

THE ROMAN
EMPIRE AT BAY
AD 180–395

David S. Potter

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THE ROMAN
EMPIRE AT BAY
AD 180–395

At the outset of the period covered by this book, Rome was the greatest power in the world. By its end, it had fallen conclusively from this dominant position. David Potter's comprehensive survey of two critical and eventful centuries traces the course of imperial decline, skilfully weaving together cultural, intellectual, and political history.

Particular attention is paid throughout to the structures of government, the rise of Persia as a rival, and the diverse intellectual movements in the empire. There is also a strong focus on Christianity, transformed in this period from a fringe sect to the leading religion.

Against this detailed background, Professor Potter argues that the loss of power can mainly be attributed to the failure in the imperial elite to respond to changes inside and outside the empire, and to internal struggles for control between different elements in the government, resulting in an inefficient centralization of power at court.

A striking achievement of historical synthesis combined with a compelling interpretative line, *The Roman Empire at Bay* enables students of all periods to understand the dynamics of great imperial powers.

David S. Potter is Professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Michigan. His previous publications include *Literary Texts and the Roman Historian* (Routledge 1999) and (with David Mattingly) *Life, Death and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (1999).

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THE ROMAN
EMPIRE AT BAY
AD 180–395

David S. Potter

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WITH LOVE

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PREFACE

This book is about the way that an empire changed in the course of two hundred years. I would say evolved, were it not that the metaphor implies improvement, and whatever else one may conclude from the pages that follow, the Roman Empire was a less powerful state at the end of the period that I am covering than it was at the beginning. In the pages that follow, I shall argue that the strength of the Roman Empire derived from the way that the empire was formed. At the height of its power the Roman Empire was an ad hoc collection of acquisitions brought together at various times that, because there never was any grand plan of empire, were governed in ways that suited them. The geographical diversity of the empire was mirrored in its administrative diversity.

The equilibrium of the first and second centuries was impossible to maintain because governments must change; no large institution can exist in a steady state. The way that the institution will change may be affected by the nature of the managerial class – is the management open to new ideas and new perspectives? Does it have a decent strategic plan? Can it understand the capabilities of its rivals? What sort of people rise to the top? In talking about the government of the Roman Empire we are often talking about what constitutes its corporate culture, and how well that corporate culture is in tune with factors that may determine the success or failure of the institution. In the case of the Roman Empire I argue that the rise of the court bureaucracy in the early third century was at odds with earlier traditions of decentralization. Decentralized power strengthened the hands of emperors who were able to negotiate between different interest groups, avoiding, if they were successful, excessive dependence on any one class. The difficulty that inhered in the earlier tradition of government was that it made tremendous demands on the emperor himself, a fact that was implicitly recognized by claims that the emperor was the “best man” in the state, ruling because he alone had the qualities necessary to govern. Behind this rhetoric lay the unfortunate reality, not just of monarchies, but of all systems of government including a chief executive officer, that some who obtain these positions are unequal to the demands of the job.

The consequence of inadequacy at the top was that effective control of the state would fall into the hands of those physically closest to the emperor, members of the palace staff. While the traditions of republican government promoted a diversity of approaches, the tradition of palace government tended to promote a more centralized approach to government. In the early third century, the result was to concentrate authority in the hands of equestrian officials, whose experience was largely in the sectors of imperial finance and law. The men who held these posts tended to deeply conservative patterns of thought, which, while characteristic of the upper classes in general, were in many ways badly suited to understanding a world in which the interests of an external power, the recently emergent Sasanian dynasty in Persia, drove the agenda of foreign affairs.

To those who dominated the government in the early third century, recalling the reigns of Severus and Caracalla – who set the diverse bodies of government against each other as ways of securing the centrality of the emperor in decision-making – dynamic leadership was to be dreaded. At the same time the concentration of power in the palace eliminated safety valves of early centuries that enabled emperors to distance themselves from points of crisis. While an Augustus, a Tiberius, or even a Marcus Aurelius could govern extensive military operations through their subordinates, the emperors of the third century, even when they were adolescents, were expected to take personal command of their armies, and to pay for failure with their lives. An important consequence of centralization was therefore the increased instability of the imperial office itself.

The lessons of the mid-third century were not lost upon Diocletian, who, with great success, strove to establish a system of government wherein the emperor could govern without having to place himself at personal risk on the battlefield. He created a collegial style of government wherein responsibility for failure (and there were some notable failures) could be diffused, while credit for success was shared. Diocletian's experiment was the most radical change in the style of administration since the reign of Augustus, and made it possible for the empire to recover its position in the world.

The ability to control narrative had always been crucial to establishing the legitimacy of government. Like all large states the Roman Empire was an "imagined community", depending upon shared myths for its coherence. From the time of Augustus onwards, the emperor needed to create a congenial story that would justify his position – for Augustus the centerpiece would be that he had ended the civil wars (never mind his role in the events), for the emperors of the second century it was the stability of a government that they ensured through their family relationships, for Diocletian it was that he had saved the state from imminent collapse. Despite this success, his experiment in government was too radical, and could not survive the ambitions of the younger generation. New narratives were shaped to compete with that imposed by Diocletian in his last years, the most powerful being that

of the young Constantine, who reasserted the claims of hereditary monarchy against collegial control. It was also Constantine who would confirm the trend already evident of aligning the imperial capital to the emperor rather than the emperor to the capital as had been the case prior to the emergence of the Diocletianic regime. This represented the ultimate triumph of court-centered government over other styles of administration, and led to the reassertion of bureaucratic control over imperial prerogative. Although Constantine, Constantius II, and Julian were all very strong personalities, capable of dominating their officials, the experience of strong government by the emperor led to a powerful reaction after Julian's death. By the end of the fourth century, the emperor had difficulty making himself heard over the interests of diverse groups that flocked to the court to obtain a stamp of legitimacy for their desires. Government for and by committee was reasserted, once again at a time when the empire was faced with new challenges from outside, and had limited internal resources with which to meet those threats.

The emperors of the second century juggled the interests of many groups within imperial society – ranging from their freedmen to members of the senate, from equestrians and municipal aristocrats to the urban population of Rome and various groups within the army. Competition encouraged these groups to identify the interest of the emperor (the preservation of ordered society with himself at the top) with their own. The result of the concentration of power in the hands of court bureaucrats and the leaders of the military bureaucracy was to create a divergence of interest between the emperor and the governing class, whereby the more general interest inherent in the imperial office was subordinated to the parochial interest of imperial officials (principally the security of their status and that of their associates). The result was that the administration of the empire as a whole lost direction, and the state as a whole became less powerful. The threats to the security of the empire that arose in the course of the third and fourth centuries may have been more severe than those of the first and second centuries; imperial powers have a tendency to increase the efficiency of their rivals, but this is not a sufficient explanation for the shift in the balance of power between the empire and its neighbors. Complacency, a sense that internal objectives mattered more than the good of the whole, and government, as it were, by special interest, are among the reasons that these external rivals could become what they did – in the case of Germanic tribes, the successors to the Roman Empire in the west.

The most dramatic transformation in these centuries was not, however, in the structure of imperial government, or even in the relationship between Rome and its neighbors. The most dramatic transformation in the fourth century was the establishment of Christianity as the dominant religion in the empire. This was largely the result of Constantine's decision to support Christian interests, and of the devotion of his son, Constantius II. Constantine and Constantius II created a momentum for growth in the number of

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Christians, while, at the same time, vastly complicating the definition of what it meant to be a Christian. There had never been a single definition of belief to which all Christians had subscribed before the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. There had, however, long been a variety of Christianities defined both by choices of books that were regarded as holy and lifestyles that were considered appropriate. The battles over Christian doctrine that raged in the course of the fourth century, given fresh intensity by the involvement of the court, mask what may be the more important point – that the diversity of the Christian movement was strengthened in the course of the fourth century. The fact that Christianity remained a highly flexible system of thought, despite all efforts by those in the established church hierarchy to make it otherwise, perhaps ensured that diverse legacies of classical antiquity would be preserved in the Byzantine Empire, as well as in western Europe and the later Islamic states.

This book was a long time in the writing, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge many debts that made completion possible. Glen Bowersock and John Matthews taught me how to study the Roman world, and their friendship has sustained my efforts over many years. Whatever good there may be in what follows owes a great deal to their inspiration and kindness. I likewise owe a debt that cannot be expressed in words to the four great historians of the ancient world with whom I worked in the early 1980s at New College, Oxford: Robin Lane Fox, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, Antony Andrewes, and George Forrest. At the same time I had the pleasure of knowing two historians of more recent times, Erich Christianson and Penry Williams, while Michael Dummett taught me (over lunch) something about the structure of philosophical thought. In my years at Michigan, Rudi Lindner and Brian Schmidt have been ready guides to areas of history before and after the period of Roman power. My students have tolerated any amount of guff as my thoughts have evolved over time, and made me rethink a very great deal. Traianos Gagos and Bob Caldwell have been called upon, countless times, for help with papyri – and they have given more freely of their time than anyone could reasonably ask. Sara Rappe has given generously of herself in helping me to understand the history of thought in the Roman world; Bill Metcalf answered countless questions on numismatics; Benjamin Acosta-Hughes and Ralph Williams have tried to make me a better reader of literature; David Ross taught me a lot about Latin; and Sabine MacCormack never ceased to help me think about a broader picture. Ludwig Koenen has always set a standard of intellectual integrity to which I can only aspire.

This book, which may be read not only as a history of Rome, but as a more general study of management and management styles, was written after I had undertaken to be faculty director of the Lloyd Hall Scholars Program at the University of Michigan. The experience of being a lower-level bureaucratic functionary has influenced the way that I have understood the history

PREFACE

of Roman institutions. At the same time, Rachael Weisz taught me how institutional structures worked, while, in the last year, Charlotte Whitney took upon herself so much of the burden of administration that I could actually finish this book, while she, Kim Haynes, and Felicia Kleinberg made it a pleasure to come to work. Mark Tucker, an artist and teacher of extraordinary ability, helped me think about the way that people can see the world without texts.

I would never have written this book without the encouragement of Fergus Millar. He has answered countless inquiries and provided enormous help. That he should ask someone who he knew would not agree with him to write this book is a sign of his extraordinary integrity. His willingness to read work that was hardly complete, and make it better, has sustained the project from the beginning. Where I have been obstinate, he has been understanding; where I have been ignorant, he has been a guide.

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Books like this take time to write, in the evenings and on weekends. My family has paid the price for this. Our daughter Natalie even decided that she should not have to go to bed unless "Daddy does his computer." Our daughter Claire had a variety of things to say, while noting that my study was scarcely an example to inspire order. My father read much of the book and made many improvements, and my mother has helped in countless other ways. My greatest debt, however, reflected in the dedication, is to Ellen, *uxor carissima*.

ABBREVIATIONS

For works not found here the reader is referred to the list of secondary works in *L'Année philologique* and, for classical texts, to the lists in Liddell and Scott.

<i>A. Arch. Hung</i>	<i>Acta Archaeologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae</i>
AAS	<i>Les annales archéologiques de Syrie</i>
AJN	<i>American Journal of Numismatics</i>
AJP	<i>The American Journal of Philology</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt,</i> ed. H. Temporini <i>et al.</i> (Berlin, 1972–)
<i>Ant. af.</i>	<i>Antiquités africains</i>
AS	<i>Anatolian Studies</i>
BAR	<i>British Archaeological Reports</i>
BASP	<i>Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists</i>
BCH	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i>
BHAC	<i>Bonner Historia-Augusta-Colloquium</i>
BICS	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies</i>
BMCR	<i>The Bryn Mawr Classical Review</i>
BSOAS	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
BzZ	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i>
CPh	<i>Classical Philology</i>
CQ	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
CRAI	<i>Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et</i> <i>Belles-Lettres</i>
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i>
<i>Damaszener Mitt.</i>	<i>Damaszener Mitteilungen</i>
DOP	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i>
GCS	<i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten</i> <i>Jahrhunderte</i>
GRBS	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
HSCP	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JAC	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
JECS	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

JEH	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
JHS	<i>The Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRA	<i>The Journal of Roman Archaeology</i>
JRS	<i>The Journal of Roman Studies</i>
LSJ	Liddell and Scott, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th edn., rev. H. Stuart Jones (1925-40); Suppl. by E. A. Barber and others (1968)
MAAR	<i>Memoirs of the American Academy at Rome</i>
MEFR	<i>Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome</i>
NAC	<i>Numismatica e antichità classiche</i>
NC	<i>Numismatic Chronicle</i>
NZ	<i>Numismatische Zeitschrift</i>
OCD ³	S. Hornblower and A. J. Spawforth, <i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1996)
OLD	P. G. W. Glare, <i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> (Oxford, 1982)
OMS	L. Robert, <i>Opera Minora Selecta</i> , 7 vols. (Amsterdam)
Opitz, <i>Urkunden</i>	H. G. Opitz, <i>Urkunden zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites 318-328</i> (Berlin, 1934)
PAPS	<i>Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society</i>
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
PIR	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> ed. Klebs and Dessau (1897-98)
PIR ²	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> , 2nd edn., ed. E. Groag, A. Stein <i>et al.</i> (1930-)
PLRE	A. H. M. Jones, J. R. Martindale and J. Morris, <i>The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire 1</i> (Cambridge, 1971)
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RE	<i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> , ed. A. Fr. von Pauly, rev. G. Wissowa <i>et al.</i> (Stuttgart, 1894-1980)
REA	<i>Revue des études anciennes</i>
Rev. Num.	<i>Revue numismatique</i>
RIC	<i>The Roman Imperial Coinage</i>
RIDA	<i>Revue internationale des droits de l'antiquité</i>
Riv. Stor. Ant.	<i>Rivista storica dell'antichità</i>
SDHI	<i>Studia et Documenta Historiae et Iuris</i>
Suppl. Hell.	H. Lloyd-Jones and P. Parsons, <i>Supplementum Hellenisticum</i>
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
Turner, EOMIA	C. H. Turner, <i>Ecclesiae Occidentalis monumenta iuris antiquissima</i> (Oxford, 1899-1939)
W. Arch.	<i>World Archaeology</i>
ZfN	<i>Zeitschrift für Numismatik</i>
ZPE	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

Classical texts

<i>Acta Ab.</i>	<i>Passio sanctorum Dativi, Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum</i> (<i>Acta of the Abitinean Martyrs</i>)
<i>Acta Proc.</i>	<i>Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani</i>
A. G.	Aulus Gellius
Agath.	Agathias
Amb. <i>De fide</i>	Ambrose, <i>De fide</i>
Amb. <i>Ep.</i>	Ambrose, <i>Epistulae</i>
Amb. <i>Ep. extra coll.</i>	Ambrose, <i>Epistulae extra collationem</i>
Amm. Marc.	Ammianus Marcellinus
Anon. post Dionem	The Anonymous Continuator of Dio (fragments in FHG 4)
Arist. <i>Or.</i>	Aelius Aristides, <i>Orationes</i>
Arles can.	<i>Concilium Arelatense anno 314 habitum</i> in Jonkers, <i>Acta et Symbola conciliorum</i>
Arr. <i>Perip. M. Eux.</i>	Arrian, <i>Periplus Maris Euxini</i>
Arr. <i>Tactica</i>	Arrian, <i>Tactica</i>
Ath. <i>Apol. contra Ar.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Apologia contra Arianos</i>
Ath. <i>Deip</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Deipnosophistae</i>
Ath. <i>De syn.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>De synodis</i>
Ath. <i>Hist. Ar. ad mon.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Historia Arianorum ad monachos</i>
Ath. <i>V. Ant.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Vita Antonii</i>
Aug. <i>Breviculus</i>	Augustinus, <i>Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis</i>
Aug. <i>Civ. Dei</i>	Augustinus, <i>Civitas Dei</i>
Aug. <i>Conf.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Confessiones</i>
Aug. <i>Contra Cresc.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Contra Cresconium</i>
Aug. <i>C. litt. Petil.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Contra litteras Petiliani</i>
Aug. <i>C. Parm.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Contra epistulam Parmeniani</i>
Aug. <i>Contra partem Don.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Contra partem Donati post gesta</i>
Aug. <i>Ep.</i>	Augustinus, <i>Epistulae</i>
Aur. Vict. <i>De Caes.</i>	Aurelius Victor, <i>Liber de Caesaribus</i>
[Aur. Vict.] <i>Epit. de Caes.</i>	Anon., <i>Epitome de Caesaribus</i>
Aus. <i>Act. grat.</i>	Ausonius, <i>Gratiarum actio</i>
Aus. <i>Mos.</i>	Ausonius, <i>Mosella</i>
CH	<i>Corpus Hermeticum</i>
<i>Chron. Pasch.</i>	<i>Chronicon Paschale</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

CJ	<i>Codex Justinianus</i>
Claud. <i>De VI cons. Hon.</i>	Claudian, <i>Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti</i>
CMC	L. Koenen and C. Römer, <i>Der Kölner Mani-Kodex. Über das Werden seines Leibes</i> (Opladen, 1988)
<i>Coll. Avell.</i>	<i>Collectio Avellana</i>
<i>Corpus Agr. Rom.</i>	<i>Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum</i>
<i>C. Tb.</i>	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
Cyp. <i>Ep.</i>	Cyprian, <i>Epistulae</i>
D	<i>Digesta</i>
Dio	Cassius Dio
Dio Chrys. <i>Or.</i>	Dio Chrysostom, <i>Orationes</i>
Elvira can.	<i>Concilium Eliberitanum anno 305 habitum</i> in Jonkers, <i>Acta et Symbola conciliorum</i>
Epict.	Epictetus
Epiph. <i>Pan</i>	Epiphanius, <i>Panarion</i>
Eunap.	Eunapius, <i>Historiae</i> , fragments in R. C. Blockley, <i>The Classicizing Historians of Late Antiquity</i> , vol. 2
Eunap. VS	Eunapius, <i>Vitae sophistarum</i>
Euseb. <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Euseb. <i>Mart. Pal.</i>	Eusebius, <i>De Martyribus Palaestinae</i>
Euseb. <i>Praep. evang.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Praeparatio Evangelica</i>
Euseb. <i>Vit. Const.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Vita Constantini</i>
Eutrop. <i>Brev.</i>	Eutropius, <i>Breviarum</i>
Evag. <i>HE</i>	Evagrius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Fast. Hydat.</i>	<i>Fasti Hydatiani</i>
Festus, <i>Brev.</i>	Festus, <i>Breviarum</i>
FGrH	F. Jacoby, <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i>
FHG	<i>Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum</i>
FIRA ³	E. Riccobono <i>et al.</i> , <i>Fontes Iuris Romani Ante Justiniani</i> , 3rd edn.
FIRA ⁷	Bruns <i>et al.</i> , <i>Fontes Iuris Romani Antiqui</i> , 7th edn.
Firm. <i>Mat. Math.</i>	Firminus Maternus, <i>Mathesis</i>
Flor.	Florus
<i>Frag. Vat.</i>	<i>Fragmenta Vaticana</i> in FIRA ³ , 461–540
Fronto, <i>Ep.</i>	Fronto, <i>Epistulae</i>
Gai. <i>Inst.</i>	Gaius, <i>Institutes</i>
George	George Syncellus, <i>Ecloga Chronographia</i>
<i>Gesta. Con. Carth.</i>	S. Lancel, <i>Gesta conlationis Carthaginensis anno 411</i>
Greg. Naz. <i>Or.</i>	Gregory Nazianzus, <i>Orationes</i>
HA	<i>Historia Augusta</i>
Herod.	Herodian

ABBREVIATIONS

Hipp. <i>Dan.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Commentaria in Daniele</i>
Hipp. <i>Ref.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Refutatio omnium haeresium</i>
Iam. <i>De myst.</i>	Iamblichus, <i>De mysteriis</i>
Jer. <i>Chron.</i>	Jerome, <i>Chronica</i>
John Ant.	John of Antioch, fragments in <i>FHG</i> 4
Jord. <i>Get.</i>	Jordanes, <i>Getica</i>
Jul. <i>Caes.</i>	Julian, <i>Caesares</i>
Jul. <i>Ep.</i>	Julian, <i>Epistulae</i>
Jul. <i>Mis.</i>	Julian, <i>Misopogon</i>
Jul. <i>Or.</i>	Julian, <i>Orationes</i>
Lact. <i>DI</i>	Lactantius, <i>Institutes Divinae</i>
Lact. <i>DMP</i>	Lactantius, <i>De mortibus persecutorum</i>
Lucian, <i>Alex.</i>	Lucian, <i>Alexander</i>
Lucian, <i>Syr. D.</i>	Lucian, <i>De Syriae dea</i>
Macarius, <i>Apocr.</i>	Macarius, <i>Apocriticus</i>
Mal.	John Malalas, <i>Chronographia</i>
<i>M. Pol.</i>	<i>Martyrium Polycarpis</i>
<i>M. Theod.</i>	<i>Martyrium Theodoti</i>
Nicaea can.	<i>Concilium Nicaenum anno 325 habitum</i> in Jonkers, <i>Acta et Symbola conciliorum</i>
Num.	Numenius
Optatus, <i>Tract.</i>	Optatus, <i>Tractatus</i>
<i>Orac. Sib.</i>	<i>Oracula Sibyllina</i>
Origen, <i>C. Cels.</i>	Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i>
Origen, <i>Exhort.</i>	Origen, <i>Exhortatio ad Martyrium</i>
Origen, <i>Princ.</i>	Origen, <i>De Principalibus</i>
<i>Origo</i>	<i>Origo Constantini imperatoris</i>
Oros.	Orosius, <i>Historia contra paganos</i>
<i>Pan.</i>	<i>XII Panegyrici Latini</i>
<i>P. Ath.</i>	P. Maraval, <i>La passion inédite de S. Athénogène de Pédachthoé en Cappadoce</i> (<i>BHG</i> 197b), <i>Subsidia Hagiographica</i> 75 (Brussels, 1990)
<i>P. Perp.</i>	<i>Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis</i>
<i>P. Pion.</i>	<i>Passio Pionii</i>
<i>Pap. Resp.</i>	Papinian, <i>Fragmenta ex libris responsarum et quaestionum</i> in <i>FIRA</i> ³ , 432–46
Paulinus, <i>V. Amb.</i>	Paulinus, <i>Vita Ambrosii</i>
Phil. <i>Her.</i>	Philostratus, <i>Heroicus</i>
Phil. <i>V. Apoll.</i>	Philostratus, <i>Vita Apollonii</i>
Phil. <i>V. Soph.</i>	Philostratus, <i>Vitae sophistarum</i>
Philost. <i>HE</i>	Philostorgius, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
Plin. <i>HN</i>	C. Plinius, <i>Historia Naturalis</i>
Plot. <i>Enn.</i>	Plotinus, <i>Enneads</i>
Plut. <i>Mor.</i>	Plutarch, <i>Moralia</i>
Porph.	Publius Optatianus Porphyrius

ABBREVIATIONS

Porph. <i>Abst.</i>	Porphyry, <i>De abstinencia</i>
Porph. <i>In Christ</i>	A. von Harnack, <i>Porphyrius "Gegen die Christen,"</i> 15 <i>Bücher: Zeugnisse, Fragmente und Referate, Abhandlungen der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil- Hist. Kl.</i> 1916, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1916)
Porph. <i>Plot.</i>	Porphyry, <i>Vita Plotini</i>
Ruf. <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Rufinus, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
SC	<i>Constitutiones Sirmondianae</i>
Socrates, <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Socrates, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Soz. <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Sozomon, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Suet.	Suetonius
Sulp. Sev. <i>Chron.</i>	Sulpicius Severus, <i>Chronicon</i>
Symm. <i>Ep.</i>	Symmachus, <i>Epistulae</i>
Symm. <i>Or.</i>	Symmachus, <i>Orationes</i>
Symm. <i>Rel.</i>	Symmachus, <i>Relationes</i>
Tac.	Tacitus
Tert. <i>Ad Scap.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Ad Scapulam</i>
Tert. <i>Apol.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Apologeticus</i>
Them.	Themistius, <i>Orationes</i>
Theod. <i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Theodoret, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
Theoph. <i>Chron.</i>	Theophanes, <i>Chronicon</i>
Zon.	Zonaras, <i>Epitome Historiarum</i>
Zos.	Zosimus, <i>Historia Nova</i>

Inscriptions and papyri

AE	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i>
<i>Aphrodisias and Rome</i>	J. Reynolds, <i>Aphrodisias and Rome</i> , Journal of Roman Studies Monograph 1 (London, 1982)
<i>Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity</i>	C. Roueché, <i>Aphrodisias in Late Antiquity</i> , Journal of Roman Studies Monograph 5 (London, 1989)
BE	<i>Bulletin épigraphique</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
CIS	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum</i>
HS	H. Desseau, <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
IG	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i>
IGBR	G. Mihailov, <i>Inscriptiones Graecae in Bulgaria Repertae</i>
IGLS	<i>Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie</i>
IGR	R. Cagnet, <i>Inscriptiones Graecae ad Res Romanas Pertinentes</i>
ILS	H. Dessau, <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
ILCV	E. Diehl, <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Christianae Veteres</i>
<i>Inscr. V. Eph.</i>	<i>Die Inschriften von Ephesos</i>
IRT	<i>Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania</i>
<i>I. Strat.</i>	<i>Die Inschriften von Stratonikeia</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

LW	Le Bas-Waddington, <i>Inscriptions grecques et latines recueillies en Grèce et en Asie Mineure</i>
MAMA	<i>Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua</i>
OGIS	W. Dittenberger, <i>Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae</i>
Oliver, <i>Greek Constitutions</i>	J. H. Oliver, <i>Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri</i>
<i>P. Bingen</i>	R. De Smet, H. Melaerts, and C. Saerens, <i>Papyri in honorem Iohannis Bingen Octogenarii</i>
<i>P. Cairo Isid.</i>	A. E. R. Boak and H. C. Youtie, <i>The Archive of Aurelius Isidorus in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo and the University of Michigan</i>
PE	S. Lauffer, <i>Diokletians Preisedikt</i>
<i>P. Dura</i>	<i>The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters Final Report</i> , vol. 5, pt. 1, <i>The Parchments and Papyri</i>
<i>P. Flor.</i>	<i>Papiri greco-egizii, Papiri Fiorentini</i>
<i>P. Geiss</i>	<i>Griechische Papyri im Museum des oberbessischen Geschichtsvereins zu Geissen</i>
PGM	K. Preisendanz, <i>Papyri Graecae Magicae</i>
<i>P. Herm.</i>	B. R. Rees, <i>Papyri from Hermopolis</i>
<i>P. Lond.</i>	<i>Greek Papyri in the British Museum</i>
<i>P. Neph.</i>	B. Kramer and J. C. Skelton (with G. M. Browne), <i>Das Archiv des Nephros und verwandte Texte</i>
<i>P. Oslo</i>	<i>Papyri Osloensis (1925–36)</i>
<i>P. Oxy.</i>	<i>Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i>
<i>P. Ryl.</i>	<i>Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library at Manchester</i>
PSI	<i>Papiri Greci et Latini, Pubblicazioni della Società italiana per la ricerca dei papiri greci et latini in Egitto (1912–)</i>
<i>P. Teb.</i>	<i>Tebtunis Papyri</i>
RGDS	<i>Res Gestae Divi Saporis</i>
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>
<i>Sel. Pap.</i>	<i>Select Papyri</i>
TAM	E. Kalinka <i>et al.</i> , <i>Tituli Asiae Minoris (1901–)</i>

Part I

THE SHAPE OF THE
ROMAN EMPIRE

CULTURE, ECOLOGY, AND POWER

Power

“After the Greek empire, no other will be raised up except that which possesses the domination in our own day and is solidly established: this is a fact evident to all. It has teeth of iron, because it kills and tears to pieces the entire world by its own force, just like iron. . . . [It] is not one nation, but an assemblage of all languages and all the races of man, it is a levy of recruits with a view to war.” The author of these lines was a Christian named Hippolytus, and the images that he was explaining were those of the beast in chapter 4 of the Book of Daniel.¹ Although he may not now be a household name, and although he wrote a very long time ago – toward the beginning of the third century AD – Hippolytus’ influence is still very much with us today. It was Hippolytus who asserted that Christ was born on December 25 in the forty-second year of Augustus, a date that was to become enshrined in Christian tradition and forms the basis of the common era by which so much of the world now measures time.²

The fate of Hippolytus is not dissimilar to the fate of many others who will pass through the pages of this book. He is little remembered in part because he does not fall within the periods that define the notion of the “classic.”

Our image of classical antiquity stems from two cities at two very different times. One is Athens of the fifth and fourth centuries BC; the other is Rome, three hundred years later. The earlier period is that in which the classical form of narrative history took shape, and the period in which the western tradition of drama was formed. It was the period in which standards of rhetoric and art were created, and the great Athenian experiment of democracy took shape, flourished, and fell. Rome in the last century BC was the time of Cicero, of Catullus, and of Virgil, the giants of Latin literature. It too was a time of incredible chaos, the period in which the republican form of government that had enabled Rome to rise to unparalleled power in the Mediterranean world failed to withstand the pressures that accompanied the acquisition of empire, degenerating into civil war. It was the Rome of Caesar,

of Pompey, of Antony, Cleopatra, and Augustus. Our view of these two great periods in antiquity was formed, in large part, by the imperial culture of the succeeding centuries, whose inhabitants accorded the status of “classic” to works of earlier generations.

Hippolytus, then, could not be a “classical” thinker because he was part of a generation that defined “classical” as something other than itself. He remains important precisely because imperial definitions of the “classic” helped shape the way that the memory of the ancient world was transmitted. The Rome that helped shape the future direction of European and Mediterranean history was less that of Cicero than that of Hippolytus; it was less that of Augustus than that of Constantine.

The Roman Empire that defined the “classic” may be seen as a dictatorship, supported by military force, or as the catalyst for both modern Europe and the Middle East, facilitated by a system of government that allowed countless peoples to communicate through a shared culture. Rome failed as the Mediterranean world’s sole superpower, and the shared culture derived from the study of the “classics” gave way, with increasing rapidity, to new cultures, shaped from the amalgam of “classics” with the reformed style of Judaism that became Christianity. How and why these things happened will be the story of this book. This story will take its shape from the interaction of groups that were formed by, and supported through, the institutions of the Roman state, and the way that classical culture served both to enable, and complicate, communication between these groups. It will be the story of how the diversity of power structures, supported by the diversity of the empire’s population, coalesced into fewer and fewer structures that ultimately failed of their purpose.

To begin again with Hippolytus, his primary concern in the commentary on Daniel, as it was in a closely related work on the coming of the Antichrist, was to show that the end of the world was a long way off.³ His intention was to show that teaching by rival Christian groups to the effect that the end of the world was imminent was false. He tells of a group in Syria that had set off into the countryside in the expectation of meeting Christ, only to find that they were assailed by beasts and brigands. They had to be rescued by the provincial governor.⁴ Thus, while his view of the Roman Empire is bleak – he admits that the empire is like the kingdom of Satan because it is all-powerful – he makes it clear that there is worse to come.⁵ It is, in his view, the Roman Empire that restrains the coming of the end; the sign that the actual kingdom of Satan was at hand would be the fall of the empire and its dissolution into ten democracies – symbolized, in Hippolytus’ view, by the ten toes of the beast in chapter 4 of Daniel.⁶

Hippolytus saw his world as the creation of Rome. The paramount power of its military force was all that could bind the diverse peoples of the empire together. Other contemporaries would praise the empire as a great fort that protected the countless cities that constituted the civilized world within its

figurative (and, in places, actual) walls.⁷ An empire that could degenerate into ten democracies, or be described as a conglomeration of cities, might also be described as one constituted of diverse power structures wherein people defined their position in terms of their relationship to the ultimate power of the emperor.⁸ In an empire of nearly sixty million people, these power structures were extraordinarily varied.

About the time that Hippolytus was writing about Daniel, a group of tenant farmers who lived on an imperial estate in the Bagradas valley of modern Tunisia (then the Roman province of Numidia) wrote to Commodus (AD 180–92) to complain that their rights were being violated.⁹ The tenants claimed that the person to whom the estate had been leased by the imperial agent (procurator) who oversaw the lands belonging to the emperor in this region was demanding services to which he was not entitled. The tenants could appeal to a law passed in the time of the emperor Hadrian (AD 117–38) that gave them the right to own marginal land that they cultivated, and to pass this land on to their heirs.¹⁰ The lessee could appeal to the self-interest of the procurator who may have been interested in maximizing the possible revenue from the estate (or in supporting a comparatively important man against his social inferiors). The procurator sent in troops who beat and imprisoned tenants who stood up to him. Somehow a man named Lurius Lucullus, who could write an eloquent petition and had familiarity with the law, came forward to represent the tenants.¹¹

The clash between tenant farmers trying to maintain traditional rights and the lessee, backed by the emperor's official, could only be adjudicated at the imperial court. In this case, the emperor's decision favored the tenants against his own officials. We know this because the grateful tenants inscribed the dossier of letters on stone so that all might know that the highest authority had been drawn into their valley and done justice.

The tale of the tenants in the Bagradas valley might serve as a paradigm for the way in which disputes between different groups could be decided, and of the overarching authority of the emperor. And so it should, but it was only one paradigm for the exercise of power. Five years before these tenants launched their appeal to Rome, a group of Christians was imprisoned at Lyons in France on charges that included incest and cannibalism. The governor arrived to hear the case, and in the face of what was a well-organized lynch mob, temporized by writing to the emperor, asking him what to do with regard to individual defendants who were Roman citizens. He sent those who were not citizens to perish in the amphitheater. The emperor upheld his decision to maintain the distinction between the two groups of Christians when he responded that citizens should be decapitated. The decision was based on the principle that Roman citizens should have superior rights to those of the emperor's subjects who had not attained such a status. Unfortunately the person primarily affected by this decree, a man named Attalus, appears to have been the main object of local

displeasure. The governor gave in to the crowd, and the emperor's order notwithstanding, Attalus met a horrific fate on the sand of Lyons's amphitheater.¹²

The foregoing examples suggest that the Roman Empire was too complex and large for general laws to be universally applicable. Despite the outward image of uniformity and power that is often evoked by the mention of Rome, the tale of the Roman Empire is more often than not one of radical change. The second century AD was highly unusual.¹³ Five emperors succeeded each other without violence between AD 98 and 180. This length of time without assassination or civil strife was unparalleled between the time that Rome achieved its paramount position in the Mediterranean world and the fifth century AD when the western provinces of the empire ceased to be ruled by a Roman emperor.

The periodic upheavals that struck the Roman world may perhaps be taken as a sign of the strength rather than the weakness of the system. For many centuries the source of Rome's power, its unmatched military potential, remained unchallenged despite chaos at the top. The accomplishment of the Roman state, despite its instability, still knows no parallel in the history of the Mediterranean world and surrounding lands.

Perhaps the most remarkable fact about the Roman Empire is that it was a geographic monstrosity. Tertullian, a Christian writer of the late second and early third centuries who lived in Carthage, the principal city in the Roman province of Africa, took it as a sign of the falsity of pagan gods that a priest of Serapis (a god of Egyptian origin) should have offered sacrifice for the health and well-being of the emperor Marcus Aurelius when Marcus had been dead for several weeks.¹⁴ In Tertullian's view, if Serapis was a god, he would have notified his priest that the sacrifice was redundant. What is perhaps more significant is that an event, the death of Marcus, that occurred in the Balkans should be personally relevant to a person living in North Africa. And it was also relevant to a person living in Britain, in France, in Syria, and in Turkey. It was the emperor's position as referee between the diverse hierarchies that constituted the civil society of the Roman Empire that made it so. Even if his word might be ignored, decisions of all sorts were his to make. His physical presence was invoked throughout these lands by countless temples, innumerable milestones marking the roads that bound the empire together, by monuments at the mouths of harbors, and at public events of all sorts. When news came of a missive from the emperor, those assembled in public places were supposed to listen, with heads bowed as his words were read out. They might then choose to forget those words, try to twist them to some personal advantage, or read between the lines to find some hidden meaning, but they would still have heard them.¹⁵ Whenever a person engaged in a financial transaction, the coin that was used would bear the emperor's image. Whenever a person dated a document, the date would bear the imprint of the imperial government. When he wanted to honor the

emperor, he would often use the language that he had learned from the emperor's pronouncements to do so.¹⁶

If we may return to Hippolytus' interpretation of the ten toes on the beast as ten democracies, we may see in this statement the notion that the imperial government was the institution that linked these groups together. In his view, the peoples of the empire had little in common other than the opportunity to serve in the army, which is another way of defining power in terms of overarching imperial institutions. If we were to expand and refine Hippolytus' view further, it might be to move in the direction of a view that structures such as that of the imperial system of taxation created a series of interrelated economic zones whose character and, consequently, whose existences were enabled by the imperial government.¹⁷ Studies of the circulation of coinage in the empire would seem to dictate precisely such a view.¹⁸ It has, for instance, been conclusively demonstrated that local coinages of Greek cities in the east circulated within relatively limited areas around their point of issuance.¹⁹ Bankers, as we now know, tended to specialize in local transactions. They did not transfer large quantities of coin from place to place, but they could engage in local financial transactions for absentee investors.²⁰ The engines that drove these financial systems were extremely wealthy individuals who held properties around the Mediterranean, and the imperial government. It was the imperial government that could provide either bullion to be minted into coinage or, in other cases, the coinage itself, to ensure that the money supply of individual areas was adequate to what the state regarded as its needs.²¹

The fate of Britain as the imperial power was withdrawn in the fourth and fifth centuries AD offers, perhaps, the greatest testimony to the importance of the order imposed by the imperial government. The reason for this is that Britain is unusual in that another authority did not fill the vacuum created by the departure of Roman government.²²

The ending of Roman Britain was a process that was already well in train during the last decades covered by this book, and a radically different social structure would emerge within thirty years of the death of Theodosius in AD 395. Indeed, many people who had grown to maturity in Theodosius' lifetime might sense that the world was not what it once was before they left it. On December 31, 406, the Rhine frontier would be irreparably breached, and a new Germanic nation, the Visigoths, would be in the process of formation within the frontiers. The Visigoths, and some of the tribes that crossed the Rhine, would carve out new kingdoms by adapting and reforming existing governmental structures. But this would not happen in Britain because those structures would have vanished before the Saxon peoples began to settle on British soil. It is this that makes the case of Britain so important for broader understanding of what made the Roman Empire work.

As early as the 380s there were signs that there was something wrong with life, as it had been lived, in Britain. Towns were beginning to fall into

disrepair, as were some villas, the houses of the elite. By AD 403 coin hoards that had been buried by landholders in fear of their safety and never recovered are beginning to show signs of significant change.²³ The clipping of bits of metal off coins, which was banned by the imperial government, begins to be widespread, and, interestingly, the forging of bronze coins appears to have become notably less common. The copying of bronze coins was connected with their use in day-to-day economic exchange, suggesting that a monetary economy was ceasing to function. After 402 it appears that silver coins ceased being shipped to the island, suggesting that the local imperial authorities were having trouble getting paid.²⁴ In 407, the governor of Britain was proclaimed emperor and set out for Gaul, where he was killed four years later. No effort was made to restore central authority or, consequently, to collect taxes. It has been argued that the tax structure of the imperial government created a mechanism of exchange between towns and the countryside that created a unified local economy, and it was the connec-



Map 1 The Mediterranean

Source: *Barrington Atlas of the Classical World*, courtesy of the Princeton University Press.

tion of this local economy with other local economies that was facilitated by Rome. If the broader connection was eliminated, there was little to keep a local economy running as it had before. In Britain the removal of the bulk of the garrison to fight in Gaul, and subsequent collapse of provincial administration, destroyed the basic mechanisms through which local hierarchies were linked together, and through which local economies were joined. By about AD 430 town life that had been nurtured on the island for more than 300 years had ended, while in the countryside many villas, once the rural bases for the civic aristocracy, were in decline. Mosaic floors were covered in dirt, hearths were built inside rooms that had once been for display, imports ceased.²⁵ Connection with the broader culture of the Roman world that had been mediated by the elites who had once lived in these houses was so diminished in significance that it cannot be traced.

The fate of Britain raises the question of what besides participation in the hierarchical structure of Roman imperial government made a person Roman?



To what extent was there a shared culture in the Roman Empire, and, to the extent that there was such a culture, how deeply did it penetrate into the peasant societies that constituted the bulk of the population of the empire? Some 80 percent of the people who lived in the empire were peasants. What did a peasant who lived in France have in common with one who lived in North Africa? There are no easy answers to these questions, and to some extent the answers will vary according to the structure of the hierarchies that were predominant at any given period.²⁶

The fate of Britain raises questions that may be no less significant than the first. Why did Romano-British society dissolve in the fourth to fifth centuries, while in the third century the weakening of Roman central government gave rise to a variety of alternative Romes? How did the balance of power between Rome and the lands it ruled change in the course of the fourth century? Did the increasing centralization of political and intellectual control in the imperial court have the effect of depressing allegiance to the central government and erasing critical space within which local societies could forge relationships with the central government?

Ecology

No account of the cultural complexities of the Roman world can ignore the diversity imposed by geography. The three central geological formations of the empire are mountains, rivers, and the Mediterranean Sea. These features define the zones of human habitation and interaction, but they do not prescribe the course that these interactions might take. The Mediterranean might act as a gigantic moat, or as a gigantic highway; rivers might be road-blocks, or they might be avenues; and a mountain range may be a lesser obstacle if one could be sure of what was to be found on the other side.

In any consideration of Roman history, it is the Mediterranean that must come first, for the Roman Empire was a Mediterranean phenomenon before it became a continental one in Europe, Africa, and the Near East. The sea itself was formed around a hundred million years ago when the African landmass collided with the Eurasian. Around twenty million years ago the eastern outlet of the Mediterranean was closed off by the Arabian landmass, and about six million years ago, it dried up when glaciation lowered the level of the Atlantic so that a land bridge emerged between Europe and Africa. The retreat of the glaciers raised sea levels again, enabling the Atlantic to pour over this land bridge into the enormous valley that had been created by the former evaporation. The new sea thereby created occupies an area of roughly 1,143,000 square miles (if the Black Sea is included). From the Strait of Gibraltar, where the sea is only twelve hundred feet deep, to the coast of Lebanon, where the Mediterranean narrows, it is 2,300 miles long with an average width of 500 miles. Its average depth is five thousand feet, and its water level is sustained by the influx of the Atlantic. Two characteristics

of the sea that stem from its surroundings are that it has very low tides and a rapid rate of evaporation, increasing its salinity.²⁷

The collision of continents left the Mediterranean ringed with high mountain ranges: the Atlas mountains of North Africa, the Pyrenees, and the Alps. The Alps, along with the Carpathian mountains, create a watershed that separates western Europe, effectively a peninsula bounded by the Atlantic and its two wings, the Baltic and Mediterranean seas, from the bulk of the Eurasian plain. In addition to the mountains, the principal features of this peninsula are three great rivers: the Rhine, the Danube, and the Rhône. The valley of the Rhône offers a line of communication from the Mediterranean coast to the interior, while the lateral lines of the Rhine and Danube defined, ideologically, if not actually, the northern limits that a Mediterranean power could hope to control. On the Spanish peninsula, the great valley of the Guadalquivir opened the heartland to the broader world of the sea.

On the northeastern end of the Mediterranean, the mountains that define the Anatolian plateau continue a geological formation that ends in the west with the Alps and with the Himalayas in the east. On the Mediterranean end the ascent to the plateau is gradual as the result of four great rivers that flow down into the sea. On the northern and southern edges of Anatolia, bounded by the Pontic outcropping of the Caucasus mountains and the Taurus, the division between the ecology of the upland and coastal regions is pronounced. South of the Taurus mountains, a line of mountain ranges – the Amanus, Jebel Ansariyah (Mount Casius in antiquity), the Lebanon and the anti-Lebanon – divides a thin coastal region from the semidesert of the Syrian plain, which extends to the banks of the Euphrates River in the east and gives way to the desert plateau of the Hauran in the south. There are three rivers that rise in the Lebanon: the Orontes, the Litani, and the Jordan. The Orontes flows north, emptying in the Mediterranean on the northern edge of the Jebel Ansariyah; the Litani, rising a few miles from the Orontes, flows south to the sea near the modern city of Tyre. The Jordan flows south through Galilee to its termination in the Dead Sea on the eastern edge of the mountainous ridge that extends north out of the Sinai. Another river, the Nile, flowing out from the mountains of Uganda and Ethiopia in east-central Africa, enters the Mediterranean through an enormous delta whose apex lies around 125 miles south of the sea coast.

The diverse geology of the Roman Empire supported, as it does now, a wide variety of ecologies ranging from northern Britain to the edge of the Atlas mountains. Variation of rainfall and temperature may indicate the extremes that a person who traveled across the empire would encounter. Let us assume the case of an army officer, on the move from the city of Dura on the Euphrates to the camp at Vindolanda in Britain. At Dura average rainfall was around seven inches a year and average temperature around 73 degrees, while at Vindolanda average rainfall was around twenty-eight inches and average temperature around 48 degrees.²⁸ Our putative traveler would

probably come to the Mediterranean at Seleucia, one of the great ports of Syria that enabled the passage of men and material from the west to the army on the eastern frontier (if this traveler was following another branch of the trade route, he might go to Caesarea in Palestine or Alexandria in Egypt). The journey by sea would enable the traveler to bypass the Alps and sail either out into the Atlantic (a very unlikely scenario) or to go directly to Marseilles at the mouth of the Rhône. Our traveler would leave the Rhône near Autun, to reach the Seine, which would take him to the great port city of Boulogne. It would then be a short trip across the English Channel to Richborough. From that point onwards the journey would probably be by land, following the roads built by the legions of Rome to London, and thence northwards through York to the region of Hadrian's Wall. Assuming a rapid and trouble-free journey, this traveler, who would have left the banks of the Euphrates in the winter so as to take advantage of the best sailing times, would now be cold and wet, winter having arrived at the point of destination just short of a year later.²⁹

Although the Mediterranean facilitated this journey, our hypothetical traveler is not a "Mediterranean" person, and it is arguable that no such class of person existed.³⁰ Our traveler moved from the Semitic environment of Mesopotamia to the Celtic of Britain. In so doing this person passed through several other ecological and cultural zones, for the mountains that ring the sea create sixty-four microclimates. With storms that move from west to east, average rainfall varies by as much as twenty inches – from fifteen to thirty-five inches – a year.

Rainfall affects the production of food, which is to some degree dependent upon local plant life. There are three characteristic types of vegetation throughout the region: scrub woodland, maquis, and garigue. Scrub woodland is typically rather open with low-crowned trees standing individually or in clumps, with an average height of between thirty and forty feet. The three primary species that make up this tree cover are the olive, evergreen oak, and Aleppo pine.³¹ Maquis, consisting of dense, scrubby evergreens standing between six and twelve feet tall, is characteristic of the upland regions. The most common species are heath, the strawberry tree, and rock-rose, with oleander, the chaste tree, and sweet bay also being well represented. Thickets of maquis are integrated into a regime of garigue, an open association of shrubs, often rich in fragrant oils, that ordinarily stand three to four feet high. These ecological regimes are ordinarily restricted to the zone below 2,500 feet, though this average disguises a tendency for the upper limit to increase as one passes from north to south. The mean upper limit in northern Spain is 1,600 feet, while in the Sierra Nevada of southern Spain it is 3,300 feet, and around 4,000 feet in the Atlas mountains. Along the extremely wet coast of Croatia, the range is around 650 feet, while on the Albanian coast it reaches only 200 feet. A few hundred miles further south, on the west coast of the Peloponnese, it reaches about 2,200 feet, and about 2,600 feet

on the Cyrenaican coast of North Africa (modern Libya). Moving from east to west, the mean elevation of the Mediterranean regime of vegetation increases around 1,600 feet along the coast of Turkey, 1,900 feet in southern Italy, and 2,500 outside the range of the Sierra Nevada in southern Spain.³²

The line of Mediterranean vegetation extends inland along the coast of western Europe to the southern edge of the Massif Central, the Jura, and the Alps. There it is replaced by a regime of mid-latitude mixed forest in which the primary species are oak and beech, with the exceptions of coastal evergreen forests along the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic coast of Britain. Coniferous forest predominates in the mountainous zones. From northern France and the Low Countries the mixed forest runs in a continuous and ever-widening spread to the Urals. This forest dominates the Balkan peninsula, with the exception of the coastal zones, until it merges with the treeless steppe of Moravia and the Ukraine.

Within the Mediterranean basin the essential components of the diet were the olive, wheat, beans, and grapes, though there were some notable exceptions.³³ The olive tree does not grow in Egypt, which may have contained somewhere between 7 and 8 percent of the population of the empire.³⁴ Nor will the olive tree grow above eight hundred meters or in regions that experience frost. The inland regions of France, Spain, the Balkans, Anatolia, the Po valley of northern Italy, and, of course, the island of Britain did not support olive cultivation. When these regions are taken together with Egypt, it is possible that some 30 percent of the population did not have olive oil as a staple of its diet. In Egypt, sesame oil was substituted; in western Europe and Anatolia, butter was used instead. Cows and goats were the predominant source of dairy products, and a substantial question subsists as to how important these animals were as sources of meat in the overall diet. It has been asserted that pigs alone were kept basically for meat. This view is based largely on the literary evidence for the consumption of pork products in Italy and the use of young pigs as sacrificial animals in Greek cult.³⁵ It is further suggested that the short Mediterranean growing season, along with a shortage of grass and other fodder, meant that there was little meat available on a day-to-day basis. Consumption of meat on a regular basis was an elite activity in which the less well off joined on rare occasions. This may be true, but recent work has called some of these assumptions into question. While there is no doubt that the wealthy had more access to meat than the poor, the assumption that pigs were the only animals kept for consumption is very dubious, as is the assumption that the poor lived as involuntary vegetarians.³⁶

West-central Italy was the great region of pig consumption in the Roman Empire: from the period of the late republic on through the period covered by this book some two-thirds of all animal remains are porcine. This reflects a cultural preference among the inhabitants of Rome and surrounding regions. It is not true of the rest of Italy. In Campania, for instance,

pre-Roman sites show a greater concentration of bovine remains until the first century BC, when this region finally joined the Latin pattern of pork-eating. In south Italy there is evidence for much higher consumption of sheep and goats, which conforms with other regions that were influenced by the western Greeks. Northern Italy reveals a greater taste in beef (though still less than that for sheep and pigs) which may reflect the tastes of the pre-Roman, Celtic, population. Even more interesting is that a much higher proportion of pig remains appears in urban contexts (roughly 54 percent) than in rural (circa 49 percent). The increase in the consumption of pork throughout Italy may reasonably be taken as a sign of the predominance of west-central Italian tastes that stemmed from the preeminence of the city of Rome. When attention is shifted to Spain, a similar pattern emerges, though with one significant variation. Here cattle predominate in the early period (circa 46–63 percent), while the sheep and goat remains drop from approximately 39 percent to approximately 21 percent with a corresponding increase in the percentage of pig. A very different dietary pattern took hold north of the Pyrenees and Alps. In the Gallic provinces cattle and pigs predominate, both before and after the coming of Rome (we are told of a Gallic tradition of pig-rearing that predates Caesar's conquest in the 50s BC), while Provence in the south appears to have had a significantly higher proportion of sheep and goat in the diet. Cattle are clearly the preferred source of meat in Britain and Germany, though there is an interesting regional difference in that sheep far outnumber pigs in Britain, while the reverse is true along the Rhine.

The significance of pork as a source of nutrition declines radically in the east. On rural sites in Greece up to 74 percent of remains are of sheep, 10 percent are of cattle, and 15 percent are of pigs. The proportions change in urban sites, where cattle remains may amount to as much as 21 percent, and the proportions of sheep to pig are roughly 46 percent to 32 percent (with wide variation from site to site). This would suggest that pork might have been seen, as the evidence of cult suggests, as a prestigious food to be consumed, along with beef, on public occasions. In Asia Minor bovine and sheep remains (in roughly equal proportions – 38 percent and 40 percent respectively) predominate over pigs. The absence of pigs is far more striking in the Semitic provinces and Egypt, where the overwhelming proportion of remains are of sheep (72 percent urban and 67 percent rural) with cattle coming in a distant second (circa 22 percent urban and 27 percent rural) and pigs an even more distant third (circa 6 percent urban and 7 percent rural). In North Africa, sheep are a clear majority at all periods, with an unusual variation in the fourth and fifth centuries whereby cattle remains decline from approximately 24 percent to 4 percent and pigs increase from 18 percent to 31 percent. Perhaps remains from military contexts provide the most interesting control on these numbers, since in those places consumption patterns mirror those of civilian communities. Far from being a force for dietary

change, the army's diet changed according to the habits of the peoples upon whom they were quartered.

The proportions of animal remains across the empire suggest that the Latin taste in pork was a highly localized phenomenon. The one area where the Roman army may have effected some change in dietary patterns was Britain, where the proportion of beef increased, possibly reflecting the tastes of soldiers recruited from the Gallic and German provinces. No influence can be detected in the east.

The ratios of animal remains cannot tell us how much meat the average person consumed. Nor can evidence for animal size – evidence from medieval records leads to the conclusion that the animals were comparatively small by modern standards – tell us all that much about consumption.³⁷ What we need to know is not how big the animals were, but rather what the ratio was of human to beast. Thus, while there is reason to think that cereals and legumes provided the bulk of the rural diet because of the poor quality of meat, we cannot begin to estimate how high this proportion actually was. An assumption that cereals and legumes constituted as much as 75 percent might well be wrong, since it is based upon assumptions about regional meat production that are not borne out by the archaeological evidence.³⁸ Assumptions about the absence of meat are also problematic, as they neglect the place of fish in the diet. In this case the evidence is yet to be assembled in the way that it has been for animal flesh. What we do know, on the notoriously unreliable evidence from our literary texts, is that fish tended to be regarded as a luxury food for the rich, and that the fisherman was notoriously poor. The Mediterranean as a whole is less productive of aquatic life than other oceans (a feature of its relatively high temperature and high salinity), and it was harder to fish with the technologies available in the premodern period because of its steep continental shelves. But this is not true of every region: we know of cities such as Tarentum in southern Italy where the sea seems to have been a source of prosperity, and fish-farming was practiced in the Roman period.³⁹ One product of this industry was a form of fish sauce (*garum*) that seems to have been widely consumed in urban areas throughout the empire.⁴⁰

Fish, lamb, bread, cheese, olive oil, beans, and the like were consumed in different proportions depending on where a person lived. Location would also determine other additions to the diet. The corpses of animals slaughtered in the amphitheater at Rome appear to have been offered as a supplement to the inhabitants of Rome (given the unusual scale of these entertainments, this is unlikely to have been of similar significance in any other city).⁴¹ Galen, the great doctor of the second century AD, gives a list of cereals that were characteristic of colder regions, and every region produced its own variety of wine.⁴² Most were more fortunate than the people of Caunus on the western coast of Turkey, who found that their product should be mixed with seawater. In the northern provinces beer was a significant

alternative to wine, even after the introduction of the vine to France in the first century AD (one of the few genuine ecological improvements in Roman history). It was also an important beverage in Egypt and, perhaps, at locations on the Euphrates.⁴³ One of the oldest and most revered divinities in the Mesopotamian tradition was Tammuz, who numbered among his functions the fermentation of grain.⁴⁴ Milk is a nutrient with an interesting history as well. In the Greek world it seems that its consumption was taken as a sign of barbarism.⁴⁵ Civilized people, it seems, turned milk into cheese. Milk-drinking was especially associated with pastoralists. This may be true, but it is sometimes hard to be sure just what this means – taken at face value this topos would suggest that it was not consumed in “civilized” areas. This may be true, but the most obvious pastoralist was the local shepherd. It might be that the notion that milk consumption was for barbarians masked a class bias as well as a cultural one. We simply cannot know for certain.

Diet is intimately connected with the physical well-being of the population. In much of the Mediterranean the low average rainfall masks a high degree of interannual variation (both too much and too little could be a problem). Although peasant farmers might pursue strategies to reduce the risk, a couple of bad years in a row could all but eliminate their reserves. In Greece and western Turkey, at least one year in three could be problematic, leading to crop failure and consequent food shortages, a fact of life that was complicated by the fact that “wheat’s unpardonable fault was its low yield.”⁴⁶ A portion of the Roman province of *Africa Proconsularis* (in modern Tunisia) was regarded as exceptionally fertile because grains planted there yielded a 5:1 return.⁴⁷ The area around Leontini in Sicily, benefiting from the rich volcanic soils around Mount Aetna, is said to have produced wheat with a yield of 10:1, above the average of 8:1 in a good year and 6:1 for a more typical year, in southern Italy.⁴⁸ These figures, derived from ancient authors, are in line with figures for southern Italy derived from studies of the early modern period.⁴⁹ There is no reason to think that figures from medieval France are not on the same scale as those from the Roman period, showing substantial interregional variation in accordance with local ecological conditions. Thus the 1338 yield figures from Provence are on the order of 4 or 5:1, a ratio that remained reasonably constant into the early eighteenth century, and are comparable with those of other Mediterranean regions.⁵⁰ In the alluvial regions of Artois, the figures are much higher, ranging from roughly 8–12:1 (or even 14–15:1 at one fertile estate).⁵¹ Across the channel, at Winchester between 1200 and 1499, the average yield was 4:1 (with a high of 6.1:1 and a low of 2.5:1). At Merton College, Oxford, yields between 1333 and 1336 averaged 4.3:1.⁵² Low yield rates such as these are especially interesting, as Britain and North Africa had reputations as grain exporters, suggesting that this renown was due to relatively low population density and, possibly, to the ability of absentee landlords to extract what they needed

even to the point of causing local food shortages.⁵³ The overall picture that may be derived of farming in the Roman Empire is that conditions were similar to those in the Middle Ages, with its patterns of good and bad years. The insecurity of the food supply in the premodern world suggests that the inhabitants of the countryside lived under the perpetual threat of shortage. Even if the diet was less heavily dependent on wheat as is sometimes suggested, shortages of grain translate into the death of animals, and loss of fertilizer and seed for the future. What is more, conditions of premodern agriculture suggest that a majority of the rural inhabitants of the Roman world suffered from a diet that lacked sufficient vitamins to be nourishing. Incorrect feeding over generations can have disastrous effects, and these problems are heightened in periods when the population is expanding.⁵⁴ There is some reason to think that the population of the Roman Empire did just this in the century and a half after Augustus.

It has been estimated that the population of the Roman Empire increased from a near historical low in the first century BC to a near historical high in the second century AD. A low estimate for the earlier period is not unreasonable. Extraordinary chaos struck the entire area of the Roman world from the beginning of the great wars of conquest in the late republic and the even greater civil wars that accompanied them in the first three quarters of the first century BC. The arrival of the peace established by Augustus may have allowed the population of the empire to expand from somewhere around 45 million people to somewhere in the vicinity of 64 million people by the time of Marcus Aurelius. A population that is nearing the limits of the carrying capacity of the land that supports it may suffer more seriously from malnutrition than a smaller one.⁵⁵ The impact of the so-called Antonine plague, a series of epidemics that raged from 165 into the mid-180s and killed off some 10 percent of the empire's population, may be a reflection of the inherent bad health. The plague's devastation was perhaps all the more severe in that the response of a rural population to such a disaster is often an increase in the birthrate. Such an effect is demonstrable in premodern China and England, and strongly suggested by the evidence of Egyptian census returns from the later half of the second century AD.⁵⁶ These records reveal sudden, catastrophic falls in population, followed by a rapid recovery with a population that was slightly younger than the one prior to the catastrophe. The population may thus have recovered to its preplague size within fifty years – and continued to place extreme pressure on the land that supported it.

The Antonine plague is not the only indication that life was harsh and short in the Roman world. Life expectancy at birth is a useful measure of social welfare, and evidence from the Roman world reveals patterns that are, once again, commensurate with that of a preindustrial population. The Egyptian evidence suggests an average life expectancy at birth of between twenty-two and twenty-five years.⁵⁷ This evidence is of value not because it

represents an absolutely reliable guide to the Egyptian experience; rather it is important because it provides some empirical support to comparative studies based on somewhat later premodern societies (whose records are better preserved). Such comparison makes it reasonable to assume that there were not substantial differences between the life-cycle in the Roman Empire and in other states occupying the same ecological niche prior to the demographic transition that began, in Europe, in the eighteenth century. But there may be more to it than that. While, as a consequence of both the empirical approach to the Egyptian evidence and the comparative approach, it is reasonable to think that average life expectancy at birth in some parts of the empire was around twenty-five years, evidence connected with other parts of the empire suggests a rather longer life-span. An analysis of magistrates from the Italian city of Canusium suggests that their life expectancy was nearly thirty-two years at birth, and the career pattern of Roman senators – who had to be over forty if they were (except under unusual circumstances) to hold the highest office (consul) – might again assume a life expectancy at birth that is closer to thirty than twenty-five.⁵⁸ Comparison with other premodern societies suggests that location had a greater impact on longevity than status – meaning that people in overpopulated areas like Rome or the Nile valley likely lived shorter lives than did people living in other climates and under other conditions.⁵⁹

Although he might not necessarily have lived longer, the elite Roman male was better nourished, better exercised, and better cared for than the average peasant. The result was likely to have been physiologically noticeable. In ideological terms, the point was enshrined in the earliest surviving Greek literature, the Homeric poems, which formed the core of an educated person's learning in those parts of the empire where Greek was the dominant language of the upper class. The story of Thersites, the common soldier who ventured to oppose the will of Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks at Troy, appears to have been a popular one. One thing that made Thersites so notable was that he was

the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion. He was bandy-legged and went lame of one foot, with shoulders stooped and drawn together over his chest, and above this his skull went up to a point with the wool grown sparsely upon it.

(Iliad 2.16–19, trans. Lattimore)

When Odysseus returned home to Ithaca in disguise, it took the intervention of the goddess Athena to make him look insignificant enough to pass for a beggar. The intrinsic interest of the upper classes in both the Latin- and Greek-speaking sections of the empire in physiognomy, in the outer person and mirror of the inner, may stem, in part, from the quite different dietary experiences of the dominant and dominated classes of the empire.⁶⁰

Across this vast expanse of ecologies the fundamental practices of rural life were necessarily diverse, as were relationships between urban centers and the land around them. Rome, the imperial capital, to take the most obvious example, transformed the rural economy of Italy, creating, in place of the distinct regions of early Italy, an integrated series of urban systems ranging from “regional central places to centers of local marketing and administration.”⁶¹ Beyond its impact on the Italian economy, the demands of feeding a city of some one million people facilitated the growth of an imperial network of great regional centers, which, though not as large as Rome, were not utterly overshadowed by it. Carthage, Alexandria, and Antioch were as ecologically distinct from Rome as they were from each other, but, functionally, their existence helped spur the development of local networks of cities. The study of the olive tree suggests that it was precisely the demands of the great centers that spurred an enormous increase in the cultivation of the tree.⁶² Moreover, as it has likewise been estimated that the bulk of agricultural production from Egypt, Africa, and Syria remained inside the province, it is arguable that the vastness of Rome was only possible because its growth had spurred developments needed to provide the surplus that supported it. The existence of regional centers likewise appears to have spurred diversification of secondary agricultural produce. As the authors of a recent study of the Mediterranean have observed:

Two places growing barley or almonds; two places cultivating fragmented lots with irrigation; two places using unfree labour . . . may be wildly different from each other because of their respective contexts in the wider ecology of connectivity. Excessive concentration on the traditional classification by crop-type or regime will obscure and render unintelligible much of their economic and social history.⁶³

To return to the earlier question of what it meant to be Roman, one answer is simply that it was to be resident in a region whose economy was given direction by the grand cities of the Mediterranean rim. Such an answer is perhaps excessively minimalist, for it is to say little more than that one was born, lived, and died in an administrative entity known as the Roman Empire. As such it would also be misleading, since the impact of Rome extended well beyond the administrative boundaries of the Roman state. Studies of the Germanic lands to the north of the Rhine and Danube suggest that a taste in Roman goods may have helped shape political structures.⁶⁴ The transfer of such goods to the north was, from the first century AD onwards, under administrative control, ideally passing through certain defined customs posts.⁶⁵ The manipulation of the flow of these goods could be used to shore up or undermine chieftains whose position depended, in part, upon their ability to reward their followers with prestige items imported

from the empire. But such goods also may have come north with men who had served in the Roman army. No longer members of the imperial establishment, they nonetheless brought with them tastes that were formed south of the border. The Runes with which texts were inscribed in northern lands appear to have developed in southern Denmark as a result of contact with Rome. Members of elite society appear to have desired to mark their goods in imitation of habits they had learned of in the south.⁶⁶

A survey of those influenced by the structures of Roman government would necessarily include also those who were involved in the transshipment of goods, by land and sea, to the Far East. We know a good deal less than we would like about the organization of this trade, but it is worth noting that the trade with India appears to have passed through a series of discrete economic zones, with the personnel changing at various points along the way. In this regard it is perhaps significant that Chinese information about major cities of trade from India through the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea in the second century AD appears to have been derived from traders of Semitic background.⁶⁷ In the same vein, it is notable that a freedman who reached Ceylon from Egypt was lost, while members of the embassy from An-Tun, the king of Ta-ch'in (a Roman emperor named Antoninus) to the emperor of China, were evidently merchants from Vietnam.⁶⁸ Whatever the ethnic identity of the traders, the forms that they used were still those of the Roman world. The fascinating text of a loan agreement for the delivery of a gigantic cargo that had arrived in Egypt from India refers to an earlier loan agreement that appears to have been drawn up in a style compatible with the Roman world at Muziris in India.⁶⁹ The Seleucid dynasty had taken over a developed network of trade with India from the Achaemenids; the Ptolemies had taken over the western and northern ends of other trade routes with central Africa, southern Arabia, and India. Both continued to flourish under Roman rule, and, at least on the Egyptian end, with a substantial degree of control being exercised from Rome once products reached the empire.⁷⁰ In India itself there seems to have been a colony of merchants who erected a temple of Augustus at Muziris on the southeastern coast, and that grain was shipped out for the use of "those concerned with shipping," who are distinct from the "merchants who do not use it" – Indians who ate rice.⁷¹ Palmyra, albeit a city that fell within the borders of the province of Syria, controlled much of the trade with the east that passed up through Mesopotamia, in its own right, and Palmyrene merchants are attested as being involved with the trade through Egypt as well. Their appearance here suggests that they were connected with a broad network of traders, professionals in the "eastern trade" wherever it landed.⁷² Inscriptions from South Arabia that commemorate ceremonies conducted by the Hadramawt king 'Il'add Yalut mention representatives from Palmyra, Babylonia, and India.⁷³ The Palmyrenes, like the Indians, are here because their interests are specifically involved.

The answer proposed above does not really help very much, nor would it be viable to say that being Roman meant nothing at all. At the very least it meant that even the inhabitants of rural areas were in contact with the broad structure of elite culture that bound different parts of the empire together. We know, for instance, of numerous villages throughout the provinces of Syria and Arabia, like “the village of Rêsō” near Petra, or Sekla near Apamea, that derived their names from important landholders.⁷⁴ Villages like that at Kefr-Laha in Arabia, or Umm ez-Zitoum in Syria, possessed a corporate body, or *koinon*, with which, it appears, local worthies would associate. In the case of Umm ez-Zitoum a man identified as a town councilor, *bouleutes*, joined with the sons of two veterans to aid “the *koinon* of the village and of the God” in erecting a building “on behalf of the safety and victory of our Lord Marcus Aurelius Probus Augustus” in 282.⁷⁵ At Kefr-Laha three veterans joined with the *koinon* in erecting a shrine to the emperor Maximinus in 236.⁷⁶ In these cases we need not suppose that the veterans were themselves villagers. Rather, having retired on the generous pensions granted soldiers, they had become landowners in the region, and they provided a link between the village and the greater world of the empire. In the Hauran, a region of modern Jordan, where there were no significant cities at the time that the province of Arabia was created in AD 106, we see other developments, inspired by the central government, whereby villages were awarded the status of *metrokomai*, or “mother villages” in the later second and early third centuries. The places of which we know appear to have had small garrisons, which contributed to their elevation, since these places developed the infrastructure of small cities to support the troops.⁷⁷

Moving north and west to the region of Karamanli in modern Turkey, we can watch the initiates of Zeus Sabasios, making dedications on behalf of “their salvation, and the salvation of the village of the Hormêleoi and the salvation of Annia Faustina and of Tiberius Claudius.”⁷⁸ Annia Faustina was the grandniece of Marcus Aurelius, and Tiberius Claudius was Tiberius Claudius Severus Proculus, her husband and the consul of 210. It is likely that the village was part of an estate that they owned in the area. In the region of Cavurbeleni in southern Turkey, when we find a wealthy woman erecting statues of herself and her husband, and giving a dinner for the people of the village, we may assume that they owned much land in the area.⁷⁹ So too may have Gaius Julius Julianus Tatianus, a wealthy man of Thyateira in Lydia (western Turkey) have owned land in or around the village Tabeirnoi, whose people erected a statue in his honor.⁸⁰ In the first part of the second century AD, the Roman Asinius Rufus wrote to the civic magistrates of Sardis asking them to recognize the right of the village of Arillenoï to hold a fair, pointing out that he was doing this as a courtesy to them since he could easily have written straight to the emperor instead.⁸¹ While we do not know what happened in the end, the letter itself is a remarkable piece of diplomacy, revealing that all power did not lie with the cities in their dealings

with the villages in their territory. Asinius, who says that he was asked to act because his ancestors had been patrons of the place, did not want to insult the magistrates of Sardis by having the emperor give them an order in a matter where they could preserve their dignity by acting on their own. In another case, we find the governor of Asia asking the civic authorities at Philadelphia in western Turkey to allow a monthly market at a village called Tetrpyrgia (probably owned by the man who had asked him to intervene) on a day that would not clash with other local markets.⁸² These markets enabled villagers to exchange their surplus produce, acquire goods from traders, and, in some cases, to grow and acquire an identity of their own.⁸³

Turning to another part of the empire, where the evidence is of a different sort, we come to North Africa, which is worth a look even though the best of the evidence for the interpenetration of urban and rural life will not appear until the fourth century AD in the context of church controversy and conflicts between settled and nomadic peoples. When we do get this evidence, it helps provide a context for appeal of the tenant farmers of the Bagradas valley, and the appearance of their champion. The area will be filled with large estates, described variously as *fundi* and *castella*, owned by members of elite families. These *castella* are the architectural descendants of the “towers” that were the central buildings of estates owned by major urban landholders as far back as the third century BC – it was in such an estate that the great Carthaginian general Hannibal hid himself after his defeat at the hands of Scipio Africanus in 201 BC.⁸⁴ Around these estates, and often supported by the estate owners themselves (who, in Africa, were less likely to be constrained by civic governments), were markets. These markets were, it seems, sponsored by the landholders as benefactions, a way of supporting existing structures in the countryside, and, in a sense integrating the value system of the urban aristocracy with the needs of the rural population.⁸⁵ Such markets could help bring peasants into contact with people like Lurius Lucullus.

The form of Lurius’ appeal reflects another aspect of the connection between peasants and the imperial government – there is remarkable similarity across time and space in the form of petitions to emperors from the countryside, opening with lengthy summaries of the injustice they wish corrected and concluding with prayers for salvation.⁸⁶ It may be that the authors of these petitions were guided by handbooks, or had their pleas shaped for them by an imperial official – we have drafts of a petition from a grammarian who wished to complain to the emperor that he was not being paid by the town in Egypt that owed him his salary, along with the draft of a letter to an official whom he hoped would help get his petition a favorable response.⁸⁷ In one case we can identify the person who brought the petition before the emperor as a soldier with connections to the village that he seeks to help.⁸⁸ People from an imperial estate in Lydia complained that ten people had been kidnapped by imperial policemen and held for ransom – though by the time that this appeal was written one man had managed to come up

with the equivalent of the 16,000 Roman sesterces that the kidnappers demanded.⁸⁹ The fact that they inscribed the tale of their woes suggests that they received help. These people may be oppressed, but they are not poor, and they are not isolated from means of redress.

In economic terms, while there is no reason to suppose that the peasant in North Africa learned new agricultural techniques from peasants in Italy, there is every reason to think that these peasants planted more acres of grain and more olive trees than they would have had the Roman Empire not existed.⁹⁰ The peasant in Syria still spoke Aramaic and farmed in much the same way that his ancestors did, but his landlord likely spoke Greek; and the enormous expansion of farming in north-central Syria is at best explained as a direct consequence of the development of Antioch as a major administrative center.⁹¹ The fact that the landlord of our putative Syrian peasant spoke Greek was perhaps nothing new, given that the area around Antioch and the inland cities that grew up on the inland lines of communication toward the Euphrates were largely Seleucid foundations. But the ability of this landlord to communicate with the landlord of our putative North African peasant was a function of Roman government.

To return again to the question of what it meant to be Roman, it might, perhaps, be better to admit that there can be no single answer, no lowest common denominator that is very useful. Rather it may be better to see varying degrees of Roman-ness depending on a person's location and status. Just as the Roman Empire could not change the way peasants farmed, it could not dictate a single model of participation in the system of government. What it could do was offer ways for people, however they participated, to communicate. The cities of the Roman Empire were linked by a shared cultural idiom, and their wealthier inhabitants who set the tone of urban life through their buildings and benefactions may have had more in common with one another than with the peasants who farmed their land. But the very fact of this link might transform the way that the peasant understood the world.

Cult and culture

When he read much of the evidence presented in the last few pages, Michael Rostovtzeff, the great Russian historian of antiquity, saw a great distinction between the peasant of the countryside and what he referred to as the bourgeoisie that dominated life in the cities.⁹² His language was that of a member of the Russian intelligentsia of the turn of the twentieth century, and his views were plainly influenced by the world that he had seen destroyed in 1917–18. But to be able to explain his views in light of his personal experience (something that Rostovtzeff himself was prone to do) should not be to invalidate them.⁹³ The distinction between town and country life that he perceived was real. What is at issue is whether or not the relationship was

symbiotic, or, as he saw it, hostile.⁹⁴ I have suggested that the situation may not have been as bleak as Rostovtzeff thought it was, though it must be admitted that the more positive picture is connected with what I take to be evidence for village elites who had access to urban patrons, and may not reflect the lot of those living at the subsistence level; and it cannot tell us much about how contact with urban culture might have changed the way people saw the world around them. To understand this it is necessary to examine the mental stratigraphy of rural areas.⁹⁵ The lives of rural peoples, closely tied though they are to the earth, are not simply defined by agricultural technologies. The inhabitants of the countryside had brains; they had emotional lives, aspirations, and beliefs that did not continue unchanged from the Stone Age to the advent of modern technologies. The rhythms of everyday life were not simply those of sowing, reaping, and reproduction. Every age left its imprint. The study of the mentalities of rural peoples as well as of their bodies is akin to the study of the earth. Just as different geological ages have left their imprint on the earth's crust, so too the study of rural life is, in a sense, stratigraphic. Just as rock formations may reveal the course of regional evolution, so too may the physical remains of cult sites supplement the uneven written record to suggest phases of human development. One crucial issue in the period covered by this book is the rise of Christianity, and the rise of Christianity is unthinkable if the peasants of the empire were immune to external influences. The adaptation of local cults to the common culture of the aristocratic city also suggests something of the intellectual effects of the Roman Empire.

The geologist has one obvious advantage in describing the stratigraphy of the earth as opposed to that of the collective mind: a mutually agreed vocabulary. A second advantage may also be cheerfully conceded to the geologist. The geologist is talking about something that demonstrably exists. The historian who makes simple assertions about the collective *mentalité* of a people whose expressions are largely lost may rapidly run out of things to say. The historian may be on safer ground when talking about behaviors. It is plain, for instance, that swords were thrown into bodies of water at cult sites in northern Gaul. In the pre-Roman period these swords were largely of Celtic design. In the first century AD the pattern of deposition shifts suddenly and irretrievably to swords of Roman design.⁹⁶ There are two reasonable conclusions about the deposition of swords in pre-Roman contexts. One is that they are trophies of war being offered to a divinity that was thought to have helped in the victory. The other is that the sword was offered to a divinity at a point of transition in a warrior's life, the most likely being when he reached the end of his effective fighting career. If the pattern in the Roman period is a continuation of the pattern in the pre-Roman period, then it is reasonable to think that the sword was sunk when it was no longer to be used; and that the Roman swords of the first century were offered up when men were mustered out of the *auxilia*. The person who offered his

sword in this way also carried with him a bronze diploma certifying that he had completed his service according to Roman regulations. The loyal servant of Rome may thus be seen to exist either between two radically different worlds, those of his Celtic heritage and of his Roman employers, or to have forged a new, coherent existence that accommodated the demands of both. To see in this practice a stratum in the human geology of Gaul may permit one to avoid the necessity of choosing either answer, and that may be preferable. It marks the addition of a new element in the lives of Gallic warriors, who now were able to channel the warlike traditions of their ancestors into a new direction; Roman rule did not rob such people of their capacity for self-definition through combat. It plainly did not require that such people abandon traditions that were important to them, but rather it enabled them to forge a form of participation in a new order.

At some point, probably in the third century, a man named Aurelius Diphilianus erected an altar at Dura-Europos to “the ancestral God, Zeus Betylos, of those by the Orontes.”⁹⁷ Aside from the fact that he identifies himself as a soldier in the Roman Legion IV Scythica Antoniniana, we know nothing about this man. We do not know if he was a native of Syria, and thus we do not know if the ancestral God, Zeus Betylos of those by the Orontes, was his ancestral god, or a god whom he had encountered in his service. However he had encountered Zeus Betylos, Diphilianus clearly thought that he was important enough to pray to, and that his prayers had obtained the desired result. The name of the god combines two significant elements, the name of the Greek god Zeus with a name derived from a Semitic style of representing divinities as objects, in this case as stones or betyls. In the Semitic tradition, betyls were stones that were inhabited by gods, and so Diphilianus may be saying that his god is the Zeus that inhabits the betyl. Otherwise, if he is using Betylos as an adjective, he may be saying that this particular Zeus is the betyl. If that is so, then his understanding of the god would probably have struck “those by the Orontes” as rather peculiar.

However Diphilianus understood his god, he is illustrative of a process. His name, Aurelius, suggests that he, or, possibly his father – we cannot take it back much further than that because Dura was destroyed in 256/57 – obtained citizenship from the emperor Caracalla (whose proper name was Marcus Aurelius Antoninus). The name Diphilianus is a hybridization of the common Greek name Diphilus, with the Latin *-anus* ending indicating attachment (or, to be more precise, since he spelled his name in Greek, the ending is *-anos*, whose usage to indicate attachment is modeled on the Latin usage). The appearance of a man with such names in the Syrian desert is unthinkable without the institutions of Rome, which have, quite literally in this case, helped define his identity. As a polytheist, he presumably felt that it was a good idea to betake himself, for assistance when stressed, to a divinity who appears to be the local version of the ruler of the gods.

It might be argued that the similar processes of divine redefinition connected with the offering of swords in Gaul and the creation of the altar of Diphilianus stem not from generalized patterns of cultural adjustment, but rather from attachment to the institutions of Rome.⁹⁸ In both cases soldiers are involved, but that is not the case with many other such dedications. No such intervention, for instance, can be detected behind a three-word dedication at Ksar Lemsa in Libya: *Maragzu Aug(usto) sac(rum)*, or “dedicated to Maragzu Augustus.”⁹⁹ Maragzu is the chief god of the region; his importance in the Roman context is emphasized by the addition of the title Augustus, which signifies the concept of supreme power. Maragzu, as the name suggests, was a divinity of the local Berber population who, rather than being effaced by the new regime, is assimilated to a generalized conception of importance. Similarly, at Sidi Amor Jedidi, also in Libya, two local magistrates, P. Cornelius Viator and Justus son of Bithies, repaired the shrine (*aedes*) dedicated to the *mibilis Cererum* in the reign of Antoninus Pius (AD 138–61). *Mibilis* is a western Phoenician word, used here as an equivalent for the Latin *numen* (divine power). Its usage in this way appears to be a development from its original meaning, which was “holy place,” or, better, the place where the spirit of a divinity resides; as with a beryl, the place where the divinity resided was filled with the spirit. The cult that they celebrated was perhaps as mixed as the language that they used to celebrate it. The “Cereses” (*Cererum*) are evidently a Phoenician adaptation of the Greek cult of Demeter and Kore (or Persephone).¹⁰⁰ According to a tradition reported by the historian Diodorus, writing in the first century BC, the Carthaginians had destroyed a shrine to these goddesses in 396 BC.¹⁰¹ All manner of disasters then struck them, including a devastating plague, the destruction of their army, and a mutiny by their mercenaries. They then created this new cult, which led to the preservation of their state (as they saw it). In this sense the Phoenician Cereses became not so much symbols of fertility, as was the Greek Demeter who had been assimilated in Roman tradition to the Italian goddess Ceres (hence the title in this text), as of salvation.

In a case like this, or Maragzu Augustus, a term like *Romanization* fails to do justice to the process, for what is suggested is not the formulation of “Romanized” conceptions of the gods, but rather the formulation of new identities that were neither Roman nor traditional. The conception of the Cereses was not opposed to that of Ceres; the men who reconstructed the shrine, commemorating the emperor as they did so, do not appear to be asserting a local tradition against the cultural imperatives of the governing power. Rather, their action reveals a moment of evolution in an ongoing effort to understand the workings of the divine within their community. Similarly, divinities such as *Dii Mauri*, or *Dii Macni* and *Dii Magifae Augusti*, attested at various points in modern Algeria, represent a combination of idioms to express concepts that are at once both local and universal.¹⁰² To describe the combination of idioms as a form of syncretism, whereby gods

of one tradition are assimilated to those of another, may be as misleading as a term such as *Romanization*, for the Dii Mauri remain, quintessentially, the gods of their region, not divinities who have become something different.¹⁰³ The polytheist traditions of the ancient world were in constant flux, able to update themselves to new situations and demands, and knowledge of the gods was potentially increasing with new revelations at all times.¹⁰⁴ If divinities were to continue to be worshipped, they had to be updated to meet the needs of their worshippers.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps the most striking example of one way in which existing divinities could be reinterpreted through new circumstances is offered by a story that was composed with a view to debunking the whole process. According to Luke the evangelist, the apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas arrived at the city of Lystra on the northern slopes of the Taurus mountains of southern Turkey, in a district known as Lycaonia, where they met a cripple:

This man listened while Paul was speaking. Paul fixed his eyes on him and saw that he had faith to be cured, so he said to him in a loud voice, "stand up straight on your feet"; and he sprang up and started to walk. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in their native Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in human form." They called Barnabas Jupiter, and Paul they called Mercury because he was the spokesman. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates.

(Acts 14:9–13)

Paul and Barnabas dissuaded them from offering sacrifice, but interestingly, Luke does not say that the crowd then converted to the faith.¹⁰⁶ The inhabitants of Lystra, disappointed though they may have been by the disclaimer, had been prepared to sacrifice the ox that their priest had brought because, in their understanding, Zeus was a god of oxen, and he was, at times, depicted in the company of a young man. This Zeus is known to us from a series of reliefs as Zeus Ampelîtês, a divinity who specialized in the protection of horses and cows. A pair of reliefs depicts him in the company of a young man, his messenger.¹⁰⁷ We do not know the origin of this Zeus, but he was one of a series of manifestations of the god that were worshipped in the Upper Tembris valley of Phrygia. They may all go back to gods in the period prior to the rise of the great post-Alexandrine Greek kingdoms in Asia Minor who were associated with Zeus as a mark of their primacy. A spectacular event such as that narrated by Luke could then lead to further development in understanding of how they might function on earth. In this way they provide a vehicle for reifying novel events in a traditional context.

Greek and Latin, as the dominant tongues of the urban elite, could not only enable the reinterpretation of existing cult in response to an external

stimulus, they could also permit new claims to be put forward. Thus at Turda in Libya (probably the ancient site of Zugal) a dedication was made to the *numen* of King Saturn, the father of the gods, and to Latona, mother of Apollo and Diana.¹⁰⁸ The description of Saturn as king (*rex*) and father of the gods is unique to this text, as is the pairing of Saturn with Latona. The cult of Saturn in North Africa descends from the Phoenician cult of Baal, but Latona is a distinctively Greco-Roman entity. In an area rich in olive trees, commemoration of Latona might have seemed particularly appropriate since she had given birth to Apollo and Diana under one. The assertion that this Saturn was king of all the gods may look back to an original Phoenician understanding of the divinity, but that is less certain than the obvious point that the novel assertion here is made possible by the permeable boundaries of local and supraregional culture.

It is possible that developments in one area could promote those in another – at least that is a possible reading of the odd dedication to “Jupiter and Juno, Dracco and Draccena, and Alexander” made by a slave named Epitynchanus at some point in the third century near Stobi, in what is now the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia.¹⁰⁹ It appears that Dracco and Draccena are best understood as local divinities, reflecting a badly attested cult of dragons. To pair them with Jupiter and Juno, leading divinities of the Roman pantheon, suggests that they should be understood as being on the same level. The Alexander mentioned here is very probably the Alexander who invented and promoted the cult of a snake named Glycon at Abonuteichos in northwestern Turkey during the reign of Antoninus Pius.

Glycon, who gave oracles from his shrine, was said by Alexander (who staged his birth using an ostrich egg and a small snake) to have been the son of Asclepius; his serpentine form was intended to evoke the serpents of his putative father. In addition to his oracles, it was alleged that Glycon would perform cures for those who slept in his temple, just as Asclepius did in his great sanctuaries at Epidauros in Greece and Pergamon in western Turkey. He was not presented as the chief of all the gods, but he does seem to have found a consort (who slept with Alexander), which may have led to the reinterpretation of the Balkan Dracco by Epitynchanus.¹¹⁰ What little we know of dragon cults in the area suggests that dragons were not ordinarily visualized as having mates. A first-century dedication in Paeonia was made by a retired member of the Praetorian Guard to “the dragon who is honored here,” and an eighth-century text describing polytheist monuments in the area of Constantinople mentions only “a big bronze dragon.”¹¹¹ One North African text is dedicated to Dragon Augustus (another example of the process described above whereby imperial titles were adopted into local conceptions of divine power).¹¹² Another commemorates “Divine Hand of Dragon.”¹¹³ It is a little hard to visualize just what the dragon with the divine hand would have looked like; but we do know that divine hands,

more generally (and in human form) were worshipped as angels in Semitic contexts.¹¹⁴ “Divine Hand of Dragon” probably marks the continuation of Phoenician worship in the area, the divine hand being the messenger of the god Dragon.

Dragons then had a history of worship in both Semitic and Balkan contexts. Glycon, while not, strictly speaking, a dragon, could thus be brought into line with those traditions if a person thought that this was reasonable. The movement of concepts from one region to another, and their reinterpretation, was a function of the shared languages of the urban elites, and this process does permit the evolution of ideas outside of the immediate urban, elite context. The shrines of the gods were public places, and the celebration of the gods at public festivals enabled the transmission of information, new or old, about them. At Abonuteichos, for instance, Alexander celebrated a three-day festival where the life history of Glycon was reenacted.¹¹⁵ At the city of Oenoanda in Lycia (southwestern Turkey) we know of a grand festival instituted by one Gaius Julius Demosthenes in honor of himself at which the villagers who farmed the civic territory would assemble to offer sacrifice. One of the crucial features of the dossier that describes the process of auto-immortalization that Demosthenes set in motion is that it reveals a mechanism through which elite values were communicated into the countryside. A decree emanating from the town council lists all the surrounding villages and the sacrifices that they should offer. A representative section is as follows:

The *agonothete* (official in charge of the festival) himself, one bull; the civic priest of the emperors and the priestess of the emperors, one bull; the priest of Zeus, one bull; the three *panegyriarchs* (officials in charge of other festivals), one bull; the secretary of the council and the five *prytaneis* (the executive officials of the town council), two bulls; the two market supervisors, one bull . . . of the villages, Thersenos with Armadu, Arissos, Merlakanda, Mego Oros, [. . .]lai, Kirbus, Euporoi, Oroata, [. . .]rake Valo and Yskapha, with their associated farmsteads, two bulls.¹¹⁶

The procession thus joins together people from the countryside, living in villages with distinctively non-Greek names, with the leaders of the civic community. These villagers were there to see, and to hear, to learn about Demosthenes and the wider world, just as were the inhabitants of Abonuteichos and its surrounding countryside present to learn about Glycon. Temples were storehouses of local knowledge, and it was at the annual festivals that these storehouses of learning were opened to the public.

The festival of Demosthenes, like countless other festivals in the Greek world, was not simply for the local folk. It was well advertised in the hope of bringing visitors from other parts of the region to town. It was the

commonality of elite culture that made this possible in a way that it had not been prior to the rise of supraregional states after Alexander the Great's conquests (335–323 BC); and it may be that the cult of Glycon offers one of the best examples of the way that a skilled entrepreneur could exploit the mobility that the Roman state enabled. Glycon offered two services that were greatly valued, healing and information about the future. Within twenty years of the foundation of the cult, Glycon had acquired clients from among the governing aristocracy of Rome. One of these clients was the governor of Cappadocia at the eastern edge of the Anatolian plateau in AD 161. Another was the governor of Asia at the same period.¹¹⁷ The result was that Glycon gained access to the capital, and Alexander spread the word of his accomplishments far and wide. The oracle was even consulted by the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who had acquiesced in the renaming of Abonuteichos as Ionopolis in the first years of his reign, in AD 170.¹¹⁸ The new name of the city disguised its Pontic origins by providing a fictitious link to the Greek world. This was not a move that appears to have aroused protest from the local inhabitants, who are said to have enjoyed the publicity (and money) that the famous cult brought in.

Marcus Aurelius, like other Roman emperors, was aware of the importance that attached to cult. The favor that he showed by consulting Glycon marked him as a man in touch with developments in the world of the divine. This was important, as the gods alone were free of his control. His predecessors can likewise be seen consulting oracles and publicizing the results as a way of proving that the gods took direct interest in their doings.¹¹⁹ But it is with Marcus himself that we can see the exploitation of the fluidity with which divine actions could be viewed. On a relatively straightforward level, he advertised the story that his prayers had called fire from the sky to destroy an enemy siege engine in AD 172.¹²⁰ In the same year (probably) he spread the story of the salvation of his army by another miracle. In this case, when the army was cut off and under pressure from a force of Germanic barbarians, an enormous storm burst over the battlefield, enabling the Romans to win the day. In a visual depiction of the event, a watery divinity pours himself forth over the fighting men, barbarians collapse, and Romans advance. According to a version of the story that is preserved in a contemporary oracular text, Marcus was personally responsible for the miracle.¹²¹ According to a somewhat later account, provided by Cassius Dio in the early third century, the miracle was the work of the Egyptian Harnouphis, who accompanied the emperor, and the god in question was Hermes Aerios, a Hellenized version of the Egyptian god Thoth–Shou.¹²²

We will probably never know what actually happened, but, even if we did, that knowledge would be less significant than what we already know. People understood what they were told in ways that made sense to them. Hence the attribution of the miracle to “the heavenly god” in one text, and to Harnouphis in another. The account was sufficiently powerful to influence

later imperial propaganda (see p. 109 below) and was appropriated both by Christians before the end of the third century, and by the emergent theurgist strain of Platonism in the later third or early fourth.¹²³ It is the version that includes Harnouphis and Thoth–Shou that is most interesting in the present context.

Cassius Dio called Harnouphis a *magos*. The word *magos* was originally applied to a representative of the Zoroastrian priestly hierarchy. His wisdom could be translated into *mageia*, or the ability to command divine powers. The use of the word to describe an Egyptian holy man reflects an ongoing process by which the wisdom of non-Greek peoples was homogenized into a generic form of “eastern wisdom.”¹²⁴ As Aelian, a collector of marvels who wrote in the early third century AD, put it,

Who could fail to admire the wisdom of the barbarians? None of them lapsed into atheism, and none argue about the gods – whether they exist or do not exist, and whether they have any concern for us or not. . . . The barbarians I have just mentioned (Celts, Indians, and Egyptians) say that gods exist, that they provide for us, that they indicate the future by omens and signs, by entrails and by other forms of instruction and teachings. These indeed are a lesson for men which derives from the gods’ forethought on their behalf. They also say that much is revealed in advance by dreams and by the stars themselves. In these matters their faith is strong. They sacrifice with purity, they piously avoid pollution, performing rites and preserving custom in ceremony, and have other practices as a result of which it is agreed that they respect and worship the gods with conviction.

(*Misc.* 2.31, trans. Wilson)

On this model, indeed, the “barbarian” is the best guide to proper worship for the contemporary inhabitant of the empire. Aelian’s view was scarcely idiosyncratic.

Priests of Egypt, initially the representatives of specific local cults in the Nile valley, could thus become *magi*, detached from their local context.¹²⁵ Harnouphis was one of a number of Egyptians to be found in the company of emperors during the second century AD. Hadrian seems to have had a particularly interesting encounter with a man named Pancrates, who showed him powerful spells.¹²⁶ More than that, Pancrates was a poet in Greek, and, in giving Hadrian a tour of Alexandria, showed him a red lotus, which he claimed should be called the “Antinoeios” in honor of Hadrian’s favorite, Antinous since he alleged that it had sprung from the blood of a lion Hadrian had recently killed while hunting in North Africa.¹²⁷ Hadrian rewarded him with a large payment for his spells and perpetual maintenance in the museum at Alexandria for his poem. Like Harnouphis, he was a man who bridged

Greek and Egyptian cultural traditions. Another such person may have been the less fortunate Serapion who made ill-advised use of “face time” with the emperor Caracalla (AD 211–17) by telling him that he would die. He was immediately executed.¹²⁸

The international reputation of Egyptian holy men, who had begun to spread about the Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander’s conquests, bringing Hellenized versions of local wisdom with them, had an impact on Egypt itself. The image of the traveling priest who could instruct kings was a powerful one in the literature of Pharaonic Egypt, and it was the continuation of this indigenous tradition that fed the desire of Greeks or Romans for “barbarian learning.” The wise Egyptian who traveled around the Mediterranean might still have a place in his native district, and the reputation of Egyptian wisdom would also draw outsiders into the Egyptian countryside. Harnouphis and Pancrates existed at one end of a continuum of information that stretched from the banks of the Nile to Rome. The “international performer,” as these two clearly were, could flourish by appropriating a Greco-Roman stereotype of the eastern wise man while functioning in a non-Egyptian context.¹²⁹ The person who came from abroad to Egypt would be seeking people who were recognizable in terms of this same stereotype. It is under the influence of this interest that the Egyptian holy man who stayed at home, and served primarily the Egyptians who sought him out in his temple, might change the services that he offered to both foreigner and native.

The traveler who came to Egypt looking for wisdom did so in the expectation that he would meet a *magos* who had direct access both to the divine and to books of ancient wisdom. The ideal type is perhaps best revealed by the fictions created by outsiders. Thus Lucian of Samosata created a Pancrates (the name plainly taken from the famous magician whom Hadrian dealt with).¹³⁰ He had lived in temples for twenty-three years while taking instruction directly from the goddess Isis. In Lucian’s story he met a young man who had been sent to Egypt by his father in order to learn wisdom. Intercepting him on a journey up the Nile, where he hoped to obtain an oracle from the talking statue of Memnon – the fictional traveler had a lot of company in this, as we shall see in later chapters – he promised him instruction in magic. After witnessing Pancrates’ performance of marvelous acts (riding crocodiles and swimming with other beasts) the traveler left his servants behind and wandered off with him. As they traveled he watched Pancrates perform various wonders, and then, after overhearing his spell, he tried to use it himself. The result was a disaster, and Pancrates ceased his instruction. More fortunate was a man named Thessalus who likewise had come to Egypt to further his education. He succeeded in obtaining a “book of Nectanebus” containing twenty-four ways to cure the body according to signs of the zodiac with the aid of stones and plants.¹³¹ Feeling that something was missing, he decided to seek a vision of the god Asclepius to gain

better knowledge. He duly found a magician who, after a three-day wait, enabled him to receive the word of God. The experience, which took place in an underground room, looks as if it occurred in a temple that had been redesigned to accommodate Greek tourists who were used to underground oracular chambers such as those of Apollo at Claros in Turkey or Trophonius in Lebadeia, and, later, that of Glycon.¹³²

Thessalus' search began with the discovery of a book. Such books had an important place in mediating the transition from older traditions of Egyptian learning to those more accessible to a broader Mediterranean audience. Thus a papyrus, dating from the reign of Augustus, which contains magical recipes opens with the statement that it is a copy of one found "in Heliopolis in the sacred book said to be of Hermes in the *adyton* in Egyptian writing, translated into Greek."¹³³ The phrase reflects the language of Pharaonic texts, and the practice, in Pharaonic times, of keeping libraries of sacred books within temples. It was the use of Greek that enabled this wisdom to pass from a local context into regional, and thence Mediterranean circulation.

The process of translation led to changes within the indigenous Egyptian setting. A hoard of texts found near Thebes in Egypt that date to the third century AD mingle Greek, Old Coptic, and Demotic spells. The mixture of languages, sometimes in the same scribal hand, represents the evolution of the priestly practice, and of the services that the priests expected to perform.¹³⁴ On another level, books of the so-called Hermetic corpus are primarily in the form of revelations made by Hermes Trismegistos, a Hellenized form of the god Thoth who was, in ancient Egyptian religion, the teacher of crafts. In many of these books Hermes appears to a disciple and gives him a lesson based on the tenets of Greek philosophy. While the philosophy may be Greek, the form of the book may be traced back to the wisdom literature of the Middle Kingdom, which offered its audiences the revelation of great sages.

The admixture of Greek, Demotic, and Coptic may represent local evolution, and should have been comprehensible to those who collected the books. But the fact remains that this was still a local development. It remains to wonder just what an outsider would have made of it. The Demotic and Coptic would have been meaningless to a man like Thessalus, who would simply see it as "Egyptian" without being able to see what it may have meant locally. So too we may wonder what a traveler from Gaul would have made out of "Divine Hand of Dragon." To say that something is a local response to shared culture is not the same thing as saying that the response would have been comprehensible to another participant in that same shared culture who lacked the local knowledge needed to see what was really happening. So long as diverse responses could remain embedded in their indigenous context, there was no cause for conflict.

Not all gods stayed at home. In the centuries after Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia, eastern peoples appear to have been drawn west in greater

numbers, possibly because new centers of power such as Alexandria and Pergamon made the Aegean lands far more important than they had been in the past.¹³⁵ They brought with them their gods, who, while taking on Greek names such as Zeus Hadad, remained, at heart, very much gods of Syria, Egypt, or Anatolia. Zeus Hadad, for instance, was originally from northern Syria and was understood not as a local manifestation of the Greek god, but rather as the supreme god to whom the closest Greek approximation was Zeus. So too were divinities like the “Syrian Goddess,” Atargatis, and the “Great Mother,” Cybele, of Anatolia thought to be greater than others.¹³⁶ Similar claims were made for Isis of Egypt, whose cult, linked with the cult of Serapis, was perhaps the most widespread of non-Greek cults prior to the time of Augustus. In all cases these cults were essentially henotheistic, meaning that their worshippers asserted that the god was the most powerful of all the divinities, that other gods were subordinate to him or her. In that their priests were professionals, these cults also differed from civic cults in the Greco-Roman world, where priests were, with a very few exceptions, not professionals. The priests of Atargatis, for instance, were notable because they traveled in groups seeking converts and gifts for their god. Yahweh, another decidedly henotheistic divinity, imposed strict dietary and behavioral standards on his followers, who were also expected to remit a portion of their annual earnings to his temple at Jerusalem.¹³⁷ Isis, whose cult began to attract Greek converts in the Aegean from the third century BC onwards, likewise had professional priests; even as the texts that proclaimed her power to the world acquired an overlay of Greek thought, they retained some of the flavor of the Egyptian original.¹³⁸

Although it is more than a bit misleading to refer to cults such as those of Isis, Yahweh, Zeus Hadad, or Atargatis as “eastern” insofar as that term implies that they came from outside the territory of the Roman Empire, it is important to recognize that cults from Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia injected a henotheistic element into the religious life of the empire. The first two centuries AD would see the further expansion of interest in such gods, albeit in a variety of forms. One of these was the worship of the “Highest God.”¹³⁹ Worship of the Highest God took a number of different forms that shaded into each other from time to time and place to place. In some areas we find dedications to Zeus the Highest, “Dios Hypsistos”; in others worship of Theos Hypsistos – Highest God – and in others, more simply Highest, Hypsistos. At Stratoniceia in Caria, for instance, there are dedications to Zeus the Highest and another divinity whose name is rendered variously as “the Divine,” “The Divine Messenger,” “the Divine Heavenly Messenger,” “the Divine Good” or even “the Divine Royal.” In other places – places as widely separated geographically as Palmyra in Syria and Tanais on the Black Sea – we meet “Highest God the Hearer,” or “Zeus the Highest and the Hearer,” while in Jewish context we often find only “Highest” or “Highest God.”¹⁴⁰ The diversity of appellations and companions in these

dedications makes it impossible to assume that there is a single conception of this god, or that there was a single form of worship. But this is what is perhaps most important, for it shows that there was a general interest in identifying a henotheistic divinity who was above all others. It may not be pushing the evidence too far to see in this desire to find a highest god some projection of the rise of monarchies in the post-Alexandrine world, a desire to equate the existence of an all-powerful individual on the human plane with some all-powerful divinity who governed the universe.

An imprecise conception of the “Highest God” may have allowed room for discussion. Certainly it does appear that the spread of Judaism may have been assisted by the fact that Yahweh was a “highest god,” and non-Jews seem to have been drawn into associate membership with Jewish groups through the similarity between their conceptions of the Highest God.¹⁴¹ It is particularly in Asia Minor that we find significant groups of God-fearers who were Greeks associated with, but not fully part of, a synagogue.¹⁴² Indeed the spread of the use of the language of “highness” in the imperial period is perhaps best seen as a reflection of the sort of behavior whereby one divinity could be identified with another. It is a form of behavior that should be seen as distinct from that connected with cults such as that of Isis or Atargatis, where a single priesthood established basic conceptions of the god for others to follow. It did not, however, preclude the continued formation and spread of other cults whose inception may be traced to a single religious figure who inspired others with a passion to preach some new way of dealing with the divine, as was the case with the cult of Glycon.

The success of Alexander suggests a model for understanding the spread of cults for which we lack even the evidence offered by a hostile narrative. In the case of the cult of Mithras, which gained a greater following, over a much wider area, than did that of Glycon, we cannot even be certain where the impulse came from – plausible cases have been made for areas as diverse as Rome, the Black Sea, and Commagene – but the evidence, largely archaeological in this case, reveals the foundational activity of a very well organized group.¹⁴³ The evidence for this group is provided by the remarkable consistency in the way that the story of Mithras was made the basis of a cult that required its members to be initiated into the “mysteries” of the god. Throughout the empire we find representations of Mithras’ birth from a stone, his capture of a bull, his creation of the cosmos after he slaughtered this bull, and of his miraculous creation of a spring by shooting at a rock with one of his arrows.¹⁴⁴ The conception of the god, who was originally a member of the Iranian pantheon, seems similar to that of other Near Eastern divinities in that he was now seen as the savior of mankind from evil. The astrological symbolism associated with his cult suggests that the founders of the movement had drawn upon Greek astrology as part of their effort to explain what the god had done, and used it to contextualize their vision of the god as the sun.¹⁴⁵ Their cult was thus neither Greek nor Iranian nor

Anatolian. It was rather the product of the fusion of traditions to create a divinity who would be comprehensible because he partook of the multiculturalism of the empire. The fact that evidence for his worship should be found so often in military contexts suggests that the message of the god was what counted. The army, as Hippolytus said, drew from all parts of the empire, and was thus a natural place for a god whose myth looked to the salvation of all to be celebrated. The message was reinforced by the ranking of initiates to the mysteries in accord with their station in life – officers tended to hold the highest positions, and so forth. In this way the cult served to help strengthen the sense of order within society, which may have made it all the more popular with members of the imperial establishment.¹⁴⁶

Although a very different sort of cult from that of Mithras, Christianity likewise owed its early spread to the efforts of a small, but deeply convinced, group of people in one part of the empire.¹⁴⁷ Its rise was assisted by the prior spread of Judaism and may have owed to its Jewish ancestry the notion that it should have a history recorded in books. Dependence upon literary narrative, which became pronounced after the composition of the gospels in the second half of the first century AD, helped set the non-Jewish version of the faith preached by Paul and his associates apart from other versions of Christianity that would continue to exist on the fringes of Judaism – we shall meet one of these groups in a later chapter.¹⁴⁸ As Christianity developed its own literature, it also developed its capacity to generate a distinctive message that was a potent counterweight to the dominant system of values. A religion that took as its founder a man who had been crucified by a Roman magistrate, a man who was quoted as saying that salvation was dependent upon faith in the will of God no matter what one's social status, was plainly at variance with cults that were integrated with existing social groups. Owing something, perhaps, to the overt hostility of the emperor Nero, who blamed Christians for the fire that ravaged the city of Rome in AD 64, the emergent cult might attract those who felt dissatisfied with the world around them. It offered a venue within which adherents could define a society that was dependent upon behaviors that were often at odds with others.¹⁴⁹ These behaviors were given a universal significance by the central role of texts.

The centrality of texts to the Christian experience is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that so many battles within the church, so many efforts to define new forms of Christianity, were, in the early centuries, connected with books. The rise of one brand of alternative Christianity, Montanism, which spread outwards from Phrygia and took as its central tenet the notion that the Holy Spirit remained active in the world, was facilitated by the circulation of new books of prophecy.¹⁵⁰ Another alternative brand of Christianity, Marcionism, which spread from Rome at the same period, was based upon a thorough rejection of the Jewish heritage.¹⁵¹ It too depended upon texts, in this case a revised version of the gospel of Luke. The emergence of both groups may be associated with an increasingly strong sense of

canon based upon the four gospels that form the core of the New Testament along with the epistles and the Book of Revelation. The spread of the cult, and the ability to translate the teaching of a Palestinian teacher to a pan-Mediterranean audience were, as Christians themselves came to recognize, only made possible by the existence of the Roman Empire.

Taken in isolation, these various religious phenomena may allow for a variety of interpretation; taken as whole, they may be seen as a visible record of the process through which corporate identities evolved. The path of evolution is obviously dependent upon the starting point. An infusion of Latin was not going to make a Berber or Phoenician cult in North Africa look like a Celtic cult in Britain; an infusion of Greek was not going to make a rural Zeus in central Anatolia look like Amon in Egypt. But these infusions of Greek and Latin, like a layer of volcanic ash, will leave their imprint upon the intellectual stratigraphy of each region where they were a feature of the dominant political discourse. It was also a process that gave rise to very different forms of religious practice that could, to a degree, transcend local differences. In this way it begins to be possible to gain some impression of what it was that the empire enabled.

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