hundred rowers. Forty thousand men were needed to repel the Persian navy, and they came not from the elite class but the ordinary citizenry. In a society where military participation and political power were virtually indistinguishable, this was a significant development. Athens' naval supremacy enabled it first to win an unlikely defensive war against the largest power in the world at the time and not long thereafter to go on the offensive. On the premise that Persian forces would surely invade again—they never did—many Greek city-states formed a defensive alliance known as the Delian League which was headquartered on Delos but under the leadership of Athens and its navy. The alliance was soon transformed into an Athenian empire while its posture shifted from defensive to aggressive and with an eye on rival Sparta. The eventual Peloponnesian War of 431–404 was pointless and did not go well for Athens.

Perhaps equally significant in the period before the Persian war and in the emergence of democracy was a new form of land warfare known as "hoplite," so named after the kind of shield (*hoplon*) that the soldiers carried. This was round in shape, wooden with a bronze veneer, and at three feet in diameter large enough to cover partially the soldier on one's left while holding a spear in one's right hand. Hoplites fought in a tight formation called the "phalanx," which to the enemy would have presented a terrifying aspect of shields, spears, helmets, and little daylight. The outcome of the war itself owed more to the navy than the army, but this fighting force again relied on a

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less aristocratic element of the citizenry, with each man supplying his own armor while the more affluent fought on horseback. Combat was a group effort less dependent on acts of individual heroism than collective determination. Hoplite warfare did not appear suddenly on the eve of the Persian invasion, but emerged gradually a couple of centuries prior, some time between 750 and 650. Its predecessor—what some historians term the proto-phalanx—already appears in Homer and was likely a looser type of formation and the norm through the archaic period. The hoplite phalanx was an important military innovation but was perhaps more important politically. The combination of citizen-soldiers and citizen-rowers in very large numbers, and with elites and non-elites (small landowners, farmers, craftsmen) fighting together as equals tilted the political balance toward the *demos*. When the latter in a given *polis* were content to leave an oligarchic order in place, they did, and when they favored egalitarian reforms they could not easily be denied.

EMPIRE BUILDERS

The tendency to encroach on territory either proximal to or remote from the homeland hardly began in archaic Greece and indeed shows itself in almost any direction one looks in ancient history and likely prehistory. The Athenian empire that followed upon the victory over Xerxes was not the first of its kind but conformed to a pattern that can be observed again and again. Larger powers dreamed of empire, smaller states resisted, in a logic that varied only in details.

If evidence is even required—for the proposition is very nearly self-evident—let us recall the movement of colonial expansion in which many Greek city-states participated between the eighth and sixth centuries and to which we briefly alluded in Chapter 3. Athens itself was not a colonial power, having control over all of Attica and no shortage of agricultural land—but the prevalent trend saw a great many *poleis* building not a unified empire but colonies in various coastal areas of the Mediterranean and Aegean as well as the Black Sea. A colony was a daughter city to its Greek original, upon which it was modeled. The Greeks were fond of thinking of colonies as previously unoccupied territories—they were nothing of the kind—into which they sent their surplus population mostly for agricultural purposes but also in search of metals and trade connections that would benefit the parent city. A colony was independent, neither a mere trading post nor strictly subordinate to or an extension of the parent. This expanding network did not constitute an empire but something more diffuse, with multiple power centers battling for supremacy while also expanding the Greek sphere of influ-

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ence far and wide. The network itself was Greek even while Greekness itself was being orientalized.

Colonization in short was a seizure of foreign lands for agricultural and settlement purposes which followed upon the decline of two erstwhile Mediterranean powers, Phoenicia and Egypt. The power vacuum was soon filled by a host of Greek states in a series of migrations that constitute a crucial step in the formation of Europe as far west as Spain. The usual pattern involved selecting the choicest available territory, expelling or subduing the natives, and creating a new society modeled on the old, with close ties to the parent and wider participation in an expanding cultural and political network. It was a competitive business and what peaceful resettlement could not accomplish, war could in a process that continued until around 500.

Colonization and imperialism are not synonyms, but if we are speaking of fundamental dynamics underlying the larger course of political events then the two phenomena are not entirely separable. When no force prevented it, a smaller power dreamed of being a larger power and got ideas about expansion, conquest, resettlement, and riches to be gained elsewhere, followed in the usual course of things by war on whatever scale necessary to achieve its objectives, and if successful the reiteration of its way of life in foreign lands. We do not need to conceive of empire builders as intending from the beginning to create a highly centralized regime on newly conquered territories. The process tends to be aggressive but also piecemeal and opportunistic. The model is not Yahweh creating a world but an organism expanding its extent and reach, in constant rivalry with other organisms but also embedded in a larger network of relations that is not limited to any struggle for survival. It is a contest for one or another form of supremacy, and it is interminable.

Imperialism proper is sometimes said to have begun on a historically significant scale in the twenty-fourth century by the Mesopotamian ruler Sargon. He was the first known figure in ancient history who possessed both the will and the military means of creating a major empire, and once the means were in place the reality soon followed. Sargon's predecessors had lacked the means, and their efforts at conquest were not successful for long. Smaller kingdoms remained the norm through ancient history until the seventh century when the Assyrian kingdom was able to consolidate power on a larger scale and to become expansionist. This kingdom, one historian writes, "was the first empire in history, in the sense that it had the first imperial administration. . . . Basically the empire consisted of the home kingdom of Assyria with a number of subject territories, the obedience of which was marked preeminently by their payment of tribute to avoid Assyrian raids. The homeland was a complex mixture of cities and rural districts. The latter were dominated by local lords, who ruled the peasants almost as serfs; but the cities of Assyria often had regular charters and a considerable amount of self-rule under their councils of elders."[30] The logic of empire was

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that bigger is better and power spreads its reach until it encounters a limit, be it geographical or political, and both as a means of gaining wealth and as an end in itself. The name of the game was not affluence alone but predominance and the prestige that went with it, not naked aggression—for imperial rulers from the beginning insisted that their conquering armies also delivered the blessings of civilization—but an unclassifiable mix of brutality and culture.

By the fifth century two major powers had emerged in Greece and the political history of that century is largely the story of their battle for hegemony. Sparta possessed military supremacy on land and controlled much of the Greek mainland while Athens, a naval power, exerted control over Attica and the Aegean Sea. Once the Persians had been expelled, the two rivals set about jockeying for position by creating major alliances with themselves at the helm. Sparta's Peloponnesian League and Athens' Delian League both had imperial ambitions, and the eventual result was the Peloponnesian war in which Sparta emerged victorious. "In the Greek world," as Brock and Hodkinson express it, "what nowadays we would call 'imperialism' was the natural concomitant of . . . negative value judgments of work and economic activity, the acceptance in one form or another of war as a means of acquisition, the notion that ideally the citizen ought to live off the resources of the city"—and the country no less. "All these elements contributed to the acceptance of domination over foreigners as a permanent fact in relations between Greek cities."[31] This was also nothing unique to Greek cities but something of an axiom prior to the classical era and for long thereafter: might never did equal right, but the two were on intimate terms and needed a surgeon's precision to separate. If the Greeks came to dread *hubris*, bitter experience had given them cause.

IDEOLOGICAL BLENDINGS

Freedom is always a curious term in ancient political systems. The Greeks largely understood it in terms not of personal autonomy but of a city-state's non-submission to a foreign power and ideally is predominance over other states and of the aristocratic element within it over the common people. Democracy represented the transference of freedom—always difficult to distinguish from power—from a small elite to a larger citizenry, and where we are speaking not of an ideological or institutional sea change but of a relative modification. "From the *aristoi* to the *demos*," it must be remembered, was ideationally speaking a categorial change and a revolution, while in the real world of politics it would have represented an enlargement of decision-making authority from a tiny to a merely small percentage of the population. The democratic experiment was not a rejection of aristocracy but a partial loosen-

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ing of restrictions on political participation rights, and the two "systems" or ideologies were not easily distinguished.

By the fourth century, Aristotle (the school of Aristotle perhaps) was able to conceive of democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and tyranny as discreet notions, but political realities were always more complex, one might say ideologically convoluted. Technical terms permit of formal definitions, but the actual functioning of states was nothing so pure but blendings of apparent irreconcilables, always shifting in response to the events of the day and to forces both internal and external that were invariably at work in a given polity at a given time. As Brock and Hodkinson point out, Aristotle himself had emphasized that "there was throughout Greek history a fluctuating balance between ideological consciousness and pragmatism, and between structural and contingent factors, in the choices and alterations which Greek communities made regarding their political systems."[32] If we think of democracy, as I have suggested, as a way of life and an ethos rather than a set of institutions only, this ethos did not dislodge so much as dilute an older aristocratic attitude, and then only partially. The institutions themselves underwent no total transformation; the major landowning families suffered no loss in status and elected officials continued often to come from this rank even while it lost its exclusive hold on power. The Greek imagination was able to affirm both attitudes, and while tensions undoubtedly existed between elites and democrats and between rich and poor, typically they did not boil over but, especially under democratic conditions, were managed in ways that most were able to countenance. Whether we are speaking of Athens or a great many other city-states of the classical period, aristocracy and democracy coexisted without seeming difficulty. Elites were too deeply entrenched to be threatened, and the larger *demos* did not appear to be making political decisions that were notably less astute, or notably more, than more aristocratic regimes. Some form of popular revolt was a customary solution to inept governing, and the democracies that emerged did not witness a great deal of this. A degree of instability was a permanent fact of ancient Greek politics, but democratic reforms appear to have dealt with this with at least relative success.

If democracy and aristocracy did not amount to a contradiction—strange but largely amicable bedfellows is a better description—nor, stranger still, did democracy and oligarchy and indeed tyranny. The well born, the newly rich, and the larger citizenry all thought they should rule, and the various states arrived at various arrangements which brought these forces into some kind of alignment or working compromise. If by the end of the archaic era aristocracy in a full sense had in many places modulated into oligarchy, elsewhere it shaded into a democracy that was in every case a blending of political principles which on the face of things appear antithetical. One looks in vain for any "pure democracy" here, and we can say the same for both

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oligarchy and aristocracy. Rather than categorize polities within any theoretically tidy notions, it may be best to speak of a spectrum, the two poles of which were aristocracy/oligarchy and aristocracy/democracy, and of the poles themselves as something other than antithetical. The well to do continued to believe themselves supremely fit to rule, and rule they did—in some states more extensively than others. So did the *demos*, and the conflict that ensued sometimes favored one end of the spectrum and sometimes the other, but we should not imagine that the division between democratic and undemocratic politics was as stark as it appears.

Even tyranny was no simple antithesis to Athenian-style democracy. Indeed, it overlapped with the latter much in the way that oligarchy did and was sometimes opted for by the people themselves. Aristocratic infighting could be a vicious affair, and *coups d'état* were not seldom resorted to in this general period when rulers were not up to the task, were unable to manage intra-elite conflict, or proved too egomaniacal. In such circumstances, some usually charismatic individual within the aristocracy or military would often gain the support of an assembly and become installed as an autocrat to end the squabbling, a phenomenon especially apparent in the last two centuries of the archaic period. As Raaflaub and Wallace write, "paradoxically, tyranny to some extent furthered the growth of 'people's power' in archaic Greece. Whatever the origin and early use of the term *turannos*, autocratic rule by an individual spread rapidly through a number of poleis during the century after 650. Tyrants monopolized power and honor, elevating themselves above all others, especially rival aristocrats. Thus, in part, tyranny reflected continuing hierarchic mentalities and ambitions widespread among the elite. At the same time, many tyrants at least began as the people's men, supported or even put forward by the demos to defend them against aristocratic abuses and the impact of destructive rivalries, and securing communal peace and prosperity."[33] Tyranny, despite the negative connotation that it would eventually acquire, emerged not as an antithesis of either democracy or aristocracy but as an organic development of both. It was a way of re-establishing order which could only be gained in a manner that was long customary: through the support, in some fashion or other, of the people and of the gods and through competent governing. A tyrant was not a king, and his rule tended to be short. The age of kings was largely past, but some form of one-person rule remained available as a remedy, usually a desperate one, to the problems of the day and was resorted to with some frequency. The word *tyrannos* seems originally (in the seventh century) to have been a synonym for king or *basileus* but later gained a connotation of one who assumes and exercises power by violent means, even while retaining a close link to the notion of a "lawgiver." Solon, for instance, may be described as a lawgiver and a tyrant simultaneously, as well as one of the seven sages of Greece. The distinction between tyrant and lawgiver, such as it was, was that the latter set down relatively

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permanent "laws" which could not easily be overturned by an assembly while a tyrant—or an assembly—issued "decrees" of a more everyday and revisable kind. Both the tyrant/lawgiver and decree/law distinctions are relative, however, and the connotation of brutality that tyranny would gain again should not lead us to conceive any opposition between tyranny and democracy. Herodotus' interpretation of the war against Xerxes as a conflict between Greek freedom and Persian tyranny ought to be doubted: about how free were slaves and women throughout the Greek world, or the helots of Sparta, the metics of Athens, or any number of groups and individuals who lacked full rights of citizenship? In the case of classical Athens, we need not look to its foreign policy for evidence of aggression. Democracy, tyranny, oligarchy, and aristocracy may be imagined less as competing ideologies than conflicting forces which overlapped, combined, and pulled against one another in a myriad of ways and in constant response to the problems of the day.

RELIGIOUS LEGITIMATION

Whether we are speaking of Mycenaean kingdoms, archaic aristocracy, or classical democracy, one constant in Greek politics was the need for legitimation by whoever held power in a given polity at a given time. One could assume power by unscrupulous means, but one could not hold it for long without rationalizing one's claim to rule in some way that satisfied the upper classes and which the common people could at least tolerate. We are speaking not of "the consent of the governed"—a matter that would be impossible to estimate anywhere in the ancient world—but of legitimation, the imperative to render palatable in the eyes of some sizable portion of the population a ruler's hold on power. Reasons needed to be adduced, and tradition pointed the way.

Enter the gods. We shall return in Chapter 5 to the role that the divinities played in the lives and imaginations of the Greeks throughout the centuries that are in question, but for now let us reiterate a point to which we have already alluded: the gods, whether they were literally believed in or not, where everywhere, and the political realm was no exception. Kings, where they existed, ruled by divine right and the social-political order over which they presided was divinely sanctioned. This was fundamental and ubiquitous; the claim to rule, particular policy decisions, institutional arrangements, wars, and alliances all required the backing of the gods, and anyone who expected to govern for any length of time employed the customary procedures for gaining such backing. Waterfield's remark about Spartan kings is broadly generalizable: "As the titular heads of state, the kings were sacred. No one was allowed to touch their persons, and on dying they received ten days of extravagant mourning. All ancient kings based their legitimacy ulti-

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mately on their alleged relationship with the gods, and the Spartan kings constantly reinforced their aura of sacredness by their conspicuous role in public ceremonies and sacrifices."[34] Indications of divine favor were found through a variety of omens and oracles, which had the advantage of being highly interpretable, and by having political rulers participate in a great many ways in the religious practices and narratives of their society. Religion and politics were and would long remain utterly inseparable in the social fabric of the hellenic world, and any king, tyrant, lawgiver, or assembly who flouted the will of the gods could expect a bad end.

Religion and the gods were never a compartment separate from everyday existence or the larger life of the society but animated an entire way of life which included politics. By the archaic period, an elaborate temple devoted to the patron god or goddess and accompanying statues and dedications was a regular feature of any city-state that could afford it, and its creation was a prime duty of any ruler. If, pragmatically speaking, autocrats and democrats alike needed to win the favor of the people then, symbolically speaking, they needed equally to win the favor of the gods, and such symbolism was important. Politics remained as steeped in religion as it had always been, and the transition to democracy did not change this. Greek religion, like politics itself, was a group activity, less a doctrinal matter than social cement, a sharing in practices and a retelling of narratives which bound the members of various societies together into both a local and a larger hellenic network.

LEGACY

A common conception of Greek political history is that the fountainhead that was classical democracy ended tragically on the battlefield in 338 with the victory of the Macedonians. Athens would become a vassal to the kingdom of Philip and before long his son Alexander, and oligarchy and dreams of empire returned with a vengeance. Rational politics would disappear until its revival in radically different form (representative rather than direct) in early modern times, while the *demos* through the rest of ancient and medieval history would be reduced to the status of subjects. Popular conceptions like this one usually possess a measure of truth, and this one is no exception, but the simplification is pronounced. Democracy neither appeared in the classical period from out of the blue nor disappeared utterly under Philip and his Macedonian and later Roman successors. As usual, the story is more complex and the legacy of classical Greek politics would be deeply felt through the Roman period and beyond.

The hellenistic era is conventionally dated from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 until 30 B.C., the year of the death of Cleopatra. These three centuries witnessed the rise and fall of another Greek empire, another age of

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monarchic rulers, and the rise of yet another empire. Philip of Macedon was an ambitious and rather ruthless individual who managed to subdue the Greek mainland and bequeath to his young son the dream of extending the new empire eastward, a formidable task which Alexander's armies managed to achieve in remarkably short order with his successful conquest of the Persian empire as far as the Indus Valley. Unknowable is to what extent the young ruler had set out to conquer Asia and in what measure his eastern adventure was a product of happenstance and opportunism, but be that as it may, a remarkable portion of the known world would fall under his command in a manner that would have been the envy of any empire builder before or after. Alexander was following in the footsteps not only of his father but of a great many rulers for whom nothing was more natural than to extend one's territory as far as it was possible and to stop when one is forced to stop, and part of the Greek legacy to Rome was precisely his example. This military conqueror was no thug; a student of Aristotle, he kept a copy of the *Iliad* under his pillow while on campaign, founded perhaps seventy new cities, many bearing his name, disseminated a common language throughout his empire—a Greek dialect called *koinê* which would become the language of the New Testament and of the educated hellenized world—and legitimated his power using solar imagery, projecting an image of himself as the great bringer of light to the dark east.

Whether the democratic revolution ended or culminated—or perhaps both—in this world-historical imperialist is debatable, but what is clear is that Alexander would become the exemplar for the hellenistic monarchs who followed him and of a good many of their successors no less. This meteoric figure who died young was able to marshal at once military might, high culture, divine authority, and competent rulership in much the way so many of his predecessors had attempted. He was no innovator, but it was in his image that generations of kings would endeavor to style themselves. As J. A. S. Evans notes, "The Hellenistic kings were autocrats in our sense of the word. They were divine, though they might differ in the degree to which they insisted on their divinity. Their images shared the temples of the gods. They were the source of law for their kingdoms, and as such, they were themselves 'incarnate law': *nomos empsychos*. The king was a human being and at the same time more than human: he embodied the divine vital force that gave the laws their substance."[35] The hellenistic era was dominated by such figures, and later Roman emperors and Christian kings followed and varied the pattern. Hellenistic monarchs typically sought a blending of Greek and local ways while democracy itself was not abolished outright—for the *demos*, and the upper classes in particular, still needed to be assuaged—but once again blended with something that in principle appears an antithesis but that in the real world of ancient politics was nothing of the kind: autocracy. A majority of Greek polities remained "constitutionally tempered democracies, with all

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the Athenian-style apparatus of tribes, demes, popular courts, a combination of sortition and election, council, boards of officers, and assembly," and while "[t]he polis continued to function much as it ever had, . . . citizens were aware that the presence of the kings gave everything they said and did the potential for insignificance."[36] Full democracy, if such a thing had ever existed, was at an end, but we should not exaggerate how radical was the transformation.

In time, of course, the entire Greek world would fall to the Romans and a new chapter of political history would begin—and one that once again exhibits clear traces of its predecessor. Greek politics and culture became absorbed into Roman politics and culture and exerted a profound influence upon the latter in large ways and small. The empire that would emerge was a power both on land and at sea, and its success owed much to the example of the Athenian navy and to a fortuitous circumstance of Italian geography: "history might have run a very different course if Italy had not been well forested."[37] Land battles alone were not enough to build an empire on the scale that Rome would achieve, as the lesson of Athens and its victory over the Persians had taught. In a thousand ways the Romans would look to the Greeks for a model which they would reiterate without copying, as we shall see in the chapters of Part III.

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Chapter Five

From *Mythos* to *Mythos*

On Intellectual History

Greek intellectual history, as the narrative often goes, began rather suddenly during the prelude to the classical era in the region of Ionia and in the form of three convention-defying thinkers named Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes. These figures appeared more or less out of nowhere and initiated the great transformation "from *mythos* to *logos*," an adage that encapsulates the caesura that the birth of western philosophy, if not western culture itself, has long been described as representing. On this variant of the Greek miracle story, philosophy "lives a supracelestial life beyond the confines of space and time," as Jonathan Barnes expressed it, while "studies of the 'background' (economic, social, political) against which the Presocratics wrote, and studies of the networks of 'influences' within which they carried on their researches" are of no philosophical "pertinence."[1] Philosophical rationality itself being ahistorical, it enjoyed something of an immaculate conception at this radical turning point in intellectual history and exhibited a potentiality, albeit in primitive form, that in time would become something that an analytic philosopher of the present day would recognize as a precursor. Mythical thinking, this childhood of the mind, was abandoned in favor of purely rational conceptions of the world, leading within a short time to the great systems of Plato and Aristotle.

Beginnings are always elusive, and while stories of miraculous departures or an axial age have their charms, they also do violence to the real dynamics that are discernible below the surface of intellectual invention. Philosophy, science, or any mode of thinking that one would wish to call rational has a long prehistory which, while often difficult to trace, is vital to understanding its emergence, its trajectory, and something of its nature. Such is the hypoth-

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esis of this chapter—that this momentous transition point in western intellectual history was no total departure but an organic development that continued and altered a conversation the origins of which are shrouded in obscurity but that extend well prior both to the classical period and to this trio of sixth-century Ionians. The old formula, "from *mythos* to *logos*," overdramatizes what occurred, overlooks the strong continuity with philosophy's more ancient origins, and misunderstands the scope of the Ionians' achievement. Philosophy from its inception belonged within a remarkably complex network of ideas extending back in the archaic and still earlier periods and across numerous regions particularly to the east. It did not invent a system of interlocution but constituted a new phase within one that had been long established.

"This intellectual revolution," Vernant writes, "appears to have been so sudden and so radical that it has been considered inexplicable in terms of historical causality. . . . All of a sudden, on the soil of Ionia, *logos* presumably broke free of myth, as the scales fell from the blind man's eyes. And the light of that reason, revealed once and for all, has never ceased to guide the progress of the human mind." This teleological story has not gone unchallenged, but its basic structure and sentiment—that human thought was transformed, at least among a few, from a condition dominated by emotion and tales of gods to one of rational inquiry—remain popular among philosophers and historians of this period. The transformation, according to Vernant, involved a "change in tone and the use of a secular vocabulary" along with "a new mental attitude, a different intellectual climate."[2] "Myths were accounts," he writes elsewhere, "not solutions to problems. They told of the sequence of actions by which the king or the god imposed order. . . . When the natural order and atmospheric phenomena (rains, winds, storms, and thunderbolts) become independent from the functions of the king, they cease to be intelligible in the language of myth. . . . They are henceforth seen as questions open for discussion," and "[t]hese questions, . . . in their new form as problems, constitute the subject matter for the earliest philosophical thought."[3] I wish to subtract the teleology and to emphasize the continuity and organic gradualness of this development. A good deal of the old *mythos* was preserved, and the *logos* itself appeared not as a bolt of lightning but something decidedly more mundane. The notion of a change in period is best met with skepticism, as is Jaspers' claim that "[p]re-Axial cultures . . . appear in some manner unawakened."[4] (What manner is that?) Our objection is not political but philosophical-historical: the old schema overlooks what did not change, as a fresh look at the intellectual landscape of this general period may reveal.

Some ideas, a "mental attitude" and "climate" perhaps, superseded others, but partially and contingently while old dynamics and tendencies remained much as they had been. Thinkers and writers themselves remained largely

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urban aristocrats and the conversation in which they effected a turn continued to reflect their social position and "the striving for power" which, as Rudolf Bultmann noted, Thucydides regarded as "[t]he primary force in history," including the history of ideas. "For the future will be of the same kind as the past. Thucydides' view of history is typical of the Greek understanding of history in general. Historical movement is understood in the same way as the cosmic movement, in which all change is simply the same thing in new constellations."[5] There is nothing simple about this, but the metaphor of shifting constellations is as apt a description of this turning point in the history of ideas as it is of the social and political history of pre-classical Greece. Here again the Greek genius was not for pure invention but for fusing and reworking ideas that were in most instances appropriated either from their archaic and pre-archaic past or from neighboring cultures, ideas of a great many kinds from a great many contexts while turned toward a novel set of problems, and in a way that philosophers of later periods would never cease to regard as exemplary.

MYTH

The story of philosophy begins with its prehistory, in particular with epic poetry. "There is no discontinuity," as Werner Jaeger expressed it, "between Ionian natural philosophy and the Homeric epics. The history of Greek thought is an organic unity, closed and complete."[6] No attempt will be made here to distinguish myth, religion, oral legend, and the epic poetry in which all of it found expression, while philosophy and science emerged from this as a new branch on an existing tree. *Mythos* and *logos* were not opposing forces but stood to each other, once again, organically. What is to be avoided are anachronistic impositions of categories and distinctions that were foreign to how Greek thinkers in this early period viewed the world. The primary word here is *mythos*, but what was this? It was not a technical term and lacked the kind of precision that modern philosophers often seek. Its basic connotation was narrative, speech, or word, and it was in no way antithetical to truth or knowledge. A story could contain or lack veracity, but one that was passed down in oral tradition was believed to be in some way revelatory of a humanly significant truth, and where no chasm separated the profane from the sacred, the literal from the figurative, or the philosophical from the religious. Karen Armstrong writes, "We know very little about the Eleusinian mysteries, but those who took part in these rites would have been puzzled if they had been asked whether they believed that Persephone really *had* descended into the earth, in the way that the myth described. The myth was true, because wherever you looked you saw that life and death were inseparable, and that the earth died and came to life again."[7] The idea did not merely please

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the imagination; it was true, and in a sense of the word that defies literalists. It was that in which one could place one's trust, all the while remaining an uncertainty and a mystery. It shed light on some fundamental matter of human existence and generated not objective facts so much as possibilities and a larger way of thinking which likely heightened rather than quenched a sense of wonder at the world.

Philosophy begins at no absolute starting point but in certain attitudes, realizations, and experiences which include the same experience of wonder from which myth likely emerged. The point is speculative, but our speculation is that philosophy's original impetus differed little from how it originates today for any individual who chooses to take it up, which is far less as an act of sovereign subjectivity than a falling into something, an experience of being amazed and grabbed by something, some question that will not let one go—the shock of disappointment and suffering, an encounter with finitude and mortality, or a sense of wonder that there is a world at all. There is a suspension of the mundane and a need to give an account of our experience—tell a story, offer an explanation, fashion a theory, or otherwise find the language that allows us to cope, psychologically and cognitively, with an experience that troubles us. *Mythos* likely originated the same way, not as a flight of fancy but as a serious-minded articulation of the world of human experience. It was neither irrational nor literal but an attempt to make sense of life as they lived it.

Something similar can be said of philosophy, although it would begin to speak in a different accent. Myth aimed at a truth that was transformative and that could guide one through the difficulties and complexities of life. The characters and the world of which it spoke were neither empirical nor anti-empirical but existed on a different plane. A Greek hero was a human embodiment of nobility while the gods themselves were personifications of values and tendencies that were in no way divorced from mortal humanity. They are us, or an aspect of our being, imaginatively presented, as the poetic word always is, but that aimed at the same time at an interpretation that is revelatory or suggestive. Myth and philosophy drew from the same well, and if tensions developed between them it was the tension that often develops between two beings that are of much the same kind. The mythical world was not inert but was animated by something vital yet elusive; it was "full of gods," and so was the world of which "the first philosopher" spoke. It was a world in which ordinary human conflicts were played out on a grand scale while the sense of life was heightened. Armstrong speaks of myth as a "perennial philosophy [which] expresses our innate sense that there is more to human beings and to the material world than meets the eye."[8] There are moments in which one is transported above the mundane, experiences of transcendence and personal regeneration that elevate us above everyday experience and which are difficult to account for in terms of such experience.

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Myth is an attempt to shed light and to transform, to help us cope with life in extremity by raising one, such as in mystery cults, to "a different plane of life" and in other instances to establish solidarity.[9]

None of this stood in opposition to the *logos*. Myths could be and were criticized long before the philosophers, including on grounds of veracity and morality. "Criticism of Homer," Walter Burkert points out, "is very old. 'Much the poets lie' sounds already in Solon like a proverbial saying; and in Hesiod the Muses' admission that they know how to tell 'many lies' seems to be directed against the Homeric tales of the gods. Towards the end of the sixth century the sharp and final judgment was formulated by Xenophanes: 'Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things which among men are reproach and blame: stealing, adultery and mutual deception.' . . . Plato had only to draw these strains together and systematize them in order to forbid all this, and especially all Homer, in his ideal state."[10] Questioning both myths themselves and the manner in which poets related them was customary as no official formulation of a myth existed, even while certain ones gained popularity. None was authoritative or dogmatic, and all were open to lines of questioning that philosophers would take up and extend.

MODES OF TRUTH

The question of whether the Greeks through any of these centuries "believed" in their myths is not straightforward. Paul Veyne's important study of this issue provides an appropriately nuanced answer, which involves changing the focus from belief to modes of truth. For the Greeks as for so many ancient and prehistoric civilizations, these stories were true, but it does not follow that people also believed them in a literal sense, as one believes it will snow tomorrow. "These legendary worlds were accepted as true in the sense that they were not doubted, but they were not accepted the way that everyday reality is." They were not doubted in the sense that they could be trusted for they revealed a truth by which one could live and in a way not unlike art. As Veyne writes, "a work of art is accepted as true in its way, even when it passes for fiction. For truth is a homonym that should be used only in the plural. There are only different programs of truth," and myth's way of saying what is true is far from identical to mathematics or physics.[11] The latter are literal, propositional, and purport to state what is objectively the case while the former is telling, suggestive, or humanly significant.

To say that Homer was the foremost teacher of archaic Greece does not remotely mean that his poetic works contained information which might admit of empirical or historical evidence. It means that his works were true in a connotation of the word for which there is no epistemology; we can no more ask how he knew all that than we can ask the same of Shakespeare.

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This truth is imaginative, potentially transformative, and pregnant with meaning. It is a truth about our existence, and symbolism reigns. "[W]e weep at the theater," the same scholar remarks, and are unmoved by the knowledge than none of what we are seeing is real.[12] Literality is beside the point, and so it likely was with ancient myths for millennia. The truth of these narratives was sanctioned by time and related by those who knew, in the sense of those who had heard the stories told by someone on whose word one could rely. They were believed and not believed, reinterpreted and criticized, but accepted as a guide for living.

Let us think of myth and of truth likewise as multifaceted. *Mythos* encompassed what we call religion, art, philosophy, history, ethics, science, and likely a few other things. One finds it where one finds *homo sapiens*, in one form or another, and is nothing unique to the Greeks. The Greek attitude toward it was likely also complex and more than one. Less worldview than life-view, it was without dogma, scripture, or a monolithic priesthood; what mattered, as we have seen, was public ritual and social cement more than private belief, and whether an individual offering a sacrifice or citing Homer believed, half believed, or withheld belief may have been a casual matter even while myth itself was not. Gods and stories were many and varied by region, making any kind of orthodoxy or unified belief system impossible even while we speak of a tradition that was at once Greek and more than a little open to foreign influence. Holding a belief was indistinguishably cerebral and emotional, personal and social, and polarities of theism/atheism, believer/nonbeliever, truth/falsity, and myth/reason are obstacles to understanding.

The same can be said of the poet-philosopher. The motley assortment of intellectuals and writers who would later be known as the first philosophers were also poets, albeit with a difference and not all in the same way. They were myth makers, myth refiners perhaps, and if their attitude toward and questions about the tradition were somewhat new their fundamental orientation was received, as was their social role. A pursuer of *sophia* was not a new species but largely continuous with several others to which the philosopher stood as something of a younger sibling. Shaman, seer, sage, bard, poet, physician, mathematician, scientist, rhetorician, and sophist were all akin, with overlapping roles and modes of discourse, and philosophy drew upon all of them in a myriad of ways. As one scholar writes, "One of the most grievous scandals of early Greek philosophy," or scandals from the point of view of a certain kind of modern philosopher, "is the fact that, even after the invention of philosophical prose, some of the greatest thinkers returned to poetry as the medium in which to publicize their philosophical message. Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedocles wrote in the traditional meter of Greek epic poetry, and Heraclitus wrote in a prose evidently deeply shaped by various poetical techniques—at a time when prose had been refined by

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their predecessors as a medium for philosophy and was already being used for history, mythological genealogy, and various kinds of technical treatises."[13] I would qualify this: the "use" of poetic language was not a "return" to an unphilosophical medium and adopted to "publicize" a "philosophical message" for an audience unacquainted with or too uncouth for proper prose. The message itself was poetic, and poetry was already philosophical. The poetic word was not being employed as one of several tools in a toolbox but was the medium, as language always is, in which the ideas themselves took form. Asking whether any of these poet-philosophers was "really" poet or philosopher is like asking a singer-songwriter of today whether they are really a singer or a songwriter. They were generalists, thinkers in a broad sense, and if the mode of truth upon which they would eventually settle was more literal than Homer, this was no total departure. The modern scholar's preference for prose inclines us to regard poetic and mythical expression as primitive, proto-, or otherwise naïve, at best a "textual strategy" for reaching a basically unphilosophical audience, but this again is an illusion. *Mythos* had never been child's play, and when at the height of the classical period Plato and Aristotle composed dramatic dialogues it was neither pre-philosophical nor a pandering exercise. At this late date the poet remained, as Jaeger put it, "the undisputed leader of his people" and poetry, another scholar writes, "is the leading force in all public life; it is the medium which reaches many people at once, and which expresses and shapes general opinions and ideas; until the middle of the sixth century it enjoyed a monopoly in this."[14]

Archaic Greek philosophers partook of the same thought-world as various other writers and knowers and gradually distinguished themselves by adopting a mode of discourse and an attitude that were not more serious than the alternatives but somewhat more argumentative. They neither invented the agonistic spirit nor were alone in importing it into the realm of ideas but subjected these to a relatively new line of questioning. Thinkers of this period "did not call themselves '*philosophoi*,' nor did the people of their day refer to them as such. Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to identify the Archaic thinkers as philosophers (*sophoi* or *sophistai* would be the correct terms). But even if we bow to convention and use the term 'philosopher,' it is difficult to identify the precise criteria that distinguish the 'philosophic' thinkers from other sages in this period."[15] Wisdom seekers were a competitive bunch, and whatever *sophia* they claimed needed, as the same scholar points out, to be "performed" for a public audience, whether they were poets, statesmen, physicians, or anything else. By Plato's time philosophy had gained a reputation for a certain kind of rigor while retaining the generality of the sage, and public performance assumed primarily the forms of writing and teaching. If the object remained truth, it needed to be approached directly and in accordance with a particular set of norms.

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NATURALIZING THE SACRED

What these early philosophers were not were specialists in a form of knowledge that was unprecedented and purified of religious and poetic elements. Their manner of thinking was not sacred and was explicitly open to contestation, but as Francis Cornford brought to our attention, "the philosopher and the poets have the same fundamental scheme in common."[16] The former was not rejecting religious ideas but endeavoring with no little difficulty to translate them into abstractions, as they would for a great many notions. Let us not speak of demythologizing; *mythos* emerged from the philosophers' speculations unscathed and afforded them a set of preoccupations and a vocabulary that were philosophy's original impetus. We can speak of these early philosophers as naturalizing myth, calling it down from the heavens and into the *agora*, so long as we do not overstate the change. Neither the Milesians nor later presocratics were pioneers of rationalism, and by no means did they jettison all talk of divinity and the sacred but rather spoke of them on a new register.

The register itself prized logical and banal explanation over traditional narrative, or the philosophers came unhurriedly round to this preference. All *sophia* needed to be brought within the *logos*, not in defiance of the poets but increasingly in competition with them and with the various other *sophoi* and sophists who were also offering their services to Greek audiences. The agonistic search for truth was not new, but the philosopher's emphasis on universality, definitional strictness, and the notion of a unified structure underlying the world was. One could compare what the philosophers were doing with the old narratives with what some Roman thinkers would later do with the work of their Greek predecessors, which was not to abandon it and make a new start but to translate Greek philosophy into Latin idiom, a painstaking process of selective appropriation and reconstruction which rejected less than it accepted. Archaic and classical Greek philosophers were affecting something similar with Homeric tradition: continuing a conversation while drawing it in a moderately different direction, asking new questions, and altering conventions which had never been set in stone. Rational discourse enjoyed no sudden liberation from myth but reorganized its basic elements in a piecemeal way which from the standpoint of the future and with much forgetfulness appeared as a revolution.

What Cornford called the "primary datum of philosophy" in this early period was nothing other than what the poets were speaking of: "The philosophers, one and all, speculated about the 'nature of things,' *physis*; and the *physis* about which they speculate is nothing but this animate and divine substance. The several schools attach themselves to one or another of the attributes of the primitive complex, which they emphasise to the ultimate exclusion of the rest, or interpret in various senses, thus reaching highly

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diverse conclusions about the nature of things. But they hardly seem to travel outside the content of their original datum. Rather they seem merely to sift and refine the material it gives them, distinguishing factors in it which at first were confused, and, in that progress toward clearness and complexity, discovering latent contradictions and antinomies, which force them to accept one alternative and reject another."[17] The philosophers were not spinning concepts out of thin air but reinterpreting material that was old and largely mythic. Their hypotheses about the natural order were not scientific in a modern sense but extensions and partial secularizations of cosmological stories, formulations carried out at a different level of abstraction perhaps but still bearing on how the world came into being and in what it consists. There remained something godlike about such knowledge, both the activity itself and its content. Pursuing it resembled initiation into the mysteries and called for a way of life that was stringent, exclusive, and almost divine. The activity of knowing brought mortals into proximity with the gods at the same time that it affirmed our own human nature as rational beings. Being at home in both the disputations of the *agora* and a realm of pure thought, the philosopher was as much a citizen of two worlds as the poets had been and could run back and forth between the sacred and the profane. There remained something spiritual about this desacralized knowledge, something appealing to aristocratic intellectuals, and was worldly and otherworldly at the same time.

The basic concepts with which archaic philosophers were working including *physis*—nature, or the fundamental and vaguely animate and divine material from which the world emerged and of which it remains constituted—water, earth, fire, god, soul, law, cause, substance, essence, matter, and so on. Cornford's point again is that "[r]eligion expresses itself in poetical symbols and in terms of mythic personalities; Philosophy prefers the language of dry abstraction. . . . But the outward difference only disguises an inward and substantial affinity between these two successive products of the same consciousness."[18] Is it "the same consciousness" that speaks of fire and "the hot" or *Okeanos* and water or "the moist," where the latter is depersonalized yet somehow still divine, or has a revolution occurred? These early philosophers developed a strong preference for abstract nouns, things that sit still and are what they are, over verbs, powers, and anthropomorphisms. Mythic wildness needed to be domesticated, arrested, or otherwise translated into something less interpretable and more object-like. Substances, even divine ones, seemed more graspable, and what was in some measure new was the manner in which the philosophers sought to delimit—one might say legislate—linguistic usage.

Philosophy represented a call to order and an expression of impatience not with myth in its entirety but with casual speech, intangibles, unclarity, and stories that were not always edifying. Forms of knowledge had emerged that were stricter than the poetic, or differently strict at any rate, and that

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seemed in some respects more satisfying, if also drier. The philosophers' innovation consisted not in pure creation but in importing into the search for wisdom particular notions and methods from not only myth but mathematics, astronomy, biology, economics, and similar arts, or in discerning which elements from this large palette could be applied to some philosophical question. Synthesis, transference, and translation are key notions here; philosophers were shedding light on some old mysteries by grasping together some disparate elements and discerning specific ways in which items of received knowledge could be used for a different set of purposes and stripped of some of their ambiguity. Plato's borrowings from mathematics are well known. The concepts of virtue (*arete*) and justice (*dikaiotes*), for instance, are based upon geometrical notions and reflect a view of social relations as ideally reflecting the due measure and equality of the natural order. Plato and Aristotle's strong emphasis upon proportion, the mean, moderation (*sophrosyne*), symmetry (*isonomia*), and avoiding excess (*hubris*) were basically mathematical as well as common Greek themes. Notions of the soul and the daemonic are borrowings from myth. The latter which plays such a prominent role in Plato's depiction of Socrates reflects, as E. R. Dodds pointed out, "the old Homeric feeling that [daemons] are not truly part of the self, since they are not within man's conscious control; they are endowed with a life and energy of their own, and so can force a man, as it were from the outside, into conduct foreign to him."[19] Socrates' daemon was a moral force with which Plato's readers would have been familiar no less than the concept of the soul and the doctrine of immortality. The Forms, Armstrong points out, "can be seen as a philosophical version of the ancient myth of the divine archetypes, of which mundane things are the merest shadow," while Socrates himself was a new Achilles, inheritor of the heroic tradition and ancestor of later Christian saints.[20] Plato and Aristotle's philosophical schools bore a resemblance to religious centers and brotherhoods of old, among the myriad other examples we could mention of Greek philosophers borrowing from the other arts, traditionary material, and whatever was around in trying to resolve a relatively novel set of questions.

THE ORIGIN PROBLEM

Identifying the origin of a cultural artifact that has any history and complexity to it, and of an entire field of knowledge still more, typically resembles following a trail that does not end but rather leaves off. "[P]hilosophy began with Thales," Bertrand Russell confidently declared, and countless others have echoed the sentiment, the original author of which was Aristotle.[21] The hypothesis has simplicity on its side as well as historical pedigree, but little more. Thales, according to Aristotle, was not content to account for the world

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in mythic terms but insisted upon empirical evidence aided by reason and was the first to do so. This hypothesis regarding "the beginning" quickly becomes complicated. As Gadamer pointed out, "in reference to the beginning, Aristotle also mentioned Homer and Hesiod, the first 'theologizing' authors, and it may be correct that the great epic tradition already represents a step along the path toward the rational explanation of life and the world, a step that is then fully initiated by the Presocratics." Thales was no Adam but was part of a tradition just as Homer and Hesiod had been, and as were all the philosophers who followed him. All these writers came out of an oral tradition that was hardly aphilosophical and that began in the way that summer does. One may point to a date on the calendar and add a story about the solstice, but this is an artificial imposition that ignores the continuity of what we see. Only prophets see beginnings; the rest select a convenient early point beyond which the trail becomes too difficult to track, and a point as well that usually exhibits a clear affinity with the interpreter's own standpoint. Gadamer added a further complication to the Thales hypothesis: "there is yet another, far more obscure precursor—something that lies prior to all written tradition, prior to epic literature as well as the Presocratics, namely, the language spoken by the Greeks."[22] Something in the structure—one might say the intentionality—of the language itself afforded it a certain bent which generations of *sophoi* would follow and seek to articulate.

Another problem with standard accounts of philosophy's origins is that they tend to regard the Greek mind as *sui generis* rather than a multifaceted participant in an interlocutionary network that was vast and already old by the sixth century. The Greek intellectual world in the archaic period was not an island but was borrowing heavily from neighboring civilizations, just as its language itself was not indigenous but an Indo-European offshoot. The first philosophers inherited a tradition that was teeming with gods, narratives, competing natural explanations, and intellectual problems many of which were not of Greek vintage. The nature of the divinities, the origin and constitution of the world, the coming to be and passing away of things, the problem of the one and the many, the issue of proportion, the nature of virtue, the soul, and immortality were questions that preceded the Milesian school and were not specifically Greek. It is a plausible hypothesis that philosophy itself, depending on how we define it, was a "barbarian import" which was taken up at first by a small number of Greek aristocrats whose taste for the esoteric and the exotic was not limited to epic poetry and luxury items.

The origin problem has no solution. The Greeks themselves were not of one mind on the issue, and while Aristotle's remarks about Thales continue to enjoy wide currency it is worth recalling, as Émile Bréhier pointed out, that "there were already historians in Greece tracing the origins of philosophy back beyond Hellenism, to the barbarians. Diogenes Laertius, in the preface to his *Lives of the Philosophers* speaks of the legendary antiquity of

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philosophy among the Persians and Egyptians. Thus, since antiquity, two theses have faced one another: Is philosophy an invention of the Greeks or a heritage they received from the 'barbarians?'"[23] One might as well ask whether summer is an invention of the twenty-first of June or a heritage of spring. Thales himself neither appeared out of nowhere nor advanced doctrines the likes of which had never been heard. He was a sage (*sophos*) in a long line of sages, one of the seven wise men of Greece, and an aristocrat reputed for a range of knowledge spanning politics, astronomy, cosmology, engineering, and mathematics. To our knowledge he wrote nothing—what is known of him stems from a handful of fragments in Aristotle—and while he has long been spoken of as a scientist and physicist, the natural order about which he theorized was far from devoid of myth and divinities. The world as he described it is in some sense alive and also divine; it is "full of gods," although what he understood this to mean is impossible to state with any certainty. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven interpret Thales' "hylozoism" as meaning "the world is interpenetrated by life, that many of its parts which appear inanimate are in fact animate," as suggested by the phenomena of apparently spontaneous movement and change.[24] This proto-rationalist conceived no separation between the material and the spiritual, the inanimate and the animate, and it is a view that Greek audiences would have readily understood as would many of their counterparts in the Mediterranean and near-eastern world. Thales was not the first to seek a unifying principle behind the multiplicity of the world, some underlying explanation spanning religion, science, and any other form of knowledge that could be had. His inquiries likely drew upon contacts to the east and south of Ionia, lending a degree of weight to the "barbarian import" hypothesis, and in particular with Babylonian, Persian, and Egyptian influences. Whether the story of his Phoenician ancestry be true or false, this Greek citizen of Miletus would have enjoyed ready access to several neighboring traditions, as would Anaximander and Anaximenes, all of whom may be seen as bridge builders, synthesizers, and sifters of the various speculations that were extant in the archaic period.

In 585 Thales successfully predicted a solar eclipse and is reputed also to have predicted the solstices and to have been the first Greek geometer. W. K. C. Guthrie pointed out that while several mathematical theorems were attributed to him, "It is impossible to estimate the actual extent of Thales's achievement [in this field]. The temptation to fasten particular discoveries on to individuals with a general reputation for wisdom was strong in antiquity."[25] More definite was the prediction of the eclipse, although it is likely, first, that he based this not upon any causal knowledge but upon empirical observations made by Babylonian or possibly Egyptian priests and, second, that some luck was involved in this eclipse being visible at that time in the region of Ionia. Thales more than likely enjoyed access to Babylonian and/or Egyptian astronomical records, and the astonishment that his prediction

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caused in the Greek world was likely made possible by a combination of fortune and an astute importing of knowledge from beyond the region of Greece. His prediction, while impressive, was not the first of its kind; lunar eclipses had begun to be predicted about a century prior in Assyria, where similar record-keeping practices stem from the mid-eighth century.

Above all, however, Thales is known as a cosmologist and for the hypothesis that water or moisture is in some way the origin and/or ultimate constituent of the world. The source again is Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and the meaning is not clear. What is clear is that numerous near-eastern myths had spoken since the second millennium of water as the primeval source of the natural world. Every object of sense emerges from and is (more debatably) constituted by water, and the world itself floats on water in the fashion of a piece of wood. Thales would have borrowed this from mythical conceptions that had been imported into Greece likely from Mesopotamia or Egypt. As Thomas McEvilley remarks, "Thales has, in effect, taken two mythological motifs—the primal ocean and the livingness of nature—and broken them loose from their mythological contexts, leaving them in a state of isolation that serves to make them semiabstract. To say that the water-nature 'underlies' all differentiation is not structurally different from saying that the world floats on water. The difference is that in the first of these formulations the concreteness of the image in the Greek word *hypokeimenon*, 'lying beneath' (Latin *substratum*), has been metaphoricized and forced to express an abstract meaning."[26] The primal waters or Homeric ocean from which all things emerge and become differentiated had been "rationalized" in the limited sense of translated rather awkwardly into an abstraction, as later philosophers would also attempt. When a mythical idea—narrative, metaphor, personification, anthropomorphism—is made into an abstraction, what has happened? Has a total break been achieved or something more modest, a refinement perhaps or change in preference? Archaic *sophoi*, or some of them, were developing a taste for abstractions which may have been combined with an impatience for older and more storied formulations, and it is a preference that intellectuals of later centuries would largely share. These concepts were not inventions but imaginative appropriations and translations of their largely mythical predecessors, and Thales' watery cosmology is only one example of this. The force and persuasiveness of the predecessors tended to remain, making grand conceptions of rationalization or demythologizing dubious descriptions of what these philosophers were doing.

ANAXIMANDER

A similar analysis applies to the second in the trio of Ionian philosophers. This younger contemporary of Thales is known to have written a treatise in

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prose around the year 548. This text, as one scholar expresses it, "rightfully attains a place not only as the first philosophical book in prose but also as a *rationalized* version of Hesiod's *Theogony*, an Hellenized version of the Babylonian creation story, the *Enuma elish*. These earlier poetical narratives tell of the origins of the cosmos and its series of developments to the present world order. The surviving doxographical fragments show that Anaximander's book explored these same matters."[27] Hesiod's narrative, or something resembling it, was now a theory which could be contested using evidentiary standards rather different from poetry. If much of the content and force of the old account was retained, the mode of truth was now different; it was to be a "*rationalized* version," one for which reasons could be adduced which did not appeal to the traditional divinities.

No more than a fragment of this "first philosophical book" is extant, making it largely speculative just how strict its author was in curtailing reliance upon poetic and mythical ideas. The lone fragment we possess leaves room for skepticism and was noted in the sixth century A.D. by Simplicius: "Anaximander said that the principle [*archē*] and element [*stoicheion*] of existing things was the indefinite [*apeirōn*]; he was the first to use this name for it. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other infinite/indefinite nature, from which all the heavens and the worlds within them come into being. And the source of coming-into-being for existing things is also that into which perishing takes place, 'according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time,' as he describes it in rather poetic terms."[28] Anaximander's *apeirōn*, Aristotle reported, was both unlimited and "divine, immortal, and indestructible," again putting into question the former's ostensible elimination of mythical references.[29] The term itself is an abstraction of mythical ancestry and forms an hypothesis that competes with Thales' and any similar accounts of the composition and history of the cosmos from its origin to his own time. The notion of a primal unity from which all beings emerge and become gradually differentiated is retained but is no single element but rather an *agon* of conflicting forces.

His account of the cosmos is centered around notions of mathematical-geometrical proportions which were familiar to an archaic Greek audience. This mathematical orientation also informed a map of the world that is often credited to him, but which was likely coauthored by a number of Ionian scholars over a period of some years and based on its Mesopotamian predecessors. The constitution of both the cosmos and the earth is nothing chaotic but is mathematically ordered and governed by ratios. The earth is comprised of Europe and Asia, two equal segments that were surrounded by bodies of water and stood to each other in equilibrium. The larger universe is similarly constituted by clashing forces (*dynameis*) which sometimes achieve a harmony that is simultaneously mathematical and political. There is a reciprocal

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rhythm to the cosmos, Anaximander believed, an endless back-and-forth between opposing forces which in time may achieve a unifying balance of power (*isonomia*). The constant tendency of elements is to struggle against one another in the manner of fire and water or hot and cold, and to remain in opposition until either one destroys the other or a balance is achieved. Any victory of one force over the other is compensated for by a defeat elsewhere in the system, while the world as a whole exists in equilibrium. The world that we see is a product of a series of stages, repetitions of this eternal rhythm, which begin and end in "the boundless." Thales' monism remains, but it is a monism not of a single element but of a principle of mathematical symmetry and political justice, one that mirrors both geometrical ratios and relations between Greek city-states. The struggle for power between states and between factions within a state reflects the eternal dynamic of the universe, and whatever justice exists is brought about by achieving a balance of forces which always threatens to collapse into a new round of conflict.

Anaximander's general orientation was almost certainly informed by his knowledge of Babylonian mathematics and astronomy. The concepts that he introduced were largely imported from the Greek world's neighbors to the east, a consequence of the interaction that was occurring by this time between the civilizations of the Mediterranean and near-eastern world. It was informed as well by a mythical tradition which the Mylesian did not secularize so much as refine, particularly in his conception of the divine as a principle that underlies the emergence and constitution of the world rather than a godly personification. Finally, Robert Hahn has plausibly argued that Anaximander's decisions both to compose a book in prose rather than poetry and to "*rationalize* the cosmos instead of mythologizing it as earlier cosmogonists had done" was owing to an additional borrowing, this time from sixth-century Ionian architecture. Philosophical rationality itself, on his view, was modeled on what the temple architects were doing, including their mode of writing. Hahn's argument "is not that Anaximander was an architect but rather, watching the architects work, Anaximander was inspired to become an *architectural historian of the cosmos*." He elaborates: "At the building sites, the Ionian architects built cosmic houses and wrote prose books about them. They planned and executed *rationally* the multitasking enterprises required to produce successfully these gigantic stone temples, and they communicated and celebrated their achievements in prose books by recording their rational strategies in honor of cosmic themes. The architects could not adequately convey in the language of poetry as they could in prose the rules of proportion for temple building or the details involved in the construction process itself."[30]

Anaximander's originality was not in invention but in creative appropriation of whatever elements of knowledge were available to him, whether in

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Greek or foreign tradition, and applying them to a line of questioning that itself was not new.

PHILOSOPHICAL BORROWINGS

These early philosophers had a boldness about them. They were traditionalists with a difference; the difference itself did not lie, as has so often been claimed, in any abandonment of poetic and mythical ideas or questions but in importing into an old conversation a mode of discourse that was more abstract, methodical, and plainspoken. The Milesians were not introducing rationality into the world but borrowing a conception of it from some combination of mathematics, cosmology, geography, architecture, politics, economics, and perhaps a few other arts, and making it speak to a received worldview or life-view in such fashion as to change the conversation over time. The search was on for an explanatory system that could provide more naturalistic and abstract solutions to familiar problems regarding the origin, history, and constitution of the world and the possibility of unity and order in a universe that appears disordered and ever changing. “Philosophy and science,” Guthrie stated, “start with the bold confession of faith that not caprice but an inherent *orderliness* underlies the phenomena, and the explanation of nature is to be sought within nature itself.”[31] “Confession of faith” is an apt phrase; this was a gambit that beneath the world as it appears to us is a system that is lawlike and intelligible in more literal terms than the poets could articulate. These physicists were not above a certain apriorism that speculated about things unseen but imaginable, a principle that was at once natural and divine and that animated the cosmos while being graspable by finite reason. The flat earth rests on water (Thales) or air (Anaximenes), or resembles an architectural column (Anaximander), but in any event there is a monism that underlies and in some way explains the variety of sensible phenomena.

Neither monism nor hylozoism was novel in the sixth century. When the last of the great Milesians opted for air as the great *archē* of the world, he was not only responding to Thales and Anaximander but in all probability reiterating an ancient mythical association of life with breath. Anaximenes’ book ventured both that the single element underlying nature is air and that the process of change and differentiation is essentially one of condensation (water, earth) and rarefaction (fire, stars), not a simple repetition of the earlier identification of air (breath) and soul (consciousness) but a variation of it which was naturalistic but still divine. McEvilley traces a good part of this account far prior to and far east of sixth-century Ionia: “In India as early as the *Atharva Veda* (X.7.34) the wind was regarded as the breath of Skambha, the ‘Substrate,’ which supports the entire universe. Indeed, the ‘prāna theo-

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ry,' or theory that air is the material substrate, is prominent in early Indian thought. Prāna, the Sanskrit equivalent of Greek *pneuma*, 'breath, air, soul,' appeared in the *Atharva Veda* as a ruling cosmic principle. 'Air, in whose power is this All, who is the Lord of all, on whom all is based . . . in air is what has been and what is to be; everything is based on air.'" Additionally, "The description of the world process on the analogy of condensation and rarefaction also seems to be enunciated in the Upanisads."[32]

Miletus in the sixth century was a bridge between east and west. Located at the eastern limit of the Greek world, it was exposed to economic and cultural currents from neighboring and older civilizations to the east and south, particularly Babylon, Persia, and Egypt. A thriving commercial center and the heart of Ionia, its international trade links were extensive and created opportunities for intellectual contact through a great extent of the Mediterranean and the east as far as India. The picture that emerges from the evidence suggests these early philosophers were not importing entire systems of thought from any of these cultures but something more selective and synthetic—borrowing particular intellectual elements in forming a palette from which a relatively novel set of accounts, later describable as "philosophical," could be articulated. We have noted the mathematical and cosmological cast of Milesian philosophy, and it is highly probable that Egyptian mathematics and Babylonian astronomy at the very least were significant influences and were integrated together with Homeric and other traditionary material in the first venturings of Greek philosophy. The number and extent of such borrowings continues to be contested, however the evidence shows Miletus at this time to have been a dynamic and wealthy meeting place of commercial, cultural, and intellectual currents from disparate regions until it was destroyed by the Persians in 494.

Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes were not miracle workers but creative borrowers, and the same description applies to the great philosophers of the classical period. This is not to downgrade the achievement of any of these thinkers but to understand it in the context of the times. The gradual turning that was the beginning of philosophy was made possible by a genius for synthesis and a hospitality to ideas from wherever they could be found. The ill-fated Ionian revolt against Persia that began in 499 precipitated a westward migration of philosophy to centers in Italy, Sicily, and mainland Greece, particularly Athens, over the course of the fifth century. Once again it was Ionians who played a leading role in the formative period of Athenian philosophy, and once again what they appear to have been seeking was an intellectual climate and a plurality of thought similar to what Miletus had offered. By the middle of this century, as we have seen, Athens had emerged as a major political and military power as well as a commercial and cultural center in the Greek world. Ideas of many kinds and from many places could be exchanged and contested there with relative ease, and the

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process of receiving and refining a wide assortment of ideas continued through Plato, Aristotle, and beyond. Athens was by no means the only major center of intellectual life in the Greek world, but what likely gave it an advantage was the combination of plurality—religious, cultural, artistic, and so on—and power.

EASTERN AND SOUTHERN INFLUENCE

It is a mistake to regard the intellectual landscape of pre-classical Greece—archaic or indeed well prior—in isolation from its several counterparts in many regions of the ancient world. It is also an old mistake, and many scholars more recently have attempted to remedy it—sometimes in ways that are excessively conjectural, but not always. The trail is long and in places unnavigable, and debate over the details can be expected to continue indefinitely. Our concern is the larger picture, and our hypothesis is that a version of the miracle story has done a profound disservice to the intellectual history of this long era. Contemporary evidence and ancient stories alike have spoken of extensive contacts between western and eastern cultures, interactions that go beyond trade and territorial conflict. As a rule in ancient history, knowledge travels along trade routes and where one finds significant interstate or international commerce, in combination with some degree of wealth and stability, one soon finds an intellectual center. Aristocratic *sophoi* of many variations, Greek and otherwise, tended to travel and to be broadly curious about their counterparts in lands sometimes far from their own. It has long been noted that areas of philosophical and religious overlap between, for instance, India and Greece both exist from an early date and are difficult to describe as coincidental. A full inventory of conceptual similarities would require book-length treatment and our point concerns the forest and not the trees.

McEvilley's work in this area is especially impressive. His hypothesis is that in the archaic period the Persian empire and its court played an especially important role as a meeting place for a great variety of knowers and artists from many regions to the east, the west, and the south. As he writes, "The milieu of the Persian court was one in which intellectual and artistic intercourse between representatives of the various satrapies flourished. The Persians themselves 'clearly . . . were not a people that we should call intellectual. They do not themselves seem to have had an inclination towards literature, medicine, or philosophical and scientific speculation.' Still, they provided a setting in which such speculation could be freely pursued." The details are speculative, but the likelihood, given the "striking fact . . . that there is no major feature of one tradition [Greek or Indian] that cannot be found in the other," is that some number of intellectuals from Greece, Egypt,

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the near east, and India traveled to the Persian imperial court around the time that the Upanisads were being written and presocratic philosophy was emerging, particularly from the mid-sixth to the early fifth centuries.[33] Persian rulers would have likely had a special interest in foreign physicians, and at a time when distinctions between medical, religious, and philosophical knowledge were very loose. We have already noted that seventh-century Greece saw an "orientalizing" phase, again suggesting that interactions with the east were likely to have been extensive, not only in that century but from around the middle of the second millennium when the movement of goods along sea and caravan routes became well established from the Mediterranean to India. In the background as well is the probability that Greek and Indian culture share a common Indo-European ancestry stretching far back in time and which preceded their migrations in the third and second millennia to many regions to the west, south, and east of their original homeland. What specific intellectual baggage they brought with them can only be conjectured, but they would not have arrived in their new settlements as blank slates.

Stories abounded in ancient Greece of archaic intellectuals traveling to the middle east, western Asia, and Egypt in search of whatever knowledge was to be had there. "It was the custom," Kirk and Raven note, "to credit the sixth-century sages (notably, for example, Solon) with visits to Egypt, the traditional fountain-head of Greek science. Thales as the earliest known Greek geometer had a special reason for being associated with the home of land-measurement. . . . That he did visit Egypt . . . is possible enough: several of his achievements are quite plausibly located there, and Miletus' relations with its colony Naucratis were so close as to make a visit by any prominent citizen, trader or not, perfectly feasible."[34] Egyptian mathematics, like Babylonian astronomy, was a practical science, and while both achievements are impressive what they appear to have lacked is the Greek penchant for philosophical abstraction. Guthrie's suggestion that "[t]his gift for abstraction . . . was the peculiar property of the Greeks" is overstated, but there was something innovative in the ways early Greek thinkers were appropriating ideas from their neighbors and predecessors, a mode of knowledge that was more theoretical and also an end in itself.[35]

Examples of probable eastern and southern influence on presocratic thought are numerous, but a short list would include the following. If Greek philosophy is an outgrowth of *mythos*, many of these myths themselves appear to have been imported, including Hesiod's account of the origin of the world which has clear middle-eastern parallels. Hesiod's creation story in *Theogony* was likely borrowed from Babylonian tradition and possibly the book of Genesis. The role of the gods, the emergence of order from chaos, the notions of a primordial unity and of creation as a divinely caused differentiation of elements were all popular themes in near-eastern myth. On these tellings, the early history of the world concerns an emerging of form, rational

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order, and justice from an original chaos, a process involving struggle and a mighty overcoming of menacing forces. It also had a political element: "In these eastern theogonies, as in the Greek theogonies that were modeled on them, the genesis themes remain integrated with a vast royal epic that depicts the clash of successive generations of gods and various sacred powers for dominion over the world. The institution of sovereign power and the establishment of order appear as two inseparable aspects of the same divine drama."[36] Hesiod's account had a profound influence on subsequent Greek religious thought, and the uncanny resemblance of much of his poetry concerning the gods to its eastern counterparts may well be owing to the intermediary activities of the Phoenicians. Specific parallels between narratives and divinities from the middle east through Egypt and Greece are many. Apollo himself, "the very embodiment of the Hellenic spirit," as Guthrie stated, is probably not of Greek origin: "There are nowadays two main schools of thought. The one believes that Apollo is in origin Asiatic, the god of some non-Greek people of inner Asia Minor, the other, relying mainly on the tradition which connects him with the Hyperboreans, holds that he comes from somewhere in the north, where in the course of their southward migrations the Greeks found and adopted him and so brought him down into Greece."[37] Apollo was no ordinary divinity but a symbol of order, rationality, art, healing, and justice, among other things, and his oracle at Delphi served for more than a millennium as one of the foremost religious sites in the Greek world. This great symbol of the Greek victory over barbarism was a barbarian import while philosophical prose itself, this most orderly and rational form of expression, was nothing *sui generis* but an art borrowed from practical and legal texts, a synthesis of mythical content and technical form. Invention here again lay in synthesis, the novel integration of familiar accounts of the gods and a divine order with a mundane form of writing imported from more pragmatic contexts. The beginning of philosophical prose in itself has long been regarded as a radical advance, a great calling down from the heavens of *sophia* itself or perhaps a raising of it to a higher order of conceptual tidiness and argumentative rigor. Prose writing could be more systematic and clear, less fraught with drama and emotionality, and could speak in a different register, but it is worth recalling that philosophers in both the archaic and classical periods were opting for this by degrees and were in no way abandoning "the poetic." This includes Plato and Aristotle no less than Anaximander or Heraclitus. Plato, for all his worries about the consequences of certain forms of poetry, was a poet, and so was his sober-minded student. Aristotle's dialogues are lost to us, but the philosophical dialogue of which he and Plato were the acknowledged masters was an artful synthesis of poetry, prose, myth, dramatic action, and any rhetorical element that could be brought to bear in persuading an audience. Indeed, the very distinction be-

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tween philosophy and myth does not appear to have preceded these two writers.

From India some aspects of metaphysical monism and the notions of a cosmic cycle and reincarnation may have found their way into presocratic thought. Upanisadic notions may have had some influence upon Anaximander's *apeirōn* and Heraclitus' cosmology. We have noted the Milesians' debt to Babylonian astronomy and cosmology. This group "reconceived physical change in terms of the conflict of elemental powers, a conflict that generated a cosmos characterized by reciprocity and equilibrium. This new conception of the world created a tradition of mathematical and empirical inquiry that progressively refined and corrected the early theories."[38]

These early philosophers, in short, were picking up ideas and forms of writing from wherever they could find them and combining influences from near and far in an effort to turn the conversation in a moderately new direction.

OLDER SURVIVALS

The familiar assertion that the emergence of philosophical and scientific rationality during the lead-up to the classical era represented the crossing of an intellectual and psychological Rubicon—from "archaic," "dark age," or perhaps "primitive man," whose propensity for mythical and magical thinking had something childlike about it, to a qualitatively more developed mentality—is evidentially sparse, as are the notions of discrete mentalities and the primitive mind itself. This transitional period in western intellectual history is not a developmental story. Ostensible primitives stand at a fair distance from us, if we were speaking of conceptual frameworks, but what we repeatedly witness in the history of thought is the persistence of ideas centuries or even millennia after they may appear to have been superseded. The ancient gods never did flee. Rather they traveled, had their names changed, altered their appearance, and employed new prophets; if they fell on hard times, they had a way of bouncing back and adapting, as any immortal would.

The philosophers themselves did not expel so much as naturalize them, speak of them in a more formal mode of discourse while retaining a good deal of their substance. Many Greek divinities appear to be survivals from the neolithic and indeed paleolithic eras. Examples of the latter include Artemis, goddess of wild animals, nature itself, and hunting. Those who lived by hunting needed to enact rituals, such as draping the hide of one's prey over the branch of a tree in recognition of their divine patron. The idea of sacrifice itself likely stems from the paleolithic era. The sacrificer was participating in the rhythm of nature, less "appeasing the gods" in the sense of negotiating a

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contract than something likely less strategic—expressing humility and gratitude for the animals that had died so that human beings could live. Killing was a condition of life, not its simple antithesis, and the dialectic between them called for symbolic enactment. "The first great flowering of mythology," as Armstrong writes, ". . . came into being at a time when *homo sapiens* became *homo necans*, 'man the killer,' and found it very difficult to accept the conditions of his existence in a violent world." Nature was unpredictable, wild, and violent, and a way of life that was inseparable from it was no romantic fantasy but difficult and utterly contingent. The idea of the hero also probably originated in this early period. The great man of action or of the spirit who must endure great trials for the benefit of ordinary mortals was likely a hunter or shaman long before the age of Homer and the axial holy men, when the ancient myth assumed wider connotations. "The Greek hero Herakles," the same scholar remarks, ". . . is almost certainly a relic of the hunting period. He even dresses in animal skins, like a caveman, and carries a club. Herakles is a shaman, famous for his skill with animals; he visits the underworld, seeks the fruit of immortality, and ascends to the realm of the gods on Mount Olympus."[39]

Other paleolithic myths likely survived as fragments which later became indistinguishable from their neolithic successors, many of which came down into the Greek tradition. The story of Demeter, goddess of the harvest and of the cycle of life and death, and her daughter Persephone is most likely neolithic, as is the figure of Gaia, the great earth mother who oversaw the workings of nature and human fertility. A way of life that was organized around agriculture, the rhythm of the seasons, and the annual death and rebirth of nature found expression in narratives of fecundity and divinities that were inseparable from the earth which preceded the arrival of Indo-Europeans whose way of life had become less pastoral and more warring. Greek myth henceforth appears to be a fusion of indigenous, chthonian divinities and the Olympian gods which the new arrivals brought down from the north: "the contrast between Aegean and Homeric cults was, generally speaking, a contrast between a religion of the soil, a worship of the fertility of the earth not unmixed with magical practices to secure its continuance, and a religion of the sky, whose chief god was the sender of thunder and lightning upon those who displeased him."[40] The migrants formed a ruling nobility whose chief deity was a sky god—male, virile, and about as averse to doing battle as classical intellectuals would be.

THE ARCHAIC LANDSCAPE

Greek philosophy was a high point in ancient intellectual history. The intent of this chapter has not been to weaken this claim but to situate this mode of

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discourse within the thought world of the archaic period. The impression of radical transformation or a *sui generis* event is mistaken. Nothing was brought to an end—a primitive mentality, an age of superstition, a childhood of the mind—and nothing appeared out of nowhere. The birth of philosophy in Greece was no different than the emergence of any organic being: it grew out of what came before it, and remained contemporary and of a piece with it, where "it" is *mythos* in all its wildness, manifold variety, and limitless history. Reason was an offspring of unreason, one might say, although a more accurate statement is that philosophical rationality was an imaginative synthesis of traditionary material both local and imported, mythical and practical, ethereal and technical, and in short of whatever intellectual elements this slightly eccentric group of thinkers found about them and saw fit to add to their palette, ask some awkward questions about, or turn to a different discursive purpose.

They were relatively free to do this because the Greek world lacked an organized and state-sponsored priesthood, was part of a network that spanned various societies of the Mediterranean and middle-eastern world, had a tradition of hospitality to a wide range of gods and an ethos that prized a good *agon* in the realm of ideas. Polytheism has a limited potential for orthodoxy. An Athenian intellectual at the height of the classical period could still encounter trouble if he were to gain a reputation for introducing new and strange gods and teaching them to impressionable youths—indeed a good deal of trouble—but he would need to push the envelope. Free thinking in itself was not a death sentence, while an important element of conservatism always characterized ancient polytheism, large-scale intolerance did not fit easily into this mode of thought. The intellectual landscape of archaic Greece was overrun with gods, holy men, seers, poets, and what would later be called philosophers, scientists, and artists, practitioners of many arts all interacting, jostling for position, and competing for prestige and audiences. Religious continuity was the norm, and the miscellany of divinities that was in place by the eighth century essentially held its position until the sixth century A.D., and even then was put down by force and still not eliminated completely.

Polytheism's resilience owed much to its openness. The large view of the world and of human existence that it expressed exhibited a sense of the contingency, the complexity, and the mystery of the world of human experience. Piety consistent in the dignified enactment of rituals that were as old as the tradition and that were also various. The gods themselves were many, and polytheists typically saw little difficulty in identifying a foreign divinity with one of their own. Myths did not need to be believed and often likely were not in any literal or dogmatic sense, which would have contributed to the syncretic attitude of many "believers," although one might better say participants. Religion or myth was something that one did—enacted in a social

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setting, related stories about, and showed some reverence for. It was not a closed system and could tolerate novelty within some parameters, there being no institutional priesthood or body of texts which one was not free to question. Greek city-states largely resisted theocracy, although nor should we imagine an altogether free marketplace of ideas. In this intellectual landscape ideas and texts could circulate widely and in some relative freedom, and when the Persian empire flexed its muscle over Ionia, intellectuals could prudently migrate west to emerging cultural centers elsewhere in the Greek world.

The longstanding picture of archaic Greece that has come down to us speaks of a crudeness of thought which contrasts with what followed it. The "archaic period" is an eighteenth-century coinage, originally so called by archaeologist Johann Winckelmann, but it warrants noting that classical Greek thinkers themselves, including Plato and Aristotle, were far from holding that their own era represented any great advance over their predecessors. On the contrary; the golden age always lay in the past, and change mostly amounted to deterioration. Philosophy itself, according to them at any rate, was no culmination or miraculous development but something more like a conversational turn. It is a peculiar intellectual revolution of which the revolutionists themselves are unaware. In what did the crudeness of a Homer or a Hesiod consist, or the age-old tradition on which they were drawing? The evaluation of primitive this or proto that is a retrospective idealization and in most instances an illusion, unless we wish to assert that polytheism is a primitive monotheism, poetry is crude prose, and similar nonsense. The age-old *mythos* from which philosophy emerged did not radically differ from that of several neighboring civilizations, and if it would eventually be eclipsed by different modes of discourse speaking in a somewhat different idiom, it is less likely that the new ways better satisfied old spiritual or intellectual needs than that they created and went some way toward satisfying new ones. Whether on the whole the human species took a forward or backward step, lurched sideways, or some other thing, only a prophet could know.

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28. Quoted in McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 31. D.L. II.1.2 = DK 12A1.
29. Quoted in McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 31. Aristotle, *Physics* 203b7.
30. Hahn, *Archaeology and the Origins of Philosophy*, 12–13.
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32. McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 34–35.
33. Ibid., 9 (McEvilley is citing J. M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* [New York: Schocken Books, 1983], 230), 643.
34. Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 77.
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36. Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, 111.
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38. Nightingale, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture," 182.
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Part III

Late Antiquity

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Chapter Six

Civilizational Collapse?

On Social History

Historians, more than occasionally, are advocates, partisans for the people and the time period of which they write, and not infrequently for their own time as well. A certain presentism—an implicit valorization of their own time, place, and culture, or particular aspects of it—has long typified this form of knowledge. This is less a criticism that a statement of hermeneutic fact: historians speak from where they are, and their knowledge serves them—or us—the perspective of their (our) time period if not the particular values of the historian. They work with evidence, of course, but the principles that govern its selection and interpretation are neither objective nor subjective but a reflection of where the historian stands in time and the ideas prevalent within it. This is not hard to see in the case of the historical analysis that has come down to us of the centuries that followed the end of the Roman empire in the west. Since the Italian renaissance, the story that has been told and retold is that the period of late antiquity—comprising roughly 300–600 A.D.—was not only a time of transition but of collapse, of the decline and fall of a civilization and the beginning of an age of darkness. The foremost exponent of this view during the Enlightenment was, of course, Gibbon, but some version of it was proffered for centuries by nearly everyone who cared to offer an opinion on what happened during the interim between the Roman period and the high middle ages or, at least, the Carolingian renaissance, these summits of high culture between which lay a valley of barbarism and backwardness. Barbarians from the north and east had stormed the gates of the empire and left a path of destruction everywhere they prevailed, which is to say the greater part of the Mediterranean world and what would become Europe. A dark age had begun and remained depressingly in place for several

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centuries until the embers of Greco-Roman civilization were happily rekindled.

It is a melancholy tale recounted for the most part by historians and other thinkers for whom the rise of Christianity represented the opposite of a blessing, an agrarian way of life was far inferior to the urban, political centralization was preferable to smaller and decentralized powers, and everything describable as high culture showed an obvious Greek and Roman pedigree. The renaissance thinkers who originated this narrative and the Enlightenment figures who perpetuated it wore their cultural preferences on their sleeve. "Classical civilization" was unitary, they believed, and ran like a thread from Athens to Rome to the renaissance, with the intervening disaster that was late antiquity. History as they saw it was divisible into the ancient, the medieval, and the modern, each of which was a discrete period and in fundamental ways a separate world between which lay a transitional period that was conceivable only in terms of a before and an after. Late antiquity was an unhappy end and not yet a beginning, a period of change that was not a transformation but a deterioration, a fall from greatness into a cultural and historical backwater.

What was their basis for this view? Things had changed—of this there is no doubt—but what needs to be questioned is the evaluation. Historians have been questioning this for several decades now and many have arrived at a notably different view. Without reaching unanimity—something that is not to be expected among historians on virtually any question that is quite so large—the now prevalent interpretation of this period rejects the decline and fall narrative almost completely in favor of a transformative and gradualist view which dispenses with teleological optimism and Gibbonesque pessimism alike. A wealth of recent scholarship has challenged the notion of civilizational collapse on a number of fronts.[1] The political and intellectual dimensions of this shall be our theme in Chapters 7 and 8. Here our focus is on social history or the broad issue of how societies changed during one of the most noteworthy turning points in the history of the west. The premise of Part III once again is that if any logic of change is discernible in history, it will be discerned on the ground, so to speak, of historical life, in the intellectual, political, and social lives of human beings rather than in the partisan and presentist categories of the theorist. Here again I am not forswearing theory but keeping our flights low to the ground: what happened, how did this compare to what preceded and followed it, and—if this is knowable—how were such changes experienced by the people who lived through them? Who in the fifth or sixth century was complaining of a cultural sunset? Was the whole matter overlooked for a thousand years, an oversight caused by the superstition of Christianity or the disappearance of any minds capable of understanding the enormity of what had occurred? Roman commentators, to be sure, bemoaned the coming of the "barbarians," but on what grounds?

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This general period has long been spoken of as a dark age, where a dark age by definition is one about which we know little but with an intimation of societal retrogression. The assertion of forward or backward movement requires a justification that historians have long found elusive and indeed more than elusive. It is without any philosophically defensible basis whatever and is more "construction" (projection is a more accurate term) than observation.

The pendulum has swung from a grand narrative of catastrophe, followed by centuries of stagnation before an eventual reawakening—a story that contains more than a hint of philhellenism (classo-philia perhaps), teleology, triumphalism, and nationalism—to something decidedly more sanguine. Swinging pendulums should always give us pause, but in this case the conception of late antiquity that now prevails seems well borne out by the evidence, both historical and archaeological. A wealth of literature now demonstrates the poverty of the old view while drawing a less dramatic picture of this general period. History is not only ambiguous and complex to the core but is usually prosaic as well, and late antiquity illustrates the point far more than has often been thought. The notions of a caesura and a conflagration long fired the imaginations of scholars, particularly those who lamented the passing away of an era of which there is so much to admire and who were unimpressed with the achievements of medieval Christendom, but the tendency toward this form of periodization should give us pause. The still canonical division of ancient, medieval, and modern which began in the renaissance is a distorting mirror which reveals more about the present than the past. What happened was nothing quite so dramatic. As Peter Brown recommends, "it is important to look carefully . . . at the overall social and economic conditions of the Roman and post-Roman West. There is a danger that we may exaggerate the height and stability of the Roman achievement, and, as a result, that we may exaggerate the depths to which Europe fell once the empire had been removed." This scholar continues: "The end of the Roman order in the west was not like the crash of a single mighty building. It is more like the shifting contours of a mudbank in an ever-flowing stream: certain prominent ridges are washed away, other, hitherto mute landscapes gain in eminence. . . . For certain features of an economy or a culture to lose high visibility does not mean that they have vanished entirely."[2]

The following chapters paint once again in broad strokes. The line of questioning we are pursuing demands a certain comprehensiveness without losing sight of the ground on which historical life is played out. It demands as well a form of historical consciousness that holds in view our own condition as historical beings and as such the often partisan interpretive values we bring to bear on the past. These values will not be suspended in Cartesian fashion, but making contact with the past does require a willingness to be challenged and interrogated by it. We do not sit alone on this judgment seat, and received conceptions of historical peaks and valleys, heroes and villains,

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will need to be challenged along with interpretive schemes that are simplistic, ideological, or self-congratulatory, where divisions are too neat and theoretical notions too formulaic. The picture that emerges is impressionistic—shifting mudbanks, a play of shadows, and varying hues, but one in which some intelligibility is there to be seen. As Julia Smith has expressed it, "The demonstration that the Europe of 1000 was very different from that of 500 is not an argument for any evolutionary grand narrative, but a recognition that, wherever and however one looks, change and fluidity are evident. Decline, stagnation, and rise have no place here; instead a kaleidoscope of multiple transformations, continuities, innovations, permutations."[3]

Our topic is the social history of the centuries that followed the end of the Roman empire in the west, and we begin with the notion of barbarian invasion.

"BARBARIANS"

Who were the barbarians of the dark ages? Frightful images of uncouth invaders and marauding hordes come to mind, whole peoples on the move from their ancestral homelands and with a penchant for destruction. The Romans, of course, appropriated the word itself (*barbarus*) from the Greeks (*barbaros*). The barbarian was the foreigner, and with a strong accent on cultural inferiority. Standing in the interim between Roman (or Greek) and animal, these people did not speak, or not intelligibly, but emitted something that sounded to Greek and Latin ears like animal sounds: bar, bar. Many historians still use this word, although for reasons that are likely obvious it is time to retire it. We are speaking of many peoples from many places, but Roman writers characterized them all as poor cousins on the make, living beyond and on the fringes of the empire but looking always toward it and with an envious eye. In the end they triumphed, and their victory was civilization's loss.

This old story has been challenged repeatedly by contemporary historians and archaeologists, and for a number of reasons. The story assumes a few things: that (Greco-) Roman civilization was one; that it came to a violent and ignominious end; that the collapse would have been perceived as such, at least by the more educated; and that the conquerors themselves were lacking in cultural sophistication. All these assumptions are problematic, and not for merely political reasons. My suggestion here is that we bracket insofar as possible (which is never completely, of course) whatever political and cultural preferences we are tempted to bring to bear and again allow the past to speak to us. Historical inquiry is not a one-way conversation, and while there is no alternative to interpreting the past from where we are, prejudices can also be challenged and here need to be. Outsiders' assessments of cultural

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development are always dubious for a reason that has nothing to do with politics: culturally and historically neutral standards for what is called development or sophistication are elusive at best and likely nonexistent. In the usual case they are presentist projections, evaluations whose yardstick measures little more than where a particular human grouping at a given time stood relative to us. In some ways we stand closer to the second century A.D. than the eighth; from this, nothing follows.

We are speaking of a geographically massive and culturally diverse territory, from western and central Europe to the Eurasian steppe, the middle east, north Africa, and the holy land, which is to say a good part of the world and, from the vantage point of the empire, almost all of it. No simple description will do, but in short the peoples whom the Romans spoke of as barbarians were for the most part farmers. (So incidentally were the lion's share of those within the empire.) The way of life that prevailed in these far-flung regions was agricultural, and where this word is not a rough definitional equivalent of primitive, ignorant, or poor. Groups to the north and east were largely Germanic speakers, and what we know about them is based in part on archaeology and for the rest on Roman sources which must be regarded with a good deal of suspicion. For Roman historians, as for their Greek predecessors, faith in their own cultural superiority was an absolute, and to make matters worse, the invaders were also victorious. Hence the animus. What we know about them from the ancient sources is mostly the role they played in the Roman imagination, which was as the archetypal other who was by turns feared and despised.[4] Contemporary historians, trying to see past this, paint a different picture. In the case of Germanic societies, their world had been impinged upon by conquerors to the south for a few centuries, and by late antiquity relations with the Romans were long established, complex, and not always hostile. In the absence of firsthand written accounts, we can only speculate regarding the self-identity of groups such as the Goths, Anglo-Saxons, Franks, Lombards, Chernusci, Bastarnae, Vandals, Alans, Burgundians, Marcomanni, Quadi, and so on. Caste divisions of freemen, freedmen, and slaves differed little from Roman society, although men's clothing preferences did. Trousers and tunics prevailed over togas, while long robes were the rule for women. Power belonged to small groups of elites, who often clustered around a military leader. As Peter Heather points out, such "kings could not simply order warriors about, but had to 'urge' and 'persuade' them to follow their policies."[5] Might did not equal right but required divine sanction, although in practice the two were about as difficult to disentangle as within the empire.

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing "damnation of memory" (*damnatio memoriae*) here belongs to the Huns. These fearsome creatures appeared quite suddenly and mysteriously from the east and, as the narrative goes, set in motion a wholesale migration of peoples westward onto lands formerly occu-

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pied by Rome. The Roman worldview contained an important distinction between farmers and nomads, and into the second category fell the Huns. Nomads, for the Romans, were the true barbarians, occupants of steppelands and deserts whose appearance on horseback was invariably terrifying. They posed a different kind of threat than the small warbands that would appear periodically from Germanic regions. Hunnic cavalries appear in Roman records in the fourth and fifth centuries, and both their arrival and disappearance are shrouded in mystery. Originating somewhere on the massive Eurasian steppe, this nomadic confederacy began moving westward not as a natural consequence of a nomadic economy or way of life but for reasons about which we can only speculate. They may have been seeking better grazing lands, resisting drought, coping with population pressures, or fleeing rival nomadic groups. In any event, their movement west was not an exercise in naked aggression but a maneuver calculated for economic or political gain. Both peasant and nomadic economies require stability, although raiding parties were also a regular feature of both. Large-scale movement is very difficult on both animals and human beings and is not random. Warfare is no more natural to nomadic pastoralists than to agriculturalists or city-dwellers. Hunnic intrusion into Germanic territory north of the Black Sea and subsequently into Gaul and Italy in the middle of the fifth century was under the direction of Attila, and his death in 453 led quickly to the demise of his empire.

Scholars are only now gaining accurate glimpses into the ways of life of the many foreign peoples that Roman sources spoke of with such disdain. When we subtract the animus, we are speaking of societies that from prehistoric times were organized around the realities of an agricultural or nomadic existence, were likely no more or less prone to war and violence than their counterparts within the empire, and whose power structures likely differed from the Romans far less than the latter chose to see. As for cultural sophistication, in the absence of any culturally neutral way of measuring this, the jury must remain out. There is nothing here to idealize or despise. Romanticizing and condemning whole societies of this period are equally misplaced and say more about interpreters than their objects.

MIGRATIONS

One historian condenses the old invasion hypothesis as follows: "The Romans kept the Barbarians at bay as long as they could, but finally they were engulfed, and the savage hordes over-ran the Empire, destroying the cultural achievements of centuries. The light of reason and civilization was virtually snuffed out by the Barbarian hordes who swarmed across Europe, annihilating everything the Romans had put in place, sacking Rome itself and con-

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signing Europe to the Dark Ages. The Barbarians brought only chaos and ignorance, until the Renaissance rekindled the fires of Roman learning and art."[6] The story is largely nonsense. The Huns may or may not have been the first domino in a process moving westward through Roman territories. It is entirely possible that they were fleeing another nomadic group to the east. Their motives are unknown. What is known is that under the leadership of Attila, Hunnic warbands succeeded in pushing various groups of Germanic-speaking agriculturalists and villagers onto the fringes and then into the heart of the Mediterranean world. Goths north of the Danube sought and were granted permission to settle on Roman lands to the south in exchange for military service, in what would become a pattern. It was safety they sought, and while invited visitors they were not, the model of invasion fits rather awkwardly the motivations and the realities of what transpired. The situation was complex. In the east, a fortunate circumstance of geography rendered Constantinople relatively safe from attack. To Hunnic cavalry the city would have appeared an impenetrable fortress surrounded by sea and by walls.[7] The eastern empire did not fall for another thousand years, although heavy losses were incurred. Due in part to good fortune and in part to plain competence—including naval dominance—the empire's eastern half managed to withstand Hunnic and Germanic assaults and to go on to enjoy relative stability through until the fifteenth century.

Territories west had no such luck. Incursions from the east initiated a series of knock-on effects as a large number of groups were displaced to points west and south. This was no sudden event, and the notion of whole peoples on the move combined perhaps with ethnic cleansing and wanton destruction is misplaced. Migrant groups settled within the western empire in a process that was variously peaceful and violent, and where the distinction between the two was decidedly blurry. Border skirmishes and attempted incursions were nothing new. The empire itself was born in conquest, and there was nothing surprising when a similar logic was employed by warbands on the other side of the frontier, usually on a small scale. By the late fourth century the scale had changed. Two waves of invasion caused large population displacements into the heart of Europe. The Huns did not operate alone but incorporated some groups along the way (Alans, Sciri, Sarmatians, and some Germanic-speaking groups) into a confederacy that overwhelmed Roman defenses. By 420 they had arrived at the Hungarian Plain and forced the empire to accept enclaves of settlers who could not be easily assimilated. Attila's campaigns of the 440s and early 450s continued the process while also distracting the Romans from troubles elsewhere. As Heather writes, it was "the *indirect* effects of the age of Atilla that posed the real threat to the integrity of the west Roman state. Because he had to concentrate on dealing with Attila, Aetius had less time and fewer resources for tackling other threats to the Roman west in the 440s. And these other threats cost the

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western Empire much more dearly than the Hunnic invasions of 451 and 452. The first and most serious loss was the enforced abandonment of the reconquest of North Africa from the Vandals."[8] Large and armed migrant groups were difficult to absorb, and the intolerance that greeted them did not make for an ideal situation. Powerful and despised, the leadership of such groups became the ruling class in various regions of the western empire, eventually leading to a patchwork of small kingdoms through central and western Europe to north Africa. Confederations of smaller groups were forged on the march and formed successor states after the fall of the empire.

What were the dimensions of this apparent sea change in European history? Was it a sudden collapse or slow transformation? The story that has come down to us is the former, although again contemporary historians paint a different picture. What collapsed was a political structure, but how did matters stand on the ground? A typical pattern saw organized bands of Germanic migrants employing force or the threat of it to seize control of western lands, to form a new elite and in time a sovereign kingdom. Peaceful settlers they were not, and not a little force was involved, but the model of hostile invasion still appears to fit the evidence very imperfectly. Even the most noted contemporary proponent of the traditional narrative writes that what many of the migrants were after was "to be settled officially and securely by the Roman authorities. What the Goths sought was not the destruction of the empire, but a share of its wealth and a safe home within it, and many of their violent acts began as efforts to persuade the imperial authorities to improve the terms of agreement between them."[9] This was how persuasion worked: with a little help from the sword, as the Romans—formerly the undisputed masters of the technique—well understood. The unruly visitors were beating the Romans at their own game, and the many steps in the process were accompanied by treaties signed in the aftermath or under the threat of war.

The social edifice did not collapse: "The West Roman imperial superstate may have gone, but in many (though not all) parts of its old territories, Roman provincial populations had survived the eclipse of empire with their social, economic, legal and cultural structures intact. Within these groups, Roman ideas and even some administrative institutions were alive and kicking. Nor, in fact, were the outsiders who had destroyed the empire implacably hostile to all things Roman. Many were its old frontier clients."[10] This last point warrants emphasis. Relations in border areas had often been tense but also cooperative. The idea of Romans as oppressors of subjects within and of enemies without is a distortion. More usual were cooperative (Roman style) arrangements in which foreign peoples, many of them also convinced of the superiority of imperial culture, adopted Roman ways, ideas, and technology to their own advantage, including in agricultural production. Service in the imperial army was not uncommon, as were mutually beneficial trade relations, the use of imperial coins, and the Roman payment of subsidies to

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foreign rulers in return for influence in their political affairs. The empire and their client states benefited from these arrangements and profoundly influenced the latter's economic and social transformation. By the time Theoderic, the Ostrogothic king of Italy, came to power, he was presenting himself as the successor to the Romans and defender of its culture, in contrast, of course, to the barbarians. "[T]he frontiers of the empire," as Mark Humphries states, "were always as much zones of communication as of demarcation."[11] The Romans exported their culture, including the Latin language and Christianity, as expertly as they had absorbed those they conquered. The process took generations, but by the fall of the western empire, Roman ways had taken root well beyond the frontier.

The Roman aristocracy suffered losses but largely retained their position in the successor kingdoms that emerged. New aristocracies appeared, sometimes combining with and sometimes replacing local elites, while a good deal of the social and economic framework continued largely as it was. Wandering settlement did occur along with migrations both forced and unforced, but as one historian expresses it, "we must envisage rural and urban settlements as dynamic and ever-changing, not static and timeless. Habitation sites were rarely stable or permanent."[12] Wholesale movement of peoples from some absolute origin point to a new and permanent home, combined often with ethnic cleansing, is not the pattern we see, but partial and usually economically motivated migrations that were inseparable from internal transformation. The notion of discrete "peoples" itself is largely a nationalist invention—an element within origin myths explaining how a given collectivity came to dominate a particular territory—as most of the migrant groups, including Franks, Sueves, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, and Anglo-Saxons, were confederations formed on the march. It is no straightforward invasion story, but one in which the phenomenon of elite transfer played a large role, the particulars varying from place to place. Recent scholarship has downgraded the migration hypothesis, particularly concerning western and northern regions, and emphasized smaller aristocratic groupings and their military retinues moving from place to place and inserting themselves in and sometimes replacing the power structures of their adopted homelands. Most people did not migrate, and while the notion of hostile takeover retains its relevance in the narrative, mass movement and mass slaughter do not. The migration story has been downgraded and the invasion hypothesis rejected entirely. Groups such as the Franks in Gaul and Anglo-Saxons in what had been Roman Britain appear to have been bands of elites, more powerful than what they encountered and overwhelmed, but relatively small minorities in the lands into which they moved. In the latter instance, the old story had it that following the Roman withdrawal the rural population was radically reduced until the arrival of Angles and Saxons from the continent. Today, as one historian writes, "there is no indication [based on contemporary archaeologi-

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cal research] of any kind of disjunction that reflects an abandonment of rural areas by post-Roman populations or indicates a massive new arrival of immigrants from outside. There has always been regular movement of people and goods between Britain and the continent, but not the mass migrations suggested by earlier investigators."[13]

AGRICULTURE

The Romans are rightfully famous for their cities, but this should not lead us to overlook that throughout its history the empire was primarily rural and its way of life primarily agricultural. During and after Roman times, the principal source of wealth was agricultural production and a large majority of people were farmers. As Brown notes, "every year, over 60 percent of the wealth of the Roman empire was gathered at harvesttime by a labor force that amounted to over 80 percent of the overall population. Every year the harvest of basic crops swept across the Roman world, beginning in the Middle East, circling the Mediterranean, and ending in Britain and on the Rhine."[14] This part of the story goes back to the neolithic revolution, and the fall of the empire did little to change this. The narrative of collapse had it that at the end of the Roman era cities fell into ruin as people abandoned them and moved en masse to the country where they were reduced to the level of subsistence farmers, serfs, or worse. Civilization took a massive step backward into rurality, localism, and oppressive poverty. Economic activity became narrowed and crude, trade links were severed, and sophisticated manufacturing disappeared. The downward spiral toward medieval feudalism had begun.

This story is mostly false. Throughout the centuries that followed the Roman period a large majority—perhaps ninety percent—of the European population lived on and worked the land. They lived at the mercy of weather and climatic conditions, and an easy existence it was not. Subsistence farming is difficult, and although there is no way to measure outputs throughout the centuries in question, we can assume that yields, being largely dependent on labor power, were relatively low. Farming in the time of the empire and through late antiquity was extensive rather than intensive. Low yields meant that large areas required cultivation in order to feed a population that lived mostly on farms or in villages. When a given agricultural area went into decline, people would resettle elsewhere. In an agricultural order of this kind, rural settlements were impermanent and population units outside the cities needed to be small and mobile.

Relatively low productivity (by modern standards), the high cost of transportation, and taxation levels acted as brakes on population growth. This would change with the invention of the moldboard plow some time between the fifth and eighth centuries, a technology that significantly increased agri-

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cultural production and in turn made possible more specialized forms of labor, manufacture, and trade. What would not change was the attitude of superiority that city-dwellers commonly felt toward people in the country-side. This ancient sentiment appears to have changed not at all throughout the period in question, and the pattern of a minority urban population living on the fruits of rural agriculturalists whom they also held in contempt remained firmly in place, although the contempt was likely mutual. Some things never change, and this would appear to be one of them. Rural farmers, whether free, unfree, or somewhere in the obscure middle, remained in the imagination of their urban counterparts uncivilized and ripe for exploitation. Also largely unchanged was the proportion of urban to rural populations. Even through the first and second centuries A.D., at the height of the empire's wealth and power, the ratio of rural to city-dwellers was likely over four to one. While it was formerly believed that this changed dramatically in the late antique period, the evidence now suggests otherwise. We must remember that the economy and the whole way of life that prevailed throughout the ancient world was primarily agricultural, and this did not change in the transition to the medieval period. Most people remained farmers and the primary source of wealth, and therefore power, was land ownership.

The transition to medieval feudalism was neither sudden nor radical. How much had really changed? Economically, as politically, it remained a world of small regions in which power was relatively localized but not fundamentally different than under imperial conditions. The empire had always been a motley assortment of regions each of which enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy. We are not speaking of an especially unified society or economy but of disparate regions held together by threads that were not always strong. By late antiquity the reality of life in the village and on farms differed little from what preceded or followed it: people tended a variety of livestock and raised crops as they had always done and were likely no poorer or more oppressed than they had been under the Romans. This way of life reflects the rhythm of the seasons and is characterized by a continuity and repetition that to an outsider can look like stagnation. Such historical sources as exist were written by city-dwelling aristocrats whose descriptions of their rural contemporaries reflect nothing so much as their own snobbery.

RURAL LIFE

A European farmer living in 200 or 600 likely cared more about the price of beer than whether they paid taxes to an emperor in Rome or to a king somewhere closer to home, and the only condition in which this is historically irrelevant is if our conception of history excludes eighty or ninety percent of the human population. How much did the disappearance of the imperial

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system matter to those who worked the land or lived outside the major cities? It is difficult to say, but it is doubtful that the narrative of collapse would have rung true to most of those who lived through it. Medieval feudalism has not enjoyed a favorable reputation in modern times, but just how bad was it and how different from what preceded it—not, again, from the standpoint of urban aristocrats but for a great majority of the people themselves? This would surely depend on one's place in the class structure. We can assume that slaves did not particularly enjoy their plight, but even here, slavery was hardly new in late antiquity. Freemen and freedmen outnumbered slaves, and the evidence that their economic condition suffered significantly after the demise of the empire is weak.

One medieval historian writes: "Feudalism took shape in the vacuum of authority left by the collapse of the Roman Empire in western Europe. The empire in its heyday furnished Europe with a highly developed political and economic infrastructure: roads, coinage, defense, governmental stability. As the empire withdrew from the West, the infrastructure withered, and each locality was obliged to look to its own resources. During the early Middle Ages, society rebuilt itself in response to the new political realities, and new systems of social organization evolved to replace those once provided by Rome. Feudalism emerged as a viable social framework that could function even in a relatively anarchic environment."[15] Land remained the principal source of wealth, and its possession was becoming inseparable from both economic and military power. Military force necessary for law enforcement and protection from raiders needed to be local after the withdrawal of Roman armies. Military and other services were provided by tenant-farmers or vassals in return for land (a fief or *feudum*) that was possessed in principle by a feudal lord but that in practice became the hereditary holding of the tenant. The relationship between lords, atop whom stood the king, and vassals became a central institution of economic, political, and military life, and it persisted in essentially unrevised form from the ninth through the fifteenth century. To work, the relationship needed to be at least somewhat reciprocal—defined by fealty or *fidelitas*—and while a vassal and his lord were hardly equals, nor was the former altogether unfree. Freedom under the Romans and after was not an all or nothing matter and was always a difficult value to measure. How free was the early medieval peasant relative to his counterpart of a couple of centuries prior? It is unlikely he would have experienced much of a difference, and while charges of bondage and exploitation undoubtedly hold some truth, this was not a new development in late antiquity. Peasants were classified as free or unfree, where the obligations of the latter varied according to local customs, but the notion of freedom itself was rather nebulous. When had rural agriculturalists ever been free in any sense of the word that we would recognize? They lived as difficult an existence as they always had, and as they would for centuries to come, one that

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depended on fortune in the form of weather and growing conditions, political and military stability, and the vicissitudes of the local economy. They were tied to the land whether by choice or necessity, but this too was nothing new. From this vantage, the king was likely as remote as the emperor had been and about as relevant. Social bonds were primarily local and personal, and this included the relation between vassals and lords.

The domination of a landed aristocracy remained as firmly in place throughout late antiquity as it had been in prior centuries. A system of rents and taxes payable to a lord and to the church would remain a basic feature of medieval social organization for a remarkably long period. Landowners who failed to reward their tenants and soldiers could expect either a tax revolt or an outbreak of violence. The claim to land rested ultimately on military capability, but since the latter was provided by the tenant-farmers themselves, an important reciprocity was established that was always inseparable from its opposite. Freedom and bondage, reciprocity and exploitation: fealty encompassed it all.[16] The lord's word was law, but we must not imagine this as an invariable recipe for tyranny. He needed to compete for labor, uphold local customs, and work within a system of political authority that included rival lords, the king, and the church. Whether consent of the governed was achieved is again not an all or nothing matter. The state's primary form of existence from the point of view of at least four-fifths of the population was the tax collector, and to whom taxes were payable was likely a matter of indifference.

Rural life did not change in ways that the vast majority would likely have regarded as dramatic. People lived either on farms or in a centrally located open-field village consisting on average of a few dozen wood or wattle and daub houses, a manor house and church, and a handful of commercial establishments. One could romanticize or condemn such a way of life, and neither would have much point.

ECONOMICS AND TRADE

Ancient and medieval agricultural economies were slow to change and not especially complex. The negative value that is often attached to these descriptions has little basis. Whether people in a given time and place feared change or simply had no need of it is rather difficult to say on the basis of archaeological and historical evidence that reveals little about general attitudes of this kind. If we can speculate that, in the countryside especially, indifference to politics was common, indifference to economics was not. If any collapse occurred, it would have been experienced here.

Bryan Ward-Perkins, a proponent of the collapse hypothesis, maintains that the Germanic invasions brought about devastating consequences for

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Mediterranean civilization in general and for economies in particular; economic sophistication went into full decline in the fifth century and would not return to imperial levels for centuries. What is "sophistication" in economics and how is it measured? His answer bears primarily upon coins, pots, and tiles, or the relative presence of these items in archaeological sites of the period. They are less prevalent than in Roman times and in the high middle ages. So indeed it appears, but how much should we make of this? Consider roofing tiles: the Romans had a fondness for these, but by the fifth century such tiles were largely replaced, particularly in Britain where Ward-Perkins focuses his analysis, by more perishable wood and thatch. Does the difference indicate merely a change in preference or a symptom of decline? The latter, he believes, although his basis for saying so is not especially strong: tiles were more durable and attracted fewer insects. Are they therefore more sophisticated? What about pottery: archaeological sites in Britain show a steep decline in locally produced pottery during this period, a condition that can only be due to a dearth of customers wealthy enough to pay for it, he reasons. So as well with coins: by the early fifth century, new coins no longer reached Britain in large quantities, although "[t]here is admittedly no straightforward correlation between the presence or absence of new coins, and levels of economic sophistication. There is . . . always the possibility that large numbers of older coins continued in circulation, even when new ones were not available."[17] Economic sophistication and complexity, like their cultural counterparts, are slipperier notions than the historian in question speaks of them. His general assessment, additionally, applies far more to the west, particularly Britain, than the east, as Ward-Perkins admits: "throughout almost the whole of the eastern empire . . . the fifth and early sixth centuries were a period of remarkable expansion. We know that settlement not only increased in this period, but was also prosperous, because it left behind a mass of newly built rural houses, often in stone, as well as a rash of churches and monasteries across the landscape. New coins were abundant and widely diffused, and new potteries, supplying distant as well as local markets, developed on the west coast of modern Turkey, in Cyprus, and in Egypt. . . . If we measure 'Golden Ages' in terms of material remains [and there is much to be said about this 'if'], the fifth and sixth centuries were certainly golden for most of the eastern Mediterranean, in many areas leaving archaeological traces that are more numerous and more impressive than those of the earlier Roman empire."[18]

Historical judgments of this order are dubious. What are we quantifying here, and how? Are we counting coins, pots, tiles, and such things and comparing our tally from one century to the next? Must such items be locally produced or may they be imported? The late antique period in what had been the western empire contains archaeological evidence in some quantity or other of coins, gold, jewelry, garnet, pottery, silk, and other luxury items

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which were in some cases locally produced and in others imported. Skilled labor appears to have been plentiful, particularly in the towns, and trading activity continued more or less unabated. Economic downturn on some scale and in some places surely occurred, but how severe, for how long, and for what reasons are elusive matters, particularly when the evidence is archaeological. Evidence for trading activity is more clear. The bulk of what people consumed would surely have been grown or manufactured locally—a fact that on its own is not an indication of backwardness—but everyday access to imported goods appears to have remained firmly in place, as evidenced by sites in various western locations that contain large quantities of luxury goods which are known not to have been locally produced.

Trading activity, always a difficult matter to quantify, may well have increased from Roman times, and trade routes themselves remained largely serviceable. Most spectacular of these, of course, were the silk roads which carried people and goods from China and India to western Europe and parts of Africa. In a broad sense of the term, the silk roads constituted "vast commercial networks, including sea-lanes, that ultimately involved so much more than silk and encompassed much of the world. From the second century BCE through the thirteenth century CE, peoples from Eurasia and Africa's great agricultural empires, nomadic tribes and federations, and desert oases and ports participated in the commercial transactions that took place along the Silk Roads."[19] This network of routes did not go into decline until the ninth century, by which time trade goods traveled largely by sea. The notion of the post-imperial Mediterranean world as populated by small, disconnected settlements in clear contrast to an earlier cosmopolitan age is erroneous. The flow of goods continued, and with it human beings, information, and ideas, particularly religious ideas not limited to Christianity but including many originating from the middle and far east.

POPULATION AND STANDARD OF LIVING

Before commenting on the living standards that commonly characterized the people of late antiquity, let us caution against idealizing the periods that preceded and followed it. Throughout the Roman era, affluent elites prospered in far-flung cities of the empire. Wealth, unsurprisingly, was concentrated in relatively few hands; Heather estimates that by the later period "less than 5 per cent of the population owned over 80 per cent" of the land, the principal source of wealth and power, "and perhaps substantially more."[20] At least four-fifths of the population did not partake of whatever prosperity existed in an economy that was primarily agricultural. Rural and frontier areas especially do not appear to have been thriving, nor would this situation be dramatically different through the middle ages. In the interim, tax burdens

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remained high, agricultural and economic conditions generally did not dramatically change (opinions continue to vary about this), and ordinary living conditions in the countryside and in cities, while seldom written about by historians of the period, appear for most to have been neither luxurious nor impoverished.

The situation was again better in the east, amid relative political stability. In the west, living standards for most of the population were in all likelihood little worse than they had been. Evidence of material culture suggests that whatever decline may have occurred was slow and moderate. As Adrian Goldsworthy puts it, "There is little evidence for an immediate and abrupt decline in the standard of living for the provincial population within the new kingdoms. In some regions it is in fact hard to see any obvious distinction at all between the Roman and post-Roman periods."[21] Engineering knowledge which the Romans possessed in abundance, and mostly borrowed, slowly declined but did not disappear. Archaeological findings reveal no shortage of tools, textiles, pottery, jewelry, weapons, beads, hair combs, and similar items of everyday use. Iron, bronze, gold, and glass were commonly used in manufacturing centers throughout the former empire as well as in many areas of northern Europe.

Another indicator of living standards is diet. Evidence here suggests nothing dire in the eating habits of late antique populations. We must not imagine Europeans of this time period, any more than their Roman predecessors or medieval successors, as malnutritioned. "Most lived," according to Smith, "at a near subsistence level," but again when and where in the ancient and medieval world was this not the case?[22] Abject poverty undoubtedly existed, but indications are that average dietary conditions were on par with both prior and later centuries. Skeletal remains found in modern Germany and Denmark show average heights—usually an indicator of overall health and nutrition—of five feet, eight to nine inches for men and five feet, four inches for women. "These average heights," Wells notes, "were not achieved again until the twentieth century. Compared with earlier and later populations in the same regions, these average measurements show that most people had adequate nutrition during most of their lives and their living conditions were generally good."[23] Other cemetery findings and bone analysis reveal some regional and seasonal variability in diet but a surprising consistency of nutritional standards by social class. A diet high in domestic animal proteins and locally grown grains, fruits, and vegetables remained the norm, although citizens of the empire regarded the new migrants' predilection for beef as further evidence of their barbarism. A low sugar diet moderated the rate of teeth loss, and if by modern standards the typical diet was plain, it was also more than adequate from the standpoint of health and nutrition.

As for life expectancy and population rates, reliable numbers throughout the ancient and medieval periods are lacking, which has not stopped many

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from venturing some educated guesses. For whatever these are worth, estimates vary once again, but the preponderant view is that average life expectancy at birth did not significantly change during the time period in question while population levels declined in some degree. Norman Cantor, for one, estimates that "the population of the empire declined markedly, perhaps by 20 percent between AD 250 and 400, primarily because of a great outbreak of bubonic plague in the third and fourth centuries." He goes on to write, "The decline in population shrank the markets, reduced the volume of trade, diminished international exchange, and thus weakened the relationship of various parts of the empire. Separate regions grew more localized, turned in on themselves, and thus weakened the political unity of the whole."[24] Notable here is Cantor's explanation of population and economic decline as triggered not by any larger collapse but in significant measure by an ill fortune with which no premodern society was able to cope effectively. There are no reliable statistics regarding population levels through the centuries of empire or the several that followed, and material remains provide an inadequate basis for judgment. Estimates of decline for the period in question are plausible but uncertain, with some scholars opting for a decidedly less bleak picture.

CITIES

A good part of the narrative of cultural decline rests upon an old hypothesis that late antiquity witnessed an exodus of urban elites into the countryside as the invaders marauded their way through the great cities of the empire, particularly in the west. The Roman aristocracy had spent lavishly on public buildings, monuments, and amenities for the benefit of city-dwellers throughout the empire and in a distinctive aesthetic style. The scale was large and not lacking in either grandeur or expense as individual elites and cities competed with one another for public displays of munificence. This ended with the arrival of the migrants, as the cities were abandoned and their public monuments fell into ruin.

Most historians now tell this story differently. Some things changed, but again the notion of transformation seems more apt than collapse. The question is old and vexed: did urban life come to a relative end with the fall of the western empire? Not contested is the situation in the east: "The eastern empire," as Brown remarks, "remained an urban civilization. To enter a late Roman city in the Greek East was an impressive experience. The city was a place of 'delights' whose ancient monuments continued to amaze and charm the visitor."[25] It is also clear that urban life in the west thrived once again by the middle ages, but what about the interim? While opinions vary once again, some matters are clear. First, as we have noted, likely not more than ten or

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fifteen percent of the population of the empire at its height lived in cities. We are not, then, speaking about any sudden change from a primarily urban to a rural way of life. Whether the percentage changed is about as elusive as population rates. Second, in the aftermath of empire, administrative centralization was also at an end. Changing political structures meant that administrative functions were localized into cities of the emerging kingdoms. Some cities went into decline or were abandoned, but the larger picture likely suggests realignment more than collapse. New cities came into being, particularly in northern Europe, old cities (Rome, Naples, Paris, Marseilles, Strasbourg, Tours, Geneva, Basel, Vienna, Ghent, London) persisted and sometimes witnessed some amount of population loss. The centrifugal forces to which the empire was always subject now prevailed. The center no longer held, but to speak of this as collapse rather than realignment presupposes a preference not only for an urban over a rural way of life but, and especially, for centralization over regionalism. Roman historians, as one would expect, had a strong preference for empire and centralization, but without this presupposition the picture looks rather different.

Speaking of cultural preferences—which the more partisan historians tend to wear on their sleeve—the hypothesis of urban decline tends to rest upon an affinity for the Roman urban aesthetic, if not outright Romanophilia, combined with a less than fond attitude toward the medieval Christian aesthetic that succeeded it. Historians who admire forums over churches and city walls will regard the cities of late antiquity as a deterioration. Public buildings in Roman London, for example, were in stone and concrete. In the period following they were constructed largely of wattle and daub. This architectural change, as Wells aptly points out, "might seem to be a shift to a more primitive way of life. But that reaction is based on our own familiarity with Roman-style (stone, concrete) architecture in our cities and on our bias that such architecture is more advanced than wood-and-plaster structures. If we think instead of the return—after the fourth century—to the traditional building techniques of native Britain as a matter of cultural choice rather than a result of impoverishment, we would be much closer to the mark."[26] Did fourth-century landowners themselves lament the change? We could mention a thousand examples like this—of the usually gradual transition of a city or artifact from "Roman" to a more regional designation—where the historian's description will often say more about the historian than history. Is stone more advanced than wood? Is a church more primitive than a Greek or Roman temple? To see that these are unanswerable questions, we need only articulate them. Our point is not merely political but is philosophical-historical: bracketing the cultural preferences of Roman sources, including the disdain for rural living and for Christian monotheism, there is little to no point in characterizing the transformation of the cities of this period as a deterioration. The economy and way of life that prevailed through the centuries of

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empire were rural and agricultural, yet in the imagination of urban elites, civilization meant city life, an idea that they appropriated from the Greek city-state model (also an agrarian society). The Latin word for "urban" (*urbānus*) in a broader connotation meant civilized, refined, or good, and it explicitly contrasted with the rustic (*rūs*, meaning country), the boorish, and the potentially violent. When it came to cities, bigger meant better, and those from the capital sensed their superiority as an absolute.

The end of centralized rule spelled the end not of cities themselves or civilization in this sense of the word but of a self-image that for the Roman aristocracy was deeply rooted and of Greek vintage. The example of Rome itself illustrates a larger transformation in the character of urban life. The city did not disappear but transformed from a political and administrative center to a religious one, and a related phenomenon occurred in various cities of the former empire. Administrative authority was decentralized as the one became the many. Moreover, the basic character of urban life became Christianized. The aesthetic and spiritual center of the city was no longer the forum but the church—a phenomenon that in itself may be described as decay only given a particular cultural preference. The design of a Roman city reflected a worldview, and so did its medieval successor. It was not uncommon in the post-imperial period for Roman buildings and monuments to be dismantled so that the stones could be reused in the construction of churches, city walls, or wealthy homes. Some public buildings were repurposed as churches or commercial establishments, depending in part on their location in the city. One historian notes, "In cities from Aix-en-Provence to Ariassos in Pisidia, church complexes were being built directly upon the forum courtyard and its associated monuments in the course of the fifth century."[27] An emerging Christian urbanism reflected a much larger phenomenon.

SOCIAL CLASSES

What happened to the Roman class structure in the aftermath of the western empire? Did the ancient aristocratic model give way before a new religion that awarded moral priority to the downtrodden and the poor? It was more than an aspiration; it was orthodoxy: the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

The reality was otherwise and the first remained first. The abject could hold out new hope for the life to come, but that did little to help in the here and now. Throughout the Greek and Roman periods, divisions between elites and commoners, the powerful and the abject, belonged to the fundamental structure of society. It was axiomatic that human beings were separated into something resembling natural kinds, usually due to circumstances of birth and lineage but with the potentiality to cross boundaries. Slaves, to take an

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important example, throughout these centuries were usually prisoners of war who under certain conditions could purchase at least some relative freedom. This would not fundamentally change in the post-imperial era.

The Greek instinct for rank which sank such deep roots in Roman culture remained firmly in place. "No word," one historian writes, "understood to its depths, goes farther to explain the Greco-Roman achievement" than *philotimia*, the love of status, and it was no more their invention than slavery was.[28] Both were ubiquitous throughout the ancient world, but Greeks and Romans made the pursuit of prestige into something of a science. Variously a function of pedigree, wealth, culture, education, and military prowess, it mapped onto a class system that for centuries remained utterly resistant to change. Identity was to a large extent a function of where one stood in the social order of rank, and it was a matter that was clearly visible from a person's appearance, dress, accent, and possessions. Elites and commoners both looked the part and left no doubt what place they occupied in the social structure and what manner of behavior could be expected from them. It is an oversimplification to characterize Roman society as a binary system of the powerful and the powerless; some movement between classes was always possible in both an upward and downward direction. Family lineage was not a guarantee, and wealth and military success were always contingent. Freemen were distinguished into higher (*honestiores*) and lower (*humiliores*) classes, where the division was essentially a question of land ownership. By late antiquity, military power had taken on new importance, and while the fact of aristocracy remained, "[w]hat had changed was the texture of these aristocracies. They were no longer made up of civilians. Among the Franks [among others], military men predominated. And the local 'Romans' were quick to imitate their Frankish peers. The carrying of arms and the presence of armed retinues were features of everyday life, even within the walls of Christian churches."[29] Given that the clergy was drawn largely from the aristocracy, it is no surprise that the church itself did nothing to challenge this system in either the west or the east. Byzantine emperors also came from a warrior aristocracy which practiced an important form of gift-giving that was restricted to members of their class while also worshipping the god of the Christians. Access to the spiritual was about as limited as it was to political power in a system that would remain basically unchanged through the middle ages.

Tradition had long decreed that membership in the aristocracy was inherited, and so it would remain. Beneath the upper nobility were the lower, the lesser landowners, knights, and warriors who along with free commoners—artists, tradesmen, merchants, state officials, and lower clergy—constituted a majority of the urban population. A large majority in the countryside, as we have seen, were agriculturalists among whom further divisions applied. The principal distinction here was between the free and the unfree, although the

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pragmatic difference between peasant and slave was not always apparent. It is doubtful that the vast majority in either late antiquity or medieval European society were any more or less free than they had been under the Romans. It is a controversial point whether any of these can be classified as slave economies given the ambiguity in the distinctions between peasant, serf, and slave. The latter two could be bought and sold, but their lot was not in all ways worse than their "free" counterparts. Serfs enjoyed some limited rights but were hereditarily bound to the land and would remain so through the medieval period. If their social rank was superior to slaves, it is not obvious how much this mattered. Long tradition reigned here as well: custom set down which liberties and obligations were the lot of which classes, and one's place in the general hierarchy was for the most part a fact of life.

EDUCATION AND LITERACY

A crucial premise of the collapse hypothesis is that these two indicators of civilizational achievement went into steep decline following the disintegration of the western empire. "In the Roman world," Ward-Perkins asserts, "the ability to read and write became a prerequisite of upper-class life," and these abilities combined with a larger and impressive "grounding in classical literary culture" prevailed throughout the cities of the empire for the first few centuries of the common era.[30] The collapse put an end to this, due in no small part to the advance of Christianity. This familiar story assumes a few things: that literacy in the sense of the ability to read and write is an objective standard of civilizational development; that the written word holds a kind of primacy over the spoken, especially as a vehicle of culture; that the real significance of literacy and education in the Roman era had little to do with power; and that these values went into sharp decline in late antiquity.

These four assumptions are about equally questionable. First, the concept of literacy does not admit of any straightforward definition but must be analyzed into several distinct abilities, of which reading and writing texts are undoubtedly two.[31] That these two should be regarded as indicators of this kind presupposes an evaluation that looks more like a cultural preference than anything objective. We live in a time and place that values the abilities to read and compose texts more highly than memory and eloquent speech, and it is an evaluation that is essentially a reversal of both ancient and medieval culture. It is entirely accurate to speak of both Greek and Roman civilization as "textual communities" if we use this phrase in a broad sense—as cultures that were held together in part by one form or another of the written word (sacred, poetic, philosophical, administrative, etc.) and educational practices organized around it—however, the arts of remembering and public speaking were commonly esteemed more highly than reading and

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writing texts.[32] For the Greeks, writing had been a barbarian import which was regarded with suspicion. As William Harris notes, "Isocrates himself says that 'all men trust the spoken word more than the written word,' and echoes—or possibly foreshadows—the Platonic argument that the written word cannot clarify or defend itself."[33] This is from the fourth century B.C., but the sentiment persisted through late antiquity and beyond that while the written word often holds a certain authority, it largely matters less than the spoken. Oral tradition required the cultivation of mental skills other than reading and writing, and in both the Greek and Roman periods individuals were readily available in the cities who could read or write whatever one needed. The contempt in which country-dwellers and, still more, foreigners were held by urbanites did bear upon a perception of the former's ignorance, but of a kind that had little to do with any facility with texts.

In the cities of the empire, literacy in this sense of the word was an element of a larger and particular form of education (*paideia*) that was Greek in form, highly valued by the aristocracy, and a prerequisite to full membership in its ranks. The possession of *paideia* was a class marker and indivisible from the pursuit of status and power. To be educated meant to have studied with some usually small number of grammarians and been exposed over several years to a rather limited body of literature: Virgil, Cicero, Sallust, and Terence in the west and Homer, Euripides, Demosthenes, and Menander in the east. Language and literature formed the standard curriculum, and familiarity with it meant access to an administrative career and an important measure of prestige. Governors in Roman times were expected to possess more than merely military acumen but to be cultivated in the manners and ways of the elite. While written texts in different forms were a commonplace of this era, "[t]here was no such thing as 'popular literature' in the Roman Empire, if that means literature which became known to tens or hundreds of thousands of people by means of personal reading. Even the best-known texts, those of Homer and Vergil (both of whom were very widely known), became familiar to school-children through dictation and recitation, not through school editions. As for works written expressly for the masses, there were none."[34] Literacy and education in this sense were the preserve of a small percentage of the urban elite and were a function more of class and power than of culture.

This did not fundamentally change in the fourth and fifth centuries. "Roman" learning retained its prestige value and literacy became still more associated with power. The most significant change was the "aristocrat-turned-bishop" phenomenon; the pursuit of a traditional education was now a preliminary to a new kind of wisdom while knowledge became ever more the preserve of the church.[35] Amid political instability, the elite of the former empire became increasingly preoccupied by military matters. Writing itself never had connoted civilization (*humanitas*) for the Romans, and if knowl-

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edge of the art was gravitating toward the church, this was not much of a loss. Whether knowledge itself, or the forms of it of which we are speaking, went into decline or merely moved into institutions of the church along with a good part of the elite themselves is debatable, but if orality enjoyed a prominence in the late antique world, it had been prominent all along. A new "religion of the book," ironically enough, may well have brought about a decline in reading and writing, although quantifying this is once again very difficult. Harris estimates that at the height of the empire, overall literacy, broadly defined, is unlikely to have exceeded ten percent of the population and that at no point in the ancient world would it have been above fifteen percent. Late antiquity did not have far to fall. The Greek and medieval periods were primarily oral as well, and compositional literacy was always rare. Singman estimates that by the late middle ages "90 percent of men and 99 percent of women were still unlettered."[36]

HIGH CULTURE

Whether higher cultural achievement more generally declined during this period is unanswerable without reference to some set of cultural preferences or standards of excellence, and the obvious (likely insurmountable) difficulty is identifying what these are. Comparing their time to our own will not do, nor is it obvious that the first couple of centuries A.D. or even classical Greece constitutes such a standard. Did the sixth century produce a Plato or an Aristotle? Not exactly. It did produce Boethius and Cassiodorus, but what may we conclude from this? Likely nothing, and the question itself is a dead end, but let us ask what became of high culture in the sense of the phrase that is commonly, if somewhat dubiously, intended? Was there a collapse?

One change, as we have seen, was the gradual eclipse of "classical literacy" in a narrow sense of the phrase. As Heather writes, "Once this education was no longer the key to a whole range of highly rewarding careers, then, certain individuals aside, the average elite parent would not be so ready to pay for it. This . . . is what underlay the end of classical literacy between the late fifth and subsequent centuries. Once the financial benefits of this kind of education disappeared as bureaucrats became warrior aristocrats, the grammarians lost most of their customers, prompting the collapse of a privately financed educational infrastructure. . . . No one (and certainly not the Christians) wanted the grammarians to go out of business, nor did Goths go around assassinating them."[37] With the disappearance of the Roman military, bureaucracy, and gods, the business of the elite lay increasingly in the church and on the battlefield. High culture did not disappear but relocated and transformed, largely under the influence of the new religion. Historians who view the advance of Christianity with regret will likely speak of decline, but relig-

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ious partisanship sheds no light here. What was the nature of this transformation?

Let us begin with the monasteries. This institution became a center for education and literacy as both values came to be regarded as important preliminaries to salvation. The art of writing was preserved in the monasteries' scriptoria, even if most writing, scholarship, and artistic production now served the ends of the dominant religion. Throughout the middle ages the monastery would serve as an important intellectual community financed by benefactors who in Roman times had spent lavishly on public buildings, monuments, and ceremonies. The practice of donation continued, and monasteries and churches became its principal beneficiaries. If the kind of scholarship that was practiced there was primarily theological, it was not lacking in sophistication. The Bible had largely replaced the old curriculum, but many classical texts needed to be copied and preserved while the new texts called for no end of intellectual labor. The true *paideia* now served the god of the Christians, but literacy and higher learning did not disappear so much as convert.

The conversion itself was not total and institutions of the church were not exclusive centers of cultural and intellectual life. Remnants of the "pagan" world remained, including in Athens where the Academy remained a center for neoplatonism until the sixth century. The city "remained a blissful haven for pagans," as Giusto Traina points out. "Following Alaric's attacks towards the end of the fourth century, the city was subject to various restoration measures, and on the whole, it had been able to retain its own pagan identity, precisely because its tradition was so glorious."[38] Traditional polytheist practice continued along with some classical learning, the latter remaining useful for teachers and administrators albeit on a diminished scale. Royal and aristocratic courts in the emerging kingdoms and in the eastern empire would continue to patronize culture and the arts, as emperors since Augustus had done. "The Byzantine court," as Yitzhak Hen notes, "has always been regarded by scholars as the foremost example of cultural patronage in the post classical world. The emperors, their wives and relatives spent a vast amount of public as well as private money on building palaces, churches and other public monuments, on commissioning art objects and manuscripts, and on patronising the work of scholars, poets and theologians. As in so many matters, Constantine the Great became the model *par excellence*, which every subsequent Byzantine ruler strove to imitate. His mother, the pious Helena, set the model for future imperial women."[39] Cultural patronage continued in late antiquity in both the east and the west in what seems to have been a sincere effort to continue a long-established imperial practice. Charlemagne's court in the late eighth and ninth centuries did not revive—for nothing had died—but continued and revised a tradition that would persist through the middle ages.

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Little had changed in the east. It remained a centralized empire in need of an educated bureaucracy, and if higher culture was now centered around Constantinople, it did not decline. They continued to define themselves as Romans ("Byzantine empire" is a renaissance coinage) and legitimate heirs not only of Constantine but of Trajan and Augustus. The elite never had to become preoccupied by military matters in the way of their western counterparts and were able to preserve at Constantinople the texts of Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, and so on. Further east, Arabic scholars would preserve a great many Greek and Roman philosophical and scientific texts, including the works of Aristotle, until their eventual reintroduction in the west. It is a caricature, however, to describe regions of the east as preserving the embers of a civilization that for all intents and purposes had disappeared in the west until the renaissance. Architecture, music, iconography, portraiture, ornamental metalwork, jewelry, and book illumination all give the lie to the caricature. If cultural production now bore the stamp of the dominant religion, and if its overall scale in the west was reduced, neither condition spelled collapse. The latter circumstance was largely a consequence of the diminished tax revenue that landowners were able to extract from the countryside. It had always been farmers who had made higher cultural achievement possible, and any loss for the latter was likely a gain for the former who no longer had to contend with the Roman state. The period saw a diminution of the gap between aristocratic and popular culture as iconography and book illumination—introducing increasingly elaborate pictures to written texts—came into fashion while a church and central street replaced the forum as the focal point of the city. Jurisprudence also enjoyed new life in the form of the Justinian code—a document formulated in the "new Rome" of Constantinople and which was largely a synthesis of classical and canon law.

LANGUAGE

The code of Justinian was written in Latin, which had been the language of common life in the Roman era through much of the west. The Greek east and the Latin west comprised the big picture, although reality was always more complex. For centuries, Greek and Latin were regarded as the languages of culture and authority. The superiority of Roman civilization (according to the Romans, of course) was based on culture, language, and education, and at its height the language of high culture was Greek. By the end of the first millennium the Latin language had gradually moved into this position in the west, Greek having receded into a pagan past. The history of language in this general period, like the history of high culture from which it is ultimately inseparable, must be understood together with power. The three underwent a slow and simultaneous shift over the centuries that witnessed and followed

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the western empire's collapse. In brief, Latin was elevated from the language of ordinary life in the west to that of higher culture, that is church and state. As the new religion gained traction in the west through the course of the second and third centuries, the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek gospels were translated into Latin while church services were also conducted in the local language. Christianity needed to be sold and rendered accessible to a population that did not know Greek. Latin had also become the language of aristocratic learning and imperial administration, eventually displacing Greek as the language of cultural predominance. By the sixth century, Latin was more than a language but "implied a whole system of learning, a social code, and a technology of power as well as a religion."[40] It would remain the language of authority through medieval times as rulers of the Goths, Franks, Lombards, and so on, governed in Latin as part of an overall effort in political legitimation. They were all "new Romans" of one kind or another, true successors to the former empire, or so their people were given to believe. These formerly Germanic-speaking peoples, or many of them, were coming over to the *lingua romana* since it had become the language of the elite.

Goths, Franks, Lombards, Bavarians, and Frisians all eventually adopted Latin as the language of political and religious authority. This would not be the case everywhere, however. Anglo-Saxons continued to speak Germanic dialects which in time would become Old English. Also in Britain (Ireland as well), Celtic would retain its hold, including its Gaelic and Brittonic forms. In the east, of course, the Greek language retained its hegemony. Its claim to being the language of higher culture throughout the Mediterranean world had subsided by the sixth century, although by that time it had also replaced Latin as the language of authority in the eastern empire. If, then, the larger picture of late antiquity is of a Greek east and a Latin west, the reality was that regional differences never lost their hold either linguistically or culturally. A common language of secular and sacred authority facilitated the interchange of ideas, persons, and goods, and went some way toward consolidating power, but languages of everyday life remained numerous, overlapping, and changing. The north-south division gained new importance, with Germanic-speaking areas in the north and east of continental Europe and popular Latin (the language of ordinary life in the former empire which would eventually become the Romance languages) prevailing closer to the Mediterranean.

What we do not see is any kind of essentialist picture—discreet "peoples" speaking similarly discreet and indigenous languages—but something far more nuanced. We see languages of ordinary people in several forms and many variations and an overarching language of power that would make possible something resembling conversation and the predominance of a Christian worldview. "Becoming Roman rarely, if ever, meant complete abandonment of local traditions" and local languages, even while Latin—but

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for the Greek east—became dominant among the elite and would remain the language of state, scholarship, law, and religion until early modern times.[41]

TRAVEL

A common conception of the post-Roman world and indeed of the long medieval period that followed is one of small, isolated communities, separated by vast areas of wilderness and farmland, where the movement of goods, ideas, and people themselves was severely limited, in contrast to the first couple of centuries A.D. when Roman roads united the disparate regions of the Mediterranean. The roads are rightfully famous along with the larger infrastructure of the empire which for centuries facilitated not only the movement of armies—always their principal function—but trade and travel for a great variety of purposes. Many of these roads were remarkable for their engineering, durability, and straightness, but perhaps still more important was their role in enabling a highly mobile and communicative empire. A state of this scale and duration required strong centripetal forces, and it found these in the form of elite education, the Latin and Greek languages, trade and communication, a state religion, and a very capable military, all of which relied on ready access to travel.

Hence the roads. Many of them followed either older travelways or natural routes while others were carved out of wilderness, but in any event their purposes were various, their importance high, and their duration often remarkable. They carried state officials, traders, couriers, artisans, entertainers, clergy, students, sightseers, and agriculturalists and helped to promote urbanization and the flow of information. Traveling was commonplace, whether by overland routes or by water, and those who did not travel likely came into contact with many who did. Shipping routes facilitated large-scale trading as well as quick transportation for travelers. But the most important purpose of the roads and travel more generally was always military; as one historian puts it, "Roads were one of the most visible signs of Roman occupation" and served as a vital instrument of propaganda. "Perhaps especially in those places where the military was absent, the road averred the proximity of Roman power, the real possibility that the army could arrive at any time, at a moment's notice."[42]

This network of roads and shipping routes largely survived through late antiquity and beyond, ensuring access to regional and long-distance travel which remained common through these centuries. "Late Antiquity," writes Blake Leyerle, "was an astonishingly mobile society," which still included the groups of travelers noted above as well as migrants and religious pilgrims.[43] Whether overall travel in the post-imperial era diminished is difficult to ascertain from the evidence, but what is not is the prevalence of

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Christian travel. After Constantine's reign, the practice of pilgrimage became a commonplace of a religious way of life. Destinations ranged from the holy land and Rome to more local sites and church institutions, but the practice itself was not reserved for the elite and its importance and scope would increase through the centuries that followed. Mobility, or the potential for this, remained a fact of life and began to assume a more Christian cast.

The verdict of civilizational collapse is not borne out by the evidence. We are speaking of a period in which some things changed and others did not, but the larger narrative of social history appears less dramatic and bleak than any decline and fall story. No flame was extinguished, or not, from the body of evidence that exists, for the vast majority of human beings who lived through it. Some new ideas gained predominance amid an ongoing system of interlocution. New political structures emerged and required forms of legitimation that echoed their predecessors. No line running from A to B is discernible in the cultural changes of this period, be it progressive or regressive, but slow and piecemeal transformations and reiterations in which far more of the old was preserved than destroyed. The fundamental stuff of life, and of a way of life, persisted in such fashion that any notion of collapse would have likely struck the people of this time, or a vast majority of them, as absurd. A state structure collapsed, and life went on. The elite remained elite, while most continued working the land and paying their taxes as they always had. Whether the hypothesis of collapse holds true in the political sphere is the question to which we now turn.

NOTES

1. Peter Brown is an especially noteworthy figure in this movement of sorts, although other early writers include A. H. M. Jones and Arnaldo Momigliano. My account of late antiquity owes much to Brown in particular, although in what follows I draw upon many other contemporary historians.

2. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity 200–1000 AD* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 20–21.

3. Julia Smith, *Europe after Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

4. "A Greek senator from Asia Minor, posted to a governorship on the Danube, could only pity himself: 'The inhabitants . . . lead the most miserable existence of all mankind,' he wrote, 'for they cultivation no olives and they drink no wine." Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 11.

5. Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 64–65.

6. Terry Jones and Alan Ereira, *Barbarians: An Alternative Roman History* (London: BBC Books, 2007), 13.

7. "The history of the eastern empire," Bryan Ward-Perkins writes, "might have been completely different if there was no band of sea separating modern Europe and Asia." Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 62.

8. Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 344.

9. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome*, 52.

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10. Peter Heather, *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xviii.

11. Mark Humphries, "The Shapes and Shaping of the Late Antique World: Global and Local Perspectives" in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 106.

12. Smith, *Europe after Rome*, 59.

13. Peter S. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Reconsidered* (New York: W. W. Norton: 2008), 32. Heather notes, "the invasion hypothesis is dead and buried. No longer would we even want to litter prehistoric and first-millennium Europe with a succession of ancient 'peoples' carving out their chosen niches via a lethal cocktail of large-scale movement and ethnic cleansing. . . . The demise of the invasion hypothesis does not mean, however, that migration has entirely disappeared from the story. Nor could it." Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 22.

14. Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11.

15. Jeffrey L. Singman, *The Middle Ages: Everyday Life in Medieval Europe* (New York: Sterling, 2013), 5.

16. As R. W. Southern writes, "Land was plentiful: labourers were comparatively few. The greatest problem for an estate manager was to ensure full cultivation. Landlords were not above competing for labour. The condition of serfdom, though it did not take away a man's property, prevented him from moving elsewhere. Probably most of those who came into this condition were already working on the land as tenants of the lord to whom they delivered their freedom; henceforth the lord was assured of their continued service—and would pay a price for this assurance. . . . [T]he guarantee of service bound also the serf's children. The securing of their labour was a vital part of the bargain." R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 99.

17. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome*, 113.

18. Ibid., 124.

19. Xinru Liu, *The Silk Roads: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 1.

20. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 138.

21. He continues: "The new kingdoms do not seem ever to have improved the economic life of an area or the levels of comfort for those living there. The best that can be said was that they did not invariably have an immediate and detrimental impact on these. Yet the trend was certainly towards a less sophisticated and prosperous lifestyle." Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 378.

22. Smith, *Europe after Rome*, 51.

23. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels*, 140.

24. Norman F. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 42.

25. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity*, 21.

26. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels*, 118–19.

27. S. T. Loseby, "Mediterranean Cities" in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, 152.

28. Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 125.

29. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 155.

30. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome*, 160, 161.

31. See William V. Harris' important study, *Ancient Literacy*, as well as Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf's anthology, *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). As Bowman and Woolf remark, "Literacy is not a single phenomenon but a highly variable package of skills in using texts: it may or may not include writing as well as reading and is generally geared only to particular genres of texts, particular registers of language and often to only some of the languages used within multilingual societies. Moreover, literacy does not operate as an autonomous force in history, whether for change, progress and emancipation or for repression. Literacy does not of itself promote economic growth, rationality or social success. Literates do not necessarily behave or think differ-

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ently from illiterates, and no Great Divide separates societies with writing from those without it. The invention of writing did not promote a social or intellectual revolution, and reports of the death of orality have been exaggerated." Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf, "Literacy and Power in the Ancient World" in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, 2–3.

32. See Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

33. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 92.

34. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 227.

35. Peter Heather, "Literacy and Power in the Migration Period" in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. Bowman and Woolf, 195.

36. Singman, *The Middle Ages*, 270.

37. Heather, "Literacy and Power in the Migration Period," 196.

38. Giusto Traina, *428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 45–46.

39. Yitzhak Hen, *Roman Barbarians: The Royal Court and Culture in the Early Medieval West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 166.

40. Smith, *Europe after Rome*, 28.

41. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 33.

42. Blake Leyerle, "Mobility and the Traces of Empire" in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, 120–21.

43. Ibid., 113.

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Chapter Seven

Decline or Transformation

On Political History

The last Roman emperor in the west was a character named Romulus Augustulus—little Augustus—an insignificant teenager who had ruled for less than a year before being deposed by Odoacer, an emerging Gothic king. The year was 476, and if one were looking for a date to pinpoint the collapse of the western empire then September 4 of that year, the date of his less than spectacular deposition, is a conventional choice. It was also something of a non-event. Later historians would often fasten upon this date as one of the most important turning points of history, representing nothing less than the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the transition into the middle ages, yet the vast majority of citizens of the western empire at the time appear to have reacted to this development with indifference. What had really changed?

Historians debate this, often heatedly, and where a good deal of the disagreement bears upon the character of this transitional period. Viewed within a narrative running from Julius Caesar to Augustus, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, and others of comparable status, the removal of the final emperor in the west may be seen as a major event and indeed a calamity, a tremendous fall from a height that was virtually unprecedented in human history. Odoacer, whatever his virtues may have been, was no Trajan, nor were the many other "barbarian warlords" who overran so much of the Mediterranean world and created a patchwork of kingdoms where a great empire had been—or so, at any rate, goes a story that originated in the renaissance, picked up a good deal of steam in the Enlightenment, and remains a popular conception among the general public and some historians alike. In a word, it was an era of decline—culturally, but still more perhaps, politically. As one contemporary historian

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rather emphatically puts it, "the decline of Rome from the mid-fourth century onwards led to a collapse of society so dramatic that the result really was the end of civilisation. It was violent, it was unpleasant, it was brutal."[1] Violence, unpleasantness, and brutality are not rare in any period of history, indeed quite the contrary. Our question is not whether these existed in the centuries that are in question—the answer is a self-evident yes, in generous quantity, and in all other times and places too—but whether these qualities defined the times in some way that was either quantitatively or qualitatively unique, as the old narrative supposes. The political lament that it expresses, of course, is a counterpart of the hypothesis of cultural collapse but is a question that warrants separate analysis. A state structure fell and was replaced with another—this much is evident, but what is not is whether this is a tale of decline or of a transformation that is relatively agnostic on the evaluative question. The issue is not whether we are affective partisans for either the Romans of the imperial era, their Germanic successors, medieval papists, or any other grouping or time period but what happened through the course of these centuries and what it may suggest regarding the logic of historical change itself.

It sheds no light to speak here as advocates. Whether one finds more to admire in the reign of Augustus, Constantine, Charlemagne, or anyone else matters far less than the events themselves and their underlying dynamics. The emphasis on decline reflects the values of renaissance and early modern intellectuals, or a good many of them, yet the historical consciousness that they passed down to us must be questioned and again has been by recent historians of late antiquity, most of whom prefer the language of continuity and transformation to decline. How should we understand the transition from the imperial to the medieval political worlds? Why did the removal of the last Roman emperor in the west cause so little stir at the time? What was happening in the east? What changed and what did not, and was any political Rubicon crossed at the outset of the middle ages? The one was succeeded by the many, but how different from their predecessor were these emerging states and the quality of civic life that prevailed within them?

The political story of this period begins once again with the Huns of the Eurasian steppe and their advance westward, first to outlying areas of eastern and northern Europe and subsequently to territories within the empire. Major actors in this drama include groups going under the names of Goths, Franks, Saxons, Burgundians, Alamanni, Vandals, and so on, confederations that had established relations with the Romans centuries prior which were variously peaceful and warring and that for a variety of reasons crossed the Danube and Rhine frontiers in the fifth century, culminating in the sack of Rome in 410 by Gothic bands. The actors here are many, and dividing them into heroes and villains is a temptation best avoided. Distinguishing legitimate rulers from tyrants, usurpers, and conquerors is also no easy task. For Gib-

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bon, the "good emperors" were Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius; Christian writers would have their own list of good emperors and bad, where the distinction turns mostly upon the cultural preferences of the writer. Reality is always more complex than this, and Brown's metaphor of shifting mudbanks applies here as well. Some things changed, but let us not overstate the extent, the suddenness, or the evaluative element. Let us also not overemphasize the western empire to the neglect of the east. The situation in the "new Rome" that was Constantinople and its emerging empire was decidedly different than the west and clearly does not fit the decline and fall narrative which may or may not apply to the west.

The model of decline has simplicity on its side, and it is not alone in this. Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler, and Arnold Toynbee all provided relatively simple models of historical analysis, allowing us to identify stages or laws, developmental or teleological movement, or otherwise to chart a course that, if nothing else, was theoretically elegant. I have cautioned against simplicity and elegance before and now do so again. The political history of late antiquity defies reduction to each of these formulas. The following analysis speaks of neither forward nor backward movement, laws, stages, or life cycles. Nor shall we speak of revolutionary developments but of transformations that were for the most part gradual, partial, and lacking drama. If any edifice came crashing down, most of the Roman ways were carefully preserved in some form or other by "barbarian invaders" who were neither barbarians nor exactly invaders. Constantinople was not the only "new Rome" in the Mediterranean world; the kingdoms that emerged in this period all claimed with some legitimacy to be successors to the former empire. Preserving its legacy was fundamental to the self-understanding of emerging states that were not bent on destruction but following much the same strategy that had created the empire several centuries prior. The name of the game was not fundamentally new, although the victors often were.

INVASION

Whatever Romanness was, carrying it forward was more than a propaganda exercise but was vital to the legitimation and self-image of the rulers of the various successor states to the empire, most of whom we should not be quick to classify as "warlords." Any interpretation of the political events of this period must begin with the contested ideas of invasion and collapse. If a majority of contemporary historians have thrown cold water on the idea as a cultural hypothesis, it remains somewhat more plausible as a political hypothesis—although here again most historians of late antiquity currently reject this as well. On the surface of things, one massive political and administrative structure was replaced by an assortment of new kingdoms, in a time

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in which migrations were happening, on whatever scale. Whether this constituted invasion, conquest, hostile takeover, or some milder notion is what is in question.

A typical summary of what occurred is as follows: "What textbooks call the fall of the Roman empire is generally described in a narrative which begins in 376, when large numbers of Goths entered the empire not in the West, where they were to end up, but across the Danube. Just two years later they won a victory at Adrianople (Erdine), killing the emperor Valens in the process. In the winter of 394–395 further instability was caused by a crossing of the Danube by Huns, a pastoral people from central Asia who are being led by changes in the ecological situation to abandon their homeland. Romans and barbarians all looked on this people with dread, and their arrival was enough to cause the Gothic leader Alaric to lead his people towards Constantinople, from what he was deflected by the promise of land in Macedonia. Here the Goths were to be based until they moved into Italy in 401, by which time another group of Goths had briefly occupied Constantinople in 400. In 408 another group of Huns crossed the Danube, and before long the Romans were paying them an annual subsidy to desist from further attacks. But a later ruler of the Huns, the famous Attila, was able to increase the payments. . . . Before long Attila tired of his remarkably successful extortion racket. He turned his attention to the West, only to die in 453. His sons were unable to maintain his power . . . [b]ut the demise of the Huns opened the way to the rise of Germanic peoples whom they had kept under their thumb."[2] Speaking of "[t]he overall character of the change" that ensued, Stephen Williams remarks that this "was neither a sudden collapse into savagery, nor . . . a general shift from Roman to German overlords which went largely unnoticed by their subjects. Rather, it was both of these things and others too, depending on when and where one lived. Many of the German kings were already partly Romanised, and became more so through settlement, marriage alliance and Christianization, although this did not filter down to the mass of their followers. It became something of a mission among the less prejudiced, more realistic Romans to do all they could to civilise their new rulers."[3]

We are not speaking of invited visitors. The Romans themselves, of course, had been conquerors, and the logic of empire was expansion, at least in its early period. Ancient and medieval strongmen, pretty much anywhere one cares to look, had a tendency to expand their sphere of influence until they encountered an obstacle, and neither the Romans, the Huns, nor Germanic groups making their way into Roman territory were an exception. When Julius Caesar arrived in Gaul, to take one typical example, it was as a conqueror, and "civilization" was what he brought with him, or so the story goes. A few centuries later, migrant groups and warbands from the east and north were not making this claim, but in most cases they appear not to have

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come as invaders or conquerors in any straightforward sense. Uninvited guests is closer to the mark, at least in many cases, and it is difficult here to generalize. The groups were many and their movement into the empire occurred sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly, over the course of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries (some extend this migration era to the eighth). Many had already been "Romanized," and they inserted themselves into politics and the aristocracy no less than the Roman military.[4] The urban landowning elite—always the dominant force in the ancient world—now was a *mélange* of old aristocratic families and the unwelcome arrivals, all jockeying for position and self-seeking in a way that would surprise no one who is acquainted with human behavior. Tensions sometimes boiled over, and violence was a fact of life; what it was not is new, although the victors often were.

The trouble with Roman sources who reported upon the phenomenon is the stubborn prejudice of Roman superiority. The migrants themselves (the unromanized ones) left us no texts, and their *modus operandi* could only be surmised by Romans who held them in contempt and later historians who are far removed from the time period and often have their own axes to grind. Either way, more than a little speculation is involved when endeavoring to understand what the migrants were seeking and why—safety from the militarily superior Huns, in the case of Germanic groups, but once the process began their intentions appear to have become more aggressive, especially when sensing the vulnerability of an empire that had formerly held the upper hand. Once ensconced in the power structure, the empire—or regions of it—was there for the taking. Wanton destruction did occur, but, so the evidence now seems, on a less dramatic scale than hitherto believed. There was no conspiracy here but rather a variable and gradual process of migration into an empire that was under increasing strain and that greeted the arrivals with decided ambivalence. The Roman army needed manpower, and this became a growing problem over the course of the third and fourth centuries. Recruits from the cities had become fewer and rural *coloni* (farmers attached to the soil) were also becoming difficult to recruit due to a scarcity of agricultural labor. Landowners could meet their obligations by paying fees that were used to hire foreign mercenaries, in a pattern one also finds in ancient Egypt and China. In time the mercenaries ascended the ranks, and this situation, combined with chronic shortages of money, high taxes, and a top-heavy administrative structure (both state and church), became increasingly untenable, particularly in the west. The strategy in 395 of bifurcating the state into an eastern and western empire did not solve the problem but contributed to the fragmentation that had begun. A combination of internal and external pressures came to bear on a political structure that was improbable from the beginning. Conquering territories for the glory of Rome and holding them for centuries are two very different propositions, and what is most surprising is

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not that the western empire collapsed—for all empires do—but why it took so long.

As two historians note, "The imperial policy of controlled barbarian immigration, *receptio*, was long established. Provided it was on Roman terms—as part of the treaty following a victory, for example—it offered a simple means of recultivating deserted lands, securing a source of recruits for the army, and creating a safety-valve for the pressures of the tribes beyond the frontiers. In consequence, a growing number of the subjects of Gaul, Italy and the Danube provinces were of barbarian origin (mainly Germanic) and semi-Romanised, as were most of the regular soldiers and officers in the army."[5] Once established, the process was irreversible and the terms ceased to be dictated by Rome. Frequent changes in leadership in both east and west symptomatized an instability that increased with time, even while the Roman way of life and political model in many ways continued to prevail in the emerging states of late antiquity and well into the middle ages. The invaders, migrants, or whatever one wishes to call them did not smash the system so much as gradually infiltrate and emerge victorious within it. The ethos of aristocratic power, suitably Christianized, persisted for centuries after the collapse of the ancient world.

By 500, the resettlements saw a variety of mostly Germanic groups dominating what had been the western empire: Visigoths in Iberia, Ostrogoths in Italy, Burgundians in northern Italy and Switzerland, Franks in Gaul, Angles and Saxons in Britain, and Vandals in northern Africa. Two hundred years later, slavic peoples had moved into central and eastern Europe, Lombards were in northern Italy, Bulgars occupied the eastern Balkans, and Moors were in Iberia, among the various players in the field. The eastern empire, of course, stood strong throughout the medieval period until falling to the Ottomans in 1453. Through it all, more of what constituted Romanness was conserved than destroyed.

BORDERS

Among the considerations that the narrative of invasion and collapse overlooks is that throughout its history the Roman empire had been a difficult—one might say unlikely—proposition which existed always under threat. The level of threat waxed and waned, but let us recall that at its height the empire extended from Britain to central Asia and from the Sahara desert to the Rhine and Danube rivers. These rivers were crossable and ineffective as a natural defense. The empire had few such defenses and its long frontiers were seldom undisputed and required massive military efforts to protect. Armies were concentrated along border zones as well as volatile regions in the east (Egypt, Judea, Syria), and money and manpower were always an issue.

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In the time of Augustus the situation was less dire. Rome was on the offensive and the aristocracy, always hungry for prestige, was not reluctant to enlist in and subsidize military campaigns that expanded the empire and brought glory and profit for the state and for themselves. "Augustus," one historian notes, "had been an out-and-out expansionist for most of his career," but "advised his successor, Tiberius, to stay within existing frontiers."[6] The logic of expansion had limits, and for succeeding emperors the name of the game was largely to hold the line since further advance was financially and militarily prohibitive. By the third and fourth centuries the posture had become defensive. Urban elites had lost their appetite for military adventures and the manpower shortage was exacerbated by plagues, high taxes, and emboldened enemies. Incursions into Roman territory, particularly from the north and east, were common, and frequent warfare with Germanic groups and a rival Persian empire combined with civil wars and assassinations to create an increasingly untenable situation. Roman dominance was waning, and while "warfare had previously been conducted on or beyond the margins of the Roman world, in the third century the theatre of war shifted to being largely within the empire. The battlegrounds and the devastation left behind in the wake of passing armies, both enemy and Roman alike, were now situated in the empire's farmlands and provincial towns. Until the end of the second century, the costs of Rome's military offensives has substantially been met by the booty they returned. Now the booty captured by the Roman armies had only just been plundered from Roman provincials."[7] Agriculture suffered, and warfare and instability rose well prior to the arrival of the Huns. Emperors themselves were often fending off challenges to their rule within the Roman aristocracy and busying themselves with the defense of Italy and the Balkans, leaving defensive wars along the frontiers to be conducted by generals who, if overly successful, could pose yet another threat to the emperor. Government corruption and a debased currency did not help the situation.

In short, the empire by the third century was already on its heels and the crisis that ensued saw a rising number of short-lived rulers who were often soldier-emperors and mediocrities. Increasing militarization and disintegration within combined with external pressures and endless border disputes placed the empire on a path toward instability and fragmentation. The first-century ideology of expansion had created a bubble which could be sustained only when external enemies were militarily weak, disorganized, and unromanized. A couple of centuries later, things had changed, and the enemies were beginning to defeat the empire at its own game. The end was not inevitable—the survival of the east might under different circumstances have found a counterpart in the west—but unsurprising given the length of the frontiers, the over-extension of the first century, and the number and nature of the empire's enemies. What had sustained a unified political structure of

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such massive extent was an effective synthesis of cultural, intellectual, and military predominance and luck, and once fortune began to smile upon enemies who had learned how to outromanize the Romans, the end was near.

AUTHORITY

In the time of Julius Caesar, "Politics at the top in Rome was a nervous business," as John Grainger puts it, "where a single false step meant death." A "hideous political minefield" needed to be traversed by every Roman ruler while the faint of heart steered clear.[8] It was a game of high stakes, aristocratic alliances, and personal ambition, and the rules were long established and well known. The ultimate prize was authority (*auctoritas*), a value that one historian describes as "a capacity to get one's own way, a political ascendancy secured by force of personality and excellence of achievement."[9]

In this unending contest some individuals and groups mattered and some did not, and the latter outnumbered the former by a wide margin. Roman politics was no world for egalitarians, but to describe it as a meritocracy is perhaps half true. The imperial era was presided over by an oligarchy which, in its mind, constituted an aristocracy on the Greek model and which in reality was a network of urban landowning families. Authority was their collective birthright, although its distribution within this class was uneven. What counted were money, pedigree, and talent, in roughly this order. Membership in a senatorial family opened doors into the political, administrative, and military apparatus, and as Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell point out, these families "regarded Italy as their private fief, and the state as a convenience designed to safeguard it and provide them with the prestigious offices to which their birth and rank entitled them."[10] Merit undoubtedly helped, when it did not get one assassinated. Successful emperors needed most and ideally all of the following: family connections and alliances, land and wealth, education and culture, and ability, both political and military. Open contempt for senatorial elites was a life-threatening proposition, and Caesar's example was not soon forgotten. Here was a man whose claim to political authority had been based on superior military ability (having conquered Gaul after eight years of difficult fighting), wealth gathered from campaigning, a powerful and experienced army, and an unusual intelligence and rhetorical capacity. His invasions of Britain and Germanic territory further enhanced his standing in the capital. In the end, he would become a casualty to the same code by which he had lived, and four centuries later so did the western empire.

The contest for authority was dangerous and unceasing. Collusion with an aristocracy that was as old as the capital itself and with the military were twin imperatives. Both needed to be persuaded to cast their lot with the emperor,

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and what was persuasive was self-interest. The elite valued changelessness highly, having created an order that served them, although it was an oligarchy that also understood the merits of civic-mindedness. Public buildings and monuments, services and entertainment (bread and circuses), and military conquest were all for the glory of Rome and a ruler who could ensure their position and the continuing prestige of the empire gained an authority that was sometimes enduring and always contingent. Roman politics had long been a business in which a network of notables implemented laws that promoted the well being of the state and themselves. The benefits for the rural majority were primarily security and peace, or what passed for them, while their counterparts in the cities enjoyed the benefits of urban life that included systems of law, commerce, and transportation. Emperors and the senate aristocracy with whom they (more or less) shared power needed to ensure the continued functioning of the system, and a generous but unthreatening level of competence directed to this end was a formula for success. One did not go it alone in this business, and as Pat Southern points out, "Money, capability and ambition were not sufficient, even in combination, to guarantee success in Roman political life. It was essential either to be admitted to the court circle or at least to form alliances with men and women who had the Emperor's ear. Patronage and clientship were ingrained in the Roman way of life from earliest times, and never more so than in the Empire. Without someone of influence to intercede on one's behalf at court, the attainment of any appointment would have been impossible. Such connections with the court could be made in several ways, by marriage alliances, for example, or by entering into client relationships with influential families."[11] Anyone wishing to navigate the complex world of imperial politics required connections and an ability to work these in accordance with one's level of ambition. What mattered, in short, was money, heredity, alliances, and real ability, in whatever combination one could muster, and the reward was a predominance within a small circle of elites for whom Rome was the world. The outlook was narrow and egoistic, at once vainglorious and public-spirited, and the art of politics as they understood it sought peace and stability, prosperity and order, prestige and preeminence, and a conception of justice that was unchanging and of Greek vintage. Rome would always be a new Greece, and by the end of the imperial era it was spawning new Romes whose political horizons showed remarkable continuity with their predecessors.

THE WAYS OF POWER

If there were one thing that the Romans understood, it was power. This regime did not dominate the Mediterranean world for a few centuries through weakness of will, yet nor was it by force of arms alone. Power and persua-

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sion were not opposites, and to see this we must look away from abstractions and toward the real world of Roman politics. Caesar, for one, was a military genius but no thug. This republican and champion of the *popularis* movement (and eventual dictator) undertook popular reforms that extended Roman citizenship and its privileges beyond the capital, broadened opportunities for political advancement to many who had not been part of the traditional oligarchy, and held officeholders responsible for their actions. Popularity smoothed his path to victory in the civil war and, as has often been pointed out, three years after Caesar's assassination at the hands of a group of senatorial conspirators, nearly all of the latter were dead, having accomplished nothing. His conquest of Gaul was no liberation and Caesar himself was no saint. This man embodied competence, *paideia*, and sophistication, and he had blood on his hands. His pursuit of personal authority and *dignitas* knew no bounds, and Rome and the lands he conquered were largely the better for it. For the next few centuries, Roman Gaul flourished. Coming under Roman dominion for any territory was not an unmixed blessing, but it became common imperial practice to leave a fair amount of autonomy to the regions and their local aristocracies. As Adrian Goldsworthy notes, "Rebellions often occurred about a generation after the initial conquest, but were extremely rare in most areas after that. By the second century it is very hard to detect any traces of a desire for independence from the overwhelming bulk of the provincial population. Partly this acknowledged the dreadful power of the legions, but the army was not large enough to have held the empire down by force and most regions never saw a soldier, let alone a formed body of troops. More importantly, enough people prospered under Roman rule to want to keep it. The Romans had no wish to occupy a wasteland, wanting provinces that were peaceful and rich."[12]

It was a formidable cocktail: military force, law and order, relative prosperity, local autonomy, what passed for freedom, and cultural and political supremacy in the known world. Roman power was based on all of these, and the more effective rulers understood this well and worked hard to maintain them. The power of the legions was dreaded but not omnipresent, slavery remained a commonplace (particularly in Italy), and violence was a part of life. The army was always, in a sense anyway, the ultimate basis of political rule, and its support was literally purchasable. Any new emperor needed to buy off the military straightaway, and their loyalty was always more or less for sale to the highest bidder.[13] The Romans never solved the problem of ensuring an orderly succession of power but survived on the legal fiction that an emperor ruled at the discretion of the senate, the army, and the gods as well as through a thoroughly complicated system of dynastic succession and adult adoption. Successful emperors preserved the fiction—whether in good faith or bad is rather difficult to know—while the reality was that the ascension to power was an unsavory business of purchasing military backing,

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negotiating senatorial alliances, heredity (real or contrived), eliminating rivals (often one's own relatives), propaganda, and petty struggles behind the scenes. Whoever emerged victorious needed to walk a difficult line, and the slide into military dictatorship was always a possibility and not seldom a reality. By the third century, most emperors were soldiers—the word itself, in Latin (*imperātor*), means commander—and they were numerous and usually short lived. The "year of the five emperors," 193, exceeded the record of four in 69 and anticipated the "crisis" of the third century, by which time military backing was about all that was required to assume the purple. Even in the good old days of the early empire, as Olivier Hekster reports, "emperors tended to start their letters to the senate with the words: 'I and the legions are in good health,' and a well-known anecdote recounts how, when the rhetorician Favorinus was reproached by friends for yielding to Hadrian in a matter of grammar though being in the right, he responded that the 'most learned man is the one who has thirty legions.'"[14] Augustus himself, to take a typical example, consolidated his youthful rise to power through the proscriptions of 43 and 42 BC which saw over two thousand members of the senatorial and equestrian orders declared outlaws and stripped of their property and often their lives. This was an efficient means of dispatching enemies while compensating the army and strengthening his power. This was followed by the civil war with Antony and Cleopatra, both of whom also appear to have been motivated by sheer ambition; they lost to a superior army. Later years would find Augustus (the Latin word for majestic) going to considerable lengths to bury the memory of his rise to power, mask his absolute authority, and transform the republic into an empire.

After Augustus, imperial rulers would always mark the beginning of their reign from the time they were proclaimed emperor not by the senate but by the army. Senate ratification was secondary and often an afterthought and a nicety. The principle of dynastic succession gained some traction but was most often a propaganda exercise beneath which was a reality of intimidation, sedition, and *coup d'état*. "In practice," as Grainger notes, "none of the emperors in the first hundred years of the empire (BC 30 to AD 68) was able to pass the throne on to his son. Only one emperor, in fact, had a son to inherit, and that was Claudius, whose son Britannicus was a child and soon disposed of by his rivals."[15] One second-century emperor who was able to pass the reins to his natural son was Marcus Aurelius, whose heir was the unfortunate Commodus. Throughout the imperial era, no real alternative existed to the military monarch, even if monumental efforts went into his legitimation. When in the centuries of late antiquity "barbarian warlords" presided over the former territories of the western empire, not a lot had changed.

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LEGITIMATION

Pedigree and military backing made for a persuasive combination, but imperial authority ideally required more than this. Power sought respectability and found it in a few ways. Roman tradition, religion, largesse, propaganda, and plain competence were all important factors in legitimating an emperor's rule, and the knives were out for any who failed this test of sorts. This would remain the case for late antique rulers, both Roman and post-Roman.

Let us begin with tradition. We have spoken of *paideia* as a gateway into the elite and a system of traditional education which was Greek in spirit while centered on Roman literature. Such an education cemented an aristocracy that saw itself as the inheritor of a cultural legacy and the center of civilization. Caesar again is an exemplar, a man of education and letters whose *Commentaries* combine seamlessly his military prowess with his skill as a writer. Its pages find military history and self-aggrandizement masterfully integrated, a propaganda exercise that placed its author in a tradition of conquerors serving the glory of the homeland and bringing civilization to the barbarians. Caesar had already established a reputation for himself as one of the foremost rhetoricians in Rome, and the *Commentaries* likewise drew widespread praise for both substance and style. A lifelong poet and authority on the Latin language, this cultural traditionalist was acknowledged by no less than Cicero as second only to himself (naturally) as a writer and orator. Caesar had studied with the foremost teacher of rhetoric of the time, was knowledgeable of Greek philosophy, and would become a patron for poets whose work he appreciated. As a ruler he was again steeped in Roman tradition and understood that even while pushing for needed political reforms he also had to abide by conventions, including one that provided that a ruler—even a dictator for life—is not a king (*rex*), a title that he resolutely refused. His assassins found the refusal unconvincing and eliminated him in the name of restoring (of course) Roman tradition. Caesar's adopted son would largely follow his example while also learning the lessons of his untimely death. Augustus was also thoroughly steeped in Roman tradition and was at pains to advertise this in his own bid for legitimation. The adoption itself and the posthumous deification of his "father" were conventions by which Roman rulers paid homage to the past and gained a pedigree that justified their claim to power. Notional adult adoption would become a common practice for new emperors anxious to legitimate themselves by styling themselves after a dead predecessor. The Antonine emperors of the second century, from Trajan to Marcus Aurelius, were all adopted sons and the custom would persist as a plausible alternative to hereditary rule.

Traditionalism reigned in Roman politics and assumed many forms. Rome itself became more cipher than reality, the symbol of a mythical and glorious past that would persist long after the eternal city ceased to function

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as a capital and the center of an empire. By 330, Constantine wished his new capital to be designated Nova Roma, and while the city (the erstwhile Byzantium) would assume the name Constantinople (another ancient custom), it was modeled directly on its Italian predecessor, right down to the corn dole and the seven hills. Restoring Rome, whatever exactly that signified, became a recurring theme throughout late antiquity and lent validity to a wide variety of policy programs and would-be rulers. Julian ("the Apostate"), for instance, sought to restore Roman religious tradition a couple of decades after Constantine and might well have succeeded had he not died in battle after a three-year reign. This soldier-intellectual, one contemporary biographer writes, "attempted to restore the traditional predominance of paganism and undermine the status acquired by Christianity since the reign of his uncle Constantine. . . . To this day Julian continues to divide opinion"—Christians deeming him a villain and Romanophiles declaring him a tragic hero.[16] Either way, his aspiration was not one of innovation but of restoration, and the basic impulse of the empire was always to favor the latter. Continuity with the past, or whatever aspect of it proved expedient, was more persuasive than any departure, the presumption always lying with tradition. This continued in the post-imperial west, for example, with Theoderic's rebuilding of Rome and extensive building projects in the capital of Ravenna and various cities of Ostrogothic Italy. Future rulers in the west, including Charlemagne, often looked to Theoderic as a model of kingship and cultural patronage. Rome—the city and, still more, the idea—and empire continued to fire the imagination for centuries, and it was standard practice for late antique rulers and Byzantine emperors alike to demonstrate allegiance to the old empire as an important legitimation exercise.

No less vital for this purpose was religion. Roman and post-Roman rulers reigned at the discretion of the gods, first the traditional divinities of Roman polytheism and subsequently the God of the Christians, and impiety was an invitation to assassination. Emperors, no matter how indifferent to religion they might have been, always assumed the title of chief priest (*pontifex maximus*), and they were routinely divinized after their death by a vote of the senate. We shall return to the point in Chapter 8, but in short, in keeping with tradition, a Roman emperor typically was at most semi-divine, and this afforded a higher basis for his rule. The details of this policy varied, but imperial authority required the blessing of the gods always and was not fundamentally different in this way from what Homer had already written of in the ninth century B.C. Greek kings were divinely chosen and so were Roman emperors, and whether this was a matter of sincere belief, political expediency, or legal formality, it was a tradition that emperors did not flout but eagerly took up in their bid to consolidate power. The empire, at least prior to Constantine, was not a theocracy, and while it approached this in the new Romania that was the Byzantine empire, it is better described as a

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compromise of theocracy, military dictatorship, hereditary monarchy, republicanism, and oligarchy—this traditional combination in which at any given time and place one or two such factors would become ascendant, usually temporarily. The perception of crisis typically brought religion to the fore, and propaganda efforts turned from emphasizing military glory to piety.

We must not underestimate the importance of propaganda throughout the period in question. Every successful emperor relied on rhetoricians as an indispensable buttress of his authority. Proximity to the divine was a constant theme in legal texts, coinage, and artistic production, and military prowess, public benefaction, and the glory of Rome were all familiar refrains. It was a standard imperative for any ruler of the imperial and post-imperial eras that however ruthless their rise to power or exercise of it may have been, it was by the will of the gods. Sheer will to power did not persuade, or not for long, and while the gods smiled on the victorious in war, their favor remained a necessary condition of political legitimacy. Emperors and kings alike needed to persuade, and not only the military but the aristocracy and, to a lesser but not unimportant extent, the common people. Bread and circuses were important, and so were public displays of imperial piety, military glory, personal prestige, wealth, and largesse. Public building projects illustrate the point: "All Roman emperors built to make statements, and not only emperors. Public buildings, and, with Christianity's coming, churches and monasteries, were the medium by which wealthy men and women advertised their euergetism."[17] Public buildings were located mostly at the heart of the city and were meant to impress visitors and inhabitants alike with their grandeur, both in Rome and in the numerous provincial cities that sought to emulate its design. Augustus' claim that he had transformed a Rome of wood and brick into a capital of marble was a self-serving exaggeration but also a precedent that later rulers would endeavor to imitate.

GOVERNING

Let us not forget that political legitimacy stemmed as well from plain competence. The everyday business of governing and walking the perilous line that emperors needed to walk spelled legitimacy as effectively as anything else. This partly explains Caesar's popularity: he saw the need to undertake reforms to a political system that had become excessively oligarchical, took effective action against piracy (a constant problem in the ancient world), managed the grain supply and the treasury, perceived the need to codify the law, and performed the kind of unspectacular acts that comprise the art of governing. His demise was brought about not by incompetence but by haste: he was a highly capable man in a hurry, and it was the latter that troubled many in the senate. Later Roman emperors who enjoyed favorable reputa-

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tions and often longer reigns had this quality in common (minus the haste), and the same can be said of their post-imperial successors. The sword alone was not a basis for rule, and legitimacy needed to be gained by much the same means from one century to the next. Early and later medieval kings in the west and Byzantine emperors in the east commonly strove to imitate their Roman predecessors, and their degree of success was often a reflection of their ability either to do so or to give this appearance.

Proximity to the divine, conquest and glory, elite pedigree and connections, and self-congratulatory spectacle all served the more successful rulers of Roman and post-Roman times, however much of the business of governing always consisted in mundane tasks, and whether these were undertaken by an emperor in Rome or a regional king or chieftain was likely of minor importance to most of the people of late antiquity. What mattered was the competent administration of public services and the small tasks that are the usual business of governing. Under this umbrella fell a good many things, most of which did not fundamentally change in the transition from ancient to medieval politics. One was transportation. This unspectacular value was nonetheless a crucial part of daily life for city- and rural-dwellers alike, and maintaining roads and shipping routes was of continuing importance throughout the centuries of which we are speaking. Another was stability. An emperor like Vespasian, who was the fourth of four to assume the purple in 69 A.D., rose to power essentially by force but lasted a decade and enjoyed success due to creating some relative stability in a tumultuous time as well as to a general competence in performing ordinary tasks.

Throughout the Roman period, the bar of governing competence was not always high, and vanity, corruption, backstabbing, despotism, and warmongering were not rare. The more capable rulers stand out—emperors like Augustus, Vespasian, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius—particularly for this reason, partly because of effective propaganda, and partly due to real ability. Emperors and their late-antique successors alike had to oversee trade and production, war and diplomacy, religious and cultural practices, laws and public works of various kinds, and their ability to do so determined a good measure of their acclaim. All of them were called upon to respond to requests, resolve conflicts, practice patronage, and preside over a court, the daily business of which was usually small and far from glorious. Unusual ability in any of these departments invited envy and worse—Caesar remains the supreme example of this—but above-average managerial competence served one well. "Ultimately," as Goldsworthy explains, "no Roman senator liked to see another man excelling him in glory and influence," and it was always a goal of the imperial system to prevent any individual from standing too high above his peers and amassing too much power or authority.[18] This was a matter less of ideology—never a matter of high importance in either Roman or post-Roman politics—than expediency. Ideology itself was typi-

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cally something of an afterthought and a veneer. What mattered was predominance—in matters of state, in the realm of ideas, and most everything in between. The claim, for instance, that the western empire approximated socialism before its demise is belied by the persistence of oligarchy and an utterly recalcitrant class system. Politics throughout these centuries was no exercise in philosophical purism but was a compromise of policies, factions, and personalities, and the art of governing was always a walk through a minefield.

PEACE, ROMAN STYLE

Just how peaceful was the "Roman peace" (*pax Romana*), either during the period that conventionally goes by that name (27 BC-180 A.D.) or in any period following? How large a contrast did it make with the period of invasion and collapse? If peace is our yardstick, how far was the fall into barbarism?

Not very far is the short answer. Peace by Roman imperial standards was no pacifist's dream but a condition that closely resembled war, or a relative and temporary respite from it which included a generous admixture of violence. The latter, in one form or another, was a regular occurrence in both warfare and peace, in the cities and the countryside, and among elites, commoners, and slaves alike. Let us remember that the empire itself was born of conquest. Once absorbed, most territories were disinclined toward large-scale rebellion, and whether this was due to the futility of resistance or to good government is difficult to determine. Some exceptions stand out—Judea, for one. Roman dealings with this province were sometimes a clear reminder that the empire was both created and maintained by force. Testing its resolve was a dangerous proposition, as the Jewish-Roman wars of the first and second centuries A.D. bluntly demonstrated. Prior to the imperial era as well, "Caesar was born into a Republic already prone to sudden outbreaks of savage political violence. The scale of the bloodshed grew worse during his life and his own murder was just one episode in an extremely turbulent period of Rome's history. . . . All the time foreign wars remained common, while the staggering success of Spartacus awoke deep fears in a society so dependent on slave labour. However, far more senators and equestrians fell in disputes between Romans, and the bloodletting was probably even greater when Antony and Cleopatra first hunted down the conspirators and then turned against each other. Caesar lived in a brutal and dangerous era. This should be an obvious truth, but it is sometimes easy to forget because it was also an extremely civilised age."[19]

Whether we are speaking of the republic or the empire, the threat of violence was part of the fabric of daily life, and not only for the lower

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classes. Aristocrats were raised in the conviction of their own unquestionable superiority, and any slights to their dignity demanded a harsh response. Rivalries within this group could get out of hand, and Caesar's fate conformed to a pattern. Not many emperors retired or died of natural causes. Less momentous perhaps, but not less spectacular, than assassination and warfare were common forms of entertainment in the arena. Watching people be killed was ordinary entertainment and it reinforced the fact of imperial power as much as it pleased the crowds. Belligerent self-assertion was part of the Roman way—let us not say the heart of it, but an enduring aspect. From the early days of the republic through the centuries of empire, warfare on some scale was the norm and the Roman population relied on a steady diet of victories and stories of glory and valor. Atrocities in war were standard practice and an important lever in the art of diplomacy. Violence, war, politics, and diplomacy were intimate acquaintances and always inseparable from the management of peace.

So too was slavery. The Romans hardly invented the practice, but they did rely upon it, particularly in Italy. Number estimates vary, but what is clear is that the imperial economy depended upon slave labor to an appreciable degree, which historians often regard as a primary reason why the Romans were not known for technological innovation. It was commonplace for prisoners of war to be compelled into servitude in a great many occupations, from domestic service to farming, manufacturing, building, teaching, and so on. Manumission was not uncommon and a slave's lot in life varied dramatically according to circumstances, but needless to say it was an abject plight, and the transition to Christianity did little to change it. In general terms, Roman-style peace was a tense business for free and unfree like, and it remained that way in the aftermath of the empire. The successor states were varying a familiar theme.

TYRANTS AND "GOOD EMPERORS"

The hypothesis of decline intimates that the kingdoms that emerged in the former western empire, and perhaps the surviving eastern empire as well, were on the whole ruled by inferior characters, often tyrants and incompetents, again in contrast to an earlier age in which great men at least sometimes commanded an empire. It is a difficult argument to sustain given the elusiveness of any standards that would allow for the kind of political judgments that would need to be made, and it is complicated further by the often religious undertones of the distinction between "good emperors" and "bad." Early Christians often drew the line on a rather narrow basis: who was kind to Christians and who was not. Secular historians broaden the terms, but the difficulty and complexity in doing so are considerable. Just who were the

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good emperors and who were the villains, and does our answer to this suggest any narrative of forward or backward movement in the transition into late antiquity? These are impossible questions and the decline hypothesis relies upon them.

A quick review of the emperors of the first two centuries A.D. reveals a good number of those to whom history has been relatively kind—Augustus, Vespasian, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus—and a smaller number to whom it has not—Caligula, Nero, Domitian, Commodus. The list is filled out by other characters whose reputations are more mixed or whose reigns were short and about whom less is known. The larger picture is not straightforward, and it became further complicated in the third and fourth centuries when the number of emperors increased, average reign decreased, and the distinction between better and worse tended to assume a more religious cast—Constantine "the Great," Julian "the Apostate," and so on. Let us take a brief look at a couple of the villains.

Nero was no modest man but a tyrant and a madman, or so the reputation that has come down to us has long had it. This man fiddled while Rome burned, was unpopular in his time and declared a public enemy by the senate, and was unkind to Christians. This failed emperor and last at the Caesars nonetheless managed a fourteen-year reign, which is rather long for the period. The famous "year of the four emperors" immediately followed his death by suicide in 68. Christians despised him, and he is often said to have been insane, a proponent of divine monarchy on a model more eastern than Roman. A man of limitless vanity, he fancied himself an artist, actor, and charioteer, and busied himself with such things when he should have been doing his job, as Commodus over a century later would suppose himself a gladiator while somehow managing a fifteen-year reign, the first four alongside his natural father, Marcus Aurelius. Was there any method in Nero's madness, and was he mad at all? Contemporary biographers reject the judgment of insanity and express a rather more mixed interpretation. While, as one expresses it, "Nero the monstrous enemy of Christ would have a long life in the Middle Ages" on account of being the first of the persecutors, he also "was a man of considerable talent, great ingenuity, and boundless energy. He was an artist who believed in his own abilities and vision, and an aesthete committed to life as a work of art. He was a historian with a keen sense of the sharp reality of the past (real, legendary, mythical) in daily life at Rome, and a public relations man ahead of his time with a shrewd understanding of what the people wanted, often before they knew it themselves."[20] He was a man of obvious flaws but neither madman, tyrant, nor incompetent. From a young age he was inspired by Greek culture and during his reign sought to bring about its revival, as so many others would. His sense of grandeur, desire for adulation, and interest in the arts were unusual only in degree, and his devo-

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tion to the last of these was sincere. Another biographer writes, "The accounts we have of Nero's performances, hostile as they are, show that he took his art in deadly earnest. He obeyed all the rules, never clearing his throat and wiping his brow only with the sleeve of his gown. He showed fear of the judges and their verdict, though the decision was always the same: 'Nero Caesar wins this contest and crowns the Roman people and his world empire,'" proving that the one with the legions is also the foremost artist.[21] His sporting interests likewise followed in hellenic tradition, and if he was inclined to impose his cultural and aesthetic sensibility far and wide, this too was not unusual for an emperor or evidence of mental instability. The villain that he became in the Christian telling was a one-sided distortion, even if a model emperor he was not.

Champlin's verdict seems fair: "There is no need to whitewash Nero: he was a bad man and a bad ruler. But there is strong evidence to suggest that our dominant sources have misrepresented him badly, creating the image of an unbalanced, egomaniacal monster, vividly enhanced by Christian writers, that has so dominated the shocked imagination of the Western tradition for two millennia. The reality was more complex."[22] Reality is almost always more complex than any tale of heroes and evildoers. Even Commodus, ne'er-do-well son of a great man, narcissist gladiator, and all-around psychopath, according to long reputation, likely warrants a more mixed review, including even "his gladiatorial madness": "Commodus," a recent biographer of his father writes, "had decided on a policy of peace, playing Hadrian to his father's Trajan, but all pacific emperors then had a problem with their image, given the importance in Roman culture of the martial ethos. Hadrian had tried to get round this by portraying himself as a mighty hunter, which was why Commodus felt he had to transcend even this and project himself as a great warrior. He also considered that spectacles enhanced stability in subtle ways: the Roman people had a right to see the emperor who was protecting them and assure themselves that he was man enough to merit his supreme position."[23] One can choose about any emperor one wishes and find evidence of short-sightedness, ruthlessness, and cruelty as well as competence, steadiness, and patriotism, all combined in some measure or other, and the situation was little different for their post-Roman successors. Just rulers, tyrants, and warlords tended to be less just, tyrannical, and warlike than reputation had it, and even the distinction between legitimate emperors and usurpers is without any clear basis. Paragons and villains, if we are speaking of the genuine article rather than caricatures, are seldom seen through any of the centuries that are in question here, and no historical narrative in which these characters play a role rings true.

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UNITY AND DIVISION

Historians who are inclined to speak of origin points will often say, for instance, that "After centuries of disintegration and disorder the first Europe took shape in the eighth and ninth centuries," in the empire of Charlemagne, about whom we shall have more to say later.[24] If "Western civilization," whatever exactly that includes, began with the Greeks, "the first Europe" emerged out of the chaos of the dark ages of the post-Roman west. What marks a "birth" is the emergence of some form of unity, usually political unity, and where centralization is prized rather more highly than "disintegration and disorder." Decentralization and regionalism are regarded as impoverished by some standard or other while unity is a civilizational achievement. Why this should be so is rarely explained but for a general preference for universality over particularity. The preference itself is more than questionable, however deep-rooted it may be. The decline hypothesis often asserts that after a few centuries of empire, the Mediterranean world became fragmented and disordered for a few more centuries until the first inkling of unity reappeared in the Carolingian empire, itself a noble but ultimately failed experiment which was followed by more centuries of medieval darkness. High points and low are measured in part by unity and disunity. What was Roman unity, and what happened to it in late antiquity? A state structure collapsed, but what unifying forces had held the empire together for so long and what became of them?

We must begin here as always with the armies. Military power, and a good deal of it, was a vital centripetal force throughout the imperial era, although a sufficient condition of political unity it was not. The empire was not (likely could not have been, by the nature of the thing) held together by force alone but by a network of ideas, institutions, laws, religion, historical memories, education, commerce, a class system, and an abiding sense of Romanness. When conquered territories were Romanized, this entailed "adopting a grid plan for towns, building *gymnasia*, drinking wine not beer (all as much Greek as Roman), putting on or attending gladiatorial shows, endowing a local deity with a Roman name and Olympian characteristics, speaking Latin in public," and such things.[25] These were the indicators of civilization (*humanitas*), and such unity as was attained was centered around them as much as the governing structure itself. When the latter fell, not all of these elements fell with it. Most endured, often in revised form, and for a long time to come. We have seen that the successor states of late antiquity were often anxious to preserve connections with their Roman past, partly as a legitimation exercise and partly, we would have to assume, out of sincere identification and conviction. Such political divisions as emerged should not be too quickly characterized as disorder. Political order became localized; it did not cease to exist. Nor did a good part of the social and cultural network

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that was transmitted in some form or other from Roman times well into the middle ages.

Let us also not exaggerate how unified the empire had been. A fair amount of regionalism had long prevailed—local differences of a great many kinds which no political superstructure was about to abolish. Rome was neither able nor inclined to homogenize everything it touched but actively encouraged limited regional autonomy over religion (under polytheism anyway), economics, and even taxation. The empire was fragmented from the beginning and beset by centrifugal forces which never subsided. Identification with and resentment of the capital coexisted, and the eventual bifurcation of the empire and eastern shift in its center of gravity replaced what was happening on a larger societal, or multi-societal, scale. Roman unity increasingly became a veneer which by the third century would have required an emperor of long reign and superior ability to do more than prop up, and at a time when reigns were becoming short and emperors were becoming nominal heads. The transition into late antiquity was no "from unity to division" story but a gradual shifting from one complex of unities and differences to another.

POLITICAL CONTINUITY

The discontinuities are evident: several states emerged where one had been, and while economic and diplomatic relations with each other and with Constantinople continued, these were fully sovereign kingdoms. Some estrangement between east and west occurred, and while emperors in the east continued to refer to themselves as Roman, most exercised no dominion over the former western provinces. Beneath the surface, continuity here as well was the rule rather than the exception.

From the perspective of urban landowning elites in the west, whom the entire political-economic system of the empire had long served, the options open to them in the empire's aftermath were essentially two. As Heather states, "You either had to mend fences with your nearest incoming barbarian king so as to secure the continuation of your property rights, or give up the elite status into which you had been born."[26] They did not opt for membership in a lower class, and the aristocracy remained entrenched under Germanic rule. "So long as this senatorial aristocracy remained in being," Vogt writes, "the Roman tradition lived on and the hard core of the old culture survived."[27] The aristocracy had no interest in political reform and nor did their new rulers. The latter wanted territory, authority, and legitimation, and military muscle was not sufficient for the purpose. Their subjects needed stability, and continuation of Roman ways was the surest means of achieving it. Continuity spelled legitimacy, in the eyes of both the aristocracy and

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(presumably to a lower extent) the common people, and it was found in the preservation of Roman law, the class system, commercial and trading practices, and religion. The Rome of old remained the great exemplar for the western kingdoms and the eastern empire alike.

We see this most clearly in Byzantium, which never ceased to define itself as Roman and which in the seventh century effectively prevented the armies of Islam from conquering Europe. Roman law, religion, and culture would continue to thrive in the eastern empire until the fifteenth century. Even then, as Lars Brownsworth notes, "when [in 1453] Mehmed II conquered Constantinople, he took the title Caesar of Rome, ruling, as he saw it, as the successor of a line that went back to Augustus. Only the scholars of the Enlightenment, preferring to find their roots in ancient Greece and classical Rome, denied the Eastern Empire the name 'Roman,' branding it instead after Byzantium—the ancient name of Constantinople. The 'real' empire for them had ended in 476 with the abdication of the last western emperor, and the history of the 'impostors' in Constantinople was nothing more than a thousand-year slide into barbarism, corruption, and decay."[28] This is certainly how Gibbon saw it, although contemporary historians typically relate the story in less dour terms. Against some formidable odds this empire stood firm for a remarkable length of time while seeing itself, with much plausibility, as an embodiment of a living past.

In the west, political continuity exhibited itself in the church, whose structure and function directly reflected the Roman state. The church hierarchy was of aristocratic pedigree and was not about to challenge a system of class and authority of which they stood at the top. Urban bishops carried influence with kings while exercising authority over their rural counterparts. In Ostrogothic Italy, Odoacer and Theoderic retained the administrative structures of the former empire and "drew heavily on Roman traditions, as Theoderic was keen to emphasise in a letter to the [eastern] Emperor Anastasius: 'our kingdom is an imitation of yours, modelled on your design, a copy of the only empire.'"[29] Much the same could be said generally of the new kingdoms of the west, where continuity of administration, taxation, economics, and civic life was the norm, albeit on a regional scale. No other political model was available to rulers who had been Romanized for some time and whose Roman populations likely outnumbered the migrants by a wide margin. Roman laws and courts were largely preserved or imitated and would remain so in one form or another through the medieval period. Resolving disputes regarding property and criminality was a constant preoccupation of secular courts while ecclesiastic matters fell to church courts, although the division between state and church would remain weak for centuries. The Roman system had never separated politics from religion in any appreciable degree, and nor did its late-antique or medieval successors.

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FORTUNE

Nothing in history happens by necessity, and it is always pertinent to ask what would have happened if this or that particular had not occurred or had turned out differently. What if the fortunes of war had been otherwise—if Pompey had defeated Caesar in their civil war, if Antony and Cleopatra had defeated Octavian, or Maxentius had defeated Constantine at the Milvian Bridge? Victory can turn upon such world-historical inevitabilities as weather, timing, and battlefield conditions on a given day. What if outbreaks of plague had not ravaged populations in quite so devastating a way? What if Marcus Aurelius' son had been more competent?

It remains a common view that the larger trajectory of history or particular events within it revolve around inexorable laws or causes of one kind or another, and it is a perception that tends to vanish upon a closer examination of particulars. Gibbon famously stated that "the decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness."[30] Were one to temper Gibbon's idolizing of the early imperial period—it must be said that he was something of an extremist on this point—the impressions of both decline and inevitability diminish. Was it inevitable that Rome would form an empire in the first place? Was it in consequence of vast, law-like forces that Augustus rose to power, won a civil war, and went on to conquer territory after territory or something more like happenstance? Was the empire itself a preconceived plan or was Augustus, as one historian puts it, "lurching without direction from one reactive response to another, making a series of *ad hoc* decisions, tailored to the particular set of circumstances and needs that obtained at the time. The theory that Augustus was searching for secure frontiers to the provinces may contain a germ of truth, though it is anachronistic to talk of frontiers until much later, when demarcation of territories became much more pronounced. It was all a question of finding the best place to stop, balanced against Roman resources and the ability to administer the territories so far taken in."[31] The latter description seems better suited to the facts, and while it is often tempting to reach a judgment of inevitability, this is normally if not always a retrospective projection. A sense of necessity is a function not of events themselves or anything that is alleged to underlie them but of the narrative in which historians locate them some time later. Augustus was not destined to be victorious on the battlefield, or if he was then let us see the evidence. He was by all accounts a highly competent individual, and he was also exceedingly fortunate, as can be said of his immediate predecessor (before he was assassinated anyway).

If it had been a foregone conclusion that Caesar's campaigning in Gaul would be successful, it was not evident to him, or to our knowledge anyone else. "Many victorious Roman generals," as Goldsworthy writes, "openly boasted that they were lucky, acknowledging that (as Caesar was to write)

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fortune played even more of a central role in warfare than in other human activities."[32] His conquest of Gaul was difficult and protracted, and the war against Pompey could also have turned out differently. Pompey was a formidable adversary, and there was nothing inevitable about his defeat. Nor was Julian's death in battle against the Persians four centuries later any consequence of world-historical forces. Were the circumstances different, this emperor's three-year reign might have lasted another thirty years and allowed him time to reverse the process of Christianization that Constantine had done so much to promote. After the latter's thirty-one-year reign, the new state religion had yet to grow deep roots and Julian's attempted return to polytheism was still an achievable goal. Christian monotheism might have been stopped in its tracks had Julian enjoyed better fortune in war or delegated the task to someone else.[33] The line between history going one way and another is sometimes razor thin, and the list of "what if" questions can be infinitely extended: what if whatever it was that motivated the Huns to venture westward had not materialized, or what if Constantinople had not weathered the storm of seventh-century Islamic invaders? The larger course can turn upon circumstances that are fickle and contingent in the extreme.[34]

JUSTINIAN

A religion of long lineage does not die quickly, and by the sixth century polytheism was still hanging on. It fell to Justinian I to drive another nail in what had become standard policy for eastern emperors and many of their western counterparts alike. Justinian was a sincere believer, advocating what came to be termed the Monophysite or one nature doctrine according to which Jesus had been constituted by a single substance, at once human and divine, in heated opposition to the Nestorians who preferred a two natures theory. Formerly a heresy, Monophysitism became the law of the land toward the end of Justinian's thirty-eight-year reign, and Nestorians, Manichaeans, Monatists, Samaritans, apostates, pagans, and Jews were enemies of Christ and the state. Justinian's dream was of one religion and one empire, where church and state were basically inseparable. Doctrines of the ecumenical councils now had the full force of law, which was less a departure than a fortifying of the received policy.[35]

"The reign of Justinian," J. A. S. Evans writes, ". . . was a period of transition, when the classical Graeco-Roman world finally died, and the Byzantine world began. Not that the sixth century itself recognized the watershed: the inhabitants of the empire called their empire *Romania* and themselves *Romaioi*, and the term 'Byzantine' . . . became common usage only in the Renaissance. The shift was probably not one that Justinian consciously willed. He saw his innovations as restoration and reform rather than a break

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with the past, but he accelerated change nonetheless."[36] This seems an apt description: this towering figure of late antiquity was no single-minded innovator but a restorer of the past and theological diplomat, ever seeking resolutions to the many doctrinal disputes to which the new religion had given rise. Divisions had deepened between religious factions and between east and west, and the bent of his thinking was constantly toward restoring some real or imagined unity—between Christian factions certainly, but also between territories of the old empire, sacred and secular authority, and within the law. By the time he assumed power, the western empire had long since met its demise, but opportunities emerged for at least its partial restoration. Whether we see Justinian as a conservative or an opportunist, he was a man of no small ambition who sensed the chance to reconquer for the empire lands in northern Africa and subsequently in Ostrogothic Italy itself, with God on his side and also a very capable general by the name of Belisarius. A Romania without Rome was displeasing to God, and the point was proven where such doctrines are most often proven: on the battlefield. Justinian's vision and Belisarius' legions made for a persuasive combination, and for a time the old empire was significantly revived. Ascertaining intentions is always difficult, but it is reasonable to suppose that the emperor's wars of conquest were not dissimilar to those of Augustus: some typically Roman combination of glory-seeking, conservatism, pragmatism, and unpremeditated opportunism. As Moorhead states, "there is no need to see the western wars as having been launched in accordance with a great strategy to restore the lost provinces of the empire . . . ; it was simply the fact that contingent and unforeseen circumstances . . . confronted Justinian with possibilities which he exploited in an opportunistic way."[37] Whether by design, happenstance, or both, the emperor was remarkably successful in reclaiming at least the idea of Romanness and a good deal of the reality. It was not empty rhetoric; the empire was Roman in more than name, and if east and west in the end continued to drift apart, the Roman model that western kingdoms were making their own was also preserved in Constantinople.

This included a good part of the legal order which Justinian famously synthesized in his code of 529 and in revised form five years later. Under his direction, centuries of Roman law—one of the hallmarks of the old empire—were reconciled and clarified under one system bearing his name. The task was monumental and his was not the first attempt. A century before, Valentinian III had attempted this in the west, and in the east Theodosius II repeated the effort in his Theodosian Code of 438. The difficulty of the task stemmed from the fact that laws had not been published systematically and over time had become overabundant and conflicting. Excessive ambiguity could be exploited by lawyers and required a fair amount of simplification and systematization, which the emperor saw to by appointing a commission

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that produced a definitive ordering of Roman law which would form the basis of the civil law tradition.

To speak of the death of "the classical Graeco-Roman world," then, is an overstatement as a great many cultural elements persisted in a configuration that was slowly altering. No one was setting about to destroy a civilization or a political order—quite the contrary. Justinian's aim was to reclaim Roman law, territory, and the religion of Constantine. The oneness he sought was of Roman form. No "Byzantine" emperor would have accepted that appellation, and Romanness itself had never been a quality frozen in time. In the east it shaded very gradually into an order that many intellectuals of the renaissance and Enlightenment did not admire, but their judgments and comparisons to an idealized past are dubious. Justinian was no Trajan; this truth sheds no light as in history no one "is" anyone else but is suspended in a web that contains innumerable persons, ideas, practices, institutions, and a great variety of things that constitute a human world. Justinian and Trajan were two of many nodal points in a "Roman civilization" whose oneness was never more than notional.

It was a notion that fired imaginations for centuries and animated one polity after another while never settling down into an essence. Justinian's Romania was about as Roman as first-century Judea or second-century Britain had been—differently so, of course, but this is the kind of difference with which history is replete. They are three trees in a forest, different and not different depending on the perspective and the question one is asking.

CHARLEMAGNE

In the west, notional Romanness remained alive and well and reached a high point a couple of centuries later in the form of the Carolingian empire. Ostensibly medieval, the Frankish empire of the mid-eighth to early-ninth century was another tree in the same forest, and indications of continuity here as well are several and obvious. (It is worth noting that this political order would serve as a model for many later European kingdoms and rulers, including Napoleon.)

A familiar political logic is discernible in the reign of the Carolingians. Here again is an empire born of conquest which drew no distinction between the political, the religious, and the cultural. In 751 or 752, the Merovingian king Childeric III was overthrown by Pippin III, one of numerous powerful mayors who for some time had been the power behind the throne in the former Roman Gaul. Pippin's father Charles Martel founded a dynasty of the Carolingian family which with the backing of the aristocracy (secular and ecclesiastic) deposed the last of the Merovingian dynasty while leaving the form of rulership largely unchanged. It was a change of personnel far more

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than of political philosophy, and by 768 Pippin's son Charles I was firmly installed. As Rosamond McKitterick writes, "Charlemagne, king of the Franks from 768 to 814, is one of the few major rulers in European history for whom there is an agreed stereotype. According to this he was a great warrior, and with his conquests he expanded his realm from a region smaller than France to include most of what we now know as western Europe. He promoted Christianity, education and learning. He was crowned emperor by the pope on Christmas Day 800, and provided thereby both the essential ideological potential for subsequent imperial ambitions among the medieval and early modern rulers of western Europe and a link between the 'Germanic' and Roman political worlds. He was already hailed as the 'father of Europe' by a poet of his own day."[38]

The stereotype, of course, is not without its problems, but if we are painting in broad strokes, the picture that emerges is of a medieval king with a Roman soul—or about as Roman as his Byzantine counterparts. Charlemagne was no more of a reformer than Justinian had been, to whom he bore more than a passing resemblance. For both figures, as well as their regimes and entire eras, political and religious authority were for all intents and purposes one. Crowned by Pope Leo himself, though he had already been serving as king for thirty-two years, Charlemagne ruled at the discretion of the Christian God and followed in a long line of others who had done the same, and who themselves had followed a tradition that extended well prior to Roman polytheism. The Carolingian dynasty had already received papal anoiting during Pippin's reign, and Christianizing the heathen remained imperial policy and was fundamental to its legitimation. Charlemagne was not introducing Christianization—this had already been the Merovingian policy from the reign of Clovis toward the end of the fifth century—but was expanding its reach and tightening its grip. He acted as an authority on church matters no less than on matters of state, a policy that was reflected in the very architecture of the capital: "When Charlemagne built his imperial capital at Aachen, he created two separate but physically connected buildings to represent the linking of his political power with his religious authority. He constructed a hall in the northern part of the complex and a chapel in the southern part. The hall had its roots in the halls of earlier times . . . though his immediate inspiration seems to have been the hall built by . . . Constantine at Trier. The chapel was modeled on the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, constructed by . . . Justinian. As if his crowning as Emperor of the Romans, in Rome, were not enough to make clear his identification with Roman glories, for the construction of his chapel he had stone removed from buildings in Rome and Ravenna, hauled north to Aachen, and integrated into the structure of his new church."[39]

The spirit of Rome was alive and well, and it extended into the religious fervor with which newly conquered peoples—the Saxons in particular—were

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brought into the Christian fold by a familiar combination of persuasion and force. Newly built churches and monasteries were unmistakable symbols of predominance in formerly pagan lands, and while Charlemagne understood himself as a Christian king presiding over the Frankish church, he was not anxious to claim the title of Roman emperor. As Cantor explains, "The imperial idea played a much more important role in the policies of Charles' son and grandson, Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald, and it became a concept whose content was much more heavily influenced by the original papal ideology. The ninth-century Carolingian churchmen moved away from the Christian empire of Charlemagne and in the direction of a political antiquarianism that sought the full revival of Roman imperial ideas by imitating the ornate court ceremony of the Byzantine emperors and by using the full title, emperor of the Romans."[40] Such grandiosity exceeded Charlemagne's ambitions, although extensive military campaigning and territorial expansion did not. Conquest remained part of the Christian king's *modus operandi* as was an identification with a Roman tradition that by this point had become thoroughly amalgamated with the Gallic. A medieval, Frankish polity integrated Christian, Germanic, and Roman elements into an empire that resonated with the past while foreshadowing a good deal of the future.

Throughout the Carolingian era, political, theological, and territorial aggression were impossible to disentangle, although Charlemagne was no more of a thug than an Augustus or a Constantine had been. The drive to predominate remained inseparable from the expansion of a cultural network which included ecclesiastic and educational institutions, scholarship and art, and a sophisticated court life. The king himself knew Greek and Latin in addition to his native Frankish, and he fostered a revival of classical culture that was less a true "renaissance," for the thing itself had never died, than a repetition and an appropriation. This "new Constantine" commissioned an enormous quantity of religious art and architecture in his own version of a new Rome in the land of the Franks. The king's largesse was made possible by the spoils of conquest and attracted scholars, teachers, clerics, artists, and poets from far and wide.

The empire of Charles I was one of many post-Roman states that sought a continuation and not the destruction of classical antiquity, albeit in a form that many intellectuals some centuries later saw as a deterioration. Renaissances, new Romes, and similar reiterations are about as plentiful through these centuries as personages who earned the designation "the Great," including those of whom we have spoken in this chapter. Whatever greatness can be attributed to them had something to do in every instance with the sword they bore in one hand and the book in the other. It is the latter to which we shall now turn.

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NOTES

1. Adrian Murdoch, *The Last Roman: Romulus Augustulus and the Decline of the West* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), 12.
2. John Moorhead, *Justinian* (London: Longman, 1994), 146.
3. Stephen Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 218.
4. As Peter Heather puts it, "While substantial numbers of the old Roman landowning class still survived in the west with their distinctive culture more or less intact, the key centralizing structures of Empire had gone. . . . Surviving Roman landowners were busy advancing their interests at the royal courts of the successor kingdoms, rather than looking towards the central structures of one Empire. Provincial Romanness survived in parts of the west after 476, but central Romanness was a thing of the past." Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 432.
5. Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, *Theodosius: The Empire at Bay* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 14.
6. Anthony Everitt, *Hadrian and the Triumph of Rome* (New York: Random House, 2010), 173.
7. Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.
8. John Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis of AD 96–99* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 30.
9. Miriam Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New York: Routledge, 1987), 18.
10. Williams and Friell, *Theodosius*, 107.
11. Pat Southern, *Domitian: Tragic Tyrant* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.
12. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, 34.
13. A famous episode in 193 saw two would-be rulers literally bid for the position, auction style, before the praetorian guard. The victor was Didius Julianus, who was executed by the senate two months later.
14. Olivier Hekster, *Rome and Its Empire, AD 193–284* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 58.
15. Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis*, xxv–xxvi.
16. Shaun Tougher, *Julian the Apostate* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), x.
17. Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, 215.
18. Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar: Life of a Colossus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 369.
19. Ibid., 512.
20. Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 20, 236.
21. Griffin, *Nero*, 163.
22. Champlin, *Nero*, 52.
23. Frank McLynn, *Marcus Aurelius: A Life* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010), 443.
24. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 161.
25. Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 142.
26. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, 422.
27. Joseph Vogt, *The Decline of Rome: The Metamorphosis of Ancient Civilization* (London: Orio, 1993), 237.
28. Lars Brownworth, *Lost to the West: The Forgotten Byzantine Empire That Rescued Western Civilization* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), xvi.
29. A. D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 183.
30. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 435.
31. Patricia Southern, *Augustus* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 155.
32. Adrian Goldsworthy, *In the Name of Rome* (Salisbury: Phoenix Press, 2004), 17.
33. Julian had ordered the rebuilding of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. Had he had time to see this project through, it would have negated a New Testament prophecy: "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2). "An attempt to rebuild the temple would stun Christians into submission. More to the point, it would show Jesus up as a liar." Moreover, "Christianity did

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not become the official winner until seventeen years after Julian's death. When Julian took the purple, the battle against Christianity was by no means over. The Christians were not a unified organization, splintered as they were into numerous groups; indeed, much of the empire was still pagan." Adrian Murdoch, *The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2008), 142, 4.

34. This would include high winds from the north on September 6, 394, the second and decisive day of the battle of Frigidus which brought the civil war of that year to an end. Those winds gave an advantage to Theodosius I, the final emperor to govern both west and east and a rather zealous Christian over his pagan foe Eugenius. Christian enthusiasts interpreted the battle's outcome and the winds as a divine verdict and the polytheism of Roman tradition was effectively at an end. Theodosius was a fanatical man in a fanatical time. He was by no means alone in his intolerance, and had any other religious faction emerged victorious from this turbulent era it would likely have adopted a similar policy. As it happens, Nicene Christianity won—through a combination of theological persuasion, legal and military force, and a lot of help from the wind.

35. "Pagans could expect no quarter. Justinian's first law against the heterodox, promulgated in 527, was followed by his sweeping edict of 529 which prescribed various penalties for pagans and once again forbade sacrifice on pain of death. . . . In 562, when Justinian was old and more pietistic than ever, pagan theurgists were paraded through the city and their books burned, along with pictures and statues of their gods. . . . Temples were demolished, idols, altars and sacred trees destroyed, and 96 churches were built, 55 of them paid for by the imperial purse." Evans, *The Age of Justinian*, 249. Justinian also permanently closed the neoplatonist Academy in Athens in 529. Plato's original school had been destroyed much earlier, in 86 B.C. by the Roman ruler Sulla, but a revival of sorts was instituted by a group of neoplatonist scholars in the early fifth century.

36. Ibid., 13.

37. Moorhead, *Justinian*, 181.

38. Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1.

39. Wells, *Barbarians to Angels*, 45.

40. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 182.

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Chapter Eight

Christianization

On Intellectual History

What Peter Brown calls "the Grand Narrative of European history" has it that after the collapse of the western empire, forces of barbarism swept across Europe and plunged it into centuries of stagnation while the eastern provinces descended into an even longer period of cultural drift.[1] The old story further relates how the Catholic church launched a counterattack, sending holy men into far-flung regions to the north and west, Christianizing the uncivilized through the centuries of late antiquity and eventually stamping out remaining vestiges of paganism and heresy. A variation on this story proposes that Christianity was part of the problem, stopping intellectual progress in its tracks and submerging Europe into an orthodoxy more interested in counting angels on pinheads than grappling with the perennial questions of Greek and Roman philosophy. The dark ages were a dark period of the mind, and whether the religion of Rome and Constantinople was part of the remedy or the problem largely depends on the religious proclivities of the historian. Brown sensibly rejects this narrative, as do most contemporary historians of this period, but what might replace it? If we are speaking of the intellectual history of the centuries in question, the word that best summarizes the larger trajectory is undoubtedly "Christianization," but what does this entail? Are we speaking of a great step forward, a backward slide, or something else, and are such issues approachable at all without appealing to either Christian or anti-Christian partisanship?

It is in no way our concern here to speak of the truth or falsity of the Christian message any more than it is for philosophers of history to take a stand on the merits of political centralization or decentralization. Our line of questioning in this chapter concerns what happened in the realm of ideas.

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When we are speaking of ancient and medieval history, religion, philosophy, politics, and culture can never be neatly distinguished. Our focus is on the realm of ideas with an accent on the religious, and without losing sight of the organic interconnectedness of all of these spheres. What followed the Roman era was a profoundly Christian one, not in the manner of a radical departure but once again as spring passes into summer, as a continuous transformation and reiteration of received ideas and in which the imperative of legitimation and the contest for predominance loomed large. It is a narrative in which there is no teleology to be found nor the reverse but a mode of change that again is steeped in contingency while echoing what came before.

"We are dealing," as Brown writes, ". . . with a very old world. In it, changes did not come as disturbing visitations from outside; they happened all the more forcibly for having been pieced together from ancient and familiar materials."[2] No bolt of lightning ever struck, and dramatic tales of saints and sinners will need to be replaced with something more prosaic. Holy men abounded, and their love of spirituality was matched by an equal fondness for coercion. The contest of ideas was settled by means of the written word and the sword; the divinities themselves, be they one or many, had a penchant for both and so did their worldly representatives. Ideas jostled for supremacy in the familiar arena of interlocution and predominance, these happy coexistents that we have encountered before. The great rupture that was Constantine, Augustine, or indeed the messiah of the Christians was, as I shall argue, nothing quite so exciting or unprecedented as has often been supposed. All emerged from a time, a place, and an interlocutionary network to which they belonged and which exhibited profound continuity with what preceded and followed it.

To partisans, transformation and continuity can appear as opposite values. To an Enlightenment enthusiast like Gibbon or a nineteenth-century atheist like Marx or Nietzsche, the coming of Christianity was a barbarism of the mind, an intellectual counterpart to the collapse of the empire. Civilization appeared to be taking a backward step while for Christian believers a caesura had also occurred but of the opposite kind. What is not in question is whether the transition from polytheism to monotheism constituted a significant transformation in the conceptual scheme of the late antique world—it surely did—but the logic of this change: was it partial or total, gradual or sudden, what forces were in play, and so on. When a historical event (apart from natural occurrences) appears to come out of the blue, it is typically if not always due to disregard of the context of the times, and this must be kept in mind in recounting the intellectual history of the post-imperial era. It was neither a spiritual awakening—when had we been asleep?—nor a dark night of the mind—when was noontime?—unless we wish to partake of either Christian triumphalism or classophilia, these two equal and opposite errors which we shall continue the effort to overcome in what follows. The dark

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night story is belied by the appearance of neoplatonism, the continued flourishing of rhetoric, the emergence of Christian philosophy and art, and the survival of a good deal of classical thought, albeit often in a new cast and more in the east than the west, while Christian triumphalism bears reminding that something resembling coercion—a generous quantity of it—accompanied the new religion on its onward march. New beliefs, and perhaps a new modality of belief, replaced old ones, and not overnight. The followers of Jesus placed a new accent on subjectivity and moral transformation which coexisted uneasily with traditional Roman religion. They may also have preferred a more literal form of belief. If we accept Paul Veyne's analysis that the Greeks and their Roman successors, or many of them, did not literally believe in their gods and myths, or not in quite the way that Jewish and Christian monotheists accepted theirs, then we are speaking of a transformation of both content and modality. The title of Veyne's book of 1983 is *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* and the answer is not straightforward. In the mind of an ancient polytheist, did the gods "really" exist, as one might assert the existence of the moon, or was "[t]he content of myth," as he prefers, ". . . situated in a noble and platonic temporality" as well as "information obtained from . . . someone else's word"?[3] The god of the Christians was no myth; he had appeared in this world, and the truth of this, so they believed, did not depend on anyone's word but on "evidence" from miracles, stories of prophets and martyrs, and earthly benefits once the new religion had taken hold. It was worldly and otherworldly at the same time, and in ways that mystified more than a few Romans.

As Averil Cameron writes, "The adoption of a Christian worldview and with it a Christian discourse in the Roman Empire was hardly a 'scientific revolution'; all the same, it represented a cultural shift of the most fundamental kind."[4] It is questionable whether the polytheism that the new religion replaced had ever been a worldview, a discourse, or something else entirely, but in any event the transformation that unfolded in the first several centuries of the common era must be understood in intellectual as well as social and political terms. These three aspects exhibit no strict identity and conform to no grand narrative. Intellectual, and all, history is not like this, but what does emerge are rough patterns and underlying themes of a kind that we have encountered before.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

The deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 was a major event neither politically nor religiously. From the point of view of the Catholic church, nothing of significance had changed as by this time "the bishops of Rome and the Ostrogothic rulers of Italy seem to have achieved more than a peace-

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ful coexistence with one another."[5] A dramatic break in the Roman thought-world it was not, although running to the opposite extreme is also a mistake. Something had changed, and the change was profound and encompassing. What it was not was dramatic. No particular event—this one, the conversion of Constantine, or any other—represented a crossing of the Rubicon and any contrary appearance is a retrospective illusion.

Our question is what happened from the point of view of knowledge, and we get a clue by asking about the material and institutional setting in which knowledge was found. The short answer is that it migrated into the church and was stamped irrevocably upon entry. As we have seen, monasteries became new centers for education and literacy, but the rise of the monastery was itself part of a larger phenomenon which was the Christianization of *paideia*. As Werner Jaeger noted, "The paideia of the Christian is *imitatio Christi*: Christ must take shape in him." Jaeger remarked that in the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa, one of numerous examples he cited, "quotes the Bible as the supreme authority. Instead of saying, 'the prophet says' or 'Christ says,' as would be most natural for us, he writes innumerable times, 'the prophet Isaiah educates us' or 'the apostle educates us' (*paideuei*), implying that what the Bible teaches must be accepted as the paideia of the Christian."[6] Christianity was not offering an alternative to Greek education but appropriating and reconceiving it. An education of the mind was preparatory to one of the spirit and its natural abode was the institutions of the church. Education for Roman elites had been the preserve of the home and family, although learning could also be obtained in many state-run schools, particularly in Greece. By late antiquity the church had assumed this role and replaced the traditional curriculum with one that spoke of salvation through the church. It was at this time that philosophy as well became "the handmaid of theology"; as Étienne Gilson remarked: "The proper function of philosophy in Christian education is to exercise the mind, to awaken the intellect and to sharpen the acumen; yet it remains a 'preparatory training for rest in Christ.'"[7]

All roads would continue to lead to Rome, but as a religious center—insofar, that is, as the religious could ever be separated from the political. As the reach of the new religion became totalizing, the alliance between education and ecclesiastical authority grew stronger and the centuries-old attitude of Roman superiority assumed new life. Study of biblical texts and their theological implications did not replace rhetoric and philosophy but became their new form. The translation of texts and the rigorous use of language and definition of words mattered as much as they ever had to the philosophers. A religion of the word, of the book, and with a taste for the absolute required a rhetoric and a *paideia* of its own if it wished to outdo its competitors, and church leaders were nothing if not shrewd. A classical education had long

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conveyed authority and prestige, and any new religion needed not to change this but to get in on it.

Books and libraries were becoming the preserve of the church. The technological innovation of the codex was replacing the ancient scroll, and Christian writers from the beginning were wise to this as well. Traditional papyrus scrolls were cumbersome and expensive relative to the new technology, and the codex had the additional advantage of featuring pictures for the edification of the illiterate. At a time when most did not read, illuminated manuscripts carried a persuasive power and an emotionality not possible for book rolls, and the church oversaw their production in considerable quantity. By the fourth century the scroll was becoming obsolete and the masters of the new technology had gained the upper hand. Old texts needed to be copied and recopied, and such pre-Christian texts that survived in the scriptoria of the monasteries were selected largely according to the new criteria. An enormous part of the Greek and Roman literary heritage was lost to western Europe and such classics as would survive were preserved largely by Byzantine copyists.

Libraries would also gravitate into the church. Through the Roman period, public libraries had been a regular feature of the major cities of the empire, although to describe them as public may be misleading. Libraries and their contents served the aristocracy, whether we are speaking of smaller or larger collections. As two scholars express it, “the so-called ‘public library’ of the ancient world was, in fact, founded by the cultural elite for the cultural elite,” and this would not fundamentally change in the transition to the middle ages.[8] From the time of Augustus, the primary function of the public library in Rome was to magnify the authority of the capital and its ruler as well as to house rare and authoritative copies of texts. The first emperor also attached libraries to the temple complex, perhaps suggesting a religious significance for these buildings while testifying to his own piety. The pattern would continue into the Christian era as the alliance of libraries, education, religion, and power assumed new form. A network of knowledge had sustained the empire, and a new iteration of the same would sustain the new era as well. Books and libraries were among the more important material conditions underlying a new order of intellectual community, and their at least partial migration into church institutions afforded a legitimacy formerly the preserve of emperors.

ROMAN PLURALISM

Prior to Constantine, Roman religion was far more consistent with Greek tradition than Jewish or Christian monotheism in both content and spirit. The gods were many and various, as they had been since neolithic times, and

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sacrifices were offered to them in temples throughout the empire. Plurality and the conservation of ancestral custom were valued highly. It went without saying that the observance of traditional rites was at once a religious and a social imperative, and ignoring duties of this kind, by an individual or the state, boded ill fortune. Impiety and atheism were serious matters, although such terms carried very different connotations than they would under Christianity. The charge of atheism was an issue less of personal belief or non-belief—many educated elites would surely not have accepted in a literal sense the existence of the gods—than of social practice. Piety was less a thought than a deed; it was something that one performed through public ritual while literal belief was accessory. As A. D. Nock writes, "To the ancients the essence of religion was the rite, which was thought of as a process for securing and maintaining correct relations with the world of uncharted forces around man, and the myth, which gave the traditional reason for the rite and the traditional (but changing) view of those forces. Everything made for the conservation of custom."[9] The Roman accent on public ritual over inward belief marked a profound difference from its monotheist rivals and was a recipe for misunderstanding and conflict.

From the point of view of the state, traditional forms of worship acted as a social cement without which a polity could not hold together. Military force was not enough, and shared religiosity meant shared action far more than belief. The divinities of old had bolstered the imperial mission from the beginning, and its legitimation included spreading the blessings of civilization which included the support of the gods. Whether we are speaking of the centuries before or after Constantine, this is an age in which politics and religion were inseparable. "Augustus had made the worship of the state gods a cornerstone of Roman policy; he revived ancient temples and priesthoods, ceremonies and rituals, and introduced the cult of the emperor into his modified principate as the religious expression of belief in monarchy. Observance of this political religion . . . was encouraged by all his successors, both in Rome and in the provinces; indeed the ruler himself always held the office of chief priest."[10] Offering sacrifices to the imperial gods was a requirement of common decency as much as a matter of law, and while for many it would have been a formality, it was an important formality. Of less importance was the particular divinities one chose to venerate. Subjects throughout the provinces were permitted to retain their traditional forms of worship in a policy of broad and relatively easygoing tolerance—prior, that is, to the arrival of Christianity. Pluralism prevailed, although this should not be confused with religious freedom in the modern sense, something that we should not expect to find anywhere in the ancient or medieval world. Not freedom but broad-mindedness was the Roman policy. The fate of the empire was contingent on the good will of divinities who were myriad and varied by region. Piety and prudence dictated remaining in good stead with both the major gods of the

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Roman pantheon—many of whom were appropriations of Greek deities—and the more everyday spirits of family and home, all of whom intervened in human life for good or ill and devotion to whom ensured public order. One example of a practice that was in equal parts public spectacle and religious rite was the triumph, held to celebrate an important military victory of a general or emperor. This was no mere parade but a ritualized ceremony that honored the gods no less than the triumphant personage, and the latter was expected to make a public show of piety as part of the celebration. Public occasions regularly called for tribute to the gods in one form or another and again in ways that helped unify an otherwise disparate polity. For centuries, the collective wisdom of the empire assumed the form of sacrifices, rites, and devotions whose salient aspect was public action.

From an emperor's point of view, piety and propaganda were inseparable. Personal authority needed to be gained, and one accomplished this by navigating between extremes of self-aggrandizement and ordinariness. Roman elites despised *hubris* and mediocrity in equal measure, and any emperor who wished to claim divinity for himself could expect ill fortune indeed. In typical Roman fashion, a compromise was reached: an emperor himself was not a god, however, he did enjoy a special relationship to the divine and his "*genius*" was a proper object of veneration. Augustus, for instance, styled himself the son of a god, and the model would be followed by many later emperors as well. In life Julius Caesar was not of a metaphysically different order than his subjects but in death was elevated by the senate to a divinity. His adopted son had a divine sponsor and could compete on this level with his early rival, Mark Antony, who advertised himself as the new Dionysus. The division between god and man was blurry but important and the first emperor "knew better than to have himself declared a god in his lifetime"—the Romans preferred their human gods dead—while at the same time "throughout the empire he encouraged the dual cult of Rome as a goddess and of himself as a godlike being. This gave provincials the opportunity to stage loyalty ceremonies and encouraged an imperial esprit de corps."[11] A "godlike being" was not (quite) a god—more recipient of divine favor than divinity himself—and the pattern he formed saw emperors declare themselves linked to a particular divinity but not themselves gods, or not in life.

Apparent exceptions were few and their names have not been remembered by history as among the more illustrious. Caligula, for example, in the first century of the empire enjoyed a "brief [four years] but colourful reign" during which his mental stability was called into question. A contemporary biographer reports "nothing has better served to confirm the popular notion of his insanity than his apparent demand to be recognized as a god."[12] To what extent he crossed this line is debatable, however, his apparent plan to create a temple to himself at Miletus and threat to rededicate to himself the temple at Jerusalem looked like more than political miscalculations. He was

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assassinated, and so, half a century later, was Domitian who drifted over the same line. Both emperors expected a level of bowing and scraping that exceeded the norm, and Domitian's use of the title "*dominus et deus*" (our master and god) did not win praise.[13] By the late imperial era, emperors were edging their way into semi-divine status and were becoming less content with the veneration of their *genius*. At the end of the third century, Diocletian and Maximian were asserting that "the emperor was the recipient of divine grace (*charisma*)—indeed the abode of the divine spirit," and the emperors set about to reform the symbolism of power on a more eastern model.[14] Divine honors in the form of public ceremonial had been an emperor's due all along—outside of Italy and its republican tradition—but Diocletian's innovation tilted the old balance in a more theocratic direction. By this time, however, the old polytheism had a couple of powerful challengers who did not look favorably upon emperors claiming divinity.

ROME AND JUDEA

A Roman governor's job was to please the emperor, ensure order, and in a thousand small ways meet the needs of his people. No little self-seeking was involved, but in the usual course of things climbing the ladder and governing well were not conflicting values, as the case of Herod illustrates. Here was a relatively successful provincial governor or client king with a difficult job description. Some Romanizing of the region did need to occur, and accomplishing this required more than a little diplomacy—an ability that he may or may not have possessed. A policy of ambitious temple building served a combination of purposes: three new temples for the observance of the imperial cult demonstrated loyalty to the capital while their locations were selected with a view to not offending the Jewish population. Reconstructing the temple in Jerusalem was a similarly grand undertaking financed by Rome and Herod himself and motivated, insofar as this is ever knowable, by "improving the image of Judea internationally, . . . expressing his Jewish piety," and of course "having his name go down in history."[15] In a polytheist order, all of this could be accomplished together; the veneration of various divinities was not a recipe for conflict and the god of the Judeans was no exception, or not from the point of view of Rome and its governor. "On the whole," as one historian writes, "Rome had few objections to Judaism, of which they recognised the ancientness—as long as Jews did not rebel against Rome."[16]

This qualification was important. Religious toleration needed to be reciprocated and the refusal of Jewish and, later, Christian monotheists to recognize any god but their own was a source of contention. From a Roman standpoint, traditional ritual observance and political loyalty were one, and refusing the former looked for all intents and purposes like refusing the latter,

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at once an act of impiety (atheism) and treason. Despite this, an exemption was created for Jewish Romans to avoid this public activity. A pair of rebellions in 66 and 132–136 A.D. did much to exacerbate an already tense situation, and when the hammer came down it struck with force. "Judaea was emphatically not a police state," or not prior to 66, and "although some governors, such as Pontius Pilate, offended Jewish religious sensibilities, they did all make some attempt to be tactful."[17] Jewish citizens themselves and their religion were not (usually) despised, however, the uniformity of belief they demanded and their religious exclusivism were usually perceived with either disapprobation or amusement. The Roman state typically ruled the province with a light hand. It was not Roman policy to compel Jews to abandon their ancestral customs or to offer sacrifices to Roman divinities. Rebellion, however, was another matter.

Increased power struggles among local elites in the years leading up to 66 had been enabled by ineffectual governors, and the revolt itself was a consequence far less of perceived oppression from Rome than of internecine conflicts. The benefits of Roman rule had been many, and the price it exacted took the form essentially of taxation and public order. As Martin Goodman points out, "the long-held notion that there was a conflict between Judaism and Hellenism in the time of Jesus has been a product less of the ancient Jewish evidence than of other issues: attempts by nineteenth-century thinkers to establish the foundations of European culture, the self-definition of Jews in the period of emancipation in Europe, and the history of early Christianity."[18] In 70, Vespasian ended the Jewish War by destroying Jerusalem and its temple, an overreaction likely motivated not by any longstanding enmity toward the region or its people but by the new emperor's need to flex some military muscle due to political vulnerability in Rome. Victory in battle spelled legitimacy at all times, but especially in the immediate aftermath of the year of four emperors. Provincial rebellion always met with a harsh response, and the claim that the citizens of Judea and the diaspora were singled out for especially harsh treatment is evidentially weak. Through until the early Christian era, the Jewish people maintained an important presence in Rome and throughout the empire. The province itself was often prosperous but volatile, replete with holy men and troublemakers in a state with a low tolerance for disorder.

CHRISTIAN EXCLUSIVISM

Roman rulers were accustomed to monotheists from Judea and an acceptance of sorts—mutual, partial, and often grudging—would take hold. The road to Roman peace contained many bumps, and nowhere more so than in the region from which a new offshoot of nonconformists would emerge. Here

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again was a group that resolutely refused to offer sacrifices to the imperial gods and appeared from the standpoint of the Romans as a strangely obstinate bunch who contrasted with the relaxed pluralism of an empire that encompassed many cultures and many divinities. The state religion made no demands regarding the citizens' personal spirituality; what mattered was the demonstration of political citizenship, and it was on this issue that Rome looked askance upon the followers of Jesus. Venerating any particular deity was not forbidden; the problem was the refusal to recognize any others and to show loyalty to the state.

This was a recipe for conflict, and in a province with a history of turbulence. It was far less the new religion itself to which exception was taken than the comportment and attitude that seemed to accompany it. "The Roman public," Frank McLynn remarks, "hated the exclusiveness, monotheism, truculence and arrogance of the Christians, which seemed to them to elicit the anger of the gods."[19] An illustration of this is found in the Christian word *paganus*, which came to refer polemically to all non-Christians with the exception of Jews. It is a term of moral condemnation and insult, roughly equivalent to spiritual barbarian. Pagans had rejected the word of God and were condemned with a stridence that the Romans typically found either rich or maddening. The sense of moral superiority this curious offshoot of Judaism exuded sometimes inspired admiration and sometimes the reverse, but what seemed distinctive about this group was its exclusivism and its intolerance, and the Romans had no use for either. Roman superiority was an absolute which in time would assume Christian form, but until then the two were on a collision course.

As one historian expresses this important point, "The conflict between Christianity and paganism in the third century was most emphatically a conflict between uncompromising monotheism and inclusive polytheism."[20] Political, cultural, and religious compromise was fundamental to how the Romans did business and partially explains the longevity and success of the empire. It did not survive on force alone but on a vast cultural network that included a religious *modus vivendi* with which Christians were having nothing to do. It was their way or the highway, and for the first few centuries the Roman state was not amused. Less a war of religion that a crusade of sorts, the resulting conflict was primarily intellectual and initiated by Christians who attacked their pagan counterparts with a ferocity to which the latter were not accustomed and placed them effectively on the defensive. The ideology of the Christians was totalizing and the kind of subversion for which it called met with no effective reply but for a conservatism that eventually would begin to ring hollow. "Paganism" was neither a philosophy nor an organized force, and it possessed no fighting creed with which to meet the adversary on its own terms. The followers of Jesus were changing the terms of debate with

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an organization and resolve that looked to the Romans like fanaticism, but it was a fanaticism that was slowly gaining the advantage.

The Christian refusal to sacrifice aroused uncomprehending indignation among Romans who had been prepared to countenance a similar refusal by Jews on account of the ancientness of their tradition and their distinctiveness as a people. The Roman gods demanded recognition, but they were not the jealous type and were slow to react to Christian condemnation. To the Romans this looked like atheism and subversion, when it was taken seriously, and for the first century or two it largely was not. Due in part to its reputation for being a mere offshoot of Judaism that was winning favor among women, slaves, the poor, and the ignorant, Rome took little action against them and allowed congregations to form so long as they remained loyal subjects. The trouble again was that the test of loyalty was sacrifice and this the Christians would not countenance. The aim of the Roman state was to avoid large-scale conflict without allowing subversion, and by the second century this issued in laws demanding observance of the old rites. Christian refusal and the sect itself were outlawed, but its members were not tracked down and enforcement was sporadic, ineffectual, and dependent on regional officials whose appetite for conflict was usually not strong. The perplexity with which Roman emperors and the aristocracy regarded this group was owing in part to the strange literality of their beliefs, their total adherence and unusual preoccupation with precise verbal formulations and doctrinal minutiae which clashed with the general spirit of polytheism. It was not always clear whether the monotheists were rejecting the existence of the imperial gods or condemning them on moral grounds. Veyne writes, "Christians . . . did not call the [polytheist] myths 'vain fables' so much as term them 'unworthy conceptions.' Since they wished to put their god in place of the pagan gods, it is possible to think that the whole project would first entail showing that Zeus did not exist and then setting forth proofs of the existence of God. This was not their program. They seem less to censure the pagan gods for not existing than to reproach them for not being good ones."[21] Christians took their myths literally whereas "[m]ost educated Romans and most emperors did not really believe in the Olympian gods (or, indeed, any gods). It was almost a badge of honour for the senatorial class to be sceptics, as though this was a mark of their status, and belief in the gods something for the mob at the arena and the Circus."[22] The followers of Jesus, from their point of view, were rabble who for the first century or two of their existence were a nuisance which for the most part was difficult to take seriously.

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CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATIONS

How did a new religious movement of decidedly humble origins gain influence among educated elites in the major cities of the empire and supplant a religion that has been entrenched within centuries of tradition? What it needed was legitimation in the eyes of both the aristocracy and the common people. This was a tall order and it did not happen quickly. The process required an aggressive combating of pagan beliefs, yet at the same time that such ideas were being turned out the front door many were being received through the back in the form of reiterations and on a large scale. This was no sudden or wholesale conversion from one worldview to another but a shift in outlook that was multifaceted, partial, and gradual. Far more of the old conceptions remained standing than were rejected, albeit often in new guise, and the list of examples is long. Documenting the full extent of these would fill a few volumes. Let us limit ourselves to several of the more obvious appropriations and rechristenings.

Early Christianity suffered from an image problem: it could claim no elite pedigree; it originated in a region and a religion of which many Romans took a dim view; it was associated with the poor and the abject; it was new, in a culture that valued religious conservatism; and it had a reputation for fanaticism, subversion, and atheism. In such circumstances it would not have been a rhetorically effective strategy to demand converts jettison all previously held ideas and adopt a worldview that was wholly new. In order for the new religion to gain traction in a society that had been hellenized for centuries, it had to place itself on speaking terms with Greek and Roman thought. What had originated as a form of Jewish spirituality needed to compete on a larger playing field and dispel unfavorable impressions of itself that were widespread in the Roman world. A program of legitimation entailed heavy borrowing from its competitors, including Mithraism: "What is surprising," Alberto Angela points out, "is that Mithras and Christ have a few things in common. Both preach universal brotherhood, and both were born in a cave during the night of December 24th and 25th! It's even more surprising to learn that Horun, the falcon-god of the Egyptians, Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, and Buddha (Siddhartha) were also born in that exact same moment of the year. . . . The reason has to do with astronomy. . . . Having the birth of a divinity coincide with the return of light has had a great symbolic meaning for many religions and civilizations. Not coincidentally, for the Romans December 25 is the *deis Solis*, the birthday of the Sun."[23] The coincidence is perhaps less surprising than Angela suggests. In a religiously conservative society it was far better to appropriate and rechristen traditional notions when possible than to abolish them, and Christianity in its first few centuries employed this strategy repeatedly. The date chosen for the epiphany, for instance, January 6, coincided with the commencement of traditional ceremo-

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nial rites in Egypt, a region that also recognized a virgin as having bore a divine offspring. Joseph Vogt provides a few more examples: "In form the liturgy was undeniably influenced by court ceremonial and by the arcane rites of the mystery religions: lights were kindled, incense offered, holy water sprinkled. . . . Martyrs were now credited with wonder-working powers and raised to the status of tutelary patrons, whether of individuals or entire cities; their veneration contains such a substantial folk element that in many ways they seem to be regarded as successors to the ancient heroes. Attempts have actually been made to identify individual saints with specific gods and heroes of the past."[24] Reusing festival dates and rituals, heroic figures, divinities, and ciphers of various kinds was common among ancient religions, and early Christians were not "stealing ideas" in any sense that contemporaries would have frowned upon so much as helping themselves to and reiterating symbolic notions that themselves were often reiterations. Reworking old ideas was standard practice, as the examples of sacrifice and noble death further illustrate. Christians, according to their reputation, refused to sacrifice, however they did no such thing but substituted one sacrificial practice for another. Jesus sacrificed himself, and in so doing upped the ante while simultaneously partaking of the virtuous death motif which had gained popularity in the Roman world. His crucifixion clearly resonated with the death of the Maccabees of the Old Testament and of Socrates himself. Martyrdom stories inspired a notion of Christian heroism and the idea that ordinary believers could participate in a higher nobility of spirit. There was a higher morality, a transcendence and a mystery that did not violate tradition but extended it. Sacrifice—indeed violent sacrifice, a practice of profound evocative power and sanctified by time—was preserved and reiterated, surpassing the rites with which they were familiar while remaining consistent with their spirit. Christianity advertised itself as new, but not so new as to abandon the common religious vocabulary that prevailed in many forms throughout the ancient world. A god that sacrificed himself for mortal humanity was an innovation, but the notions of a deity having offspring, dying and being reborn were not. Blood sacrifice and moral heroism had long been inseparable and pleasing to the gods.

Notions of prophets, saints, martyrs, and messiahs were also not new but were creative adaptations of ideas well familiar to an ancient audience. Jesus and the martyrs who followed were hardly alone in choosing an honorable death over abandoning their values. As Candida Moss observes, "Long before the birth of Jesus, the ancient Greeks told stories about the deaths of their fallen heroes and the noble deaths of the philosophers, the Romans saw the self-sacrifice of generals as a good thing, and Jews in ancient Palestine accepted death before apostasy. The idea of sacrificing oneself for one's religious principles, country, or philosophical ideals was remarkably common. . . . This kind of conduct wasn't even seen as heroic; it was expected."[25]

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Heroic figures needed heroic deaths, and Christianity could compete not only on this score but on its promised victory over death itself, its messianism and hopefulness of a better future. Messiah figures and the notion itself were familiar in Jewish discourse where it appears to have had a broader meaning of "anointed person" which also included a political connotation. Later Christian saints bore an obvious resemblance to Jewish and other prophets commonly found in the Mediterranean world and the middle east. The new clergy and the church also had clear precursors: Clement imagined the unity of the church on the model of a Roman army while it had long been commonplace that priests of various ranks were intermediaries between gods and mortals.

Early Christian borrowings from Greek and Roman philosophy were similarly extensive and vital to the legitimation efforts of a religion that was migrating well beyond its point of origin. We have seen that a vital part of what held the Roman aristocracy together across such a vast territory was a shared *paideia* and participation in a classical heritage, and Christianity was not abandoning this but only varying it. Rhetoric had a central role to play and the new religion used the old techniques to its advantage. The form of the sermon, for instance, was an appropriation of the declamation and the diatribe of philosophers and statesmen as well as the exhortation familiar from Jewish synagogues. Christian writers employed a vocabulary and style that reflected the rhetorical education many of them had received and which their audience expected. They did not present Christianity as a philosophy but selectively employed philosophical ideas and terms that had currency and which helped clarify and sell the new religion to an audience many of whom stood at some remove from Jewish monotheism. "Nonsense to gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23) was Paul's phrase, but this was only half the story.[26] Terminology had to be found that was familiar to Christian and non-Christian thinkers alike, and the intellectual world in which they lived had been hellenized for centuries. "Rather than a single Christian discourse," Cameron notes, "there was rather a series of overlapping discourses always in a state of adaptation and adjustment, and always ready to absorb in a highly opportunistic manner whatever might be useful from secular rhetoric and vocabulary."[27] The vocabulary was a combination of Jewish and Greek elements while the primary language both written and spoken was the latter. Paul himself cited the Old Testament in the Greek translation and carried out his ministry, including his conversations with hellenized Jews, in this language. Christian writers from the first generation, while relative outsiders to Greek philosophy, were also endeavoring to conceptualize the teachings of their deity and to win converts in its language. "Pauline Christianity was a Hellenized and not a Jewish phenomenon," according to Goodman, although "the contrast between Judaism and Hellenism does not seem to have been a major issue among early Christians any more than it was among other first-century

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Jews."[28] While chastizing "the wisdom of the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:19), Paul presented the new doctrine not as a philosophical wisdom but a religious variant. Jesus "was" wisdom itself, also "the way, the truth" (John 14:6). He had come as a teacher, the personification of *logos* itself, but again not in a technical, philosophical sense of this word but one that ostensibly transcended the philosopher's reach. Religious knowledge was revealed, not demonstrated, although here again the distinction was no more categorical than that between Judaism and hellenism or religion and philosophy. Christian speech was didactic and its purposes were simultaneously defensive—to answer critics such as Celsus (a platonist)—and offensive—to convert hellenized Jews and Roman polytheists indiscriminately.

The Christian message was primarily moral-theological and would have been at least partially familiar to stoics, but it was platonism that early ecclesiastical writers such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria were primarily drawing upon in the second and third centuries. Plato's accent on immaterial being had prepared the way, and indeed "[e]ven the word 'conversion' stems from Plato, for adopting a philosophy meant a change of life."[29] The doctrinal formulations that would begin to consume Christian intellectuals did not transform the new religion into a philosophy, although it did afford many avenues for philosophical clarification and speculation, especially by late antiquity when the historical association with Judaism was intentionally obscured by Christian thinkers eager to characterize their religion as a hellenized phenomenon.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The texts that became the New Testament were written in Koine Greek, a dialect that had taken root in the eastern Mediterranean in the time of Alexander. This is not the language that Jesus spoke (Aramaic), but the audience these writings were designed to win over were not apt to be persuaded by "the language of fishermen." Galilee was no Rome, and a prophetic figure from this cultural hinterland who produced no writings needed to have his story told in a manner and a language that possible converts would find acceptable. The cultural atmosphere in which these texts were composed was highly charged both politically and, never separable from politics, religiously. The gospel texts were written between 70 and 100 A.D., forty to seventy years after the death of Jesus and in the immediate aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple at the hands of Vespasian's army. Judea had been traumatized and some meaning had to be found for what had happened. By this time the two main claimants to religious authority in the region were what would come to be called Rabbinic Judaism (heirs of the Pharisees) and Christianity. The diversity of belief and practice that had prevailed among

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the worshippers of Yahweh prior to the Roman-Jewish war of 66–73 was now far reduced and the competition between the two remaining groups was on. To survive, the old faith needed to be reinvented, and here the followers of Jesus gained the advantage. A religion centered around a temple now lacked a temple, and the Christians had an answer: the temple that would replace it lay within the hearts of believers, and additionally, it had all been prophesied: "An uncontrollable social and cultural catastrophe became controllable, for Jesus had predicted it, and therefore the event was part of a tightly controlled divine plan. This is a splendidly successful piece of work, biblical invention at its best."[30] The true kingdom was not of this world; it was "to come," and not to everyone. The chosen would preserve the faith in a new form—a "new covenant"—and if they lacked a temple, they did not lack texts.

Indeed, there was a plethora—perhaps as many as twenty gospels—and by century's end these needed to be selected, edited, and consolidated into a canon. The four gospels that emerged were at once a reaction to the war and a reiteration of Jewish monotheism calculated to win adherents in a hellenized intellectual world. The story of Jesus' ministry which had been preserved in oral form required articulation in written prose, and this was no straightforward undertaking. The authors of the four are largely unknown but for the fact that they were educated Greeks and likely not Judeans. If Jesus had taught orally, these authors needed to formalize in prose whatever sayings had been preserved while employing all the tools of Greek rhetoric. "The originality of a prophet," as Nock observes, "lies commonly in his ability to fuse into a white heat combustible material which is there, to express and to appear to meet the half-formed prayers of some at least of his contemporaries. . . . The message of John the Baptist and of Jesus gave form and substance to the dreams of a kingdom which had haunted many of their compatriots for generations."[31] The originality of the gospel authors was to compose a narrative that was at once faithful to oral tradition and rhetorically compelling. The author of the gospel of Luke, for instance, appears to have composed the crucifixion episode with the above-noted noble death tradition very much in mind; more than possibly its author used the death of Socrates as a model.[32]

Strategic reinvention was evident throughout the gospels and the remaining texts of the New Testament. Further examples include the naming of the gospel authors and the selection of the four texts. Little is known about the selection process that saw the elevation of these four and the "quite ruthless suppression of others," except that it was carried out by Christian authorities in the second century of the common era.[33] Irenaeus' role in the determination of the canon was especially important, and his urging of the four cannot be separated from his campaign against the gnostics. Consolidating the faith required the elimination of rivals, and while his selection of Matthew, Mark,

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Luke, and John was based, he claimed, on the ostensible connection of each of the four texts to specific apostles or their companions, he also "did not attempt to explain why the specific four gospels he has chosen deserved their inclusion. Rather, he based his view on the naturalness of four—four quarters of the earth, four winds and even, in an early creative use of the Book of Revelation, four living creatures (Revelation 4:7)."[34] The gospel authors did not name themselves; the names are later (by a century) attributions for which there is no evidentiary basis of a link between a particular name and a particular text. Christians were given to believe that these works were authoritative because of the status of their authors and the proximity of the latter to Jesus, and the argument is spurious. With the possible exception of Luke, the actual authors are cloaked in as much mystery as is the basis for selecting these texts among the many alternatives. It is reasonably likely that the attributions and selection were both driven by an agenda of legitimation. Attaching a famous name to a text—religious, philosophical, or what have you—was a common method of granting the latter status and predominance over possible rivals. Affixing the name of an apostle, a close companion of an apostle, or a member of Jesus' family spelled authority, and the writings that became unified as the New Testament received authorial names based more on rhetorical strategy than historical accuracy. The same point applies to a few of the letters of Paul which many scholars believe were composed after his death. The practice of authorial attribution was neither a Christian invention nor an attempt to deceive but a means of persuasion that afforded an advantage over its competitors. It was as effective a strategy as the early Christian preference for the codex over the old book roll technology noted above. New converts were to see the hand of God everywhere and a divine authorship behind a unified and authoritative text, and the strategy prevailed.

CONVERSION AND CONQUEST

Attracting adherents to the movement was the name of the game, and more than a little strategy was involved. To say that Christianity spread through free persuasion is as false as claiming that it happened by force. The truth lies in the mundane middle—perhaps a couple of steps toward the latter pole of this spectrum but not at the extremes, and, as always, it is complex. The variables at play were many, but let us single out a few of the more consequential.

How did early Christianity win converts on such a scale and under conditions that might be regarded as improbable? The sanitized narrative speaks of benevolent evangelists and missionaries, unbidden conversion and the transformation of souls, and of course it is a whitewash. Somewhat better is a story of power politics and aggressive self-seeking on the part of marginal-

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ized elements in Roman society and their later intellectual and spiritual heirs. The latter view captures an aspect of a phenomenon that is best described as neither free nor unfree. What happened was in part surely owing to the content of the Christian message itself. It provided both ordinary men and women as well as educated elites with a simple code for how to live which, while stringent, was also forgiving, open to wide interpretation, and consistent with many traditional and popular moral conceptions of the time, including asceticism. There was an idealism about it and a universality. Stories of holy men retreating from ordinary society and devoting themselves to a life of piety combined with the charitable activities of the church inspired the idea that there is a way of living in this world that is heroic but also accessible to ordinary people. Christianity was for everyone at the same time that it pointed to something transcendent. It held out promises of divine grace and victory over death itself, an encompassing system of theology that for ordinary believers boiled down to a code of living that resonated with tradition while also holding out something new. It promised salvation for the initiated, and initiation was easily obtained provided submission to a particular authority. The church alone could fulfill needs of the spirit which it had also manufactured. Especially compelling were popular narratives of miracles and healing, moral heroes and villains, martyrs and saints, and wonders and mysteries of a kind with which ancient audiences were familiar but that again seemed to up the ante. None of these stories was especially new, but this was part of their success. The sayings and resurrection of Jesus, the lives of the saints, martyrs suffering bravely for their faith, healing in the name of the deity, tales of noble death, and an entire mythic world forged out of received elements found a receptive audience and for the initiated also created an important sense of belonging.

The followers of Jesus were speaking to people where they were—about them, to them, and in their own language. A large network of interlocution took form which was exclusive in the sense of castigating adversaries both without (pagans) and within (heretics) while also inclusive in that outsiders were issued an open invitation to join the movement, and with more than a little cajoling. Christianity had joined a conversation about gods and heroes, death and immortality, kingdoms and the good life, suffering and injustice which was anything but new and was leading it in a moderately new direction, yet less so than advertised. Dialogue in a myriad forms—written and spoken, authoritative and unorthodox, abstract and everyday, storied and literal, religious, moral, political, and philosophical—was enjoined and participation not restricted to the elite. "Christians did not 'resist' dialogue," as Cameron notes, "so much as put it to their own uses." "Dialogue and debate where everywhere in the late antique world."[35] The conversation included many a sharp tongue and disagreements between Christians and non-Christians and, perhaps especially, between competing Christian factions could be

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heated indeed. The dialogue was no tea party but a multifaceted contest of aspirations and beliefs within an interlocutionary network that came to encompass the entire Roman world. Missionary and military campaigns brought the new religion to far-flung regions of the empire and beyond. Bishops, emperors, and warlords were travelers, and the conversions they affected were in part a consequence of organizational effectiveness and communal solidarity. The new community was not tied to a location or any centralized sacred site but was readily exportable. Its belief in inward commitment over public ritual and a deity asserted to be universal gave it a competitive advantage in that membership was open to everyone, whoever and wherever one was, and a "house of God" could be built anywhere and to any design. "The very concept of a *Church* was unique to it," in the sense of an organized institution of unlimited geographic extent and whose concentration was more on an approach to life than formal ceremonial.[36] The latter it had as well, but bread, wine, and an ordinary building could be had anywhere. A system of continual correspondence and clerical hierarchy gave it martial organization, while the zeal of many of its believers would have made a strong and often favorable impression on possible converts.

"Glad tidings" had a dark side, and to see this we need look no further than the phenomenon of state religion. Prior to Constantine, the Roman state took a relatively relaxed view, by ancient standards anyway, of their citizens' religious beliefs so long, as we have seen, as demonstrations of public loyalty continued. This would change with Constantine and his Christian successors. As Brown expresses it, "Among the upper classes, a combination of browbeating and cajolery was the stuff of late Roman politics. Such styles were transferred, without a moment's hesitation, to the new governmental effort to achieve religious conformity. A recurrent *obbligato* of ceremonious bullying, and not the occasional outburst of bigotry and outright religious violence, was by far the most obtrusive . . . feature of the religious politics of the age."[37] From late antiquity through the middle ages, Christianity and power were utterly inseparable and often shaded into a militarism that was not the monopoly of this religion. The crusades that would begin in the eleventh century had the ground prepared several centuries prior, in a state religion that employed much the same *modus operandi* as the imperial government in the early period of expansion. A "universal Christian Church insensibly came to replace a universal empire," and by not dissimilar means.[38] Predominance in this sphere did not usually require outright violence and gentler means were preferred, but by one means or another uniformity of belief had to be attained and was with extraordinary effectiveness. Anyone hoping for social advancement, positions in civil administration and politics, even tax breaks needed to tow a line that was indistinguishably religious and political.[39] An important moment in post-imperial Gaul saw Clovis, the Frankish king, adopt Christianity for essentially strategic reasons. In one historian's telling,

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"in 496, in the heat of a crucial battle with the Alamanni, Clovis vowed himself to Christ in the event of being granted victory. He won the battle, made his decision for the victory-giving God, and at the shrine of St Martin at Tours announced his intention of seeking baptism, enlisting his whole people as recruits to the Catholic faith."[40] Similar episodes of empire builders and mass enlisting to the new religion by whatever means necessary were a common feature of this era. Clovis was a conqueror in the usual mold and his conversion provided a legitimacy and indeed sanctity in the eyes of his subjects and, equally important, "the episcopate, the only political, economic, and moral power that still existed throughout Gaul."[41] Not long thereafter, Justinian was accomplishing much the same in the east. His missionary program was inseparable from his political and military expansionism and his reign illustrates yet again that for every Justinian there was a Belisarius.

The "good news" was also a fighting creed, and it had plenty of competition in the centuries of late antiquity and the early middle ages. Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Islam were all battling for political and territorial predominance through the middle and far east, the last of these in especially spectacular fashion. Arab armies were carrying their new brand of orthodoxy through Persian and Roman lands from the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth centuries using the usual means of persuasion that an army provides. Religious militants often employed the strategy of placing religious buildings on the sacred sites of their enemies, sending a less than subtle message about the new power in town. An obvious example from the seventh century is "the magnificent Dome of the Rock, erected on the spot in Jerusalem where Jesus had predicted that 'not one stone will be left upon another' (Mark 13:2), was decked out with beautiful tiles inscribed with a paraphrase of Qur'an 4:171: 'The Messiah Jesus son of Mary was only a messenger of God, and His word which He committed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. . . . Do not say 'three.' . . . God is only one god; he is too exalted to have a son.'"[42] Christian conquerors, crusaders, and missionaries followed a similar policy in ways variously subtle and unsubtle. The crusader was simultaneously a pilgrim and a holy warrior battling the infidel in what was invariably understood as a war of reclamation and defence. Through several centuries of the medieval period, few ideas captured the imagination of Christendom more than the notion of the soldier of Christ carrying out the worldly bidding of their creator. The name of the game was power, that curious blend of enlightenment and violence that was the ordinary stuff of life throughout the general period of which we are speaking.

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COUNCILS, CREEDS, AND POWER POLITICS

From the point of view of Roman elites, the glory of the empire partly bore on the fact that an emperor was not a tyrant but governed in a manner that respected tradition, the senate aristocracy, education and higher culture, and the will of the gods. Religion was a vital dimension of an emperor's authority, and the majesty of his office made it an uncontroversial matter that he should impose religious uniformity using every means at his command. Since Augustus, the emperor had always held the office of chief priest, and while this was discontinued in the early Christian era, the underlying phenomenon did not fundamentally change. The transition to monotheism saw emperors often involving themselves in doctrinal disputes that were political as much as they were theological, including in the church councils that would define Christian doctrine for centuries to come.

The Nicene creed, to take an important example, emerged from the first council of Nicaea in 325 and was modified in 381 at the council of Constantinople, and its ostensible purpose was to articulate in precise and also concise terms the basic articles of faith of a religion that in its first few centuries had admitted of a good deal of fluidity. The council itself was summoned and presided over by Constantine, who had little patience for the theological minutiae and the factional and often personal disputes between bishops which by that time had become commonplace. One especially contentious issue concerned the metaphysics of the divine father-son relationship: had Jesus been created out of nothing by God the father, as the Alexandrian presbyter Arius held, and from which it seemed to follow that Jesus was not himself God, or were father and son in some mysterious sense a unified being? The emperor sided with the latter faction and the matter was quickly settled. "Arius and his followers were condemned, and the Council issued a Creed containing the statement that Christ was 'of the same essence' (*homoousios*) with the Father, a resounding affirmation of his true divinity."[43] *Homoousios* was an odd term which seemed to open an even larger can of philosophical worms than it had resolved, yet it satisfied Constantine and that was the end of it, or so he hoped. In time the Arian controversy, as it came to be known, generated still more heated debate, but if the theology was unclear the law was not: all were to accept the new creed and any who refused, including Arius himself, were condemned as heretics and exiled. The matter was less debated than decided in haste by a ruler whose chief interest lay in enforcing unity and dispelling Arius.

The resulting atmosphere saw theologians in the role of politicians trying to win favor for their party from both adherents and, more important, the emperor until Theodosius convened a second council at Constantinople in 381. The Nicene doctrine was reaffirmed, and again more as a result of political strong-arming than theological debate. As Freeman writes, "histo-

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rians of Christian doctrine still talk of the Nicene solution as if it had floated down from heaven and had been recognised by the bishops as the only possible formula to describe the three members of the Trinity. In reality, Theodosius brought the belief from his native Spain to the eastern empire where the matter was still unresolved and then imposed it by law before calling a hand-picked council on the matter."[44] Following Constantine's example, Theodosius imposed the Nicene trinity by law and Arianism was once again condemned, less resolving a theological debate that had raged for a considerable period than terminating it. Seven decades later, Justinian followed suit and brought to an end another thorny debate, this one concerning whether Jesus had possessed a single nature, at once human and divine, or whether his humanity and divinity were metaphysically distinguishable, constituting him as one person with two natures. Pope Leo I held the latter view and Justinian required his backing if he wished to establish authority in Rome. In 451 Justinian declared the single-nature theory a heresy at the council of Chalcedon and he and his successors persecuted its adherents in a fashion that had become customary.

It would be overstating matters to characterize such emperors as thugs manipulating religion for purely political ends, for late antiquity was a time when theological controversies and political machinations were virtually indistinguishable, and a similar description applies to the periods that preceded and followed it. Justinian, for instance, was a devout churchman and his actions at Chalcedon may be interpreted as a political calculation or a sincere effort to resolve a debate or both, and the last of these is likely closest to the truth. The same can be said of Constantine, Theodosius, and a great many other emperors as well as popes and medieval kings. Christian orthodoxy was a blend of philosophical argumentation, power politics, and everything in between, and a ruler's duty was to pronounce the final word and to pass it down the chain of command.

The idea was old: political and religious authority were one and its possessors were the aristocracy, from the emperor down to various local officials in all the various towns and cities of the empire. What changed in late antiquity was not this but the predominant ideology and, to a lesser extent, the identity of the players. After Constantine, the latter came to assume an overtly Christian aspect and bishops and priests were moving into roles formerly occupied by civil magistrates, but as we have already noted the clergy were drawn largely from the same (upper) classes from which local authorities had come since republican times. The imperial idea was alive and well and so was the Roman nobility. Authority and money now flowed into the churches, bishops rose in status and wealth, and by the fifth century the papacy had established spiritual hegemony in post-imperial Europe. Pope Leo I (another "the Great") in the middle part of that century adopted the rhetorical maneuver of asserting papal pre-eminence on the basis of an imag-

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inative if historically dubious connection with Peter. Leo's theological opinions, and his authority, were not Leo's but Peter's and his rightful heir—who happened to be one and the same Leo—in what one historian calls "probably the single most important rhetorical development in the history of papal self-aggrandizement."[45] Emperors and kings were not alone in the scramble for power, and reverberations were felt throughout the upper and lower classes. In what was becoming a Christian world, the always inseparable connection between political and religious authority had become stronger still, as popes now claimed that the basis of secular power was a religious authority that stemmed from Peter.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

It was inconceivable to the Romans that a polity as extensive and interconnected as the empire could be sustained without the blessings of the gods. Religious observance was indispensable to the maintenance of public order, and while an attitude of live and let live had long been imperial policy, public refusals by Christians or others to demonstrate patriotism seemed an open challenge to an emperor's authority and to the legitimacy of the state. When social tensions rose, displays of political loyalty gained new importance and such refusals went from being an irritant to a subversive act. In the second century the Christian religion was officially criminal yet largely tolerated, but by the "crisis" of the third century regaining divine support was a necessary means of restoring order and persecution of the nonconformists began. Prior to the middle of the third century, some adherents of the new religion had been killed for their beliefs but sporadically and at a local level. Nero's actions against the Jesus followers were an important exception, however, as Goodman points out, "after this persecution by Nero there was to be no central initiative by the emperors themselves against the Christians for nearly two hundred years. . . . In 249 the emperor [Trajan] Decius decreed that steps be taken to ensure that everyone in the empire (apart, presumably, from Jews) be shown to have sacrificed to the gods on behalf of the welfare of the state. His motivation was probably less hostility to Christians than a desire to unite the empire through a single cultic act at a time of military crisis precipitated by invasions across the Danube."[46] The policy ended less than two years later following the emperor's death, and while Valerian revived similar measures against the church for a couple of years, his successor Gallienus ended all persecution of Christians, a policy that persisted for nearly half a century.

Persecution of Christians and Manichaeans began in earnest at the outset of the fourth century by the emperor Diocletian. Again the apparent motivation was to restore unity to a polity under strain, and again the severity of the

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crackdown depended on the actions of regional officials. By this time, battling Christianity was a losing cause and martyr stories only fuelled its spread. The narrative that Christians told and retold is that they had been subjected to sustained and large-scale persecution from the beginning while great martyrs, in imitation of Jesus, bore their cross with bravery and died a sanctified death. The truth is less spectacular, as Moss has documented: "Between the death of Jesus around 30 CE and the ascension of Constantine in 313, Christians died as the result of active measures by the imperial government only (1) immediately following the Great Fire of Rome in 64, (2) around 250, during the reign of Decius, (3) briefly during the reign of Valerian in 257–58, and (4) during the 'Great Persecution' under the emperor Diocletian, which lasted from 303 to 305 and was renewed by Maximinus Daia between 311 and 313. . . . [W]e are talking about fewer than ten years out of nearly three hundred during which Christians were executed as the result of imperial initiatives."[47] Those initiatives not only failed to achieve their ends but further legitimized the new religion, and after Constantine's ascension the tables would turn.

PERSECUTION BY CHRISTIANS

The self-image of this religion was that they had been under siege from the death of their savior to the present day, and that they had overcome unlikely odds to become the official religion of the empire. Once again, the blessings of civilization and spiritual knowledge could be spread to the borders of the Roman world and beyond, but the great battle was not over and could now be taken to the enemy from a position of strength. Christians who had been "thrown to the lions" would now rise up and visit a similar fate on their enemies, only successfully.

Through the first three centuries of the common era, what the Roman state wanted from the followers of Jesus in short was not to renounce their beliefs but to show political loyalty. Anti-Christian persecution was sporadic, short lived, and ineffectual, a description that does not apply to many actions of this particular polity, and what it again suggests is that imperial officials through the great majority of this period took a dim yet largely tolerant view of a movement that was slowly transforming a tradition which the state was committed to conserving. Before Constantine, Roman emperors had little interest in the inward religiosity of the population and any battle for hearts and minds had a decidedly public aspect. Christian emperors, kings, bishops, and popes through late antiquity and early medieval times would change this, and with a resoluteness that far surpassed what the state had previously exhibited.

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Through the first few centuries of its existence, Christianity slowly mastered the arts of rhetoric and organization and applied them with a determination unmatched by its competitors. By the end of the fourth century, as James O'Donnell observes, "when Christian emperors set out to—we might as well use the word—persecute 'pagan' communities and practices, they were far more devastatingly effective. They halted the supply of state funds for traditional practices, crippling much of what had been long familiar. Then they seized buildings and banned ritual in them, sweeping the landscape nearly clean of the old ways. What survived—and much did—was personal, small-scale, or highly localized. Over a relatively short time, the new bludgeoned the old into submission and eventually supplanted it. That's what real persecution could do, unafraid to use violence but not needing to use very much of it. But Christianity never faced anything like what it would later visit on the traditional cults."[48] The process that Constantine had begun gained momentum through the fourth century, and by its end Theodosius had prohibited all religious observance but for Nicene Christianity. Sacrifices both public and private were banned, shrines and temples were repurposed or destroyed, non-Christians were excluded from the civil service and the military; in short every vestige of what passed under the names of paganism and heresy were forbidden, and what the state and the church did not directly destroy was destroyed by mobs with their blessing. A heretic (from the Greek *heiresis*, meaning choice) had chosen an unorthodox variant of Christianity and met a similar fate as the pagan. All were essentially hounded out of existence, and if the traditional practices took a long time to die, it was not for lack of trying. Justinian was "able to issue a law, which contained the passing observation 'we hate heretics,'" and anyone guilty of this offence was ranked with traitors.[49]

This was an age that saw little value in religious toleration. Christianity's enemies needed to be eliminated, and while remnants of traditional polytheism hung on for centuries, especially in rural areas, church and state both took every measure they could to eradicate it. Polytheists, Manichaeans, Monatists, Nestorians, apostates, and other nonconformists were vilified more forcefully and more effectively than Christians had been treated through the first three centuries, while Jews received only slightly gentler treatment. Throughout the fourth century the old and the new monotheism remained in direct competition, and when the latter gained the upper hand the consequences were predictable. One incident during the reign of Theodosius saw the emperor attempt to punish a bishop for ordering the destruction of a synagogue only to be rebuked by bishop Ambrose of Milan. The latter prevailed in this public altercation, having chastised the emperor from the pulpit. The Jewish population, however, had more to fear from zealous mobs than the state or the church. The latter in the east and the west were capable of spectacular brutality, but could at least sometimes exercise restraint in

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their dealings with Jews, and Christian mobs were not known for restraint. Christianity's triumph was the result of four centuries of protracted persuasion, violence, and everything in between. Whether the final tally reveals the victorious religion more as victim or as perpetrator of persecution is debatable, although the preponderance of evidence seems to suggest the latter. Much of the Christian persecution narrative is more legend than history, if indeed persecution is an accurate term. Ancient justice, whether we are speaking of the Roman or any other state, was seldom gentle or subtle, and the tradition of pious victimhood, martyrdom, and noble death gave the Christian movement a moral advantage on which they skillfully capitalized.

CONSTANTINE

An account of the intellectual history of this period would be remiss without at least brief discussion of a couple of central figures in the early Christian movement. The candidates are many, but let us focus on just two: an emperor and a theologian. As is so often the case with early figures in a religious movement, the narrative of the first Christian emperor has been shrouded in legend and partisanship from the beginning. Constantine ("the Great," of course) from the beginning has been regarded as a visionary and an innovator, although in many ways he was something of a conservative. He largely continued the economic policies of his predecessors and, as Charles Odahl points out, "He enforced Diocletian's laws mandating hereditary services in essential professions—soldiers in the army, workers in arms factories, *coloni* on farms, and *decuriones* in cities were all expected to stay in their positions and to provide heirs who would continue to ensure to the state the services and goods it needed to function."[50] On religious matters, he hardly invented the idea that an emperor required divine favor—a notion that stemmed from pre-Homeric times—while the religion he would come to champion would already have three centuries of tradition behind it and had become popular among a good part of the population by his ascension in 306 and his battlefield conversion six years later. Diocletian's efforts to put Christianity down by force had been too little too late, and the old imperial gods were beginning to feel the heat. It was neither inevitable nor surprising that by the early fourth century a Roman emperor would opt for a religion that was no longer new and which seemed to have the wind in its sails. The title of *pontifex maximus* Constantine retained until his deathbed, and while in most ways he inclined toward conservatism he did not do so unthinkingly. A man who "was neither a saint nor a tyrant," he "was more concerned to preserve and modify the imperial system which he inherited than to change it radically—except in one sphere."[51] This was, of course, imperial religion. What was the meaning of this change and how did it come to pass?

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The answer has to do in no small part with battlefield contingencies at the site of the Milvian Bridge on the outskirts of Rome on October 28, 312. This structure spanning the Tiber is not "where it all happened" in any absolute sense, for the process had begun long before, but it was the location of a major turning point in the history of Christianity. Both Constantine and his rival Maxentius had a creed, and when the defender of traditional Roman polytheism went down to defeat, so did his religion, although as we have noted it did not go quickly or quietly. Constantine, son of the soldier-emperor Constantinus Chlorus, was a very capable commander and dispatched the less skilled Maxentius on that day and a dozen years later achieved the same in the east with a victory over Licinius. The story has it that shortly prior to the battle against Maxentius, Constantine, advancing on Rome and worrying much about the strength of his enemy, decided that some divine assistance was needed for the approaching battle and from the most powerful deity in the heavens. He found this in the God of the Christians, ordered his soldiers to march under the battle standard of the formerly persecuted religion, and rolled the dice. The embellished version has the emperor and his soldiers seeing a cross of light in the sky carrying the words "In this sign conquer." In any event, the gambit paid off and his victory and his conversion were accomplished in one stroke. Scholars largely regard the emperor's conversion as genuine, and his later actions do seem to confirm that it was more than a sheer act of expediency, although expedient it was.

The new state religion was not long in taking effect. The church was now exempt from paying taxes, the clerical profession grew massively—now no longer from the ranks of the aristocracy alone but from the laboring classes on whom the economy had depended—endowments from the wealthy formerly destined for public works and buildings increasingly were directed to church institutions, and a good deal of the investment in economic production and public services now went into private spiritual undertakings. Individuals who in former times would have been drawn to positions of political and cultural leadership increasingly opted for the church which in turn was becoming indistinguishable from the state. Christians were now given preference in the civil service, churches were built at state expense, temple riches were redirected to the church along with sizeable land grants, bishops were enriched, administrative powers were conferred upon them, and they rose in social rank to a position superior to that of polytheist priests. Religious practices of old began to be prohibited as part of the emperor's campaign to evangelize the Roman world, particularly in the east where his new capital would be located. As Timothy Barnes notes, "Paganism was now a discredited cause. Constantine forbade the erection of cult statues, the consultation of pagan oracles, divination of any sort, and sacrifice to the gods under any circumstances. A change so sudden, so fundamental, so total shocked pagans."[52] To speak of the change as total may be overstating it. The game was

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the same; only the victor had changed, and it went about in similar fashion as the "Great Persecution" of Diocletian only a short time prior.

Constantine was a sincere believer even while his primary interest in religion always lay in its power to legitimize his authority. The emperor was no theologian, although this did not stop him from inserting himself directly into ecclesiastical affairs and doctrinal disputes for which he had little patience. The disputes were numerous, protracted, and often caustic, and the emperor assumed the role of unifier, most notably at his council at Nicaea in 325. Hoping, as we have seen, to resolve the Arian controversy where the possibility of compromise was slim to none, "[h]e suggested, possibly on his own initiative, perhaps at the instigation of Ossius, that the correct way of describing the relationship between Father and Son was to declare them *homoousios*, 'of one substance.' The motive was probably to isolate Arius through inserting a phrase that his supporters would never accept."[53] Clerics being more difficult to command than soldiers, in the end the church was more divided than ever and generations of bishops and theologians were left to try to figure out the meaning of *homoousios*. Constantine shared his predecessors' desire for unity and order, and his gamble was that the Christian God could be the source of this provided that internal divisions and external competitors could be eliminated through persuasion when possible and force when needed. The cultural revolution that followed was momentous but in most ways carried forward what had preceded it. Rome and all that it symbolized was not rejected but rechristened.

AUGUSTINE

According to the decline narrative, Christianity's slow rise to predominance through these centuries coincided with and in some measure caused the collapse of classical civilization, and the foremost theologian who paved the way for the long superstitious age that followed was a bishop from Hippo. Militant religiosity had its church and its emperors, and by the fourth and fifth centuries it had its philosopher as well. Christianity was now a totalizing worldview, combining subjective pathos with an institution, a creed, a political theory, an historical self-understanding, and an encompassing way of life which would stand basically unchallenged for a thousand years while never equaling the height of its classical predecessor. The partisanship in this story is based more on cultural preferences than any philosophical foundation, even while the story itself likely holds a degree of truth. The process of Christianization had an unmistakable dark side, part of which was a reflection of the times in which these events unfolded and part of which was a new variation initiated by this movement and expounded and legitimized in the writings of individuals such as Augustine.

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He, of course, had his predecessors. The bishop was drawing from what was by then a tradition of religious, philosophical, and political thought much of which preceded Christianity. A man by no means opposed to force, he is sometimes regarded as "the first theorist of the Inquisition" in that, as Brown points out, "for Augustine, religious coercion remained a genuinely corrective treatment: in was a brusque way of winning over 'hardened' rivals, rather than an attempt to stamp out a small minority."[54] It had become a Christian age, and as in the imperial era that preceded it, political supremacy entailed a larger process of Romanization in which enemies were absorbed or eliminated. If Romanization now marched under a Christian standard, it remained on the march, stamping out pagans and heretics within the empire by no gentle means and in accordance with God's plan. Human history, Augustine taught, was the history of salvation, and the larger undertakings of church, state, and other historical actors needed to further the divine purpose of leading us one way or another to "the city of God." History itself—sacred history—had a purpose and a teleology. Following Augustine's time, "[m]edieval Christians believed that history would arrive at its appointed end when the church became truly universal, when all men were Christians. They had little idea, at least before the thirteenth century, of the size of the world or of the number of non-Christians in the East; they believed that the triumph of Christianity was close at hand and that the use of force to complete the task was God's will—that force was justified by the immensity of the accomplishment."[55] Augustine did not invent the idea—traces of it can be found in the Old Testament and in Christian form in the writings of Origen and Eusebius in the third and fourth centuries—but he refined and amplified the concept of history no longer as a repetitive clash of forces but as purposive, linear, and explicitly teleological. The past contained a message and a plan, even while it lacked inevitability. It remained the source of political legitimacy as human efforts were required to carry out the divine will. "Christian bishops," Heather writes, "had been happy to propagate the idea that it was no accident that Christ and Augustus had lived at exactly the same moment. What better indicator that the Roman Empire was destined to conquer the world and bring the whole of humankind to Christianity?"[56] It would be by human will, not metaphysical necessity, that the destination would be reached, and in the effort there was no point in compromise: one was furthering God's purpose or one was not, and in the event of the latter one needed what Augustine called "discipline" (*disciplina*) or correction through punishment, as God had thrown Paul to the ground to bring about conversion and any number of other biblical examples illustrate. God's church needed to be as stern as was God himself, and heretics such as the Donatists who especially aroused the bishop's ire required urgent correction. Augustine's rationale was familiar: a Christian age requires authority and unity, and since the Donatist church threatened both it was declared heretical and forcefully abol-

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ished at the beginning of the fifth century. Other competitors met a similar fate and with the full blessing of the bishop of Hippo: Manichaeism, which had earlier attracted his sympathy, was a dangerous rival in need of the same active suppression as the traditional Roman divinities. Augustine, as Brown notes, "wrote the only full justification, in the history of the Early Church, of the right of the state to suppress non-Catholics," and suppress them they did.[57]

He was hardly alone in this view, nor was religious-political authoritarianism exactly unprecedented. Augustine provided an old policy with an elaborate theological defence which would exercise a profound influence on medieval Christendom at the same time that he would seek to clarify the relationship between the Catholic faith and Greek and Roman thought. The old culture was not to be left behind but reiterated on Christian terms. Rhetoric, grammar, and education would follow a traditional pattern while "secular" knowledge would again be carried forward but in a subordinate capacity. The theologian had little use for Aristotle's empirical and logical turn of mind but found a good deal to admire in Plato. The latter and Augustine himself were no irrationalists, but he believed he had found in Plato a philosopher who was alive to the otherworldly and the mystical and who shared the church's dream of unity. There was an irrationality and a mystery—let us not say irrationalism or mysticism—at the heart of the Christian message, and it was Plato, Augustine believed, who had prepared the way in Greek thought for its reception by the Roman church. The bishop of Hippo was neither a thoroughgoing neoplatonist nor a philhellene. He was decidedly a man of the church who found in classical culture ideas that were useful to his purpose and others that he believed needed to be forcefully confronted.

Whether a decline and fall narrative fits the intellectual history of late antiquity is doubtful. There is much here that leaves modern sensibilities cold, but the leap from this to the hypothesis of collapse is not indicated by the events themselves. The notion of an edifice crashing down or civilization being plunged into a millennium of superstition is a caricature that has stood since the fourteenth century when the Italian poet Petrarch introduced the notion of "dark ages" to speak of the era spanning late antiquity to the high middle ages. The intellectual culture of late antiquity was in transition from polytheism to monotheism, from the classical to the medieval, or however one wishes to characterize it, but it was slow, piecemeal, and invariably contingent. It appropriated and transformed far more of the old order than it rejected or replaced and was consistent in this way with the larger course of the social and political history of this period.

NOTES

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3. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, 27.
4. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 223.
5. George E. Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 87.
6. Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 93.
7. Étienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972), 32, 33.
8. Victor M. Martínez and Megan Finn Senseney, "The Professional and His Books: Special Libraries in the Ancient World" in *Ancient Libraries*, eds. Jason König, Katerina Oikonomopoulou, and Greg Woolf, 403.
9. Nock, *Conversion*, 161.
10. Vogt, *The Decline of Rome*, 34.
11. Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor* (New York: Random House, 2007), 269.
12. Anthony A. Barrett, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 140.
13. Southern, *Domitian*, 45.
14. Vogt, *The Decline of Rome*, 73.
15. Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (London: Continuum, 1999), 247.
16. Hekster, *Rome and Its Empire*, 77.
17. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 397, 398.
18. Ibid., 106.
19. McLynn, *Marcus Aurelius*, 264.
20. Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, 198.
21. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*?, 113–14.
22. McLynn, *Marcus Aurelius*, 228.
23. Alberto Angela, *A Day in the Life of Ancient Rome: Daily Life, Mysteries, and Curiosities* (New York: Europa Editions, 2009), 126.
24. Vogt, *The Decline of Rome*, 121.
25. Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2013), 17.
26. Biblical references are all from the *International Standard Version of the Bible*.
27. Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, 5.
28. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 107.
29. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, 10.
30. Donald Harman Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeletal Key to the Historical Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 76.
31. Nock, *Conversion*, 9–10.
32. See Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 60–61.
33. Donald Harman Akenson, *Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 214.
34. Charles Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 160.
35. Averil Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity* (Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2014), 56, 55.
36. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery*, 167.
37. Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45.
38. Ibid., 53.
39. See Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39–40.
40. Vogt, *The Decline of Rome*, 266.

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41. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, 113.
42. Robert G. Hoyland, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 196.
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44. Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, 253.
45. Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter*, 42.
46. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion*, 510.
47. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution*, 129.
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49. Moorhead, *Justinian*, 25.
50. Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 230.
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53. Freeman, *A New History of Early Christianity*, 232.
54. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 2000), 236.
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Conclusion

Marching in Place

The idea of progress was less a doctrine than an article of faith. It expressed the hope and conviction that historical changes in the realms of knowledge, technology, social institutions, the arts, and so on were in the grand scheme of things for the betterment of humanity. History was on the march; a great emancipation had at last been achieved over medieval backwardness, the knowledge of the ancients, such as it was, had been retained and refined, and the perfectibility of humankind had become an attainable goal. A spirit of self-confident optimism accompanied the emergence of early modern science and philosophy and in time became virtually synonymous with the modern outlook. Any demand for evidence had something indecent about it. Only pessimists could challenge it, and did—romantics like Rousseau who could be dismissed as nostalgics or the occasional intellectual (Hume, Nietzsche) who could be written off as gloomy eccentrics. Progress was an attitude and a sense of life, and while it spoke the language of science and philosophy its evidentiary basis consisted largely in a selective highlighting of modern achievements combined with flights of speculation of which Hegel was the great master.

The idea itself was not of scientific but of religious inspiration. We have traced it to Augustine, and its prehistory could be traced further to both the New and Old Testaments. The Greeks had no part of it, being curiously wedded to a cyclical view of history which retained its hold through the Roman era. By late antiquity the Greek view seemed to lack hope, or the kind of it that Christianity now promised. The coming of the messiah had occasioned a radically new conception of history. Sacred history was purposive, teleological, and optimistic, and by early modern times it had become some-

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thing of an axiom, but on condition that it be secularized and applied no longer to sacred but to real history. Hegel, Marx, and the progressivists were all working in the tradition of Augustine, even while the ideology had changed, and cultural evolutionists would follow suit. Many of the latter saw progress to the door only for it to return through the back way, and we were back to an acceptably scientific Augustinianism.

World-historical optimism and pessimism alike are interpretive anticipations far more than either attitude is grounded in the phenomena. Those with a penchant for decline and fall narratives can find much in the historical record to confirm their belief, and the reverse is no less true. The history of any time and place, if it is populated by human beings, is on the move, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly, but nothing human stands still and merely is what it is. It is in motion—optimists will say advancing, on the march, but if it is marching then it is marching in place. Great sound and fury at times, but for all the commotion the larger picture that emerges shows enormous repetition and a play of forces that is about as teleological as the rise and fall of the tides. In a way, the ancients had it right: the great model of historical change is indeed nature. The endless back and forth of generation and corruption, life and death, daybreak and nightfall, and the cyclical rhythm of the natural world combined with its boundless complexity affords at least a rough model of historical variation when viewed in the large. *Sui generis* happenings are nowhere to be seen. The Greek miracle was more like a series of repetitions and appropriations, a great gathering of ideas and cultural elements from far and wide, most of them old but newly synthesized and turned to a relatively novel set of purposes. That is not a miracle; nothing appeared from out of the blue, very little was brought to an end, and enormous continuity may be seen even while we admire the scale of their achievement. Much the same may be said of the ostensible decline of the ancient world as of its birth. The end of the Roman era saw no utter collapse but a gradual transformation and transition into a relatively new set of circumstances which again preserved more of the old order than it swept away. No discreet historical agent sprang from the forehead of Zeus at the outset of the classical period, lived several storied centuries and finally expired of glorious old age in the year 476. This is a fable, but it is a fable with an impressive pedigree and which retains a powerful hold on the modern mind.

Our analysis of the major transitional periods that were archaic Greece and late antique Europe revealed no rise and fall narrative but one of organic continuity and kaleidoscopic variation on themes that recur in an endless array of forms. The sea of particulars does evince a semblance of universality provided that any comprehensive view remains an impressionistic play of grey upon grey. Discreet stages and periods are nowhere to be found, even while many continue to presuppose divisions that are artificial and betray an

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unmistakable partisanship for the present. The ancient, medieval, modern triad itself ought at long last to be dispensed with as it is dubiously normative and continues to assume that the present historical moment is the apex and the measure of all things. The notion that world history can be divided like a hockey game into three periods, separated by transitional centuries which every century can be described as, is more than a simplification; it is a distortion and a secularization of a theological idea that retains traces of its origin. There is no subtracting teleology from this triad, and modern iterations of the kingdom of God ought to go the way of the golden age. All of these belong to the same family of ideas, and if historians cannot work without some conception of periodicity it need not be one that is quite as simplistic and self-congratulatory.

Historical interpretation, like all interpretation, requires a conceptual nomenclature which it is the task of the philosophy of history to provide. Bare particulars defy understanding and historical events are no exception. In the aftermath of Hegel, Comte, Marx, Spengler, and company, many historians are justifiably skeptical of the kind of services philosophy can provide to their discipline, and our aim in this study has not been to follow in their wake but to articulate a non-progressive account of change which is faithful to the things themselves, one that does not forswear universality but finds it at work in the pages of history, some general notions that are not causal regularities but recurring themes and tendencies that reflect the beings who animate history. Speculation in the spirit of apriorism, idealism, or pseudo-science is well lost, but an anti-theoretic reaction is no victory for rigor but a formula for misunderstanding. The position we have defended is intermediate between a prophetic universalism and a hard-nosed particularism that jettisons general notions altogether. It seeks not causal explanations but hermeneutical interpretations which are grounded in the phenomena and do not lose sight of the interpreter's own participation in history. The purpose of a philosophy of history of this kind is to illuminate meanings and larger trajectories that belong to the past and to the present no less and which define the historian's own standpoint. One inquires into history from no place outside it and searches for interconnections and rough patterns which shed a light that is never more than partial.

We can agree with Karl Jaspers' statement that "[t]he purpose of an overall philosophical view of history . . . is to illuminate our own situation within the totality of history. It serves to light up the consciousness of the present epoch and shows us where we stand," provided we qualify this.[1] Historical self-understanding is possible only with constant reference to the past, or to particular chapters of it that show some vital connection to "where we stand." Understanding our historical others and ourselves is one unified process, even while the former is the immediate object of inquiry. History is about the past, but it is a living past which claims, interrogates, and consti-

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tutes us even as we seek to know it in his otherness. The past does not leave us; at times it is forgotten—the consequence of which is a dangerous absence of self-knowledge—but its blood still runs in our veins. Philosophical history is Janus-faced, looking continually backward and at "the present epoch" with all its vicissitudes and anticipations simultaneously, even while the past always retains a certain authority. It is the latter that we wish to know, and the present by its reflected light. Knowing either is impossible in a conceptual vacuum. "If we speak of a philosophy of history," as Dilthey expressed it, "that can only mean historical research which has a philosophical bent and makes use of philosophical resources," where these resources are synthesizing concepts that are decidedly less grand of scale than what an Augustine or a Hegel spoke of while affording some larger perspective on historical life.[2] No grandiose logic is to be found here, however if we are to rise above the chaos of random particulars we need some conceptual resources to accomplish this, and Part I of this study attempted to outline such a nomenclature before bringing this to bear upon an analysis of two of the most noteworthy turning points in the history of the west.

Neither of these transitional periods can be described as a discrete interim between two stable states for stability is a relative value which no century other has or lacks. Every period can be and has been described as a transitional period, and with reason. It is an episode in a narrative that is without beginning and end but that does contain relative turns in the road which are sometimes visible only in retrospect. The "beginnings" of democracy, science, and philosophy were not and likely were not experienced as great caesuras but as organic developments, and the same may be said of "endings." Narrating such events goes beyond simple chronology to an imaginatively synthesized arrangement of happenings, characters, meanings, forces, relations, and interconnections which hang together in any number of ways. Some kind of organizing scheme is imperative here, and if it is to be useful then it must issue from a perspective wide enough to encompass a good number of particulars but not so wide as to lose contact with them. Any organizing concepts must stay close to the ground, and if historians are often wary of the attempt, this is well understandable, but it remains that historical interpretation is conceptual and theory-laden whether we choose to take account of this fact or not.

Jaspers was one of innumerable writers who over the last century or more have spoken of the historical present as an age of transition, although if we are being strict the question of "into what" remains unanswerable. The impossibility of prognostication with any claim to knowledge has not stopped many from making the attempt. A couple of well-known examples are Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington. The former's penchant for "end of history" talk in the tradition of Hegel and Marx assumes a politically conservative form with a decided note of post-Cold-War triumphalism, while the

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latter speaks of the "clash of civilizations" or cultures as the next stage into which humanity as a whole is ostensibly moving. Here again is history in the grand style, and indeed a history of the future. Texts like *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) and *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) are simultaneously historical and political and, as is so often the case when this description applies, the latter far more than the former. Pronouncements of this order, whether they issue from the left or the right, are more polemical than historical, their main point being to add a note of world-historical gravitas to an analysis that is essentially ideological. Claims that we have reached a new stage of history, still more the final one, one that includes winners and losers—and the claimants never place themselves in the latter category—are a secular reiteration of the claim that God is on our side. If He is dead, history lives, and it has a political agenda that beautifully dovetails with our own. Not just the present phase but what Fukuyama calls "history as such" (and it is far from evident what this could mean) is at an end; the conservative counterpart to the classless society is here, and the future can only be an extended victory party. The left varies the theme only slightly. Thus, Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History* (2012) is a clarion call for the rebirth of the left—a synonym for history itself, according to him—and its revolutionary spirit. These claims are echoed by politicians and activists of various stripes who continually claim history as an ally, and unless an unseen prophet has whispered into the ears of their claimants such assertions are equally preposterous. The faith of the progressivists lives on in a myriad of forms, from the overtly political to the scientific, technological, economic, and various other manifestations. Cultural evolutionists defend still another variation, and on and on it goes.

A related phenomenon finds some observers attempting a direct reversal of progressivism by invoking a notion of cultural decline which they claim to perceive in either some particular dimension of culture or modern times more generally. This curious view has had many defenders for a couple of centuries now, including many artists—often among the more astute critics of their times—philosophers, historians, and social commentators, and given some of the names on this list and also its length it is a judgment we should not quickly dismiss. If the modern zeitgeist remains wedded to some form of progressivism, it also includes a generous admixture of its apparent antithesis and sometimes nostalgia, if not for a golden age then for some vision of the past from the perspective of which the historical present is regarded as a deterioration. Historical self-understanding here finds a counterpart to the kind of myth that generations often tell about themselves as well as their predecessors and successors; *après nous, le déluge*, as this familiar story has it. Here again is a partisanship and a faith, and whether the golden age is asserted to lie in the past, present, or future matters little. The notion of cultural decline is to progress what many a view going by the name of anti-

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_______ism is to whatever fills in the blank, which is less the radical negation it often conceives itself to be than a moon orbiting the same planet it wishes to discredit. Progressivists and anti-progressivists are equally selective in their attention to the past and present, and what needs to be questioned is what guides the selection. Critical attention to any period reveals shortcomings that are real and numerous; the difficulty is that the anti-progressivist, however incisive their judgments of the present can often be, typically fails to subject the past to an equally careful analysis and the resulting judgment shares the same one-sidedness as the progressivist position. Nietzsche, to take an important example of this, was perhaps the foremost cultural physician of his time, and the avalanche of criticism that he directed toward his own nineteenth century regularly hit the mark—yet toward the ancient Greek culture that he in many respects idolized he was insufficiently critical, and the pedestal on which he placed it (or aspects of it) goes some way toward explaining his diagnosis of cultural decline. For every "*après nous*," we must always ask how critical of the *nous* the speaker has been.

The temptation to complete sentences that begin with some variant of "We are moving into an age when," "We continue to progress toward," or "We are evolving into" should be resisted, impressive as such constructions are. This kind of talk is often political or aspirational, an expression of either hope or foreboding, and while it can have a purpose it falls inevitably short of knowledge and usually well short. We ought to acknowledge frankly that we do not know where this Gogolian troika is heading, only where it has been and something of its speed and trajectory—and while trajectories tend to persist, the only necessity in history is that which is a function of our biology. Gogol answered his insistent question, "And where do you fly to?" as follows: "She doesn't answer. The carriage bells break into an enchanted tinkling, the air is torn to shreds and turns into wind; everything on earth flashes past, and, casting worried, sidelong glances, other nations and countries step out of her way."[3] She, of course, was Russia, and she did not answer because she could not. Historians of the *longue durée* are not prophets but at best notetakers of thematic regularities or, if the phrase is not too grand, cultural physicians à la Nietzsche. That thinker too believed he was living in a transitional era symbolized by the "death of God" or the world-historical decline of the absolute in all its forms, the consequences of which would take centuries to work out, and that this was detectable by means of an idiosyncratic form of historical interpretation. On a less eccentric reading, we may well characterize the historical present in certain general terms, as evidenced by various undercurrents, watchwords, and signs of the times of which we see countless manifestations: science, technology, instrumental rationality, utilitarian institutions, information economy, corporate democracy, existential anxiety, and, of course, globalization, much of which Nietzsche did manage to foresee. A worldview and a way of life are contained in these terms, and a

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progressivist ethos continues to animate them. In a globalized world, Oakeshott's conversation of humankind assumes a new aspect and scale, and its shadow still accompanies it.

When we subtract the prejudices that quickly come to the fore when questions of "the present epoch" arise (progressivism, triumphalism, nationalism), the question "Where are you racing to?" is indeed approachable so long as we exercise an abundance of caution and keep one eye on the past. Where we have been is in the midst of a narrative stretching about as far back as we care to look in which, apart from natural events, developments do not appear out of nowhere, repetitions and reiterations abound, power and persuasion continue their incessant dialectic, and changes large and small resemble nothing so much as variations on themes the likes of which we have seen before in the endless manifold. It is a story without apexes and collapses, forward marches and retreats, rising and falling, end times or any comparable notion, but that is modified organically, as a forest may be analyzed into an array of mutually interacting parts while remaining a single forest. The story of humanity is comprised of virtually unlimited chapters, each in permanent need of rewriting, leading nowhere that any eye can see. Nietzsche diagnosed its current installment as nihilism and the death of the absolute, yet whether it has died or been rechristened is open to question. The constellation of modern science, technology, and rationality appears as prominent in the heavens as any premodern deity ever did—with a difference, undoubtedly, and differences ought never to be minimized, but the current constellation is as alternative-less as any medieval or ancient worldview ever was. It predominates utterly and globally. The conversation of humanity and its shadow have taken us here, and any Nietzsche who would question it is the Julian the Apostate of our time. A system of interlocution can resemble a steamroller, and globalization is its present name.

This is not a condemnation but an interpretation of the present historical moment, simplified to the extreme. These signs of the times are often asserted to be unprecedented, and to see that they are not we need not only to cast a backward glance but to look beneath the surface of current affairs in the way that any cultural physician would attempt. One unusually astute observer has spoken of "our technological civilization" as capable of "reawakening consciousness of solidarity" and of an emerging "humanity that slowly begins to know itself as humanity"; the author is Gadamer and his point about the deep human need for solidarity was both phenomenological and aspirational.[4] Conversation of humanity talk has a certain validity as long as we speak of any truly global interlocutionary network as an aspiration of whose dark side we do not lose sight. Interlocution is agonistic at the best of times and readily turns into its opposite; we have seen this dynamic before and can almost venture that a global civilization will resemble neither a dialogical utopia nor anything quite as crude as a "clash of civilizations."

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We must not imagine an identitarian variant of a Hobbesian state of nature but again a forest of organically interrelated parts, some of which clash directly while most exhibit a complex integration and mutual dependency. Whether we speak of knowledge, culture, art, religion, or politics, conversational networks have reached a scale that renders virtually any localism obsolete, globalism having replaced it without altering the dynamics. These networks do not emanate from a center but are multi-nodal, multidimensional, and overlapping. New Romes proliferate, but let us remember that Rome itself (the real one) was a center not in every way but administratively-militarily, while the empire was characterized by considerable internal diversity and attained whatever level of unity that it did through a combination of factors ranging from military power to higher culture. All roads led to Rome only in a sense and to a degree, and in a globalized world this has not fundamentally changed. Notions of an "American empire," western European/American empire perhaps, or some other candidate for a contemporary center are dubious; again we are speaking of a centerless network with a diversity of nodal points scattered worldwide and of a multitude of elements—knowledge, art, culture, economics, politics, etc., all in a multitude of forms—that intersect and interpenetrate without cascading out from any headquarters. Rome was held together by force and by ideas—these two, in constant combination, and it would be little exaggeration to assert that the two were not two at all. A "humanity that knows itself as humanity" while exhibiting a tendency to "clash" is nothing new under the sun, and where it is flying to bears more than passing resemblance to where it has been. The themes of which we have spoken—contingency, interlocution, reiteration, legitimation, predominance—and the constant toing and froing between them are with us still, as undercurrents visible not far from the surface of events and in a never-ending series of forms. We step into the same river not twice but infinitely, and in an infinite number of ways. If we are living in an age when one worldview predominates, we have seen this phenomenon before, and any "death of God" or decline of absolute worldviews, like "the king is dead," has been known to presage the second half of a sentence.

In Chapter 1 we cited J. B. Bury's statement that "the Progress of humanity belongs to the same order of ideas as Providence or personal immortality" in the sense that "[i]t is true or it is false, and like them it cannot be proved either true or false." We can say the same of some related notions, all of which resemble confessions of faith more than hypotheses: the end times, the end of history, cultural deterioration, dark ages, golden ages, stages and periods, decline and fall. Theorizing historical change within this general family of concepts or nomenclature says more about the storyteller than the story and most often becomes an exercise in sheer partisanism for a particular historical time and place and often enough in speculative castle building. It follows not that all historical theorizing is at an end but that our theoretical

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flights must remain in sight of the particulars on which our universals come to bear. Human history in general is characterized by boundless complexity, and any philosophical understanding of it must go some way toward matching this. If teleology and reverse teleology will not do, what might is a conceptual scheme that arises from the real world of historical inquiry. We have gone back to antiquity for this reason: walking down roads—the more, the better—in the social, political, and intellectual history of the transitional periods that were "the birth and death of ancient civilization" reveals, if anything does, something like a logic of historical change—one that forswears both universalist apriorism and an anti-theoretic particularism, and that sees in the larger sweep of history an incessant back and forth of forces that are fundamental to the kind of beings that we are.

According to Hegel, the only alternative to teleology is a meaningless chronicle of "one damn thing after another," where the historian is limited to immediate perception and change is unintelligible. That this is a false choice was not lost on Nietzsche, for whom history's apex lay in ancient Greece and the larger sweep is one manifestation of the will to power after another, some of them nobler than others but all of it leading to a modernity that is not a culmination but an era of disillusionment which he hoped might lead to a more life-affirming future. Following Nietzsche, Foucault saw history as a directionless series of power/knowledge configurations, "regimes of truth" that never lack a political dimension. Progressivists continue to read authors like these last two as pessimists, but it is better to view optimism and pessimism alike not as indicated by the evidence but projections governing its selection. All three writers had a point: understanding historical change, as Hegel correctly pointed out, requires that we look up from the sea of particulars yet, as Nietzsche and Foucault forcefully argued, without teleological naivety and while having an eye for clashing forces among which none is more prominent than the struggle for power. An historical period is an idealization and a simplification, and it transitions into another as summer turns into fall, which is continuously and organically, with repetition and a cyclicality in which the ancients firmly believed. If the frequently expressed claim that "we are at a turning-point in history" contains a share of truth, it is true in the way that an episode in a narrative foreshadows another.[5] Gogol's troika is on the move—but when was it not, and does the current stretch of steppe not bear an uncanny resemblance to what preceded and might be anticipated to follow it? Its pace has likely quickened, but its trajectory changes in the manner of Nietzsche's eternal hourglass. The relation between our historical past and present is internal, and if the modern outlook regards this as pessimistic, this is owing to its own hubris.

We interpret history from the thick of historical life, and an effort to conceptualize change from this perspective might stem from the familiar observation that "it is ideas," in the words of Victor Hugo, ". . . that move the

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world."[6] Indeed they do; Oakeshott's conversation of humankind or what I have called the phenomenon of interlocution has been a driving force of change through the millennia, even while it has not done so in a vacuum or apart from its abstract antithesis. The activity and expansion of interlocutionary networks and the relentless drive for predominance are opposites only in theory. In historical reality the two are as poles of a single continuum between which is an endless dialectic and play of forces, temporary ascendancies and recurring fragments of narrative leading in the larger scheme of things in no discernible direction. History, as the ancients well understood, does repeat itself and never in the same way twice. Enduring regularities from the drive for knowledge to the will to power are novel reiterations far more than simple repetitions, an ebbing and flowing that is far removed from any simple morality tale. These two always already intend one another, and the resulting cyclicality is neither "hopeless" nor divisible into a tidy sequence of stages. No basis for prognostication or judgments of inevitability and linearity exists, and if any single principle stands beneath the manifold of historical particulars, it is contingency alone. The goddess Fortuna presides over an infinite march that leads nowhere but to more of the same.

NOTES

1. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 81.
2. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, eds. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, trans. Michael Neville (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 141.
3. Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 278.
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Boston: MIT Press, 1983), 86.
5. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 232. He writes in the same text, with much disquiet, "It is the Age of Technology, which seems to leave nothing standing of what man has acquired in the course of millennia in the way of methods of work, forms of life, modes of thought and symbols" (96).
6. Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Penguin, 1985), 823.

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