



The Rise of Western Christendom

Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000

TENTH ANNIVERSARY REVISED EDITION

Peter Brown

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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**Triumph and Diversity,
A.D. 200–1000**

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Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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For Betsy

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Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition

This book is a reprint of a book with a history. It is a history of curiosity and of growing excitement. I first wrote it in the form of a relatively short essay (virtually without footnotes) which appeared in 1996 as part of the series *Faire l'Europe: The Making of Europe*, directed by Jacques le Goff.

Over the next few years, however, I realized that I could hear behind me the roar of a dam burst. A remarkable surge of publications, of new discoveries and of new and daring perspectives was under way. It ensured that the centuries associated with the end of the Roman empire and the first centuries of the western Middle Ages (between 200 and 1000 A.D.) – previously dismissed as the “Dark” Ages – looked very different from how they had done before. New views had emerged, lively controversies had arisen concerning the rise of Christianity, the fall of the Roman empire, the origin and expansion of Islam, the conversion to Christianity of northern Europe and the establishment of the empire of Charlemagne. I needed to dive back into the flood and bring these changes in modern scholarship to the attention of readers in an expanded account. This was fully equipped with footnotes and bibliography, so that they also could dive in and join in the fun.

Hence what was called a Second Edition of the book appeared in 2002. It was considerably more than a mere re-edition. The title apart, it was a new book. But the surge in scholarship has continued unabated. It is only proper to pause once again to take breath. In this preface, I will sum up some recent arguments and make available, from the continued, mighty flood of publications, an inevitably short selection of recent works. I hope that readers will find these

works helpful to continue the exploration of what has remained a hotly debated period. I do this so as to encourage readers to wander even more widely in this rapidly evolving and creative field. There they will find many other outstanding works to which, for reasons of space alone, I was not able to refer.

A Wider Setting

First let me remind readers of the shape of the book. It is not a conventional book about Europe, or even about the history of Christianity. I have deliberately set my narrative against a far wider geographical background than that of most accounts. From the very first pages, we meet figures set against a landscape that embraces the whole of Eurasia and northern Africa, from Ireland to China and from the estuary of the Rhine (and, eventually, from Iceland) to the southern end of the Red Sea.

There are good reasons for having done this. For a historian of the ancient world in its last centuries, it is essential to place what we now call western Europe on the map. In the year 200 A.D., western Europe was barely perceptible as a distinct region. The Roman West was made up of a series of concentric rings. Its economic center of gravity lay far to the south – in north Africa and in southern Italy. The Mediterranean coastline of Spain and southern France was dotted with settlements that went back to the days of the ancient Greeks and the Carthaginians. By contrast, the lands further north – most of what we now call “western Europe”: northern France, Belgium, Britain, the Rhineland, Switzerland, Austria, and Hungary – were still relatively raw territories, recently absorbed into the Roman order. Outside these concentric rings lay a further ring, made up, according to the Roman imagination, of feral persons – the “barbarians.” Altogether, compared with the

ancient empires that had grown up around the Mediterranean, in Egypt, in Mesopotamia, and on the Iranian plateau, what we now call “western Europe” was a small and marginal region. It lay far to the northwest of the ancient heartlands of civilization.

The View from Eurasia

The Roman empire around the Mediterranean in the West and the Persian empire between Mesopotamia and Central Asia in the East saw themselves as the “Two Eyes of the Earth.”¹ Their continued conflict for the control of the Middle East was the only true world war of this period. In sheer mass and destructiveness, the repeated confrontations of Roman and Persian armies made what Europeans call “the barbarian invasions” appear like mere gang wars.² Yet, seen from the vast steppelands of Eurasia and the hot deserts of Arabia and the Sahara even Rome and Persia seemed small. For Persians and Romans alike, the swathe of grazing land inhabited by nomad pastoralists, which swept in an almost unbroken stretch from the plains of eastern Hungary to the northern edge of China, remained a looming presence. These nomads were regarded as the immemorial antithesis to civilization. They were the Ultimate Barbarians – the barbarians *par excellence*. Occasionally they made their presence felt. For a short time (as we shall see), the nomadic empire of Attila bullied the Roman empire and struck fear into the Germanic tribes around the Roman frontiers. The book of Christopher Kelly has taken us into the court of Attila.³ The work of Peter Heather has traced the destabilizing effect of the Hunnish empire on the settled populations of the Danube and of Germany.⁴

The Horizons of the Silk Road

What is less often realized is that the nomad confederacies of the Eurasian steppes acted as Europe's relay system along the long road to China. What we call the Silk Road was never a simple, commercial highway, the ancient equivalent of the Trans-Siberian railway. Instead, goods passed along it in the form of diplomatic interchanges between the great powers – between the empires of Rome, Persia, and China. The stepping stones on this long route were nomadic kingdoms which patrolled the routes and which absorbed the caravan cities of Central Asia and western China.⁵

Throughout this period (as we shall see, especially in chapters 1, 12, and 13), the material and cultural goods that crossed Eurasia included new religions. The Silk Road was dotted with communities of Christians. Their libraries and churches abutted Buddhist stupas in the middle of great-caravan cities. Much of what we know about the beliefs and worldview of the Manichees (a radical sect of largely Christian origin) comes from manuscripts excavated in the oases of the Turpan Depression of western China. Western tourists who nowadays walk around the great adobe ruins of Gaocheng outside modern Turpan realize, with a slight shiver of surprise, that here, in the midst of the Taklamakan desert, Manichaeism – once the most loathed and systematically persecuted of Christian heresies in the Roman empire, whose radical and exotic doctrines had fascinated the young Augustine in fourth-century Carthage – was alive and well and, indeed, a state religion in the Uyghur, Turkish kingdom of Turpan at a time when Charlemagne ruled in the West.⁶

The mobility of Manichaeism and of other forms of Christianity along the Silk Road is a reminder that, for

Eurasia as a whole, late antiquity and the early Middle Ages were not a period characterized by insuperable boundaries. Goods, ideas, and persons traveled slowly but surely over huge distances. They crossed ancient political frontiers. They moved with ease across the seemingly unbridgeable frontier between the nomad and the settled worlds.

What is a Frontier?

Looked at from the steppe lands of Eurasia, the Roman frontier along the Rhine and Danube was a non-frontier. Both sides of it were green. No stark ecological chasm divided one side from the other, as the settled world was divided from that of the nomads in Inner Asia, Arabia, and the Sahara. Up to 400 A.D., two very different social orders faced each other across the Rhine and the Danube. But they were not social orders based upon unbridgeable and unchangeable differences in ecology, in technology, and even in mindset. For this reason, the contrast between “Romans” and “barbarians” – though it seemed so clear to the imagination of contemporaries – was constantly eroded by the facts of nature. The two groups shared a temperate climate which ensured that both Romans and “barbarians” were settled farmers. Like all great rivers (one thinks of the Rio Grande between Texas and Mexico), the Rhine and the Danube were as much joining places as they were dividing lines.

The Roman answer to this challenge had been to invent an absolute frontier where, in fact, no such frontier (such as that traditionally associated with the contrast between nomads and the settled land) existed. They treated all societies outside the political frontier of Rome as “barbarians.” More than this: they consistently described all barbarians as ultimate barbarians. They treated the Germans as if they were no different from the nomads of the

Eurasian steppes. They saw them as rootless, as bloodthirsty, as ever ready to “flood” the peaceful lands of the empire with murderous bands.

And why did they do this? A great scholar of Gaul and of the “barbarian” side of the Rhine frontier – John Drinkwater – has recently provided a cogent answer. He argues that emperor, military, and civilian populations alike needed the idea of a “barbarian threat” to justify their own existence. The threat of invasion justified high rates of taxation. It justified the splendid palaces and cities ringed with high walls which overlooked the Rhine and the Danube, from the North Sea to the Black Sea. It gave a *raison d'être* to a powerful and well-paid military class. Above all, it enabled the emperor to stand tall as the defender of civilization. By working on both sides of the frontier, through the patient analysis of Roman sources checked against the findings of recent archaeology, Drinkwater has concluded that much of this was a bluff:

The “Guard on the Rhine” [mounted along the Roman side of the frontier], which the imperial establishment sold so successfully to contemporaries and to later historians, was an artifact.⁷

Alas, as Drinkwater points out, the imperial establishment did their job only too well: “Like the ancients, we still seem to need the Germanic bogeyman.”⁸ Altogether the Roman government had a way of rendering absolute boundaries that were, in reality, extremely permeable. A brilliant and closely argued monograph by the late Yves Modéran has shown this happening also in North Africa. Through careful reading of the texts produced by Roman writers in late antique Africa, he shows how an ideological Iron Curtain came to be erected between Romans and Berbers (known to contemporaries as “Moors”). For much of the time, Romans and the Berbers of the mountainous hinterland of North Africa had coexisted. The Berbers were accustomed to a