

# Bloch

Feudal Society

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# Feudal Society



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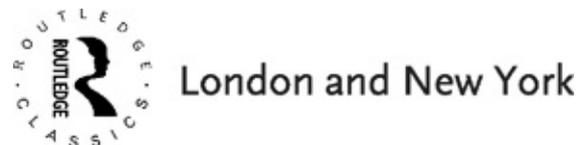
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Bloch

# Feudal Society

Translated from the French  
by L.A. Manyon

With a foreword by Geoffrey Koziol



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# FOREWORD TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION GEOFFREY KOZIOL

Why read a work of history written over seventy years ago? Because the historian was important. Marc Bloch was certainly that. He wrote three works of mature historical scholarship, each very different in subject matter and source material but each strikingly innovative. *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924) was a study of the belief that the kings of France and England could heal the disease known as scrofula by their mere touch. Here Bloch displayed two interests that became characteristic of his work: the social power of non-rational beliefs and the particular power of secondary beliefs and practices generated within the interstices of orthodoxies. *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (1931) traced the development of different agrarian regimes in France, though the description hardly does the book justice. Using sources uncustomary for historians (including old maps and etymologies), Bloch showed that the shape of agricultural fields had taken very different forms over the course of French history and that the different forms were functions of a web of complexly interacting factors—plowing technologies, soil characteristics, and regimes of lordship—which in turn led to widely divergent social and political effects of great importance; one form leading to cohesive peasant communities, the other working against their formation. As for *La Société féodale* (1939–40), it is not really a history at all. Rather, it is a virtuoso analysis of the entire fabric of medieval culture, in which family ties, religious beliefs, political institutions and economic imperatives are all woven into a multi-faceted yet coherent tapestry of a living, changing human society. Nor was Bloch only a writer of scholarly histories. At his death he left chapters of an unfinished work later published as *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou Métier d'historien* (1949). Here Bloch begins with a question once posed by his son: “Papa, tell me, what is the use of history?” To his credit, Bloch took the question seriously. His book’s short length and simple style are deceptive: it can take years of experience teaching and writing history before one realizes how profound it is. Finally, with Lucien Febvre he was co-founder and co-editor of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, and for many years he and Febvre were its principal contributors. By the 1960s, now renamed *Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, it had become the single most influential journal in the practice of history.

So Bloch was an important historian and *Feudal Society* was his most comprehensive history. Yet if we are honest with ourselves, that is probably not why we still read it. We read it because of what he would have regarded as his acts of citizenship. Like many secularized Jews of his generation, Bloch believed passionately in the importance of the French Third Republic, not its politics as practiced but the liberal ideals that had led to its foundation—including the secularity of government and the government’s duty to protect the rights of individuals. In 1940, after the Germans had overrun the north of France and Bloch had fled to Montpellier in the south, he wrote down a record of his experiences as a front-line officer at the outbreak of the war: *L'Étrange défaite*. Here Bloch ceased being a historian reading witnesses of the past and became a witness in a courtroom of the future whose judge would be history. He used the failure of the Third Republic and the French collapse of 1940 to lambast the leaders of society, its generals, politicians, captains of industry, but also its educators. And among educators he criticized historians, in particular, for being so wedded to a belief in the grandeur of French history that they could not see how much present realities travestied those beliefs, making the histories themselves dangerous. *Strange Defeat* is a French liberal’s incrimination

of nationalism and nationalist histories but also, more broadly, an incrimination of historians who teach history as their politics want it to be, not as it was. And Bloch practiced the citizenship he preached. In 1943 he joined the French Resistance in Lyon and used his skills in communication to help bring the different resistance groups together. In 1944 he was captured and executed, machine-gunned down in a field along with twenty-seven others. If we are honest, this is why we read Marc Bloch: because he was a hero. His life and death are proof to historians that scholarship and heroism are not mutually exclusive, that done well, scholarship can demand heroism.

All this is perhaps why we should read a life of Marc Bloch, or his letters, or *Strange Defeat* itself. Is it a reason to read *Feudal Society*? Bloch himself would surely have denied it. For Bloch did not write history as a partisan, a philosopher, or a social critic. He wrote as a scientist. This, in fact, is one of the reasons he was such an important historian: Bloch believed that the practice of history had become more scientific. His was not the simple positivist historical science in which many nineteenth-century historians had believed, a science of hard facts and chains of cause and effect (thought to lead to one or another modern nation-state regarded as the evolutionary triumph of history). His was the much more complex science, exactly contemporary to Bloch, of Einstein and Heisenberg, of relativity and probability, where electricity and magnetism had become the same thing seen differently and the only constant was the speed of light. His was also the age of new social sciences, like Émile Durkheim's sociology and John Maynard Keynes' economics. Bloch was fully aware of these changes and thought endlessly about what they meant for the practice of history. He believed that Durkheimian sociology was inherently flawed by its rejection of history and that economics should cultivate a strong historical component. But he also believed that history had to become a true social science. What would make it so? For Bloch, a scientific history would be a history of social and material forces rather than of great events and great men. It would be a history of groups and collectivities rather than of states and nations. It would be a history that posed and solved historical problems rather than one that told exemplary stories of past heroes and villains. It would also be a comparative history, one that progressively honed the definition of terms and the formulation of problems through the systematic interrogation of similarities and differences across social formations. The evidence of Bloch's scientific program of history is everywhere in *Feudal Society*: in his attention to demographics; in his constant desire to look not at what happened but at the reasons it happened; in his care to define the characteristics of European "feudalism" and then to use the definition to pose questions about Japanese feudalism. Above all, Bloch's program is visible in his subordination of the history of individual kingdoms to a history of societies; for the old history had been a history of nations because it was a history in the service of nationalism. It had therefore been less scientific history than historical mythology, whose falseness had been proven in the failures Bloch chronicled in *Strange Defeat*. If there were to be any hope for Europe, for peace, for the rights of individuals, it would have to be found in a history that disowned the historical mythologies of nations.

In some respects Bloch was hugely successful. The practice of history did become more "scientific" in just the ways he had hoped. Research is far more systematic. Terminology is more precise. Sources are analyzed and contextualized more probingly. As Bloch championed the application of new techniques to old problems, so his successors followed his lead. Archaeology especially has continued to transform our understanding of early medieval migrations, settlement patterns, ethnicity, disease, diet, gender, commerce and power. However, as a result of all this work Bloch's own history has been superseded. He himself anticipated that this would happen and looked forward to it, since it would mean that the study of history had become a science capable of falsifying poor explanations and generating better, more comprehensive ones. But this makes reading *Feudal Society* today problematic, for it no longer stands as an accurate account of the period. No good medieval historian

writing today would make vassalage a key to understanding medieval society: vassals and fiefs simply were not all that important. The invasions of Vikings and Magyars are no longer seen as the generative cataclysms Bloch thought they were. No one today has such a dismal view of the economy of Bloch's "first feudal age." Correspondingly, few believe that a "second feudal age" began with a sudden, all-transforming revolution in commerce, agriculture, and social relations. Although most specialists still agree that insult and injury were felt to demand vengeance, no one sees vengeance giving rise to long-term feuds fought between extensive kindreds. What feuding there was is now much more likely to be regarded as an adjunct to the jurisdiction of courts rather than a rejection of it; nor do historians now regard the prevalence of mediation and arbitration as entirely the consequence of weak state power, nor do they see violence as unremitting and unrestrained. Christianity and the church would play a much larger and more constructive role in any account written today of lay beliefs and practices. Indeed, Bloch's reconstruction of the evolution of chivalric dubbing would be almost completely reversed, with churches initiating the practice (for their own warriors). No one today would write the history of medieval culture so purely limited to a western Europe so largely dominated by French sources. No one would so completely ignore women. No one would use the kinds of phrases that remind us that Bloch's assumptions were still those of Europe's long nineteenth century: "true savages," "untutored minds," "the most vital elements in the nation." One should not read *Feudal Society* and think that its depictions represent our current understanding of western European culture between the ninth and twelfth centuries.

Admittedly, Bloch got much right—a testimony to his intelligence and to his vast reading of the most advanced scholarship (in the course of his career he reviewed some thousand books). He already understood the long-term consequences of Charlemagne's destruction of the Avar kingdom and the importance of the Dnieper as a trade route between Scandinavia and Byzantium. He rightly criticized the notion of an early medieval closed economy. His analysis of medieval law as embedded in social relations was far in advance of his French and British contemporaries (though strikingly duplicated by his German contemporary Otto Brunner, with whom Bloch otherwise had nothing in common). He correctly saw that the unstable identity of early medieval kindreds made them unsuitable as a basis for social order and that in consequence lordship played the organizing role that kinship did in other societies. He knew that urban communes were rooted in the kinds of horizontal oaths that had typified earlier peace-guilds and the Peace of God. He knew that the growing power of twelfth-century kings was only an extreme manifestation of a broader tendency towards the concentration of authority. It is remarkable that Bloch got so much right. And it is remarkable that historians still work so much according to scholarly principles he helped establish. Yet to read Bloch because he was at the origins of much current historical practice is still to do him a disservice, because Bloch himself abhorred what he called "the Idol of Origins." He might be flattered that we still read him, but he might also be dismayed.

Why, then, should we still read *Feudal Society*? Perhaps we should broaden the question: why do we read any old historians? Why do we read Thucydides, Tacitus, Bede, Gibbon, or Toqueville? We read them because they were great stylists who can teach us how to write; because they were powerful minds whose histories are really vehicles for debates about the nature of government, power, reason, or the logic of history itself; because they were such good writers possessed of such powerful minds that even though their histories are now known to be false, partisan or seriously incomplete, they still seem utterly convincing and coherent; the only histories that could possibly be written. We read them partly as sources for the pasts about which they wrote, but also as witnesses to the presents in which they wrote. For these reasons, we might also still read *Feudal Society*. For Bloch was a wonderful stylist, formal yet conversational, conversational yet precise, and he had a knack for moving between

the general and the particular and for illustrating a broad assertion with the perfect detail. We can read him as a witness to a particular moment in which one of the most horrendous passages in European history generated a complete rethinking of both history and the writing of history, its effects still with us today. We can read him because he wrote such a compelling account of medieval society that even today it seems like it should be true even when we know it is not. How is that possible? And why is that in the seventy years since the publication of *Feudal Society*, no one has succeeded in writing history of medieval society that is half so compelling?

# INTRODUCTION

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## GENERAL SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

ONLY within the last two centuries or so could the words “Feudal Society”, as the title of a book, have conveyed an idea of what the book was about. Yet the adjective itself is a very old one. In its Latin form, *feodalis*, it dates from the Middle Ages. The French noun *féodalité*, feudalism, though of more recent origin, goes back at least to the seventeenth century. But for a long time both these words were used only in a narrowly legal sense. The fief (*feodum*) was, as we shall see, a form of real property and *féodal* was therefore understood as meaning “that which concerns the fief” (this was how the French Academy defined it); and *féodalité* might mean either “the quality peculiar to a fief” or the obligations incident to such tenure. The French lexicographer, Richelet, in 1630, described these terms as “lawyers’ jargon”—not, be it noted, historians’ jargon. When did it first occur to anyone to enlarge their meaning so as to designate a state of society? *Gouvernement féodal* and *féodalité* are used in this sense in the *Lettres Historiques sur les Parlemens*, published in 1727, five years after the death of their author, the Comte de Boulainvilliers.<sup>1</sup> This is the earliest example that I could find, after fairly extensive research. Perhaps one day another inquirer will be more fortunate. Until this happens, however, this strange man Boulainvilliers, at once the friend of Fénelon and the translator of Spinoza, above all an impassioned apologist of the nobility whom he believed to be descended from German chieftains—a sort of prototype Gobineau with less enthusiasm and more learning—may be regarded as having a presumptive claim to be the inventor of a new historical classification. For that is what it really amounts to, and in the study of history there have been few stages so decisive as the moment when “Empires”, dynasties, famous periods identified with some great name—in a word, all the old arbitrary divisions born of a monarchical and oratorical tradition—began to give place to another system of classification, based on the observation of social phenomena.

It was however a more celebrated writer who first gave wide currency to this conception and to the terminology that expressed it. Montesquieu had read Boulainvilliers. The vocabulary of the lawyer, moreover, held no terrors for him: was not the literary language of France to emerge from his hands, greatly enriched with the gleanings of the Bar? If he seems to have avoided the term *féodalité*, which was doubtless too abstract for his taste, it was unquestionably he who convinced the educated public of his time that the *lois féodales* were the distinguishing marks of a particular period of history. From the French the words, along with the idea, spread to the other languages of Europe, being in some cases merely transcribed, and in others translated, as with the German word for feudalism, *Lehnwesen*. At length the French Revolution, in its revolt against what remained of the institutions but lately christened by Boulainvilliers, completed the popular diffusion of the name which he, with entirely opposite sentiments, had conferred upon them. “The National Assembly”, declares the famous decree of the 11th August 1789, “totally abolishes the feudal régime”. How could one thenceforth deny the reality of a system which it had cost so much to destroy?<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the word feudalism, which was to have so great a future, was a very ill-chosen, even though at the time the reasons for adopting it appeared sound enough. To Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu, living in an age of absolute monarchy, the most striking characteristic of the Middle Ages was the parcelling out of sovereignty among a host of petty princes or even lords of villages. It was this characteristic that they meant to denote by the term feudalism.

and when they spoke of fiefs they were referring sometimes to territorial principalities, sometimes manors. ~~But not all the manors were in fact fiefs, nor were all the fiefs principalities or manors.~~ Above all, it may be doubted whether a highly complex type of social organization can be properly designated either by concentrating on its political aspect only, or—if “fief” be understood in its narrowest legal sense—by stressing one particular form of real property right among many others. But words, like well-worn coins, in the course of constant circulation lose their clear outline. In the usage of the present day, “feudalism” and “feudal society” cover a whole complex of ideas in which the fief properly so called no longer occupies the foreground. Provided that he treats these expressions merely as labels sanctioned by modern usage for something which he has still to define, the historian may use them without compunction. In this he is like the physicist who, in disregard of Greek, persists in calling an “atom” something which he spends his time in dividing.

It is a question of the deepest interest whether there have been other societies, in other times and other parts of the world, whose social structures in their fundamental characteristics have sufficiently resembled that of our Western feudalism to justify us in applying the term “feudal” to them as well. This question will turn up again at the end of this book, but it is not the subject of our present study. The feudalism which we shall attempt to analyse here is that to which the name was first applied. Apart from some problems of origin or of later developments, the inquiry will be confined to the period of our history which extends roughly from the middle of the ninth century to the first decade of the thirteenth; and it will be restricted to western and central Europe. The reasons for the choice of dates will become clear in the course of the work itself, but the geographical limits seem to call for a brief explanation.

Ancient civilization was centred about the Mediterranean. “I believe that the earth,” wrote Plato, “is very large and that we who dwell between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis live in a small part of it about the sea, like ants or frogs about a pond.”<sup>3</sup> These same waters remained through many centuries the axis of the Roman world, even after conquest extended that world. A senator from Aquitania could make his career on the shores of the Bosphorus; he could own vast estates in Macedonia. The great fluctuations of prices that shook the Roman economy were felt from the Euphrates to Gaul. Without the grain of Africa, the existence of Imperial Rome is as little conceivable as Catholic theology without the African Augustine. On the other hand, anyone crossing the Rhine found himself at once in a strange and hostile land, the vast territory of the Barbarians.

Now, on the threshold of the period that we call the Middle Ages, two far-ranging movements of peoples had destroyed this equilibrium—there is no need at present to inquire how far it had already been shaken from within—and replaced it by a very different pattern of peoples. The first of these was the Germanic invasions; the second, the Moslem conquests. The Germans penetrated the greater part of the countries formerly included in the western section of the Roman Empire, and the territories occupied by them became united, sometimes through subjection to the same political régime, but always and in any case by the common mental habits and social customs of the invaders. Little by little, the small Celtic groups in the British Isles were linked up with this Romano-Germanic society and more or less assimilated to it. North Africa, on the other hand, was to follow an entirely different course. The counter-offensive of the Berber tribes had prepared the breach with Rome: Islam completed it. Elsewhere, on the shores of the Levant, the victories of the Arabs had isolated the former East Roman Empire in the Balkans and Anatolia and transformed it into the Greek Empire. Difficulties of communication, a distinctive type of social and political structure, and a religious mentality and ecclesiastical organization very different from those of Latin Christianity combined to cut off this Empire more and more from the Christian communities of the West. The West, it is true

exercised a wide influence among the Slav peoples in the eastern parts of Europe, among some whom it introduced not only the Catholic form of Christianity, but also Western modes of thought and even certain Western institutions; but, none the less, the societies which were linguistically Slavonic evolved, for the most part, on quite independent lines.

Hemmed in by these three blocs, Mohammedan, Byzantine, and Slav, and ceaselessly engaged in pushing forward its ever-changing frontiers, the Romano-Germanic world was itself by no means homogeneous. Differences arising from their different backgrounds had deeply marked the various societies of which it was composed, and had lasting effects. Even where the points of departure were almost identical, the lines of development might subsequently diverge. Yet, however pronounced these differences may have been, how can we fail to recognize, over and above them, the predominant quality of a common civilization—that of the West? If in the following pages where the phrase “Western and Central Europe” might have been expected, we say simply “Europe”, this is not merely to avoid the repetition of cumbersome adjectives. What does it matter, after all, how the name and its limits were defined in the old artificial geography, with its “five parts of the world”? All that counts is its human significance. European civilization arose and flowered, until in the end it covered the face of the earth, among those who dwelt between the Tyrrhenian, the Adriatic, the Elbe, and the Atlantic Ocean. It had no other homeland. The eighth-century Spanish chronicler who, after their victory over Islam, styled “Europeans” the Franks of Charles Martel, had already dimly perceived this. So, some two hundred years later, had the Saxon monk, Widukind, who, when Otto the Great had driven back the Hungarians, enthusiastically hailed him as the liberator of “Europe”.<sup>4</sup> In this sense of the word—and it is the richest in historical content—Europe was a creation of the early Middle Ages. It was already in being at the beginning of the feudal age proper.

The term “feudalism”, applied to a phase of European history within the limits thus determined, has sometimes been interpreted in ways so different as to be almost contradictory, yet the mere existence of the word attests the special quality which men have instinctively recognized in the period which it denotes. Hence a book about feudal society can be looked on as an attempt to answer a question posed by its very title: what are the distinctive features of this portion of the past which have given it a claim to be treated in isolation? In other words, what we are attempting here is to analyse and explain the social structure and its unifying principles. A similar method—if in the light of experience it should prove fruitful—might be employed in other fields of study, under a different set of limiting conditions. I hope that what is undeniably new in the present enterprise will make amends for the defects of execution.

The very magnitude of the inquiry, so conceived, has made it necessary to divide the material. The first book will describe the social background generally and the growth of those bonds of interdependence between men which, more than anything else, gave the feudal structure its special character. The second book will be concerned with the development of social classes and the organization of governments. It is always difficult to divide up a living organism. Yet the final differentiation of the old social classes, the emergence of a new class, the *bourgeoisie*, and the resuscitation of the authority of the State after long eclipse, coincided with the time when the most specifically feudal characteristics of Western civilization began to disappear; and this explains why, though no strictly chronological division has seemed possible, the first book is concerned above all with the birth of feudal society, the second with the way it developed, extended and declined.

But the historian is in no sense a free man. Of the past he knows only so much as the past is willing to yield up to him. What is more, when the subject he is attempting to cover is too vast to allow him to examine personally all the sources, he is conscious of being constantly frustrated in his inquiry by the

limitations of research. No survey will be made here of those paper wars in which scholars have sometimes engaged. History, not historians, is my concern. But whatever may be the reasons for the I resolved never to conceal the gaps or uncertainties in our knowledge. In this I felt I should run no risk of discouraging the reader. On the contrary, to impose an artificial rigidity on a branch of knowledge which is essentially one of movement—that would be the way to engender boredom and indifference. One of the men who have gone furthest in the understanding of medieval societies, the great English jurist Maitland, said that a historical work should make its readers hungry—hungry to learn, that is, and above all to inquire. If this book does that, I shall be well content.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de la France avec XIV Lettres Historiques sur les Parlemens ou Etats-Généraux*. The Hague, 1727. The fourth letter is entitled *Détail du gouvernement féodal et de l'établissement des Fiefs* (1, p. 286) and contains (p. 30) this sentence: "Je me suis étendu dans l'extrait de cette ordonnance, la croyant propre à donner une idée exacte de l'ancien féodalité".
- <sup>2</sup> Among the French people whose buttonholes are today adorned with a red ribbon or rosette, how many know that one of the duties imposed on their order by its first constitution of the 19th May 1802 was "to combat ... any enterprise tending to establish the feudal régime?"
- <sup>3</sup> *Phaedo*, 109b.
- <sup>4</sup> *M.G.H., Auctores Antiquissimi*, XI, p. 362; Widukind, 1, 19.
- <sup>5</sup> Every historical work, if it happens to be addressed to a relatively large public, confronts its author with a practical problem of the most difficult kind—the problem of references. Justice perhaps required that the names of all the learned works but for which this book would not exist be set out in full array at the foot of each page. At the risk of being thought ungrateful, I decided to leave such references, for the most part, to the bibliography at the end of the book. I have, however, made it a rule never to cite an original source without affording every student with a little experience the means of finding the passage referred to and of verifying my interpretation of it. If the reference is not given, the reason is that the information given in my text, supplemented by well-arranged tables in the publication in which the document appears, makes it easy to find. Where these are lacking, a note serves as a pointer. In a court of justice, after all, the status of the witnesses is much more important than that of counsel.

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# VOLUME I

# PART I

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## The Environment: The Last Invasions

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## MOSLEMS AND HUNGARIANS

### 1 EUROPE INVADED AND BESIEGED

“YOU see before you the wrath of the Lord breaking forth.... There is naught but towns emptied of their folk, monasteries razed to the ground or given to the flames, fields desolated.... Everywhere the strong oppressteth the weak and men are like fish of the sea that blindly devour each other.” Thus, in 909, the bishops of the province of Rheims assembled at Trosly. The literature of the ninth and tenth centuries, the charters, and the deliberations of councils are full of such lamentations. When a reasonable allowance has been made both for exaggeration and for the pessimism natural to religious orators, we are forced to see in this incessantly recurring theme, supported as it is by so much contemporary evidence, the proof of a state of affairs regarded as intolerable even in those days. Certainly it was a period when those who were capable of observing and making comparisons, the clergy in particular, felt themselves to be living in a hateful atmosphere of disorder and violence. Feudalism was born in the midst of an infinitely troubled epoch, and in some measure it was the child of those troubles themselves. But some of the causes which helped to create or maintain this disorderly environment were altogether foreign to the internal evolution of European societies. Forged several centuries earlier in the fiery crucible of the Germanic invasions, the new civilization of the West, in its turn, seemed like a citadel besieged—indeed more than half overrun. It was attacked from three sides at once: in the south by the devotees of Islam, Arabs or their Arabized subjects; in the east by the Hungarians; and in the north by the Scandinavians.

### 2 THE MOSLEMS

Of the enemies just enumerated, Islam was certainly the least dangerous, although one would hesitate to speak of its decline. For a long period neither Gaul nor Italy, among their poor cities, had anything to offer which approached the splendour of Baghdad or Cordova. Until the twelfth century the Moslem world, along with the Byzantine world, exercised a true economic hegemony over the West: the only gold coinage still circulating in our part of Europe came from Greek or Arab mints, or at least—like more than one of the silver coinages too—were copies of their productions. And if the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed the final breakdown of the unity of the Caliphate, the various states which at that time arose from the wreckage remained formidable powers. But thereafter it was much less a question of invasions properly so-called than of frontier wars. Let us leave aside the East, where the emperors of the Amorian and Macedonian dynasties (828–1056) painfully and valiantly sought themselves to reconquer Asia Minor. Western societies came into collision with the Islamic states on two fronts only.

First, southern Italy. This region was, as it were, the hunting-ground of the sovereigns who ruled over the ancient Roman province of Africa—the Aghlabite emirs of Kairouan, succeeded, at the beginning of the tenth century, by the Fatimite caliphs. The Aghlabites had wrested Sicily little by little from the Greeks who had held it since Justinian’s time and whose last stronghold, Taormina, fell in 902. Meanwhile the Arabs had gained a footing in the peninsula. Across the Byzantine provinces of

the south they threatened the semi-independent cities of the Tyrrhenian coast and the little Lombard principalities of Campania and of the Beneventino, which were more or less dependencies of Constantinople. At the beginning of the eleventh century they could still carry their raids as far as the Sabine mountains. One band, which had made its stronghold in the wooded heights of Monte Argentaro, very close to Gaeta, could only be destroyed, in 915, after twenty years of marauding. In 982, the young "emperor of the Romans", Otto II, set out to conquer southern Italy. Though Saxon by origin he considered himself nevertheless to be the heir of the Caesars, in Italy as elsewhere. He committed the surprising folly, so often repeated in the Middle Ages, of choosing the summer season as the time for taking to these scorching regions an army accustomed to entirely different climates, and on the 25th July he encountered the Moslem bands on the east coast of Calabria and suffered a most humiliating defeat.

The Moslem peril continued to press heavily on these regions till, in the eleventh century, a handful of adventurers from Normandy routed both Byzantines and Arabs. Uniting Sicily with the southern part of the peninsula, the vigorous state which they eventually created was destined both to bar forever the path of the invaders and to act as an inspired intermediary between the Latin and Islamic civilizations. On Italian soil the struggle against the Saracens, which had begun in the ninth century, continued for a long time—with small and fluctuating territorial gains on either side. But in relation to Christendom as a whole, it was only a remote territory that was at issue.

The other field of conflict was in Spain. There, it was for Islam no longer a question of raids for plunder or temporary annexations; populations of Mohammedans lived there in great numbers and the states founded by the Arabs had their centres in the country itself. At the beginning of the tenth century the Saracen bands had not yet completely forgotten the way over the Pyrenees. But these long distance raids were becoming more and more infrequent. Starting from the extreme north, the Christian reconquest, in spite of many reverses and humiliations, slowly progressed. In Galicia and on those plateaux of the north-west which the emirs and caliphs of Cordova, established too far to the south, had never held with a very firm hand, the little Christian kingdoms, sometimes divided, sometimes united under a single ruler, moved forward to the region of the Douro from the middle of the eleventh century; the Tagus was reached in 1085. At the foot of the Pyrenees, on the other hand, the course of the Ebro, although so near, remained for a long time Moslem; Saragossa fell only in 1118. These struggles, though they did not by any means preclude more peaceful relations, were as a rule interrupted only by brief truces, and they stamped the Spanish societies with a character of their own. With the Europe "beyond the passes" they had scarcely any dealings, save in so far as the latter furnished its nobility—especially from the second half of the eleventh century—with the opportunity for brilliant, profitable and pious adventures, while at the same time providing its peasants with the opportunity of settling on the unoccupied lands at the pressing invitation of Spanish kings and nobles. But along with the wars properly so-called went piracy and brigandage, and it was chiefly through these that the Saracens contributed to the general disorder of the West.

From an early date the Arabs had been sailors. From their lairs in Africa, Spain, and especially the Balearics, their corsairs attacked the western Mediterranean. Nevertheless, in these waters, traversed by only a very few ships, the trade of pirate in the true sense of the word had not been very profitable. In the mastery of the sea, the Saracens—like the Scandinavians in the same period—saw above all the means of reaching coasts whence they could carry out profitable raids. From 842 they went up the Rhône as far as the approaches of Arles, plundering both banks on their way. The Camargue at that time was their normal base. But soon an accident was to procure them not only safer headquarters, but also the possibility of extending their ravages very considerably.

At a date not precisely ascertained, probably somewhere about 890, a small Saracen vessel coming from Spain was driven by the winds on to the coast of Provence, on the outskirts of the present town of Saint-Tropez. Its crew hid themselves during the day, then at nightfall emerged and massacred the inhabitants of a neighbouring village. Mountainous and wooded—it was called at that time the land of ash-trees (*frênes*), or “Freinet”<sup>1</sup>—this secluded place was easy to defend. Like their compatriots at Monte Argento in Campania, at the same period, this band of Arabs fortified themselves on a height in the midst of thickets of thorns, and summoned their comrades to join them. Thus was created the most dangerous nest of robbers. With the exception of Fréjus, which was pillaged, it does not seem that the towns, protected as they were by their walls, were direct victims. But in the neighbourhood of the coast the country districts were appallingly devastated. The brigands of Le Freinet also took numerous prisoners whom they sold in the Spanish markets.

Moreover, they were not slow to carry their incursions well inland. Very few in number, they seem to have been reluctant to face the risks of the Rhône valley, relatively populous and protected by fortified cities or castles. But the Alpine massif made it possible for small bands of practised mountaineers to steal far forward, from one range of mountains to another, from thicket to thicket, and coming as they did from the Sierras of Spain or the mountainous Maghreb, these Saracens were, in the words of a monk of Saint-Gall, “real goats”. Moreover, the Alps, in spite of appearances, were not to be despised as a field for raids. Nestling in their midst were fertile valleys, on which it was easy to descend without warning from the surrounding mountains. Such a valley was Graisivaudan. Here and there, abbeys stood forth, ideal objectives for the raider. (Above Susa, the monastery of Novalesa, whence most of the monks had fled, was sacked and burned as early as 906.) Best of all, the mountain journeyed through the passes small parties of travellers, merchants, or even pilgrims on their way to Rome to pray at the tombs of the Apostles. What could be more tempting than to ambush them on the road? As early as 920 or 921, some Anglo-Saxon pilgrims were battered with stones in a defile, and from then on such crimes were of frequent occurrence. The Arab *djichs* or armed bands were not afraid to venture astonishingly far north. In 940, we find them in the neighbourhood of the upper Rhine valley and in the Valais, where they burned the famous monastery of Saint-Maurice d’Agaune. About the same time, one of their detachments riddled with arrows the monks of Saint-Gall as they walked peacefully in procession round their church. This band, at any rate, was dispersed by the little group of defenders whom the abbot hurriedly gathered together; a number of prisoners, brought in to the monastery, heroically allowed themselves to die of starvation.

To police the Alps or the Provençal countryside was beyond the power of contemporary states. There was no other remedy than to destroy the lair at Le Freinet. But here a new obstacle arose. It was practically impossible to lay siege to this citadel without cutting it off from the sea, whence it received its reinforcements. Now, neither the kings of this region—in the west, the kings of Provence and Burgundy, in the east, the king of Italy—nor their counts had fleets at their disposal. The only skilled sailors among the Christians were the Greeks who, however, occasionally turned their skill to account, just as the Saracens did, by taking to piracy. (It was Greek pirates who plundered Marseille in 848.) On two occasions, in 931 and 942, the Byzantine fleet appeared off the coast of Le Freinet; on the second at least, and probably on the previous occasion also, they had been summoned by the king of Italy, Hugh of Arles, who had important interests in Provence. Nothing was achieved on either occasion. What is more, in 942, Hugh changed sides, even while the struggle was in progress, planning to make the Saracens his allies and with their aid to close the Alpine routes against the reinforcements which one of his rivals for the Lombard crown was awaiting. Then in 951 Otto the Great, king of East Francia—Germany of today—made himself king of the Lombards. His purpose was to build up in central Europe and even as far as Italy a power like that of the Carolingians, a Christian power and

promoter of peace. Regarding himself as the heir of Charlemagne whose imperial crown he was to assume in 962, he believed it to be his mission to put an end to the depredations of the Saracens. First trying the diplomatic approach, he sought to persuade the caliph of Cordova to order his people to evacuate Le Freinet. Then he formed the project of leading an expedition himself, but never carried it out.

Meanwhile, in 972, the marauders made the mistake of capturing too illustrious a prize. On the route of the Great Saint Bernard, in the valley of the Dranse, the abbot of Cluny, Maïeul, who was returning from Italy, was ambushed and taken to one of those mountain refuges which the Saracens frequently used when they were not able to get back to their base. He was only released in return for a heavy ransom paid by his monks. Now Maïeul, who had reformed so many monasteries, was the most revered friend, the director of conscience and, if one may venture to say it, the *saint familier* of many kings and barons; notably of William, count of Provence. The latter overtook on their way back the band who had committed the sacrilegious outrage and inflicted on them a severe defeat; the abbot, gathering together under his command a number of nobles from the Rhône valley, to whom were to be distributed subsequently the lands brought back into cultivation, he launched an attack against the fortress of Le Freinet. This time, the citadel fell.

This for the Saracens was the end of large-scale brigandage on land, though naturally the coastlines of Provence, like that of Italy, remained exposed to their outrages. Even in the eleventh century we find the monks of Lérins actively engaged in buying back Christians whom Arab pirates had captured and taken to Spain; in 1178 a raid near Marseilles yielded many prisoners. But the cultivation of the fields could be resumed in the coastal and sub-alpine regions of Provence, and the Alpine route became again neither more nor less safe than any others traversing the mountains of Europe. Moreover, on the Mediterranean itself, the merchant cities of Italy, Pisa, Genoa and Amalfi, had since the beginning of the eleventh century passed over to the offensive. They chased the Moslems from Sardinia, and even hunted them down in the ports of the Maghreb (from 1015) and of Spain (in 1092). Thus they began to clean up those seas on the security of which their trade was so largely dependent. It was only a relative security, but until the nineteenth century the Mediterranean was not to know anything better.

### 3 THE HUNGARIAN ASSAULT

Like the Huns before them, the Hungarians or Magyars had appeared in Europe almost without warning, and at an early date the writers of the Middle Ages, who had learned to know them only too well, showed a naive astonishment that the Roman writers should not have mentioned them. Their early history is in any case much more obscure than that of the Huns, for the Chinese sources which date well before the Western records begin, enable us to follow the trail of the "Hiung-Nu", are silent on the subject of Magyars. It is certain that the new invaders also belonged to the peculiar and highly characteristic world of the nomads of the Asiatic steppes: peoples often of very diverse languages, but astonishingly alike in their manner of life, because of the similarity of their surroundings; horse breeders and warriors, living on the milk of their mares or the fruits of their hunting and fishing; natural enemies especially of the agriculturalists on the fringes of their territory. In its basic structure the Magyar speech belongs to the linguistic type called Finno-Ugrian; the idioms to which it is closest today are those of certain aboriginal peoples of Siberia. But in the course of its wanderings the original ethnic stock had been mixed with numerous Turkish-speaking elements and had received a strong imprint from the civilizations of that group. <sup>2</sup>

As early as 833 we find the Hungarians, whose name appeared then for the first time, disturbing the settled populations—the Khanate of the Khazars and the Byzantine colonies—in the neighbourhood of the sea of Azov. Soon, they are threatening at any moment to cut the Dnieper route, at this time an extremely active commercial highway by which, from portage to portage and from market to market, the furs of the North, the honey and wax of the Russian forests, and the slaves bought on all sides were to be exchanged against the merchandise or gold of Constantinople or Asia. But new hordes—the Petchenegs—starting out after them from beyond the Urals, harassed them unceasingly. The road to the south was successfully barred to them by the Bulgarian empire. Thus driven back, one of the groups preferred to bury itself in the steppe further to the east, but the greater number crossed the Carpathians in about 896, to spread over the plains of the Tisza and the middle Danube.

These vast areas, so often ravaged by invasion since the fourth century, formed at that time on the map of Europe a sort of enormous blank patch, “Solitudes” is the word used to describe them by the chronicler Regino of Prüm, though it is not necessary to take the expression too literally. The various populations which had formerly had important settlements in these regions, or had merely passed through them, had in all probability left behind small groups of stragglers. Above all, a great mass of Slav tribes had by degrees infiltrated there. But settlement unquestionably remained very sparse. Witness the almost complete recasting of the geographical nomenclature, including that of the rivers, after the arrival of the Magyars. Furthermore, after Charlemagne had crushed the Avar power, there was no longer any solidly organized state capable of offering serious resistance to the invaders. The only opponents were some chiefs of the Moravian people who a short time before had succeeded in establishing in the north-west corner a tolerably strong principality, already officially Christian—the first attempt, in fact, to form a genuine, purely Slav state. The attacks of the Hungarians destroyed it once and for all in 906.

From this moment, the history of the Hungarians took a new turn. It is scarcely possible any longer to speak of them as nomads in the strict sense of the word, since they now had a permanent settlement in the plains which today bear their name. But from there they sallied forth in bands over the surrounding countries: not, however, to conquer territories. Their sole purpose was to plunder and return loaded with booty to their permanent location. The decline of the Bulgarian empire after the death of the tsar Simeon (927) opened the way to Byzantine Thrace, which they plundered on several occasions. The West, much less well defended, had a special attraction for them, and they came into contact with it at an early date.

As long ago as 862, before they had even crossed the Carpathians, a Hungarian expedition had penetrated as far as the borders of Germany. Later on, some of these men had been engaged as auxiliaries by the king of that country, Arnulf, in one of his wars against the Moravians. In 899, the hordes swooped down on the plain of the Po; the following year, on Bavaria. From this time onward scarcely a year passed in which the annals of monasteries in Italy and Germany, and soon afterwards in Gaul, did not record, sometimes of one province, sometimes of another: “ravages by the Hungarians.” Northern Italy, Bavaria and Swabia were especially afflicted; all the region on the right bank of the Enns, where the Carolingians had established frontier commands and distributed lands to their abbey, had to be abandoned. But the raids extended well beyond these limits. The radius covered would confound one’s imagination, if one did not take into account the fact that the long pastoral journeys which the Hungarians were formerly accustomed in the open steppe and which they continued to practise in the more restricted circle of the Danubian *puszta* had been a wonderful apprenticeship. The nomadism of the herdsman of the steppes—who was already a robber as well—was a preparation for the nomadism of the bandit. Towards the northwest, Saxony—that is to say the vast territory which extended from the Elbe to the middle Rhine—was attacked as early as 906, and from then on w

repeatedly ravaged. In Italy, the Hungarian hordes drove on as far as Otranto. In 917, they penetrated by way of the Vosges forest and the Saales pass, to the rich abbeys grouped about the Meurthe. From that time onwards, Lorraine and northern Gaul became one of their familiar hunting-grounds. Then they ventured into Burgundy and even south of the Loire. Men of the plains, they were nevertheless not afraid to cross the Alps if the need arose. It was "by the devious ways of these mountains" that coming from Italy, they descended in 924 upon the district of Nîmes.

They did not always avoid battles against organized forces, and in these engagements they met with varying success. Nevertheless they preferred as a rule to glide rapidly across country: true savages whom their chiefs drove to battle with blows of the whip, but redoubtable soldiers, skilful in flank attacks, relentless in pursuit and resourceful in extricating themselves from the most difficult situations. Perhaps they needed to cross a river, or the Venetian lagoon. They hurriedly made boats of skins or of wood. At their halting places they set up their tents—the kind used by the people of the steppes; or they entrenched themselves in an abbey abandoned by its monks and from that point assailed the surrounding country. Artful as savages, provided when necessary with intelligence by the ambassadors whom they sent on ahead, less to parley than to spy, they had very quickly penetrated the rather clumsy artifices of Western policy. They kept themselves informed about interregna, which were particularly favourable to their incursions, and they were able to profit by the dissensions among the Christian princes to place themselves at the service of one or other of the rivals.

Sometimes, following the normal practice of bandits in every age, they demanded sums of money from the conquered populations in return for sparing their lives; from some they even exacted regular tribute: Bavaria and Saxony were obliged for several years to submit to this humiliation. But these methods were scarcely practicable save in the territories bordering on Hungary itself, and elsewhere they simply killed and robbed outrageously. Like the Saracens, they seldom attacked fortified towns; where they ventured to do so, they usually failed, as they had done under the walls of Kiev in the early days of their expeditions in the region of the Dnieper. The only important city they captured was Pavia. They were especially dreaded by the villages and the monasteries, frequently isolated in the country districts or situated in the suburbs of towns, outside the walls. Above all, they seem to have been bent on taking prisoners, carefully choosing the best, and sometimes, among the whole population put to the sword, sparing only the young women and the very young boys—to serve their needs and their pleasures, no doubt, but mostly to be sold. On occasion, they had no compunction about selling this human cattle even in the markets of the West, where not all the customers were of mind to be fastidious over the nature of their purchases; in 954 a girl of noble family, captured in the outskirts of Worms, was put up for sale in the city.<sup>3</sup> More often these unfortunates were dragged far as the Danubian regions, to be offered to Greek traders.

#### 4 END OF THE HUNGARIAN INVASIONS

Meanwhile, on the 10th of August 955, the king of East Francia, Otto the Great, who had received intelligence of a raid on southern Germany, attacked the returning Hungarian band on the banks of the Lech. After a bloody battle he was victorious, and was able to press home his advantage. The marauding expedition thus dealt with was destined to be the last. On the confines of Bavaria hostilities were henceforth limited to border warfare. Soon, in accordance with the Carolingian tradition, Otto reorganized the frontier commands. Two marches were created: one in the Alps, on the Mur; the other further north, on the Enns. The latter, soon to acquire the name of the eastern command—*Ostarrîch* from which Austria is derived—reached the forest of Vienna as early as the end of the tenth century, and the Leitha and Morava towards the middle of the eleventh.

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