

The
**SHORTEST
HISTORY**
of
EUROPE



JOHN HIRST



‘Beautifully and sparely constructed, yet rich in fact, feeling and detail, sweeping, challenging and funny’ JAMES BUTTON

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INTRODUCTION

IF YOU LIKE TO SKIP TO THE END OF A book to see what happens, you will enjoy this book. The endings start soon after it begins. It tells the history of Europe six times, each from a different angle.

These were originally lectures designed to introduce university students to European history. I do not start at the beginning and go through to the end. I quickly gave the students an overview and then returned later with more detail.

The first two lectures sketch out the whole of European history. This is truly the shortest history. The next six lectures take a particular theme. The aim is to deepen understanding by returning and more deeply examining.

A story has a plot: a beginning, a middle and an end. A civilisation does not have a story in this sense. We are in thrall to narrative if we think a civilisation must have a rise and fall, though it will have an end. My aim here is to capture the essential elements of European civilisation and to see how they have been reconfigured through time; to show how new things take their shape from old; how the old persists and returns.

History books deal with many events and people. This is one of history's strengths and it takes us close to life. But what does it all mean? What are the really important things? These are the questions I always have in mind. Many people and events that get into other history books don't get into this one.

The more detailed lectures in the second part of the book stop around 1800—and this simply because when I designed this course of lectures there was another course dealing with Europe since 1800. So how much history does this leave out! I have looked forward occasionally, but if my approach works you'll recognise the world we now live in, whose lineaments were laid down long ago.

After classical times, the book deals chiefly with western Europe. Not all parts of Europe are equally important in the making of European civilisation. The Renaissance in Italy, the Reformation in Germany, parliamentary government in England, revolutionary democracy in France: these are of more consequence than the partitions of Poland.

I have relied heavily on the work of historical sociologists, particularly Michael Mann and Patricia Crone. Professor Crone is not an expert on European history; her specialty is Islam. But in a little book called *Pre-Industrial Societies* she included one chapter on 'The Oddity of Europe'. This is a *tour de force*, a whole history in thirty pages, almost as short as my shortest history. It provided me with the concept of the making and reworking of the European mix, as set out in my first two lectures. My debt to her is that great.

For some years at La Trobe University in Melbourne I was fortunate to have as a colleague Professor Eric Jones, who was a great encourager of the big-picture approach to history and upon whose book *The European Miracle* I have heavily relied.

I claim no originality for the book except in its method. I first offered these lectures to students in Australia who had had too much Australian history and knew too little of the civilisation of which they are a part.

John Hirst

CHAPTER 1. *Europe Classical and Medieval*

EUROPEAN CIVILISATION IS UNIQUE because it is the only civilisation which has imposed itself on the rest of the world. It did this by conquest and settlement; by its economic power; by the power of its ideas; and because it had things that everyone else wanted. Today every country on earth uses the discoveries of science and the technologies that flow from it, and science was a European invention.

At its beginning European civilisation was made up of three elements:

1. the culture of Ancient Greece and Rome
2. Christianity, which is an odd offshoot of the religion of the Jews, Judaism
3. the culture of the German warriors who invaded the Roman Empire.

European civilisation was a mixture: the importance of this will become clear as we go on.

* * *

IF WE LOOK FOR THE ORIGINS of our philosophy, our art, our literature, our maths, our science, our medicine and our thinking about politics—in all these intellectual endeavours we are taken back to Ancient Greece.

In its great days Greece was not one state; it was made up of a series of little states: city-states, they are now called. There was a single town with a tract of land around it; everyone could walk in the town in a day. The Greeks wanted to belong to a state as we belong to a club: it was a fellowship. It was in these small city-states that the first democracies emerged. They were not representative democracies; you did not elect a member of parliament. All male citizens gathered in one place to talk about public affairs, to vote on the laws and to vote on policy.

As these Greek city-states grew in population, they sent people to start colonies in other parts of the Mediterranean. There were Greek settlements in what is now Turkey, along the coast of North Africa, even as far west as Spain, southern France and southern Italy. And it was there—in Italy—that the Romans, who were then a very backward people, a small city-state around Rome, first met the Greeks and began to learn from them.

In time the Romans built a huge empire that encompassed Greece and all the Greek colonies. In the north the boundaries were two great rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, though sometimes these were exceeded. In the west was the Atlantic Ocean. England was part of the Roman Empire but not Scotland or Ireland. To the south were the deserts of North Africa. In the east the boundary was most uncertain because here were rival empires. The empire encircled the Mediterranean Sea; it included only part of what is now Europe and much that is not Europe: Turkey, the Middle East, North Africa.

The Romans were better than the Greeks at fighting. They were better than the Greeks at law, which they used to run their empire. They were better than the Greeks at engineering, which was useful both for fighting and running an empire. But in everything else they acknowledged that the Greeks were superior and slavishly copied them. A member of the Roman elite could speak both Greek and Latin, the language of the Romans; he sent his son to Athens to university or he hired a Greek slave to teach his children at home. So when we talk about the Roman Empire being Greco-Roman it is because the Romans wanted it that way.

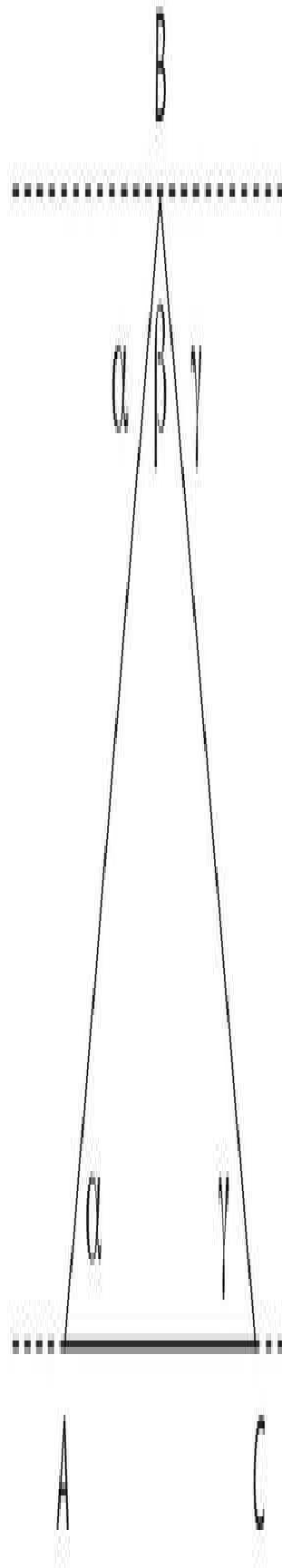
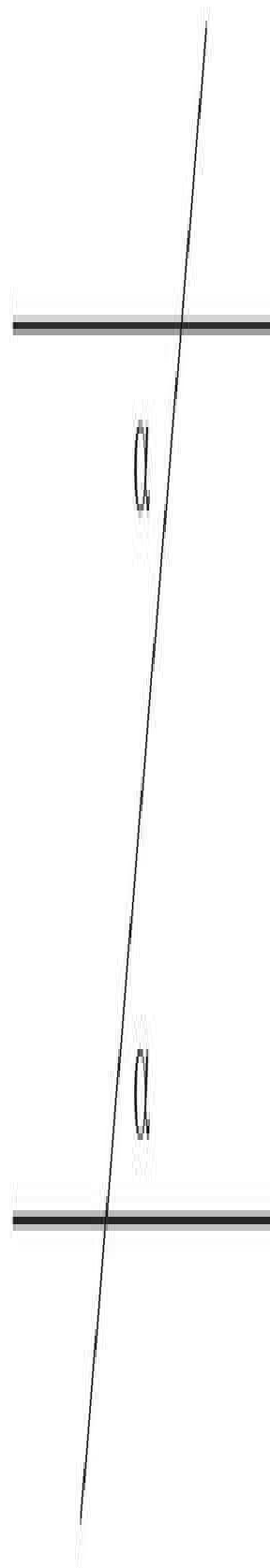
Geometry is the quickest way to demonstrate how clever the Greeks were. The geometry taught in school is Greek. Many will have forgotten it, so let's start with the basics. That is how geometry works; it starts with a few basic definitions and builds on them. The starting point is a point, which the Greeks defined as having location but no magnitude. Of course it does possess magnitude, there is the width of the dot on the page, but geometry is a sort of make-believe world, a pure world. Second: a line has length but no breadth. Next, a straight line is defined as the shortest line joining two points. From these three definitions you can create a definition of a circle: in the first place, it is a line making a closed figure. But how do you formulate roundness? If you think about it, roundness is very hard to define. You define it by saying there is a point within this figure, one point, from which straight lines drawn to the figure will always be of equal length.

Along with circles, there are parallel lines that extend forever without meeting, and triangles in a their variety, and squares and rectangles and other regular forms. These objects, formed by lines, are all defined, their characteristics revealed and the possibilities arising from their intersection and overlapping explored. Everything is proved from what has been established before. For example, by using a quality of parallel lines, you can show that the angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees (see box).

Geometry is a simple, elegant, logical system, very satisfying, and beautiful. Beautiful? The Greeks found it beautiful and that they did so is a clue to the Greek mind. The Greeks did geometry not just as an exercise, which is why we did it at school, nor for its practical uses in surveying or navigation. They saw geometry as a guide to the fundamental nature of the universe. When we look around us, we are struck with the variety of what we see: different shapes, different colours. A whole range of things is happening simultaneously—randomly, chaotically. The Greeks believed there was some simple explanation for all this. That underneath all this variety there must be something simple, regular, logical which explains it all. Something like geometry.

GEOMETRY IN ACTION

Parallel lines do not meet. We can define this characteristic by saying that a line drawn across them will create alternate angles that are equal. If they were not equal, the lines would come together or they would diverge—they would not be parallel. We use letters from the Greek alphabet to identify an angle—and on the diagram on the left α marks two angles that are equal. The use of letters from the Greek alphabet for the signage in geometry reminds us of its origins. Here we use the first three letters: alpha, beta and gamma.



$$\alpha + \beta + \gamma = 180^\circ$$

From this definition we can determine the sum of the angles within a triangle. We put the triangle ABC on the right with two parallel lines: knowing how to bring into play what is known to solve what is unknown is the trick of geometry. The angle at point A has an angle that is equal to it at point B, on the basis that they are alternate angles across parallel lines. Likewise the angle γ at C has an angle equal to it at point B. The top parallel line at B is now made up of three angles: $\alpha + \beta + \gamma$. Together they make a straight line, and we know that straight lines make an angle of 180 degrees.

So $\alpha + \beta + \gamma = 180$ degrees. And we have established, using parallel lines, that the sum of the internal angles of the triangle is also $\alpha + \beta + \gamma$. So the sum of the internal angles of a triangle is 180 degrees.

We have used parallel lines to prove something about triangles.

The Greeks did not do science as we do, with hypotheses and testing by experiment. They thought you got your mind into gear and thought hard you would get the right answer. So they proceeded by a system of inspired guesses. One Greek philosopher said all matter is made up of water, which shows how desperate they were to get a simple answer. Another philosopher said all matter is made up of four things: earth, fire, air and water. Another philosopher said all matter is actually made up of little things which he called atoms—and hit the jackpot. He made an inspired guess which we came back to in the twentieth century.

When science as we know it began 400 years ago, 2000 years after the Greeks, it began by upsetting the central teachings of Greek science, which remained the authority. But it upset the Greeks by following this Greek hunch that the answers would be simple and logical and mathematical. Newton, the great seventeenth-century scientist, and Einstein, the great twentieth-century scientist, both said you will only get close to a correct answer if your answer is simple. They were both able to give the answers in mathematical equations which described the composition of matter and how matter moves.

The Greeks were often wrong in their guesses, very wrong. Their fundamental hunch that the answers would be simple, mathematical and logical could have been wrong too, but it turned out to be right. This is the greatest legacy that European civilisation still owes to the Greeks.

Can we explain why the Greeks were so clever? I don't think we can. Historians are meant to be able to explain things but when they come up against the big things—why, for example, in these little city-states there were minds so logical, so agile, so penetrating—they have no convincing explanation. All historians can do, like anyone else, is wonder.

Here is another miracle. We are coming to the second element in the European mix. The Jews came to believe that there was only one god. This was a very unusual view. The Greeks and Romans had the more common belief that there were many gods. The Jews had an even more extraordinary belief that this one god took special care of them; that they were God's chosen people. In return, the Jews had to keep God's law. The foundation of the law was the Ten Commandments, given to the Jews by Moses who had led them out of captivity in Egypt. Christians retained the Ten Commandments and they remained the central moral teaching in the West until recent times. People knew the commandments by number. You might say of someone that he would never break the eighth commandment but sometimes he broke the seventh. Here are the Ten Commandments, as recorded in the second book of the Bible, Exodus, Chapter 20.

And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving to you.

You shall not kill.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not desire for yourself your neighbour's house, your neighbour's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's.

The Ten Commandments were only the beginning of the moral law. The Jews had a very complex, detailed system of law which covers the matters law usually does—crime, property, inheritance, marriage—but also diet, cleanliness, the running of a household and how to make sacrifices to God at the temple.

Though the Jews believed they were the chosen people, they didn't have a dream run. They were frequently humiliated; they were conquered and taken into exile; but they didn't doubt that God existed or that he cared for them. If disaster struck they concluded that they had not been following the law properly, that they had offended God. So in the religion of the Jews, as in Christianity, religion and morality are closely linked, which is not the case with all religions. The Romans and Greeks had gods who acted immorally, who had affairs and plotted against each other. In the Roman religion the gods might punish, but usually not for any moral offence; it might be that you hadn't sacrificed correctly, or often enough.

Jesus, the founder of Christianity, was a Jew and his first followers were all Jews. When Jesus taught the Jews were again not in control of their country; Palestine was a distant province of the Roman Empire. Some of the followers of Jesus looked to him to lead a revolt against Rome. His opponents tried to trick him into a declaration to this effect. Should we pay taxes to Rome, they asked him. Hand me a coin, he said—whose image is on it? Caesar's, they replied. Jesus said, 'Give Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.'

Jesus knew the Jewish law and teaching very well and his own teaching grew out of this. Part of his teaching was to sum up the essence of the law. This was one of his summations: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and love your neighbour as yourself.

It is not clear whether Jesus was saying you can take the summary and forget all the detail. Or whether he was saying that the detail is important—about cleanliness, sacrifice and all the rest—but the summary is a guide to the most important things. Scholars argue about how far Jesus remained within Judaism or was breaking out of it. But one thing is clear: he extended the old moral teaching in ways which were very demanding and which you might think impossible to follow. Just consider what he said about loving your enemies in the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel Chapter 5:

Our forefathers were told, love your neighbour, hate your enemy. But what I tell you is this: love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Only so can you be children of your Heavenly Father, who makes his sun rise on good and on bad alike and sends the rain on the honest and on the dishonest. If you love only those who love you, what reward can you expect? Surely the tax-gatherers [the hated Roman tax-gatherers] do as much as that. And if you greet only your brothers, what is there extraordinary about that? Even the heathen do as much. You must therefore be all goodness. Just as your Heavenly Father is all good.

On this occasion, Jesus was transforming the Jewish code into a system of universal love.

Jesus was only one of many teachers and prophets at this time. They aroused the suspicion of the leaders of the Jewish faith, and in Jesus' case the leaders of the Jews co-operated with the Romans in having Jesus executed. But Jesus was different from these other teachers because after he was dead he came alive again—or so his followers believed. So he was not just a teacher, a prophet or a good man, which is probably the belief of many church-going people today. His followers believed that he was God's son and that something of cosmic significance had happened when Jesus was crucified. God had sacrificed himself to save humankind from damnation, a consequence of man's original sin which

brought evil into the world. If you believed in Christ you could save yourself and after death you would not be condemned to hellfire but you would be forever with God in heaven.

Was this religion just for the Jews or was it for everyone? Jesus' followers after his death were divided on this question. The traditionalists said that you could only become a Christian if you became a Jew first and so followed all the strict rules that were laid down for the Jews in the Old Testament. That would have included circumcision, which for adult males is a rather painful operation. If that path had been taken, Christianity would have remained a very small sect of the Jewish faith and probably have died out or certainly been of no great significance. The other side won, the side that said, this is a totally new religion. You don't have to become a Jew first; all the restrictions of the law can go; Christ has set us free from all that; his teaching about love surpasses anything that the law could offer. This is the view of Paul, the great early missionary of the church and, according to some, the founder of Christianity, because when Jesus died this faith was a Jewish affair only. Jesus was a Jew, his followers were Jews, some of whom wanted to keep it that way. It was Paul who most clearly said this is a religion for everyone and so from that time Christianity became, potentially at least, a world religion. Within 300 years it had spread right throughout the Roman Empire.

The third group in the mixture are the German warriors who invaded the Roman Empire. They lived on the northern borders and in the 400s they flooded in. By 476 AD they had destroyed the empire to the west. It was here in France, Spain and Italy that the mixture of European civilisation first took shape.

The Germans were illiterate and left no written records, and so we have very little information about them before they invaded. The best account—probably not a first-hand account—is by a Roman historian, Tacitus, in the first century AD. He describes the chiefs and companions who lived and fought together and who lived for fighting:

On the field of battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be outdone in courage by his companions, and for the companions not to equal the courage of their chief. As for leaving a battle alive after your chief has fallen, that means life-long infamy and shame. To defend and protect him, to put down one's own acts of heroism to his credit; that is what they really mean by allegiance. The chiefs fight for victory, the companions for their chief. Many noble youths, if the land of their birth is stagnating in a long peace, deliberately seek out other tribes where some war is afoot. The Germans have no taste for peace. Fame is easier won among perils and you cannot maintain a large body of companions except by violence and war. The companions are always asking things of their chiefs: give me that warhorse or give me that bloody and victorious spear. As for meals, with their plentiful if homely fare, they count simply as pay. Such open-handedness must have war and plunder to feed it. You will find it harder to persuade a German to plough the land and to await its annual produce with patience than to challenge a foe and to earn the prize of wounds. He thinks it is spiritless and base to gain by sweat what he can buy with blood.

These are the people who, 300 years later, took over the Roman Empire.

We have now examined the three elements. Let us summarise them. The Greek view was that *the world is simple, logical and mathematical*. The Christian view was that *the world is evil, and Christ alone saves*. The German warriors' view was that *fighting is fun*. It is this unlikely mixture that comes together to make European civilisation.

GREEK

& ROMAN

LEARNING

CHRISTIANITY

GERMAN

WARRIORS

World is simple, logical

and mathematical

World is evil; only

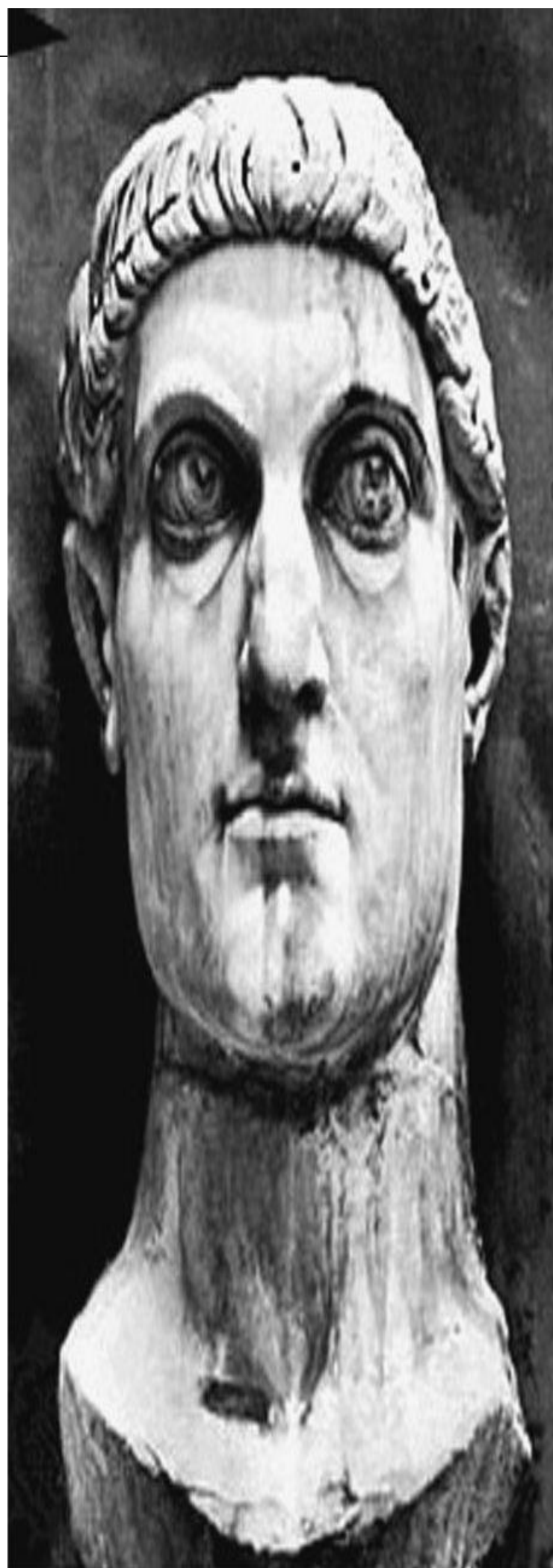
Christ can save

Fighting is fun

HOW WERE THE THREE ELEMENTS brought together? First, consider Christianity's connection with the Greco-Roman world. The Roman authorities from time to time tried to stamp out Christianity. They seized the holy books; they confiscated church property; they arrested and tortured Christians; they executed those who wouldn't deny Christ.

The Romans were usually very tolerant. They ruled an empire which was composed of a variety of races and religions; if you kept the peace the Romans were prepared to let you follow your own path. You could govern yourself. You could practise your own religion, with this exception: you had to sacrifice to the emperor. The Romans believed the emperor was something like a god. The sacrifice you were required to make was trifling. There might be a portrait or statue of the emperor and, in front of it, a flame. You had to take a pinch of salt and drop it in the flame. The flame would flare up. That was enough. It was like saluting the flag or singing the national anthem. The Christians wouldn't do that because, like the Jews, they said they must worship only one god and they would not treat the emperor as in any way a god. The Romans usually excused the Jews from honouring the emperor. They thought of them as cranky and volatile, but recognisable, an ancient people with their temple and their gods occupying a certain tract of country. By contrast, Christians were following a new religion and Christians could be anyone, anywhere. The Romans thought of them as subversives who had to be eliminated. They might have succeeded in this if they had consistently maintained the persecution.

Then a miracle happened. An emperor, Constantine, in 313 AD became a Christian or at least gave official support to the Christian churches. He thought their god might look after him and the empire better than any other. When Christianity was still far from being a majority faith, the ruler of the state embraced it; he gave the churches money and endorsed the rule of the bishops. Fifty years later another Christian emperor outlawed all other religions. Four hundred years after Jesus taught in a troubled and distant province of the Roman Empire, Christianity became the official and sole religion of the empire. The bishops and priests now paraded around the towns and marched into the countryside to destroy the pagan temples. This is the first link between the three elements: *the Roman Empire becomes Christian.*



By this stage the church was very different from what it had been in its early days. At first, groups of Christians had met in private houses. Now, three or four centuries later, there was a complete hierarchy of full-time paid officials: priests, bishops and archbishops. One of the bishops—the bishop of Rome—had managed to make himself into the pope and to govern the church. The church had its own system of law and its own courts and gaols to enforce its law. The church governed quite important matters like marriage and inheritance, not just church affairs. The church ran and enforced its own system of taxation because everyone was obliged to pay money to support it.

When the Roman Empire collapsed, the church survived—it was like a government in itself. The pope was a parallel figure to the Roman emperor, controlling a hierarchy of officials beneath him. Here we see the second link in the making of the mixture: *the church becomes Roman*.

After the Roman Empire collapsed, the church preserved the learning of Greece and Rome (which had already begun to do). This is an amazing development because all the writers, philosophers and scientists of ancient Greece and Rome were pagan, not Christian. Why would the Christian church bother with such people? There was one group in the Christian church who said that they should not: that their writings were falsehoods and the only truth is in Christ. “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” said Tertullian. But that view did not prevail.

The Christians did not set up their own system of education, so when Christianity began to order and systematise its beliefs it relied on educated people who were steeped in the Greco-Roman tradition. They used Greek philosophy and Greek logic to explain and defend Christianity. The Christian scholars thought of the great philosophers and moralists of Greece and Rome as possessing some of the truth, though Christianity was of course the full truth. But the Greek philosophers could be used as a guide to the truth and to argue about the truth. So although they were pagan, the church preserved and used their writings. This is the third link: *the church preserves Greek and Roman learning*.

When the Germans invaded the Roman Empire they did not intend to destroy it. They were coming for plunder, to get the best lands and to settle down and enjoy the good things of life. They were happy to acknowledge the emperor’s rule. But the trouble was that in the 400s so many Germans came, and took so much land, there was nothing left for the emperor to control. In effect the Roman Empire came to an end because there was nothing left to rule.

For their part the German warriors found that they had to run the societies they had invaded, which is not really what they expected to do, and they had to do so in very difficult circumstances. They themselves were illiterate; in the chaos that they had caused, the remaining Roman administration collapsed; trade and the towns shrank. The warrior chiefs set themselves up as kings and created little kingdoms; they fought among themselves; kingdoms rose and fell rapidly. It was many centuries before the outlines of the modern states of western Europe appeared: France, Spain, England.

Governments in these circumstances were extremely weak. They were so weak they were not able even to collect taxation. (To us this seems a contradiction in terms – a government that doesn’t tax.) Instead of being the chief, the German warrior now turned himself into a king and allotted land to his companions, who were turning themselves into the nobility, on the condition that when the king needed an army the nobles would provide it for him. They would send so many soldiers. But the nobles began to treat the land as if it were their own and to have their own views about how many soldiers they would send, and of what quality and for what purpose.

Today heads of state inspect guards of honour. They move along the ranks, appearing to scrutinise the soldiers, perhaps saying a word or two. This is a carry-over from an early medieval practice which

the king was really scrutinising the soldiers he had been sent and saying to himself: what sort of rubbish have they sent this time?

There was a long fight for kings to get more power: to be able to rule without being in the hands of the nobles; to get their own system of taxation; to have an army that they fully controlled; to get their own bureaucracy. But because they started from such a weak position there were some things that they were never able to threaten. Private property became sacrosanct; the nobles had turned land held in common condition into private property. This always put a limitation on governments, so that though the powers of European kings grew they never became like oriental despots, who owned everything in their realm. If a despot was in need of assets he would simply seize someone's property or send his troops down to the bazaar to grab a pile of merchandise. European governments, even when called 'absolute', could never act like that. *Not everything is the king's* was the foundation of European thinking about government. From the right to private property derives the notion of individual rights, which is a central part of the Western tradition. The notion that government must be limited arose because at the beginning government in fact was extremely limited.

This limitation on government was also important for economic development. The security that merchants enjoyed was an important reason why it was in Europe that economic growth took off in a way not matched anywhere else.

Knowing what we do about these warriors and their attitude, we should not be surprised that soon after invading the empire, they became Christian. The church was the only institution which survived the collapse of the Roman Empire. It was often the bishop who went out to treat with the warrior barons as it arrived bent on plunder. It was the bishop who said: 'You can have the land on that side of the river, but please leave the rest to us.' He might point out the palace of the former Roman governor, which the chief would no doubt claim for himself, and suggest that he would visit him there soon for help in running the place. Quite quickly the bishops were able to persuade the warriors that they would kill more of their enemies if they accepted the Christian god. These were conquerors of a special sort: they accepted the religion of the people they had conquered. The church made it quite clear to the new rulers, kings and nobles, that one of their duties was to uphold the Christian faith. This is our last link: *German warriors support Christianity*.

If we summarise all the links:

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