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# [1] *FROM ROME TO THE CAROLINGIANS*

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## *THE ROMAN EMPIRE AND ITS LEGACY*

Few human creations have ever marked memory so strongly as the Roman empire. Its relics, above all its astonishingly durable buildings and other structures, are still physically present in some quantity across much of western Europe. Classical culture and the Latin language have proved still more enduring and influential throughout the West until very recent times. Any history of this region across the *longue durée* can hardly start anywhere else, unless it is to delve back into the long ages before written records begin. It may therefore seem rather perverse that this book should take the fall of the western empire as its starting point, rather than some earlier moment such as Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul. This choice certainly does not help with chronological precision, because only the most literal-minded would now think that the deposition in 476 of the last emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus, amounted to a dramatic change. In reality the empire disintegrated very slowly over many decades, by such imperceptible stages that many among its elites hardly seem to have noticed. Historical periodisation now recognises this through the ingenious notion of Late Antiquity, a period stretching roughly from the so-called imperial crisis of the third century AD to the onset of the Carolingian age some four centuries later. The use of this era as a springboard turns out to have great advantages, because it allows us to probe the relationship between the empire and the 'barbarian' kingdoms that succeeded it and to understand many paradoxical or surprising features of this transition.

It was powerful internal dynamics, not any conscious plan, which drove Roman power to the boundaries reached in the first century AD. The essential reason why expansion then stopped was that the regions beyond the *limes* offered very little in the way of tangible rewards, while the level of social

organisation in most of them was too primitive to facilitate either conquest or control. It can also be argued that although the empire included vast tracts of territory north of the Alps, stretching to the frontier zones along the Danube and the Rhine, only Gallia Narbonensis, the southernmost part of modern France, was truly an integral part of what remained essentially a Mediterranean empire and economic system. There was indeed a remarkable level of uniformity at one level, notably in a thousand cities equipped with similar institutions and sets of public buildings, which also shared a common culture that underpinned civilian ruling elites. The association of *Romanitas* with status, wealth and power was a very strong glue holding the empire together, which worked in parallel with the devolution of most functions to provincials and the toleration of a huge variety of local arrangements. An advanced material culture, relatively well-developed communication and trade structures and an overarching legal system were further impressive aspects of the Roman world, even at its peripheries. The emperor Constantine and his successors brought a new factor into play in the fourth century with the adoption of Christianity as a state religion, possessing great potential as a cohesive force. Where Edward Gibbon famously saw this as a fatal step towards the dissolution of the empire, modern historians take a much more positive view. By this time, however, other problems had long been threatening to undermine the *pax Romana*, and we may reasonably think that one crisis or another must eventually have proved fatal.

The Roman world may have offered a strikingly good deal to its ruling elites, but the view from the underside would have been much less attractive. Slavery and other forms of personal subjection remained widespread; even if we cannot readily measure their extent, it is clear that the labouring population in general was exposed to high rates of surplus extraction. Outside a few (admittedly impressive) industries this remained a fairly primitive economy in productive terms, so the cultured lifestyles of the few rested on the enforced toil of the many. Just as significantly, so did their protection against the constant threats from outside the *limes*. All the other aspects of empire could only exist because the legions patrolled the frontiers and stood ready to contain, then repel, any serious incursions by hostile armies. The maintenance of a permanent professional army required high levels of taxation; although we know too little about tax rates and the local economies on which they had an impact, their oppressive nature is hardly in doubt. The army also lay at the heart of a command economy, because large quantities of foodstuffs, clothing, consumer goods and weapons had to be moved to the frontier zones to supply the troops and their families. It seems likely that the commercial and communications systems that sustained the urban consumer culture across the empire were to a large extent parasitic on this military exchange system. Official Roman coinage was primarily required in order to pay soldiers and run the tax system, while it is doubtful how far it provided a medium of commercial exchange for the broader economy. Many important levies were indeed made in kind. Since the state had not managed to construct anything significant by way of a borrowing facility, it was very vulnerable to short-term fluctuations in tax receipts. The only immediate technique to meet shortfalls

was debasement of the currency, a disastrous expedient from which later emperors did their best (not of course enough) to abstain.

Until sometime in the second century AD, the political and military systems had largely worked together as agencies of Romanisation. The emperors were drawn from the immensely rich senatorial aristocracy, which was primarily based in Italy, while the citizen peasantry still provided one major source of recruitment for legionaries. Dramatic changes in these arrangements can be linked to the Marcomannian Wars along the Danube frontier, which began in 166, and these conflicts in their turn must be related back to the Roman impact on 'Free Germany', the tribal societies beyond the *limes*. When the Romans first encountered this society, it was made up of small patriarchal units, which lived by subsistence agriculture and stock-raising. Low-level violence, mostly in the forms of feuding and cattle raiding, was endemic; it was almost a natural condition of existence in the Germanic world. Larger groupings, from the kindred up to the tribe, were fissile and unstable, although they provided forms of mediation that kept violence under some degree of check. A still more unpredictable element also existed, in the form of war-bands of young unattached males that formed around individual leaders. This was not at all the kind of society with which Romans were comfortable, as their occasional attempts to describe the barbarians reveal, but in its original state it was not likely to pose anything beyond modest and intermittent challenges to the military might of the empire. More serious problems arose as Roman wealth and goods flowed over the frontiers, creating much sharper social divisions, alongside a more deliberate policy of supporting client kingships just across the great river boundaries. In the absence of written sources, we can detect the movement of goods from archaeological finds and perceive that some kind of major turmoil was taking place by the later second century across virtually the whole region bounded by the Rhine, the Danube and the Baltic. Tribes and bands from the interior were on the move, pressing on the client kings and generating new confederations of unprecedented size. Large armies of barbarians repeatedly crossed the Danube, raiding as far as northern Italy, so that some twenty years of sustained military effort were required to contain them.

These were warning signs of a more fundamental shift, which would be played out over many centuries. At the start of the first millennium, the Mediterranean world was vastly more advanced in its social, political and economic structures than the lands to the north of the Alps. The conquest of Gaul and southern Britain had brought the more developed regions into the empire, even if they always remained somewhat marginal, leading to significant advances in productivity and what we think of as civilisation. Whether or not because of proximity and cross-influence, Germanic society also underwent radical changes, most of which can only be reconstructed from the archaeological evidence. In essence a considerably more intensive agriculture evolved, linked to a major upswing in the population and to the availability of surpluses that could be appropriated by warlords to fund greatly expanded retinues. More powerful kings and larger political units naturally followed, while a great increase in metalworking provided weapons and luxury goods. German confederations were still unstable, and the Romans proved skilful in exploiting this

to undermine dangerously successful leaders. In the long run, however, the empire would have to raise its game significantly if it was to keep its boundaries safe against these increasingly powerful and predatory neighbours. Such adjustments were all the more necessary because the relatively wealthy client states along the borders were themselves now targets for migratory groups from the outer regions, although these incomers would not yet have had the strength to confront Roman power directly. The character of these migrations was particular; Germanic leaders could only assemble viable armies by including warriors from the free peasantry, so dependants had to accompany their menfolk in great waggon trains. The kind of pressures that would eventually lead to imperial collapse were taking shape on a smaller scale on the periphery, contributing to extensive changes in the late empire that were driven by the frontier situation (Figure 1.1).

Over the ninety years between the assassination of the emperor Commodus (193) and the emergence of Diocletian (284–305), the balance of power within the empire swung abruptly in favour of the army, from whose ranks a long succession of largely unsuccessful emperors emerged. These men needed to buy loyalty, so resources were poured into the frontier areas, where the legions now recruited almost wholly among the local populations and from the barbarians. Diocletian's reforms brought a new period of stability, at the cost of higher taxation and the further militarisation of society north of the Alps. Although his



**Figure 1.1** Porta Nigra, Trier. This impressive city gate exemplifies the grandeur of Trier as the Roman capital north of the Alps.

division of the empire into western and eastern halves was temporarily reversed under Constantine, this partial separation made sense in many ways and would soon become permanent. The armies mutated further during the fourth century to include very substantial groups of barbarian federates under their own leaders, Germanic officers who adopted Roman culture and values, then became major players in the power politics of the imperial court. No longer the agents of Romanisation, the military had become a force for the barbarisation of the empire, even if the barbarians in question saw themselves as loyal Romans. At the same time, this policy was in its own way a notable success and cannot be seen as the main reason for the gradual collapse of the empire in the fifth century.

It was again the vulnerable Danubian frontier that gave way from the 370s onward, under the intense pressure created by the appearance of the Huns, nomadic warriors who would ultimately draw (or force) many other tribes into a vast if ephemeral conglomerate under their leadership. Even when the Huns were still based in the Caucasus, their raids seem to have induced various tribal entities with previous Roman connections to migrate across the borders as large groups complete with women and children, seeking protection and employment. The last thing any of these would-be allies wanted was the destruction of the empire under whose wing they sought shelter, but their ambiguous presence would in the long run destabilise it beyond repair. The appearance of the Huns was crucial because it drove such a large number of Germanic leaders to take the enormous risk of entering Roman territory within a short time span, swamping the defences and creating an unprecedented situation. The Gothic tribes who banded together to win the battle of Adrianople (378) ultimately coalesced into a loose grouping known as the Visigoths, which a weakened empire could neither assimilate nor destroy. Although in 405–6 another Gothic force was defeated in Italy, this time simultaneous incursions across the Rhine by Vandals, Suevi, Alans and Burgundians were far more successful.

There are serious drawbacks to the idea of ‘barbarian invasions’, because the term risks giving rise to many false impressions. The empire was not swept away by some tidal wave of pagan Germanic tribes, bursting over the great rivers and displacing the local inhabitants. Although some of the intruding groups were certainly quite large – the Visigoths who were permitted to settle in Aquitaine may have numbered 100,000 or more, including women and children – they were insignificant when set against the indigenous populations. The biggest confederations just east of the Rhine, the Alemanni and the Franks, took little if any part in the invasions. These groups seem to have been powerful enough to protect their own territories against the migrants and were probably enjoying the relaxation of Roman pressure evident from the 390s onward, so they had little motive to take such risks. Most of those who did cross the borders were at least nominally Christian, despite a tendency to favour the Arian heresy and deny the full divinity of Christ. Nor did the invaders burn and slash their way across the whole landscape, although they plainly had very damaging effects in some areas; if significant parts of the empire suffered serious economic damage, this often seems to have resulted from longer-term exploitation by groups who only migrated at intervals. On a broad scale, there was an extensive process of assimilation; as the elites of more distant provinces lost touch with Rome, and with the patronage

system of the imperial court, their political horizons changed and narrowed. It might even be argued that the situation in some regions was little more than an extension of conditions that had long prevailed in the militarised frontier zones, with local elites brought into sharp contact with the culture of the Roman military as it had become by AD 400. A new political order resulted, as these elites formed alliances with the warlords who were the only available source of military protection. Old civil institutions ceased to mediate between the military leaders and civilian society, leaving no clear boundary between legitimate and illegitimate use of force. Groups like the Visigoths, granted an area for their support, rapidly extended their power far beyond the assigned limits. Regional capitals emerged, while the warlords sought to hold their followings together by a stress on ethnicity, reversing the value system of the Roman imperial culture. There was something very artificial about this, because the groupings were far from sealed, recruiting in a fairly promiscuous fashion as what had been separate barbarian forces sought safety in numbers, and also by deals with the existing local elites. Older notions about the ethnic origins of modern European nations are therefore simply untenable in the light of current knowledge.

The settlement of large barbarian war-bands and their camp followers within the empire could hardly be a comfortable process; the scale was unprecedented, while the men were no longer assimilated by service in the Roman armies. For several decades, the imperial leadership would only negotiate with them under duress and made intermittent efforts to eliminate them by force. This can only have worsened the position of those among whom they were encamped; the massive tax reductions granted to regions traversed by Goths and Vandals refute any suggestion that there was little by way of barbarian violence. The shock administered by Alaric and his Goths when they sacked Rome in 410 was only part of their devastating effect on the Italian heartland. Even so, from the Italian perspective, the virtual abandonment of much of the north to the invaders after that time might have looked a limited success, because there were to be no more problems of barbarian invasion or civil war until the middle of the fifth century, and barbarian federates probably seemed safer than local commanders who could use their legions in bids for the imperial title. This was of course an illusion, as became evident when a moderately successful Roman attempt to drive the Vandals and Alans out of Spain in the 420s precipitated their successful invasion of North Africa, the ultimate migration of the whole period. The loss of this crucial economic powerhouse by 439 probably marked the moment at which the western empire was past saving, with its tax revenues so reduced that its armies became a shadow of their former selves (Figure 1.2).

### *THE SUCCESSOR STATES; MEROVINGIANS AND OTHERS*

The empire progressively broke up into smaller units, with simplified internal structures. An increasingly ghostly imperial presence did, however, persist for several decades, during which the new local rulers behaved rather like provincial



**Figure 1.2** Roman wall, Le Mans. As the northern empire became unstable, city fortifications were strengthened, and extraordinarily durable walls like this one survive quite widely, as in Colchester.

governors, applying Roman law with expert advice but not issuing law codes or claiming independent sovereignty. They avoided putting their images on coins, perhaps in line with their attempts to secure recognition and support from Constantinople. When law codes did finally appear they had much to do with the interface between the newcomers and provincial society, along which a hybrid elite emerged. Then two major new powers appeared in the West at the end of the fifth century. Superficially the more impressive was the kingdom of Italy established by Theoderic the Ostrogoth after 488, at the end of another major migration by an inconvenient group of Roman allies. Everything we know suggests that Theoderic was a notably skilful politician, able to maintain a working relationship with the eastern empire while building an extensive power base in the West, which eventually extended across much of southern Gaul and Spain. Here he was able to co-opt both the native elites and other Germanic groups, while he exploited much of the old imperial rhetoric and symbolism. On the other hand, this was a largely personal creation, resting on distinctly fragile compromises. Once its leader had died (526), it would soon collapse, under the dual pressures of an internal succession struggle and an assault by the forces of the emperor Justinian. This attempt to reunite eastern and western empires would ultimately fail, but only after a long period of fighting which completed the devastation of Italy and left the peninsula politically fragmented. A more insidious process in northern Gaul saw the Franks, a

recent assemblage of Germanic tribes who had previously been mostly loyal Roman clients, move from their territories in the region of the modern Netherlands into the vacuum left by imperial retreat. Since they faced little organised opposition, this did not require the kind of concentrated migration seen elsewhere, nor a single leader, so a plethora of little Frankish kings appeared. Only from the late 470s did Clovis begin his blood-stained drive towards domination over all these rivals, to establish the Merovingian kingship (named after the alleged founder of the dynasty) that became the first durable replacement for Roman power.

Despite his defeat of the Visigoths in 507, Clovis prudently refrained from any open challenge to the Ostrogothic kingdom. Whether or not he could have guessed it, time and geography were on the Frankish side, because after Justinian's invasion of Italy no Mediterranean power would ever again have the resources or the motivation to intervene effectively north of the Alps. For brief moments over the next century, the rulers in Constantinople might have dreamed in such terms; once the Islamic conquests had reduced them to the status of a merely regional power any such notions were dead. This was a truly epochal moment, when northwestern Europe found itself free to develop its own dynamic, even if it was still far from being strong enough to reverse the ancient polarity and dominate its southern neighbours. Meanwhile the seismic movements of peoples that had brought down Rome were being followed by some highly significant aftershocks in east-central Europe. Here, where Germanic peoples had previously occupied vast territories stretching into the borderlands of modern Russia, new waves of Slav migrants pushed westwards; over three or four centuries from around 500, they were to advance as far as the river Elbe, Bohemia and the Balkans, bringing their language and their culture with them. Numerically impressive though the German migrations across the *limes* may have been, over the whole period they probably only involved numbers towards the lower end of the range between half a million and a million individuals. They had certainly not emptied the lands they left of peasant farmers or even local rulers, so largely invisible (to us) processes of conquest, domination and assimilation must have been taking place across most of the eastern sections of the Great North European Plain.

Although there were to be further important migrations over future centuries, these would only affect the ethnic and linguistic frontiers in relatively modest ways, so that the patterns established by the great shifts linked to the fall of Rome are still visible today. It is vital to understand that in none of the regions where we can know something about the process did invaders ever end up constituting a majority of the population. Modern DNA studies confirm other findings here to emphasise the extreme 'stickability' of the peasantry across the continent, perhaps even back beyond the Bronze Age. This was also true in one important region not mentioned so far, the British Isles. The collapse of *Romanitas* (notably that of cities and villas) in England and Wales was rapid and much more total than elsewhere, but this had little to do with any major incursions by Anglo-Saxon warriors. It looks rather as if old

tribal structures, co-opted rather than destroyed by the Romans, reappeared in the form of petty kingdoms which were not averse to hiring some foreign military muscle. Only very gradually, by the later sixth century, had the intruders taken over control across most of England, in the process achieving sufficient political and economic dominance to impose their language and culture on the majority. This probably required migrations amounting to no more than 10–20% of the overall population, crucially including the women-folk who had a vital role in language transfer between the generations. Scotland and Ireland, never subjugated by the Romans, retained their own native structures, as did much of Wales. For a long time to come, the British Isles would be characterised by a much higher level of fragmentation than generally prevailed on the continent, while their religious history would also follow some particular – and highly diverse – trajectories.

The transformation of Christianity from the faith of persecuted minorities in the age of Diocletian to the dominant creed of the late empire and many of its ‘barbarian’ clients was an extraordinary story, which cannot be retold here. What can be said is that the later history of Europe is simply unimaginable without this key development and the equally astounding fashion in which the church not merely survived but came to dominate so many aspects of the medieval West. It would perhaps be better to speak of the churches, because this was anything but a coherent or disciplined institution, in an age when the pope was little more than the bishop of the city of Rome. As changes under the late empire stripped away most of the power previously held by the civic elites, so the bishops emerged ever more clearly as the natural leaders of urban communities. Their recruitment from among the dominant local families, with its implication of wide political links and high educational standards, reinforced an authority that could also draw on sacral power and wider popular support. It seems clear that Constantine and his successors favoured Christianity precisely because of its potential to buttress authority and promote stability. Once the invaders arrived the bishops’ prestige rose still higher, as the natural negotiators and intercessors for their cities. The conversion of Clovis, although undatable and shrouded in later myth, can still stand as witness to the powerful attraction the church could exert on ambitious rulers. A mystery cult that had drawn its adherents mostly from the lower strata of society had rapidly mutated into a creed for the powerful, one that aligned secular and religious hierarchies and promised military success as the reward for adherence. In the process, the emperors and their clerical allies had been driven to confront the chaotic and contradictory elements within Christian theology, which had spawned so many vicious disputes in the fourth and fifth centuries; this kind of endless debate was simply incompatible with the new role ascribed to the church. The great theologians of late Antiquity, with St Augustine at their head, sought to establish a single Christian truth to which all must subscribe. What this came to mean was the triumph of faith over reason, inaugurating many centuries when intellectual activity was constrained within theological limits.

There is a striking congruence between the regions where Latin remained the dominant language and those where Christianity prospered after the fall of Rome, with mainland Britain as the most obvious case where both went into precipitate retreat. Yet this everyday lived Christianity was a notably diverse and localised phenomenon, which tended to incorporate pagans and their customs rather than converting them outright; the High God was widely expected to co-exist with a multiplicity of other unseen powers in what amounted to a polytheistic compromise. One might even think that the churches were themselves creating such alternative sources of power on a grand scale. The saintly dead, with their specific associations and their shrines, acted as the foci for intense local loyalties. Peter Brown has shown us a world of 'fertile religious experimentation', in which the bishops guarded the reputations of 'their' saints and promoted belief in the power of relics. These bishops were also encouraging almsgiving and donations, both for communal activities and to enhance the splendours of their churches, with wealth lavished on saints who were expected to operate a magical transfer to heaven on behalf of the donors. As the old Roman civic glories faded away, the contrast between major cathedrals and churches and all other buildings must have become spectacular, with their richly decorated interiors as almost literal gateways to heaven. A rival form of sacred powerhouse was rapidly emerging, however, as monasteries and convents multiplied, embodiments of belief in the collective power of prayer as exercised by groups of holy ascetics. Royal and aristocratic women, in particular, could operate in this context to generate supernatural support for kingdoms and great aristocratic families.

As the churches became integrated with the systems of social and political power, so they attracted enormous donations, above all of land. Even if some of these were less permanent than might have been thought, so that clerical holdings might function as a kind of land-bank for kings and their great subjects, the massive enrichment of the clergy was one of the great phenomena of the age, with lasting effects. There was a close link between gift-giving and monasticism, because those who gave could benefit from holiness and enhance the symbolic glory of the sacred, while maintaining a profane lifestyle. Such relationships emphasised the aristocratic character of a religion whose principal rewards went to those who could make and reciprocate gifts, in order to obtain privileged access to the sacred. Over the sixth and seventh centuries, western Christianity took on a social and economic character it would retain into relatively modern times, while it also developed a matching theology. New ideas about sin, atonement and the other world brought with them an emphasis on the individual person and his or her fate after death. The Mass became linked to the deliverance of the soul, and confession with penance as the remedy for sin, opening the way for the slow emergence of the doctrine of purgatory. Sin and repentance as universal principles also explained the successes and disasters of kingdoms. These trends meant that the care of souls became a language of power, as lay rulers sought to demand higher standards of behaviour from the governing classes, in order to ensure divine favour. As the memory of Rome faded, it ceased to be the dominant model, in a world of warrior kingdoms that found the past of the Old

Testament much better fitted to their needs. The church promoted the ideal of a moral king who won his battles, protected his people, was just and generous and listened to his bishops.

This highly successful nexus of religion, wealth and power made Christianity irresistible to the kings of the successor states to Rome, and by the end of the seventh century the regional kings of Anglo-Saxon England would join the club. Matters were very different among the sturdily independent peasant farmers of Saxony and their counterparts elsewhere in northern Europe; here the associations of Christianity with hierarchy and control would long promote loyalty to local deities, as numerous missionaries found to their cost. The situation among the rural populations of the West is hard to assess accurately, given the absence of parish structures at a time when local churches were still very rare. Although miracle stories and other sources confirm the obvious point that peasants flocked to shrines and holy men for assistance with their problems, they would also suggest that they had resort to plenty of other more dubious sources of supernatural power. The imposition of basic Christian beliefs and practices in the countryside would largely be a work for the future, carried on over many centuries. Meanwhile the church attained an effective monopoly over education, so that clerics became essential servants for any ruler, as specialists in literacy and bureaucratic skills. One accidental but crucial result was that monastic scriptoria acted as the vital conduit through which much of the literature and philosophy of the classical world survived, as the old non-military elites vanished and took the secular educational system with them. Such copying of texts did not, however, mean that the ancient heritage was used in any positive fashion; at the most it was mined for examples that could be fitted into a Christian context.

The shift to the domination of a military aristocracy constituted a massive change in political culture, one that would last for more than a thousand years. It went along with the replacement of the Roman tax-raising state by one based on landowning elites with military obligations. This implied a much weaker state, for two major reasons. Tax-raising states are usually much richer than land-based ones, and only at certain high points could even the Frankish kings match the wealth of those Mediterranean states that had retained taxation in the Roman style. Secondly, there was the problem of controlling outlying territories and local potentates, made worse by the absence of a network of salaried officials, which led to a persistent tendency for larger units to break up. In practice, however, the successor kingdoms often found ways of compensating for these problems and proved more durable than might have been expected. The Visigothic kings who ruled in Spain and part of southern France not only permitted considerable autonomy to cities and local aristocrats, but they also adopted an elective kingship which allowed different contenders to have their turn, while the church played a vital role in promoting a degree of unity. The drawbacks of this 'light touch' monarchy only became fully apparent with the Arab invasion after 711, when the Muslim newcomers found little difficulty in exploiting internal divisions and building alliances with Christian elites. In Italy, the Gothic Wars left the peninsula in a very bad state after the middle of the sixth century, and the Lombard invaders who took control in the

north were unable to destroy Byzantine power elsewhere. Under the Lombards it was the secular ruling elites in the northern cities who remained the most potent political force, partly because noble landholding seems to have been relatively small-scale and fragmented.

The cities also generally survived in the old heartlands of the western Roman empire, maintaining a fairly sophisticated administrative system, although the tax system gradually declined and urban populations diminished. The regions north and east of the Loire and Rhône rivers, on the other hand, were more thoroughly dominated by the men of violence, whose extensive landholdings made them the richest aristocrats of their age. Northern France and western Germany were the core areas where the Merovingian kings from Clovis onwards built their power; in the process these Frankish rulers created the enduring political centrality of the Paris–Cologne axis and were the first to rule on both sides of the river Rhine. Francia was anything but a stable or united kingdom, however, so that the surface history of the 250 years between Clovis and the replacement of his dynasty by the Carolingians in 751 is a kaleidoscopic story of feuds, assassinations and rebellions. Boundaries were always shifting as kingdoms and principalities combined, then broke up, only to form new combinations. The central Frankish kingdoms of Austrasia, centred on the Moselle and the Rhine, Burgundy on the Rhône axis and Neustria, around Paris and the Île de France, were surrounded by a looser periphery of such regions as Aquitaine, Bavaria and Thuringia, often ruled by their own dukes or by royal heirs serving an apprenticeship. The rather depressing tale of violence and treachery that confronts the modern student of this period should not mislead us into exaggerating the political weakness of these long-haired kings. Much of this just represented the routine problems of dynastic politics, in an age when there was no clear rule about succession, and unreliable life expectancy always tended to throw up either too many male heirs or too few; after the death of King Dagobert in 638 a sequence of royal minorities proved particularly hard to manage. Even in these difficult years, it was a case of periodic crises that erupted amidst relatively lengthy periods of stability, largely driven by the desire of elites across the kingdoms to secure their own effective and wealthy Merovingian rulers.

A combination of extensive landholdings with income from tolls and what remained of the Roman tax system made these kings rich, although they needed to be generous with these resources to maintain the dense network of relationships with other power holders, both secular and ecclesiastical, which underpinned their rule. Tax revenues that were largely devoted to supporting royal courts were hardly essential, so tax rates eroded steadily and by the end of the seventh century the system had become too expensive and unproductive to be worth maintaining. Armies were raised by the magnates and the cities, not paid by the kings. Ultimately this had to imply a more violent style of politics, when secular aristocratic identity was now wholly military, with landed wealth supporting armed followers. If this rarely led to extended strife and heavy bloodshed, that was because conflicts between would-be rulers tended to be decided by strategic desertions among their supporters. Great magnates had good reason to be cautious, because they were well aware of the heavy

costs of maintaining what amounted to private armies; for them as for the rulers the 'politics of land' was an expensive business. This helps to explain why they proved such committed upholders of the Merovingian system, continued to see power as essentially royal, and preferred to serve kings rather than build up local hegemonies. Proximity to the ruler counted enormously, so successful kings needed to be highly visible and to travel around their kingdoms. They also held the public assemblies that both symbolised and embodied the direct links between the ruler and his free men; although in practice only the more important or the more ambitious attended, for several centuries public politics in the West would involve participation by large parts of the military class. The status of these assemblies meant that vital decisions about the succession, about war and peace and on major legal disputes were not just a matter for the kings and their immediate councillors. Aristocratic status and political ambition went together, spilling over into church affairs as bishoprics became the preserve of leading families, while monasteries grew in importance and the church was drawn deeper into aristocratic rivalries.

## *THE CAROLINGIAN AGE*

One might even say that the Merovingian world rested on a set of balances that ensured the survival of a distinctly loose-jointed system, at the cost of considerable insecurity for the kings themselves. Individual monarchs were expendable for the Frankish elites, but the maintenance of kingship was essential. When the lack of strong Merovingian rulers in the later seventh century did threaten to prove dangerous, with signs of a move to a more local politics, an ingenious solution emerged. The court position of mayor of the palace developed into an alternative source of power, in the hands of the Pippinid family, originally great Austrasian nobles but later equally strong in Neustria. They somehow avoided the normal fate of such upstarts, that of being pulled down by jealous rivals, until between 714 and his death in 741 one of their number, Charles Martel, imposed himself as the effective ruler of much of Francia. Although later Carolingian propaganda certainly exaggerated the failings of late Merovingian kingship, Martel's ruthless combination of political and military strength had created the opening for a new dynasty that would develop its own distinctive style. Any trends towards localism would now be reversed, as Frankish rule and values became the basis for a new imperial power. This involved a great deal of violence in the early stages, with the forcible subjection of local elites, the elimination of opponents and the reconquest of peripheral regions. Annual campaigns marked a new stage in the domination of a warrior class, whose members sought advancement and booty. At the same time, Martel and his sons found another way of binding aristocrats to them, by exploiting the wealth of the church. So much land had passed into ecclesiastical hands by this time that it was possible to resume large amounts of it and distribute it among followers on life tenures. The church was amply compensated by the imposition of the tithe as a general obligation on the whole population, which helps to explain why a series of church councils in the 740s sanctioned the land transfers.

The surviving sources tell us a good deal about the people of the sword and the book, or at least their higher strata, so that we can understand the basic character of their world pretty well. For the people of the plough and the billhook, in contrast, the rural workers who made up the vast majority of the inhabitants of early medieval Europe, the records are desperately thin. All estimates of population size for the period are merely intelligent guesswork; a consensus view would be that by the seventh century, overall levels may have been only half of those prevailing in the late Roman empire two centuries earlier. If there was such a fall, the reasons for it are even less clear. Catastrophic events such as bubonic plague or extreme weather conditions (possibly caused by some astronomical accident) have long been suspected, and despite the mysterious silence of most of the sources, scholarly opinion now tends to identify the Justinianic Plague of the sixth century as one of the main culprits. Whatever the degree and nature of the population decline, it was matched or exceeded by that in the scale of production and the intensity of exchange. The collapse of the Roman command economy, largely driven as it had been by the needs of the great Mediterranean cities and of the standing army on the frontiers, saw a reversion to more primitive styles of local autarky. It seems likely that specialisation and inter-regional trade had developed far enough under the empire for this reversal to be unusually disruptive; in some areas it would be a long time before local craft skills re-emerged to fill the gaps.

Although the new military elites may have been land-based, outside northern Francia they seem to have been markedly less wealthy than the great senatorial families of the Roman era. Here there was a complex relationship with the position of the peasantry; was it the relative weakness of the lords which made it harder for them to extract wealth from their estates or the difficulties of such surplus extraction which weakened aristocracies? Were aristocrats more interested in the quick and easy rewards from service to kings than in the hard grind of establishing profitable dominion over peasantries? Whatever their causes, in many cases these trends opened up greater freedom of action for the rural populations and reduced the economic pressures on them. If there really were many fewer people around, then this fact would in any case have compelled lords to be more generous to their tenants and dependants, in order to prevent them moving elsewhere. The peasantry may thus have enjoyed an unusually favourable position in relative terms between the sixth and eighth centuries. On the other hand, the archaeology tells a much less positive story about living standards. Good quality consumer goods, tools and other commodities had circulated quite freely in the Roman world, within an economy where money was at least in frequent use. Time and again excavations reveal just how far down to village level these exchanges operated, then show a dramatic decline that largely coincides with the fall of the empire. The rate and extent of this decline naturally varies by region, being most rapid in Britain and more extended in most of the western Mediterranean, but the range is between the bad and the catastrophic. Some historians reckon that levels of production and exchange comparable to those under Rome would not be seen again, over any wide area, until the later Middle Ages. Standards of housing, facilities for cooking and storing foodstuffs, clothing quality and much else

deteriorated very badly, while agricultural specialisation to match crops to climate and soil fertility went into reverse. Cattle, which had been getting much bigger and therefore more productive, dropped back to the sizes typical of Iron Age Europe.

None of this can tell us whether peasants still ate better than their predecessors under the Romans, because smaller numbers and lower taxation may have compensated for declining production, but any such effects are likely to have been marginal. One linked aspect was a dramatic fall in urban populations, probably greatest in the big cities. There is little reason overall to doubt that the fall of Rome was associated with a massive regression in economic sophistication and development; too many parts of an interdependent system had been damaged or destroyed for the remainder to survive in more than vestigial form. It is quite hard, however, to avoid the impression that in economic as in political terms the Roman world had reached limits from which escape was distinctly unlikely, so its collapse did not break any clear upward trend or block obviously promising developments. Should we associate the end of the empire with a slide into violence, disorder and local conflict, as essentially military elites replaced the civilian ones the Roman order had protected? In some areas and at some times this must have been true, but the overall picture is almost impossible to reconstruct, when historians have so little evidence for the tenor of everyday life. Under its veneer of civilisation, Roman rule had been distinctly coercive for many, while most of the violence we can trace after the initial invasions was among the new ruling groups, as leaders and followers jostled for land and power. Outside some peripheral zones (arguably including Britain), there is little sign of any long-term descent into anarchy, with many local institutions continuing to function, whatever changes they may gradually have undergone. When the invaders brought – or invented – their own law codes these usually seem to have functioned in parallel with existing practices, rather than replacing them outright.

Just as the invaders had not sought the overthrow of Rome, so they displayed no obvious enthusiasm for dismantling such elements of the imperial system as had survived. This may help explain why some of those who lived during the key period of the fifth century apparently thought that not much of importance had changed. The invasions apart, most of the processes of change, profound though they were, must have been slow enough to feel relatively undramatic. The new and rather unstable polities did not, however, become Roman-style states on a reduced scale, largely because their ruling classes were essentially military; as the elite families colonised the church hierarchy the only alternative power structure largely fell under their control as well, so kings could only exercise some limited power in the localities by co-opting aristocrats who naturally had their own agendas. Fragmentation must be a permanent threat to states built around the possession of land, and it might have overtaken the Merovingian West much earlier, but for the massive impact of the Carolingian dynasty. In many respects, the Carolingian triumph began as the ultimate version of militarisation, with the state itself as the most violent exponent of the rule of the thugs. The empire of Charlemagne only achieved its territorial limits in the 790s, after many decades of virtually continuous

warfare; these dated back to the civil war of 714–19, which had seen the emperor's grandfather Charles Martel eliminate all rivals within his own family grouping and overcome the most immediately dangerous noble factions. This personal success has to be balanced against the destructive effects of the conflict on many of the allegiances and understandings that had held the Merovingian world together. Although later historians of the Carolingian dynasty would misrepresent the whole subsequent process of virtual reconquest as one of almost uninterrupted success, in reality there were many ups and downs, and serious resistance was still found in some localities almost to the end of the century (Figure 1.3).

Martel's crucial first success was to take control in the western kingdom of Neustria, where large estates and exploitation of the peasantry seem to have developed sufficiently to make both rulers and aristocrats unusually wealthy and powerful. When the Austrasian and Neustrian aristocracies came together under the new dynasty, they proved strong enough to establish their dominance over a widening area (ultimately extending from France and the Netherlands over much of Germany, then also into northern regions of Spain and Italy), building on a series of loose confederations with more local powers. The elite they formed has been compared to the Roman senatorial order as an international phenomenon,



**Figure 1.3** Emperor on horseback. This emperor figure may well represent Charlemagne; the ruler on horseback was to remain a standard expression of power until very recent times.

and this was possible because they intermarried freely with other existing elites and established local power structures, yet they continued to see themselves as a special ruling class. In future the path to advancement was to join the Franks, perhaps by marriage, to adopt their lifestyle and attitudes and to serve their rulers. One crucial effect was to make the Rhine boundary largely irrelevant, as the Frankish style of landowning extended eastwards, enabling lords to extract more wealth from the peasantry. This created a new and untidy frontier, largely coinciding with that between Christianity and paganism; once the Carolingians had overcome the initial resistance from regional powers in Germany, they could recruit the local elites into their advance eastwards and northwards through the typical processes of assimilation.

The precise means by which Charles Martel's son Pippin replaced the last Merovingian king in 751 remain obscure; an elaborate new coronation ceremony was evidently necessary to bolster his regnal claims, alongside a very deliberate attempt to represent himself as a defender of the church and of the moral order associated with it. Until this point and beyond, the many campaigns were essentially directed at opponents within the Frankish heartlands of Austrasia, Burgundy and Neustria, then against the various peripheral duchies that had acquired something close to independent status, Bavaria, Alemannia and Aquitaine. It was as an indirect result of the intervention in Aquitaine that a large Muslim raiding force from Spain was defeated near Tours in 733 (the so-called Battle of Poitiers), an event whose significance used to be greatly exaggerated. Papal support for Pippin helped to draw him into a rather reluctant involvement with Italian affairs so that the Lombard kingdom in north Italy ultimately became a kind of client state. Charlemagne would extend military action well beyond the old boundaries of the Frankish state to the east and the north, in a forty-year struggle to subjugate the stubbornly independent Saxons, and a briefer but very violent confrontation with the Avars in the region of modern Hungary. By this stage the Carolingians, like the Romans before them, had expanded their state to the point where there were few incentives to take the project any further, with distance becoming a real obstacle to further conquests. The dynasty was fortunate that between 719 and 840, with just some brief intervals, there was normally one adult male ruler at the head of affairs. This made it much easier to use the regular campaigning as a bonding element, with military service rewarded by plunder and land, and assemblies rendered relatively easy to control. A snowball effect was gradually established, as ever wider circles of aristocrats were drawn into service, to form a massive military force that no opponent could rival.

The apparent inevitability of such processes is something of an illusion; just as those writing in the service of the dynasty exaggerated the weakness of the later Merovingian kings, so they smoothed over the many reverses and problems that explain why it took so long to establish hegemonic rule. In Aquitaine, for example, Charles Martel and Pippin had long sought to operate by negotiation and alliances, so that it was only in the decade after 759 that territorial conquest was carried through in the face of bitter resistance. Here, as in Lombardy and elsewhere, it proved necessary to conciliate local feelings by installing sons of the dynasty as secondary rulers. As with all empires built on

military might, expansion ceased when lines of communication became too long or when groups beyond the frontiers were simply not worth conquering. There was an obvious contrast between the scale of the mature Carolingian empire around 800, covering virtually the whole of northwestern continental Europe, and its rather primitive political and administrative structures. Yet because we know that within a century the whole colossus would have fragmented beyond repair, it is probably too easy to identify such weaknesses and underestimate its remarkable strengths. The Carolingians – with the Frankish aristocracy more generally – had some good reasons for their immense self-confidence in their natural right to rule, backed as much by references to the heritage of Troy and Israel as to that of imperial Rome. Their central political project, displayed in a very self-conscious fashion, aimed to discipline both the personal lives and the public acts of their subjects, through the inculcation of a thoroughly hierarchical form of Christianity. This chimed in perfectly with the dynasty's need to identify with the church that had given it legitimacy in the first place; it also justified the remorseless assault on the Saxons and other pagans.

Carolingian Europe only makes sense in the context of the emergence of a dynamic and remodelled Christian world, now so integrated with the ruling elites as to be virtually inseparable from them. The nobles who endowed prestigious and wealthy monasteries understood that these promised to open the way to heaven for the donors, while they also tended to retain tight links to the founding families, which often retained control for extended periods. This all encouraged a massive expansion of clerical landholding, so that by the eighth century almost a third of the land area of Francia and Italy may have been under ecclesiastical control. Convents and monasteries were understood to possess a collective power of prayer, based on holiness and asceticism, which exceeded that of any single holy man. Impressive displays of piety, especially when led by royal women in convents, could thus mobilise prayer as a force empowering the whole Frankish kingdom. A relatively simple ecclesiastical hierarchy emphasised the great importance of bishops, at a time when rural churches were still rare, only starting to multiply in Francia after 700. Rituals, including processions and festivals, reinforced the status of bishops, as did their defence of their cities and dioceses on the political stage. Aristocratic birth became virtually obligatory, being seen as intrinsically virtuous, which in turn encouraged a related lifestyle and greater involvement in high politics. The political bishops of the earlier period were succeeded by warrior bishops in the early eighth century, men who were no longer monopolists of the sacred, but simply powerful lords who rivalled other aristocratic leaders. This was the time when the monasteries largely took over as centres of religious and cultural life. The exceptions to some of these rules were the missionary bishops in Germany, but their efforts to impose a more hierarchical system were notably helpful to the Carolingians, and they formed part of the project to construct a new and 'true' Christianity both across and beyond the empire. The much looser styles of rule long prevalent in northern and central Europe had been tied in with ancient cults, so spreading Christianity had major political implications. This was equally true in the Frankish heartlands, where councils of the

whole Frankish church began to be held from the 740s as instruments of central control. This was part of a long-term movement based on top-driven reform, into which the dynasty and its servants enlisted the support of a much wider ruling class. The implication was that divine favour would only continue if the emperors built a godly state; if they failed in this crucial duty, then decline and defeat would follow. The drive for reform and the regular assemblies turned bishops and abbots into the key men in an imperial church, effectively now royal officials rather than just local leaders, with the link between church and state taken for granted. Local priests were also to be brought much more firmly under episcopal control and subjected to a new discipline that would mark them off as a separate and sacred group.

The Carolingians understood that if priests were to function as agents in the creation of a reformed Christianity, they needed a sound economic basis, which was a major reason for turning the tithe into a general obligation, legally enforceable by royal agents. For this to work properly, boundaries were necessary, so there was a major stimulus towards a network of rural parishes and churches. A natural extension was greater control over the rites of passage and the treatment of the dead; Christian cemeteries gave the dead ancestors a special place in the community of the living, while trying to remove markers of their individual status. The elites were allowed exemptions, naturally, and could patronise Masses or seek burial in the family monastery. Priests must evidently be educated properly if they were to carry through the programme of correction, symbolised by the requirement that they use a corrected church Latin. Much of this must have reflected aspirations rather than realities, because the changes implied went far beyond anything that could have been achieved at this time; it is indeed arguable that down to modern times churches claiming to include the whole population have been fighting and losing similar battles over superstition and deviance. Nevertheless, some progress was probably made in replacing a system that tended to privilege charismatic contact with local sources of sacred power by one based on hierarchical principles, with a professional caste as managers of the way to salvation. Sainthood was safely distanced from living holy men and their relics, to be attached to those long dead or to leading churchmen, while relics were increasingly distributed from Rome and brought under episcopal regulation.

Rulers gained enormously from the alliance with the church, as a power structure extending across all of northwestern Europe, which could penetrate to the grassroots as no secular administration could hope to do. This was why it made such good sense to allow the clergy to collect the tithe, the kind of general tax that only they could manage efficiently. In return, it would seem, the Carolingians tapped into the landed wealth of the church by taking back 'surplus' estates for distribution to leading followers, although craftily they rarely allowed these to become permanent grants. With around 180 episcopal sees and 700 leading monasteries within the Carolingian realm of the early ninth century, the rulers and their greater aristocrats had access to an enormous patronage system. The desire to impose a 'correct' Christian law carried with it the conception of a literate ruling class, so the educational role of the church was also crucial. As the Romance languages in common use started to

diverge regionally (although mutual understanding long remained possible), a new elite developed that associated itself with high standards of Latinity. This barrier was naturally much greater in the northern and eastern zones where Germanic speech prevailed, but everywhere in this highly stratified society there seems to have been a relative indifference to problems of communication with inferiors. Arguably that had only marginal practical effects, because those inferiors proved quite capable of developing sufficient linguistic skills to bridge such gaps. Where the Christian leaders and the monasteries of the Merovingian period had been hostile to much of the traditional Latin culture, in favour of a drastically narrowed-down and ascetic vision of wisdom based on moral improvement, the 'Carolingian Renaissance' displayed broader sympathies. It was almost wholly the monastic scribes of this period who preserved a large proportion of the classical heritage, sometimes in single copies, using the Carolingian minuscule script that bore witness to new standards of literacy. This crucial achievement should not be misinterpreted as a restoration of classical learning, any more than the ambitions of the rulers represented a desire to restore the Roman empire. For the scholars of this time Christianity, as a timeless embodiment of truth, was far more relevant than the Roman past; indeed, they created the myth of the barbarian invasions and the Dark Ages, then presented Carolingian success as God's reward for the dynasty that had restored the correct practice of religion.

The Carolingian rulers and their key advisers (very often clerics) were quick to put this ideology into service, and the elites as a whole were expected to possess at least a basic acquaintance with the Bible and theology. The frequent church councils produced a long series of moral exhortations and precepts, with a greater emphasis on church reforms from the 780s. The court of Charlemagne became a genuine centre of intellectual activity, gathering enough leading thinkers together to form a critical mass that encouraged debate as part of an active competitive culture centred on writing; this tradition would last through most of the century following the great emperor's death in 814. For a few dozen leading families who formed the imperial aristocracy the court was also the place where their sons were trained, while members of this group were employed to enforce royal policies across the empire. Office and royal favour seem to have been creating steeper hierarchies over the eighth century, as the fruits of expansion were unequally distributed, with the magnates accumulating lands and influence across the Frankish world. Their loyalties rarely became regional, however, because contact with the source of royal patronage at court remained vital to them. For those at the next level down regional ties dominated, one reason why royal sons were used as sub-kings, and why a system of local counts linked centre and peripheries. So long as the kings were strong this apparently posed no threat to royal authority; counts were often absent and relied heavily on local men as their agents. When the itinerant *missi dominici* were added as direct substitutes for the king, these were still the kind of clerics and landowners who relied on royal favour. This remained a remarkably fluid world, with flexible kinship structures and no tradition of retaining property for a single heir, while the kings tended to make grants for one life only. Expectations of service were general

rather than specific, with the kings drawing strength from a complex structure of mutual obligations. Charlemagne was able to rely on a spoils system extending over much of Europe to offer a wide range of inducements to loyalty, within a hierarchical social order.

This pattern was backed up by a widespread practice of oath-taking, which invoked supernatural sanctions to reinforce the duties of the ruling class towards Christian society, with the need to do justice and have regard for the interests of the poor. The same message was pushed by assemblies where the classic balance between giving counsel and achieving consensus found expression in the lists of desiderata known as capitularies. There were attempts to circulate these documents to the regions, and to establish an archive system for them, but they were not laws and nothing resembling a mechanism for enforcing them was created. Assemblies, army musters and the royal court were very partial answers to the endless problem of holding such a vast and diverse empire together, alongside an increasing resort to moralised ritual. It is very significant that the kings, who still disposed of extensive personal resources, never attempted to introduce any serious tax system, which might have driven genuine structural change. As for justice, this remained essentially local and personal, not institutional. There can be no doubt that the Carolingian rulers fell far short of their high aspirations to build a Christian society where the rights of both the powerful and the humble were respected; the unkind might suspect they were in any case less interested in this project than were the clerics who did most of the drafting. Aristocratic bad behaviour was rarely checked, the poor were routinely oppressed and repetitive legislation is good evidence for impotence. The state was far too weak to achieve much on these fronts, when any kind of enforcement could only come from those elites that were normally the chief offenders. Yet there was some degree of interplay between the rulers, with their great patronage powers and their enormous prestige, and the local societies. Peasants could and did try to defend their rights in local courts, even if they rarely succeeded. It was not just the great aristocrats with their ties to the court, but also the dense network of cathedrals and monasteries that sustained the imperial project, in a world where the secular elites were expected to be literate and to subscribe to Christian values.

The church necessarily had its own agenda, albeit one which made it the natural ally of the kings. As new churches started to cover the land after about 700 many clerics had to face up to the inchoate mass of beliefs and practices that flourished in local society, which were increasingly perceived as abuses in urgent need of pruning. Boundaries were progressively set between the sacred and the profane, as sacred objects and spaces were separated off, with access to them brought under stricter control. This did have a vital implication that outside such sacred spaces the faithful were free to maintain alternative myths about the distant past that were pre-Christian. Meanwhile the insatiable popular demand for healing and supernatural protection inevitably drew local clergy into endless compromises; the church largely dealt with magic of this type by taking it over, the only realistic option. The upper clergy seem to have tolerated this but were more anxious about the dangers posed by semi-literate autodidacts, who might attract significant bodies of followers for unorthodox

doctrines. This led to a new stress on preaching or more often the reading of homilies that were translated into the local Romance speech from the 'correct' Latin that was creating another barrier between clergy and laity. On another front, it was important to persuade the peasantry, now burdened by the compulsory tithes, that the church was worth supporting. If the provision of 'magical' services was one response, another was a reshaping of the system of baptism and godparents, with its vital role in cementing social bonds. Here too older informal arrangements were codified and incorporated into church ritual. A more ambiguous extension of clerical powers concerned marriage, still handled with notable freedom even in the upper ranks of society. Now the bishops, in particular, were asserting their claims to ratify unions and to disqualify the convenient divorces that had been so common among the elites. The prohibited degrees of kinship were also formalised with a new rigour; these rules on marriage easily became major factors in the politics of succession and may even have been accepted because they could be applied in partisan ways that suited particular factions. The prohibitions on cousin marriage had great long-term implications for western European society, because they tended to undermine classic patterns of clan loyalty in favour of more flexible communal attachments.

The church also helped drive socioeconomic change through its massive accumulation of landed property. It is thought that over a third of the land in Germany was involved, and things cannot have been very different elsewhere in the Frankish lands. Because monasteries in particular kept records with special efficiency, much of our knowledge of rural society comes from these sources, whose atypical nature must always be remembered. Over a very long time span, there was a decisive change towards the subjection and exploitation of the peasantry, from a time around 700 when many settlements were semi-independent (although hardly egalitarian) to the tenth century, when larger villages and heavy obligations had become the norm. The picture had always been fragmented, with patches of slavery and serfdom even in the earliest times; this was followed by the piecemeal extension of the manorial system, pioneered on royal estates in Neustria and by the greater monasteries. More stable rural communities, marked by churches and cemeteries, facilitated the development of steeper hierarchies based on exploitative lordship. If this lordship lagged behind its models on royal and monastic estates, this was probably because tighter structures of kinship and inheritance were necessary to make it widely viable. Although the demographic history of these centuries remains deeply obscure, the historical consensus is for a significant population growth over time, which must have aided the process of subjection. The key to change in most cases was the manorial system, with a core of demesne land worked by labour services extracted from the peasants who were compensated with small plots of their own. This was best suited to areas whose geography and soils could support more intense cereal cultivation, so was always much rarer in the mixed farming zones south of the Loire, while its rapid development in Germany was a ninth-century phenomenon. The rural economy does appear to have become more dynamic in some respects, with greater specialisation and some pockets of rural industry

developing. The spread of watermills was an important feature linked to the emphasis on cereals; here technological progress had a major downside for the peasantry, now forced to pay for the compulsory use of seigneurial mills. Some bold claims made by earlier historians about the introduction of heavy ploughs and the use of horses to pull them have come under effective criticism, but it remains plausible to suppose that deep ploughing (normally using teams of oxen) did become a more widespread practice. It was accompanied by a more sophisticated triennial crop rotation system, winter corn followed by spring corn, then a year as fallow. Rye and oats were key new crops here, as part of a more varied cereal agriculture that made better use of the northern European climate and of marginal land.

Although grain yields remained very low by modern standards, these changes must have increased levels of production (rather than efficiency) where the manorial system dominated. They also allowed more extensive and effective farming of heavier soils, where the earlier preference seems to have been for lighter and better-drained land, with cultivators often moving on when yields declined. Elsewhere the lords seem to have relied on a combination of smaller estates under direct control worked by servile labour, whether slaves or serfs, and various levies on production, in order to draw their income from the land. There were obvious advantages to moving towards manorial-type organisation, with labourers who could feed themselves from their own plots, then be subjected to an increasingly severe regime of labour services and levies in kind. Just about everywhere the freemen, a diverse group whose real military functions are very hard to assess, were under pressure and in danger of being reduced to servile status. Economic development did, however, create opportunities for peasants to enter the market directly, so a minority of freemen rich enough to run plough teams were able to buck the trend and take hesitant steps towards forming a distinct group of peasant oligarchs. Animal husbandry played a crucial role here, as it did more widely, with hay and fodder crops (primarily oats) becoming more important; horse breeding was indeed essential for the development of the heavily armoured knights whose role increased dramatically in the Carolingian armies. Where earlier Frankish armies seem to have fought mainly on foot, Charlemagne's long-distance campaigning required a predominance of cavalry and enormous numbers of horses for logistics as well as combat (Figure 1.4).

A wealthy ruling class inevitably helped drive a trade in luxury goods, and by the eighth century the North Sea coast had a flourishing trade network, with sites that functioned as major emporia. These were encouraged by rulers and concentrated the limited amount of maritime trade, as the quantity of shipping in the northern seas probably came to exceed that in the Mediterranean. The Frankish heartland between the Seine and the Rhine did possess some luxury industries, in metal goods and ceramics for example, although there is hardly any evidence from this period for the crucial textile sector. Because the Frankish economy was much more developed than those of its northern neighbours, the short-term trading boom was largely an expression of Carolingian wealth and influence; it would also prove very vulnerable to predation by Viking raiders. Local markets, on the



**Figure 1.4** Carolingian cavalry. Carolingian military power was primarily based on cavalry, reflecting the great distances over which armies had to move. As would remain true into the modern era, campaigning in full strength was therefore only possible when enough fresh grass was available. Unknown Source/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

other hand, represented a more durable form of economic development, as local production expanded, and regional exchange networks benefitted. Even if urban growth remained slow and patchy, the towns were beginning to recover from their long decline and despite the importance of rural fairs they were the major centres for exchange and commerce. The Carolingians attempted to regulate trading centres; they also recovered control over the coinage, with a switch from gold to silver making the new coins (with their lower values) better suited to serve as a means of exchange, although this was still a very tentative shift. Here as elsewhere the evidence for some modest economic growth is compelling, without any reason to suppose it was at all rapid or transformative in character.

## *THE POST-CAROLINGIAN WORLD AND FEUDAL SOCIETY*

Charlemagne's vast empire was a very impressive construct, which almost seemed to defy normal historical laws of gravity. Beyond the expansionist drive that directed aristocratic energies outwards and brought so much plunder, there was a powerful ideological element, which brought together the church and the Frankish elites as integral parts of the system. Early medieval kingship was remarkably effective within its own parameters; where it was deficient was in building administrative, legal and financial systems that could turn aspirations into realities and survive the inevitable dynastic crises. Historians should, however, beware of treating the Carolingian achievement as something of a dead end, by concentrating too much on high politics at the expense of lower-level continuities. The empire had in most crucial respects been a joint enterprise between the dynasty and the 'Frankish' ruling class, and the continuing domination of this broader group carried forward trends that would do much to shape the European future. Even dynastic decline was to be intermittent and protracted, as for over seventy years after Charlemagne's death powerful successors continued to exercise authority in much the way he had, although already after the death of his heir Louis the Pious in 840 the empire was broken up into smaller groupings. The Treaty of Verdun in 843 was a typical enough arrangement to cope with the claims of three sons, with the eldest (Lothar) receiving a long north-to-south 'middle kingdom' named Lotharingia, Louis the German the lands to the east of the Rhine, and Charles the Bald what later historians would call West Francia. Such divisions were never intended to be permanent and have very little connection with the later emergence of nation states with vaguely similar boundaries. It is hopelessly anachronistic to blame a ruler such as Charles the Bald for his supposed failure to create a viable state covering much of modern France, for example, when no-one at the time conceived of kingship in such terms.

One of the most crucial elements in west European history has been largely missing from this account to date; the sea. Whereas maritime supremacy and sea-borne trade had played a vital role in the Roman empire, in the next centuries the sea had become surprisingly marginal to the affairs of the continent. One reflection of this was the fashion in which the Basques and the Bretons, who occupied important positions on the Atlantic littoral, had never seemed worth subjecting, so retained their independence even under Charlemagne. The British Isles had also been allowed to go their own way again, with Ireland and the highland zone of Scotland remaining tribal societies still deeply embedded in Iron Age patterns of life. The appearance of the emporia on the Channel, North Sea and Baltic coasts was a first sign of change from the seventh century on, one which may have been connected to the dramatic emergence of the Vikings in the ninth century. The development of longboats capable of long oceanic voyages gave the Norsemen the chance to combine trade, piracy and raiding not only along the extensive European coastlines but also far inland up the navigable rivers. There must have been pressures generated within

Scandinavian society, although these remain rather obscure in the absence of written records from these times, which led men to adopt this adventurous and very risky lifestyle. Young men and ambitious leaders now streamed out from Norway and Denmark in increasing numbers, whether through the northern seas to Scotland, the Isles and Ireland, or down the Channel towards the rich and vulnerable shores of England and Francia. As pagans, the Vikings had no compunction in taking advantage of the numerous wealthy monasteries that had chosen exposed coastal sites or of many others in riverside towns; when our sources are overwhelmingly clerical this may have encouraged some exaggeration of their impact, but for Charles the Bald and the kings of Anglo-Saxon England the challenge proved a very hard one to meet effectively. With the huge advantages conferred by mobility and the capacity for surprise, the raiders were infuriatingly hard to catch, although Frankish armies at least always seem to have defeated them when they got the chance.

For many years Charles the Bald faced a greater threat from Pippin the Younger, who contested control of Aquitaine intermittently until his death in 864. With the Vikings, he often resorted to the sensible if unpopular policy of buying them off, while his fortified bridges on the Seine and the Loire proved fairly effective; the raiders were certainly a major nuisance, and Carolingian military organisation was badly suited to dealing with them, but they were ultimately a manageable problem. Charles remained a very effective king until his sudden death in 877, largely retaining his hegemony over the aristocracy, while his shrewd use of ceremonial, *missi dominici*, and clerical intellectuals kept the 'Carolingian project' running down to that time. To the east, his elder half-brother Louis the German was perhaps even more successful, although he had to begin by confronting and suppressing the largest peasant revolt of the age, the Saxon Stellinga of 841–2. Here the existence of an enormous open frontier, with potential attackers ranging from Vikings along the Baltic coastline to powerful Moravian rulers in the southeast, encouraged the continuation of active military kingship in traditional Carolingian style. Although the heirs of Lothar soon lost their more northerly territories, for a time they too established a successful kingdom in northern Italy. The tendency to portray the ninth century as a period of crisis and decline is heavily influenced by hindsight; the aristocrats of the period were intermittently rebellious, as they had always been, but they essentially sought a partnership with one or another royal court, and desired to enjoy favour under stable government. The rulers continued to enjoy a very strong relationship with the church, whose support was crucial in enabling them to overcome several major challenges. What brought the Carolingians down was the sudden failure of the principal male lines at the end of the century, admittedly at a time when various forces were tending to fragment the great empire into smaller kingdoms. Only in West Francia did the dynasty struggle on (intermittently) for almost another century, albeit with greatly reduced authority and power.

On the northwestern edge of the continent, the British Isles followed a very different trajectory to their continental neighbours. The fragmentation that had resulted from the sudden end of Roman rule was maintained even after the Anglo-Saxons had established their dominance across England and was if

anything more marked still in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. By the seventh century, the Celtic languages that had once been current across the Isles had given way to Germanic speech in most of England, something that would soon be true of what is now lowland Scotland as well. Ireland had a distinctive culture, extending to an indigenous Christianity (largely based on monasteries rather than bishops) that was to have significant influence elsewhere in Europe, while political authority was divided between some 150 kings ruling tiny areas. Parts of western Scotland really belonged to this same world, linked by extensive seafaring; in the absence of records, the history of the transient kingdoms elsewhere in the north of Britain remains largely conjectural. In Wales (where Roman and Christian traditions remained important after 410), the numerous kingdoms seem to have had more of a territorial basis than their Irish counterparts, which were essentially personal followings built around the genealogy of the various chieftains, although the boundaries of Welsh kingdoms too were far from stable. The picture for England is not much clearer until the seventh century, when a pattern of relatively small overlapping political units can be perceived, also partly territorial in their nature. The most powerful kings enhanced their wealth and authority more by establishing themselves as overlords who exacted tribute from subordinate rulers than by direct conquest. Such practices probably extended almost seamlessly across the linguistic frontiers to incorporate parts of the Welsh and Scottish borderlands. The archaeological evidence shows that these kings commonly patronised organised pagan cults with shrines and priests, an unusual feature that may have betrayed some indirect Christian influence. After the arrival of the missionaries from Rome in Kent in 597, Christianity was generally adopted by the Anglo-Saxon rulers over the course of the seventh century, often starting as an addition to their existing practices, then drawing them in by offering a combination of anticipated divine favour in war with support for hierarchical authority.

Such loose political structures must inevitably have encouraged a pattern of low-level but endemic violence; in Ireland and the highland zones, this largely involved varieties of cattle raiding, with a more unpleasant extension into taking human captives for the slave trade. The struggles for local supremacy between Anglo-Saxon kings led to some pitched battles, although the numbers involved probably remained quite small. By the eighth century, some combination of military success and political adroitness had allowed the kings of Mercia, with their base in the English Midlands, to establish a degree of hegemony over all their rivals, reaching its apogee under kings Offa and Cenwulf in the years 757–821. After that time, dynastic infighting in Mercia led to a situation where four substantial kingdoms, Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia, were in rough parity. Partly as a result of the papal sponsorship of the conversion, England did have a relatively unitary church, and rulers found multiple reasons for endowing churches and monasteries, not least as supports for their power. This helped to forward more formal structures of land tenure, with records kept by literate administrators, which were then extended to land held by the significant lay supporters of the kings. Service obligations such as maintaining bridges and fortifications started to be attached to land grants, while trade from the east and south coast ports

grew, bringing in valuable tolls. Offa was able to negotiate with Charlemagne as at least a nominal equal, and England came to export both missionaries and royal brides to the continent. How far this slow development might have gone within the relatively small English kingdoms it is hard to guess; it included greater social stratification and written law codes in the vernacular. What changed everything was the impact of the Vikings, who had begun to raid coastal monasteries from the 790s, then started to arrive as much larger war-bands in the 830s and to exploit the internal divisions of England.

English kings, who possessed only a fraction of the resources available to Charles the Bald, found themselves in deadly peril, especially when the war-bands overwintered after 851. The exaction of plunder and tribute was gradually mutating into settlement and possible conquest. The climax came in 865, when several large bands united to form the Great Army, which imposed puppet rulers across much of the country over the next eight years or installed its own leaders as local kings. This was, however, a very unstable situation, with no kind of institutional framework or unified leadership. As a result, the surviving English kingdom of Wessex was able to embark on a lengthy series of campaigns against the invaders, exploiting their disunity in a fashion that ultimately made King Alfred's successors the first kings of England from about 920. Here the ultimate effect of Viking invasion was paradoxical, because it stimulated rapid advances on the military, administrative and financial fronts, which in due course turned Anglo-Saxon England into what many historians consider the most advanced state in north-western Europe around the end of the first millennium. Even so, these kings were content to maintain a rather loose hegemonic supremacy in some outlying regions, while concentrating on more direct control in the Danelaw, those eastern regions from which any renewed threats were likeliest to come. The kings followed the example of the Carolingians in several respects, as with their reliance on a developing oligarchy of powerful men, the use of public assemblies to enforce law and the sponsorship of monastic reform. They went further in the establishment of an effective tax system, however, both to fund their own military efforts and later to buy off the Danish invaders. This was possible because rights to property had been developed in such a way that by the tenth century even free peasants had substantial obligations to their overlords; this aristocratic dominance was notably helpful to the monarchy, itself of course a major landowner. The English peasantry appears to have been more rapidly subjugated than its continental counterparts, yet by a process sufficiently gradual to avoid much in the way of open resistance. Greater social differentiation also encouraged trade and the growth of a money economy, further advantages for the crown. There were also kings who aspired to hegemony elsewhere in the Isles, but in Wales and Ireland particularly this was a fitful process, with none of these rulers developing much in the way of new structures of power so that defeat or death repeatedly put paid to such ambitions. Although the Welsh may have dreamed of reconquering England, in practice their kings had to admit some kind of dependency on their more powerful neighbours. Meanwhile the Vikings (in this case essentially Norwegians) settled in Orkney, Shetland and parts of northern Scotland, then built up a network of trading settlements around the Irish Sea, including Dublin.

By comparison with England, the East Francia of the ninth century was a more traditional polity, with little development of any infrastructure. Here the disappearance of the Carolingian line in 911 merely confirmed a serious decline in central authority, which was filled by dukes who represented a very tenacious regional power structure. From the 930s, however, the Ottonian rulers of Saxony emerged as a new paramount dynasty in the German lands; soon they replaced any recalcitrant dukes with their own dependants to reinforce their power. In a sense they may have been fortunate to face a major external challenge from the Magyars of Hungary, originally steppe nomads, whose raids in the first half of the ninth century reached as far as what is now north-eastern France. To many of their potential victims, the Magyars were just as threatening as the Vikings, so Otto I gained great prestige from his major victory over them at the Lechfeld (955), from which they never fully recovered; within a few years his take-over of the Italian kingdom in 961–2 culminated in his coronation as emperor. The German lands and northern Italy were now brought together under a single ruler, and the fact that there was not much else to unite them mattered less than might be supposed when the emperors allowed so much power to remain in the localities. This was not out of weakness, but because strong rulers like Otto I had no reason to challenge traditional arrangements that they had proved able to manage very well. It was natural for them to make concessions to dukes and bishops, the holders of local power, then to retain overall control by a policy of divide and rule. The Ottonians could exploit their great landed wealth, then the revenues of the Saxon silver mines opened up after the 970s, to support a large army so that even during the inevitable major revolts, they never lost control of the Saxon heartland and retained military supremacy. They were largely absentee rulers in Italy north of Rome, a situation that was very acceptable to the local magnates. Here there was a more effective administration based in Pavia, but real power was largely devolved to a network of city-based oligarchies. If in retrospect the drawbacks to this style of kingship may seem obvious, when set against those state-building tendencies that historians love to detect, it is wholly inappropriate to judge tenth-century rulers by reference to concepts and practices that were quite foreign to them. Assembly politics, grand public ceremonies and military action were the natural ambience within which these emperors operated, as they moved incessantly around their far-flung territories to reinforce the bonds to their major dependants, while amusing themselves and their courtiers with hunting, hawking and feasting.

The characteristic tensions between centre and periphery may not have been inherently stronger in West Francia than elsewhere, but here circumstances led to far greater fragmentation. The survival of a rather ineffective Carolingian line, punctuated by long minorities, was one serious problem, especially after an alternative royal family was available among the descendants of Odo of Paris, king from 888 to 898 in the years while Charles the Simple was a child. Groupings of the old Carolingian counties mutated increasingly into principalities, from Flanders through Normandy to Anjou and Brittany, with a further range of such units south of the Loire. Their rulers turned away from an impoverished royal court to concentrate on building

up local power bases, while seizing land from monarchy, church and rivals wherever they could. Kings who only drew income from a very limited bloc of territories in the Île de France were reduced to ineffective figureheads, who could exercise very little influence over the endless internecine conflicts between their nominal subordinates. One sign of such weakness was the grant of the dukedom of Normandy to the Viking Rollo in 911, a move with enormous (if wholly unforeseeable) long-term consequences; this was in its own terms a rather successful attempt to buy the support of one group of the invaders in order to block off others, while the Norman dukes and their followers rapidly adopted the language and the political style of their Frankish neighbours. Normandy and Flanders also seem to have been more stable and probably better governed than most of the other principalities, along with Burgundy. Elsewhere there was a great deal of friction between insecure dukes and counts, as they sought to protect their recent gains and extend their influence, amid all the predictable dynastic accidents and rivalries. Alongside the widespread collapse of authority, the removal of the last Carolingian monarch in favour of Hugh Capet in 987 must have seemed a trivial event, and it certainly brought no immediate improvement in the parlous situation of the kings. Although the lamentations of monastic chronicles may be an unreliable guide to the true extent of local violence, partly because the church was a major loser in the struggles for land, we can hardly doubt that across much of the kingdom churches, monasteries and people needed to find armed protectors, then to pay the necessary price for this.