

THE MEDIEVAL WORLD: PART I

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354-430 - Augustine
fl. 400 - Pelagius

412 - Synod of Carthage
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ART

- c. 333 - Old St. Peter's (Rome)
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- 526-547 - San Vitale (Ravenna)
- c. 532-726 - First Golden Age of
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- 532-537 - Hagia Sophia (Constantinople)
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- c. 600 - Sutton Hoo (England) grave
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- c. 700 - *Lindisfarne Gospels*
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- 843-c. 1000 - Second Golden Age of
Byzantine art
- c. 975-1150 - Romanesque period in art

- 1030 - Cathedral of Speyer (Rhineland)
- 1053-1272 - Cathedral of Pisa and
Baptistry (Pisa)
- 1063 - Cathedral of St. Mark (Venice)
- c. 1073-1083 - Bayeux Tapestry
- c. 1080-1120 - St. Sernin (Toulouse)
- 1093-1130 - Durham Cathedral (England)
- 1115-1120 - St. Etienne (Caen)
- c. 1120-1132 - Autun Cathedral
(Burgandy)

LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

c. 480-524 - Boethius

540-604 - Gregory the Great
(Biographer of Benedict)

673-735 - The Venerable Bede

c. 700 - *Beowulf*
c. 735-804 - Alcuin

780-814 - Revival of learning under
Charlemagne

c. 935-c. 1000 - Hrotswitha

c. 1000 - Aelfric, Abbot of Eynsham
(a Latin grammar)

1079-1142 - Peter Abelard

c. 1100 - *Song of Roland*

HISTORY

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION: THE CHANGING REPUTATION OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The reputation of the Middle Ages has varied greatly in the centuries since their end. The term itself contains a judgment of value, usually derogatory, and its Latin derivative, "medieval," has come to denote what many have considered a thousand-year valley between the great peaks of Ancient and Modern. Indeed, the terms *Middle Ages*, *Medieval*, and *Gothic* have been slanderously used to connote "a thousand years without a bath," in which man lived enveloped in a cowl of abysmal ignorance and superstition, concerning himself only with escape from the torments of hell. This view had its origins in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was employed by men who were contemptuous of their immediate predecessors and attempting to throw a stronger and more favorable light upon their own achievements. In the present this view is still entertained by those who prefer their history divided into neat pigeonholes and bounded by simplistic generalities. It is clear, however, that the warp and woof of the historical fabric does not lend itself to such stereotypic interpretation.

On the other hand, the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century, headed by writers like Sir Walter Scott, fell in love with what they thought of as the Middle Ages. People actually began building again in the medieval style; at one noted American university, it is said, the *new* Gothic stone steps were artificially hollowed out to give the appearance of generations of use, as Gothic steps should. At the height of the romantic revival of medievalism, young children played at Robin Hood, while their parents praised the poetry and "solemn unreasonableness" of the Gothic style. But lovers make notoriously bad judges, and this view, at once so sympathetic and positive in its attitudes, resulted in a misapprehension as wrong as that of its polar opposite.

With the passage of time the terms have become common, conventional nomenclature; for the modern student they lose their original flavor of praise or blame. Or do they? Prejudice, no matter how subtle, is deeply ingrained and difficult to root out, and our language often reflects a continuing bias against the Middle Ages. Thus it is not unusual to hear a modern reformer disparage the ideas of a conservative opponent by branding them as "medieval." Perhaps it would prove a useful enterprise to examine our own prejudices. Were the "Dark Ages" really dark?

With some qualification there is ample reason for considering the period from about 400 to 1000 a dark age. As a whole, when measured by the criteria of philosophical and political concepts, the period is sadly lacking in sophistication, especially when compared with the preceding and following periods or with the contemporary developments in the Byzantine East. During this time lay education was nearly nonexistent, and the goal of that which did exist was not education per se but the training of clergy in pursuit of ecclesiastical office. For their part, ideas concerning the law and the state mark a positive regression from those which had emerged in an earlier time.

Having recognized these great gaps, however, we would be wrong to use them to condemn the Middle Ages out of hand as a time of "willful ignorance" during which some men consciously sought to keep other men in a state of darkness. Such an impulse is both easy and wrong, and must be struggled against. In this struggle a capable ally is found in the genetic-historical method which seeks to identify the sources and causes of decline. Moreover, by asking *why* the Dark Ages occurred and developed as they did, we begin to achieve an understanding based upon knowledge rather than mere ignorant prejudice. And understanding often opens the door to empathy.

Historians disagree as to the dates for the beginning and end of the Middle Ages. All, however, believe that there was a period of transition from the ancient Greco-Roman world, after which there emerged civilizations in both East and West which, by the eighth century, looked quite different from their predecessors in Greece and Rome. As with all such changes, the old was not completely lost in the transition but rather taken up in a synthesis with other elements. In the West the synthesis was essentially a blend of three influences: first, the old Greco-Roman (more Roman than Greek) institutions and traditions; second, an emerging Christianity; and third, a Germanic component. In the East the Byzantine cultural synthesis shared the first two elements with the West, although the Greek influence was far stronger and the form of Christianity somewhat different. In place of the Germanic influence, however, the East was influenced by its age-old connections with an Oriental heritage which stemmed from Persia, Syria, Anatolia, and the Hebrews.

In this unit we shall be concerned primarily with the West, but will include a focus on Eastern developments for the purposes of contrast and broadened understanding. Since the backdrop in both East and West for these developments was the great structure of the Roman Empire, it is with that civilization's late nature and decline that we shall begin.

THE DECLINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE WEST

The death of the emperor Commodus, whose reign was characterized by cruelty and dissipation, cast grave doubts upon Rome's ability to rule itself, let alone its far-flung possessions. In the fifty years following

235, the throne was controlled by the military and occupied by twenty-six emperors, only one of whom died from natural causes. With this thoroughgoing instability at the seat of government and power, conditions worsened throughout the empire: economic activity declined, social problems increased, and the vast frontiers became indefensible against incursions of foreign invaders.

The decline was halted temporarily by the accession of a strong ruler, Diocletian, in 284. Although he adorned himself with the trappings of an Oriental despot and demanded the reverence due a god, Diocletian proved himself to be an innovative leader and a competent administrator. Under his rule, steps were taken to increase bureaucratic efficiency, to defend the borders of the empire, and to stop economic deterioration. Reforms in the army and attempts to control inflation soon followed. Perhaps his greatest innovation was the creation of a co-ruler with the title of Augustus. In a general sense, this amounted to admitting that the empire was simply too large for one man to control; in a more specific sense, it formalized the previously tacit understanding that the empire was divided into Eastern and Western interests.

After a brief period of disruption following the end of Diocletian's reign, another strong ruler, Constantine, became sole emperor in 324. During his rule, which extended from 306 to 337, the inventive period of renascent centralism and rebuilding begun by Diocletian was continued. In the process many of the institutional foundations of the Middle Ages were laid. To begin with, Roman society was divided into functional orders, ranging from the farmers and artisans at the bottom to the military and administrative elites at the top. As they evolved, each service position came to have its own rewards, rights, and duties, and these were enjoined upon the individual by virtue of his occupation in a particular service.

In connection with this development, imperial law invaded private right; as state service was required of all, service invaded freedom. By law, the peasant was bound to his land and the soldier to his arms. Here in *statu nascendi* are revealed the origins of the functionally servile character of medieval society: inherent in the plan was an ideal of a "corporate" society in which everyone was in his proper place.

Relations between the state and the Christian Church also set the tone for developments in the Middle Ages. Under Constantine, church and state were allied; the Church canonized imperial authority and unity, while the state provided the model for church organization and law. Through his Edict of Milan (313), Constantine granted freedom of worship to all Christians and began to show partiality to Christians in public office. He also recognized the Christian Church as a legal body before the law, a fact that meant that the Church could not only hold property but also accept bequests and have its own ecclesiastical courts. These developments opened the way for the Church and its members to develop organization, attitudes, and skills which would raise them to primary positions later in the developing culture of the Middle Ages.

In 330 Constantine moved the capital of the empire to the East, settling in Byzantium, which was renamed Constantinople. With its strategic location--controlling the Aegean Sea and standing astride both Europe and Asia--the city was a fine choice for the seat of power which controlled what now came to be called the "Christian Roman Empire." In this new capital and the renaming of the empire, one can see the union of two of the most important cultural elements of the Middle Ages, the classical Greco-Roman tradition and the new religion of Christianity. (Paradoxically, this fusion was abetted by the third element of the synthesis, the Germanic, for Constantine was encouraged in his move eastward by Rome's increasing vulnerability in the face of barbarian invasions.)

Many theories have been advanced for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Certainly the concentration of authority in the autocracy ruined local governments, long the real backbone of the empire, and entrusted the conduct of public affairs to a ruthless bureaucracy, open to every form of corruption. Moreover, the insatiable demands of the army and the bureaucracy led to a reckless fiscal policy and a destructive inflation. (Perhaps it is true that the empire was just too large to be ruled by unoppressive measures.)

More recent explanations have been economic in nature. For example, some maintain that soil exhaustion physically enfeebled the empire, while others hold that cycles in greater and lesser rainfall created unstable agricultural conditions and economic havoc.

For his part, Mikhail Rostovtzeff, the eminent Russian historian, believes that there was a gradual absorption of the higher classes by the lower, accompanied by a gradual leveling (or lowering) of standards. In the struggle between these classes, the city, with its urban and capitalistic society, was completely engulfed by the inflow of barbarous elements. In an earlier variation of this theme, Gibbon, in his classic work *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), also attributes the destruction of Rome to the barbarian hordes.

It seems probable that the fall of Roman influence in the West (dated traditionally at 476) was the result of a combination of these and other factors which had been building momentum for centuries. As a result of their confluence in the fifth century, Rome's Western empire retreated eastward like a melting glacier. In its path it deposited many phenomena which were to determine a great deal of the development that ensued.

As imperial power and control receded, local populations remained stationary; in this way local loyalties, local governments, and local economies waxed in importance and flowed into the vacuum created by the loss of central control. In this they were aided by the long-established *latifundia*, the large estates which were autonomous and self-sustaining entities. In essence, the feudal/manorial system which was to characterize the Middle Ages was being created.

Economic activity declined to primitive levels of barter and ruralism. Great cities suffered disintegration, lesser ones disappeared. Not

surprisingly, the appearance of a simpler "house-economy" was accompanied by a loss of Roman law and its replacement by a more local, customary legal code which reflected the more primitive social conditions that came to prevail. Finally, the old Roman concept of "clientage" wherein a weaker individual sought the patronage and protection of one who was stronger became part of the basis for a thorough-going revolution in social relations. Centrifugal forces were in motion, and the center could not hold.

THE GERMANIC COMPONENT

The second factor which both contributed to the decline of Roman power and helped determine the nature of early medieval Europe was the influence of the Germanic barbarians.

For centuries different nations of Germanic peoples had been making incursions into Roman territory. At times they came as invading armies, but generally they filtered in slowly, bringing their families and possessions with them. Their fighting abilities had impressed Roman commanders and thousands were enrolled in the armies. Finally, by the time of Constantine, foreign elements formed the bulk of the army, and German warriors were to be found in the bodyguard of nearly every princeps and emperor. Eventually even the civil service swelled with their numbers, and it seems unsurprising then that Rome itself should eventually have been taken over by the Germans.

Our chief source of information concerning ancient Germanic society is the *Germania* of Tacitus, written in A.D. 98. From this work we learn that the economic and political institutions of the Germans were those of a people just emerging into a settled existence. This is to say that trade took the form of barter, political institutions revolved around assemblies of warriors, and the administration of justice remained largely in private hands. In such a context notions of state and law remained primitive, the latter taking the form of oaths and ordeals. Social relationships placed great weight upon the institution of the *comitatus*, in which the warriors were bound by pledges to fight for and serve their leader. Clearly, this last point re-enforced the Roman concept of clientage and contributed greatly to the important medieval notion of a contractual relationship between rulers and subjects, involving reciprocal obligations of protection and obedience.

Armed conflicts began in earnest in the fourth century when the Visigoths, angered by the oppression of imperial governors, raised the standard of revolt. In 378 they overwhelmed a Roman army at Adrianople and then marched westward into Italy. In 410, under Alaric, they captured and sacked Rome itself. Rome was plundered once again in 455 by the Vandals, who had established a kingdom in the province of Carthage after migrating from their original home between the Oder and Vistula Rivers. By 476 the Roman Empire in the West fell in the wake of Germanic and other

pressures.

Between 500 and 700 most of western Europe languished in a kind of backward age, and the barbarian usurpers of Roman authority proved themselves incapable of bringing about any meaningful degree of unity. Some scholars have taken this failure as proof of the barbarians' "inferiority." In their view the invaders were unable to maintain the administrative organization and high culture that had passed into their hands. Contrary to this, it is the view in this unit that the Germans had inherited a deteriorating situation of such proportions as to preclude anyone from exerting effective remedial force. From this it follows that the "barbarians," while undoubtedly contributing to the decay of the Roman Empire, must also be seen as victims of the empire's decline. Thus, judgments of a questionable nature are avoided, and the blame for the "Dark Ages" is more equitably distributed.

Italy

Since efficient government for the public welfare was impossible, it is understandable that many Germanic rulers regarded their kingdoms as private estates to be exploited for their own benefit. The exception to this rule was Theodoric the Ostrogoth, who conquered the Italian peninsula in 493. Seeking to check the progress of deterioration, he fostered commerce and agriculture and repaired many public buildings and roads. Because of his tolerance and patronage of learning, his rule compares favorably to those of many of the Caesars. None of this, however, survived his death, and the reconquest of Italy by Justinian around 550 merely increased the devastation of the countryside. Conditions fell to the point where cannibalism was not unheard of, and devastation was followed by further invasion as the Lombards descended into Italy in 568. These new masters succeeded in holding fast until the conquest of Charlemagne in the eighth century.

Merovingian

In France the Frankish kingdom emerged under the guidance of the Merovingian dynasty which was established by Clovis in 481. Under his direction the Franks conducted a series of conquests that made them the most powerful people in the West and, thus, the most useful to the Church. Clovis married a Christian Burgundian princess, Clothilda, and promised to become a Christian himself if he were victorious in the battle with the Alemanni. The victory was won, and Clovis was baptized together with his warriors. With this act Clovis became the only orthodox Christian ruler in the West, since the other tribes had all embraced Arianism. The acceptance of orthodox Christianity by the Franks assured Clovis the support of the papacy, and the ensuing partnership between throne and altar was to have long-range consequences and mixed blessings for both parties. Clovis expanded his secular realm in the name of Christian orthodoxy by undermining the Arian Germans in Burgundy and the Rhinelands, the Visigoths south of the Loire, and the Ostrogoths in Provence. The Merovingian

successors extended the Frankish kingdom to include all of modern France, Belgium, and much of Germany.

But the Merovingian house began to decay from within. The practice of dividing the realm among all the sons (a practice derived from seeing the realm as a private affair which could be inherited) resulted in constant civil wars. Unable to transcend their cultural limits, the princes persisted in the use of force to gain their personal ends at a time when a new wave of invasions threatened the Franks. The western Slavs invaded the frontiers, and there was constant fighting between Slav and German. In the seventh century, moreover, Muslim invaders spread across North Africa and into Spain, where they defeated the Visigoths and took over control of most of the Spanish peninsula. In the face of such threats, the so-called "do-nothing" rulers of the degenerating dynasty provided scant protection.

Carolingian

Power was eventually concentrated in the chief official of the royal household, the mayor of the palace. A new period in Frankish history began when Charles Martel ("the Hammer"), mayor of the palace and founder of the Carolingian dynasty, took over the realm in 714 but kept the Merovingians in nominal control. He beat down the rebellious nobles, restored unity among the Franks, and strengthened the eastern frontier against the Slavs. In 733 he crowned his achievements by defeating the Moors at Poitiers, driving them back across the Pyrenees into Spain.

Pepin the Short (741-768), Martel's son, was a worthy successor. St. Boniface, the great English missionary, served as intermediary to have the papacy recognize Pepin as legal ruler. In 751 the Franks elected Pepin king, and he was crowned by St. Boniface (thus tightening the interaction between sacred and secular). Pepin pursued the same policies as his father--improving royal administration and strengthening the frontiers. In 754 Pope Stephen II sought aid from the Frankish king to maintain control of papal territories in Italy as the Lombards, who held northern Italy, threatened to expand southward. In the past the Eastern emperor had aided the pope, but in the eighth century a serious schism developed over the Iconoclastic Controversy, and the Western pontiff was forced to find support in other quarters. Thus, events widened the gap between East and West, and the isolation of Europe caused the two dominant forces of the area to form a stronger alliance. An agreement called the *Donation of Pepin*, based upon an earlier document called the *Donation of Constantine*, was drawn up, promising the papacy the right over certain lands; and Pepin drove the Lombard forces back.

In 768 Charlemagne, Pepin's son, emerged to become one of the greatest figures of the early Middle Ages. His biographer, Einhard, described Charlemagne as a leader par excellence, with an imposing physique, a joy for life, a powerful intelligence, and a strong devotion to family and church.

One of the most important and enduring achievements of his reign was the cultural renaissance that distinguished his age. This "Carolingian Renaissance" sought to advance education and scholarship. At Aix-la-Chapelle, his capital, a palace school was placed under the direction of Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon scholar. Among significant achievements were the reform of handwriting into a style called miniscule and the preservation of classical manuscripts.

Charlemagne's long reign was highlighted by a series of campaigns that added important territories and established frontier buffer zones called *marks* or *marches*. In 774 he defeated the Lombard king and annexed all the Italian peninsula except the southern part and the Papal States. He subdued the Saxons on the northeastern frontier and seized a large territory to the east from the Avars and Slavs. He also created a Spanish March across the Pyrenees to Barcelona.

Charlemagne desired to set up good government as well as to conquer. All of the Carolingian territories were divided into administrative units, each under a count. To prevent the counts and dukes from exploiting their offices for private advantage, he sent out *missi dominici*, the king's envoys, to check on these officials. Charlemagne tried to set up a regime of order and justice based upon Christian ideology by which each person's rights were guarded under the law.

Charlemagne was an ardent champion of the expansion of Christianity, encouraging missionaries and even using force to make converts. The conquests of Charlemagne were made possible only by fearful bloodshed and a resort to measures of extreme cruelty. Under his orders, for example, the stubborn opposition of the Saxons was subdued by the beheading of 4,500 people. It is typical of such events that a "higher justification" is given for such activity; in this case the pretext was that of inducing the pagan to adopt Christianity. If Pascal was right in saying that "none do greater damage than those who act from religious conviction," how much more so is this true when that religious conviction can serve to buttress the expansion of a secular realm. In any event, such service was rewarded by Charlemagne's coronation as Roman emperor on Christmas Day, 800. As Pope Leo III, whom Charlemagne had re-installed in the papacy earlier that year, placed the crown on his head, the crowd hailed him as "Augustus, crowned by God, the great and peace-bringing emperor of the Romans."

For all practical purposes, the pope's act was merely the recognition of an accomplished fact; Charlemagne already ruled nearly all of western and central Europe. The significance of the coronation went much deeper, however, for it foreshadowed the great struggle of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries--a struggle over who should be supreme in western Europe, the emperor or the pope. For his part, Charlemagne never acknowledged any sovereignty of the pope over him. In his view church affairs were as much a part of his domain as were secular matters.

For the pope, the act of coronation carried a different meaning. In his view all kings were his stewards, exercising their authority for the

benefit of the Church. The emperor received his dignity from the pope; and what the pope could grant he could also take away.

The resolution of this problem, with a historical examination of its background, must wait until Unit 6, when we shall trace the development of the Church in the West in greater detail. Suffice it to say here that the problem became thornier as much of Charlemagne's accomplishment perished after his death. His son, Louis the Pious, was unable to administer the system established by his father. Shortly after his death the Treaty of Verdun (843) provided for division of the empire among Louis' three sons: Charles the Bald obtained the western part; Louis the German received the eastern; and Lothair, who retained the title of emperor, obtained Italy and a narrow corridor up to the North Sea. These divisions were to form the basis for the shaping of modern France and Germany, while the center area of Lorraine remained the source of wars and disputes for centuries.

England

Coming first as invaders but remaining as settlers, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were firmly established in England by the end of the sixth century. In 787 the Vikings, whom the Anglo-Saxons called the Danes, first settled in Ireland and then in northeastern England. For a time the Danes were able to take advantage of the strife among the Saxon kingdoms, but the suspicious groups united in a strong confederation in the face of the Danish threat. Under the leadership of Alfred the Great of Wessex (849-899), the unified kingdoms managed to drive the Danes back.

In addition to being a good military leader, Alfred was also an efficient administrator. He reorganized the army, infused new vigor into local government, and revised and clarified the laws. In an attempt to establish elements of a national culture and to foster learning, he founded schools and brought scholars from afar to have the classics translated from Latin into the vernacular. Unfortunately, King Alfred's successors were men of weaker fiber. With the reign of Ethelred the Unready (not a name designed to strike fear in an enemy's heart), the kingdom was surrendered into the hands of the powerful Danish king Canute in 1017. In 1035 Canute died, and the Saxon dynasty regained control. But not for long: Ethelred's son, Edward the Confessor, proved to be as unready as his father. During his reign affairs in England fell to the management of the Duchy of Normandy, across the channel. Upon Edward's death the Duke of Normandy, who came to be known as William the Conqueror (1027-1087), laid claim to the English crown. William landed at Sussex in 1066, and the Battle of Hastings demonstrated that England had yet another king who would live up to his name.