Sources from the Past

St. Cyprian on Epidemic Disease in the Roman Empire

St. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, was an outspoken proponent of Christianity during the early and middle decades of the third century C.E. When epidemic disease struck the Roman empire in 251 C.E., imperial authorities blamed the outbreak on Christians who refused to honor pagan gods. Cyprian refuted that charge in his treatise On Mortality, *which described the symptoms of epidemic disease and reflected on its significance for the Christian community.*

It serves as validation of the [Christian] faith when the bowels loosen and drain the body's strength, when fever generated in bone marrow causes sores to break out in the throat, when continuous vomiting roils the intestines, when blood-shot eyes burn, when the feet or other bodily parts are amputated because of infection by putrefying disease, when through weakness caused by injuries to the body either mobility is impeded, or hearing is impaired, or sight is obscured. It requires enormous greatness of heart to struggle with resolute mind against so many onslaughts of destruction and death. It requires great loftiness to stand firm amidst the ruins of the human race, not to concede defeat with those who have no hope in God, but rather to rejoice and embrace the gift of the times. With Christ as our judge, we should receive this gift as the reward of his faith, as we vigorously affirm our faith and, having suffered, advance toward Christ by Christ's narrow path. . . .

Many of us [Christians] are dying in this epidemic—that is, many of us are being liberated from the world. The epidemic is a pestilence for the Jews and the pagans and the enemies of Christ, but for the servants of God it is a welcome event. True,

without any discrimination, the just are dying alongside the unjust, but you should not imagine that the evil and the good face a common destruction. The just are called to refreshment, while the unjust are herded off to punishment: the faithful receive protection, while the faithless receive retribution. We are unseeing and ungrateful for divine favors, beloved brethren, and we do not recognize what is granted to us. . . .

How suitable and essential it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems so terrible and ferocious, probes the justice of every individual and examines the minds of the human race to determine whether the healthy care for the ill, whether relatives diligently love their kin, whether masters show mercy to their languishing slaves, whether physicians do not abandon those seeking their aid, whether the ferocious diminish their violence, whether the greedy in the fear of death extinguish the raging flames of their insatiable avarice, whether the proud bend their necks, whether the shameless mitigate their audacity, whether the rich will loosen their purse strings and give something to others as their loved ones perish all around them and as they are about to die without heirs.

For Further Reflection

▦ To what extent do you think St. Cyprian was effective in his efforts to bring inherited Christian teachings to bear on the unprecedented conditions he and his followers faced?

Source: Wilhelm von Hartel, ed. *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia* in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum.* Vienna: 1868, vol. 3, pp. 305–6. (Translation by Jerry H. Bentley.)

MAP 12.3
China after the Han dynasty, 220 C.E.
Compare this map with Map 8.2 showing the Han empire at its height.

What considerations might help explain why the Han empire broke up into the three kingdoms shown here?

economic, and social problems similar to those that afflicted China and the Mediterranean basin. India may well have suffered from epidemic disease and population losses, although there is limited evidence for those troubles in south Asia. In east Asia and the Mediterranean basin, however, it is clear that epidemic disease seriously weakened Chinese and Roman societies. Indeed, epidemic disease contributed to serious instability in China after the collapse of the Han dynasty, and in weakening Mediterranean society, it helped bring about the collapse of the western Roman empire.
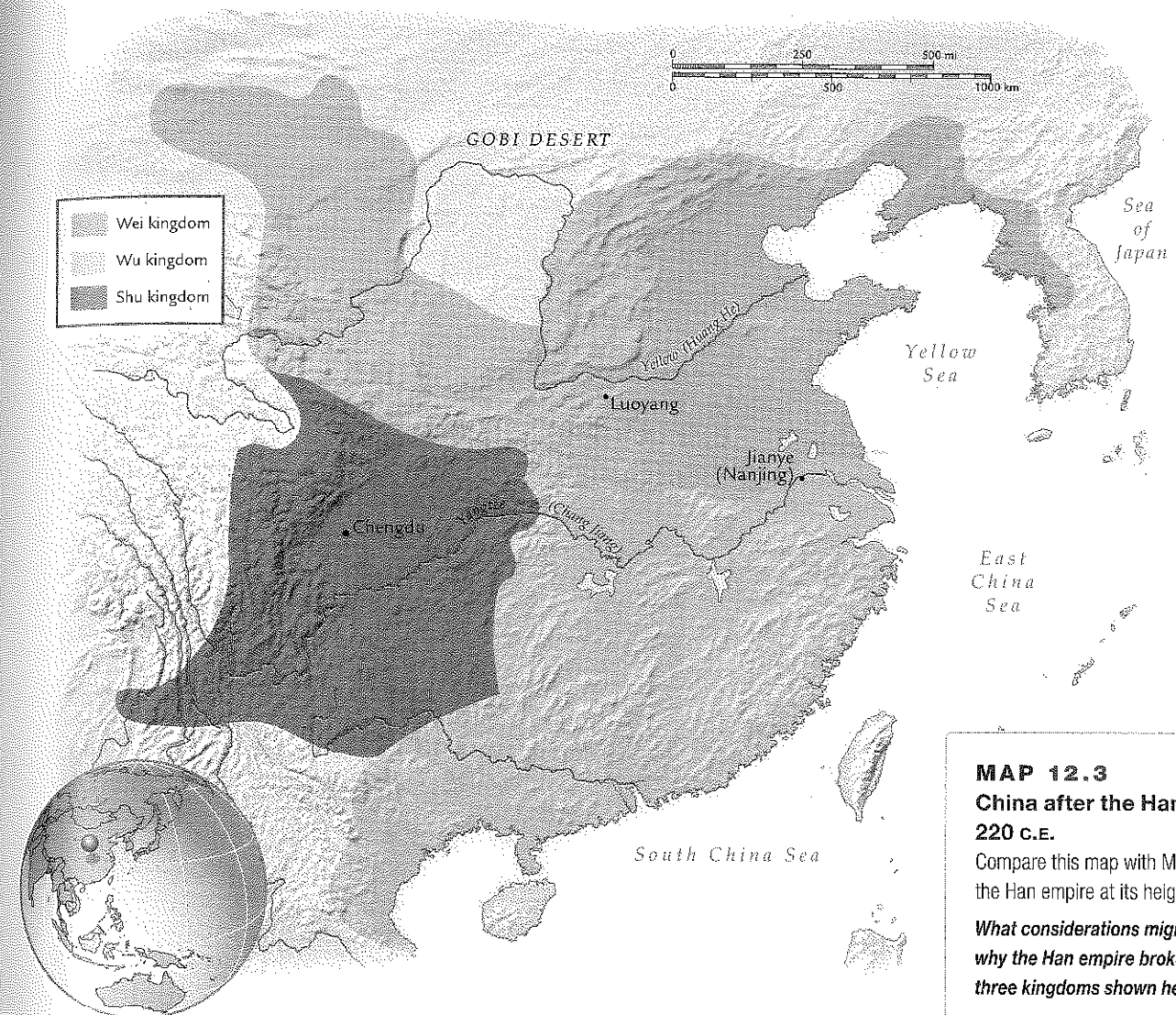
CHINA AFTER THE HAN DYNASTY

By the time epidemic diseases struck China, internal political problems had already begun to weaken the Han dynasty. By the late second century C.E., Han authorities had largely lost their ability to maintain order. Early in the third century C.E., the

central government dissolved, and a series of autonomous regional kingdoms took the place of the Han state. With the disappearance of the Han dynasty, China experienced significant cultural change, most notably an increasing interest in Buddhism.

Internal Decay of the Han State

The Han dynasty collapsed largely because of internal problems that its rulers could not solve. One problem involved the development of factions within the ranks of the ruling elites. Marriage alliances between imperial and aristocratic families led to the formation of many factions whose members sought to advance their prospects in the imperial government and exclude others from important positions. That atmosphere led to constant infighting and backstabbing among the ruling elites, which in turn reduced the effectiveness of the central government.

An even more difficult problem had to do with the perennial issue of land and its equitable distribution. At the turn of the millennium, the usurper Wang Mang had attempted to redistribute land in China, but his program did not survive his brief reign (9–23 C.E.). During the last two centuries of the Han dynasty, large landowners gained new influence in the government. They managed to reduce their share of taxes and shift the burden onto peasants. They even formed private armies to advance their class interests.

Peasant Rebellion Those developments provoked widespread unrest, particularly among peasants, who found themselves under increasing economic pressure with no means to influence the government. Pressures became particularly acute during the late second and third centuries when epidemics began to take their toll. In 184 C.E. peasant discontent fueled an immense uprising known as the Yellow

Turban rebellion, so called because the rebels wore yellow headbands that represented the color of the Chinese earth and symbolized their peasant origins. Although authorities suppressed it after five years of fighting, the rebellion proved to be only the first in a series of insurrections that plagued the late Han dynasty.

Collapse of the Han Dynasty Meanwhile, Han generals increasingly usurped political authority. By 190 C.E. the Han emperor had become a mere puppet, and the generals effectively ruled the regions controlled by their armies. They allied with wealthy landowners of their regions and established themselves as warlords who maintained a kind of rough order based on force of arms. The generals continued to recognize an emperor for a short time, but in 220 C.E. they formally abolished the Han dynasty and divided the empire into three large kingdoms.

After the collapse of the Han dynasty, China experienced social and economic difficulty. Wealthy classes often traveled in ox carts instead of more expensive, horse-drawn carriages. Archaeologists found these ceramic models of ox carts in tombs. They were produced during different dynasties that ruled parts of China from the third to the seventh centuries.
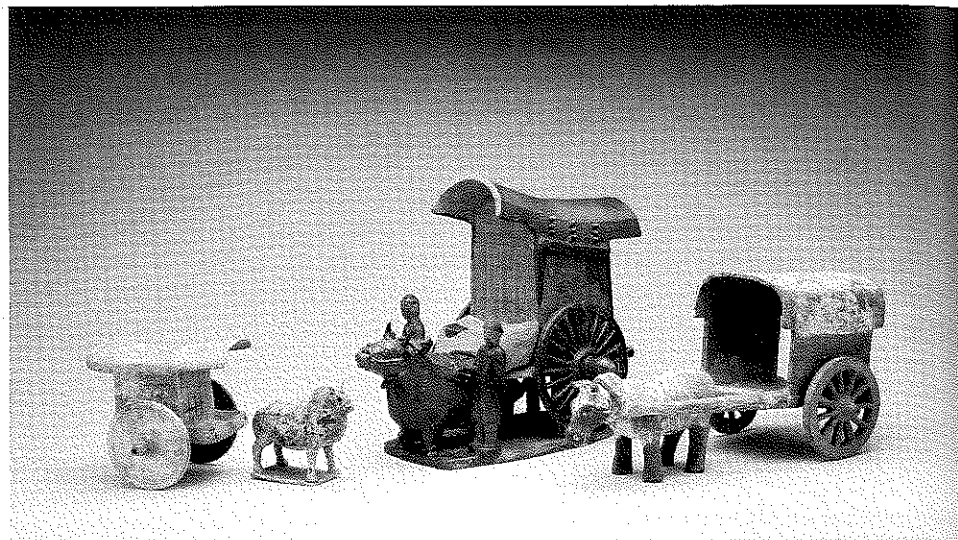
Once the dynasty had disappeared, large numbers of nomadic peoples migrated into China, especially the northern regions, and they helped to keep China disunited for more than 350 years. Between the fourth and sixth centuries C.E., nomadic peoples established large kingdoms that dominated much of northern China as well as the steppe lands.

Cultural Change in Post-Han China

In some ways, the centuries following the fall of the Han dynasty present a spectacle of chaos and disorder. One kingdom toppled another, only to fall in its turn to a temporary successor. War and nomadic invasions led to population decline in much of northern China. By the mid-fifth century, the region around Chang'an and Luoyang—the heartland of classical China—had experienced almost complete devastation because of armies that ravaged the region in search of food and plunder. Contemporaries reported that the Former Han capital of Chang'an had no more than one hundred households and that the Later Han capital of Luoyang resembled a trash heap more than a city.

Sinicization of Nomadic Peoples Beneath the disorderly surface of political events, however, several important social and cultural changes were taking place. First, nomadic peoples increasingly adapted to the Chinese environment. They took up agriculture and built permanent settlements. They married Chinese spouses and took Chinese names. They wore the clothes, ate the food, and adopted the customs of China. Some sought a formal Chinese education and became well versed in Chinese philosophy and literature. In short, nomadic peoples became increasingly **sinicized,** and as the generations passed, distinctions between peoples of nomadic and Chinese ancestry became less and less obvious. Partly because of that development, a new imperial dynasty was eventually able to reconstitute a centralized imperial state in north China.

Second, with the disintegration of political order, the Confucian tradition lost much of its credibility. The original goal of Confucius and his early followers was to find some means to move from chaos to stability during the Period of the Warring States. As long as Confucian methods and principles helped to maintain order, ruling elites and intellectual classes honored the Confucian tradition. When the Han dynasty collapsed, **Confucianism** seemed irrelevant.

Individuals who in earlier centuries might have committed themselves to Confucian values turned instead to Daoism and Buddhism. As in the Period of the Warring States, **Daoism** once again offered a way to find peace in a turbulent world. Originally, Daoism was a school of speculative philosophical thought that appealed mostly to an educated elite. After the fall of the Han, however, it became more a religious than a philosophical doctrine. Daoist sages not only promised salvation to those who observed their doctrines and rituals but also experimented with spices, herbs, and drugs to concoct elixirs or potions that supposedly conferred health and immortality. Daoism attracted widespread interest among a population afflicted by war and disease and became much more popular than before, especially because it faced less competition from the Confucian tradition.

Popularity of Buddhism Even more important than Daoism for Chinese cultural history was **Buddhism.** Until about the fourth century C.E., Buddhism was largely the faith of foreign merchants in China and attracted little interest on the part of native Chinese. After the fall of the Han empire, however, Buddhism received strong support from nomadic peoples who migrated into northern China and who in many cases had long been familiar with Buddhism in central Asia. Meanwhile, as a result of missionary efforts, the Indian faith began to attract a following among native Chinese as well. Indeed, between the fourth and sixth centuries C.E., Buddhism became well established in China. When a centralized imperial state took shape in the late sixth century C.E., Buddhism provided an important cultural foundation for the restoration of a unified political order.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

Moralists have often interpreted the disintegration of the Roman empire as a symbol of the transitory nature of human political structures. Fascination with imperial Rome has encouraged the proliferation of theories—many of them quite silly—seeking to explain the collapse of the empire as the result of some single, simple cause. By various accounts, the Roman empire disintegrated because of lead poisoning, radiation given off by bricks, immorality, or the rise of Christianity. Notwithstanding the zeal with which proponents have promoted pet theories, there was no single cause for the disintegration of the Roman empire. Instead, a combination of internal problems and external pressures weakened the empire and brought an end to Roman authority in the western portion of the empire, whereas imperial rule continued until the fifteenth century C.E. in the eastern Mediterranean. In the Mediterranean basin as in China, imperial weakness and collapse coincided with significant cultural change, notably the increasing popularity of Christianity.

Internal Decay in the Roman Empire

The Barracks Emperors As in the case of the Han dynasty, internal political problems go a long way toward explaining the fragmentation of the Roman empire. Like their Han counterparts, the Roman emperors faced internal opposition. During the half century from 235 to 284 C.E., there were twenty-six recognized emperors (and many others who staked temporary claims to the imperial office). Known as the "barracks emperors," most of them were generals who seized power, held it briefly, and then suddenly lost it when they were displaced by rivals or by their mutinous troops. Not surprisingly, most of the barracks emperors died violently: only one is known for sure to have succumbed to natural causes.

Apart from divisions and factions, the Roman empire faced problems because of its sheer size. Even during the best of times, when the emperors could count on abundant revenues and disciplined armed forces, the sprawling empire posed a challenge for central government. After the third century, as epidemics spread throughout the empire and its various regions moved toward local, self-sufficient economies, the empire as a whole became increasingly unmanageable.

Diocletian The emperor **Diocletian** (reigned 284–305 C.E.) attempted to deal with this problem by dividing the empire into two administrative districts. The eastern district included the wealthy lands of Anatolia, Syria, Egypt, and Greece, and the western district embraced Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and north Africa. A coemperor ruled each district with the aid of a powerful lieutenant, and Diocletian hoped the four officials, known as the *tetrarchs,* would be able to administer the vast empire more effectively than an individual emperor could. Diocletian was a skillful administrator. He managed to bring Rome's many armies, including unpredictable maverick forces, under firm imperial control. He also tried to deal with a crumbling economy by strengthening the imperial currency, forcing the government to adjust its expenditures to its income, and imposing price caps to dampen inflation. His economic measures were less successful than his administrative reforms, but they helped stabilize an economy ravaged by half a century of civil unrest.

Constantine Yet Diocletian's reforms also encouraged ambition among the four top corulers and their generals, and his retirement from the imperial office in 305 C.E. set off a round
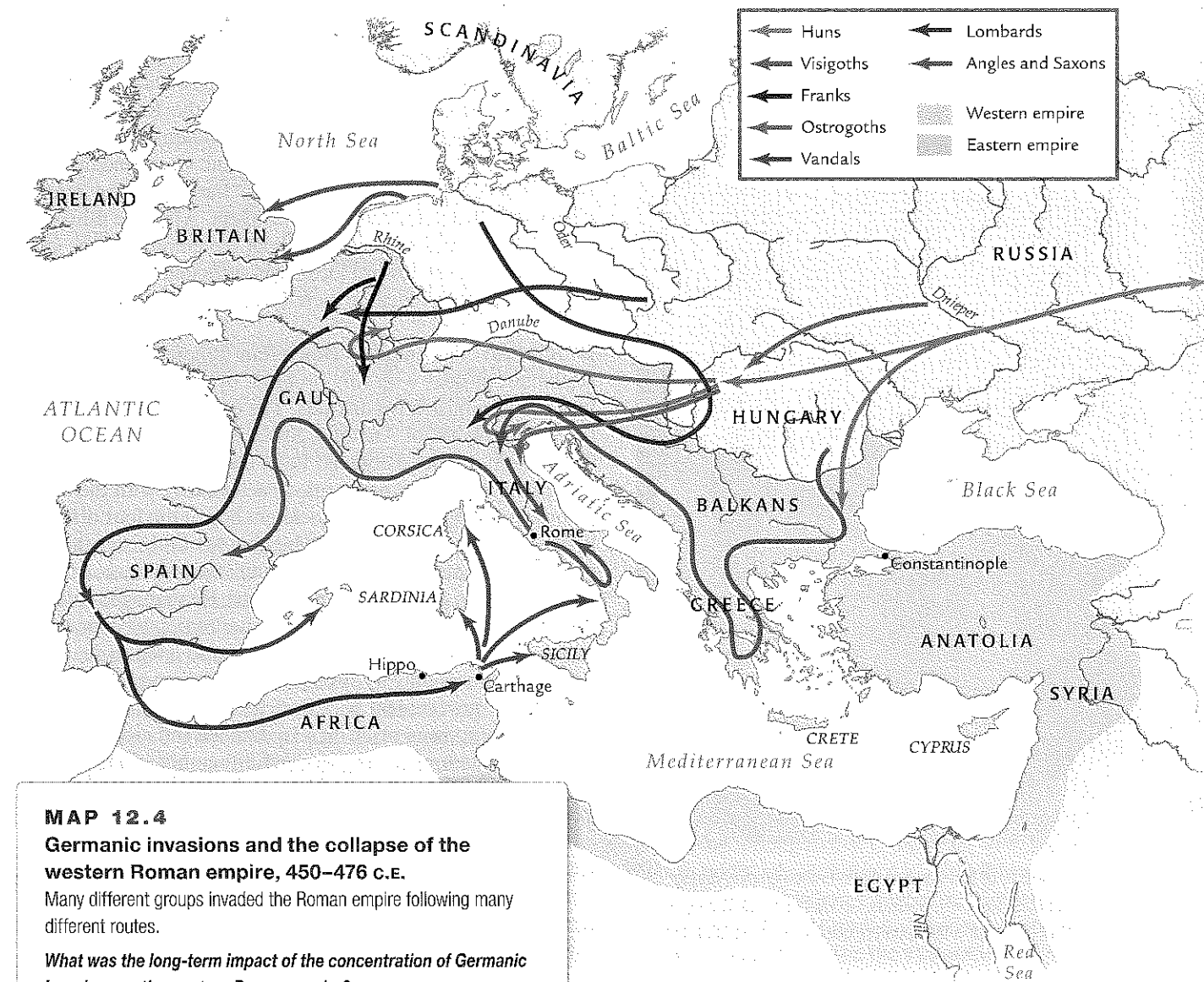

Sculpture of the tetrarchs, or four corulers of the Roman empire, during the late third century C.E.; from left, Galerius, Constantius, Diocletian, and Maximian. What message is the apparent closeness of the tetrarchs intended to convey?

Diocletian (dah-yuh-KLEE-shuhn)

of internal struggles and bitter civil war. Already in 306 C.E. **Constantine,** son of Diocletian's coruler Constantius, moved to stake his claim as sole emperor. By 313 C.E. he had defeated most of his enemies, although he overcame his last rivals only in 324 C.E. Once he had consolidated his grip on power, Constantine ordered the construction of a new capital city, Constantinople, at a strategic site overlooking the Bosporus, the strait linking the Black Sea to the Sea of Marmara and beyond to the wealthy eastern Mediterranean. After 330 C.E. Constantinople became the capital of a united Roman empire.

Constantine was an able emperor. With the reunion of the eastern and western districts of the empire, however, he and his successors faced the same sort of administrative difficulties that Diocletian had attempted to solve by dividing the empire. As population declined and the economy contracted, emperors found it increasingly difficult to marshal the resources needed to govern and protect the vast Roman empire.

The need for protection against external threats became especially acute during the late fourth and early fifth centuries C.E.

Germanic Invasions

Apart from internal problems, the Roman empire faced several formidable military threats. One arose on the empire's southeastern frontiers when the Sasanid dynasty toppled the Parthians in 224 C.E. and established a powerful state in Iran. Sasanid and Roman forces clashed repeatedly in Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia as each side sought to consolidate its authority in border regions. Some of the conflicts dealt devastating blows. In the year 260 C.E., the Roman emperor Valerian fell captive to Sasanid forces. He spent his last few years at the Sasanid court in Ctesiphon, where his captors forced him to stoop and serve as a mounting stool when the Sasanid king wanted to ride his horse. (After his death, the

MAP 12.4
Germanic invasions and the collapse of the western Roman empire, 450–476 C.E.
Many different groups invaded the Roman empire following many different routes.
What was the long-term impact of the concentration of Germanic invasions on the western Roman empire?

In this relief sculpture carved in the second century C.E., a clean-shaven Roman soldier battles bearded Germanic forces along the Danube River.

Sasanids preserved Valerian's skin as a memento of their victory over the Romans.) Romans and Sasanids engaged in intermittent hostilities until the sixth century C.E., but a series of buffer states between the two empires reduced the intensity of conflict after the third century.

Migratory Germanic peoples posed a more immediate and serious military threat to the Roman empire. Indeed, during the fifth century C.E., Germanic invasions brought an end to Roman authority in the western half of the empire, although imperial rule survived for an additional millennium in the eastern Mediterranean.

Germanic Migrations Germanic peoples had migrated from their homelands in northern Europe and lived on the eastern and northern borders of the Roman empire since the second century C.E. Most notable were the Visigoths, who came originally from Scandinavia and Russia. Like the nomadic peoples who moved into northern China after the fall of the Han dynasty, the Visigoths settled, adopted agriculture, and drew deep inspiration from Roman society. They adapted Roman law to the needs of their society, for example, converted to Christianity, and translated the Bible into the Visigothic language. They also contributed large numbers of soldiers to the Roman armies. In the interests of social order, however, the Romans discouraged settlement of the Visigoths and other Germanic peoples within the empire, preferring that they constitute buffer societies outside imperial borders.

The Huns During the late fourth century, the relationship between Visigoths and Romans changed dramatically when the nomadic **Huns** began an aggressive westward migration from their homeland in central Asia. The Huns spoke a Turkish language, and they may have been cousins of the nomadic Xiongnu who inhabited the central Asian steppe lands west of China. During the mid-fifth century C.E., the warrior-king **Attila** organized the Huns into a virtually unstoppable military juggernaut. Under Attila, the Huns invaded Hungary, probed Roman frontiers in the Balkan region, menaced Gaul and northern Italy, and attacked Germanic peoples living on the borders of the Roman empire.

Collapse of the Western Roman Empire Attila did not create a set of political institutions or a state structure, and the Huns disappeared as a political and military force soon after his death in 453 C.E. By that time, however, the Huns had placed such pressure on Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, Franks, and other Germanic peoples that they streamed en masse into the Roman empire in search of refuge. Once inside imperial boundaries, they encountered little effective

resistance and moved around almost at will. They established settlements throughout the western half of the empire—Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and north Africa—where populations were less dense than in the eastern Mediterranean. Under the command of Alaric, the Visigoths even stormed and sacked Rome in 410 C.E. By the middle of the fifth century, the western part of the Roman empire was in shambles. In 476 C.E. imperial authority came to an ignominious end when the Germanic general **Odoacer** deposed Romulus Augustulus, the last of the Roman emperors in the western half of the empire.

Unlike the Han dynasty, the Roman empire did not entirely disintegrate: imperial authority survived for another millennium in the eastern half of the empire, known after the fifth century C.E. as the **Byzantine empire.** In the western half, however, Roman authority gradually dissolved, and nomadic peoples built successor states in regions formerly subject to Rome. Vandals and then Visigoths governed Spain, Franks ruled Gaul, Angles and

The colossal head of Constantine is one of the few remaining fragments from a marble statue that originally stood about 14 meters (46 feet) tall.

Saxons invaded Britain, and Italy fell under the sway of a variety of peoples, including Visigoths, Vandals, and Lombards.
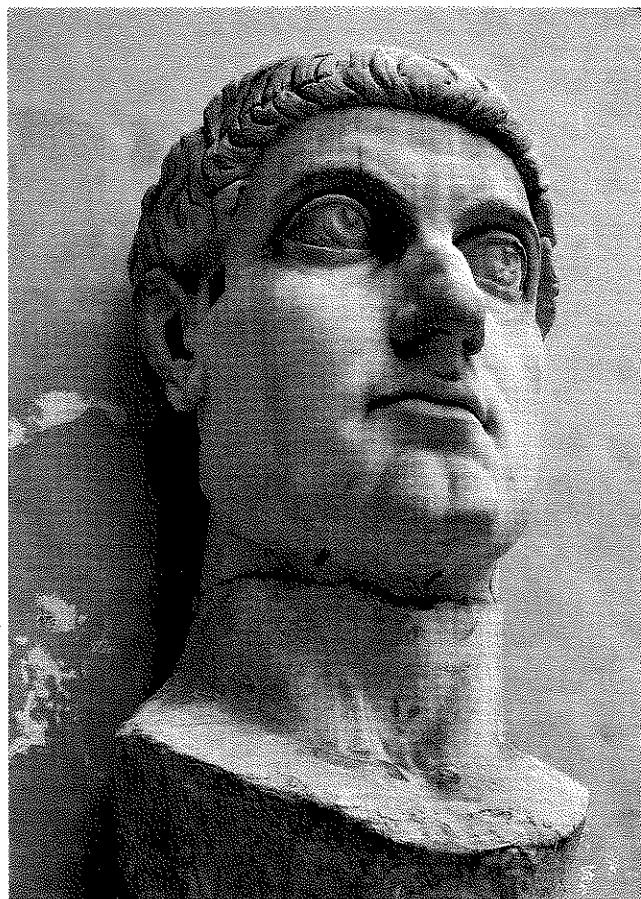
Cultural Change in the Late Roman Empire

In the Roman empire, as in China, the collapse of the imperial state coincided with important social and cultural changes. The Germanic peoples who toppled the empire looked to their own traditions for purposes of organizing society and government. When they settled in the regions of the former empire, however, they absorbed a good deal of Roman influence. They adapted Roman law to their needs, for example, thus preserving one of the most important features of Roman society. Over time, the mingling of Roman and Germanic traditions led to the emergence of an altogether new society—medieval Europe.

Prominence of Christianity **Christianity** was perhaps the most prominent survivor of the western Roman empire. During

Odoacer (AHD-oh-vah-ser)
Byzantine (BIHZ-uhn-teen)

the fourth century C.E., several developments enhanced its influence throughout the Mediterranean basin. In the first place, Christianity won recognition as a legitimate religion in the Roman empire. In 312 C.E., while seeking to establish himself as sole Roman emperor, Constantine experienced a vision that impressed on him the power of the Christian God. He believed that the Christian God helped him to prevail over his rivals, and in 313 he promulgated the Edict of Milan, which allowed Christians to practice their faith openly in the Roman empire. At some point during his reign, perhaps after his edict, Constantine converted to Christianity, and in the late fourth century the emperor **Theodosius** made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. By the mid-fourth century, Christians held important political and military positions, and imperial sponsorship helped their proponents attract more converts than ever before.

Christianity also began to attract thoughtful and talented converts who articulated a Christian message for the intellectual elites of the Roman empire. The earliest Christians had come largely from the ranks of ordinary working people, and their doctrine struck philosophers and the educated elites as both unsophisticated and unbelievable. During its first three centuries, Christianity grew as a popular religion of salvation favored by the masses, rather than as a reasoned doctrine of intellectual substance. During the fourth century, however, intellectual elites began to take more interest in Christianity.

St. Augustine The most important and influential of these figures was **St. Augustine** (354–430 C.E.), bishop of the north African city of Hippo (modern-day Annaba in Algeria). Augustine had a fine education, and he was conversant with the leading intellectual currents of the day. During his youth he drew great inspiration from Stoicism and Platonism, and for nine years he belonged to a community of Manichaeans. Eventually, he became disillusioned with both Hellenistic philosophy and Manichaeism, and in 387 C.E., while studying in Italy, he converted to Christianity. For the remainder of his life, he worked to reconcile Christianity with Greek and Roman philosophical traditions, especially Platonism, and to articulate
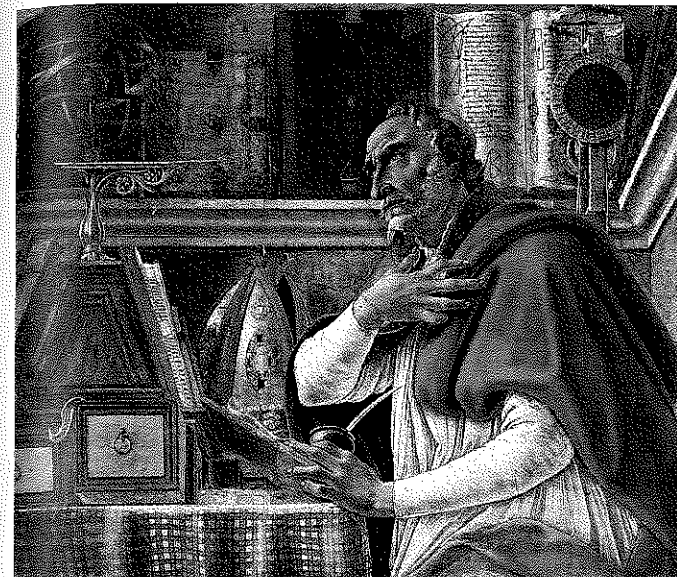
This fifteenth century painting by Sandro Botticelli depicts St. Augustine in his study. In his voluminous writings, Augustine sought to explain the meaning of history from a Christian perspective.

Christianity in terms that were familiar and persuasive to the educated classes. More than any others, Augustine's writings made Christianity an intellectually respectable alternative to Hellenistic philosophy and popular religions of salvation.

Besides winning the right to practice their religion openly and attracting intellectual talent, Christian leaders constructed an institutional apparatus that transformed a popular religion of salvation into a powerful church. In the absence of recognized leadership, the earliest Christians generated a range of conflicting and sometimes contradictory doctrines. Some taught that Jesus was a mortal human being, others that he was a god, and yet others that he was both human and divine. Some allowed women to serve as priests and attributed great powers to Jesus' mother, Mary, and others restricted church offices to men and conceived of Christian deities as males.

The New Testament and the Emergence of Orthodox Christianity Early Christians might well have continued to express their understandings of their faith in individual ways.

During the third and fourth centuries, however, as the Roman empire experienced political turmoil and underwent administrative changes, some church leaders sought doctrinal stability and worked to define essential tenets that all Christians must accept. As Christians became more prominent in the Roman empire, state authorities also promoted efforts to standardize teachings. Emperor Constantine himself pushed for a clear statement of Christian doctrine that he hoped would create a foundation for cultural unity in the Roman empire.

In search of clearly defined doctrine, church leaders conducted intense debates about the quality and authority of the numerous writings that the earliest Christians had generated. Those writings, which numbered in the scores or perhaps even hundreds, included gospels that told the story of Jesus' life, epistles that outlined the authors' views of moral and religious issues, and historical accounts that offered interpretations of early Christian experiences from different perspectives. By the late fourth century, church leaders were reaching consensus that twenty-seven short writings were more authoritative than the others, and they recognized these writings as canonical scriptures known later as the New Testament. By adopting a small number of writings as canonical, church leaders rejected many others as misguided, untruthful, or even heretical. As a result, they profoundly influenced the development of doctrine that most Christian authorities eventually came to recognize as the orthodox or correct teaching.

The Institutional Church To standardize their faith, Christian leaders also instituted a hierarchy of church officials. At the top were five religious authorities—the bishop of Rome and the **patriarchs** of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople—who resided in the most important spiritual and political centers of the Roman empire. These five authorities wielded roughly equal influence in the larger Christian community, although the bishop of Rome enjoyed somewhat greater prestige than the others. (His enhanced status derived both from his claim to be the spiritual descendant of Jesus' chief disciple, St. Peter, and from the fact that he had his seat at Rome, the original imperial capital.)

Subordinate to the five principal authorities were bishops, who presided over religious affairs in their districts, known as dioceses, which included all the prominent cities of the Roman empire. When theological disputes arose, the patriarchs and bishops assembled in church councils to determine which views would prevail as official doctrine. The councils at **Nicaea** (325 C.E.) and **Chalcedon** (451 C.E.), for example, took up the difficult and contentious issue of Jesus' nature. Delegates at the councils proclaimed that Jesus

Theodosius (thee-hu-DOH-see-uhs)
patriarch (PAY-tree-ahrk)
Nicaea (nahy-SEE-uh)
Chalcedon (KAL-suh-dawn)

was both fully human and fully divine at the same time, in contrast to Nestorians, Arians, and other Christian groups who held that Jesus was either primarily human or primarily divine. The decisions and decrees of the church councils did not put an end to all debate, nor did they prevent new divisions and new grounds of contention from arising. Nevertheless, by defining the doctrines that most church authorities regarded as orthodox, council delegates left enduring influences on the beliefs and values of Christianity.

As Roman imperial authority crumbled, the bishop of Rome, known as the pope (from the Latin *papa*, meaning "father"), emerged as spiritual leader of Christian communities in the western regions of the empire. As th only sources of established and recognized authority, th popes and the bishops of other important cities organize local government and defensive measures for their communities. They also mounted missionary campaigns convert Germanic peoples to Christianity. Althoug Roman imperial authority disappeared, Roman Christiani survived and served as a foundation for cultural unity lands that had formerly made up the western half of th Roman empire.

CHRONOLOGY

3rd century B.C.E.	Spread of Buddhism and Hinduism to southeast Asia
2nd century B.C.E.	Introduction of Buddhism to central Asia
139–126 B.C.E.	Travels of Zhang Qian in central Asia
1st century B.C.E.	Introduction of Buddhism to China
2nd century C.E.	Spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean basin and southwest Asia
184 C.E.	Yellow Turban rebellion
216–272 C.E.	Life of Mani
220 C.E.	Collapse of the Han dynasty
284–305 C.E.	Reign of Diocletian
313–337 C.E.	Reign of Constantine
313 C.E.	Edict of Milan and the legalization of Christianity in the Roman empire
325 C.E.	Council at Nicaea
451 C.E.	Council at Chalcedon
476 C.E.	Collapse of the western Roman empire