

Part II



**The Not-So-Dark Ages
(500-1200)**

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The Blessings of Disunity

In response to the long-prevailing absurdities about how the fall of Rome plunged Europe into the “Dark Ages,” some historians now propose that very little happened after the Western Empire collapsed—that the “world of Late Antiquity,” as Peter Brown has identified the era from 150 to 750,¹ was one of slow transformation. Brown is, of course, correct that the history of these centuries can be told “without invoking an intervening catastrophe and without pausing, for a moment, to pay lip service to the widespread notion of decay.”² But to deny decay does not require the denial of change.

The fall of Rome was, in fact, the most beneficial event in the rise of Western civilization, precisely because it unleashed so many substantial and progressive changes.

This chapter will examine the dramatic progress that began after Roman unity fell apart. Europe in this era was blessed with lasting disunity; periodic efforts to reestablish empires failed. Disunity enabled extensive, small-scale social experimentation and unleashed creative competition among hundreds of independent political units, which, in turn, resulted in rapid and profound progress. Thus, just as the Greek “miracle” arose from disunity, so too “European civilization . . . owes its origins and *raison d’être* to political anarchy,” as Nobel Prize winner F. A. Hayek explained.³

Not surprisingly, most of the early innovations and inventions came in agriculture. Soon most medieval Europeans ate better than had any

common people in history, and consequently they grew larger and stronger than people elsewhere.⁴ They also harnessed water and wind power to a revolutionary extent. In addition, faced with constant warfare among themselves, medieval Europeans excelled at inventing and adopting new military technology and tactics, all of them consistent with the Western principles of warfare initiated by the ancient Greeks. In 732, when Muslim invaders drove into Gaul, they encountered an army of superbly armed and trained Franks and were destroyed. Subsequently, the Franks conquered most of Europe and installed a new emperor. Fortunately, the whole thing soon fell apart and Europe's creative disunity was reestablished.

The Myth of the Dark Ages

Belief in the Dark Ages remains so persistent that it seems appropriate to begin this chapter by quickly revealing that this is a myth made up by eighteenth-century intellectuals determined to slander Christianity and to celebrate their own sagacity.⁵

It has long been the "informed" opinion that after the fall of Rome came many centuries during which ascendant Christianity imposed an era of ignorance and superstition all across Europe. In her long-admired study of medieval philosophers, *The Age of Belief* (1954), Anne Fremantle wrote of "a dark, dismal patch, a sort of dull and dirty chunk of some ten centuries."⁶ Fremantle's assertion merely echoed the anti-Christian fulminations of various eighteenth-century dissenters. Voltaire described the era following Rome as one when "barbarism, superstition, [and] ignorance covered the face of the world."⁷ According to Rousseau, "Europe had relapsed into the barbarism of the earliest ages. The people of this part of the world . . . lived some centuries ago in a condition worse than ignorance."⁸ Edward Gibbon called the fall of Rome the "triumph of barbarism and religion."⁹

More recently, Bertrand Russell, writing in the illustrated edition of his famous college textbook (1959), declared: "As the central authority of Rome decayed, the lands of the Western Empire began to sink into an era of barbarism during which Europe suffered a general cultural decline. The Dark Ages, as they are called."¹⁰ In 1991 Charles Van Doren earned praise for his book *A History of Knowledge*, in which he noted

that the fall of Rome had “plunged Europe into a Dark Age that lasted for five hundred years.” It was an age of “rapine and death,” since “there was little law except that of force.” Worse yet, “life had become hard, with most people dependent on what they could scratch with their hands from the earth around their homes.”¹¹ Van Doren blamed Christianity for prolonging this dismal era by disdaining consumption and the material world while celebrating poverty and urging contentment.¹² In 1993 the highly respected historian William Manchester summed up his views of the period “AD 400 and AD 1000” in his book title: *A World Lit Only by Fire*. He dismissed those who no longer believed in the Dark Ages on grounds that “most of what is known about the period is unlovely. . . . The portrait that emerges is a mélange of incessant warfare, corruption, lawlessness, obsession with strange myths, and an almost impenetrable mindlessness.”¹³

Nevertheless, serious historians have known for decades that these claims are a *complete fraud*. Even the respectable encyclopedias and dictionaries now define the Dark Ages as a myth. *The Columbia Encyclopedia* rejects the term, noting that “medieval civilization is no longer thought to have been so dim.” *Britannica* disdains the name Dark Ages as “pejorative.” And *Wikipedia* defines the Dark Ages as “a supposed period of intellectual darkness after the fall of Rome.” These views are easily verified.

There may have been some serious, but short-lived, dislocations associated with the collapse of Roman rule and the organization of new local political units. But the myth of the Dark Ages posits many centuries of ignorant misery based on four primary factors: (1) most cities were abandoned and fell into ruin; (2) trade collapsed, throwing local communities onto their own, very limited resources; (3) literacy all but disappeared; and (4) the standard of living of the average person fell to a bare subsistence level.

It is true that Roman cities and towns declined greatly in number and size after the fall of Rome. The population of the city of Rome dropped from about five hundred thousand in the year 400 to about fifty thousand in 600. Of 372 Roman cities in Italy listed by Pliny, a third disappeared soon after the fall.¹⁴ Many towns and cities in Gaul and Britain “became like ghost towns, with small populations,” according to Roger Osborne in *Civilization*.¹⁵ All told, most of the empire’s estimated 2,000 “cities” (mostly towns) suffered this fate.¹⁶

But these changes did not mean that the West had slid into backwardness. The truth is that most Roman cities no longer served any purpose. They had been funded by the state and existed only for governing: for collecting taxes, administering local rule, and quartering troops. As Osborne noted, “they were centres of consumption, not production, and had no autonomous reason for existence.”¹⁷ In contrast, the towns that arose or survived in post-Roman Europe were centers of trade and manufacturing—as were the many towns in the “barbarian” North, which continued to flourish. The towns and cities of this new era tended not to be large, because there were no state subsidies to pay for daily distributions of free food and entertainment for idle masses. Those people “now were not fed at all unless they made shift to feed themselves,” as the historian A. R. Bridbury put it.¹⁸

Surely this was a major change. Just as surely, it was not decay.

With the demise of the fabulously rich Roman elite, the luxury trade bringing exotic food, jewels, and cloth from distant sources may have declined. But proponents of the Dark Ages myth propose that *all* forms of trade soon disappeared: in Van Doren’s words, “the roads were empty of travelers and freight.”¹⁹ But it wasn’t so—there was far more European trade *after* the fall. For one thing, although the Romans transported a lot of goods, it wasn’t really trade but merely “a traffic in rent and tribute,” in Robin Williams-McClanahan’s apt phrase.²⁰ Coins and precious metals, food, slaves, and luxury goods flowed to Rome; little came back except tax collectors and soldiers. As Bridbury explained, Roman trade “did not generate income, it simply impoverished those from whom it was extorted.”²¹ Second, long before the fall of Rome the “barbarian” areas had established very active, dense, long-distance trade networks,²² and these not only survived but soon were extended south and westward. Post-Roman Europe sustained busy trade networks dealing in practical things such as iron tools and weapons, pottery, glassware, and woolens. Most of these items were well within the means of ordinary people, and some of the goods traveled several thousand miles.²³

“Everyone” knows that the fall of Rome soon resulted in an age of illiteracy. No doubt most people in the post-Roman world were unable to read or write. But this was nothing new: literacy was probably below 5 percent during the days of the empire as well.²⁴ It also is true that after the fall, fewer people wrote in Latin or Greek—since they did not speak them either. Meanwhile, many of the “barbarian” tongues already were,

or soon became, written languages. For example, written Gothic dates from the fourth century and Old English from about the fifth.

As for the average person's standard of living, it is true that the state no longer subsidized food or made daily free distributions of bread, olive oil, and wine. But studies based on isotopic analysis of skeletons have found that people in the so-called Dark Ages ate very well, getting lots of meat, and as a result they grew larger than people had during the days of the empire.²⁵

Finally, the Germanic North had already been "Romanized," even though it lay outside the empire. The historian Alfons Dopsch demonstrated that by the end of the first century the Germanic societies "had acquired most of the attributes of a fully articulated economic civilisation, including the use of coinage and the dependence on trade."²⁶ Moreover, when the Goths and Franks and other Germanic peoples took up residence in the empire, or later in what had been parts of the empire, they quickly assimilated. Thus it is that nowhere in modern Europe does anyone speak Frankish or Gothic. Instead, millions speak French, Spanish, and Italian—the Romance languages, which are, of course, merely "low" forms of Latin. This shift occurred very early.

What *did* decline during the so-called Dark Ages were literary pursuits. Manchester expressed the common theme: "Intellectual life had vanished from Europe."²⁷ In fact, little writing on any subject survives. As a result, echoing generations of scholars, the famous nineteenth-century artist Howard Pyle could complain, "Few records remain to us of that dreadful period in our world's history, and we only know of it through broken and disjointed fragments."²⁸ Although some writing from that era may have been lost, it appears that far less was written for several centuries after the fall of Rome than before or since.

Why? In large part because the wealthy leisure class inherent in the parasitical nature of the imperial system had fallen away. Under the empire, the immense wealth drained from the provinces had sustained the idle rich in Rome. When this flow of tribute disappeared, so did the leisure class. There ended up being far fewer persons who did not need to work for their livings and who had the leisure to devote themselves to writing and other "nonproductive" enterprises. It was a few centuries before the reappearance of persons free to produce artistic and literary works.

For generations of scholars, that alone was sufficient to call an era

“dark,” even if it was abundant in new technology—which these scholars probably would not have noticed in any event.

The Geography of Disunity

The map of medieval Europe’s independent political units looks remarkably like a map of primitive cultures occupying this same area in 3000 BC.²⁹ That is because the geography proved inimical to unification. Europe was, in E. L. Jones’s words, “a scatter of regions of high arable potential set in a continent of wastes and forests.”³⁰ Unlike China or India, it was not one large plain but a multitude of fertile valleys surrounded by mountains and dense forests, each often serving as the core area of an independent state. Only a few sizable plains, such as those surrounding Paris and London, could easily sustain larger political units; the rest of the political units that developed were tiny—*statelets* is the appropriate term. We lack sufficient information to count the states and statelets of the early post-Roman period, but as late as the fourteenth century there were more than a thousand independent units spread across Europe.³¹ Even today there are more than thirty.

Europe’s geographic barriers created not only many political units but cultural and linguistic diversity too, which also impeded efforts at unification. It should be remembered that Rome was able to impose its rule on far less than half of Europe—only the area southwest of the Rhine and the Danube Rivers. Even in Britain, Hadrian’s Wall separated the Roman area from that of the northern tribes. Within the empire, the Mediterranean substituted for a great plain facilitating central control from Rome. That is, Rome was essentially a waterfront empire encircling the great inland sea, and most Roman travel and trade was by boat. It is doubtful that the Romans could have controlled either Spain or the Levant had the legions been required to invade and supply themselves entirely by land. And once Rome fell, both areas splintered back into many small units.

Unlike Rome, however, most of Europe did not depend on the Mediterranean for waterborne tradeways. It had an immense advantage over Asia and Africa because of what Jones called “an abnormally high ratio of navigable routeways to surface area, which was a function of a long indented coastline and many navigable rivers.”³²

Migrations and Disunity

Our knowledge of the migrations of various groups into and across Europe is a confused mess. Most of the groups left no written accounts of their movements; the Roman reports are often wrong and almost always biased; modern archaeology has challenged a lot of what we thought we knew.

For example, every British schoolchild knows about the invasion of the Angles and Saxons, two related Germanic peoples who arrived in England during the fifth century and took over, as demonstrated by the fact that their language (Old English) soon dominated. In fact, the word *England* means “land of the Angles.” The Anglo-Saxons’ arrival in England and their rise to power is carefully attested by the Venerable Bede (672–735) in his esteemed *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

But archaeologists now challenge the claim that a substantial Anglo-Saxon migration took place.³³ As archaeology professor Peter S. Wells has documented, isotope studies of skeletons in what everyone has regarded as Anglo-Saxon cemeteries show “consistently that the individuals, whom earlier investigators would have interpreted as immigrants from the continent, were in fact local people.” Anthropologists now believe that the famous migrations “rarely, if ever, involved the large numbers that many accounts indicate, especially in western and northern Europe.” Instead, it now is believed that “small groups of elites, often with bands of their loyal warriors, sometimes moved from one region to another and quickly asserted their power over the peoples into whose land they moved.”³⁴ That is, after the arrival of elite groups of Angles and Saxons, most people in England *became* Anglo-Saxons—or at least their descendants soon did.³⁵

Obviously there were various “barbarian” groups on the borders of the Roman Empire. Obviously, too, many of these groups were large enough to pose a serious threat to Roman areas. And clearly some of them did enter the empire in large numbers as Roman rule faltered—the Ostrogoths and Visigoths, for example. But in the post-Roman period, it is difficult to know whether large groups, or only elites, were involved in migrations. During the fifth century, did great Frankish migrations occur into northern Gaul, or did Frankish warrior elites simply carve out many small kingdoms populated by locals? Whatever the case, cultural diversity increased dramatically, which increased disunity.

The proliferation of European political units had several important consequences. First, it tended to make for weak rulers. Second, it offered people some opportunity to depart for a setting more desirable in terms of liberty or opportunity.³⁶ Finally, it provided for creative competition.

Technological Progress

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually “one of the great innovative eras of mankind,” in Jean Gimpel’s words. During this period technology was developed and put into use “on a scale no civilization had previously known.”³⁷ It was during the supposed Dark Ages that Europe took the great technological and intellectual leaps forward that put it ahead of the rest of the world.³⁸ The illustrious French historian Georges Duby pointed out that this was an era “of sustained growth” in the West, while in the surviving Eastern Empire it “was one of decay.”³⁹

The Agricultural Revolution

Long before the fall of Rome, the “barbarians” beyond the Rhine had invented a plow with an iron blade that was so much more effective than the one the Romans used that it resulted in a population explosion.⁴⁰ In several generations the Goths and others needed to expand their territories—with the results recounted in chapter 3. Soon after the fall of Rome, this plow was made even more effective as part of a revolution in farming methods.

Farmers in the Roman Empire depended on the scratch plow, which was nothing but a set of digging sticks arranged in rows. Scratch plows do not turn the soil but are simply dragged over the surface, leaving undisturbed soil between shallow furrows. This is not effective even for the dry, thin soils of southern Europe, and it is very unsatisfactory for the heavy, damp soils further north. The Germanic tribes rectified this problem by devising a plow with a heavy share (blade) that would dig a deep furrow. They added a second share at an angle to cut off the slice of turf being turned over by the first share. Then they created a moldboard to fully turn over the slice of turf. Finally, wheels were added to help move the plow from one field to another and to allow plowing at different depths. The fully developed heavy plow is known to have existed by the fifth century.⁴¹

With this new plow, land that the Romans could not farm at all became productive. Even on thinner soil, crop yields were nearly doubled by improved plowing alone. Shortly thereafter the harrow was invented, an implement consisting of a frame and teeth that is dragged over a plowed field to further break up the clods.⁴²

The post-Roman era also brought greatly increased speed. Neither the Romans nor anyone else knew how to harness horses effectively for pulling. Horses were usually harnessed the same way as were oxen, which put the pressure on the horse's neck, with the result that a horse could pull only light loads without its strangling. Then, perhaps in the ninth century, a rigid, well-padded horse collar appeared in Scandinavia (possibly brought from China). It placed the weight of pulling on the horse's shoulders instead of neck, enabling a horse to pull even more weight than an ox could. Since horses could also pull such a load much faster than oxen, farmers using horses could plow more than twice as much land in a day. In addition, harnesses were modified so that two-horse teams could be placed in columns to increase pulling power. Farmers quickly made the switch to horses, whose productivity had already improved thanks to the earlier invention of iron horseshoes nailed to the hoof, probably made in Gaul during the fifth century. Horseshoes not only protected the hoof from wear and tear but also improved the horse's traction.

If this weren't enough, during the eighth century farmers stopped wearing out their land by constant planting. Instead, they adopted a system that divided their land into three plots—one planted in the fall (grain), one planted in the spring (of legumes such as peas and beans, or vegetables), and the third allowed to lie fallow (unplanted) and kept weed free, often by allowing livestock to graze on it, thus contributing fertilizer. The next year the plot that had been fallow was planted in the fall, the one that had been planted in the fall was planted in the spring, and the one that had been planted in the spring was allowed to be fallow. This, too, resulted in much greater production and more efficient use of labor, since plowing, sowing, and harvesting were spread more evenly around the calendar.

This agricultural revolution meant that most people in the medieval West ate far better than had all but the wealthy Romans. As a result, compared with the average Roman (or the average person elsewhere in the world), the average medieval European was healthier, more energetic, and probably more intelligent, since malnutrition stunts the brain as well

as the body. In addition, the dramatic increase in the food supply sustained a long period of population growth.⁴³

Wind and Water Power

Only after the fall of Rome did there arise economies that depended primarily on nonhuman power.⁴⁴ The Romans understood water power but, as noted, could see no reason to exploit it because they had slaves to perform needed tasks. By the ninth century, however, an inventory found that one-third of the estates along the River Seine in the area around Paris had water mills, most of these being on religious estates.⁴⁵ When William the Conqueror had the *Domesday Book* compiled in 1086, this forerunner of the modern census reported at least 6,500 water-powered mills operating in England, or one for about every fifty families.⁴⁶ Across the channel in Toulouse, early in the twelfth century a company known as the Société du Bazacle was founded to offer shares in a series of water-powered mills along the River Garonne. Because the shares were freely traded, Gimpel proposed that the Société “may well be the oldest capitalistic company in the world.”⁴⁷ A century later, water mills had become so important that Paris had sixty-eight mills in one section of the Seine less than a mile long—an average of one mill every seventy *feet* of river.⁴⁸

Europeans in the Dark Ages dramatically improved the productivity of these early water mills by building dams and developing so-called *overshot* mills. Most early water mills were of the *undershot* variety—that is, the water passed under the wheel, with the river’s current providing all the force. Mills derived much greater power from overshot wheels, in which the water descended by a spillway to approximate a waterfall striking the top of the wheel; in this setup, both the speed and the *weight* of the water generated power. In most cases dams were needed to back up water so as to exploit its weight and pressure to generate power. Some very large dams were constructed at least as early as the twelfth century, including one at Toulouse more than 1,300 feet across.⁴⁹ There are many references to overshot wheels by the fourteenth century, but given the proliferation of large dams, they must have appeared much sooner.

Using various cranks and gear assemblies to increase the power of waterwheels and convert their motion from rotary to reciprocating action, Europeans were soon exploiting water power for all sorts of productive endeavors—sawing lumber and stones, turning lathes, grinding knives and swords, fulling (pounding) cloth, hammering metal and drawing

wire, and pulping rags to make paper.⁵⁰ That last use offers a clear illustration of the point that invention per se is not the most critical factor to consider with technologies; more crucial is the extent to which the culture *values* inventions and puts them to use. As Gimpel pointed out, the Chinese had invented paper about a thousand years earlier, and the Arabs had been using it for centuries. Through all those years they continued to manufacture paper by hand (and foot). But almost as soon as paper reached Europe in the thirteenth century, a new production process emerged. “Paper had traveled around the world,” Gimpel wrote, “but no culture or civilization on its route had tried to mechanize its manufacture” until medieval Europeans did so.⁵¹

Medieval Europeans quickly harnessed the wind as well. In Roman times large areas of what are now Belgium and the Netherlands had been under water. Medieval engineers developed windmills that allowed them to pump water away. Vast tracts of land were reclaimed for agriculture by thousands of windmills that pumped day and night throughout most of the Dark Ages.

Windmills proliferated even more rapidly than waterwheels because wind was everywhere. Engineers learned to take full advantage of the wind even when it shifted direction: the so-called post mill mounted the sails on a massive post that could turn with the wind. By the late twelfth century Europe was so crowded with windmills that owners began to file lawsuits against one another for blocking their wind.⁵²

Transportation

The introduction of the horse collar not only revolutionized agriculture but increased trade as well. Beyond being limited to using oxen to pull heavy loads, the Romans had primitive carts and wagons that had no brakes and whose front axles could not pivot. Not surprisingly, anything of substantial weight seldom moved very far overland.⁵³

After the fall of Rome, medieval innovators designed wagons with brakes and with front axles that could swivel, and they created harnesses that allowed large teams of horses to pull big wagons. The celebrated Cambridge economist Michael Postan noted the “Roman inefficiency in the use of draught animals. Where the Romans moved themselves and their goods on horseback, medieval men used carts.”⁵⁴ As the horse became the primary draft animal, medieval Europeans also began to develop much larger, stronger breeds of horses.

Even with large, horse-drawn wagons, transporting goods overland remained expensive. In boat transportation, too, the Germanic peoples substantially improved on Roman technology. The improvements actually began well before the fall of the empire. Despite the long-standing image of the Germanic peoples as barbarians, as early as the first century they possessed sufficient nautical technology to attack Roman shipping in the Mediterranean. These were not Viking raids—those came much later. These attacks were conducted by Chauci, Franks, Saxons, Goths, and Vandals.⁵⁵ Moreover, whereas the Romans depended entirely on galleys, which were usually rowed, the Germanic boats already relied mainly on sails.⁵⁶

The post-Roman era brought even greater innovation—most notably, the round ship, a sailing vessel with superior stability and increased cargo space. (It was called round because its hull was far wider relative to its length than had been the case with previous boats.) In many ways the round ship was an extension of the Viking transport ship the *knarr*.⁵⁷ The first fully developed round ships, called cogs, appeared in the tenth century.⁵⁸ The cog had no oars but was a true sailing ship, capable of long voyages with large cargoes. Like the Vikings, those possessed of cogs and their successors ventured out during the winter, something Roman galley captains had been loath to do.

Amazingly, for generations the notion of the Dark Ages had such a firm grip on historians that they clung to it despite their awareness that this was an era of remarkable inventiveness. S. C. Gilfillan decided that Marx must have been wrong to claim that invention is the mechanism by which civilizations rise, since during the Dark Ages civilization had declined while inventions “continued and even grew.”⁵⁹ It did not occur to him that if this was an era rich in inventions, perhaps it wasn’t “dark.”

Manufacturing and Trade

For far too long historians were content to accept Roman claims about the Germanic people who came to dominate Europe. Most influential were the characterizations of Tacitus (AD 55–ca. 120), which shaped conventional thinking about the Germanics for nearly two millennia. Of the Germans, Tacitus wrote:

All have fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames. . . . Whenever they are not fighting, they pass much of their time in . . . idleness, giving themselves up to sleep. . . . They . . . lie buried in sloth. . . . It is well known that the nations of Germany have no cities, and that they do not even tolerate closely contiguous dwellings. They live scattered and apart. . . . They all wrap themselves in a cloak which is fastened with a clasp, or, if that is not forthcoming, with a thorn leaving the rest of the person bare. . . . They care but little to possess or use [gold and silver]. . . . Even iron is not plentiful with them as we infer from the character of their weapons.⁶⁰

Nonsense. As the distinguished French historian Lucien Musset noted, the so-called barbarians were “admirable goldsmiths,” and their “technological superiority extended also to a sphere of vital importance—metallurgy, and in particular the making of weapons. . . . They were able to produce a special steel for the cutting edge of their swords or battle-axes which was unequalled until the nineteenth century, and was infinitely superior to that which the imperial [Roman] arms factories were producing.”⁶¹ Much of this sophisticated metal work was done in the many Germanic cities scattered beyond the Rhine.⁶² And not even the Germans were tough enough to go around wearing only a cape in the frozen North.

Nothing refutes these foolish notions about the Germans more fully than archaeological studies of a small Swedish island in Lake Mälaren, eighteen miles west of Stockholm.⁶³ Here an elaborate industrial community known as Helgö flourished from about 250 through 700, turning out what Peter S. Wells characterized as “large quantities of iron tools and weapons, bronze jewelry, gold ornaments, and others products . . . [including] locks and keys . . . [and] glass beads.” Moreover, Helgö was closely linked to trading networks “throughout the continent,” as demonstrated by coins found at the site, as well as “a bishop’s crozier from Ireland” and even a “bronze Buddha figure made in India.”⁶⁴ Nor was Helgö an anomaly: there were numerous industrial centers like it all over northern Europe.⁶⁵ Many of these trading centers were coastal; many others were situated on rivers, which served as Europe’s main trade arteries until the advent of trains and trucks.⁶⁶

Scholars such as the famous historian Henri Pirenne, who claimed that trade dwindled in Europe and did not begin to recover until the twelfth century,⁶⁷ were misled partly by the shift of the center of the

European economy from the old Roman southern area to the Germanic North. They focused on what may have been a decline in trade across the Mediterranean and failed to take account of the increased role of the major rivers linking northern and western Europe with the Black and Caspian Seas. In addition, they based their claims of a trade decline on the lack of imports of a few high-status commodities such as silks and spices without taking into account changes in taste.⁶⁸ For example, the importation of olive oil fell dramatically because the Germanic groups greatly preferred butter⁶⁹—large amounts of which moved over the trade routes from what is now Denmark. As for a decline in the importation of silks, even the most affluent northern Europeans regarded fur as far more luxurious.

Finally, until very recently historians have relied almost entirely on literary evidence for their knowledge of the past. That is, if references to something declined in the written materials from some era, they have taken this as proof that this *something* declined. But that approach can be misleading, for a reason Wells identified: “Trade was an everyday affair and not of major concern to church officials, who were the principle sources of written information about this period.”⁷⁰ In any event, there is by now abundant archaeological evidence to show that trade expanded rapidly during medieval times,⁷¹ if for no other reason than that people could now put to personal use wealth that Rome had previously squeezed from them.⁷²

High Culture

Even if Voltaire, Gibbon, and other proponents of the Dark Ages idea could be excused for being oblivious to engineering achievements and to innovations in agriculture, surely they must be judged severely for ignoring or dismissing medieval Europeans’ remarkable achievements in music, art, and architecture.

The Romans and Greeks sang and played monophonic music: a single musical line sounded by all voices or instruments. It was medieval musicians who developed polyphony, the simultaneous sounding of two or more musical lines—hence, harmonies. Just when this occurred is unknown, but the practice was well established by the time the influential manual *Musica enchiriadis* was published around 900.⁷³

Similarly, near the end of the eighth century an initial form of musical notation was developed (perhaps in Metz), and within two hundred years a fully adequate system was invented and popularized. These innovations allowed music to be accurately performed by musicians who had never heard it. That's why modern choirs can sing Gregorian chants.

The so-called Carolingian Renaissance that began late in the eighth century initiated innovations in art and architecture. Most of the surviving art consists of illuminated manuscripts and of metal work. The architecture was mainly devoted to churches and castles, and many of the buildings were very large and quite attractive.

The remarkable artistic era that emerged in eleventh-century Europe is known as "Romanesque," despite the fact that it was quite different from anything the Romans did. This name came from nineteenth-century professors who believed that Europe recovered from the Dark Ages only by *going back* to Roman culture. Hence, this could only have been an era of poor imitations of things Roman. In fact, Romanesque architecture, sculpture, and painting were original and powerful in ways that "even the late Roman artists would never have understood," as the art historian Helen Gardner wrote.⁷⁴

The Romanesque period was followed, in the twelfth century, by the even more powerful Gothic era. It seems astonishing, but Voltaire and other eighteenth-century critics scorned Gothic architecture—extraordinary achievements including the Chartres Cathedral—and painting for not conforming to the standards of ancient Greece and Rome. These same critics mistakenly thought the style originated with the "barbarous" Goths—hence the name. As anyone who has seen any of Europe's great Gothic cathedrals knows, the artistic judgment of these critics was no better than their history. That is to say nothing of their disregard for the architectural inventions of the Gothic period, including the flying buttress, which made it possible to build very tall buildings with thin walls and large windows, thus prompting major achievements in stained glass.

Thirteenth-century artists in northern Europe were, moreover, the first to use oil paint and to put their work on stretched canvass rather than on wood or plaster.⁷⁵ Anyone who thinks that great painting began with the Italian "Renaissance" should examine the work of the Van Eycks.

So much, then, for notions that the centuries following the collapse of Rome were an artistic blank or worse.

Chronic Warfare, Constant Innovation

All historians, both early and late, agree that medieval Europe was a war zone. So much so that throughout the eleventh century the popes attempted to impose a cease-fire to get the nobility to stop making war on one another (often seemingly just for the sport of it). When Pope Urban II addressed an assembly of knights gathered outdoors at Clarendon in 1095 to propose the First Crusade, he told them: “Christian warriors, who continually and vainly seek pretexts for war, rejoice, for you have today found a true pretext. . . . Soldiers of Hell, become soldiers of the living God.”⁷⁶ Although many knights responded by joining the Crusade (as will be seen in the next chapter), they never did stop picking fights with one another.

But this chronic medieval warfare had a significant by-product: innovation. Within several centuries of the fall of Rome, Europeans had developed military technology that far surpassed not only the Romans’ but that of every other society on earth.

Arms and Armor

Chain-mail armor probably was invented by the Celts—our first knowledge of it comes from a third-century-BC Celtic chieftain’s burial in Romania. The Romans first encountered chain-mail armor when fighting against the Gauls, and subsequently the Germanics perfected it. Chain mail consisted of tiny rings of metal (preferably steel) closely linked—the standard was for each ring to be linked with four others. Some chain mail consisted of one layer, but more often it consisted of two or three layers.⁷⁷ With chain mail covering the arms and torso, sometimes the legs, and even the head and neck, Western knights during the Crusades often came away from an encounter with Muslim archers looking like porcupines, arrows sticking out in all directions, none of them having penetrated deeply enough to wound.⁷⁸

Since a single chain-mail shirt might contain twenty-five thousand rings, it was very expensive, costing perhaps as much as “the annual income from quite a big village,” according to the military historian Andrew Ayton.⁷⁹ A good sword cost about as much. The cost of arms tended to limit military participation to men of means—with a nasty exception.⁸⁰

Although the English were famous for their longbows, and various

Germanic groups used excellent composite bows, the most popular and lethal weapon of medieval times was the crossbow, which was widely adopted during the tenth century.⁸¹ The crossbow could penetrate even heavy plate armor from medium distance. Anyone could be trained to use a crossbow effectively in a week or two, since one just aimed and pulled the trigger. And that was the rub. Like the Colt revolver in the Old West, the crossbow was the great equalizer, allowing untrained peasants to stand up to aristocratic knights who had devoted their lives to learning military techniques. Under the direction of Pope Innocent II, in 1139 the Second Lateran Council declared the crossbow “a weapon hateful to God” and prohibited its use against Christians. That still permitted the crusaders to use crossbows against the Muslims; Richard the Lionheart had a large number of crossbowmen with him during the Third Crusade in 1191. In any case, the pope’s prohibition had little influence: the Genoese several times deployed as many as 20,000 crossbowmen in a single battle,⁸² and the French used 1,500 at Agincourt in 1415. What the pope’s prohibition did accomplish was to cause crossbows to be little mentioned in contemporary accounts and subsequently by historians. Even some accounts of the death of Richard the Lionheart fail to mention that the wound that developed gangrene and killed him was from a crossbow.

The Cavalry Controversy

As pointed out in chapter 3, without stirrups a cavalryman could not charge behind a lowered lance without being vaulted from his horse. Thus it wasn’t until the stirrup appeared sometime during the seventh century that there could exist the celebrated armored knight astride his great charger and armed with a long lance. Unfortunately, the development of this knightly heavy cavalry has led many historians badly astray. In his classic *Arms and Armour in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (1871), Charles Boutell noted that “it was not possible that an infantry . . . should withstand the shock of mail-clad men-at-arms with their long lances, their strong swords, and their powerful horses. Hence, the serious fighting in those days took place between the mounted combatants.”⁸³ R. Ewart Oakeshott agreed, writing in 1960, “The armoured cavalryman fighting with the lance and sword on a heavy horse became for the next 1,100 years the arbiter of war.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Archibald R. Lewis claimed that the stirrup made “heavily armed cavalry carrying lances the decisive battle-troops of the period.”⁸⁵ And the influential Lynne White believed that

“the new military method of mounted shock combat” made cavalry the “backbone of [the medieval] army.”⁸⁶

If so, why did the knights, even though they rode to the battlefield, usually dismount when it came time to fight? For example, at the Battle of Agincourt (1415) both the French and the English had thousands of mounted knights, all of whom dismounted and marched into battle. Or if cavalry were the key to victory, why did the infantry overwhelmingly outnumber the cavalry in medieval European armies? As a typical example, for his Falkirk campaign in 1298, England’s Edward I assembled a force of 3,000 heavy cavalry and 25,700 infantry.⁸⁷

In fact, throughout the entire medieval era, battles were fought and won by infantry. Good commanders never committed their cavalry until the enemy infantry had broken ranks. The “glorious” knights on their chargers were reserved for riding down those poor souls who were already fleeing for their lives.

The Muslim Threat

Shortly before his death in 632, the Prophet Muhammad’s forces, gathered in the Arabian Peninsula, began probing attacks into Byzantine Syria and Persia. These attacks were in keeping with what came to be known as Muhammad’s farewell address, during which he said: “I was ordered to fight all men until they say ‘There is no god but Allah.’”⁸⁸ That was entirely consistent with the Qur’an (9:5): “Slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them [captive], and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush.” In this spirit, Muslim armies launched a century of successful conquests.

First to fall was Syria, in 636, after three years of fighting. Other Arab forces conquered the Persian area of Mesopotamia, known today as Iraq. Subsequently, the caliph al-Mansur built his capital city on the Tigris River. Its official name was Madina al-Salam (City of Peace), but everyone called it Baghdad (Gift of God). Eastern Persia, the area that is today Iran, soon fell to Muslim invaders as well.

Next, Muslim forces moved west. First up was the Holy Land, at that time the most western part of Byzantine Syria. Muslim forces entered it in 636, and in 638, after a long siege, Jerusalem surrendered to the caliph ‘Umar. In 639 ‘Umar invaded Egypt, a major center of Christianity and

also a Byzantine colony. Because the major Egyptian cities were strongly fortified, the Arabs massacred the villages and rural areas in hopes that Byzantine forces would be drawn into open battles. That occurred from time to time, but following each engagement, the Byzantines withdrew to their fortifications in good order. In 641 a new Byzantine governor of Egypt was appointed. For reasons that remain unknown, a month after his arrival by sea in Alexandria he arranged to meet the Muslim commander and surrendered the city and all of Egypt to him. A Muslim army of perhaps forty thousand then swept over the Byzantine cities along the coast of North Africa. In 711 Muslim forces from Morocco invaded Spain and soon pushed the defenders into a small area in the North, from which they never could be dislodged. A century later Sicily and southern Italy fell to Muslim forces.

Except for the one in Spain, all of the Muslim victories over Christians in the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily, and Italy had come against Byzantine forces—most of them low-quality fortress troops, all of them mercenaries. In Spain the Muslims had defeated a small Visigothic force—after several centuries of peace, the ruling Visigothic elite had felt no need to maintain a substantial army. Worse yet, a number of Visigothic leaders and their troops deserted to join the Muslims. After these easy victories, the Muslims were quite unprepared for what was to come.

The Battle of Tours/Poitiers

The Pyrenees Mountains contained the Muslim advance in northern Spain—for a few years. But in 721 Al-Samh ibn Malik al-Khawlani, the Muslim governor of Spain, led his troops north intent on annexing the Duchy of Aquitaine in southern Gaul (now France). His first step was to lay siege to the city of Toulouse. After three months, with the city on the brink of surrender, Duke Odo of Aquitaine arrived with an army of Franks. While Odo had been away gathering his forces, lack of opposition had encouraged Muslim arrogance. They had constructed no defenses around their camp, had sent out no scouts to warn of an approaching threat, and may not even have posted sentries. Taken completely by surprise when the Franks attacked, the Muslims fled, many without their weapons or armor, and most of them were slaughtered by Frankish heavy

cavalry as they ran away. Al-Samh ibn Malik al-Khawlani was mortally wounded.

In 732, led by ‘Abd-al-Rahmân, the Muslims tried again, this time with a far larger force. Muslim sources claim it was an army of hundreds of thousands; the Christian Chronicle of St. Denis swore that three hundred thousand Muslims *died* in the battle. More realistic is Paul K. Davis’s estimate of an army of eighty thousand Muslims.⁸⁹ In any event, contrary to some historians who want to minimize the importance of the engagement, this was no mere raid or exploratory expedition. The Muslims came with a large army and drove deep into Gaul. The battle occurred only about 150 miles south of Paris, although it is uncertain precisely where it was fought. The best that can be done is to place it near where the rivers Clain and Vienne join, between Tours and Poitiers. Thus some historians refer to it as the Battle of Tours, while others call it the Battle of Poitiers.

As the Muslims moved north from Spain everything went well for them. They defeated a company of Franks attempting to defend Bordeaux and plundered the city. Then they slaughtered another small Christian army at the Battle of the River Garonne. At this point, according to Isidore of Beja’s contemporary account, the Muslim commander “burned churches, and imagined he could pillage the basilica of St. Martin of Tours.” But first he paused to regroup. Once again the Muslims were brimming with confidence. According to an anonymous Arab chronicler, “The hearts of ‘Abd-al-Rahmân, his captains and his men were filled with wrath and pride.”⁹⁰ Hence they sent out no scouts and failed to detect the approach of Charles Martel (688–741), *de facto* ruler of Gaul, who was leading an army of battle-hardened Franks.

Charles (Martel means “the hammer”) was an unusually tall and powerfully built man, the bastard son of King Pépin II and famous for his military exploits. Even had he not confronted Muslim invaders, Martel would have been a major historical figure. By winning many battles against the Bavarians, the Alemanni, the Frisians, and the Saxons, he had founded the Carolingian Empire (named for him; Charles is Latinized as Carolus)—an empire later perfected by his grandson Charlemagne. Now, after gathering his troops, Martel marched south to meet the Muslim threat.

Taking the Muslims completely by surprise, Martel chose a battleground to his liking and positioned his dense lines of well-armored infan-

try on a crest, with trees to the flanks, thus forcing the Muslims to charge uphill or refuse to give battle. And charge they did. Again and again.

As noted, it is axiomatic in military science that cavalry cannot succeed against well-armed and well-disciplined infantry formations unless they greatly outnumber them.⁹¹ In this instance, the Muslim force consisted entirely of light cavalry “carrying lances and swords, largely without shields, wearing very little armor,” as military historians Edward Creasy and Joseph Mitchell recounted. Opposing them was an army “almost entirely composed of foot soldiers, wearing mail [armor] and carrying shields.”⁹² It was a very uneven match. As Isidore of Beja reported in his chronicle, the veteran Frankish infantry could not be moved by Arab cavalry: “Firmly they stood, one close to another, forming as it were a bulwark of ice.”⁹³ The Muslim cavalry repeatedly rushed at the Frankish line, and each time they fell back after suffering severe casualties, with increasingly large numbers of bleeding and riderless horses adding to the confusion on the battlefield.

Late in the afternoon the Muslim formations began to break up, some of them withdrawing toward their camp, whereupon the Franks unleashed their own heavily armored cavalry for a thunderous charge.⁹⁴ The Muslim cavalry fled and thousands of them died that afternoon, including ‘Abd-al-Rahmân, who was run through repeatedly by Frankish lancers.⁹⁵

Many historians have regarded the victory at Tours as crucial to the survival of Western civilization. Edward Gibbon supposed that had the Muslims won at Tours, “Perhaps interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.”⁹⁶ The nineteenth-century German military historian Hans Delbrück wrote that there was “no more important battle in world history.”⁹⁷

As would be expected, some more recent historians have been quick to claim that the Battle of Tours was of little or no significance. According to Philip Hitti, “Nothing was decided on the battlefield at Tours. The Muslim wave . . . had already spent itself and reached a natural limit.”⁹⁸ And Franco Cardini wrote that the whole thing was nothing but “propaganda put about by the Franks and the papacy.”⁹⁹ This is said to be consistent with evidence that the battle made no impression on the Muslims, at least not on those back in Damascus. Bernard Lewis claimed that few Arab historians made any mention of this battle at all, and those who did presented it “as a comparatively minor engagement.”¹⁰⁰

Given the remarkable intensity of Muslim provincialism, and the Islamic world's willful ignorance of other societies,¹⁰¹ Damascus probably *did* regard the defeat at Tours as a minor matter. But that's not how the battle was seen from Spain. Spanish Muslims were fully aware of who Charles Martel was and what he had done to their aspirations. They had learned from their defeat that the Franks were not a sedentary people served by mercenary garrison troops, nor were they a barbarian horde. They too were empire builders, and the Frankish host was made up of well-trained citizen volunteers who possessed arms, armor, and tactics superior to those of the Muslims.¹⁰² The Muslims tried to invade Gaul once more in 735, but Charles Martel and his Franks gave them another beating so severe that Muslim forces never ventured north again.

Martel defeated not only the Muslim invaders but nearly every other group in western Europe. At his death, the Frankish Realm included most of what had once been the Western Roman Empire except for Spain, Italy, and North Africa. Martel's conquests also extended to some of the Germanic areas that had never been part of Rome. His grandson expanded the realm to create a new "Roman Empire."

The Carolingian Interlude

Charlemagne (742–814) was the son of King Pépin III (Pépin the Short) and the grandson of Charles Martel (for whom he was named). In 768 he succeeded his father as king of the Franks, ruling along with his brother Carloman. A potential civil war between the two was averted when Carloman died in 771—but the tension between the two should have warned the Franks against divided rule.

Charlemagne was tall for his era (a study of his skeleton performed in 1861 estimated his height at slightly more than 6'2").¹⁰³ Although he had received little education, he was fluent in Latin and able to understand Greek. He married three times and had eleven legitimate children as well as a number of illegitimate children by his various concubines.

Soon after his brother's death, Charlemagne drove the Lombards out of northern Italy, adding it to his empire and placing Rome under his rule. In 795 Leo III became pope, despite opposition from the powerful Roman families who usually controlled the Church. Leo's opponents soon accused him of adultery and perjury and dispatched a gang to cut

out his tongue and gouge out his eyes. Local soldiers saved Pope Leo, but he was formally deposed and shut up in a monastery. He escaped and fled to Charlemagne, who escorted him back to Rome and reestablished him in office. Two days later, on Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo crowned Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor.

During his reign, Charlemagne was almost constantly at war. Many of his campaigns were fought to extend the boundaries of his empire, and many others were to suppress rebellions against his rule. Most often he went campaigning in the East, usually against the Germanic Saxons, and here an additional motive played a central role—to stamp out paganism and impose Christianity. Thus, Charlemagne issued an edict making it a capital offense to resist Christianization and slaughtered thousands on those grounds. When he died in 814, his new empire included far more of Europe than the Romans had held.

Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's only surviving legitimate son, succeeded his father. But things began to fall apart when Louis chose to divide the empire among his three sons. Wars of succession broke out and the "empire" was rapidly divided into increasingly smaller pieces that soon numbered in the hundreds. Europe's precious disunity was restored!

Progress between Empires

The final blow to the myth of the Dark Ages is that Rome was not conquered by barbarians. In terms of some technologies such as metallurgy, the people of the North were well ahead of the Romans. They had cities. They had extensive trade networks. And when their turn came, they launched a postimperial era of progress. The Franks almost reimposed an empire that no doubt would have derailed that progress. Fortunately, the Carolingian Empire was short-lived.



Northern Lights over Christendom

Western civilization was born on the shores of the Mediterranean, but it came of age along the Atlantic Coast and beyond the great rivers that Rome's legions had been loath to cross. As we have seen, after the fall of Rome, Europe's social and cultural center of gravity shifted north. Even when the Carolingian Empire fragmented, the Vikings brought new energy and enthusiasm to continue the West's glorious journey. Remarkably, much of this story has been ignored and some has been falsified.

Despite the fact that historians have given many times more attention to the Carolingian Empire than to the Vikings, the latter played a far more significant and lasting role in the rise of the West than did the Carolingians. Charlemagne was never able to conquer Denmark (let alone Sweden or Norway), and even during his lifetime, seagoing Viking raiders had begun to terrorize Europeans living along the Atlantic coast and to plant colonies, eventually doing so in England, Scotland, Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, France, Iceland, Greenland, Newfoundland (briefly), and a multitude of coastal islands, including the Shetlands, Orkneys, and Faroes. Not content with these Atlantic possessions, in 860 Swedish Vikings sailed down the Dnieper River and captured Kiev. From there, a Viking fleet of two hundred longboats continued down the Dnieper into the Black Sea and attacked Constantinople. Although they were unable to breach the city's immense walls, the Vikings pillaged all the suburbs without interference from Byzantine forces, which must have

greatly outnumbered the Viking raiders. Eight years later, in 868, the Vikings based in Kiev imposed a ruling dynasty on the whole of Russia that lasted for seven hundred years—the name Russia derives from *Rus*, a name applied to Swedish Vikings.

Finally, in the tenth century Vikings were ceded a large province on the west coast of France in return for protection against their raiding countrymen. This province became known as Normandy and its residents as Normans (Latin *northmanni* means “men of the North”). The subsequent triumphs of the Normans reveal that the prevailing view of the Vikings as backward barbarians who wore horned helmets and used skulls for drinking vessels is without any basis in fact. The Viking raiders may have been brutal (raiders usually are), but Scandinavia was as civilized as the more southern societies. In 1066 Duke William and his Normans sailed across the channel and easily conquered England. Far to the south, by 1071 Normans had driven out both Muslims and Byzantines and established the Norman Kingdom of Sicily, which included southern Italy. Then, in 1096, Normans played the leading role in the First Crusade—two of the four leaders were Normans.¹ And Richard the Lionheart, who led the Third Crusade, was a Norman (the great-great-grandson of William the Conqueror).

When the knights of the First Crusade arrived in the Holy Land, they so surpassed their Muslim adversaries in armor, weapons, and tactics that, although extremely outnumbered, they repeatedly routed Muslim forces.² Hence, although surrounded by an enormous Muslim world, and being very few in number, Christian knights were able to sustain crusader kingdoms in Palestine (so long as Europeans were willing to pay the substantial costs involved) and sent reinforcements when major crises arose. After two centuries European support dried up and the last knights came home. As the Crusades demonstrated, the real basis for unity among the Europeans was Christianity, which had evolved into a well-organized international bureaucracy. So for that era it would be more accurate to speak of Christendom rather than of Europe, since the latter had little social or cultural meaning at that time.³

Now for the details.

The Viking Age

From early days, historians have held the Vikings in contempt as brutal savages. Even the distinguished twentieth-century historian Norman Cantor wrote that the “Scandinavians had nothing to contribute to western European civilization. Their level of culture was no higher than that of the more primitive tribes among their German kinsmen. The unit of Scandinavian society was the same kind of war band that is depicted in *Beowulf*. . . . [They] had a penchant for drowning their rulers in wells.”⁴

Such views of the Vikings as primitive barbarians are based entirely on reactions to Viking raiders without regard for, and perhaps with no knowledge of, the societies from which they ventured. But, as discussed in chapter 4, as early as the third century (and probably before) Scandinavia had many advanced manufacturing communities such as Helgö, and Viking merchants traveled a complex network of trade routes extending as far as Persia—tens of thousands of early Middle Eastern coins have been found in what is now Sweden.⁵ Moreover, the Vikings had excellent arms, remarkable ships, and superb navigational skills.

Technology

Viking arms and armor were similar to those of the Carolingians, except that the Vikings made greater use of battle-axes. Otherwise, they had chain-mail armor (although they sometimes preferred to wear only heavy leather into battle to have freer movements), iron helmets (without horns), shields, spears, and long swords of fine steel. But if Viking arms and armor were standard, their boats were far superior to anything found elsewhere on earth at that time.

The magnificent Viking longships, such as the Gokstad ship reassembled and on display in Oslo, were used almost exclusively for warfare. For sailing the Atlantic and hauling cargo, the Vikings used a ship known as the *knarr*. Knarrs looked much like longships, but they were deeper and wider, and the decks were covered fore and aft, open only at midships. Knarrs often were more than fifty feet in length with a beam of about fifteen feet. The knarr enabled the Vikings to haul livestock and supplies to Iceland and Greenland for centuries. It also could sail in shallow water, making it a fine riverboat. It was primarily a sailing ship, using oars only when there was no wind. Under favorable wind and wave

conditions the knarr probably could reach a speed of twenty knots.⁶ None of the ships Columbus used on his first voyage could exceed about eight knots.

In contrast to the knarr, the longships (known as *skei*) relied mainly on oars, and they probably could (briefly) achieve a top speed of fifteen knots. Because of its shallow draft, the longship could sail in waters less than three feet deep and land on beaches, allowing Viking raiders to sail up rivers. Being double-ended, longships could reverse their direction without turning around. Although used for war, the longboats were not fighting ships but troop transports. The largest longship that archaeologists have discovered is 118 feet long. (Columbus's *Santa Maria* was only 75 feet long.) The longships were usually constructed of oak planks about an inch thick, which gave the boat considerable flexibility, and by overlapping the planks and riveting them together, the Vikings gave the longships great strength.

Together, the knarr and the *skei* gave the Vikings command of the water, whether salt or fresh. In addition, the shipbuilding industry must have been a major factor in the Scandinavian economy: "the foresters, carpenters, blacksmiths, sail-makers, rope-makers, and labourers involved must have been legion," Robert Ferguson observed in his Viking history.⁷

It took more than fine ships to sail from Norway and Sweden to Iceland, Greenland, and Labrador. The Greeks and Romans navigated by following the shore and by island hopping. The Vikings, by contrast, had several mechanical means for determining their latitude. They would sail along a particular degree of latitude and use well-established landmarks, the direction of currents, the appearance of seabirds, and remarkably accurate knowledge of astronomical cues to determine when to turn north or south.⁸ Unfortunately, the Vikings who wrote the sagas were not interested in technology, so we know much less about Viking technology than might be expected. In fact, most of what we do know is the result of recent archaeology and scientific research. In 2011 French scientists reported that a particular kind of crystal, widely available in Scandinavia, can be used to accurately locate the sun even on very cloudy or foggy days.⁹ This lends credence to traditions that the Vikings used a sort of sunstone.

Finally, the Vikings were experts at catching and drying codfish, and they relied on this form of "hardtack" to sustain them on long voyages.

Raids and Settlements

Viking voyagers discovered that none of the realms to the south could defend themselves against raiders from the sea and that there was enormous wealth to be taken, especially from the undefended monasteries. They took full advantage of the opportunity.

Viking raids began late in the eighth century; the first well-documented attack was in 793 on the monastery located on the island of Lindisfarne, off the east coast of England. As the twelfth-century chronicler Simeon of Durham reported, “They came into the church . . . laid everything waste with grievous plundering . . . dug up the altars and seized all the treasure from the holy church. They killed some of the brothers, took some away in fetters. . . . Some they drowned in the sea.”¹⁰ Other monks soon reestablished the monastery, but the Vikings came again; this process was repeated several more times until the monks finally abandoned Lindisfarne in 875. The same thing happened to the monastery at Iona on the west coast of Scotland, first raided in 794 and abandoned fifty years later. The Vikings also pillaged the monasteries off Ireland’s west coast, beginning in 795. Throughout the ninth and tenth centuries the Vikings regularly raided the Frankish towns along the Atlantic coast and sailed up the Meuse, Seine, and Rhine Rivers and their tributaries, attacking and looting towns, churches, estates, convents, and monasteries.

It may have been that the Vikings were especially likely to raid church properties because they were undefended and wealthy. But it also has been suggested that they chose them, and were particularly brutal toward monks and nuns, because they were angry about vicious efforts to Christianize the North.¹¹ Especially provocative would have been the atrocities committed by Charlemagne, who, for example, had about 4,500 unarmed Saxon captives forcibly baptized and then executed. The Vikings seem to have known that Charlemagne had issued an edict imposing the death sentence on all who tried to resist Christianization.

As time passed, the Viking raids involved ever-larger fleets. In 832 an armada of about 130 ships—each ship transporting about fifty Vikings—attacked along Ireland’s northern and eastern coasts. Twenty years later it was not unusual for a raiding party to have more than 300 ships. In 885 a fleet of 700 Viking ships sailed up the River Seine and laid siege to Paris (the raiders accepted a fortune in silver to leave).¹²

The Vikings also began to establish settlements—founding Dublin, Limerick, Wexford, and Waterford in Ireland and Skokholm and

Swansea in Wales, and claiming all of northern Scotland as well as the whole of Russia. During the 880s they established their most lasting and historically significant settlements, along the Frankish coast. From this secure coastal base the Vikings raided further inland. In 911 Charles the Simple, king of France, signed a treaty with the Viking leader Rollo, ceding to him a substantial coastal area around Rouen (an area the Vikings already held) to be known as the Duchy of Normandy. In return, Rollo agreed no longer to raid any Frankish areas, to defend the Seine so that no Vikings could threaten Paris, to convert to Christianity, and to marry Charles's daughter Gisela. Although both sides observed the provisions of the treaty, the boundaries of Normandy expanded substantially for about thirty more years.

Norman Triumphs

In principle, the dukes of Normandy were subjects of the kings of France, but they didn't act like it: they struck their own coins, levied their own taxes, raised their own armies, and named the officials of their own new archdiocese. The Normans also quickly won the support of the local Frankish population, both peasants and nobility—who, in effect, *became* Normans. In fact, most of the Viking settlers of Normandy married local women and welcomed some talented local men to their ranks. Soon most Normans in Normandy were at least partly of Frankish origins.

To England

In 1035, at the age of seven, William the Bastard (1028–1087) became duke of Normandy. He survived various threats to his rule, defeating rebel barons in 1047. As William consolidated his power, the king of France attempted to invade Normandy but was beaten badly in 1054 and again in 1057. William proved to be a popular leader and attached the county of Maine to Normandy in 1060. All the while he was eyeing the English throne, to which he had a tenuous claim. When Pope Alexander II recognized his claim, William assembled an invasion fleet—in part by promising English land and titles to his fellow Normans. Before William sailed he got word that Harald III, king of Norway, also a claimant to the English throne, had landed a Viking army near York. Knowing that Harald II, the Anglo-Saxon king of England, had

marched his army north to meet the Norwegian Harald, William set sail across the channel.

The English overwhelmed the Norwegians and then rushed south to meet William and his Normans. The battle took place about six miles from Hastings on the road to London. This was the first appearance in England of crossbowmen, whose deadly volleys caused the English infantry to back up, whereupon William unleashed his heavy cavalry in a thundering charge. But the English infantry troops were sufficiently firm to turn back the cavalry. After another hour of fighting, one wing of William's infantry fell back. Seeing this, the English infantry broke ranks in pursuit—at which point the Norman cavalry rushed in and routed the English forces.

There followed some maneuvering and negotiations, but William's victory was not in doubt. He was crowned king of England at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066. William the Bastard was now to be known as William the Conqueror.

Soon after the battle most of the Normans returned to Normandy, with only about eight thousand remaining in England to form a ruling elite.¹³ This is consistent with the many other instances considered in chapter 4 when “major” migrations involved only a small elite. In any event, this small number of Normans was sufficient to hold power. One might suppose that they soon were speaking English and assimilating. Not so—they remained a French-speaking elite for centuries.

William proved to be a very competent ruler, even though he spent most of his time back in Normandy. In 1085, to have full knowledge of the tax potential of England, he had an elaborate census taken to reveal the ownership and value of every parcel of land and of all livestock, the makeup of all villages (even noting each watermill), and all church properties. The English deeply resented this census as an intrusion; comparing it to the “final judgment,” they called the completed assessment the *Domesday Book* (pronounced “Doomsday”). What the *Domesday Book* showed was that the Normanization of English property was nearly total; the English owned only about 5 percent of the land, and this was further reduced in subsequent decades.¹⁴ As a consequence, the English (Anglo-Saxon) nobility fled—many to Scotland and Ireland, some even to Scandinavia.¹⁵ And sometime in the 1070s a large group of Anglo-Saxons sailed from England to the Byzantine Empire.¹⁶ There they served as effective mercenaries, helping Alexius I Comnenus seize the imperial throne.¹⁷

Finally, in part because Viking traditions limited the power of kings over the nobility, in 1215 the Norman barons imposed the Magna Carta on King John, thereby taking the first step toward democratic rule.

Kingdom of Sicily

Because of their fearsome reputations and unusual height, Normans soon discovered that they could earn premium wages as mercenaries, so many younger sons hired out all over the continent. The Byzantines engaged some to augment the forces they sent in 1038 to stop Muslim pirates operating from the ports of Sicily. It was a decision the Byzantines would always regret.¹⁸

The most famous living Byzantine general, George Maniakes, led an oddly assorted invasion force—Lombards forced into service, a few Byzantine regulars, and a substantial contingent of Norman mercenaries. Crossing over from southern Italy, Maniakes's army took Messina almost at once, won major battles at Rometta and Troina, and soon controlled more than a dozen fortresses in Sicily.¹⁹ Then everything fell apart. Maniakes withheld the Normans' share of the booty, angering them and causing his most effective contingent to return to Italy,²⁰ Then, when the naval commander foolishly allowed the Muslim fleet to escape through the Byzantine blockade, Maniakes abused him physically and called him an effeminate pimp.²¹ That naval commander was the emperor's brother-in-law Stephen. In revenge, Stephen sent a message to the emperor accusing Maniakes of treason. Maniakes was summoned to Constantinople and immediately thrown into prison. Stephen took command in Sicily—and made a complete mess of things before dying. His replacement, a court eunuch named Basil, was not much better.²² The Byzantine army began a slow retreat, and then left Sicily altogether when it was called to quell a Lombard rebellion in Apulia, the southernmost province in the heel of Italy. Sicily was once again under uncontested Muslim rule.

The experience was eye-opening for the Norman mercenaries. They now knew that Sicily was rich, that the large Christian population would support an invasion, and that the Muslims were hopelessly divided. They also recognized that Constantinople was too far away and too corrupted by intrigues to sustain its rule in the West. So rather than help suppress the Lombard uprising, the Normans decided to lead it. In 1041 the Norman knights sneaked across the mountains and descended into Apulia.

The Normans were led by William of Hauteville, whose heroic

exploits in Sicily had earned him the nickname “Iron Arm.” They quickly seized Melfi, a well-situated and fortified hill town, and accepted the submission of all the surrounding towns. The Byzantine governor assembled an army considerably larger than that of the Normans and rebels. He then sent a herald to the opposing camp offering either the Normans’ safe return to Lombard territory or battle. In response, an enormous Norman knight smashed his mailed fist on the head of the Byzantine herald’s horse; the horse fell dead on the spot. (Yes, this actually happened, historians agree.)²³ The battle began the next day.

The vastly outnumbered Normans routed the Byzantine forces, most of whom were killed in battle or drowned while trying to flee across the river. The Byzantine governor responded by importing many regular troops from Constantinople, but William Iron Arm and the Normans slaughtered this new Byzantine army, too. Even then the Byzantines did not accept defeat. They gathered another army and fought one more battle near Montepeloso. Again Iron Arm and his Normans prevailed, even taking the Byzantine governor prisoner and holding him for ransom. Never again were the Byzantines willing to fight an open battle with Normans in Italy; they contented themselves with defending strongly fortified towns and cities. Although they avoided further military catastrophes, they also failed to hold southern Italy, which slowly transformed into a Norman kingdom.

Soon the Normans turned their attention back to Muslim Sicily. In 1059 Robert Guiscard, the Norman duke of southern Italy, designated himself in a letter to Pope Nicholas II as “future [lord] of Sicily.”²⁴ Two years later he and his brother Roger, with a select company of Normans, launched an invasion. They fortified Messina; formed an alliance with Ibn at-Tinnah, one of the feuding Sicilian emirs; and took most of Sicily before having to return to Italy. By 1071 Guiscard had driven the Byzantine forces out of southern Italy. The next year he returned to Sicily, captured Palermo, and soon took command of the entire island. Thus was created the Norman Kingdom of Sicily (which included southern Italy).²⁵ It only lasted for about a century, but Muslim rule never resumed.

Centuries after the Battle of Tours, West and East continued to clash on European turf. There was nothing preordained about the outcome of these conflicts. But here again we see the decisive impact of matters contemporary historians so often disregard—seemingly mundane matters such as military tactics and technology.

The Crusades

In 1095 Pope Urban II called on the knights of Europe to join in a crusade to free Jerusalem from Muslim rule and make it safe again for Christian pilgrims to visit their holy city. Although Muslims had controlled Jerusalem since 638, large numbers of Christians had continued making pilgrimages to Jerusalem through the centuries. Local Muslims welcomed the revenue they derived from the annual waves of penitent Christians. They permitted Christians to worship in their local churches—some of them having been built by Constantine early in the fourth century.²⁶ Then, at the end of the tenth century, the caliph of Egypt had prohibited Christian pilgrims, ordered the destruction of all Christian churches in the Holy Land, and demanded that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the cavern in the rock beneath the church that was believed to have been Christ's tomb be demolished. These desecrations caused a furious response across Europe, but calls for action subsided when the caliph was assassinated (by his own relatives) and his antipilgrim policies were reversed.

But the Muslims never completely returned to the policy of welcoming Christian pilgrims. They often enforced harsh rules against any overt expressions of Christian faith. For example, in 1026 Richard of Saint-Vanne was stoned to death after having been detected saying Mass. In addition, Muslim officials ignored frequent robberies and bloody attacks on pilgrim travelers, such as the incident in 1064 in which Muslims ambushed four German bishops and a party of several thousand pilgrims as they entered the Holy Land, slaughtering two-thirds of them.²⁷

Making matters far worse, the Seljuk Turks—militant, recent converts to Islam—captured Jerusalem in 1071. In principle they allowed Christian pilgrims access to Jerusalem, but they often imposed huge ransoms and condoned local attacks. Soon only very large, well-armed, wealthy groups dared to attempt a pilgrimage, and even so, many died and many more turned back.²⁸ Pilgrims' dreadful tales of robbery, extortion, torture, rape, and murder once again aroused anger toward Muslims in the Holy Land. It was in this context that, in 1095, the Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus appealed for Western forces to defend Constantinople from the threat of Turkish invaders. And it was in answer to this appeal that the pope organized the First Crusade.

Recruitment

There has been a great deal of antireligious nonsense written about the Crusades, including charges that the knights marched east not because of their religious convictions but in pursuit of land and loot. The truth is that the crusaders made enormous financial sacrifices to go—expenditures that they had no expectations of making back. For example, in order to finance a company of crusaders, Robert, Duke of Normandy (son of William the Conqueror), pawned the entire Duchy of Normandy to his brother King William of England for ten thousand marks, an amount that would have paid a year's wages to 2,500 ships' captains. To raise such a sum, the king had to impose a new tax on all of England (which caused many angry protests).²⁹ Similarly, Godfrey of Bouillon sold his entire county of Verdun to the king of France and mortgaged his county of Bouillon to the bishop of Liège.³⁰ Moreover, most of the crusaders knew they probably would never return, as expressed in many wills and letters they left behind.³¹ In fact, very few of them did survive.

It is important to recognize that only a small percentage of Western knights heeded the pope's call to arms; nearly everyone stayed home. Those who did go were closely tied to one another by bonds of marriage and kinship. For example, Count William Tête-Hardi of Burgundy sent three sons and a grandson on the First Crusade; three men married to Tête-Hardi's daughters joined them, as did the husband of Tête-Hardi's granddaughter Florina, Sven of Denmark. Scandinavians such as Sven and Normans were extremely overrepresented among the crusaders, and many of the Franks who volunteered, like the Tête-Hardis, had Norman relatives.³²

The First Crusade consisted of four main armies,³³ two of which were made up of Norman knights and led by Norman noblemen: Robert, Duke of Normandy, and Bohemond, Prince of Taranto (of the Norman Kingdom of Sicily). Aided by his nephew Tancred, Bohemond played the leading role in the success of the First Crusade.

Although Emperor Alexius had put out the call for help, he was apprehensive about having Prince Bohemond in Constantinople. And with good reason: Bohemond (ca. 1058–1111) was the son of Robert Guiscard, and along with his father he had repeatedly defeated Byzantine armies, some led by Alexius himself. Back in 1081, after taking control of Italy and Sicily, Guiscard and Bohemond had sailed their Norman troops across the Adriatic Sea, invading the primary Byzantine territory.

Alexius had marched north to expel the Normans, only to be badly defeated at the Battle of Dyrrhachium. While still in his early twenties, Bohemond defeated Alexius in two battles in northern Greece, thus putting the Normans in control of Macedonia and nearly all of Thessaly.

Bohemond was nearing forty when he arrived in Constantinople on April 9, 1097. He was still a commanding figure. Alexius's daughter Anna, who was fourteen at the time she met the Norman leader, wrote a remarkable sketch of Bohemond many years later: "The sight of him inspired admiration, the mention of his name terror. . . . His stature was such that he towered almost a full cubit [about twelve inches] over the tallest men." In fact, his real name was Mark; his father had nicknamed him Bohemond (after the mythical giant) because of his great size as an infant. Anna continued:

He was slender of waist . . . perfectly proportioned. . . . His skin was . . . very white . . . His hair was lightish-brown and not so long as that of other barbarians. . . . There was a certain charm about him, but it was somewhat dimmed by the alarm his whole person inspired; there was a hard, savage quality in his whole aspect, due, I suppose to his great stature and his eyes; even his laugh sounded like a threat to others. . . . His arrogance was everywhere manifest; he was cunning, too.³⁴

Bohemond's meetings with the Emperor Alexius were tense. But the two leaders appeared to come to an agreement, as Bohemond led his troops across the Bosphorus to join forces with the crusader army commanded by Godfrey of Bouillon. A few days later a third crusader army, led by Raymond IV of Toulouse, arrived, followed in two weeks by the Duke of Normandy's forces. In all, probably about forty thousand crusaders were available for battle—or as many as fifty thousand fewer than had set out for the Holy Land. Some had turned back, but most had been lost to disease or in encounters fought with local forces along the route.

Alexius had never anticipated that thousands of high-ranking European nobles and knights would answer his call for help against the Turks. Few upper-class Byzantines engaged in military activities, and for centuries the armies of the empire had consisted of mercenaries and even slaves—often under the command of a eunuch.³⁵ Now Alexius was confronted with thousands of men who had come of their own free will and

were dedicated to a cause; he and his court thought them to be dangerous barbarians.

In turn, the crusaders thought Alexius and his court were a bunch of decadent, devious plotters; the *Gesta Francorum*, the most influential eyewitness account of the First Crusade, often attaches a nasty adjective when referring to Alexius, such as “the wretched emperor.”³⁶ They had supposed that Alexius would lead a joint force of Byzantine and Western warriors, but when the time came to attack the Turks, Alexius did not take command. Nor did he merge his army with the crusaders. Instead he sent a small contingent to accompany them only so far as needed to recover recently lost Byzantine territory. His position was that if the crusaders wanted to push on to the Holy Land, that was their own concern, but that “Jerusalem was strategically irrelevant to the empire.”³⁷ The “barbarians” would have to go it alone. Thus began an antagonism between East and West that ultimately resulted in the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade.

Victories

Although the crusaders held Alexius in contempt, they were not deterred by the lack of Byzantine troops. Rather, after defeating overconfident Muslim armies at Nicaea and Dorylaeum, they marched boldly on the city of Antioch, the main barrier to the Holy Land. Antioch, in what is today southern Turkey, was a strongly fortified city on the side of a mountain and with direct access to the sea. The crusaders lacked sufficient forces to surround Antioch, so the city continued to be resupplied. When winter came, the crusaders ran out of food and some starved to death. Of course, Emperor Alexius easily could have sent them supplies by sea, but he did not. He ordered the small contingent of Byzantine soldiers to withdraw.

Soon a large Muslim relief force arrived. Greatly outnumbered, the crusaders formed up as heavy infantry and gave the Muslims, all of whom were cavalry, a terrible defeat. As the Muslims began to retreat, Bohemond appeared with the remaining Christian cavalry, numbering perhaps three hundred. Their thundering charge turned the Muslim defeat into a massacre.

That still left Antioch unconquered. Making contact with Christians within the city, Bohemond found a Muslim in command of a tower who could be bribed to open a postern gate. That night Bohemond led a small group of Normans into the city, and they quietly took command of ten

towers and a long stretch of wall, whereupon the remaining crusaders climbed into Antioch and wiped out the entire Muslim garrison.

Within a few days, however, a powerful new Muslim army arrived at the gates of Antioch, led by the Turkish sultan Kerbogha. In the face of this looming danger, Bohemond was acknowledged as the overall commander of the crusader army in recognition of his greater experience. Rather than accept a siege, he prepared the army to attack the Turks, realizing that this was the best military option, albeit “a dangerous gamble.”³⁸ So on June 28 the remaining crusader forces marched through the Bridge Gate of Antioch to face Kerbogha’s far larger host. The Turks attacked but recoiled after colliding with the well-armored, disciplined heavy-infantry formations. It was, in many ways, the Battle of Tours all over again. The Muslim cavalry attacked and died. The crusader ranks seemed impregnable. Soon the Turks began to withdraw and then to flee. The crusaders tromped along in their close formations, overran Kerbogha’s camp, and killed everyone within reach. The only reason that some Turkish forces escaped was that the crusaders lacked the horses needed to catch them. To have triumphed so completely against such a powerful enemy seemed incomprehensible to many crusaders, even after the fact. The story spread that a contingent of mounted saints had descended from heaven and joined in the attack.³⁹

So another major Muslim force had been destroyed and the road to Jerusalem lay open before the crusaders. But Bohemond did not plan to march down it. Instead, he accepted the offer to become the ruler of a new kingdom based in Antioch—he was extremely popular with the large Christian population remaining in the city. So while Bohemond remained at Antioch, his nephew Tancred led the Norman force from Sicily. Godfrey of Bouillon led the Normans and all the other remaining crusaders in their effort to take back Jerusalem.

By now there were fewer than fifteen thousand crusaders, only about a third the number of those who had reached Constantinople two years earlier. The Muslims had far greater numbers in their garrison in Jerusalem, which was “one of the great fortresses of the medieval world,” in the words of the esteemed historian Sir Steven Runciman.⁴⁰ Worse yet for the crusaders, an overwhelming Muslim relief force was on its way from Egypt. At this point a priest had a vision that victory could be gained if the crusaders fasted for three days and marched barefoot around the walls of Jerusalem. So they did, mocked all the way by Muslims who crowded

the city's walls to observe these foolish Christians. But two days later the crusaders gained a foothold on the walls, having built two movable wooden towers from which they fired lethal barrages from crossbows. From there they poured into Jerusalem and dispatched every one of the Muslim defenders.

There was no time to celebrate. The large Egyptian army was coming to retake Jerusalem. Even though by now there probably were fewer than ten thousand crusaders, they immediately marched south to meet the enemy, leaving only a token force in Jerusalem. At the town of Ascalon, fifty miles south of Jerusalem, they reached the Egyptian encampment and once again destroyed a far superior force. Very few Muslims escaped.

In celebration of this victory, most of the surviving crusaders boarded ships and sailed home. This left only about six hundred fighting men to defend the Holy Land.⁴¹ Although the Muslims could have outnumbered the crusaders by several hundred to one, they had suffered such overwhelming defeats that it was a long time before they were willing to do battle again.

The Crusader Kingdoms

With Jerusalem in their possession, and having defeated the large Egyptian army sent to turn them out, the crusaders had to decide what to do to preserve their victory. Their solution was to create four kingdoms— independent states along the Mediterranean coast. These were the County of Edessa, named for its major city; the Principdom of Antioch, which surrounded the city of Antioch; the County of Tripoli, just south of the Principdom and named for the Lebanese coastal city of that name; and the Kingdom of Jerusalem, an enclave on the coast of Palestine roughly equivalent to modern Israel.⁴²

Edessa was the first crusader state to be established. When the main body of crusaders marched south in 1098 to attack Antioch, Baldwin of Boulogne—brother of Godfrey of Bouillon—led a smaller force east to Edessa and managed to convince Thoros, the childless ruler of the city (who was a Greek Orthodox Christian), to adopt him as his son and heir. When Thoros was assassinated by angry subjects, Baldwin took over. Edessa also had the distinction of being the first crusader state to be retaken by Islam (in 1149).

After Bohemond captured the city of Antioch in 1098, he was named prince. His nephew Tancred became regent when Bohemond returned to

Italy in 1105 to raise a new army to fight the Byzantines. Bohemond died in 1111, making Tancred the permanent prince, although he too died the next year. The area remained an independent state until 1119, when it was joined to the Kingdom of Jerusalem (although Bohemond's descendants continued as princes). In 1268 Antioch fell to an army led by Baybars, sultan of Egypt, whose troops killed every Christian they could find.

The County of Tripoli was the last of the four crusader states to be established—in 1102. It came into being when Count Raymond IV of Toulouse laid siege to the port city of Tripoli. When Raymond died suddenly in 1105, he left his infant son as heir, so when the knights finally took the city, the county became a vassal state of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It fell to Muslim forces in 1289.

By far the most important and powerful of the crusader states was the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which was also known as Outremer, the French word for “overseas” (*outré-mer*). Initially that term applied to all the crusader states, but it came to refer primarily to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Godfrey of Bouillon, who led the capture of Jerusalem, was installed as the first ruler, with the title Defender of the Holy Sepulchre.

Despite its name, the Kingdom of Jerusalem included the city of Jerusalem for only about ninety years. As Muslim aggression built up, Western forces simply did not have enough troops to defend the long corridor linking Jerusalem with the coast. Consequently, it is absurd to claim, as many historians do, that the forces of Saladin prevented Richard the Lionheart from retaking Jerusalem during the Third Crusade. Richard knew that such a conquest was pointless and made no effort to take Jerusalem. Instead he overwhelmed Saladin's army at Arsuf, after which the Muslim leader signed a treaty restoring to Christian pilgrims the right of safe passage to and from Jerusalem.

Although few of the original crusaders remained to defend these kingdoms, two knightly religious orders eventually reinforced their ranks. These orders combined “monastic discipline and martial skill . . . for the first time in the Christian world,” as the historian Thomas F. Madden pointed out.⁴³ The Knights Hospitallers were founded to care for sick Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land, but in about 1120 the order expanded its vows from chastity, poverty, and obedience to include the armed protection of Christians in Palestine. The Knights Templar originated as a military religious order in about 1119. Hospitallers wore black robes with a white cross on the left sleeve; the Templars wore white robes

with a red cross on the mantel. The two orders hated each other, but together they provided the kingdoms with a reliable force of well-trained soldiers who built and garrisoned a chain of extremely well-sited castles along the frontiers.

Nevertheless, the existence of the kingdoms remained perilous, surrounded as they were by a vast and populous Muslim world. For many years, whenever the Muslim threat loomed especially large, new Crusades were mounted in Europe, bringing fresh troops east in support of the kingdoms. But eventually Europeans lost their fervor to defend—and, just as important, to *pay for* the defense of—the Holy Land, and Islamic forces ate away at the crusader areas.⁴⁴ Still, that the Kingdom of Jerusalem lasted until 1291, when its last fortress at Acre fell to a huge Muslim army, seems a remarkable achievement.

What the Crusades most revealed about the West was the superiority of its tactics and military hardware. Unwilling to shift from light cavalry, the Muslims were unable to dent crusader heavy-infantry formations. Beyond that, their arrows could not pierce the crusaders' mail armor unless shot from point-blank range, whereas the crusader crossbows were lethal at considerable range. Crossbows were widely used during the First Crusade, but during the Third Crusade, Richard the Lionheart fielded a large number of crossbow *teams*: a shooter supported by one or two loaders, facilitating a very high rate of fire. And of course Richard, like most crusader commanders, held in reserve a contingent of heavy cavalry that was irresistible when properly utilized. The few Muslim victories in the field were due to overwhelming numbers; their other victories involved sieges.

Crusader “War Crimes”

Of late, the alleged brutality of the crusaders is much lamented. In 1999, for example, the *New York Times* solemnly proposed that the Crusades were comparable to Hitler's atrocities.⁴⁵ The former priest James Carroll agreed, charging that the Crusades left a “trail of violence [that] scars the earth and human memory even to this day.”⁴⁶ And the ex-nun and popular writer Karen Armstrong claimed that “crusading answered a deep need in the Christians of Europe,” because Christianity has “an inherent leaning towards violence.”⁴⁷ Carroll and Armstrong, along with many other modern authors, have gone so far as to claim that the Muslims who did battle with the crusaders were civilized and tolerant victims.

It is absurd to impose modern notions about proper military conduct on medieval armies; both Christians and Muslims observed quite different rules of warfare. One of these was that if a city surrendered before the attacking forces had to storm over the walls, the residents were supposed to be treated leniently. This was true no matter how long the siege had lasted. But when a city forced the attackers to storm the walls and thereby incur serious casualties, commanders (Muslims as well as Christians) believed they had an obligation to release their troops to murder, loot, and burn as an example to other cities that might be tempted to hold out in the future. This was the case in the fall of Jerusalem—the primary instance of a “massacre” that animates critics of the crusaders.

Many Western histories of the Crusades express such outrage against crusader “war crimes” but give little or no attention to the many massacres Muslims committed. As the British historian Robert Irwin noted, his country has “a long tradition of disparaging the crusaders as barbaric and bigoted warmongers and of praising the Saracens as paladins of chivalry.” Irwin added, “Indeed, it is widely believed that chivalry originated in the Muslim East,” with Saladin upheld as “the most perfect example of Muslim chivalry.”⁴⁸ Another British historian, Christopher Tyerman, pointed out that such beliefs are neither recent inventions nor confined to Britain. Since the Enlightenment, Tyerman wrote, Saladin has “bizarrelly” been portrayed “as a rational and civilized figure in juxtaposition to credulous barbaric crusaders.”⁴⁹ In 1898 Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm visited Damascus and placed a bronze laurel wreath on Saladin’s tomb. The wreath was inscribed: “From one great emperor to another.”⁵⁰

Much has been made of the fact that Saladin did not murder the Christians when he retook Jerusalem in 1187. Writing in 1869, the English historian Barbara Hutton claimed that although Saladin “hated Christians . . . when they were suppliants and at his mercy, he was never cruel or revengeful.”⁵¹ But as Muslim writers have acknowledged, Jerusalem was an exception to Saladin’s usual butchery of his enemies. Indeed, Saladin had planned to massacre the knights holding Jerusalem, but he offered safe conduct in exchange for their surrender of Jerusalem without resistance. In most other instances Saladin was quite unchivalrous. For example, Saladin’s secretary, Imad ad-Din, related the sultan’s treatment of captured knights following the Battle of Hattin (1187): “He [Saladin] ordered that they should be beheaded, choosing to have them dead rather than in prison. With him was a whole band of scholars and sufis and a

certain number of devout men and ascetics; each begged to be allowed to kill one of them, and drew his sword and rolled back his sleeve. Saladin, his face joyful, was sitting on his dais; the unbelievers showed black despair.”⁵² It thus seems fitting that during one of his amazing World War I adventures leading irregular Arab forces against the Turks, T. E. Lawrence “liberated” the kaiser’s wreath from Saladin’s tomb; it now resides in the Imperial War Museum in London.

Similarly, many Western historians have given little or no coverage to Baybars, sultan of Egypt, although he is much more celebrated than Saladin in Muslim histories of this period. When Baybars took the Knights Templar fortress of Safad in 1266, he had all the inhabitants massacred after promising to spare their lives during negotiations.⁵³ Later that same year his forces took the great city of Antioch. Even though the city surrendered after four days of siege, Baybars ordered all inhabitants, including all women and children, killed or enslaved. What followed was, as Thomas Madden observed, “the single greatest massacre of the entire crusading era.”⁵⁴

Since Bohemond VI, prince of Antioch, was away when this disaster befell his city, Baybars sent a letter telling him what he had missed:

You would have seen your knights prostrate beneath the horses’ hooves, your houses stormed by pillagers. . . . You would have seen your Muslim enemy trampling on the place where you celebrate Mass, cutting the throats of monks, priests and deacons upon the altars, bringing sudden death to the Patriarchs and slavery to the royal princes. You would have seen fire running through your palaces, your dead burned in this world before going down to the fires of the next.⁵⁵

The massacre of Antioch is seldom reported in the many apologetic Western histories of the Crusades.

Of course, even though most of the crusaders went to war for God and at considerable personal cost, few of them adopted a religious lifestyle. They ate and drank as well as they were able, and most of them routinely violated commandments, especially those concerned with adultery and coveting wives. Moreover, they did not disdain the spoils of battle and looted as much as they were able—which wasn’t much when balanced against the costs of crusading. And of course they were often cruel

and bloodthirsty—after all, they had been trained from childhood to make war, face to face, sword to sword. No doubt it was “unenlightened” of the crusaders to have been typical medieval warriors, but it seems even more unenlightened to anachronistically impose the Geneva Conventions on the crusaders while pretending that their Islamic opponents were innocent victims.

Christendom

It was only through the auspices of the Church that a “European” effort such as the Crusades could be conceived and initiated. Indeed, the Church was the only entity that gave some semblance of political and cultural coherence to the West—despite the fact that, even by the time of the Crusades, much of the North had not yet been converted to Christianity

Two Churches

Ironically, the immense favoritism the Roman emperor Constantine showed toward Christianity did it substantial harm. Eamon Duffy, in his history of the papacy, pointed out that Constantine elevated the clergy to high levels of wealth, power, and status so that bishops “became grandees on a par with the wealthiest senators.”⁵⁶ Not surprisingly, “there was a stampede into the priesthood,” in the words of Richard Fletcher.⁵⁷ Soon Christian offices, and especially the higher positions, were dominated by sons of the aristocracy—some of them gaining bishoprics even before being baptized. Gaining a church position became a matter mainly of influence, commerce, and eventually heredity. Simony became the rule—an extensive and expensive traffic in religious offices, including even lowly parish placements. There quickly arose great clerical families whose sons followed their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers into holy offices. Even the papacy soon ran in families. Pope Innocent (reigned 401–417) was the son of his predecessor, Pope Anastasius (399–401). Pope Silverius (536–537) was the son of Pope Hormisdas (514–523). Many other popes were the sons, grandsons, nephews, and brothers of bishops and cardinals. Competition for high church offices became so corrupt that from 872 to 1012 a third of all popes died violent deaths, many of them murdered as a result of the constant intrigues among the Roman ecclesiastical families, and at least one killed by an irate husband.⁵⁸

Of course, many who entered the religious life were neither careerists nor libertines. The “stampede” into the priesthood was accompanied by a rapid expansion of monasticism, which, perhaps surprisingly, also was dominated by the privileged: 75 percent of ascetic medieval saints were sons and daughters of the nobility, including the children of kings.⁵⁹ By the middle of the fourth century there were thousands of monks and nuns, nearly all of them living in organized communities; as time passed, the number of monks and nuns continued to soar.

In effect, two parallel churches arose. These can usefully be identified as the Church of Power and the Church of Piety.

The Church of Power was the main body of the Church as it evolved in response to the immense status and wealth bestowed on the clergy. It included the great majority of priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes until the Counter-Reformation began during the sixteenth century. Most clergy of the Church of Power were sensible and temperate men, but they tended to be worldly in both senses of that term—practical and morally somewhat permissive.

In contrast, the Church of Piety pressed for virtue over worldliness and constantly attempted to reform the Church of Power. Starting in 1046, the Church of Piety controlled the papacy for more than a century. Indeed, in 1073 a monk became pope (Gregory VII), and the next three popes also were monks, including Urban II, who launched the First Crusade. Even after the Church of Power recaptured the papacy, it was unable to silence the Church of Piety because the latter retained an unyielding base in monasticism, which had strong family ties to the ruling elites.

In practice, there was a division of labor between the two churches. The task of conversion, especially of pagan territories, was left to the Church of Piety, while the task of administering Christendom was undertaken by the Church of Power.

Christianizing the North

It was monks who converted the German “barbarians,” and subsequently it was monks who undertook to convert the Vikings. Early on, many of the monks who missionized in Viking areas were martyred. But even when it became less dangerous, missionary monks had no choice but to try to convert the nobility and hope that their example would trickle down to the general population.⁶⁰ The realities of conversion dictated this strategy.⁶¹

For generations it was assumed that religious conversions were the

result of doctrinal appeal—that people embraced a new faith because they found its teachings particularly appealing, especially if these teachings seemed to solve serious problems or dissatisfactions that afflicted them. If so, then to convert the Vikings might have been accomplished by preaching to mass audiences. But, surprisingly, when sociologists⁶² took the trouble to go out and actually watch conversions take place, they discovered that doctrines are of secondary importance in the initial decision to convert. One must, of course, leave room for those rare conversions resulting from mystical experiences such as Paul’s on the road to Damascus. But such instances aside, conversion is primarily about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines. Put more formally: *people tend to convert to a religious group when their social ties to members outweigh their ties to outsiders who might oppose the conversion, and this often occurs before a convert knows much about what the group believes.*⁶³

Of course, one can easily imagine doctrines so bizarre as to keep most people from joining. It also is true that successful faiths sustain doctrines that have wide appeal. But while doctrines can facilitate or hinder conversion, in the normal course of events *conversion primarily is an act of conformity*. But then, so is nonconversion. In the end it is a matter of the relative strength of social ties pulling the individual toward or away from a group. This principle has, by now, been examined by dozens of close-up studies of conversion, all of which confirm that social networks are the basic mechanism through which conversion takes place.⁶⁴ To convert someone, you must be or become his or her close and trusted friend. When people convert to a new religion, they usually seek to convert their friends and relatives. Conversion, therefore, tends to proceed through social networks. This dynamic rules out mass conversions in response to sermons. In fact, social scientists have now discarded notions of “mass psychology” and “collective consciousness.”⁶⁵

A successful mission to a large population takes generations. The first missionaries must slowly form close ties with a few people who, in turn, may be able to attract some of their friends and relatives to the new faith. Of course, this supposes that the missionaries have free access to build such close interpersonal ties and are willing to be patient through many disappointing years. The Christian monks seeking to convert the Vikings had neither access nor time. To venture out among the Viking settlements was apt to be fatal, or at least unavailing, as the locals rejected contact. And

the pressure was on the monks to achieve immediate results, since it was widely believed that if the Vikings could be brought to Christ they would cease their raids and invasions. Consequently, the monks focused on converting Viking rulers or on helping Vikings who had been raised as Christians outside Scandinavia to seize power.⁶⁶ As early as the eighth century, missionaries began to gather up Danish boys to be baptized and trained.⁶⁷

The first Scandinavian king to be converted was the Dane Harold Klak, who was baptized in Germany in 826. His motives for becoming a Christian were not religious but political—by doing so he gained the support of the Carolingians. It is not certain that he ever returned to Denmark, but if he did, he was driven into exile the next year. Then, in about 965, Harold Bluetooth, the king of Denmark, was baptized. He, too, seems to have converted to gain Carolingian support. Subsequently Christians were intermittently persecuted in Denmark, and in 1086 King Canute IV was murdered in a church. His canonization as Saint Canute in 1188 is said to mark the triumph of Christianity in Denmark—although there still were few Christians aside from the nobility.

Next, consider Norway. Olaf Trygvason grew up in England as a Christian. In 995 he seized Norway's throne, whereupon he attempted to convert the nobility by force, killing some who resisted and burning their estates. This aroused so much opposition that the nobility rebelled and, in the Battle of Svolder (about the year 1000), Olaf was killed. Fifteen years later, another Olaf (Haraldsson), who had been baptized in France, took the Norwegian throne. He, too, used the sword to compel Christianization, sparking rebellion. Driven into exile, he attempted to return after raising a new army in Kiev, but he was defeated and killed at the Battle of Stikklestad in 1030. Amazingly, once Norway was ruled by Christian nobles (converted in Denmark), history was rewritten to such an extent that the murderous Olaf Haraldsson became St. Olaf.

The conversion of the Swedish nobility also involved murder and forced conversions. Late in the eleventh century, Inge the Elder was king of Sweden and an ardent Christian (little is known of him, and nothing of the source of his Christianity). He was driven into exile when he tried to abolish pagan worship. After three years in exile, he returned with a band of armed followers and surrounded a hall in Old Uppsala, where his rival and his court were gathered. Inge and his men set fire to the building and killed all those who exited. Restored to the throne, Inge resumed his persecution of non-Christians.

Despite the success in baptizing Scandinavian kings and nobles, Christianity did not trickle down much among the people. The outward forms of paganism were muted, but the inward forms prevailed. As the great Danish historian Johannes Brøndsted pointed out, it was quite easy for Christianity to become the “public” faith in Scandinavia, “but far more difficult to overcome the complex [pagan] culture beneath.” He quoted a twelfth-century Anglo-Danish monk: “As long as things go well and everything is fine, [the people] seem willing to acknowledge Christ and honor him, though as a pure formality; but when things go wrong,” they turn against Christianity and revert to paganism.⁶⁸ Or, as the medieval Icelandic saga *Landnámabók* noted, Helgi the Lean “was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ, but invoked Thor in matters of seafaring and dire necessity.”⁶⁹

Brøndsted suggested that to the extent it can be said to have taken place at all, the conversion of Scandinavia occurred “only . . . when Christianity took over old [pagan] superstitions and usages and allowed them to live under a new guise.”⁷⁰ Of course, since the baptizing of kings meant that Christianity became a state church, funded by tithes, it did not depend on popular support, and church officials had little motivation to work at convincing the masses. Thus, even today forms of paganism remain surprisingly popular in Scandinavia.⁷¹

Insofar as the Church of Power was concerned, it was enough that the Church of Piety had placed Christian state churches in power in Scandinavia. The tithes flowed in and all the formalities were properly observed.

An Organized Religion

Spanning hundreds of medieval states and statelets was a church structure based on geographic units—parishes and dioceses. A parish is the small, local area served by an ordained pastor (sometimes with assistant priests). A diocese is a set of parishes, presided over by a bishop. (An archdiocese is led by an archbishop.) After several centuries, all of Catholic Europe was divided into parishes and dioceses,⁷² enabling the Church to act as the moral and administrative basis for continental unity.

To some extent, the Church could curb the worst excesses of the nobility—through excommunication, actual or threatened, or even by withholding the sacraments. Hence, Henry IV (1050–1106), the Holy Roman Emperor, was forced to humble himself and walk barefoot through the snow to gain the forgiveness of Pope Gregory VII. Henry’s

conflict with the pope involved the right to name bishops in Germany, but often the issues concerned moral lapses and abuses of power. The king of France was not permitted to go on the First Crusade because he was married to a woman who had not divorced her previous husband. The Church took a constant interest in marriage among the nobility, often blocking divorces or invalidating marriages between couples who were too closely related.

The Church also frequently, and surprisingly effectively, imposed sanctions on rulers who overstepped moral boundaries on mistreatment of their subjects. Consider the notorious case of Fulk III, Count of Anjou (972–1040). Fulk (called “the black count”) was a “plunderer, murderer, robber, and swearer of false oaths, a truly frightening character of fiendish cruelty,” in the words of Richard Erdoes.⁷³ The count had had his first wife burned to death in her wedding dress, allegedly for having sex with a goatherd. For that act, Fulk’s confessor demanded that he make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem—and he went. Soon, however, he reverted to type, and whenever “he had the slightest difference with a neighbor he rushed upon his lands, ravaging, pillaging, raping, and killing.”⁷⁴ Eventually, Fulk was required to make four pilgrimages to Jerusalem; he died on his way back from the last of them. Despite his relapses, Fulk’s excesses would surely have known no bounds had it not been for the Church’s interventions.

Although few medieval rulers were so extreme as Fulk, it was common for them to combine a tendency to violence and sin with deep religious devotion. By the tenth century Viking and Norman pilgrims were coming to Jerusalem who, it was said, “were very devoted to Christ if not to his commandments.”⁷⁵ In some cases noblemen were told to make the whole trip to Jerusalem barefooted, and most obeyed.

The Church played other roles as well. With churchmen frequently acting as aides and advisers at royal court, the Church served as a universal diplomatic service, negotiating agreements and mediating disputes among rulers. As was the case during the Crusades, the Church also served as a major lending institution—until replaced by the rise of secular banks in the twelfth century (see chapter 6). Moreover, because of the constant movement of the religious, the Church became the primary conduit of news and gossip to the otherwise isolated courts.

Finally, the Church provided the intellectual life of the medieval West. All educated Europeans had been educated by the Church—all

tutors were clergy or monks. Most music was church music, and all the pipe organs were in churches. Most of the great buildings were cathedrals. The graphic arts were mainly paid for by the Church. Most of the books were written by the religious, and all publications were the work of copyist monks. And, as will be seen in chapter 8, all the early scientists were monks or clergy—including many bishops and even an occasional cardinal.

This was Christendom.

Upside-Down History

For far too long, far too many historians have had a strong preference for empires. Not only have they continued to regret the fall of Rome, but they remember Charlemagne as the man who almost “saved” Europe and restored civilization, but whose heirs undercut his great achievements by subdividing his empire. That Charlemagne was a bloodthirsty tyrant is ignored or rationalized because, as R. H. C. Davis explained, “he was devoted to the cause of Christianity and Roman civilization.”⁷⁶ Like a true Roman, Charlemagne was devoted to wars of conquest, leading his army somewhere to attack someone in almost every year of his forty-one-year reign. And he demonstrated his devotion to Christianity by pronouncing a death sentence on all who resisted becoming Christians.

In contrast, most historians have dismissed the Vikings as bloodthirsty enemies of civilization. As for the Normans, most historians have assumed that the sophistication shown by William the Conqueror and his nobles reflected their Viking forebears’ rapid assimilation into Frankish culture. In fact, the Scandinavians were as civilized as the Franks, while William the Conqueror was certainly as able as Charlemagne, and considerably more tolerant.



Freedom and Capitalism

Compare Shakespeare's tragedies with those of the ancient Greeks.¹ Not that Oedipus was without faults, but he did nothing to deserve his sad end—he simply fell victim to his destiny. In contrast, Othello, Brutus, and the Macbeths were not the captives of blind fate. As Cassius pointed out to Brutus, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.”² And in the end, each of these Shakespearean characters got what he or she deserved.

One of the most important ideas facilitating the rise of the West is the belief in *free will*. Whereas most (if not all) ancient societies believed in fate, Westerners came to believe that humans are relatively free to follow the dictates of their conscience and that, to a substantial degree, they make their own fate. This belief had remarkable behavioral consequences. Most important, perhaps, it created a tendency for people not to be resigned to things as they are but rather to attempt to make the situation better. Moreover, belief in free will led directly to valuing the *right* of the individual to freely choose, with the result that medieval Europe rejected slavery—the only culture ever to have done so without external compulsion. (Of course, eventually the West had to do it again in the New World.) The value placed on individual freedom, combined with the legacy of Greek efforts at democracy, led to new democratic experiments in the medieval Italian city-states. Meanwhile, the rise of large monastic estates having extensive commercial activities led to the invention of capitalism and to the reformulation of theological doctrines in ways

favorable to commerce. Subsequently, capitalism gained a firm footing in the newly democratic Italian city-states, transforming them into major centers of banking, trade, and even manufacturing.

Free Will

Unlike the Greeks and Romans, whose gods lacked virtues and did not concern themselves with human misbehavior (other than failures to propitiate them in the appropriate manner), the Judeo-Christian God is a judge who rewards virtue and punishes sin.³ This conception of God is incompatible with fatalism; the admonition to “Go and sin no more” is absurd if we are captives of our fate. Judaism and, later, Christianity were founded on the doctrine that humans have been given the capacity and hence the responsibility to determine their own actions. As Deuteronomy (30:19–20) puts it: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.”

Saint Augustine (354–430) wrote again and again that we “possess a will” and that “from this it follows that whoever desires to live righteously and honorably, can accomplish this.”⁴ The notion of free will, Augustine added, is entirely compatible with the doctrine that God knows ahead of time what choices we will make. Writing in refutation of Greek and Roman philosophers, he asserted “both that God knows all things before they come to pass, and that we do by our free will whatsoever we know and feel to be done by us only because we will it. But that all things come from fate we do not say; nay we affirm that nothing comes to pass by fate.”⁵ In other words, God knows what we will freely decide to do but does not interfere; it remains up to us to choose virtue or sin.

Augustine’s views were echoed across generations of Christian thought. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), for example, taught that “a man can direct and govern his own actions” and that “the rational creature participates in the divine providence not only in being governed but also in governing.”⁶

The idea of free will was not exclusive to the Judeo-Christian heritage. The Roman philosopher Cicero (106–43 BC) expressed views somewhat similar to Augustine’s.⁷ But for Jews and Christians, free will was not an

obscure philosophical matter. Rather, it was the fundamental principle of their faith, without which the Ten Commandments were nonsense. Thus both Moses and Jesus taught that each individual must atone for moral lapses precisely because these are *wrong choices*.

Being central to Jewish and Christian thought, the doctrine of free will called into question the legitimacy of social structures and customs that limited the individual's ability to choose freely—especially slavery and tyranny.

The Abolition of European Slavery

If each of us has free will and is to be judged by our actions freely taken, what is the duty of Christians with regard to another's freedom to act? As the church fathers pondered the implications of free will, they grew increasingly uncomfortable with the institution of slavery and, especially after the fall of Rome, opposed it.

The historical record shows that slavery is far older than the pyramids and has been universal to all societies sufficiently affluent to afford it, including many aboriginal societies: the American Indians of the Northwest, for example, had extensive slavery long before the arrival of Columbus.⁸ Moreover, according to the U.S. State Department's annual report, as many as twenty-seven million people around the world are exploited in modern slavery, most of them in Muslim nations and in central Africa.⁹

A slave is a human being who, in the eyes of the law and custom, is the possession, or chattel, of another human being or of a small group. Ownership of slaves entails absolute control, including the right to punish (and often to kill), to direct behavior, and to transfer ownership.

The existence of slavery is a function of human productivity. There will be a demand for slaves when the average person can produce sufficient surplus so that it becomes profitable to own them—when the costs of maintaining and controlling slaves are more than offset by their production. Slavery also can exist as a form of consumption, wherein sufficiently affluent people use slaves in nonproductive roles as personal servants, concubines, entertainers, and even bodyguards. Consumption slavery has been typical in Islamic societies.

All early empires made extensive use of slave labor. But as the classical scholar M. I. Finley explained, the Greeks and Romans achieved

the first truly “slave societies,” becoming highly dependent on “the large-scale employment of slave labor in both the countryside and the cities.”¹⁰ In fact, at the height of the empires, slaves may have outnumbered free citizens in both Athens and the city of Rome. There is no record that any voices were raised against slavery in either Greece or Rome.

Slavery began to decline in the latter days of the Roman Empire as a direct result of military weakness. No longer were victorious commanders dispatching throngs of prisoners to the slave markets. Since fertility was very low among Roman slaves, due both to privation and to a lack of women, their numbers declined.

But the successful military expeditions of the Germanic kingdoms produced a new source of slaves. Although no one really knows how many slaves were in Europe during, say, the sixth century, they seem to have been plentiful and their treatment was, if anything, harsher than in classical times. In the legal codes of the various Germanic groups that ruled in place of Roman governors, slaves were equated not with other humans but with animal livestock. Nevertheless, several centuries later slavery was on the way out.

Some historians insist that there was never an end to medieval slavery—that nothing happened other than a linguistic shift in which the word *slave* was replaced by the word *serf*.¹¹ These historians are the ones playing word games. Serfs were not chattel; they had rights and a substantial degree of discretion. They married whom they wished and their families were not subject to sale or dispersal. They paid rent and thus controlled their own time and the pace of their work.¹² If, as in some places, serfs owed their lords a number of days of labor each year, the obligation was limited and more similar to hired labor than slavery. Although serfs were bound to a lord by extensive obligations, so too was their lord bound by obligations to them.¹³ No one would argue that medieval peasants were free in the modern sense, but they were not slaves.

The brutal institution had essentially disappeared from Europe by the end of the tenth century. Although most recent historians agree with that conclusion, it remains fashionable to deny that Christianity had anything to do with it. As Robert Fossier put it, “The progressive elimination of slavery was in no way the work of Christian peoples. The Church preached resignation, promised equality in the hereafter . . . [and] felt no compunction about keeping large herds of animals with human faces.”¹⁴ Georges Duby also dismissed any church role in ending slavery: “Chris-

tianity did not condemn slavery; it dealt it barely a glancing blow.”¹⁵ According to such historians, slavery disappeared because it became an unprofitable and outdated “mode of production.”¹⁶ Even the Yale scholar Robert S. Lopez accepted this view, claiming that slavery ended only when technological progress such as the waterwheel “made slaves useless or unproductive.”¹⁷ In this view, the end of slavery was not a moral decision but one of self-interest on the part of the elite. That same argument has been made concerning the abolition of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Both claims are consistent with Marxist doctrine—but quite inconsistent with economic realities. Even as late as the start of the American Civil War, Southern slavery remained a profitable “mode of production.”¹⁸

The fact is that slavery pays. But it is equally true that slaves are not nearly as productive as self-interested individuals performing the same tasks in pursuit of their own economic gain. That is, *owners* benefit from the possession of slaves, but *societies* gain far more from a free workforce. For example, Rome had a far stronger economy (and army) before the small independent farmers were pushed out by the slave-based estates (*latifundia*). Consequently, overcoming slavery gave Europe an immense economic advantage over the rest of the world.

But economics was not the decisive factor. Slavery ended in medieval Europe *only* because the Church extended its sacraments to all slaves and then banned the enslavement of Christians (and of Jews). Within the context of medieval Europe, that prohibition was effectively a rule of universal abolition.

In the beginning, the Church asserted the legitimacy of slavery, but it did so with a certain ambiguity. Consider the most-cited New Testament passage on slavery. Writing to the Ephesians (6:5–9), Paul admonished: “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, in fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ . . . knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is slave or free.” Those who eagerly quote this passage seldom go on to quote the next verse: “Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.” That God treats all equally is fundamental to the Christian message: all may be saved. This encouraged the early Church to convert slaves and when possible to purchase their freedom—Pope Callistus (died 223) had himself been a slave.

So long as the Roman Empire stood, the Church continued to affirm the legitimacy of slavery. In 324 the Christian Council of Granges condemned anyone who encouraged discontent among slaves,¹⁹ which suggests, of course, that such activities were taking place. But tension grew between support for slavery and the emphasis on the equality of all in the eyes of God. With the demise of the empire, the Church extended its embrace to those in slavery, denying them only ordination into the priesthood. The historian Pierre Bonnassie expressed the matter as well as anyone: “A slave . . . was baptised [and] had a soul. He was, then, unambiguously a man.”²⁰ With slaves fully recognized as human and Christian, priests began to urge owners to free their slaves as an “infinitely commendable act” that helped ensure their own salvation.²¹ Surviving wills show many manumissions.

The doctrine that slaves were humans and not chattel had another important consequence: intermarriage. Despite being against the law in most of Europe, mixed unions seem to have been prevalent by the seventh century, usually involving free men and female slaves. The most celebrated of these unions took place in 649 when Clovis II, king of the Franks, married his British slave Bathilda. When Clovis died in 657, Bathilda ruled as regent until her eldest son came of age. Bathilda used her position to mount a campaign to halt the slave trade and to redeem those in slavery. Upon her death, the Church acknowledged Bathilda as a saint.

At the end of the eighth century Charlemagne opposed slavery, as did the pope and many other powerful clerical voices. As the ninth century dawned, Bishop Agobard of Lyons thundered: “All men are brothers, all invoke one same Father, God: the slave and the master, the poor man and the rich man, the ignorant and the learned, the weak and the strong. . . . None has been raised above the other. . . . There is no . . . slave or free, but in all things and always there is only Christ.”²² At the same time, Abbot Smaragde of Saint-Mihiel wrote in a work dedicated to Charlemagne: “Most merciful king, forbid that there should be any slave in your kingdom.”²³ Soon, no one “doubted that slavery in itself was against divine law,” as the historian Marc Bloch put it.²⁴ During the eleventh century both Saint Wulfstan and Saint Anselm campaigned to remove the last vestiges of slavery in Christendom, and, according to Bloch, “no man, no real Christian at any rate, could thereafter legitimately be held as the property of another.”²⁵

But exceptions remained, all of them involving extensive interaction with Islam. In Spain, Christian and Muslim armies continued to enslave one another's captives taken in battle, and slave trading involving northern Italian export firms and Muslim buyers persisted into the fifteenth century, in defiance of the Church. The number of slaves involved in this trade was small. They were purchased from Slavic tribes in the Caucasus (the word *slave* is a corruption of *Slav*). A few were kept as a form of luxury goods by wealthy Italians such as the Medici, but most were exported to Islamic lands—white slaves being “more precious than gold in trading with Egypt,” in Lopez's words.²⁶

Although this residual slave trade withered away, slavery reappeared with a vengeance in the New World. The Church responded vigorously, with sixteenth-century popes issuing a series of angry bulls against New World slavery. But the popes had no serious temporal power in this era, and their vigorous opposition was to no avail.²⁷

The theological conclusion that slavery is sinful has been unique to Christianity (although there are antislave passages in the Torah and several early Jewish sects rejected slavery).²⁸ In part this reflects the fact that it is possible for Christian theologians to propose new interpretations without engendering charges of heresy. So, for example, they could plausibly “correct” Saint Paul's understanding of God's will concerning slavery. By contrast, Buddhists, Confucianists, Hindus, and even Muslims reject the idea that sages or saints in times past may have had an imperfect understanding of religious truths. A second factor is that, of the major world faiths, only Judaism and Christianity have devoted serious and sustained attention to human rights, as opposed to human duties. Put another way, the other great faiths minimize individualism and stress collective obligations. They are, as the anthropologist Ruth Benedict so aptly put it, cultures of shame rather than cultures of guilt.²⁹ There is not even a word for freedom in the languages in which their scriptures are written.³⁰

As for Islam, there is an insuperable barrier to theological condemnations of slavery: Muhammad bought, sold, captured, and owned slaves.³¹ The Prophet did advise that slaves should be treated well: “Feed them what you eat yourself and clothe them with what you wear. . . . They are God's people like unto you and be kind unto them.”³² Muhammad also freed several of his slaves, adopted one as his son, and married another. In addition, the Qur'an teaches that it is wrong to “compel your slave girls to

prostitution” (24:33) and that one can gain forgiveness for killing a fellow believer by freeing a slave (4:92). But the fundamental morality of the institution of slavery was not in doubt—and widespread slavery continues in many Islamic nations.

New Democracies

Christian theology also provided the moral basis for the establishment of responsive regimes. But political freedom did not emerge throughout Christendom. Rather, it appeared first in a number of Italian city-states. Why? Because as these city-states expanded foreign trade, they dispersed political power among a set of well-matched interest groups: not only the aristocracy, the military, and the clergy but also merchants, bankers, manufacturers, and the workers’ guilds. Dozens of city-states in northern Italy separated power in this way. Let’s look at two case studies: Venice and Genoa.³³

Venice

Shielded by remarkable natural barriers and with unimpeded access to the sea, Venice fended off all Lombard efforts to subordinate it and instead became a province of the Byzantine Empire. This gave the growing city many commercial advantages, such as being free from Byzantine tolls or customs in its trade with the East. That commerce became increasingly important as Islam developed a trading network throughout the region, including Spain, Sicily, the toe of Italy, and North Africa. In fact, Venice probably was the first society to live by trade alone.³⁴

It also was a pioneer in the return of democracy. Distance, and growing Venetian sea power, made Byzantium’s sovereignty over Venice nominal at best. As far back as records go, Venice had been recognized as a dukedom and was administered by a duke, known as the *doge*. But Venice was unlike most other dukedoms in several ways. For one thing, the doge was not sustained by taxes or rents but owed his wealth to his active participation in commerce. The earliest known medieval reference to a monetary investment was in the will of Doge Giustiniano Partecipazio. When he died in 829, his estate included 1,200 pounds of “working *solidi*, if they come back safely from sea.”³⁵ Second, the position of doge was not hereditary (although sons sometimes followed their fathers). According

to Venetian tradition, even the very first doge was chosen by the “people,” and Venetians enjoyed substantial political freedom from earliest days. If the “people” did not include all inhabitants of Venice, they did make up a substantial number—all those having wealth, military responsibilities, or business establishments, or who were members of the clergy. And as time passed, the “people” became an increasingly inclusive group. Meanwhile, the power of the doge was gradually reduced as elected councils took greater authority, leading to what came to be known as the *commune*—made up of the body of citizens with voting rights and the executives and legislators elected by them.

Venice was not the first Italian city-state to develop a commune; that honor may belong to Pisa.³⁶ But by the middle of the twelfth century, Venice’s commune was in full operation, with five layers of government.³⁷ At the apex of this pyramid was the doge—a chief executive elected for life, but without regal pretensions, his powers being carefully limited by his oath of office. Below the doge was the Ducal Council, made up of six members, each representing a geographical area of Venice. Councilors were elected to serve a one-year term and could not be reelected until they had been out of office for two years. The councilors worked closely with the doge, who was required to gain their assent for major decisions. Beneath the council were the Forty and the Senate. The Forty were akin to a court of appeals, while the Senate consisted of sixty men who were particularly concerned with issues of commerce and foreign policy. The Forty and the Senate were selected from the Great Council (sometimes by election, sometimes by drawing lots), which also elected fleet commanders. Members of the Great Council, which often numbered more than a thousand, were selected from the General Assembly, which consisted of the thousands of voting Venetians. The General Assembly met irregularly, being summoned to ratify basic legislation and the choice of a new doge.

In early days, participation in Venetian politics was limited to various elites, but as time passed, and especially as Venice became a major manufacturing center as well as a trading port, the franchise was extended. The principal mechanism by which this was accomplished was by the organization of guilds—associations of persons engaged in a specific craft or trade. Guilds represented lawyers, physicians, glassblowers, apothecaries, jewelers, tailors, furriers, butchers, bakers, barbers, sailmakers, shopkeepers, and many others. Well organized and possessed of financial

resources, the guilds became such a significant political force that they were assigned representation in the councils, thus giving the masses a significant voice in government. To this was added the influence of religious confraternities—lay fellowships that featured religious devotions but that also provided for mutual aid, rather like a modern fraternal lodge.

Venice and the other leading medieval Italian city-states were by modern standards medium-sized towns—in the year 1000, Venice had a population of about thirty thousand, and most of the other city-states were considerably smaller.³⁸ Everyone knew everyone else, current public opinion was transparent, and consensus often was easily achieved. This, combined with relatively open political institutions, allowed Venice to sustain a substantial degree of freedom and responsive governance.

Genoa

Situated on the western side of Italy at the head of the Ligurian Sea, Genoa occupied a strategically important coastal strip of land, where the best land route from Rome to France and on to Spain passed. This location helped make Genoa the dominant port in the western Mediterranean (a position solidified when the city-state defeated Pisa in a huge sea battle in 1284).

Unlike Venice, which was essentially independent from the start, Genoa had been dominated by the Lombards and then sacked by Muslim raiders in 934–35.³⁹ But by the end of the eleventh century it had established itself as an independent city-state.

Initially, Genoa was ruled by a council of nobles in the tradition of the Roman Senate. But, as happened in Rome, an autocratic coalition took over. This resulted in two civil wars, from 1164 to 1169 and again from 1189 to 1194. Neither war produced a winner, but the immense costs of these conflicts—which disrupted commerce and led to the loss of overseas colonies—made it evident that both sides would benefit by finding a lasting political solution.⁴⁰ Although the political system Genoa adopted seems bizarre, it was fully in accord with modern game theory—and it worked.

Called the *podesteria*, the setup involved a sort of city manager—a non-Genoese *podestà* hired each year to be military commander, chief judge, and political administrator.⁴¹ Although an elected council of nobles selected the *podestà* and set policies and goals, during his one-year term the *podestà* had supreme authority and brought with him a com-

pany of soldiers and a set of judges. Neither the *podestà* nor his troops or judges were permitted to marry Genoans, to buy local property, or to engage in any commercial transactions, and at the end of the year he was required to leave and not return for several years. The system worked because the *podestà* had enough troops of his own so that combined with either Genoan faction he could defeat the other faction; at the same time, the *podestà* lacked sufficient troops to defeat either faction alone, preventing a dictatorship. This system worked so well that many other Italian communes adopted it.⁴²

The Genoan system of government became more democratic in 1257 after a rebellion by guilds and confraternities. The council was expanded to thirty-two members, four elected from each of the city's wards, each set of four being divided equally between the nobility and the people. In place of an outside *podestà* serving for a year, the council elected a "captain" to administer the commune for a ten-year term. The fact that the first man elected captain, Guglielmo Boccanegra, was a rich commoner suggests that the real basis for the creation of a more democratic regime was Genoa's booming commercial economy. From a tiny town having perhaps ten thousand residents in 1100, by 1250 Genoa had a population of about fifty thousand, making it one of the largest cities in Europe.⁴³

It needs to be emphasized that the Church vigorously advocated and defended democracy in northern Italy. Not only did the Church unequivocally assert moral equality, but it also ventured into the political arena, with bishops and cardinals playing a leading role on behalf of expanding the franchise.

Inventing Capitalism

Probably every leading textbook in introductory sociology gives substantial, positive coverage to Max Weber's famous thesis that Protestants invented capitalism, as he claimed in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5). But it isn't so! The rise of capitalism in Europe preceded the Reformation by centuries. In the 1970s the celebrated Fernand Braudel complained that Weber's "tenuous theory" had endured for decades even though "all historians have opposed" it and, more to the point, "it is clearly false." Braudel added, "The northern countries took over the place that earlier had so long and so brilliantly been occupied by

the old capitalist centers of the Mediterranean. They invented nothing, either in technology or in business management.⁴⁴ Even these northern centers of capitalism were Catholic, not Protestant, during their critical period of economic development—the Reformation still lay well into the future.

Why my fellow sociologists persist in embracing Weber's thesis can only be attributed to historical ignorance. But historians' common objections to Weber's thesis also need correction. Capitalism was not invented in the Italian city-states, for all that they were fully developed capitalist centers by the end of the eleventh century. Weber was correct in asserting that capitalism had religious roots. It was not, however, originated by Protestants: capitalism first appeared in the great Catholic monastic estates back in the ninth century.

On Capitalism

What *is* capitalism? Several thousand books have been written on the subject, but very few authors explain what they mean by the term *capitalism*.⁴⁵ This is not because no definition is needed;⁴⁶ it is because capitalism is difficult to define, having originated not as an economic concept but as a pejorative term used by nineteenth-century leftists to condemn wealth and privilege. To adapt the term for serious analysis is a bit like trying to make a social-scientific concept out of a *reactionary pig*.⁴⁷ Although it might be good strategy to let readers supply their own meaning of capitalism, it seems irresponsible to base any analysis on an undefined term. Therefore: *Capitalism is an economic system wherein privately owned, relatively well-organized, and stable firms pursue complex commercial activities within a relatively free (unregulated) market, taking a systematic, long-term approach to investing and reinvesting wealth (directly or indirectly) in productive activities involving a hired workforce and guided by anticipated and actual returns.*⁴⁸

The phrase *complex commercial activities* implies the use of credit, some degree of diversification, and little reliance on direct producer-to-consumer transactions. The term *systematic* implies adequate accounting practices. *Indirect* investment in productive activities extends the definition to include bankers and passive stockholders. The definition excludes profit-seeking ventures assembled for short-term activities, such as an elite-backed voyage by privateers or a one-shot trade caravan. It also excludes commerce conducted directly by the state or under extensive

state control (or exclusive license), such as foreign trade in ancient China or tax farming in medieval Europe. Undertakings based on coerced labor such as Roman slave-based industries are excluded too. Most of all, this definition excludes simple commercial transactions—the buying and selling that has gone on among merchants, traders, and the producers of commodities through the centuries around the world.

Capitalism rests on free markets, secure property rights, and free (uncoerced) labor.⁴⁹ Free markets are needed for firms to enter areas of opportunity, which is precluded when markets are closed or highly regulated by the state. Only if property rights are secure will people invest in pursuit of greater gains, rather than hide, hoard, or consume their wealth. Uncoerced labor is needed so firms can attract motivated workers or dismiss them in response to market conditions. Coerced labor not only lacks motivation but also may be difficult to obtain and hard to get rid of. The capacity to motivate work and the systematic reinvestment of profits account for the immense productivity of capitalism.

Christianity and the Rise of Capitalism

Why have so many scholars overlooked Christianity's influence on the rise of capitalism? One reason may be that the Bible often condemns greed and wealth ("For the love of money is the root of all evil").⁵⁰ Similarly, many early church fathers—endorsing a view prevalent in the Greco-Roman world—believed commerce to be a degrading activity that involves great moral risk: it is difficult to avoid sin in the course of buying and selling.⁵¹

But note that the Bible does not directly condemn commerce or merchants. Moreover, soon after the conversion of Constantine (312 BC) the Church ceased to be dominated by ascetics, and attitudes toward commerce began to mellow. Augustine's writings reflected this change. He taught that wickedness was not inherent in commerce but that, as with any occupation, it was up to the individual to live righteously.⁵² Augustine also gave legitimacy to free-trade practices when he ruled that price was a function not simply of the seller's costs but also of the buyer's desire for the item sold.

By the ninth century the Church was deeply involved in the earliest forms of capitalism.⁵³ Throughout the medieval era the Church was by far the largest landowner in Europe, and its liquid assets and annual income far surpassed not only those of the wealthiest king but probably

those of all of Europe's nobility added together.⁵⁴ In addition to receiving many gifts of land, most monastic orders reinvested wealth in buying or reclaiming more land. Many monasteries established fifty or more outposts; by the eleventh century the huge monastic center at Cluny may have had a thousand priories.⁵⁵

This period of great expansion was motivated in part by population growth and in even greater part by the immense increases in agricultural productivity.⁵⁶ Until this era the monastic estates were subsistence operations—they produced their own food, drink, and fuel; they made their own cloth and tanned their own leather; they maintained a smithy and often even a pottery. But as productivity increased, they began to specialize in particular crops or products. Some estates produced only wine, others grew grains, some raised cattle or sheep—the Cistercians at Fossanova specialized in raising fine horses.⁵⁷ The estates would engage in trade to secure their other needs. The rapid increase in agricultural surpluses also encouraged the founding and growth of towns and cities. Indeed, many of the monastic centers themselves became cities. Writing about the great monastery of St. Gall in Switzerland, Christopher Dawson noted that by 820 it was “no longer the simple religious community envisaged by the old monastic rules, but a vast complex of buildings, churches, workshops, store-houses, offices, schools and alms-houses, housing a whole population of dependents, workers and servants like the temple cities of antiquity.”⁵⁸

When estates grew into small cities and sustained many scattered outposts, and as they became specialized and dependent on trade, three important developments occurred. First, they evolved more sophisticated and far-seeing management. Unlike the nobility, the monasteries did not leave their affairs to the vagaries of inherited leadership. The essential meritocracy built into the orders ensured a succession of talented and dedicated administrators having the capacity to pursue plans of long duration. As Georges Duby put it, the new era forced monastic “administrators to turn their attention to the domestic economy, to reckon up, to handle figures, to calculate profits and losses, to think about ways and means of expanding production.”⁵⁹

Attendant to specialization was a second development, a shift from a barter to a cash economy. It simply was too complicated and unwieldy for a wine-making estate, say, to barter for its other needs, transporting goods hither and yon. It proved far more efficient to sell wine for cash and

then buy whatever was needed from the most convenient and economical sources. Beginning late in the ninth century, the reliance on cash spread, with the monks in Lucca (near Florence) perhaps the first to adopt a cash economy. The system was well established across Europe when, in 1247, a Franciscan chronicler wrote of his order's estate in Burgundy that the monks "do not sow or reap, nor do they store anything in barns, but they send wine to Paris, because they have a river right at hand that goes to Paris, and they sell for a good price, from which they get all their food and all of the clothes they wear."⁶⁰

The third development was credit. Barter does not lend itself to credit. The value of a future payment of, say, three hundred chickens can easily be disputed: are these to be old hens, roosters, or pullets? But the precise meaning of owing someone two ounces of gold is not in doubt. The great church estates began to extend one another monetary credit. Beyond that, as their incomes mounted, many monasteries and bishops became banks, lending to the nobility at interest. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries Cluny lent large sums at interest to various Burgundian nobles,⁶¹ while in 1071 the Bishop of Liège lent the incredible sum of 100 pounds of gold and 175 marks of silver to the Countess of Flanders and subsequently lent 1,300 marks of silver and 3 marks of gold to the Duke of Lower Lorraine. In 1044 the Bishop of Worms lent 20 pounds of gold and a large (unspecified) amount of silver to Emperor Henry III.⁶² By the thirteenth century, monastic lending often took the form of a *mort-gage* (literally, "dead pledge"), wherein the borrower pledged land as security and the lender collected all income from that land during the term of the loan and did not deduct this income from the amount owed.⁶³

As University of Pennsylvania sociologist Randall Collins noted, the economic system that developed in this era was not merely a sort of proto-capitalism involving only the "institutional preconditions for capitalism, . . . but a version of the developed characteristics of capitalism itself." Collins referred to this as "religious capitalism," adding that the "dynamism of the medieval economy was primarily that of the Church."⁶⁴

The Church's bursting treasuries had another effect. Monks began to leave their fields, hiring a labor force that proved more productive.⁶⁵ Thus, as "religious capitalism" unfolded, more monks worked as executives and foremen. In this way, the medieval monasteries came to resemble modern firms—well administered and quick to adopt the latest technological advances.⁶⁶

The arrangement also allowed monks to retire into liturgical work, where they conducted endless paid Masses for souls in purgatory and for living benefactors who wished to improve their fates in the next world. Monks now enjoyed leisure.

The advent of leisure for clergy and other church officials had a profound impact on the rise of the West, for, as will be seen, in the centuries to come church figures played key roles in advancing science, economics, and learning.

The Virtue of Work

Just as important as these economic developments were changes in attitudes toward work that Christianity inspired. Notions of the dignity of labor were incomprehensible in ancient Rome or any other precapitalist society. Traditional societies celebrated consumption while holding work in contempt. In China, for example, the Mandarins grew their fingernails as long as they could (even wearing silver sheaths to protect them from breaking) to make it evident that they did no labor. Capitalism required and encouraged a remarkably different attitude, one that saw work as intrinsically virtuous. Max Weber identified this as the Protestant ethic, so-called because he believed it to be absent from Catholic culture. But Weber was wrong.

Belief in the virtues of work arose centuries before Martin Luther was born.⁶⁷ Despite the fact that many, perhaps even most, monks and nuns were from the nobility and wealthiest families,⁶⁸ they honored work not only in theological terms but also by actually doing it. In Randall Collins's words, they "had the Protestant ethic without Protestantism."⁶⁹

In the sixth century Saint Benedict made evident the virtue of work, writing in his famous *Rule*: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as prayerful reading. . . . When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monks."⁷⁰ In the fourteenth century Walter Hilton, the English Augustinian, wrote, "By the discipline of the physical life we are enabled for spiritual effort."⁷¹ This commitment to manual labor distinguishes Christian asceticism from that found in the other great religious cultures, where piety is associated with rejection of the world and its activities. Eastern holy men, for example, specialized in meditation and lived by charity, whereas most medieval Christian monastics lived by their own labor, sustaining highly

productive estates. Being of the world sustained a healthy concern with economic affairs. Although the Protestant-ethic thesis was wrong, capitalism was indeed linked to a Christian ethic.

Thus it was that, beginning about the ninth century, the growing monastic estates came to resemble “well-organized and stable firms” that pursued “complex commercial activities within a relatively free market,” investing in “productive activities involving a hired workforce,” “guided by anticipated and actual returns.” If this was not capitalism in all its glory, it was certainly close enough.

A Theological Revolution

Just as Augustine’s teachings had marked a shift in Christian attitudes toward commerce, Christian theologians who witnessed the growing economic activities of the great religious orders began to think anew about doctrines concerning profits and interest. In this way, the Church made its peace with early capitalism many centuries before there were any Protestants.

The Church had long opposed charging interest, a position inherited from the Jews. The basis for this doctrine was the Old Testament passage Deuteronomy 23:19–20, which admonishes: “You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest.”⁷²

Of course, the prohibition in Deuteronomy did not necessarily bar Christians from charging interest, since they were not Israelites. But the words of Jesus in Luke 6:34 were taken to prohibit interest: “If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.”

Interest on loans was thus defined as the sin of usury. As Benjamin Nelson wrote in his history of usury, as late as the Second Lateran Council in 1139 the Church “declared the unrepentant usurer condemned by the Old and New Testaments alike and, therefore, unworthy of ecclesiastical consolations and Christian burial.”⁷³ But while widely condemned in principle, charging interest was pretty much ignored in practice. That is what allowed some of the great religious houses to venture into banking

late in the ninth century. Likewise, bishops became second only to the nobility in their reliance on borrowed money. Many secured loans from private Italian banks that enjoyed the full approval of the Vatican. Documents from 1215 show that the Papal Court itself had usurers from whom prelates could obtain loans.⁷⁴

Still, more traditional clergy continued to condemn usury and, more broadly, the pursuit of profit. Augustine may have approved of prices set on a free market, but were there no moral limits to profit margins?

During the thirteenth century Christian theologians declared that profits were morally legitimate. Echoing Augustine, Saint Albertus Magnus proposed that the “just price” is simply what “goods are worth according to the estimation of the market at the time of sale.”⁷⁵ That is, a price is just if that is what uncoerced buyers are willing to pay. Adam Smith could not have found fault with this definition. Magnus’s student Thomas Aquinas likewise recognized that worth is not really an objective value—“the just price of things is not absolutely definite”—but is a function of the buyer’s desire for the thing purchased and the seller’s willingness or reluctance to sell. Aquinas’s respect for market forces is best revealed by his story about a merchant who brings grain to a country suffering a famine and who knows that other merchants soon will bring much more grain to this area. Is it sinful for him to sell at the prevailing, high market price, or should he inform the buyers that soon more grain will arrive, thus causing the price to decline? Aquinas concluded that this merchant can, in good conscience, keep quiet and sell at the current high price.

Aquinas was less clear about interest on loans. In some writings he condemned all interest as the sin of usury; in other passages he accepted that lenders deserved compensation, although he was fuzzy as to how much and why.⁷⁶ But many of Aquinas’s contemporaries, especially the Canonists, were not so cautious. With the commercial economy rapidly expanding, they began detailing exceptions wherein interest charges were not usurious.⁷⁷ For example, if a productive property such as an estate was given as security for a loan, the lender could take all the production during the period of the loan and not deduct it from the amount owed.⁷⁸ Also, a lender could be compensated for the opportunity cost of not having the money available for other commercial opportunities.⁷⁹ In this same spirit it was deemed proper to charge interest for goods bought on credit.⁸⁰ Banks could not make straight loans at a fixed rate of interest

because such deals would involve no “adventure of the principal.” But it took little finesse for bankers to evade this prohibition by trading notes, bills of exchange, or currencies in ways that seemed adventuresome but that in fact had predictable returns.⁸¹ In short, *usury* had become essentially an empty term.

Thus, by no later than the thirteenth century the leading Christian theologians had fully debated the primary aspects of emerging capitalism—profits, property rights, credit, lending, and the like. As the historian Lester K. Little summed up: “In each case they came up with generally favorable, approving views, in sharp contrast to the attitudes that had prevailed for six or seven centuries right up to the previous generation.”⁸² Capitalism was freed from all fetters of faith.⁸³

It was a remarkable shift. After all, most of these theologians had taken vows of poverty, and most of their predecessors had held merchants and commercial activities in contempt. Other religions, too, condemned paying interest on loans, and they did not so dramatically revise their positions. In Islam, for example, the Qur’an (2:275) condemns all interest (*riba*) on borrowed money. Although medieval Muslims often ignored prohibitions on lending money at interest, this was almost exclusively to fund consumption, not for investment.⁸⁴ Religious opposition to interest, combined with the avarice of repressive regimes, prevented capitalism from arising in Islam—and still does.⁸⁵

So what accounts for the theological revolution in Christianity? The shift occurred because the great monastic orders had begun actively participating in free markets. This direct experience caused monastic theologians to reconsider the morality of commerce. Of course, officials in the church hierarchy were far worldlier than those in religious orders. Few holding higher church positions had taken vows of poverty, and many displayed a taste for profligate living. As we saw in chapter 5, many church officials purchased their positions—sometimes before being ordained or even baptized!⁸⁶ The worldly aspects of the medieval Church were an endless source of scandal and conflict, culminating in the Reformation. But they paid serious dividends in the development of capitalism. The Church didn’t stand in the way; in fact, it justified and even played an active role in the commercial revolution of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁸⁷ Had this not occurred, the West may have ended up like the nations of Islam.

Capitalist City-States

Although capitalism developed in the great monastic estates, it soon found a receptive setting in the newly democratic Italian city-states. In the tenth century these city-states emerged as the banking and trading centers of Europe. Subsequently they industrialized and began producing a large volume of manufactured goods for export across the Mediterranean and to northern Europe and the British Isles. For example, eyeglasses (for nearsightedness as well as farsightedness) were mass-produced by plants in both Florence and Venice, and tens of thousands of pairs were exported annually.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Italian capitalism was the rapid perfection of banking. The Italian bankers quickly developed and adopted double-entry bookkeeping. To facilitate trade, they invented bills of exchange, making it possible to transfer funds on paper rather than transporting coins or precious metal over long distances, which was both difficult and dangerous. Italian bankers also initiated insurance to guard against loss of long-distance shipments by land or sea. Perhaps the most important of all the Italian banking innovations was the perfection of modern arithmetic, based on the adoption of Hindu-Arabic numerals and the concept of zero. Even addition and subtraction were daunting chores for Romans, given their cumbersome numeral system. The new system was revolutionary in terms of its ease and accuracy. Arithmetic schools sprang up in all the leading northern Italian city-states, eventually enrolling students from as far away as northern Europe.⁸⁸

Banks proliferated. By the thirteenth century there were 38 independent banks in Florence, 34 in Pisa, 27 in Genoa, 18 in Venice—a combined total of 173 in the leading Italian city-states.⁸⁹ Most of these Italian banks had foreign branches, too. In 1231 there were 69 Italian banking branches operating in England and nearly as many in Ireland. In fact, until well into the fifteenth century every bank in western Europe was either in Italy or was a branch of an Italian bank.⁹⁰

The proximate cause of the rise of Italian capitalism was freedom from the rapacious rulers who repressed and consumed economic progress in most of the world, including most of Europe. Although their political life often was turbulent, these city-states were true republics able to sustain the freedom capitalism requires. Second, centuries of technological progress had laid the necessary foundations for the rise of capitalism,

especially the agricultural surpluses needed to sustain cities and to permit specialization. In addition, Christian theology encouraged the idea of progress, which justified long-term investment strategies, and provided moral justifications for the business practices fundamental to capitalism.

The Freedom Factor

If there is a single factor responsible for the rise of the West, it is freedom. Freedom to hope. Freedom to act. Freedom to invest. Freedom to enjoy the fruits of one's dreams as well as one's labor.

So much of that freedom emerged during the so-called Dark Ages. The ramifications would be felt for centuries to come.

