leaders and spokesmen for the cities—had been used to collecting the taxes for their communities, making up any shortfalls, and reaping the rewards of prestige for doing so. In the fourth century, new land and head taxes impoverished the curiales, while very rich landowners—out in the countryside, surrounded by their bodyguards and slaves—simply did not bother to pay. Now the tax burdens fell on poorer people. Families pressed to pay taxes they could not afford escaped to the great estates of the rich, giving up their free status in return for land and protection. By the seventh century, the rich had won; the barbarian kings no longer bothered to collect general taxes.

The cities, most of them walled since the time of the crisis of the third century, were no longer thriving or populous, though they remained political and religious centers. For example, the episcopal complex at Tours (in Gaul) was within the walls of a fortification built c.400. (See Map 1.4.) Although it still functioned as an institution of religion and government, almost no one lived in the city any longer. But outside of Tours, in a cemetery that the Romans had carefully sited away from ordinary habitation, a new church rose over the relics of the local saint, Martin. This served as a magnet for the people of the surrounding countryside and even farther away. A baptistery was constructed nearby, to baptize the infants of pilgrims and others who came to the tomb of Saint Martin hoping for a miracle. Sometimes people stayed for years. Gregory, bishop of Tours (r.573–594), our chief source for the history of Gaul in the sixth century, described Chainemund, a blind woman:

She was a very pious woman, and full of faith she went to the venerable church of the blessed bishop Martin. She was ... [blind and] covered with abrasions on her entire body. For a sickness had attacked all her limbs with sores, and her appearance was so horrible and so repulsive to look at that she was considered by the people as a leper. Every day she felt her way and went to the church of the glorious champion. After almost three years, while she was standing in front of his tomb, her eyes were opened and she saw everything clearly. All the weakness in her limbs disappeared ... and a healthy skin grew back.12

With people like Chainemund flocking to the tomb, it is no wonder that archaeologists have found evidence of semi-permanent habitations right at the cemetery.

The shift from urban to rural settlements brought with it a new localism. The active long-distance trade of the Mediterranean slowed down, and although it did not stop, it penetrated very little beyond the coast. Consider the fate of pottery, a cheap necessity of the