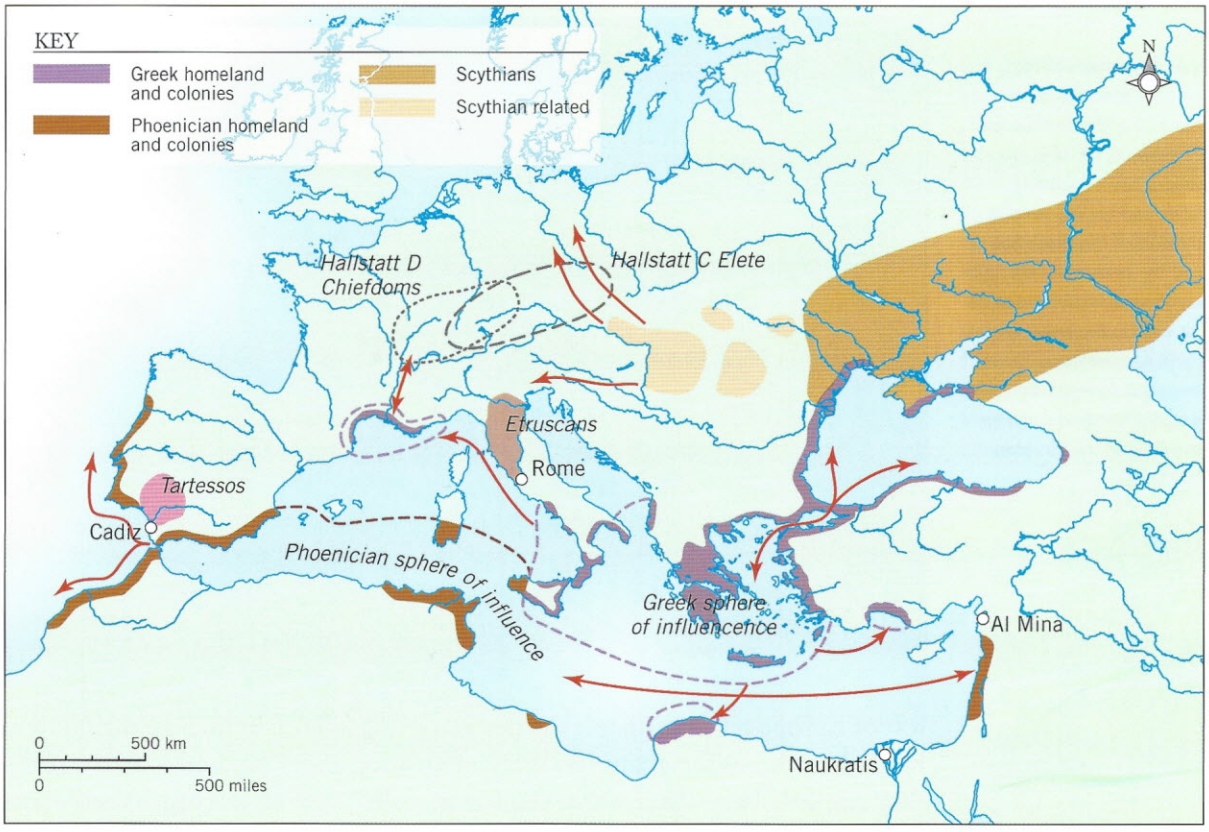
CHAPTER NINE

The Three Hundred Years That Changed the World: 800–500 BC

'The three hundred years that changed the world' is perhaps a somewhat exaggerated claim but it rather depends on one's viewpoint. To a classicist focused on the Mediterranean, this was a period of phenomenal change during which all those who were to become big players on the world stage emerged from prehistoric obscurity – Greeks, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Carthaginians and Romans – and serious 'history' begins, with texts providing the names of the key actors and stories of political intrigue spiced with set-piece battles – presented of course through the eyes of the victors. For them, it was as though the fog had lifted, allowing the glories of Greece and the might of Rome to burst through. An archaeologist might approach the period from a different perspective. This was a time when many of the social and economic trajectories already under way in the preceding centuries escalated and collided. The desire to control resources led to political entanglements that created new imperatives. It was a time, too, when tens of thousands of people were leaving their homes to set up enclaves in distant territories, creating new interfaces with *barbarians* (the general phrase used by the Greeks and Romans to describe other people) and from these contact zones ripples of change spread deep into the hinterland of Europe. The nature of exchange was also transformed: at the beginning of the period the movement of commodities was still embedded within systems of tribute and gift-giving between elites; by the end we can at last talk of trade in the sense of the purchase of commodities without further obligation. The real fascination of the period lies in being able to trace the exponential growth in interconnectedness between the developing polities in the Mediterranean and the interactions between the Mediterranean states and the chiefdoms of the European peninsula.

The information base becomes much richer. In addition to the mute archaeological evidence there is now a body of textual data. By its very nature all written evidence is selected and distorted by its authors, but among the more reliable sources are the histories of Herodotus written in the mid-fifth century BC and of Thucydides written later in the same century. Both writers were close to the events they described and, while by no means free from bias,

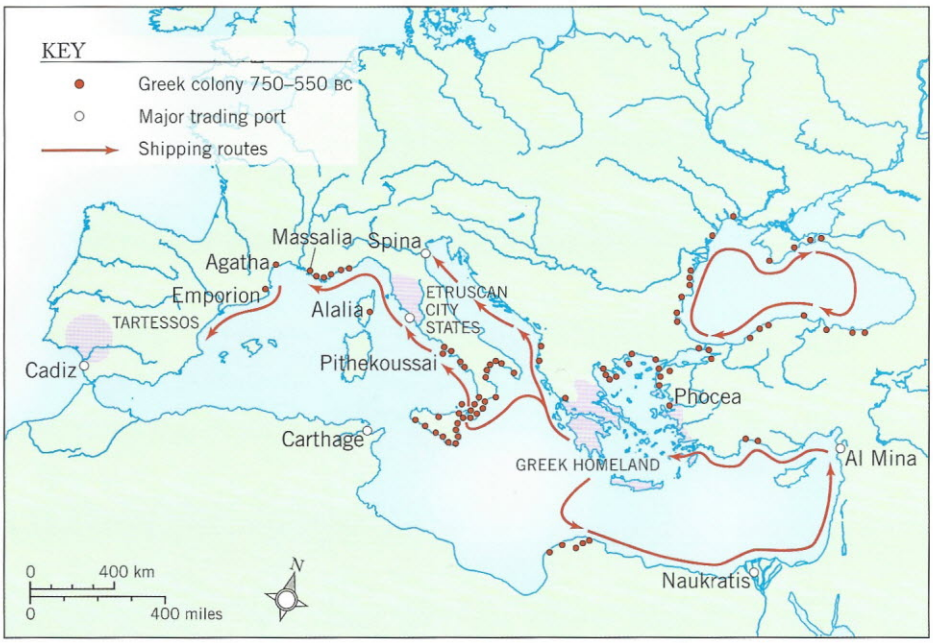


9.1 Europe 800–500 BC. The cities of the two Mediterranean powers, Phoenicia and Greece, were now beginning to carve up the Mediterranean into spheres of influence, the Greeks making the Black Sea their own while the Phoenicians expanded into the Atlantic. In Eastern Europe the Scythians from the steppes established enclaves as far as the Great Hungarian Plain.

they strived for accuracy. Herodotus is encyclopaedic in the background, both historical and geographical, that he provides for his story of the struggles between the Greeks and the Persians, while Thucydides offers a detailed account of much of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (431–404 BC), an event that he lived through and took part in. Other scraps gleaned from later writers help to sketch in some of the background and to create a tolerably robust chronological skeleton.

The archaeological evidence is much richer for this period than for earlier times, not least because generations of scholars working on the stylistic niceties of Greek pottery, fine metalwork and statuary have been able to develop tightly dated sequences that give reasonably accurate dates to the contexts in which they are found. In addition, coins minted by many of the states, lawcodes inscribed on stone, and graffiti scratched on pots all add to the varied database. For barbarian Europe, apart from a few generalized insights gleaned from Herodotus, we are still reliant on material evidence preserved in the archaeological record, though a few datable Mediterranean imports help in constructing chronologies and offer some insight into social interactions.

The disparity in the data base between the Mediterranean zone and the



9.2 The Greeks in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Over a brief two centuries, 750–550, the Greeks had established cities and trading posts throughout the Black Sea and the central Mediterranean, extending as far west as Emporion in north-eastern Iberia. These western colonies were a direct threat to the trading activities of the Etruscan city states.

rest of Europe tends to distort the perceived importance of the two regions and has led to the unfortunate tendency of treating them separately when really they can only be understood in relation to each other. In the pages that follow we will make some effort to restore a balance and to resist the temptation of being drawn into too many of the intriguing sidelines of classical archaeology.

The Big Players: A Very Brief Sketch of the Mediterranean, 800–500 BC

Since we are concerned in this book with the broad processes of change that underlie the development of Europe, rather than the events and the personalities flitting on the surface, conventional history will not feature large. But to set the scene it will be helpful, first, to give a very brief sketch of geopolitical events in terms of the big players – the main ethnic configurations as they were perceived by the classical writers.

The two most active of the Mediterranean peoples in this period were the Phoenicians and the Greeks. The Phoenicians occupied the narrow coastal strip of the Levant (Lebanon and Syria) dominated by the cities of Tyre and Sidon, while the homeland of the Greeks lay in the lands surrounding the Aegean. While they may have begun as partners in exploring the Mediterranean, they were soon to become competitors as they set up colonies the better to exploit the potential of the barbarian world. The Phoenicians

into the dreary depths of Silesia. Or could it have been a set of finery acquired through the exchange network, perhaps as a gift, by a local Lusatian chieftain? Archaeological evidence is sometimes tantalizing in its vagueness.

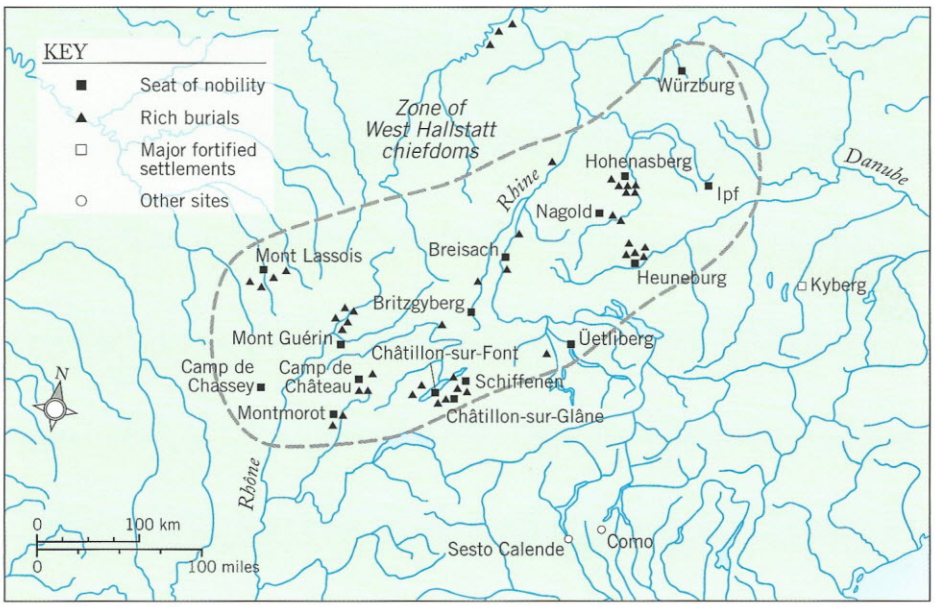
That some Scythian groups may have raided deep into the North European Plain need not surprise us. They were by nature a warlike people as their mercenary activities in Asia Minor in the seventh century amply demonstrate. In their relations with the Greeks they showed little aggression but when, in 513 BC, Darius led his Persian army across the Danube into Scythian territory he found them a difficult enemy to pin down: they were always on the move, drawing him further and further into the steppe. In the end there was nothing he could do but turn back and leave the Scythians to themselves. Even the great Darius was no match for men born to the saddle and proud of their unfettered mobility.

In the Centre of the Peninsula

Compared to the fast-changing scenes in the Mediterranean, Middle Europe – or the North Alpine zone – exhibited a stolid stability in the period from the eighth to sixth centuries BC. This is not to deny that social and economic changes took place, but more to emphasize that the culture (which archaeologists call Hallstatt after a salt-mining settlement in Austria) was deeply rooted in the preceding Urnfield culture of the Late Bronze Age. The Hallstatt culture, or rather the many regional groups that comprise it, extended from central France to Transdanubia (western Hungary) and from the Alps to Kujavia in the centre of Poland. The broad similarities across this vast region are not the result of conquests or folk movements but of a tight network of routes through which exchanges were articulated – this was, after all, the region where the majority of the river systems of peninsular Europe converged and through which the major transpeninsular routes were forced to thread their way.

Within the Hallstatt region there were three broad sub-zones: a western zone that extended roughly from Burgundy to Bohemia; an eastern zone between the eastern Alps and the Danube bordering on to the Scythian cultures of the east; and a northern zone extending across the old Lusatian cultural area into central Poland. Each of these sub-zones derived its characteristic culture from indigenous roots in the Bronze Age past. It was in the western zone – the area at the heart of the route network – that the greatest range of innovations became archaeologically visible.

Most evident was the emergence of a rite of elite burial involving the use of a ceremonial four-wheeled vehicle to carry the body of the deceased to the grave. The vehicle and the horse gear (but not the horses) were placed in a large timber-lined grave pit together with the body and a range of equipment

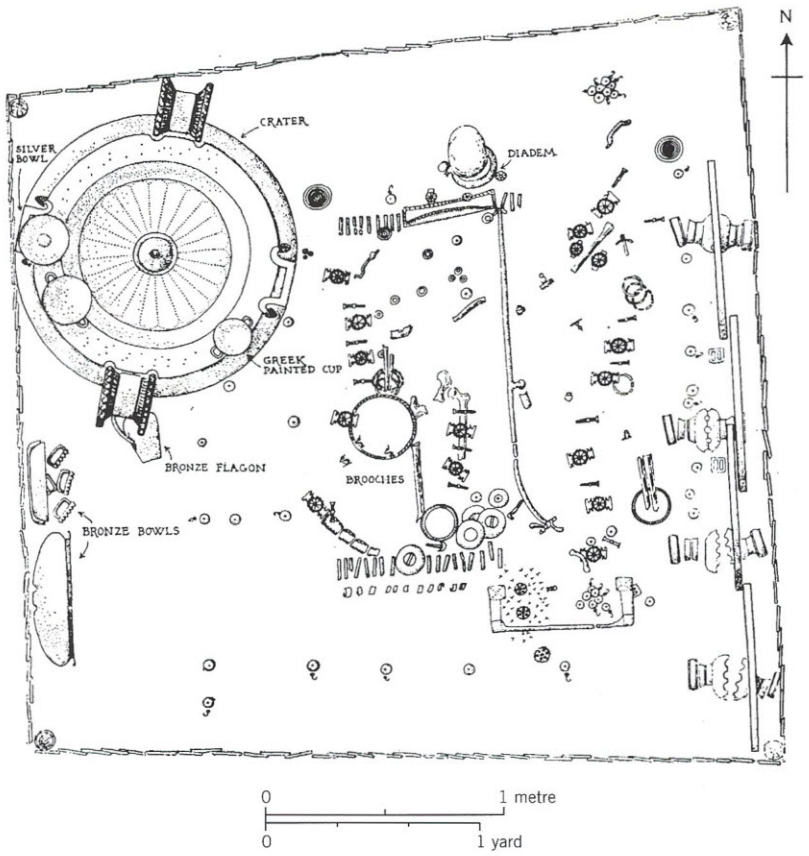


9.19 In the Late Hallstatt period (*c.*600–480 BC) the elite built defended hilltop settlements and buried their dead with elaborate grave goods, including items of Greek and Etruscan origin. These centres of power extended from Burgundy to southern Germany.

9.20 *Opposite:* The defended hilltop settlement of Heuneburg in southern Germany overlooking the Danube was an elite centre in the Late Hallstatt period. At one stage it was defended by a wall of mudbrick built on a drystone foundation. The corner of the defensive circuit has been reconstructed together with several close-spaced timber buildings found inside.

appropriate to the status of the person. This ritual is clearly rooted in Urnfield traditions that used small vehicles and models of vehicles in religious processions. The difference now was that inhumation became the norm for high-status burials and the four-wheeled vehicles were large, elaborate constructions with multiple-spoked wheels and iron tires attached to the felloe with large-headed iron nails. These were sophisticated constructions involving the skills of highly inventive coach-builders working under the patronage of the elite.

In the early part of the Hallstatt period (Hallstatt C), in the eighth and seventh centuries BC, burials of this kind are found over a wide territory extending from eastern France to the Czech Republic. But in the later period, Hallstatt D, which covers broadly the sixth and beginning of the fifth centuries, the focus of elite burial in the western Hallstatt region becomes more restricted to a zone of about 200 by 500 km (130 by 310 miles) extending from eastern France to southern Germany. Here, the rich burials clustered around fortified hilltop settlements, the traditional homes of the lineages of local rulers. These 'seats of nobility' (*fürstensitz*), of which some sixteen have so far been identified, occupy prominent positions and are clearly the centres of large territories over which the resident elite exercised power. One of the most extensively studied is Heuneburg in the valley of the Upper Danube. The hilltop had been occupied in the Urnfield period and continued to be refurbished from time to time thereafter. In one phase, dating to the opening decades of the sixth century, the rampart, previously of earth and timber, was rebuilt in Mediterranean style with a drystone base and mudbrick

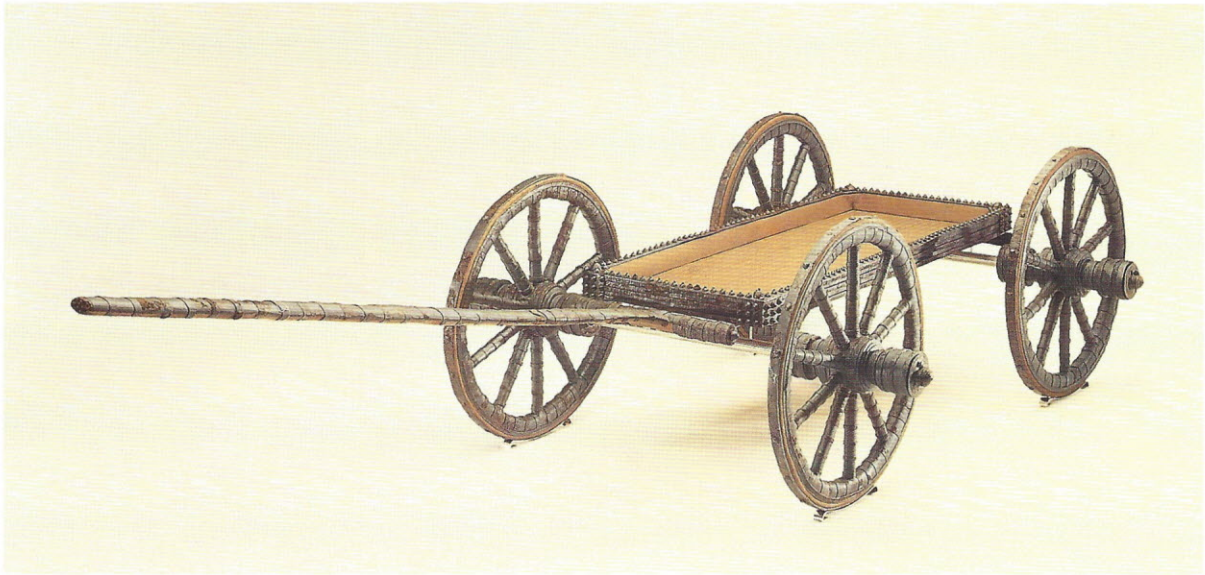


9.21 The grave chamber found beneath a great barrow mound at Vix, Châtillon-sur-Seine, France dating to the end of the sixth century BC. The timber-lined chamber contained the body of a woman together with a disassembled funerary cart and a set of Mediterranean wine-drinking equipment.

9.22 *Opposite:* Bronze krater from the burial chamber at Vix. It was probably made in a Greek workshop in southern Italy. Its great size (1.64 m/5½ ft high) would have required it to have been dismantled for its long journey from the Mediterranean to the barbarian north.

superstructure, the circuit aggrandized by forward-projecting square towers. The rebuilding can only have been overseen by someone thoroughly conversant with Greek construction methods. The choice of such an exotic mode of building – one totally unsuited to the local climate – must have been made deliberately to impress by its 'foreignness'. This same attitude is amply displayed in the grave goods placed in the elite graves. These usually include exotic gear of Mediterranean origin associated with wine-drinking. At Vix, near Châtillon-sur-Seine, the female, buried in a large timber-lined grave chamber some time about 510–500 BC, was accompanied by her ceremonial vehicle and personal ornaments as well as a huge Greek krater for mixing wine, basins, a beaked flagon and two Attic cups – all part of the equipment of the wine-drinking ritual. A generation or so earlier a chieftain buried at Hochdorf near Stuttgart lay on a bronze couch with his funerary wagon nearby. His drinking set included nine gold-mounted drinking horns together with a large Greek cauldron that had contained mead. Apart from the cauldron his finery was of entirely local origin.


CRATÈRE EN BRONZE
TRAVAIL GREC
FIN DU VI^e SIÈCLE avant J.C
HAUTEUR 1.64
POIDS 208 kg



9.23 The princely burial at Hochdorf, near Stuttgart, Germany, dating to the second half of the sixth century BC, contained a four-wheeled funerary wagon sheathed in iron. The body of the chieftain lay on a bronze couch and nearby was a large bronze cauldron of Greek manufacture. A set of drinking horns was hung on the wall of the chamber.

The elite of the western Hallstatt zone had access to a range of Mediterranean goods, including wine, coming from the coastal regions of France and imported in distinctive Massaliot amphorae, as well as bronze vessels and Attic pottery. These they accepted, selecting items that best fitted into their patterns of behaviour. Much of this material will have been transported, via the Rhône, from the Greek port of Massalia (Marseille) in the second half of the sixth century BC, the bulk of the imports following the extension of the colony *c.*540 BC and the development of local wine production. To begin with, the imports on offer were high-grade metal vessels but in the last two decades of the sixth century quantities of cheaper Attic pottery became increasingly available.

The Rhône valley seems to have functioned as the main route to the north until about 500 BC, when Etruscan entrepreneurs, working from the Po valley, began to develop trading connections northwards through the western Alps, using as middlemen the communities of the Golasecca culture, who commanded the southern approaches to the western Alpine passes. In that way the Hallstatt elites acquired Attic Red-Figured wares (brought by sea to the ports of Spina and Adria) and the first of the highly distinctive Etruscan beaked flagons that were to become popular in the first half of the fifth century. The foundation of Massalia *c.*600 BC had seriously disrupted Etruscan trade with the north. It took about a century for the Etruscans to re-establish their links with the transalpine world by a neat outflanking movement that must have caused some economic distress to Massalia in the early part of the fifth century.

9.24 The major exchange networks across the centre of Europe in the ninth to seventh centuries BC.

The elite system in west central Europe has been described as a 'prestige goods economy' – that is, a system in which the social hierarchy was maintained by the paramount chieftains controlling the throughput of rare raw materials and distributing elite goods downwards through the social pyramid as gifts. So long as the flow of elite commodities was kept up the system remained in equilibrium, but if flow faltered the system would become unstable. In effect the system lasted for barely two generations before undergoing major readjustments in the early years of the fifth century. It is tempting to see the prime cause of the collapse as readjustments in the competing trading spheres in the Mediterranean. Those commanding the active routes might flourish, but trade was a fickle friend.

The three hundred years from 800 to 500 BC can fairly be said to mark a major turning point in European history. Many things were happening. In the Mediterranean state formation was now well under way, with distinct polities

– Greek, Phoenician and Etruscan – vying for control of the seaways, extending their territorial hold all around the Mediterranean coasts and expanding well beyond, into the Black Sea and out into the Atlantic. A sailor who wished to boast of his adventuring could now claim to have sailed from the Pillars of Hercules (Gibraltar) to Tanis (at the mouth of the river Don) without facing too much incredulity. But while the Mediterranean-wide system was expanding and intensifying, the Atlantic and Baltic sea routes were fragmenting into far more localized systems, largely because of the collapse of bronze as a prime commodity of liquidity as iron became the metal of choice. That said, the Atlantic and Baltic zones were highly productive of commodities that were in general demand and so the intercontinental routes remained active. Within the core of the peninsula the Celtiberian and Hallstatt communities maintained a tenuous stability deeply rooted in tradition, while to the east in the Carpathian Basin the steppe culture, closely related to that of the Scythians of the Pontic steppe, was now firmly established with the Danube, flowing north–south through Hungary, becoming a cultural frontier that was to remain operative for a thousand years.

At the beginning of the period, around 800 BC, most of Europe was a patchwork of communities enmeshed together in what were essentially 'prehistoric' social and economic systems. Three hundred years later the Mediterranean had become a lake of warring states vying with each other for dominance over land and commodities. A sharp divide was beginning to appear between the 'barbarian' north and the 'civilized' south. That divide was to become increasingly evident as the power struggle for the Mediterranean followed its course.