Central Europe, the Dogmen, and the Oak Woods of Berehove

T HE MEDIEVAL SCRIBES WHO ILLUSTRATED MANUSCRIPTS of-
ten added small sketches in the margins of pages, either to
tantalize readers or as a relief from their own boredom. They drew
winding vines, flowers, farmyard animals, and ordinary people, but
they often also included fabulous creatures. These might be unicorns
or mermaids, but there were monsters and monstrosities as well: flame-
spewing dragons, mossy wild men, and headless creatures with faces
in their chests. A favourite was the 'dogman', or cynocephalus, who
had a human body but a dog's head. Being social, as humans are, but
only able to bark, the dogmen were frequently drawn gesticulating and
pointing.

The dogmen were an idea taken from classical literature and they
were thought to be real creatures, living on the edge of civilization in the
same way they occupied the margins of manuscripts. Early Christian
scholars debated the balance in dogmen of canine and human qualities,
since if they were mainly human then it followed that they had souls
and should be converted. But the dogmen were elusive, always keeping
just beyond the reach of missionaries and of the warbands of Christian
kings and rulers. Even so, stories kept on coming of what dogmen
were doing just over the horizon—murdering priests, feasting on cap-
tives, and consorting with long-nailed female warriors or Amazons. No
shaggy dogman was ever captured, but with unbelievers it was best to
be on the safe side. One ninth-century account tells of how a mission-
ary bishop in what is now Austria denied a place at the table to visiting
pagan chieftains, instead laying out bowls on the floor.[1]

As the tide of religious conversion advanced eastwards, creating Christian kingdoms out of what had been pagan peoples, the dog-men were shunted out of Europe altogether and made to dwell on the world's edge. The late-thirteenth-century 'World Map' (*Mappa Mundi*) in Hereford Cathedral in England shows a group of dogmen in the far east being chased from the Garden of Eden by an angel. A second group are portrayed in their subsequent exile, gesturing on a promontory far in the north. They share the margin of the world with cave-dwelling troglodytes, headless men, and the one-legged monopods who sleep on their back in the shade of an overlarge foot. But, as it turned out, the banishment of the dogmen to the remote north would not be permanent. Even by the time the monks of Hereford were drawing their World Map, the dogmen had returned to the European mainland in a new and more terrible form. This time, they were for real.

Central Europe rests on its western edge against the River Rhine, which joins the North Sea to the Alps, but its eastern boundary has no obvious physical marker. The Carpathian Mountains, which start northeast of Vienna, in modern-day Slovakia, curl around Hungary and Transylvania, forming a border in the southeast. But further north there is just open country. Northern Europe is flat, lying on the Great European Plain which reaches more than three thousand kilometres from the Low Countries to the Ural Mountains in Russia. On its southern flank, the Great European Plain blends into the steppe land or, as it was once known, the 'Wild Plain' that runs through modern-day Ukraine and Central Asia.

It was over the Wild Plain that the dogmen came, bursting out of Central Asia in 1241 and wasting Poland and Hungary. They called themselves Mongols and Tatars, and the second name betrayed (so it was thought) their origin in Tartarus, the classical name for the abyss of hell. Their leader, too, was self-evidently a dog, for he was known as a khan, a name that harked to the Latin word for dog (*canis*). The behaviour of the Mongols confirmed the connection since, as one French witness related, 'they ate the bodies of their victims, like so much bread.' Believing all this, contemporary writers confidently reported

that the Mongols were the dog-headed men of antiquity, belonging to the people of Gog and Magog whom Alexander the Great had once walled up in the Caucasus along with sundry giants, corrupt nations, and the unclean people who ate mice and flies. Evidently, something or someone had let them out.[2]

The Mongols were the dogmen of Tartarus or, in another description, the hounds of hell. Although the Mongol Empire rapidly fell apart, one of its successor states preserved the link. From the fifteenth century onwards, the Tatar khans of the Crimea launched successive raids on the Christian kingdoms to the west. They were looking for loot, in the form of slaves, and young ones in particular, whom they would sell in the Crimean port of Kaffa (now Feodosia), repurposed as either concubines or eunuchs. For centuries, the folklore of the peoples who lived around the Carpathian Mountains rehearsed the depravities of the 'dog-snouted Tatars', combining these with other tales involving devils and demons. In Hungarian accounts, the association of Tatars with dogmen was so complete that Tatars were seldom recorded before the twentieth century without the epithet of 'dog-headed'.[3]

It was not just the Tatars who were thought to be dogmen. From Anatolia, which is now mainland Turkey, the Ottoman Turks invaded and occupied the Balkan peninsula in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, capturing Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in 1453. Less than a century later, they occupied central Hungary, raiding deep into the neighbouring countries. Unsurprisingly, the Turks were described as agents of Satan, with an insatiable thirst for blood. Western writers accused the Turks of all sorts of extravagances, including bestiality and sexual relations with fish, but from the very first they, too, were associated with the dogmen. According to the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, the Turks married dogs, generating hybrids from their union. Since the prophet Mohammed was also said to be a dog and was sometimes shown with a dog's head, it made sense to consider all Muslims as potential dogmen.[4]

The history of the dogmen embodies the predicament of Central Europe. Real and imagined, the dogmen are predatory and invasion

is a recurrent theme in Central Europe's history. The list of would-be conquerors begins with the Goths and Huns in the fourth century, continues through the Avars, Slavs, and Hungarians in the seventh and ninth centuries, and goes on to include the Mongols and Ottoman Turks in the later Middle Ages. After 1500, the picture is more complicated, since invaders came from every direction—the French from the west, the Swedes from the north, and the Russians from the northeast. Of these, the Russians were the most tenacious, pushing into Central Europe in the late eighteenth century and occupying most of it after 1945.

But Central Europe has never been just a passive victim. Its kingdoms and empires have also been predatory, carving out spaces at the expense of their neighbours. Conflicts arising in the region have often spilled outwards as well. The Thirty Years' War fought in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648 engulfed almost the whole continent, with sideshows in Africa, the Caribbean, and even distant Taiwan. The seizure of Austrian Silesia in 1740 by Frederick the Great of Prussia led to more than two decades of war, which drew in Britain and France and, during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), was partly waged in North America and the Indian subcontinent. German unification was made possible in 1871 only because the Prussian politician Otto von Bismarck had just defeated France and occupied Paris. In the twentieth century, Central Europe was the starting place of two world wars, and in the twenty-first century it was the site of the most destructive war waged in Europe for more than seventy years.

Central Europe has often been characterized by what it is not. The earliest definition of Central Europe, or 'Mitteleuropa', as it was known in German, was guided by the politics of the Napoleonic Wars. Published in Brunswick in 1805, Georg Hassel's 'Statistical Sketch of All the European States' (*Statistischer Umriss der sämtlichen europäischen Staaten*) was uncompromisingly exact. Central Europe was the part of Europe that was neither France nor Russia, so leaving just the lands belonging to the German rulers whom Napoleon had kept in power, Prussia, and the Austrian Empire. It was in the middle of Europe, not

only geographically but politically too, and Europe's freedom from the double threat of French and Russian tyranny rested on its survival. The view that Central Europe lay in Europe's middle persisted throughout the nineteenth century in travel books and gazetteers, although to drum up sales, publishers of tourist guides to the region also added in excursions to London and Paris.

Political boundaries change, and with every alteration the idea of Central Europe changed too. Germany was always a part of it, but Central Europe's other members varied according to who was writing, and when, and where. So, Belgium was occasionally included, along with Alsace and Lorraine, and Poland either brought in or left out depending on whether the state of Poland actually existed at the time. Up to the Second World War, German geographers and historians were never less than ready to pronounce where the region was. But their definitions were often a cover for Germany rolling up the states to its east, either commercially or politically, on the dubious grounds that they had always been culturally German or produced goods that were particularly useful to the German economy. After 1945, 'Central Europe' fell from use as a term, since Europe was now divided down the middle into West and East. Following communism's collapse, historians and political scientists often referred to the former Eastern Europe as East Central Europe, although they seldom explained where West Central Europe might be.

This history of Central Europe is unique in combining the region's two halves, since historians usually discuss them separately as Germany and as East Central Europe, with Austria flitting uncertainly between the two. It does not foreground national histories but traverses the byways of the past, to kingdoms and duchies that were once great but whose memory has been squeezed out by histories that make the nation state their starting point. Broadly, the book covers the area now included in modern-day Germany, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, and western Romania or Transylvania, but its scope is as fluid as Central Europe's historical parts, venturing at times into the territory of today's Ukraine, Croatia, Switzerland, and the Baltic states.

This book aims to give a broad survey of Central European history, but it has another purpose too: to explore Central Europe's distinctiveness and to show it to be more than just a contested space. Central Europe's history has much in common with Western Europe's. The two regions shared the same medieval civilization. Like England and France, the kingdoms and duchies in Europe's middle had castles, knights, Catholic churches and monasteries, flourishing cities, and wealthy merchants. Central Europe experienced, too, the rediscovery of classical learning that is called the Renaissance, the struggle over religion during the Reformation, the growth of empire, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, modern nationalism, industrialization, and two world wars.

But Central Europe often embraced these larger movements differently, giving them a special twist or an unexpected intensity. Its knights were also colonizers, opening new spaces for settlement and founding villages and cities in the region's less populated eastern part. Across medieval Central Europe, noblemen, city folk, and villagers established parliaments, assemblies, and self-governing communities to a degree far greater than in most of Western Europe. Central Europe's Renaissance was influenced by what was going on in Italy, but it was infused, too, with a deep spirituality and a concern with death and redemption. Its Protestant Reformation threw up a medley of sects and denominations that survived into the seventeenth century in an atmosphere of relative toleration. Unlike France, Spain, and England, in most of Central Europe people were not burnt for their beliefs.

Conditions in the countryside differed too. Throughout Europe, the broad mass of the population comprised peasants who in return for their farms were obliged to pay rent to their lords, sometimes by working for them. But in much of Central Europe, particularly in its eastern parts, landlords' demands were more onerous and they frequently compelled peasants to labour in their fields for several or more days per week. On top of this, many peasants in the east of Central Europe were tied to the soil, in the sense that they could not quit their villages to escape their lords. In a large part of Central Europe, right through

to the nineteenth century, a type of serfdom persisted that was mostly missing in Western Europe.

The modern state was born in Central Europe, where bureaucracy first fused with the early Enlightenment. So, whereas in England, France, and North America, the Enlightenment tended to promote individual liberty, in Central Europe the Enlightenment championed the state and the right of government to rule by decree. And, whereas in Western Europe, empires were built overseas, in Central Europe empires swallowed up the region, leading to a contest for hegemony fought out between the Austrian Habsburgs, Russia, and Prussia, which became the core of the new German Empire. At the end of the eighteenth century, the empires sliced up among themselves Poland and Lithuania. They then went on to fight among themselves, eventually destroying one another in the First World War. In the twentieth century, the fusion of nationalism with the pseudo-science of racial biology took destruction one step further, leading to the attempted elimination of whole peoples.

Central Europe's historical experience differs from Western Europe's. Its trends seem to replicate a good part of what was happening in Western Europe, but upon closer examination they pulse more vigorously or have a different quality, as if seen in a distorting mirror. Language makes Central Europe seem different too. The fictional Lorelei Lee, the narrator in Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), visited Central Europe in the 1920s. As she explains, Central Europe was 'where they talk some other kinds of landguages [*sic*] which we do not understand besides French.' (The 1953 screen version, starring Marilyn Monroe, leaves out this observation.) Language marks out Central Europe as difficult. German may be troublesome to the visitor on account of its habit of keeping the listener guessing what the operative verb is until the end of the sentence. But farther east, the languages spoken become baffling, written with an abundance of consonants, odd diacritical marks, and, in places, even a different alphabet.

Strip away the language or, better still, render it intelligible and we soon enter a world that, like Central Europe itself, reveals a mixture of

familiarity and difference. So, from a fifteenth-century list itemizing a noble landowner's properties on the edge of the Carpathians, near today's city of Berehove:

> His oak woods, copses and orchards, beginning at the Ferry Water and going up to the road by the Eagle's Perch; next, his oak woods at Little Lapping, Little Mire, Round Lake, and Redoubt, along with the fish pond at Great Mastage and the wood called Elm Grove, beside the place where Great Owls Brook falls into the Black River, and going up to the road which leads from Mallards Meadow to the place and pasture called Long Sand . . .[5]

Once rendered in translation, Berehove's landscape and toponymy sound as if they could be somewhere in the French countryside. But Berehove is also a microcosm of the changes that have coursed through Central Europe over the last century. First mentioned in the 1240s, in the aftermath of the Mongol-Tatar invasion, Berehove was until 1918 a part of Hungary. At the start of the twentieth century, the city had a centre of monumental neo-baroque buildings with grand ornamental façades and tree-lined boulevards, set against a backdrop of rolling hills of oak and beech forests, cornfields, and vineyards. It had a mix of peoples too—Jewish shopkeepers and Hasidic rabbis, Gypsy musicians, and itinerant Turkish ice cream sellers, although the population was mostly Hungarian and Ukrainian.

After the First World War, Berehove became a part of Czechoslovakia, then briefly returned to Hungary in 1939 before being occupied by Germany in 1944. Nazi rule resulted in the murder of at least 3,600 Jews from Berehove and its immediate neighbourhood. At the end of 1944, Soviet troops conquered the city, which was soon afterwards swept into the Soviet Union. The Soviets completed the destruction of Berehove's Jewish culture, converting the main synagogue into a communist 'cultural centre'. To hide the Hebrew inscriptions and Jewish symbols on the building's exterior, they daubed it with thick cement. What had been one of Berehove's most imposing façades is now its

ugliest. As for Berehove's countryside, the Soviets first plundered it and then carved it up into collective farms.

With every change of the map, Berehove's name changed too, from Beregszász to Berehovo, to Bergsass, to Berehovo again, and finally to Berehove. Together with the oak woods and elm groves of its countryside, Berehove now lies in western Ukraine, and beyond its horizon a new generation of dogmen prowl, this time armed with Kalashnikovs. They are the latest in a long line of invaders and conquerors who have broken into Central Europe over the course of two millennia and a fresh reminder of the vulnerability of its civilization. What follows is Central Europe's story, but it is also an exploration of the many little places like Berehove that belong both to Europe's middle and to its edge.

The Roman Empire, the Huns, and the *Nibelungenlied*

T HE POET OVID WAS UNLUCKY. AT THE START OF THE FIRST millennium, the emperor Augustus banished him from Rome for an unspecified crime. Ovid maintained that it was all a misunderstanding, but he was nevertheless sent to the Roman frontier city of Tomis on the Black Sea coast, which is now Constanţa in Romania. In exile, Ovid complained of the cold in winter, which cracked vases of wine and froze their contents into icicles, and of the assaults on Tomis and its countryside by wild Sarmatian tribesmen. He described how their horsemen broke through the Roman defences, plundered farmsteads, and murdered indiscriminately with poison arrows. More accustomed, as he sobbed, to Cupid's darts, Ovid now had to dodge the venomous missiles of a savage people.

It was Ovid's misfortune to have been sent to one of the worst places on the Roman frontier, for otherwise the frontier was in the first centuries of Roman imperial rule generally quiet. At its greatest extent in the second century CE, the Roman Empire had a border that was five thousand kilometres long, enclosing five million square kilometres of territory. More than half a million soldiers were charged with its defence and with maintaining order in its hinterland. According to a list made about 300 CE, they faced no fewer than fifty hostile peoples, ranging from the Picts in the far north to the Armenians in the east and the Moors of Africa.[1]

In North Africa and the Middle East, the desert acted as a protective cordon. In Central Europe, the Roman frontier largely followed the line of the Rhine and Danube Rivers, but with salients that pushed

deep into the territory beyond: most notably the Roman province of Dacia, which enclosed Transylvania and the eastern Carpathians, and the province of Upper Germania (Germania Superior), which included the triangle of territory between the upper reaches of the Rhine and the Danube. At its height, the Roman Empire occupied a large chunk of Central Europe, including what is now the Rhineland and western Germany, Switzerland, much of Bavaria and southern Germany, Austria, western Hungary, Slovenia, and western Romania. In the third century, the Romans abandoned Dacia and much of Upper Germany. Thereafter, the line of Central Europe's two main rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, marked the course of the frontier.

Roman patrol boats guarded the Rhine and the Danube. Jokingly called 'pleasure craft', or *lusoriae*, they were each manned by thirty soldier-oarsmen and attached to depots which doubled as memorials for the dead, where tablets listed the names of the drowned and slain. About a thousand warcraft plied the Danube in the second century. Defensive works—starting with clearings and watchtowers, and gradually augmented with ditches, palisades, stone walls, and towers—reinforced the natural geography of the frontier. Some sixty garrisoned blockhouses and forts ran along the southern bank of the Danube, from Passau to Vienna. Behind the Rhine and the Danube, on the Roman side, nestled a mix of the indigenous Celtic population, immigrant farmers who were often legionary veterans, and slaves captured in raids across the border.

Irrespective of their origins, the people living in Roman Central Europe were rapidly Romanized in their language, dress, and manners, soon adopting names like Julius, Tiberius, and Claudius. Their original tribal organizations vanished, only surviving in the names of the Roman provinces into which they were absorbed. The cities that clustered along the frontier mimicked Rome with amphitheatres, public baths, aqueducts, monumental buildings, square temples, and, from the early fourth century onwards, Christian churches. In the countryside, villas with mosaics and wall paintings were the centres of large

THE ROMAN EMPIRE c. 378 CE

| | Roman Empire East |
| | Roman Empire West |

North Sea

Baltic Sea

SLAVS

Franks

German Tribes

River

Rhine

Mainz

Burgundians

Speyer

Upper Germany

Passau

Vienna

River

HUNS

Sarmatians

Lake Constance

Pannonia

Aquincum

GAUL

Dacia

GOTHS

Viminacium

Danube

Tomis

Black Sea

Rome

Adrianople

Naples

Constantinople

Athens

Mediterranean Sea

AFRICA

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| 0 | | 300 mi |
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agricultural, wine-producing, and herding enterprises. Archaeologists have identified the sites of some six hundred villas in the Roman province of Pannonia alone (roughly where western Hungary is today).[2]

Roman power did not stop at the border. The peoples who lived on the other side were often brought into the Roman political, diplomatic, and economic orbit. They traded amber, dyes, grain, and goose feathers to stuff pillows and provided recruits and even generals for the Roman legions, and their chief men were rewarded with lavish gifts and military protection. To make sure of the tribes' allegiance, legionary commanders dug forts deep in the Central European countryside, well beyond the shelter of the frontier. Roman troops also began the construction of a five-hundred-kilometre earthen rampart that looped around the edge of the Hungarian Plain, from Aquincum in the northwest (now a part of Budapest) to the fort at Viminacium, which lies east of today's Belgrade. Later called the Devil's Dyke, stretches of the earthwork are still there, although much eroded. Crossing modern-day Hungary, Romania, and Serbia, it was a military achievement comparable in scale to Hadrian's Wall in Britain.[3]

Peaceable relations on the frontier were achieved by exporting violence beyond it. The German tribes and Sarmatian nomads on the other side jostled for position, each seeking a place closer to the Roman Empire and thus easier access to its wealth. Shortly before 100 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus noted the inclination of the German tribes to violence and of their young men to fighting and looting. He listed the tribes, and historians have long puzzled over the names he gave them (Ubians, Cattans, Tencterians, and so on), for only a few reappear sixty years later in Ptolemy's great world map, which is actually a list of names and geographical coordinates. Some tribes can be tracked over several centuries, but most seem to have vanished almost as soon as Tacitus named them, most probably having been defeated and absorbed by rivals. As Tacitus wryly observed, 'Long, I pray, may foreign peoples persist, if not in loving us, at least in hating one another, for . . . fortune now has no better gift than the discord of our foes.'[4]

Tacitus's image of youthful tribes engaged in adolescent rivalry comported with Roman stereotypes of the peoples across the border, who were either hideous in their appearance or playful but wayward innocents in need of Rome's protection and example. For Romans, the Germans belonged to the second category. Living in rustic hamlets, they practised, so we are told, only a primitive agriculture, knowing neither proper government nor industry, nor even their own sexuality. So, both sexes bathed chastely together naked; the men could not be roused from their habitual indolence to undertake any craft, and they had no knowledge of money until introduced to it by the Romans. By contrast, the Sarmatians, whom Ovid encountered at Tomis, were, in one contemporary description, 'a robber horde . . . the most isolated of all the barbarous peoples in these regions'. Tacitus noted their double-handed swords and armour made of overlapping scales of iron and leather. Roman artists sculpted the Sarmatians as lizards.[5]

The same sense of difference also coloured the earliest descriptions of Central Europe's landscape beyond the Roman frontier. For Roman authors, Central Europe was a vast forest of oak trees, so dense that they made the climate colder, and whose colliding roots threw up archways wide enough to take a squadron of cavalry. Back in the first century BCE, Julius Caesar could find no one who knew the forest's true extent, but he thought it to be several months' march in breadth. A century later, Tacitus described Central Europe as distinguished by 'its misshapen landscape and harsh climate, wretched to live in or look on'. Its soil was too thin to support fruit trees, he explained, and the flocks and cattle there were underweight and ugly. Other writers stressed the rivers, mountains, and swamps that impeded travel and the lack of roads and stone buildings. For classical authors, the further northwards, the harsher the geography and climate became, until one arrived at the bleak Baltic Ocean, where the Finns lived, 'whose barbarism and baseness are sickening, beyond belief'.[6]

It was the Romans who first imposed on the peoples of Central Europe the label of German, for otherwise they had no word for themselves or any sense of a common identity—indeed, it seems doubtful

that the dialects they spoke were mutually comprehensible, at least on first hearing. These early Germans lived in villages and kinship groups, which might or might not have been united in some sort of larger political confederation. Some of these tribal groups were ruled by kings, others by assemblies of headmen, and a few by priests. In several places, the inhabitants practised the head binding of infants, which resulted in the elongation of the skull in adulthood. Elsewhere, they were content with knotting their hair on the side of the head as a mark of belonging. Nevertheless, by favouring some tribes above others, Roman policy led to their political consolidation.[7]

The Roman Empire knew violence. Most of it was home-grown and caused by slave revolts, food riots, local uprisings, and civil wars caused by overambitious generals. Incursions across the border added to the mix. Towards the end of the second century, the German tribe of the Marcomanni burst through the Roman defences on the Danube, acting in concert with Sarmatian bands. They were repulsed, but not before they had raided northern Italy. In the middle decades of the third century, German tribes took advantage of prolonged periods of civil conflict in Rome to ravage across the frontier. But most incursions were small-scale and swiftly checked. In a famous illustration from the late third century, Roman patrol boats on the Rhine intercepted near Speyer a group of raiders which was returning home with several cartloads of plunder seized from a villa nearby. Upon being challenged, the robbers fled, leaving behind the silver plate, kitchenware, and farm implements they had stolen.[8]

Banditry gave way in the late fourth century to something altogether more serious. Instead of raiders looking for booty, the frontier was now assailed by whole peoples on the move, who brought with them their children, the sick, and the old. They were in flight for their lives, running from 'a race of men, which had never been seen before . . . which had arisen from some secret corner of the earth, and was sweeping away and destroying everything that came in its way.' Roman writers smugly rehearsed older stories about the peoples living north of the Black Sea, but the refugees insisted that they faced entirely new

foes, born of the union of witches with the unclean spirits that dwelled in swamps. They called them the Huns.[9]

Classical authors were never discerning in their descriptions of the Huns, borrowing passages from earlier writers that related to quite different peoples, while adding their own rhetorical flourishes. So, we are told, the Huns, like Homer's Cyclops, ate roots and were wary of buildings; like centaurs, they were only half-human; and like the ancient Massagetae, they ate their old folk. Roman authors confidently concluded that the Huns were either descended from the primitive people described by the poet Virgil as springing from the trunks of trees or belonged to the Old Testament people of Gog and Magog. In fact, the people that Romans called the Huns were a mixed bag of tribes. The Hunnic core originated from what is now Kazakhstan and mainly comprised Turkic speakers, but the warrior elite also included members of previous bands that the Huns had defeated and even soldiers of fortune recruited from within the Roman Empire. A court jester of the Huns later kept his audience amused by gabbling, so we are told, in a mixture of Hunnish, Gothic German, and Latin.[10]

The Huns were nomads and pastoralists, but they needed sedentary populations both as tribute payers of gold and as suppliers of the manufactured goods that they lacked. The settled peoples west of the River Don were an obvious target. From the fourth century onwards, the Huns expanded westwards from their home in Central Asia along the steppe land. Having gathered allies on the way, they fell upon the Goths in the 370s. The Goths were a Germanic people, related linguistically to the Central European tribes. Divided into half a dozen separate groups, they occupied the space east of the Carpathians, in what is now Ukraine. The Gothic tribes living north and west of the Black Sea put up a futile resistance to the Huns. In vain, their last king sacrificed himself to the gods on his people's behalf. After a (literally) last-ditch attempt to halt the invaders failed, the Goths massed on the banks of the Danube, where they were joined by other tribes in flight from the Huns.

The Roman Empire was by this time divided into halves, with capitals at Rome and Constantinople (now Istanbul). The refugees petitioned the Emperor of the East, Valens, to give them shelter, since the Balkans south of the Lower Danube belonged at this time to the eastern half of the empire. Thinking them a potential source of man-power for the army, Emperor Valens agreed. But the settlement of the Goths was botched, and the Goths left starving and vengeful. Valens sought to reduce them to obedience by force, but the Goths destroyed his army at the Battle of Adrianople in 378 CE. The emperor either fell in the fighting or was burned to death in a cottage where he was resting to tend his wounds. In the wake of their victory, the Goths plundered the Balkans so thoroughly that, as Roman sources relate, nothing was left except for the horizon.

The Gothic leaders and Valens's successor, Theodosius, concluded a treaty in 382. Theodosius advertised it as the instrument by which 'an entire people of the Goths along with its king surrendered to the Romans', but the treaty was nothing of the sort. It let the Goths into the empire and exempted them from taxes, gave them land to farm, allowed continued governance by their own princes, and awarded them an annual tribute. Although the Goths were expected to serve in the Roman armies, they did so under the immediate command of their own chieftains. Unsurprisingly, when new bands broke into the Roman Empire, they pressed for the same extensive rights. The high point was reached on 31 December 406, when a mixed band of Germans, Sarmatians, and former allies of the Huns crossed the Rhine at Mainz and advanced into Roman Gaul. Four years later, a military confederation of Gothic tribes, called the Visigoths, seized and plundered Rome.[11]

From their encampment on the Hungarian Plain, Hun bands continued to raid Italy and the Balkans and to harass German tribes, pushing them across the frontier, while also offering their services as allies of the Romans. Most notoriously, the Roman commander Aetius enlisted the Huns of a chieftain called Rugila to crush the Burgundians, a German tribe that had occupied lands west of the Rhine

around Worms. Rugila's massacre of the Burgundians in 437 CE was so complete that it passed into legend as a chilling example of the Huns' ferocity and of their readiness to wipe out whole peoples.[12]

But the Huns were not content to act as the Romans' gatekeepers. During the 440s, command of the Huns passed to Rugila's nephew, Attila. Attila welded the Huns and their allies into a confederation that was loyal to him, punishing the faithless with crucifixion and the errant tribes with extinction. Leadership among the Huns was customarily shared by twin kinsmen, but Attila would have none of this—he murdered his elder brother and co-ruler in 445, after which he assumed sole power. A contemporary description of him survives: 'Short of stature, with a broad chest and a large head; his eyes were small, his beard thin and sprinkled with grey; and he had a flat nose and swarthy skin, showing evidence of his origin.' Later accounts would give him a dog's head and describe his father as a greyhound, thus uniting him with the legend of the dogmen from the east.[13]

For the first few years of his sole rule, Attila was mostly active on the Danube frontier, waging a war of terror aimed at extracting loot from the East Roman emperors. But around 450 he turned his attention to the west. Behind the scenes, Attila had been negotiating with Honoria, the wily sister of the western emperor Valentinian III, and she had stirred an ambition in him to replace either Aetius as military commander in the west or even her own brother as emperor via an improbable marriage to herself. For Attila, both strategies made equal sense—no longer to press upon the empire from outside but to take it over entirely.

Attila began his campaign early in 451, when (in a contemporary description) 'suddenly the barbarian world, rent by a mighty upheaval, poured the whole north into Gaul', after which it descended on Italy. Attila's army was estimated at the time to be half a million men—an unlikely number, but testament to the panic it caused. Even so, it was clearly numerous, comprising a mass of German tribes. Among them were the remnants of the Gothic tribes, now welded together as the so-called Ostrogoths by a descendant of the Gothic king who had killed

himself eighty years before. Also present were a section of the Franks, whose chieftains would ultimately inherit the power of the Huns in a large part of Central Europe.[14]

The end came swiftly. It may be that late in 452 Attila had a meeting with Pope Leo I, but it is unlikely that the saintly bishop of Rome convinced him to become a man of peace. Something earthlier forced Attila's withdrawal—a lack of fodder for his horses, brought on by a hot summer. Attila returned to his headquarters on the Hungarian Plain but died the next year, suffocated in his sleep by a nosebleed. His sons disputed their inheritance, prompting a civil war in the course of which Hun power both in Europe and on the Black Sea steppe collapsed. Historians today often exaggerate the strengths of the Huns and describe their empire as a state, but it was nothing of the sort. It was a loose assemblage of Hunnic, Germanic, and Gothic tribes, held together by a ruthless and ambitious ruler. Once he was gone, it fell apart.[15]

Even so, the Huns had remade Central Europe. By breaking its power, they had forced Rome to abandon its Central European provinces in what is now Germany, Austria, and Hungary. On the back of the Huns, German tribes took Rome's place in the southern and western parts of Central Europe. As the newcomers' leaders imposed their own taxes, apportioned land to their followers, and dispossessed the provincial Roman aristocracy, the marks of civilization contracted. Walled encampments and fortified hilltops took the place of country villas, and large agricultural estates went to ruin. As one Roman contemporary lamented, 'The flocks are gone, the seeds of the fruits are gone, and there is no place for vines or olive trees; destructive fire and rain have even taken away the buildings of the farms.' North of the Alps, hot running water as a household amenity disappeared for a thousand years. The Huns' legacy was also the cultural and economic impoverishment of a wide swathe of Central Europe.[16]

In the wake of the Huns' work of destruction, Gothic tribes pushed into the western half of the Roman Empire, carving out their own kingdoms. So, the Visigoths occupied southern France, and later

Spain, and the Ostrogoths took over Italy. In time, they would become linguistically acculturated so that the Latin-based Romance language of the majority prevailed in what would become France, Spain, and Italy. But in Central Europe, where the German settlement was denser, Latin was squeezed out and the region became mostly German-speaking. The Rhine, previously the Roman frontier, accordingly straddled two emerging linguistic zones, with German speakers to the east and Romance speakers to the west. As for the West Roman Empire, it ceased to exist in 476, when the last emperor abdicated in return for a pension from the Roman Senate and a palace in Naples.

After the fifth century, the originally German-speaking Franks, who had previously settled in northern France, extended their power across the old Roman province of Gaul and pushed eastwards across the Rhine. From the seventh century onwards, they were neighbours in Central Europe to Slavonic tribes. A new Central Europe was born under Frankish leadership. Frankish Central Europe was linguistically mixed, including both German and Slavonic speakers. To their number were added the Hungarians, with their unrelated language, who arrived in the Carpathians at the end of the ninth century. Over time, Franks, Germans, Slavs, and Hungarians adopted a common cultural code of kingship, Catholic Christianity, law, knighthood, and chivalry.

But curiously, that code was also infused with remembrance of the Huns. A common literary tradition united the different peoples of Central Europe, who looked back to the invasion of the Huns as a defining moment in their development. Greek and Roman writers had cast the Huns as villains, and most early Christian accounts did the same, piling on martyrs whose deaths were blamed on the Huns. But in Central Europe, a different dynamic was at work. Here, many of the German tribes had fought on Attila's side, and their descendants cultivated romantic tales about the Huns' exploits and the deeds done in their service. These legends took as their theme the last days of the court of Burgundy in Worms, before its destruction by the Huns in

437, and told of palace intrigues in the Huns' capital Esztergom (now in Hungary), where Attila ruled under the name of Etzel in consort with the Ostrogothic ruler Theodoric (Dietrich).

These historical fragments were overlaid by other stories—of the deeds of the fabled Siegfried and of his murder, and of the vengeance plotted by his Burgundian widow, Kriemhild, who became Attila's fictional wife. Passed on in song and oral recitations, these tales later fused in the epic poem known as 'The Song of the Nibelungs', or *Nibelungenlied*. More than two thousand verses long, the *Nibelungenlied* achieved its final form only in the thirteenth century, thanks to an unknown poet from Passau in Bavaria. The *Nibelungenlied* is a tragedy that describes the consequences of betrayal, jealousy, and grief, along with dwarfs guarding treasure, cloaks of invisibility, dragon slaying, and magic rings that turn people into dust.

The strands which contributed to the *Nibelungenlied*'s final form were also woven into later Czech and Polish accounts (often via the parallel 'Walther Legend'), some of which self-consciously modelled themselves on the *Nibelungenlied*'s epic form. Again, many of these celebrated the Huns' achievements and described a heroic contest between the Huns and their Roman adversaries. Others recast episodes entirely, changing location and actors to fit their audiences while preserving the outlines of the plot—Tyrolean versions had a mountainous backdrop, for instance, and Styrian ones added in ancestors of the ruling ducal house in what is now Austria. Recollection of the Huns also contributed to accounts of Hungarian origins which made the Huns into the Hungarians' progenitors (the similarity of names helped) and Attila into the forebear of the Hungarian ruling house. Memory of the Huns and their empire worked its way into Central Europe's first legends.[17]

But the *Nibelungenlied* was also typical of a larger European literary genre—its tropes of chivalric endeavour and vengeance, of courtly ideals matched with martial vigour, and of a conflict of loyalties between kinsmen and lord are commonplaces in French epics, Scandi-

navian sagas, and Spanish and Provençal ballads. So too are the knight in search of a bride, ritual visits and exchanges of gifts, and the image of the careworn ruler (Attila-Etzel in the *Nibelungenlied*; King Arthur in the Round Table romances; King Mark in the Tristan legends, and so on). By embracing the *Nibelungenlied* and reworking its content, the fledgling societies of Central Europe also showed that they had become part of a larger cultural community, which was unmistakably Christian in character. How these societies became Christian in the first place and what types of Christianity they embraced are the subjects of the next chapters.

The Franks and Charlemagne: The View from Lake Constance

Roman Christianity had not taken conversion seriously. Christianity was a religion of the cities and the villas, and missionaries were slow to evangelize in the countryside. The same prejudice influenced bishops and popes in their dealings with the German tribes. It was only after a tribe or ruler had already converted that they sent in priests. The consequence was that the regions of the former Roman Empire settled by Germans either remained pagan or adhered to a heretical form of Christianity called Arianism. Named after the early-fourth-century theologian Arius (and so having nothing to do with the race theory of Aryanism), Arianism rejected the idea that Christ was of one being with the eternal God, arguing instead that God had created Christ and so 'there was a time when Christ was not.' Arians rejected the Trinity, proposing instead a hierarchy with God at the top followed by a created Christ and the angel that stood for the Holy Spirit.[1]

The conflict between Catholics and Arians was bitter and vicious, with Arian mobs running amok in Roman cities. But despite its apparent obscurity, Arianism was Central Europe's earliest Christian religion, adopted in the fourth and fifth centuries by most of the Goths and many of the German tribes. Only the Franks, Frisians, and Saxons, whose chieftains stuck to paganism, stayed outside Arianism's embrace. Arianism's appeal lay in its church services, which were held in the vernacular and not in the Latin favoured by Catholic priests. The first translation into German Gothic of the New Testament and of a part of the Old Testament was done by an Arian bishop, Ulfila (Little Wolf), in the middle of the fourth century in a script of his own

invention. Importantly, too, the idea that there was a celestial hierarchy fitted in with older pagan beliefs that there were many gods but with a superior god on top.[2]

The Franks had originally comprised several tribes living close to the Middle and Lower Rhine, on both sides of the Roman frontier. Their first king of whom we have definite knowledge was Childeric (died 481 CE), who belonged to the line of so-called Merovingian rulers—they were named in honour of an eponymous sea serpent's brood. His extraordinary grave at Tournai bears witness to his double role as a tribal leader and Roman administrator, for Childeric was buried with the long shoulder-length hair that was the mark of Frankish royalty, his horse's severed head, a cloak bearing three hundred golden bees, and gifts that could only have come from the East Roman emperor in Constantinople. Under Childeric's son, Chlodwig or Clovis (lived 466–511), the Franks expanded from the northwest to take over most of the old Roman province of Gaul, while also vanquishing the region between the Upper Rhine and the Danube.

Catholic Christianity was lucky that around 496 Clovis converted from paganism to Catholicism, after which, we are told, many of his leading men also embraced the new faith. Clovis became a Catholic under the influence of his devious wife, who was already a Catholic, and because her God had helped him in battle. But conversion also made political sense since a good part of the Romanized population of Gaul were already either Catholics or followed a mixture of Catholicism and Roman pagan cults. Clovis was the first German ruler to embrace the faith of Rome, for which the East Roman emperor rewarded him with the rank of consul, even though the title was meaningless.

Despite the recency of his conversion, Clovis advertised himself as God's minister. It was a role that justified his wars against pagans and Arians and sanctioned his conquests. Even so, the pace of conversion in the Frankish countryside was slow. Older practices continued, which included not only, as one sixth-century law code complained, 'nights spent at Christmas and Eastertide in drunkenness, buffoonery, and song' but also human sacrifice and worshipping an image of Christ

with an extended phallus. But the Frankish bishops were not drawn to missionary work. They kept to their dioceses, cultivating local saints and writing thoughtful sermons against Arianism and other varieties of misbelief. Frankish conquests east of the Rhine were not matched by the conversion of the population from paganism or of their chieftains from Arianism.[3]

Help came from an unusual quarter. The island of Ireland, or Hibernia, had never been part of the Roman Empire. But a zealous clergy, operating largely independently of Rome and the Catholic Church, had impressed Christianity there. Since Hibernia had no cities, it was hard to impose a network of bishops based upon urban centres. Monasteries took their place. But whereas monks elsewhere in Europe shunned the outside world, their Irish brethren actively sought it out, making popular conversion their vocation and, in the words of one bardic verse of the time, travelling 'eastward towards the Sun Tree, into the broad long-distant sea'. By the last decades of the sixth century, Irish monks were establishing monasteries on the Continent and inspiring a new generation of missionaries to press into what is now southern Germany. Among these was the combative St Columbanus (540–615), from what is now Leinster in Ireland, to whom an angel had revealed a map of the world and explained its conversion as the saint's vocation.[4]

Now in Switzerland, the abbey of St Gallen near Lake Constance has its origin in the life of St Gall, a follower of St Columbanus. Around 610, Columbanus had been journeying with his entourage to Bobbio in northern Italy to preach to the Arian Lombards there. Gall had fallen sick, so Columbanus had instructed him to stay by Lake Constance and set an example of piety. Gall made his home in a hut by a waterfall, from where he went to preach to the neighbouring German tribe of Alemanns. A small religious community gathered around the hermit's cell which survived his death in around 650. Over the next two centuries, the cell became a chapel and then a three-nave abbey church, and finally a monastic complex with dormitories, a school and infirmary, kitchens and gardens, a scriptorium for copying

manuscripts, and a library which by the ninth century had about four hundred books, making it one of the largest in Europe.

St Gallen was one of a line of frontier monasteries founded in the Irish tradition that carried Christianity into Central Europe. Disciplined and hardy, the monks were not tonsured. Instead, they shaved the front of their scalps and let their hair grow in a mane behind, and they frequently tattooed their eyelids—a painful undertaking, but that was the point of it. They promoted as models not only Saints Columbanus, Gall, and Kilian, martyred at Würzburg in 689, but also more distant holy men and women in Ireland and on the island of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides. Notwithstanding the shattering of Irish monasticism by the Scandinavian Vikings in the ninth century, Ireland retained a fabulous reputation in German legend as the homeland of dragons, miracle-working queens, and dangerous love potions.

Monks schooled in the Irish tradition were the shock troops of Merovingian Christianity. But after Clovis, the Merovingian kings have a poor reputation. Doubtless some fitted one modern historian's description of them as rulers who 'performed no services . . . were utterly incapable of organizing anything . . . suspicious, cruel, capricious and selfish despots.' Even so, they built on Roman foundations, melding German practices such as the blood feud with courts of law and legal codes that copied the example of Rome. They had an effective tax system and a literate bureaucracy. Even the kings could read, and one wrote Latin poetry, albeit badly. However risible, the kings of the Franks saw themselves as the heirs of the Romans, even to the extent of building amphitheatres, presiding like Roman emperors over crowded 'spectacles' (usually horse races run around a circular track), and augmenting the list of their ancestors with Roman deities.[5]

The problems were several. First, the Merovingian line of kings was weakened by partible inheritance, which meant that sons divided up the kingdom among themselves on their father's death, and rulers diminished their authority still further by giving away the right to tax to private lords, mainly churchmen. Second, the Merovingian monarchs were held to be sacred beings, so much so that they added strands of

their hair to the wax of seals, lending an almost magical power to their commands. As such, they stood aside from the daily routines of rulership, entrusting the business of government and warfare to a majordomo or 'mayor of the palace'. From the late seventh century, the office of mayor became hereditary. Historians call the dynasty of mayors the Carolingians. The name recalls the warlord and mayor Carolus, also known as Charles the Hammer or Charles Martel (lived c. 688–741). Bit by bit, the Carolingian mayors nibbled away at the royal power.

All of this was watched in St Gallen. The monks compiled annals, listing important events year by year. The names of kings barely feature in them; instead, it was the achievements of the mayors that they itemized—Charles the Hammer fighting the Frisians by the North Sea, fending off an Arabic attack from Spain across the Pyrenees, and pushing Frankish power eastwards. Next, they told of Charles's elder son and successor as mayor, Carloman, renewing the war against the Alemanns and in 747 going to Rome to become a monk. Then it is Pippin, Carloman's brother and successor as mayor, whose deeds the annalists related. But in a brief entry of just four words the St Gallen annals noted a sudden change in his rank. Under 751, the monastic compiler wrote: 'Pippin is made king' (*Pippinus in regem elevatur*).[6]

What the annals of St Gallen describe here was a coup d'état. For two centuries, the mayors had acted as de facto rulers. Now the mayor seized the royal office. Pippin justified his takeover of the kingdom on the grounds that 'it was better to call him king who had the royal power than the one who did not.' The transition was effortless, and the deposed king was shorn of his long locks and packed off to a monastery in an oxcart. To make sure of his new title, Pippin had himself anointed king first by the archbishop of Mainz and then by the pope, who in 754 travelled across the Alps to perform the rite. This was one of the first occasions when a European ruler was sanctified with oil. The ceremony of anointment, which drew on the Old Testament, placed Pippin in the same tradition as the biblical David, whom the prophet Samuel had anointed king in place of King Saul.[7]

The Merovingian rulers had extended their authority eastwards across the Rhine, but they had not consolidated their power there, treating the local tribes of Alemanns and Thuringians more as providers of tribute than as subjects to be governed. Under Charles the Hammer, policy changed, and the local German chieftains were subordinated to Frankish warlords. Frankish settlers also moved into the new space, which was divided up into counties, giving the name of Franconia to the region around the confluence of the Rhine and Main Rivers. The new regime was imposed ruthlessly. When the Alemanns rebelled in 746, Pippin's predecessor, the mayor Carloman, hauled their leaders before a court and condemned them to death. The scale of the slaughter, which may have included several thousand men, was even at the time thought excessive, and may have prompted Carloman's decision to become a monk.[8]

The tide of Frankish power sweeping eastwards across the Rhine is captured in the earliest of St Gallen's charters. As the monks' reputation spread, laymen gave over land to their monastery so that St Gallen soon owned a swathe of properties across what is now southern Germany and Switzerland. But land was vulnerable to depredation. To discourage raiding, the first charters conveying property to St Gallen, which the monks wrote on the donor's behalf, included clauses that told how God would take revenge upon anyone who tried to cheat the monastery out of its land. But during the course of the eighth century, the type of threat changed. New financial penalties were added, made payable to the royal treasury as breaches of the peace, and it was no longer just with God's vengeance that wrongdoers had to reckon but also with 'the anger of the king'.[9]

The protective embrace of Carolingian rule came at a price. Charles the Hammer and his heirs were wary of Irish monasticism, since without the supervision of bishops the monks tended to embrace unusual and even perverse schemes of belief. Complaints at the time included that the monks explained the Bible incorrectly, allowed polygamy, rejected the teaching of the Church Fathers, and (worst of all) held Easter on the wrong date by following the Jewish calendar. Their treatment of

female supernumeraries was also perverse. Walled up in cells with only a small hatch through which to pass food, the women frequently went mad, at which point the monks scrutinized their ravings as divinely inspired visions.

Under the direction of St Boniface, the energetic archbishop of Mainz (in office 745–754), the task of evangelization was taken away from the monasteries and given to bishops. Henceforth, the monks were relieved of all pastoral responsibilities outside the monastery walls and told to dedicate themselves to prayer. Frankish officials followed up by reallocating some of St Gallen's estates to the nearby bishops of Constance and Chur. When St Gallen's abbot protested, he was arrested and exiled to an island on Lake Constance, where he soon died (in 747). It was more than a century before the properties were restored.

King Pippin died in 768 and was succeeded by his two sons, who divided the kingdom of the Franks between them. The elder, Charles, was almost from the first called 'Magnus' or 'Great' since this was a part of the royal style, and it is in the contracted form of Charlemagne that he was later known. Charlemagne immediately contested his brother's rights, and it was only his brother's early death in 771 that prevented them from coming to blows. For more than thirty years, Charlemagne was almost continually at war—in southern France, along the Pyrenees, in Central Europe, and south of the Alps, where he had himself crowned king of Italy in 774. All these places were traditional targets of Frankish expansion. But the scale of Charlemagne's interventions, his success in battle, his doubling of the size of the Frankish kingdom to a million square kilometres, and his ruthless determination mark him out (in one historian's estimation) as a military genius, almost without parallel in European history.[10]

Part of Charlemagne's success lay with the terror he caused. When thwarted, Charlemagne was violent. In his long war against the Saxons east of the Rhine, he deported swathes of the native population, enslaved women and children, and murdered the Saxons' leading men in a bloodbath that allegedly claimed 4,500 lives. The missionaries who

came in the wake of this slaughter brought a warning—either to convert or to face Charlemagne, 'who will invade your lands, plundering and wasting them, exhausting you in battle; he will make you exiles, take your lands or kill you, give your possessions to whomever he likes, and you will be his slaves.' Single-minded in his dedication to war, Charlemagne was the first European ruler to deploy a war elephant. Originally a gift of the caliph of Baghdad, the poor beast perished in 804, during his master's campaign against the Danes.[11]

But behind the terror was organization. In the language of the time, Charlemagne was not only a warrior (*bellator*) but also a commander (*imperator*). He had Roman military manuals read to him, ordered the drawing of maps and march routes, organized supply depots and pontoon bridges, and instructed his generals to use the sun and stars to plot latitude. It was entirely possible for him to accomplish pincer movements over hundreds of kilometres of hostile terrain. All this was sustained by lists—of taxpayers, of saints whose names might be invoked in battle, and of the counts and commissioners (*missi dominici*) who executed his will in the Frankish countryside. One hundred and twenty palaces, each with a great hall and church, were the economic backbone of his rule, for the villages attached to each palace sustained the king's mobile court, household, and armed retinue. Their contents were catalogued too—how many peasant farmers, horses, and goats they had. Charlemagne demanded conformity as well. Whereas the laws of all the Merovingian kings amount in the standard edition to just twenty-five pages of text, Charlemagne's run to several hundred.

Charlemagne never learned to read. We are told that he kept a wax tablet and stylus beneath his throne and tried painfully to inscribe letters in his spare time, but the task was beyond him (rheumatism cannot have helped). Even so, he had books read aloud to him and his amanuenses often wrote in the margins his critical comments on poems and philosophy. His officers also reported directly to him, and some of his injunctions to them survive—'this is what we want,' 'you should do as the law says,' and even 'we've told you this before with our own mouth and you have never understood.' List-making fitted in with the literary

THE EMPIRE OF CHARLEMAGNE 800 CE

North Sea

Danes

Baltic Sea

Frisians   **Saxons**

River   **Wends**

Thuringians

Elbe

River

Rhine

Aachen   ○ Cologne

Tournai ○

○ Frankfurt

Moselle

River   Mainz ○

River   *Main*

Paris ○

Alemanns (Franconia)   Regensburg ○

Danube

River   **BAVARIA**

Lake Constance   ○ Salzburg

St Gallen ○

CARINTHIA

Lake Geneva

○ Milan

Bobbio ○

KINGDOM OF ITALY

Pyrenees

Rome ○

Mediterranean Sea

0	150 mi
0	150 km

Empire of Charlemagne 800 CE

style known at the time as *congeries*, which was the piling on of words and phrases, and Charlemagne's court poets were never less than diligent in enumerating the king's virtues and the heroes with whom he might be compared. Greater than Hercules, Augustus, and Solomon, Charlemagne was (in the words of his top scholar, Alcuin of York) 'the golden light of the world, the salt of the earth, a safe haven, the glory of the Church, and a crown resplendent with jewels'.[12]

Central Europe was Charlemagne's main area of expansion. Although the Franks had eliminated Arianism, Central Europe was still mostly pagan, and so Charlemagne thought it his Christian duty to bring its people to the faith by conquest. But eastward expansion was also a strategic necessity. During Charlemagne's rule, the weight of the Frankish kingdom shifted from the interior of what is modern-day France towards the Rhine and the Moselle, where Charlemagne had his greatest palaces. But to the north lived the Saxons, who stuck by paganism and regularly trespassed into Frankish territory, sacking churches and stirring local resistance to Frankish rule. Charlemagne did not shirk the challenge.

In 771, Charlemagne ransacked the Saxon temple to the god Woden, felling its sacred grove and carrying off its treasure. The Saxon response was to invade immediately the Eder Valley north of Frankfurt. Only the sudden arrival of angels stopped the Saxon advance, but it did nothing to halt the war, which ground on for thirty years. Even so, Charlemagne's Franks had by the 790s pushed the frontier eastwards to the River Elbe. In the wake of their advance came churches, bishops, palaces, tax collectors, and brutal laws that forbade pagan worship on pain of death. But in victory, Charlemagne could afford to be magnanimous. If Saxon chieftains converted to Christianity, Charlemagne spared their lives, even restoring them to power, but only as his servants and with their children held as hostages.

The monks of St Gallen and of its sister monasteries in southern Germany watched all of this. In their annals and histories, they recorded Charlemagne's triumphs not only against the Saxons but also against enemies closer to home—the Bavarians, whose dukes, once

subject to the Merovingian kings, had assumed an independent power; the Wends, who frequently fought beside the Saxons; and the nomadic Avars, who occupied what is now eastern Austria and Hungary. The monks wrote breathlessly, for Charlemagne's ambition and military deployments were, indeed, astonishing: so, for instance—

> 797: Charlemagne was once more in Saxony, whither he ferried ships overland and launched them on the rivers, and he built a castle, which hemmed the Saxons in well enough. And he sent his son Pippin against the Wends, another army against the Avars, and his son Louis to Spain. And he went to Aachen, and once more to Saxony, and wintered there.

The staccato itemization of campaigns was followed three years later by the following terse note, which records a turning point in European history—

> 800: Charlemagne held court in Mainz; from there, he went to Italy and arrived in Rome, where he was made emperor.[13]

The coronation of Charlemagne as emperor was performed by Pope Leo III, in St Peter's in Rome, on Christmas Day 800. We may safely disregard the comment by Charlemagne's earliest biographer that the crowning came as an unwelcome surprise to Charlemagne as well as the speculation that had he not had arthritis the king might have somehow dodged the pope as he brought the diadem to him. Negotiations over the coronation had been proceeding for several years and Charlemagne had taken his daughters to St Peter's to see the event.

Plainly though, the coronation meant different things to people at the time. For the pope, it signified the appointment of a new protector, in which respect it helped that Charlemagne's soldiers had recently rescued the unpopular pope from a vengeful mob in Rome. For the main Byzantine commentator of the time, who viewed the Byzantine Empire as Rome's true successor, the coronation was an absurdity, and the

ceremony of anointing the new emperor carried out so inexpertly that his robes were drenched with oil. For Charlemagne's advisers, it signalled the rebirth of the Roman Empire and the foundation of a new Christian Europe under Frankish leadership—'renewal', 're-making', 're-creation', and 'renovation of the Roman Empire' were the words Charlemagne's scribes used in letters and on seals to describe the significance of their master's new title.[14]

Charlemagne never disclosed his own thoughts on the matter. But he plainly had an elevated view of his own kingship, being the first European ruler to use the formula *Dei gratia* (by grace of God) as part of the royal style. He also looked to Roman antiquity for inspiration, hauling Roman columns and stonework to Aachen as furniture for his palace and de facto capital—he was first buried in a second-century marble sarcophagus that rather randomly bore a relief of Pluto ravishing Proserpina. The polygonal chapel at Aachen was also modelled on a Roman design. But empire made sense too. By his conquests, Charlemagne had become a king three times over—king of the Franks, king of Italy, and, although never crowned as such, king of the Saxons. The imperial office brought together the separate realms of Franks, Lombards, and Germans in a new superstructure, headed by a super-monarch with a super title.[15]

Rules, writing, and Roman—the three Rs embodied Charlemagne's cultural legacy, but it was not only disseminated by the palace at Aachen and Charlemagne's team of churchmen and advisers. The so-called Carolingian Renaissance was polycentric and the monasteries were its hubs. St Gallen was in the forefront of rulemaking—laying down guidelines for musical notation, for the education of the young, and for Latin grammar and script. It was a literate community which insisted that its business be conducted in writing according to a standard format and that all its important records be stored in a dedicated archive with numbered drawers. Its monks were also at the forefront of preserving classical Roman texts, copying and crosschecking for errors some of the earliest editions of Caesar, Tacitus, Livy, Ovid, and Horace, and depositing their finished works in the monastery library.[16]

Charlemagne's courtiers extolled him as a poet-king, a second David, an exemplar of piety and moral worth. But Charlemagne never lived up to the grand images that others thrust upon him. Despite the penance he prescribed for violating God's commands, he kept concubines and was unsparing in his sexual quests. Even his daughters seem to have shared his bed and borne him children. On his death, few mourned him and there is only one contemporary lament of his passing. Instead, writers told of the terror he had unleashed, rehearsed how an angel had once presented Charlemagne with a scroll that announced his secret vice, and spoke of a visionary that had seen the emperor suffering in the afterworld, with 'his privies being gnawed at by some type of animal'. It was only later that Charlemagne's reputation recovered, when publicists made him into a paragon of moral and martial worth to set against the shortcomings of his successors.[17]

Whatever his personal failings, it was under Charlemagne that the Roman Empire was reinaugurated in Europe. For the next thousand years, there would be a Roman emperor in the west, governing a large chunk of Central Europe. There would be gaps in the succession, and the title of 'Holy' would later be added to 'Roman Empire'. What 'Roman' and 'empire' meant would vary over time as much as the significance of Charlemagne's coronation differed in the minds of contemporaries. Because the idea of empire was never defined at the moment of its birth, later generations could bend its meaning to fit in with their own fantasies and programmes. So, over time the renewed Roman Empire might stand for a united Christian Europe, a mission to defend the Catholic Church and convert the faithless, a stepping stone to the Last Judgment, a worldwide scheme of conquest, a means of bringing the whole earth into harmonious concordance with God's grace, or just another way of saying Germany. All of these ideas would be played out in the millennium that followed Charlemagne's coronation, and Central Europe would be their stage.

CHAPTER 3

Avars and Slavs: Destruction and Conversion

WEST OF THE RHINE, CHARLEMAGNE'S EMPIRE MOSTLY comprised the German tribes that either he or his Frankish predecessors had conquered—Alemanns in what is now southwestern Germany, because of which the French name for Germany is *Allemagne*; north of them, Thuringians, Frisians, and Saxons; and in the east, Bavarians. In the rest of Central Europe, Frankish influence was less pronounced and exercised indirectly through ceremonies when local chieftains paid homage, attending the Frankish ruler's court with gifts and tribute. Even so, there are some signs of Frankish settlement in areas otherwise remote from the centres of Frankish power. Byzantine accounts knew the region adjoining the Lower Danube in what is now northern Serbia as Frankochorion, pointing to some sort of Frankish presence there, and we know of confrontations between Franks and Bulgarians close to the western edge of Transylvania.[1]

East of the region of German settlement (and in places overlapping with it) lived the Slavs. By the seventh century, the Slavs occupied the vast space between the Baltic and the Aegean Sea, from what is now the southeastern corner of Denmark to the steppes and including most of the Balkans. The origin of the Slavs is entirely mysterious, for they are not mentioned by writers much before they are found occupying almost the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. One of the earliest accounts (550 CE) describes them as 'very populous' and occupying 'a great expanse of land' in what is now southern Poland. How the Slavs came there without anyone noticing cannot easily be explained.[2]

Historians have done their best with ambiguous archaeological remains and linguistic fragments. Because the early Slavs borrowed

from German their name for beech tree, historians once hunted for a place where beech trees were missing and so made the Pripet Marshes that lie between modern-day Kyiv and Minsk the Slavs' original starting point. Alternatively, because the early Slavs were sometimes known as Wends, they were thought to be identical with the Venedi, whom Roman geographers had described living on the Baltic shore in the first and second centuries CE. Neither theory of Slavonic (or Slavic) origins now carries much scholarly weight, although historical atlases have been slow to catch up. Suffice it to say that early accounts of the Slavs put them between the Upper Vistula, the Lower Danube, and the Dnieper Rivers—a region large enough to accommodate most speculation. But just to confuse matters, some DNA research suggests a continuous Slavonic presence in what is now western Poland, thus implying that the Slavs did not migrate to Central Europe from anywhere further east but had been living in part of it all the time.[3]

Estimating population densities in the early Middle Ages is a fool's game, but sometimes the jester's cap is the only headwear on offer. Putting guesstimates together suggests that the eastern part of Central Europe (nowadays including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia) had a population density in the first millennium of less than one person per square kilometre. By contrast, the area of modern-day Germany had perhaps as many as eight per square kilometre. We can double, halve, or treble the figures, but the implication amounts to the same—much of the eastern part of Central Europe was sparsely populated, and it would not take the movement of many people to change its complexion entirely. Instead of great waves of peoples rippling across Central Europe, it is probably more sensible to think of thinner, but equally decisive, population flows.[4]

By the end of the sixth century, Slavs predominated in the parts of Central Europe previously vacated by the Germans and Goths. Contemporary commentators all described the Slavs as made up of small tribes practising a primitive agriculture, living in squalid huts in the forests for safety, and having only the most primitive weapons—short

spears, unwieldy swords, and poison arrows. In combat, we are told, they were disorganized, being unable to fight in close order, and they preferred—when not hiding in the woods—to run at the enemy in a disorganized mass. At the beginning of the eighth century, a band of Slav warriors near Friuli defended itself, according to one account, 'more with stones and axes than with weapons of war'.[5]

Unsophisticated militarily and politically disunited, the Slavs fell prey to more organized groups. One of these was led by a Frankish adventurer called Samo, who in the first half of the seventh century carved out a duchy that may have reached from modern-day Slovenia to southern Poland. Samo was a merchant and his principal cargo was slaves. It was during the seventh century that the names *Slav* and *slave* were first treated as synonymous both in Europe and in the Middle East. (The name *Slav* derives from *slovo*, or 'word', meaning 'the people who speak'.) Many male Slav slaves went to the castration factories of Lyons, Venice, and Verdun where they were prepared for onward consignment, to be sold as eunuchs. Doubtless some of the female slaves fed Samo's appetite for marriage and procreation—he had at least twelve wives and is said to have fathered twenty-two sons and fifteen daughters.[6]

Notwithstanding Samo's fecundity, his slave state did not outlive his death in 658. The Avar kingdom in Central Europe proved more enduring. Avar origins are as mysterious as Slav, although in the case of the Avars we do not even know what language they spoke. They were, like the Huns, pastoral nomads and stockbreeders from the steppe land who had been displaced and forced westwards, probably from Transoxiana in Central Asia. From the late sixth to the late eighth century, the Avars occupied the old Roman province of Pannonia and the neighbouring Hungarian Plain, but their influence also extended both westwards and southwards, into what is now Austria and eastern Bavaria, Transylvania, and the western Balkans. The Byzantine emperors relied for defence on a network of castles and walls reaching south of the Lower Danube, but the Avars still broke through. In their wake, tens of thousands of Slavs pushed into the Balkan peninsula, fundamentally

changing its linguistic landscape. By the mid-seventh century, Thessaloniki was a mainly Slav-speaking city.

The Avars provided political organization. The disparate Slavonic tribes began to coalesce into larger, more stable groups. The Avar state was a tribute state, which survived by amassing booty through war raids, ransoms, and tribute. In the late sixth and early seventh centuries alone, the Byzantine emperor paid over to the Avars more than six million gold coins. The loot was then distributed to chieftains and headmen to keep them loyal. But the growing power of the Franks limited raiding opportunities in the west, while in the south a new state, populated by Slavs but led by an elite of former steppe nomads called Bulgars, prevented movement into the Balkans.

Deprived of booty, the power of the Avar chieftains or khans withered. In the mid-eighth century, the Bavarian dukes, who paid only a nominal allegiance to the Frankish ruler, pressed upon the Avars from the east and supported a rebellion among their Slavonic subjects in what is now northern Slovenia and southern Austria but which was then called Carantania. In the aftermath of the Bavarian victory, Irish monks from Salzburg set about the conversion of the Slavs in this corner of Central Europe. But Charlemagne resented the independence of Bavaria's rulers. Once he had made good his power in the west, Charlemagne crushed the Bavarians, condemning the last of their ducal line to death and only sparing him when he became a monk.

Now it was Charlemagne who led the war against the Avars in a series of campaigns during the 790s. The Avars had reinforced their land with elaborate circles of earthworks, brushwood, and logs, but Charlemagne's troops punched through these and captured what was left of their treasure. As one monk reported from St Gallen, 'All the booty of the Avars, which Charlemagne found in Pannonia, he divided most liberally among the bishoprics and the monasteries.' Evidently, not all of it went to the Church, for another account tells of how Avar loot transformed the fortunes of the Frankish chieftains and warriors, who 'until that time had seemed almost paupers'. Charlemagne not only took the Avars' gold but also destroyed their leading men. A few

became his vassals, ruling in his name over shadowy dukedoms, but otherwise we are told 'the whole nobility of the Avars perished and all their glory ended.' After more than two centuries' sojourn in Pannonia, the Avars simply disappeared from the historical record. As an old Russian saying once put it, 'They have perished like the Avars.'[7]

The list of Central Europe's invaders and occupiers between the fifth and the ninth century is a long one—Huns, Ostrogoths, Slavs, Avars, Samo's slavers, Bavarians, and Franks. But among these the Avars were not just one in a line of conquerors who came and went, leaving little trace. They were predatory, but to exploit their subject peoples they marshalled them into groups and consolidated them—perhaps, after all, there is not so much difference between shepherding flocks and shepherding peoples. The Avars brought innovations too. The stirrup was their contribution to technology in Europe, and with it the means of riding against the enemy at full tilt without being tossed off on impact. Less happily, the Avars also brought to Europe a new strain of leprosy that was considerably more virulent than its predecessors. Following the Avars' arrival in Central Europe, as many as a quarter of male skeletons excavated in parts of the region show evidence of infection from leprosy. As well as its monastery, school, and scriptorium, the abbey of St Gallen also had a *leprosarium*, or hospital for lepers, founded at some point in the eighth century.[8]

Perhaps on account of their background as nomads, the Avars prized portable works of art. In all of continental Europe, the greatest find from the first millennium is surely theirs—the treasure unearthed in 1799 at Sânnicolau Mare (Nagyszentmiklós), which lies today on the Romanian side of the border with Hungary and is otherwise famous as the birthplace of the composer Béla Bartók. Made in the eighth century for a nameless Avar chieftain, the hoard comprises twenty-three gold vessels—tureens, bowls, and ewers, each ornately engraved with images and pattern work. The repertoire of designs draws on late Roman and Byzantine motifs, Catholic religious iconography, and Central Asian and Persian motifs, including lions, sea griffins, and leopards.

Several inscriptions are written in Greek letters but an unknown language. Only two words are decipherable—'zoipan', or *župan*, which is Slavonic for 'chieftain', and 'Boila', which is a common enough Turkic word, usually translated as 'noble', although it may also be a proper name. The Sânnicolau Mare hoard bears witness not only to the wealth of the Avars but also to their curiously hybrid culture, with its mix of Asiatic and Slavonic languages and fusion of Byzantine, Oriental, and continental European designs. Forgotten in the ebb and flow of conquest, the Avars deserve to be better known.[9]

Slavonic dukedoms replaced the Avar khanate, forming a patchwork along either side of the Danube. But the big players in the region were the Franks of Charlemagne and his successors and, further east, the Bulgarians whose Bulgar chieftains pressed into Transylvania and along the waterways of the Hungarian Plain with the aim of capturing the salt mines and trade routes. In 822, envoys from half a dozen Slavonic tribes came to Frankfurt bearing gifts for Charlemagne's son and successor Louis the Pious and asking for help against the Bulgarians. Four years later, Louis and the Bulgarian Khan Omurtag agreed on a common border between their two realms that ran through the Hungarian Plain, after which Louis organized the border region into marchlands. It was the first major international partition of Central Europe's space.[10]

North of Pannonia and the Hungarian Plain lay a confusing medley of Slavonic groups and statelets. Around the year 900, a nameless monk known to historians as 'the Bavarian Geographer' compiled a list of some sixty peoples in Central Europe, including many who belonged to these early political formations, and he counted the fortified places each had. A few of the tribes on his list had names that would endure—Bohemians, Moravians, Sorbs, and so on. But the majority of names are the only relic of shadowy principalities that rose and fell without leaving any trace—'The Thadesians with more than two hundred forts, the Goplans who have four hundred forts or more, the Zeurians with three hundred and twenty-five forts,' and so on. We

do not know what happened to these people or where they lived, and their so-called forts were probably no more than hilltops circled with earthen walls. It was these minor political groupings in Central Europe that now became targets of Frankish expansion and evangelization.[11]

The contest, however, was not just between Christianity and paganism. There were rival Christianities—the Catholicism of Rome and the Orthodoxy of Constantinople, both of which were interested in the spiritual colonization of Central Europe but increasingly estranged. And there were rival bishops, too, each anxious to implant their priests and to enlarge the extent and prestige of their dioceses. So, the archbishops of Mainz in the Rhineland competed for souls and patronage with the missionary Bavarian sees of Salzburg, Regensburg, and Passau, with Würzburg in Franconia, and in the tenth century with the archbishops of Magdeburg in Saxony. The popes in Rome also watched the growing influence of the independent-minded German bishops with alarm and worked to hinder their endeavours. Conversion was never only about *to what* but also *to which* of a variety of religious competitors.

The religious battleground was Pannonia and the rim of the Carpathian Mountains to the north. In the aftermath of the Avars' defeat, new Slavonic rulers carved out semi-independent principalities. We know of at least four of these, reaching from the shelter of the Little Carpathians north of modern-day Bratislava to what is now Croatia on the Adriatic coast, where corsairs were busy becoming princes. Some of these early formations were of Avar origin, set up to facilitate tribute payment, but others were Frankish marcher lordships, under Slavonic leadership. Historians seek to plot their location on maps, but they are better thought of more as dukedoms than as duchies—as groups of people who acknowledged an overlord and duke, and not as defined spaces with fixed borders.

During the first decades of the ninth century, missionaries described at the time as 'Italians, Greeks, and Germans', were active among the Slavs of Pannonia and the northern Carpathians. Among these, the rival sees of Passau and Salzburg took the lead, but Passau

won an early advantage when in the 830s its protégé, Mojmir, overthrew Salzburg's man, Pribina, and seized his lands, which lay around Nitra, now in western Slovakia. Mojmir called himself Duke of the Moravians, and his power base seems to have lain in what is now the eastern part of the Czech Republic, which is still called Moravia today. Mojmir was succeeded in 846 by his nephew Rastislav, who was plainly dissatisfied with Passau's priests. Accounts tell of how they had betrayed their mission, preaching that 'Beneath the ground live people with huge heads; and all reptiles are the creation of the devil, and if someone kills a snake, they will be absolved of nine sins.' But politics also had something to do with it, since the German clergy stood close to the Frankish bishops and promoted their interests.[12]

In 862 Rastislav made an extraordinary move. He sent an embassy to Constantinople to ask the Byzantine emperor to send him priests, 'who can explain to us in our own language the true Christian faith'. But there was a hint in Rastislav's overture that something more was afoot—'so that other countries which look to us might emulate us'. At this time, Constantinople and Rome were sparring over Bulgaria and whether it should be subject to the Byzantine patriarch or to the pope. Rastislav was effectively promising to bring his people over from the Catholicism of Rome to the Orthodoxy of Byzantium, and he knew that by opting for one side or the other he could tilt the religious balance in the Balkans.[13]

In Constantinople, Emperor Michael III understood what Rastislav meant and he knew just the man to lead the expedition: St Cyril of Thessaloniki. (In fact, St Cyril's baptismal name was Constantine, and he chose to be called Cyril only on his deathbed, when he became a monk, but he is generally known as Cyril.) Cyril had proven credentials in the mission field, having preached to both Muslims and Jews in the Middle East and the Caucasus. Like his brother Methodius, an abbot on Mount Olympus and provincial administrator, he was a thoroughly seasoned diplomat. Cyril had recently won plaudits in Constantinople for identifying a chalice as belonging to the time of the Old Testament King Solomon on the basis of its inscription of

'999 BC' (Before Christ). Cleverly, too, having recovered under divine direction the body of the first-century pope and saint Clement, Cyril had kept the saint's body parts as a bank of relics to exchange for political favours.

Cyril and Methodius already knew Slavonic from living in Thessaloniki, and we must imagine that at this time the Slavonic spoken in the Balkans was still close to the language used by Rastislav's subjects. Cyril accordingly devised an alphabet whereby Slavonic might be written down as the first step to producing a Bible, liturgy, and manuals of religious instruction. This alphabet, which was later called Glagolitic, roughly meaning something to be spoken, was partly based on Greek lowercase letters with additional sounds rendered in Syriac, Hebrew, and possibly Armenian characters. The individual letters, of which there were no fewer than forty-one, were further ornamented with religious symbols—a circle standing for eternity, a triangle for the Trinity, and so on. It was not an easy script to master.

Cyril and Methodius's mission, which reached Moravia in 863, was guaranteed to face hurdles, for too much rested on Rastislav, and the chieftain's political position was never secure. He was eventually overthrown in 870, following a bungled attempt to strangle his main rival. But the two brothers found an unexpected ally in Pope Adrian II (ruled 867–872). Pope Adrian approved the mission and religious texts translated into Slavonic with the Glagolitic alphabet, made Methodius bishop of the Slavs of Moravia and Pannonia, and received in return what was left of St Clement's corpse. Adrian plainly intended to turn Methodius into his own creature. But, upon returning to Moravia in 870, Methodius was promptly arrested by the new pro-Frankish ruler of Moravia, Svatopluk, who handed him over to trial and imprisonment by his ecclesiastical enemies on the grounds of usurping episcopal authority. (Cyril had meanwhile died, in 869.)[14]

We do not know whether papal pressure or a change in political direction prompted the rapprochement between Methodius and Svatopluk which followed the saint's release from confinement in 873.

For the next dozen years, Methodius trained priests in the Slavonic liturgy, translated Greek religious texts into Glagolitic, and celebrated the mass in Latin, Greek, and Slavonic. He also sent out clergy into the mission field, preaching in Bohemia and what is now southern Poland. But the Frankish clergy in Svatopluk's court never ceased to mount objections to Methodius's presence, accusing him of heresy for delivering the mass in Slavonic and not in Latin. His life ended in 885 amidst turmoil—his bitter excommunication of his adversaries, a revised papal verdict that banned celebration of the mass in Slavonic, and shortly after his death, Svatopluk's expulsion of Methodius's followers from Moravia.

Cyril and Methodius's legacy endured. The Orthodox Church headed by the patriarch of Constantinople embraced their linguistic innovations. The outward form of Church Slavonic changed, modified by the saints' students into the more manageable alphabet based on Greek uppercase letters that, in Cyril's honour, is still known as Cyrillic. It was with this alphabet that the Serbs, Russians, and Bulgarians were eventually educated in Christian doctrine and brought to knowledge the Christian faith. But in Central Europe, Latin prevailed as the language of the liturgy and of church services, and with it the Catholic faith that looked to Rome. Only in Dalmatia, a part of Croatia, did the Slavonic mass survive. But except as a curiosity, the Slavonic mass and adherence to the Orthodox faith failed in Central Europe. So, the Czech composer Janáček's eerie 'Glagolitic Mass', first performed in Brno in Moravia in 1926, is thoroughly Catholic in its setting and composition—it just happens to be sung in a mix of old Slavonic languages.[15]

The Catholic mission would continue to prosper in Central Europe. Bohemia and Croatia were brought into the Catholic fold in the ninth century, and Poland and Hungary in the century after. In all these countries, Latin became the language of the mass and of divine worship. Because the Catholic clergy provided most clerks, administrators, and teachers, the Latin language also became the language of

government, legislation, literature, and learning, right through to the eighteenth century. By contrast, in Russia and most of the Balkans, it was the Orthodox religion and the Slavonic liturgy that flourished, and with them a quite different religious culture and intellectual landscape. In time, the use of the vernacular in church services would produce national churches that intensified religious allegiances by their patriotic appeal—a Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, and so on.

At the same time, Orthodoxy was founded on quite different principles to the Catholic faith of Rome. Owing to the primacy of the Greek language, the Orthodox intellectual tradition diverged from Latin-based Roman Catholicism, focusing on ancient Greek metaphysics, the writings of the early Greek Fathers (from the first centuries CE), and the critical interpretation of biblical and Greek religious texts. The newly converted Slavs joined in this inheritance, mediated through Greek texts translated into Church Slavonic. They also shared with their Greek counterparts a distrust of Catholic Christianity, partly arising from different theological stresses, but also fuelled by a sense of superiority that regarded users of Latin not only as 'men of a different language' but even as 'men of another race'.[16]

These different religious and cultural trajectories were decisive in Central Europe's development. The Orthodox religion emerged out of the Byzantine Empire, whose rulers governed with an almost unlimited power as both the servant and image of God. Orthodoxy embraced this ideal, emphasizing in its rituals and ceremony the authority of the monarch, whose power came directly from God. In Byzantium, representative institutions and assemblies were missing, for with an all-powerful sovereign there was simply no room for them.

Catholic and Western scholars often describe Orthodox Christianity as conservative, insular, and traditional, whereas in reality it was just different. But for Central Europe this difference mattered. Having been brought into the fold of the Catholic Church, Central Europe would share in the fruits of its civilization, experiencing the same impulses and movements that guided Catholic and, later, Protestant Europe.

Universities, parliaments, the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment were not missing in Orthodox Europe, but they only appeared there in shadowy and attenuated forms. By embracing Catholicism and rejecting Orthodoxy, Central Europe was drawn culturally westwards. Russia and the Balkans went off in a quite different direction. Notwithstanding the common origin of the Slavs and their related languages, the Slavonic world was split in two.

The Return of the Huns, Slave States, and the Shaping of Central Europe

THE EARLIEST HISTORIES COMPOSED IN CENTRAL EUROPE considered its countries as homes gifted by God to the peoples who lived in them. Medieval chroniclers spoke of their own people as wandering across the face of the earth until guided by a patriarch, who like the Old Testament Moses led them to the place promised by the Almighty and installed their first rulers. The land given them was invariably abundant in all things, with plentiful pastures, clear streams, and riverbanks studded with gems. Variations on this theme added in how the chronicler's people had come from Troy or once fought alongside Alexander the Great, and writers wove in fabulous etymologies, tricky prophetesses, and hostile dragons. Even so, the presumptions of the earliest chroniclers were largely the same. The nations they described had always existed and providence had ordained the territories they would occupy and their earliest leaders. Rulership, people, and land converged as part of a divine plan.[1]

In reality, boundaries were fluid, rulership was contested, and what constituted a people was still uncertain. The prevailing pattern was one of consolidation, disintegration, and the reassembling of the parts into entirely new configurations of territory, people, and power. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, Central Europe was repeatedly pulled apart, reorganized, and then dismantled again. Even at the time, contemporaries lamented the many kinglets that sprang uninvited from the bowels of the earth (intestinal analogies were much the fashion), and how 'all were driven by greed, and sought only their own advantage.' Gradually, however, the pieces stabilized. The map of

Central Europe round about 850 shows a medley of minor principalities and dukedoms—some with familiar names, but likely as not in unusual places. A century and a half later, the lines and labels are more recognizable and the political boundaries more fixed.[2]

The Frankish Empire was the first great power to fall apart and be rebuilt. Its disintegration began almost immediately after Charlemagne's death. Charlemagne's sole surviving heir was Louis, known even in his own lifetime as 'the Pious' (ruled 814–840). It was a sobriquet that he chose, signing himself 'Louis the most pious emperor'. But at the time piousness had nothing to do with saintliness. Instead, it meant a readiness to set aside personal interests, friends, and family for the sake of the public good. Louis was conspicuous in not doing this. Although Louis had already been crowned co-emperor, upon hearing of his father's death in 814 he raced to his father's old palace in Aachen to be crowned there again—a third coronation by the pope in Rheims followed the next year. Despite these grand ceremonies, contemporary commentators were swift to point out that Louis had little of his father in him, that 'he never showed his white teeth in a smile', and foretold that he would squander his inheritance.[3]

Following Frankish tradition, Louis planned that the Frankish Empire should be divided after his death among his three sons. But he treated his legacy like a caricature aunt rewriting her will, except that the consequences were bloodier. In the partition that he devised in 817, he left out his nephew, whom Charlemagne had already made king of Italy, so the nephew promptly rebelled. Louis ordered him blinded, but the punishment was botched and the nephew left to die in agony. Then, upon the death of his first wife, Louis took a second, whom he chose at a beauty pageant of potential spouses.

Louis's new wife, Judith of Bavaria, had a reputation for promiscuous living and consorting with sorcerers. In 823 she threw Frankish politics into turmoil by bearing Louis a son, which meant that the scheme of succession had to be adjusted. It did not help that the son's paternity was in doubt. Since the elder three sons must lose out if a dubious fourth was added to the arrangement, they went to war