

JUSTINIAN'S IMPERIAL AMBITIONS

As we observed in [Chapter 6](#), the eastern and western territories of Rome's empire were becoming divided along linguistic, cultural, and economic lines. By the end of the fourth century, this division also became political. The Ostrogothic conquest of Italy under Theodoric (r. 493–526), which was supported by the imperial government, briefly placed Constantinople in a position to influence affairs in the old Roman heartland, and enabled Theodoric to reestablish Roman rule in some regions of Italy and Gaul. But none of Theodoric's short-lived successors was able to rule this territory effectively. In 535, the Ostrogothic kingdom was overthrown in an attempt to reunify the entire Roman Empire.



THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD UNDER JUSTINIAN, 527–565. Compare this map with the one on [page 194](#). Here, the green shading represents those regions controlled by Justinian. ■ *What was the geographical extent of Justinian's empire?* ■ *Which areas of the former Roman Empire did Justinian not attempt to reconquer?* ■ *What may have been the strategy behind these campaigns?*

The man responsible for this was Justinian (r. 527–565), the most ambitious emperor since Constantine. Although the empire he ruled was largely Greek-speaking, Justinian himself came from the Latin-speaking province of Dardania (now Serbia). He saw himself as the heir to the

principate established by Augustus; and like Augustus, he was aided by an astute and determined wife, Theodora, who played an influential role in his reign. Although his efforts ultimately failed, they had a lasting influence on the entire Mediterranean world.

Justinian's Attempted Reconquest

Justinian's initial efforts to strengthen and reunite the Roman Empire seemed successful. In 533, his general, Belisarius, conquered the Vandal kingdom of northwest Africa, destroying one of the eastern Roman Empire's greatest rivals and facilitating campaigns in Ostrogothic Italy and Visigothic Spain. By 536, Belisarius appeared poised to occupy Rome's old homeland, where he was welcomed as a savior by some former subjects of the Ostrogoths. But these early victories were illusory. Although the Mediterranean was under Roman control, the human and financial costs of these campaigns drastically strained imperial resources. Belisarius's army in Italy was overextended, and Justinian's need to levy soldiers led to oppressive taxes on vitally important regions such as Egypt and Syria, which undermined support for his imperial project. The Romans of Italy and North Africa, meanwhile, resented the costs their own "liberation" im-

posed on them. When the imperial armies were withdrawn from these regions to deal with the growing threat of Persia, North Africa was ripe for later conquest by the Arabs (see [page 225](#)).

Persia and the Rise of Rabbinic Judaism

Although the Persian Empire under the Sassanid dynasty had long been a rival of Rome, it was able to expand its reach with little resistance during this time, while Rome's armies contended with waves of invasion elsewhere. It was in Persia that many Palestinian Jews had found a home after the Romans' destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem ([Chapter 6](#)), and where they joined older Jewish communities that had remained in the ancient region of Babylonia after it was conquered by Cyrus the Great ([Chapter 2](#)). Here, a group of powerful and learned *rabbis* (teachers) worked to keep Judaism not only alive, but flourishing. They established special schools (*yeshivas*) for the study of the Torah. In the sixth century, they presided over the codification of the Talmud, a collection of writings that preserved and interpreted centuries of oral teachings and legal judgments. This new phase of Judaism's development in Persia during the dias-

pora is accordingly known as Rabbinic Judaism, and it soon influenced the establishment of similar schools and traditions in Jewish communities throughout the medieval world.

The Justinianic Plague

In addition to the challenge posed by Persia, Justinian's attempted reconquest of former Roman territories was further complicated by a pandemic that broke out in 541–542. It even afflicted Justinian himself—although he recovered—and is known as the Justinianic Plague. According to recent findings by epidemiologists and geneticists, this pandemic was caused by an early strain of the same virus that later spawned the terrible Black Death of the fourteenth century (see [Chapter 10](#)). It may even have been just as deadly and widespread, stretching from China (where it appears to have originated) to Scandinavia and into Africa and the Indian Ocean. It is estimated to have killed a large percentage of the world's population at that time (some 25 million people) and recurred in some places for the next 200 years. It is ironic that the plague spread so rapidly and so far because of the very efficient infrastructures—roads, bridges, and trading networks—that bound the Roman Empire together

and linked it to its neighbors.

Justinian's Impact on the Western Roman Empire

Justinian's wars proved more devastating to Italy, in particular, than the previous incursions of barbarian peoples. Around Rome, the vital supply lines of the aqueducts were cut, and the elaborate system of conduits, drainage ditches, and reservoirs was destroyed. Parts of the Italian countryside returned to marshland, and some areas were not drained again until the twentieth century. In 568, a new group of migrants, known as the Lombards, took advantage of the chaos to conquer the northern third of the peninsula. Thereafter, Italy would be divided between Lombard territories in the north and imperial territories in the southeast, with Rome and its region precariously sandwiched between them. The controlling forces within these territories changed greatly over time, but this tripartite division remained the essential political configuration of Italy until the nineteenth century—and it still divides Italian politics to this day.

Meanwhile, tensions between Arian Visigoths and their Roman subjects continued in Spain, even after the Visi-

gothic king officially converted to Roman Christianity in 587. This mutual hostility persisted until the Visigothic kingdom, like North Africa, was largely absorbed by Islam.

The Codification of Roman Law

Justinian's most positive and lasting accomplishment was legal and intellectual. The codification of Roman law was a project long overdue. Since the time of the third-century jurists (see [Chapter 5](#)), the number of imperial statutes and legal decisions had multiplied, and the resulting body of law was both massive and self-contradictory. Moreover, conditions had changed so radically within the empire that many legal principles no longer applied. When Justinian came to power in 527, one of his first initiatives was to bring existing precedents into harmony with actual historical conditions and thereby restore the prestige and power of the imperial office.

To carry out this work, Justinian appointed a team of lawyers under the supervision of a jurist called Tribonian. Within two years, this commission published the first result of its labors: the Code, a systematic compilation of imperial statutes, which was later supplemented by another book, the Novels (*Novellae*, “new laws”), containing

the legislation of Justinian and his immediate successors. By 532, the commission had also completed the Digest, a summary of the writings of Rome's great legal authorities, including the jurists of the principate. Its final product was the *Institutes*, a textbook of legal principles. Together, these four volumes constitute the *Corpus Juris Civilis* (“body of civil law”).

Justinian's *Corpus* was a brilliant achievement. In the eastern Roman Empire, it immediately became the foundation on which all subsequent legal developments would rest. Although little known in western Europe for centuries, it eventually influenced the legal systems of many nations. The nineteenth-century Napoleonic Code—still the basis of law in France, Spain, much of Latin America, and the state of Louisiana—is essentially based on the *Corpus* of Justinian.



JUSTINIAN AND THEODORA. These sixth-century mosaics from the Church of San Vitale in the imperial capital of Ravenna (Italy) show the emperor and empress proceeding toward the main altar of the church, carrying the holy vessels used for the consecration of bread and wine. ■ *What do these images convey about the sacred and secular powers of both figures? What do they suggest about the role of gender in the representation of power?*

The *Corpus* also had a profound impact on political philosophy. Starting from the maxim that “what pleases the prince has the force of law,” it granted unlimited powers to the emperor and was therefore adopted by early modern rulers as a foundation for absolutism (see [Chapter 15](#)). But the *Corpus* provided some support for constitutional forms of government as well, because it maintained that a sovereign’s powers are delegated to him by the people, and that what is mandated by the people can also be taken away by them. Equally important is the fundamental principle that the state is a corporate body, not the extension of an individual’s private property. The modern conception of the state as a public entity derives from the legal maxims of the *Corpus*.



THE ROMAN EMPIRE OF BYZANTIUM

With the failure of Justinian's project of imperial reunification, the history of the eastern Roman Empire can be said to enter a new phase. Indeed, many historians regard it as essentially a new entity, the Byzantine Empire, a name derived from the ancient port where Constantinople was situated. [Byzantium](#) thus became *one* of Rome's three heirs, not the sole heir of Roman authority, as Justinian had hoped. Yet according to the citizens of this empire, it never ceased to be Rome, and they were never anything but Romans. They called their empire Rome, not Byzantium, and saw themselves as carrying forward Roman traditions, values, and institutions.

As a result of Justinian's policies and outside pressures, however, this New Rome was struggling for survival. By 610, the Greek-speaking imperial dynasty that began with Heraclius (r. 610–641) was unable to extend its influence much farther west than the Adriatic. Meanwhile, the Persians had conquered almost all of the empire's eastern and southern territories in Syria and Palestine.

They had even plundered Jerusalem and carried off a precious relic believed to be part of the original cross on which Jesus had been crucified. With an enormous effort, Heraclius rallied his remaining military powers and routed the Persians, recapturing Jerusalem and retrieving the relic in 627.



THE SECRET WEAPON OF BYZANTIUM: 'GREEK FIRE.'

This depiction of Greek fire in action illustrates a chronicle by John Skylitzes, a Byzantine historian who flourished in the eleventh century. This manuscript was copied in Sicily during the twelfth century and is now preserved in the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid.

But these gains were short-lived. Arab armies, inspired by the new religion of Islam, were able to profit from

the empire's exhaustion. They soon occupied the recently reconquered Byzantine territories and claimed Jerusalem as a holy site for Muslims, as well as for Jews and Christians. They also absorbed the entire Persian Empire and rapidly made their way westward to Roman North Africa. They then took to the sea and, in 677, attempted a naval conquest of Constantinople. Repulsed with difficulty, they made another attempt in 717 by means of a concerted land and sea operation. This new threat was countered by the emperor Leo III (r. 717–741). His forces were able to defeat the Arabs by deploying keen strategy and a secret inflammatory mixture of chemicals that produced “Greek fire.” Over the next few decades, the eastern Roman Empire managed to reconquer most of Anatolia, which remained the imperial heartland for the next several centuries.

Sources of Stability

In many ways, the internal politics of the Byzantine Empire were as challenging as the history of its wider region. Because all power was concentrated in the imperial court at Constantinople and the emperors followed their predecessors in claiming autonomous rule, opposition to imperial authority could take the form of intrigue,

treason, and violent plots. Indeed, Byzantine politics is so famous for its cloak-and-dagger complexity that the word *byzantine* has come to denote devious machinations or elaborate systems of bureaucracy. In reality, though, many able rulers wielded their powers very effectively in Constantinople, where a centralized government continued to function even in times of upheaval. No polity in western Europe had anything resembling such effective mechanisms of government until a much later period.

Strong, self-perpetuating political institutions thus constituted a major source of stability in Byzantium and offer an explanation for the extraordinary longevity of the empire's core provinces—nearly a thousand years. The imperial bureaucracy in Constantinople regulated prices and wages, maintained systems of licensing, and controlled exports and trade. Its highly educated officials supervised many aspects of social and cultural life, overseeing schools, the organization of the Orthodox Church, and the observance of religious rites and holidays. Even the popular sport of chariot racing—New Rome's exciting answer to gladiatorial combat, which harked back to the love of that sport in ancient Greece ([Chapter 3](#))—was strictly regulated, as were the various teams' fiercely competitive fans. The imperial government also regu-

lated the army and navy, the courts, and the diplomatic service, endowing these agencies with organizational strengths incomparable for their time.

Another source of stability in the eastern Roman Empire was a well-integrated and sophisticated economy. Commerce and cities continued to flourish as they had done in late antiquity, which was not the case in western Europe at this time: the new barbarian kingdoms had no established gold or silver coinage to facilitate transactions, and few cities had withstood the upheavals of the fifth century. Constantinople became a central emporium for eastern luxury goods and western raw materials alike. The empire also nurtured and protected its own industries, most notably the manufacture and weaving of silk, which—according to legend—had been brought illegally to western Asia from China, where silkworms and the knowledge of cultivating them was a carefully guarded secret among the women who dominated this industry—and who continued to do so in Byzantium.

But Constantinople was not the only great urban center. The Hellenistic capital, Antioch, and the bustling cities of Thessalonica and Trebizond were also very large and prosperous. Any one of them would have dwarfed any western European city; Paris was a village, and Rome

may have had a few thousand people living among the ruins. In such cities, Byzantine trade and industry produced most of the surplus wealth that sustained the state. But agriculture also lay at the heart of the Byzantine economy, so much so that peasant farmers struggled to maintain their independence from large estates owned by wealthy aristocrats and monasteries. As in the final centuries of the Roman republic ([Chapter 4](#)), they were only able to do so with the help of legislation. When the aristocracy eventually gained control, during the eleventh century, free peasants were transformed into impoverished tenant farmers, as had been the case in Italy during the third century C.E. This was one of the less positive ways in which New Rome resembled its ancient predecessor.

Orthodoxy and Iconoclasm

Viewed from our perspective, law, strong governance, and a thriving economy seem to be the basis of Byzantine civilization. Yet the inhabitants of New Rome also cared a great deal about religious [orthodoxy](#). Indeed, their intense preoccupation with questions of doctrine could be a catalyst for political and social dissension, but it also endowed the empire's inhabitants with a deeply shared

sense of identity. In ancient Rome, the *mos maiorum* ([Chapter 5](#)) had undergirded Roman pride and superiority; in New Rome, Orthodox Christianity occupied the same fundamental place. The stakes of theological and doctrinal disputes were further heightened because emperors took an active role in them.

The most contentious issue, and one that came to a head in the eighth century, was a violent disagreement over the meaning and use of religious images, known as the [Iconoclast](#) (“image-breaking”) [Controversy](#). As we saw in [Chapter 6](#), Christians had long been accustomed to expressing their devotion to Christ and the saints through the making and veneration of images. There was even a legend that the author of Luke’s Gospel had been a painter, the maker of the first icon. At the same time, however, some Christians argued that any representation of a holy person came close to being a form of idolatry, something strongly condemned in the Jewish tradition, which Christianity had inherited. Both Roman (Latin-speaking) and Orthodox (Greek-speaking) Christian teachers insisted that images were only *aids* to worship, not *objects* of worship, but this fine line was easily crossed.

In Byzantium, the veneration of icons was an especially

potent part of daily devotion, so any suggestion that such images should be suppressed or destroyed was bound to be contentious. But that is precisely what the iconoclast movement advocated. They argued that honoring images was blasphemous because they were made by human beings who were thereby setting up gods other than God (the first prohibition in the Ten Commandments given to Moses). For their part, traditionalists argued that the images themselves were never objects of worship; rather, icons were windows through which a glimpse of heaven might be granted to human beings on earth.

The iconoclast movement was initiated by Emperor Leo III, whose leadership had helped to save Constantinople from Arab invasion, and who was then faced with the task of rebuilding imperial authority. It thus seems likely that there were political and economic motives behind the campaign. By proclaiming a radical new religious movement, the emperor could renew and strengthen control over the Orthodox Church and thus combat the growing power of monasteries. And indeed, the great monasteries of Byzantium were the major producers of icons. So when the monasteries rallied to the cause of images, they were strongly suppressed by Leo and his successors, who took this opportunity to confiscate much of their wealth.



DEVOTIONAL IMAGE—OR DANGEROUS IDOL? This icon of the Virgin Mary, “the Bud-Bearer (Theotokos) was painted in the sixth century and is one of the oldest such images in existence. Preserved at the Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai (Egypt), it shows the mother and child flanked by two warrior saints and protected by angels gazing upward at the hand of God emerging from heaven. *How might such icons inspire devotion and shape viewers’ ideas of femininity and motherhood?*

- *According to the proponents of iconoclasm, why would such an image be considered blasphemous?*

The Legacy of Iconoclasm

The Iconoclast Controversy was resolved toward the end of the eighth century in favor of those who promoted religious imagery, the Iconodules (“image servants”). But it had some long-lasting effects. One was the destruction of many artworks produced or preserved in the eastern Roman Empire. This means that examples of Christian artistry from the first eight centuries after Jesus’s death are very rare in these regions and are preserved mainly in Italy, Palestine, Egypt, and Ethiopia—beyond the reach of the iconoclastic emperors. A second consequence was the widening of a religious and political breach between

the Greek East and the Latin West. Prior to Emperor Leo's iconoclastic initiatives, the patriarch of Rome—known familiarly as “*papa*” in Latin slang—had often been a close ally of Byzantium's rulers. But iconoclasm called into question not only the veneration of images but also the veneration of the saints, and by extension, the Roman patriarch's claim to be Saint Peter's successor (see [Chapter 6](#)). This was not a position that the Roman *papa* (pope) could support.

The ultimate defeat of iconoclasm crystallized some aspects of belief and practice that came to be characteristic of Byzantium. One was a renewed emphasis on the Orthodox faith of the empire, which had the effect of marginalizing the Christians of Syria and Armenia, who had their own churches and devoutly held beliefs. Fear of heresy, combined with the powerful position of the emperor as head of the Orthodox Church, also tended to inhibit intellectual freedom. Although the imperial family eventually founded a university in Constantinople, its students and faculty were discouraged from expressing dissenting opinions or engaging in any significant degree of intellectual speculation—in marked contrast to the more freewheeling intellectual atmosphere cultivated by the universities of western Europe (see [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#)).

Tradition and Innovation in Byzantium

Although Orthodox religion was central to the identity of Byzantine Romans, so was their direct link with the Hellenistic past and the heritage of ancient Greece. Byzantine schools based their instruction on classical Greek literature, in marked contrast to the more tentative attitude toward classical learning in western Europe (see [Chapter 6](#)). Educated men and women around the Byzantine court who quoted only a single line of Homer could expect their listeners to recognize the entire passage from which it came. In the English-speaking world, only the King James Bible has ever achieved the same degree of cultural saturation. Indeed, Homeric epics were a kind of sacred text in Byzantium, as were the surviving tragedies of Athenian dramatists of the fifth century B.C.E.

Byzantine scholars intensively studied the philosophy of Plato and the historical prose of Thucydides. In contrast, Aristotle's works were less well known, and many other philosophical traditions of antiquity were deemed dangerous. Although Justinian had presided zealously over the codification of ancient Roman (and thus pagan) law, he registered his distrust of Greek (pagan) philosophy by shutting down the Athenian academies that had existed since Plato's day. The practice of Greek scientific inquiry

Byzantine Art and Architecture

Byzantine achievements in the realms of architecture and art are exemplified by the church of Hagia Sophia (“Holy Wisdom”) in Constantinople, constructed at enormous cost under the patronage of Justinian. It quickly came to define an architectural style unique to Byzantium. Its purpose was not to express pride in human accomplishment but rather to symbolize the mysteries of the Christian faith and the holy knowledge imparted by Christ to the soul of the believer. For this reason, the architects paid little attention to the external appearance of the building. The interior, however, was decorated with richly colored mosaics, gold leaf, colored marble columns, and bits of tinted glass set on edge to refract rays of sunlight like sparkling gems, making it appear that light is generated from within. The magnificent dome over its central square was an unprecedented engineering feat: it was upheld by four great arches springing from pillars at the four corners of the square. The result was an architectural framework both marvelously strong and delicate. Its effect is heightened by the many windows placed around the dome’s rim, which convey the impression that it floats in midair.



HAGIA SOPHIA. This great monument to the artistry, engineering skill, and spirituality of Byzantium was built during the reign of Justinian. The four minarets at its corners were added in 1453, after Constantinople (now Istanbul) was absorbed into the empire of the Ottoman Turks. Hagia Sophia is now a mosque and a museum.



DOMES OF HAGIA SOPHIA. The revolutionary structure of the church, shown here, made it appear as if the enormous dome floated on light and air.

Many aspects of Byzantine arts and learning exerted

strong influence on the artisans and scholars of western Europe through continued economic and cultural contact. The basilica of San Marco in Venice (c. 1063) reflects this influence distinctly, as do medieval mosaics in such cities as Ravenna and Palermo. Greek-speaking monasteries in southeastern Italy maintained especially close ties with their counterparts in the eastern empire, and many were allowed to practice the rituals of the Orthodox Church; many Greek books, including the comedies of Aristophanes ([Chapter 4](#)), were copied and preserved there. But much of the heritage of Western civilizations that was cultivated in Byzantium was largely inaccessible elsewhere in Europe, because the knowledge of Greek became increasingly rare.

Glossary

Byzantium

A small settlement located at the mouth of the Black Sea and at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, it was chosen by Constantine as the site for his new imperial capital of Constantinople in 324. Modern historians use this name to refer to the eastern Roman Empire, which lasted in this region until 1453, but the

MUHAMMAD AND THE TEACHINGS OF ISLAM

The civilization that formed around the religion of Islam mirrors the Roman Empire in its global reach and longevity; in this, it is truly one of Rome's heirs. Islam (Arabic for "submission") also calls to mind the early republic of Rome in that it demands loyalty not just to common forms of worship, but also to certain social and cultural norms. But whereas the Roman Empire came to undergird Christianity, elevating it to the status of a major faith, the Muslim faith was itself an engine of imperial expansion.

The Revelations of Muhammad

Islam emerged in Arabia, a desert land considered so forbidding that neither the Romans nor the Persians sought to conquer it. Arabian society was tribal and did not revolve around urban settlements. Many Arabs were herdsmen, living off the milk of their camels and the produce of desert oases. But as with the Hittites in the second

millennium B.C.E. ([Chapter 2](#)), their very mobility, ingenuity, and pioneering spirit made them excellent explorers and long-distance traders. In the second half of the sixth century, when protracted wars between Byzantium and Persia made travel dangerous for merchants, the Arabs quickly established themselves as guides, couriers, and guardians of transit routes between Africa and Asia.

As part of this process, towns began to emerge. The most prominent of these was Mecca, an ancient sacred site that lay at the crossroads of major caravan routes. Mecca was home to the Kaaba (*KAH-ah-bah*), a shrine housing the Black Stone worshiped by many Arabian tribes. (It may be a meteorite, and hence of celestial origin.) The Quraysh (*kur-AYSH*), the tribe that controlled this shrine, thus came to dominate the economic and religious life of the whole region, forming an aristocracy of traders and entrepreneurs.

[Muhammad](#), the founder of Islam, was a member of this tribe. He was born in Mecca about 570. Orphaned early in life, he entered the service of a wealthy widow and successful merchant Khadija, whom he married. She would be his closest confidant, first follower, and energetic proponent of his teachings.

Until middle age, Muhammad lived as a prosperous trader, little different from his fellow townsmen. But around 610, he experienced a spiritual epiphany. At this time, the Arab tribes worshiped many gods. Yet, like the ancient Hebrews, they also acknowledged one god as more powerful. For the Hebrews, God was Yahweh; for the Arabs, Allah. But whereas the Hebrews' embrace of monotheism was a long and gradual process, Muhammad's conversion was sudden, the immediate consequence of revelation. Thereafter, Muhammad received further revelations that became the basis for his teachings and by which he was persuaded to accept the calling of a prophet and proclaim the new faith to his tribe.

The Beginnings of Islam

Muhammad was not immediately successful in gaining converts among his own people. In Mecca, tribal leaders of the Quraysh feared that his teachings would diminish the importance of the Kaaba. Some residents of the town of Yathrib, however, saw an opportunity to increase its prestige and invited Muhammad to live among them to serve as judge and arbiter in local rivalries. Muhammad, mourning the recent death of Khadija, accepted this invitation in 622, along with a few loyal followers. Because

this emigration—in Arabic, the *Hijra* (*HIJ-ruh*)—marks the beginning of Muhammad's wider influence, Muslims regard it as the beginning of time. Just as Christians date all events according to the birth of Jesus (see [Chapter 6](#)), Muslims begin their dating system with the Hijra.

Muhammad changed the name of Yathrib to Medinat-an-nabi ("City of the Prophet") and established himself as the town's ruler. He did not, however, abandon his desire to exercise authority among his own people. He and his followers began a series of military raids of Quraysh caravans traveling beyond Mecca. An important early victory occurred in 624 at the Battle of Badr in western Arabia, where a small number of loyal adherents to Islam defeated a much larger force sent out from Mecca to defend a valuable trading caravan. Muhammad's men killed the expedition's leader and took valuable booty and prisoners. The success of this enterprise sent a powerful message to the Quraysh and inspired many men to join Muhammad. But there was further opposition to Islam, not only from Mecca, but from Jewish tribes in the region who joined forces with Muhammad's Arab enemies. This led Muhammad to denounce the Jews as faithless to their own prophets and to expel all but one wealthy Jewish clan from Medina and its surrounding region.

Analyzing Primary Sources

A Sura from the Qur'an

The Qur'an preserves the teachings of Muhammad in a series of suras, or chapters. Composed in verse forms that draw on much older traditions of Arabic poetry, they are meant to be sung or chanted. Indeed, the word Qur'an means "recitations," referring both to Muhammad's method of teaching and the Muslim practice of memorizing and repeating portions of scripture.

Sura 81: The Overturning

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

When the sun is overturned

When the stars fall away

When the mountains are moved

When the ten-month pregnant camels are abandoned

When the beasts of the wild are herded together⁵

When the seas are boiled over

When the souls are coupled

When the girl-child buried alive

is asked what she did to deserve murder

When the pages are folded out¹⁰

When the sky is flayed open

When Jahim [the Day of Reckoning] is set ablaze

When the garden is brought near

Then a soul will know what it has prepared

I swear by the stars that slide,¹⁵

stars streaming, stars that sweep along the sky

By the night as it slips away

By the morning when the fragrant air breathes

This is the word of a messenger ennobled,

empowered, ordained before the lord of the throne,²⁰

holding sway there, keeping trust

Your friend [Muhammad] has not gone mad

He saw him on the horizon clear

He does not hoard for himself the unseen

This is not the word of a satan struck with stones²⁵

Where are you going?

This is a reminder to all beings

For those who wish to walk straight

Your only will is the will of God lord of all beings

Source: From *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*, trans. Michael Sells (Ashland, OR: 1999), pp. 48–50.

Questions for Analysis

1. What impressions of Arab culture emerge from this sura? What does the litany of unlikely or mystical events reveal about the values of Muhammad's contemporaries?

2. How does Muhammad speak of himself and his role in society?

In 627, the Quraysh assembled a large coalition force to attack Medina, hoping that the remaining Jews there—who had reason to distrust Muhammad—would join forces with them. In response, Muhammad decided to risk a siege of his own city and caused a deep defensive trench to be dug around it, slowing the enemy's advance. The Meccan army had not come equipped for an extended battle and eventually dispersed: an ignominious defeat known as the Battle of the Trench. And even though the Jews of Medina had not joined forces with the Meccans, the Muslims charged them with treason and executed all the men and enslaved the women and children.

By 630, Muhammad's successes had persuaded his kinsmen to submit to his authority and teachings. Muhammad, for his part, ensured that the Kaaba's shrine would be revered as Islam's holiest place, a status it maintains today. And because Mecca had long been a pilgrimage site and gathering place for tribes throughout Arabia, many more people were exposed to Muhammad's teachings and inspired by his military prowess, which promised prosperity for his people in the years to come. At the time of

his death in 632, Muhammad's followers were committed to spreading this new faith.

Muhammad and the Qur'an

As its name indicates, the faith of Islam calls for submission to Allah, whom Muslims identify as being the same as the Jews' Yahweh and the Christian God. (The Muslim saying "there is no god but Allah" is more accurately translated as "there is no god but God.") For Muslims, the history and prophecies of the Jews are therefore important components of their religion, as are the teachings of Jesus, who is regarded as a great prophet. But Muhammad is regarded as the greatest prophet, whose revelations established the rituals and practices essential to Islam.



LEAVES FROM THE OLDEST EXTANT COPY OF THE QUR'AN. In 2015, scholars at the University of Birmingham (England) announced that two leaves of a Qur'an manuscript had been carbon dated to the years 568–645 C.E. (Carbon dating is only accurate for a range of years and cannot pinpoint a single date.) This extraordinary discovery suggests that at least some of Muhammad's teachings were written down much earlier than had been previously thought—possibly even during his lifetime, and certainly within a decade or so after his death. The implications of this evidence will be debated by Arabic scholars and historians of Islam for years to come.

and 715. Byzantine influence is apparent in its arched colonnades, mosaics, and series of domes, all of which were replicated in much subsequent Islamic architecture. The mosaic over the central doorway, shown here, indicates that the visitor is entering paradise. The mosque was constructed on the foundations of a Roman temple and also incorporates a later Christian shrine dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. ■ *Why would the caliph have chosen this site for his mosque?*

The Umayyad and Abbasid Dynasties

The political triumph of the Umayyads in 661 and the military conquests of their supporters created a strong state centered on Damascus, formerly an administrative capital of the Roman Empire. And in many ways, the Umayyad caliphate functioned as a Roman successor state: it even continued to employ Greek-speaking bureaucrats trained in the techniques of Roman governance. Through these means, the Umayyads dominated the Mediterranean for several generations.

But the failure of the Umayyads' two massive attacks on Constantinople checked their power, which was also

being challenged by a rival dynasty, the [Abbasids](#), who claimed descent from one of Muhammad's uncles and regarded the Umayyads as usurpers. In 750, the Abbasids led a successful rebellion, with the help of the Persians, forcing the Umayyads to retreat to their territories in al-Andalus (Muslim Spain: see the map on [page 238](#)).

In contrast with the Umayyads, the Abbasid caliphate stressed Persian elements over Roman ones. Symbolic of this change was the shift in capitals from Damascus to Baghdad, where the second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754–775), built a new city near the ruins of the old Persian capital. The Abbasid caliphs also modeled their behavior on that of Persian princes and their administration on the autocratic rule of the former Persian Empire, imposing heavy taxation to support a large professional army and presiding over an extravagantly luxurious court. This is the world described in the *Arabian Nights*, a collection of stories written in Baghdad under the Abbasids. The dominating presence in these stories is Harun al-Rashid, who ruled from 786 to 809. His reign marked the height of Abbasid power.

Meanwhile, the Umayyad dynasty continued to rule in al-Andalus and continued to claim that it was the only legitimate successor of Muhammad. Relations between

lms preferred their rule to that of their Byzantine and Persian predecessors.

The Shi'ite–Sunni Schism

As this wave of conquests widened the reach of Islamic influence, disputes continued to divide the original Muslims of Mecca. When the caliph Umar died in 644, he was replaced by Uthman, a member of the [Umayyad](#) (*oo-MY-yad*) family: a wealthy clan that had long resisted Muhammad's authority. Opponents of Uthman accordingly rallied around Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, whose marriage to Muhammad's only child Fatimah, made him seem a more appropriate choice. When Uthman was murdered in 656, Ali's supporters declared him the new caliph—but Uthman's powerful family refused to accept him. When Ali, too, was murdered, another member of the Umayyad family replaced him. From 661 to 750, this Umayyad dynasty ruled the Islamic world, establishing its capital at Damascus in Syria.

Ali's followers, however, did not accept defeat. They formed a separate group known as the Shi'ites (from *shi'a*, the Arabic word for "faction"). The Shi'ites insisted that only descendants of Ali and his wife, Muhammad's daughter Fatimah, could legitimately rule the Muslim

community. Moreover, the Shi'ites did not accept the customary religious practices (*sunna*) that had developed under the first two caliphs who succeeded Muhammad, his father-in-law Abu Bakr and his disciple Umar. Hence, those Muslims who supported the Umayyad family and who *did* regard these customs as binding were called Sunnis. This division between Shi'ites and Sunnis lasts until the present day. Often persecuted by the Sunni majority as heretics, Shi'ites consider themselves the only true exponents of Islam. Today, Shi'ites predominate in Iran and are the largest single Muslim group in Iraq, yet they constitute only one-tenth of the world's Muslims.



THE GREAT UMAYYAD MOSQUE AT DAMASCUS. This mosque was built by Caliph al-Walid between 705

Spain in 711, quickly absorbing most of the Iberian Peninsula. In less than a century, followers of Islam had conquered the oldest civilizations of western Asia and much of the Roman Mediterranean. In the process, the desert-dwelling Arabs had transformed themselves into the world's most daring seafarers.



THE EXPANSION OF ISLAM TO 750. This map shows the steady advance of Islam through Arab conquests from the time of Muhammad to the middle of the eighth century. ■ *What was the geographical extent of Muslim rule in 750?* ■ *Compare this map to the map of Justinian's empire on [page 214](#). Which of these territories had formerly belonged to Rome? What re-*

sources would have been available to the Muslim conquerors as they moved into these territories?

How can we explain this prodigious achievement? On a basic level, what motivated the Arabs had motivated the Sumerians, Neo-Assyrians, Greeks, Macedonians, and Romans: the search for richer territory and new wealth. The Muslim identity that was bound up with military successes also played a crucial role, since the teachings of Muhammad and the shared study of the Qur'an forged common allegiances among tribes hitherto at war with one another.

This Muslim identity must have been further strengthened by the absence of any organized opposition to the Arabs' advancement; it was regarded as a mark of their religious superiority. Missionary fervor may also have played a role, although there is little evidence that Muslims actively converted their new subjects to the faith of Islam at this time. Instead, they established themselves as a ruling class, with a grasp of the sophisticated workings of governance and finance that matched their military acumen. Non-Muslims living under Muslim rule were expected to pay the taxes that had been due to the previous Persian or Byzantine authorities, as well as a poll tax (*jizya*). In many places, those conquered by the Mus-

THE WIDENING ISLAMIC WORLD

As we have frequently noted, the death of any charismatic leader precipitates a series of crises. Muhammad and Alexander the Great represent different types of leadership, but both were visionaries whose military and political successes inspired intense loyalty; and neither designated his own successor, leaving behind a number of close followers who disagreed as to the proper uses of the power they inherited.

The Arab Conquest of the West

Muhammad's closest surviving followers were his father-in-law Abu Bakr (*ah-boo BAHK-uhr*) and an early convert named Umar. After Muhammad's death, they took the initiative in providing a leader for the Muslims of Arabia by naming Abu Bakr as *caliph*, a word meaning "deputy" or "representative," of Muhammad. But many tribes were unwilling to accept this aged man as Muhammad's successor, leading to a new phase of warfare. As ar-

mies loyal to Abu Bakr moved northward, their successes encouraged even more men to embrace Islam and join the fight to establish the faith. When they came to the Arabian frontier they kept going, meeting only minimal resistance from the Byzantine and Persian armies as they moved west.

When Abu Bakr died two years later, Umar succeeded him as caliph, and he continued to direct the growing forces against Byzantium and Persia. In the following years, victories were virtually continuous. In 636, they routed a Byzantine army in Syria and then quickly swept over the entire area, occupying the leading cities of Antioch, Damascus, and Jerusalem. In 637, they destroyed the main army of the Persians and took the Persian capital of Ctesiphon. By 651, the Arabian conquest of the entire Persian Empire was virtually complete.

Arab forces, now increased by newer converts, then turned toward North Africa, capturing Roman Egypt by 646 and extending their control throughout the rest of North Africa during the following decades. Only Ethiopia, far to the south, remained an independent Christian kingdom. Although attempts to capture Constantinople were not successful, as we noted previously, Arab and allied forces crossed from North Africa into Visigothic

These teachings are preserved in the sacred scripture of the Qur'an (*kuhr-AHN*), an Arabic word meaning “recitations” because Muhammad is said to have recited his revelations orally. Eventually, they were gathered together and transcribed, a process that continued after Muhammad’s death. So unlike the Christian Gospels, which offer different perspectives on Jesus’s ministry and were recorded a generation or two after his crucifixion, the Qur’an is considered to be a direct link with Muhammad. It is also unlike most books of the Bible because it takes the form of poetry, drawing on ancient genres of Arabic song.

Islam teaches that a day of judgment is coming—and soon. On this day, the righteous will be granted eternal life in a paradise of delights, but wrongdoers will be damned to a realm of eternal fire. Therefore all people are offered a fundamental choice: to begin a new life of divine service or to follow their own path. If they choose to follow God, they will be blessed; if they do not, God will turn away from them. Thus, the only sure means of achieving salvation is to observe the Five Pillars of the faith: submission to God’s will as described in the teachings of Muhammad, frequent prayer, ritual fasting, giving alms, and at least one pilgrimage to Mecca (the *Hajj*) during the believer’s lifetime.

Unlike Christianity, Islam is a religion without priests. In this, it more closely resembles Rabbinic Judaism as it developed after the destruction of the Second Temple, which made a Temple priesthood obsolete. Instead, as we noted previously, Jewish communities gathered around a master teacher, the rabbi. Similarly, Muslims often rely on a community leader (*imam*), a scholar qualified to comment on matters of faith who may also act as a judge in disputes. Like Judaism, Islam also emphasizes the inextricable connection between religious observance and daily life, between spirituality and politics. There is no opposition of sacred and secular authority, as in Christianity. But in marked contrast to Judaism, Islam is a religion that aspires to unite the world in a shared faith. This means that Muslims, like Christians, consider it their duty to engage in the work of conversion.

Glossary

Muhammad

(570–632 C.E.) The founder of Islam, regarded by his followers as God’s last and greatest prophet.

Qur'an (often Koran)

the Umayyads of Spain and the Abbasids of Persia were therefore very cold; but because their realms were far apart, the hostility between them rarely erupted into war. Instead, the two courts competed for preeminence through literary and cultural patronage, much as the Hellenistic kingdoms had done. Philosophers, artists, and especially poets flocked to both. The *Arabian Nights* was one product of this rivalry in Baghdad. Not to be outdone, the caliphs at the Spanish capital of Córdoba amassed a library of more than 400,000 volumes—at a time when a monastery in western Europe that possessed 100 books qualified as a major center of learning. Nothing remotely comparable had been seen in the Mediterranean since the time of the Ptolemies in Alexandria.

Commerce and Industry in the Islamic World

Alongside its political and military triumphs, the transformation of tiny settlements into thriving metropolitan commercial centers is one of early Islam's most remarkable achievements. So is the Arabs' capacity to adapt themselves to life in highly urbanized regions and to build on the long-established commercial infrastructures of Egypt, Syria, and Persia. By the tenth century,

Arab merchants had penetrated into southern Russia and equatorial Africa, and had become masters of the caravan routes that led eastward to India and China. Ships from the Islamic world established new trade routes across the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea, and for a time dominated the Mediterranean as well.

The growth of commerce during this period was driven and sustained by a number of important new industries. Mosul in Iraq was a center for the manufacture of cotton cloth; Baghdad specialized in glassware, jewelry, pottery, and silks; Damascus was famous for its fine steel and its woven-figured silk known as “damask”; Morocco and portions of al-Andalus were noted for leatherworking; and Toledo produced excellent swords. Drugs, perfumes, carpets, tapestries, brocades, woolens, satins, metal goods, and a host of other products turned out by skilled artisans were carried throughout the Mediterranean world, and also into central Asia along the network of roads to China that came to be known as the Silk Road—after the most prized commodity for which these goods were traded. With these precious goods went the Islamic faith, which took root among some peoples in what are now India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

THE CONVERSION OF NORTHWESTERN EUROPE

At the end of the sixth century, the Frankish chronicler Gregory of Tours (c. 538–594) considered himself to be a Roman, living in a Roman world of towns, trade, and local administration. Gregory was proud of his family’s senatorial rank and took it for granted that he and his male relatives should be bishops who ruled, by right of birth and status, over their cities and the surrounding countryside. Like others of his class, Gregory still spoke and wrote Latin—a different Latin from the polished prose of Cicero, but one that would certainly have been comprehensible to the Romans of the republic. Although Gregory was aware that the western territories of the Roman Empire were now ruled by Frankish, Visigothic, and Lombard kings, he regarded at least some of these kings as Roman successors because they ruled in accordance with Roman models. In the case of the Franks, the king even ruled with the approval of the Roman emperor in Constantinople. It was also a source of satisfaction to Gregory that all these barbarian kings had converted to Roman Christianity and no longer embraced the heresy of Arianism, which re-

inforced their *romanitas* and lent legitimacy to their rule.

Two hundred years later, the greatest of all Frankish kings, Charlemagne (742–814), was crowned as a new kind of Roman emperor in the West. But by this time, people no longer felt a sense of direct continuity with the earlier Roman world or a sense of obligation to the Roman emperor in Byzantium. When intellectuals at Charlemagne’s court set out to reform the political, religious, and cultural life of their time, their goal was to revive the Roman Empire from which they considered themselves estranged. They sought a *renovatio imperii Romanorum*: “a renewal of the Romans’ empire.” This awareness of a break with the Roman past developed during the seventh century as a consequence of profound economic, religious, and cultural changes.

Economic and Political Instability

Even though the economy of the Roman Empire had become increasingly regionalized from the third century C.E. onward (see [Chapter 6](#)), the Mediterranean remained a crucial nexus of trade and communication. Gold coinage continued to circulate in both the eastern and the western provinces; a luxury trade in silks, spices, swords, and jewelry continued to move west; and slaves, wine,

jewels, silks, spices, and other luxury goods from India and the Far East flowed north and west into Frankish territory. These trading links with the Abbasid world helped fund the extraordinary achievements of Charlemagne's own empire, which had a lasting effect on the culture and politics of Europe.

Past and
Present



The Meanings of Medievalism



ligious impulses. The ability of the ulamas and the Sufis to coexist is testimony to the cultural pluralism of the Islamic world.

There were no comparable careers for religious women, a reminder of the limits often imposed by gender. There are significant exceptions, of course. Muhammad's favored wife, Aisha (*ah-EE-sha*; d. 678), was revered as a scholar and played an important role in the creation and circulation of the *hadith* (Arabic for "narrative"): stories and sayings that shed light on the Prophet's life and teachings. But in general, women were mainly considered valuable as indicators of a man's wealth and status. The Qur'an allowed any Muslim man to marry as many as four wives, which often meant that the number of women available for marriage was far smaller than the number of men who desired to marry. This made for intense competition, and men who had wives and daughters needed to ensure that their prized assets were safeguarded. So women were usually kept from the sight of men who were not members of the family or trusted friends. Along with female servants and the enslaved concubines also owned by wealthy men, they were housed in a segregated part of the residence called the *haram* ("forbidden place"). Following Persian custom, they were often guarded by eunuchs (men, usually sold as slaves, who had been

castrated prior to adolescence). Within these enclaves, women vied with each other for precedence and worked to advance the fortunes of their children—often the only form of power they could exercise.

Islam's Neighbors

For the inhabitants of Byzantium, the triumph of the Abbasid caliphate in the eighth century released the Mediterranean from the pressures of Umayyad expansion. Farther west, the Franks of Gaul also benefited from the advent of the Abbasids. Because an Umayyad dynasty controlled al-Andalus, the great Frankish ruler Charlemagne (*SHAHR-leh-mayn*; r. 768–814) could counter neighboring Muslims' power by maintaining strong diplomatic and commercial relations with the more distant Abbasid caliphate. The most famous symbol of this connection was an elephant called Abul Abbas, a gift from Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne. More important, however, was the flow of silver that found its way from the Abbasid Empire north through the Baltic into the Rhineland, where it was exchanged for Frankish exports of furs, wax, honey, leather, and especially slaves—Europeans, often Slavic peoples, who were captured and sold for profit by other Europeans. Through these channels,

ization—bureaucratic record keeping, high levels of literacy and book production (especially copies of the Qur’an), even the standard form of cursive Arabic script known as Kufic—would have been impossible without the widespread availability of paper. Western Europeans began to practice papermaking only in the thirteenth century, but they would still continue to rely on the more durable parchment made from animal hides for the copying of most books and documents. And it was not until the advent of print that paper began to replace parchment as the reading and writing material of western Europe (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Mobility, Opportunity, and Status

As the reach of Islam extended through conquest and commerce, so Muslim culture became highly cosmopolitan, blending Arab customs with the civilizations of Byzantium and Persia, which were themselves the heirs of ancient empires stretching back to the time of Hammurabi’s Babylon. The preeminence of trade and ease of travel increased geographical mobility, and with it social mobility. (Muhammad’s teachings further encouraged this, because the Qur’an stressed the equality of all Muslim men.) At the courts of Baghdad and Córdoba, careers

were open to men of talent, regardless of birth or wealth. Because literacy was remarkably widespread, many could rise through education and achieve top offices through enterprise and skill. Even slaves could achieve high status through these means. Slave women (non-Muslim or Muslim) who bore male children to Muslim men often shared some of the privileges of their legitimate sons.

For those men wishing instead to embrace the religious life, Islam offered two main alternatives. One was that of the *alim*, a learned man whose studies qualified him to offer advice on aspects of religious law and practice. These men often exerted great influence on the conduct of public life. Complementary to them were the *Sufis*, mystics who might be equated with Christian monks were it not for the fact that they seldom withdrew from the life of the community. Whereas the ulamas stressed adherence to religious law, the Sufis stressed individual contemplation and the cultivation of spiritual ecstasy. Some Sufis were “whirling dervishes,” so known in the West because of their mystical dances; others were *faqirs*, associated in the West with snake charming; still others were quiet, meditative men. Sufis were usually organized into brotherhoods and eventually made many successful efforts to convert the peoples of Africa and India to Islam. Sufism also provided a channel for the most intense re-

The Power of Paper

One commodity in particular deserves special mention: paper. Both Arabs and Persians learned papermaking from the Chinese and became masters of the art in their own right. By the end of the eighth century, Baghdad alone had more than a hundred shops where blank paper or books written on paper were sold. Paper was cheaper to produce, easier to store, and far easier to use than papyrus (the chief writing material of antiquity) or parchment (widely used in northern Europe). As a result, paper replaced papyrus in the Islamic world by the early eleventh century—even in Egypt, the heartland of papyrus production for almost 4,000 years.



ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY. Muslim artists experimented with the art of calligraphy to make complex designs, sometimes abstract but often representing natural forms. This ink drawing on paper actually incorporates Arabic words. It dates from the seventeenth century and also demonstrates the Muslim mastery of papermaking.

The ready availability of paper brought about a revolution. Many of the characteristic features of Islamic civil-

grain, and leatherwork still moved east from Gaul, Hispania, and North Africa toward Constantinople, Egypt, and Syria. By about 650, however, this Mediterranean world disintegrated further. This was partly a result of Justinian's failed efforts to reconquer the empire's western territories, as well as imperial overtaxation of agricultural land, especially in Egypt and North Africa.

But the most significant causes of economic instability in northwestern Europe were internal, not external. The cities of Italy, Gaul, and Hispania could no longer maintain their walls, public buildings, and urban infrastructures as they had done under the Roman Empire. Although Christian bishops and their aristocratic kinsmen still governed from these cities and continued to provide a market for certain kinds of luxury goods, barbarian kings and their nobles were moving to the countryside during the seventh century, living as much as possible from the produce of their own estates rather than purchasing their supplies in the marketplace. At the same time, much agricultural land was passing out of cultivation. The slaves or servile peasants who had farmed the large plantations for hundreds of years had no efficient Roman state to enforce their obedience. They were able to become more independent, if also less effective, working just a few acres by themselves. Productivity declined, as did revenues from

tolls and taxes.

The systems of coinage that circulated in western Europe were also breaking down, which means that wealth ceased to be readily portable, hindering long-distance exchange. The Arab conquests may have further reduced the supply of gold available, because it was now being channeled eastward. But in any case, gold coins were too valuable to be useful in a local market economy. When we find evidence of such coins at this time, they are more likely to have been plundered, hoarded, or given as gifts rather than used to facilitate commerce. By the 660s, rulers who were still in a position to mint coins and guarantee their value had shifted from gold to silver coinage. Indeed, Europe would remain a silver-based economy for the next thousand years, until the supply of gold from European conquests in Africa and America once again made a gold standard viable (see [Chapter 12](#)).

Lordship and Its Limitations

As a result of these processes, western Europe came to rely on a two-tier economy, a kind that had not been necessary in any Western civilization since the Lydians introduced a standardized currency in the sixth century B.C.E. (see [Chapter 2](#)). Gold, silver, and luxury goods circu-



D. Sutton Hoo buckles.

Questions for Analysis

1. What do these artifacts, and the contexts in which they were found, reveal about the extent of Anglo-Saxon contact with the rest of the world? Which regions are represented, and why?
2. From this evidence, what conclusions can you draw about Anglo-Saxon culture and values?
3. Do any of these grave-goods indicate that the occupant was a Christian king? Why or why not?

Analyzing Primary Sources

From Anglo-Saxon Slave Girl to Frankish Queen

The Anglo-Saxon Saint Balthild rose to prominence as the wife of the Merovingian king Clovis II (r. 639–657), but she began her life as a slave. After the king's death, she was left in a precarious position at the Frankish court as regent for her son, Clothar III, and eventually was forced to enter the convent she had founded at Chelles, near Paris. The following excerpt from her Latin vita ("life") describes her speedy ascent to a position of power. It was probably written by a nun of Chelles.

Praise should first be sung of Him Who made the humble great and raised the pauper from the dunghill and seated him among the princes of his people. Such a one is the woman present to our minds, the venerable and great lady Balthild the queen. Divine Providence called her from across the seas. She, who came here as God's most precious and lofty pearl, was sold at a cheap price. Erchinoald, a Frankish magnate and most illustrious man, acquired her and in his service the girl behaved most honorably. . . . For she was kind-hearted and sober and prudent in all her ways, careful and plotting evil for none. . . . And since she was of the Saxon race, she was graceful in form with refined features, a most seemly woman with a smiling face and serious gait. And she so showed herself just as she ought in all things, that

The contents of the grave are extraordinarily varied and offer clues to values and contacts of the burial's occupant. They included the following items:

- a lamp and a bronze bucket once suspended from a chain
- a ceremonial helmet (image C) modeled on those worn by Roman cavalry officers just before the withdrawal of the legions from Britain in 410—but decorated like helmets found in eastern Sweden
- a sword and a large circular shield, resembling those found in Swedish burial sites
- exquisitely crafted belt buckles and shoulder clasps (image D) made of gold and garnets and worked with designs
- a pair of silver spoons with long handles, possibly crafted in Byzantium, and inscribed in Greek with the names PAULOS and SAULOS (Paul and Saul)
- a large silver dish (72 cm in diameter) made in Byzantium between 491 and 518
- a bronze bowl from the eastern Mediterranean
- a six-stringed lyre in a bag made of beaver skin, similar to lyres found in Germany
- a purse containing thirty-seven gold coins, each from a different Frankish mint, the most recent datable to the 620s

- heaps of armor, blankets, cloaks, and other gear



C. Sutton Hoo helmet.



reaches into the burial chamber.



A. The Staffordshire hoard, found in 2009.

Another find, made in 1939, was a royal gravesite dating from the seventh century (image B). Many scholars believe it to be the tomb of King Redwald of East Anglia, described by Bede as a baptized Christian who refused to give up the worship of his ancestral gods. The king's body was placed in a wooden structure in the middle of a ninety-foot-long ship that had been dragged to the top of a bluff (a *hoo*) eleven miles from the English Channel. The ladder in the photograph of the original excavation



B. The original excavation of the burial chamber at Sutton Hoo, found in 1939.

the powerful bishops of Gaul by converting to Roman Christianity—emulating the example of Constantine on many levels. Clovis's family came to be known as the Merovingians, after his legendary grandfather Merovech, who was said to have been fathered by a sea monster—meaning that no one really knew where Merovech came from. Clovis's own name proved even longer lasting than the dynasty he founded. As the language of the Franks merged with the Latin of Gaul to become French, the name “Clovis” lost its hard *C*, and the pronunciation of the *V* was softened. Thus “Clovis” became “Louis,” the name borne by French kings up to the time of the French Revolution over a millennium later (see Chapter 18).

The [Merovingians](#) were not the only noble family in Gaul with a claim to kingship, but they were more successful in defending it than their counterparts in Visigothic Spain, Lombard Italy, and both the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic territories of Britain. In part, this was due to their capacity to transfer power from one generation to another. In early medieval Europe, the right of inheritance was not limited to the eldest male claimant of each competing royal family. When it came to property or power, all the king's sons—and frequently all his male cousins and nephews, and even his daughters—could consider themselves rightful heirs. So even when the rule of any family

was not threatened by outsiders, the transfer of power was almost always bloody.

Interpreting Visual Evidence

The Ship Burial of Sutton Hoo

Several of the most impressive finds in the history of British archaeology have been made by amateurs. A recent one, in the summer of 2009, was the largest hoard of worked gold and silver ever found in one place: more than 5 kilograms of gold and 2.5 kilograms of silver (image A). It was discovered by a man in Staffordshire walking over a neighbor's farm with a metal detector. The hoard's extraordinary value and range of artifacts—and their historical implications—can only be guessed at now; even the dating is inconclusive.

lated among the very wealthy, but most people relied on barter and various substitute currencies to make transactions. Local lords collected rents from their peasants in food or labor, but they then found it difficult to convert these in-kind payments into weapons, jewelry, and silks that brought prestige in aristocratic society. This was problematic not only for social reasons but also for political ones: the power of lords depended on their ability to bestow rich gifts on their followers (see *Interpreting Visual Evidence* on [page 232](#)). When they could not acquire these items through trade, they had to win them through plunder and extortion; either way, the process led to violence.

The successful chieftains of this era therefore tended to be those whose areas of influence adjoined wealthy but poorly defended territories that could easily be attacked or blackmailed. Such “soft frontiers” provided warlords and kings with land and booty that they could then distribute to their followers. Successes of this sort would bring more followers to a lord’s service, allowing him to extend his influence further; and as long as more conquests were made, the process of amassing power and wealth would continue. But power acquired through plunder and conquest was inherently fragile: a few defeats might speedily reverse the fortunes of the lords

reliant on it, leaving their followers to seek plunder elsewhere.

Another factor contributing to the instability of power in this world was the difficulty of ensuring its peaceful transfer. The barbarian rulers who established themselves during the mass migrations of the fifth and sixth centuries did not come from the traditional royal families of their peoples, and thus faced opposition from many of their own warriors. Moreover, the groups who took possession of territories within the western Roman Empire during these years were rarely (if ever) composed of a single unified group; they were usually made up of many different tribes, including a sizable number of displaced Romans. Such unity was largely the creation of the charismatic chieftain who led them, and this charisma was not easily passed on by inheritance.

The Prosperous Kingdom of the Franks

Of all the groups that set up kingdoms in western Europe during the fifth and sixth centuries, only the Franks succeeded in establishing a single dynasty from which leaders would be drawn for the next 250 years. This dynasty reached back to Clovis (r. c. 481–511), a warrior-king who established an alliance between his family and

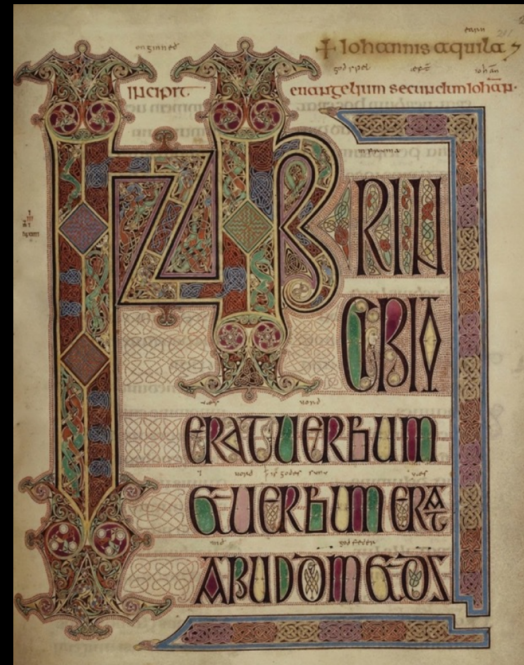
but powerful and pious women had worked behind the scenes to make it happen.

The Papacy of Gregory the Great

Pope Gregory I, also known as Gregory the Great, was the first bishop of Rome to envision a new role for the papacy in northwestern Europe. We have seen that the Roman *papa* had begun to assert his superiority over other patriarchs throughout the Christian world; but in reality, he was subordinate to the emperor in Constantinople and the greater prestige of its patriarch. As Byzantine power in Italy declined, however, Gregory sought to create a more autonomous Latin Church by focusing attention on the untapped resources of the wild West. An influential theologian, he is considered the intellectual successor of Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine (see [Chapter 6](#)) because he greatly extended the applicability of their teachings to the world outside the Romanized Mediterranean.

Among Gregory's doctrinal contributions were an emphasis on the necessity of penance for the forgiveness of sins and the concept of Purgatory as a place where the soul could be purified before being admitted into heaven—instead of being sent immediately to perpetual damnation. Alongside this emphasis on penance, Gregory

emphasized the importance of pastoral care: the proper instruction, encouragement, and control of the laity. He also sought to increase the affective power of Christian worship by promoting the performance of music. Song has always been essential to religious ritual, but Gregory encouraged it to such a degree that the very style of singing that emerged in this period is still known as Gregorian chant.



have elsewhere, or at any other time in history up to this point. Within the monastery, women had control over their own minds and bodies. They could wield enormous influence, promoting their families' diplomatic and dynastic interests without the dangers and uncertainties of pregnancy. And they were guaranteed salvation, at a time when salvation outside the cloister seemed a perilously uncertain prospect. Moreover, the prayers of holy women were regarded as particularly effective in securing divine support or retribution. This further enriched convents through donations of land and wealth, although it could not always safeguard them from violence, or their inhabitants from abduction and rape.

Monasteries for women also served the interests of men, which is why kings and lords supported them. They were dynamic repositories of prayer, regarded as essential to furthering the ambitions of their male benefactors and protecting them from harm. They provided a dignified place of retirement for inconvenient but politically powerful women, such as the sisters and daughters of rivals or the widow of a previous ruler. And by limiting the number of powerful women who could reproduce, female monasteries also reduced the number of male claimants to power. Establishing aristocratic and royal women in such convents was thus an important way of

controlling successions and managing political disputes.

Monasticism played an important role in missionary activity, too. As noted previously, the work of Irish monks was crucial to the spread of Christianity in northern parts of Britain and in other areas of northern Europe virtually untouched by the Roman Empire. Missionaries were also sponsored by the fledgling papacy in Rome and by the Merovingian royal family—especially its women. The best example of this is the conversion of Britain's Anglo-Saxon tribes, which we glimpsed in the opening paragraph of this chapter. In 597, a group of forty Benedictine monks were sent by Pope Gregory I (r. 590–604) to the southeastern kingdom of Kent, where their efforts were assisted by Frankish translators—and by the fact that the local king, Æthelbeht (*ETH-el-beht*), had married a Frankish princess who was already a Christian. This pattern of influence repeated itself all over southern and eastern Britain. Writing a hundred years later in the monastery of Monkwearmouth in Northumbria, the historian Bede could claim that the tribes of England were now united in their shared allegiance to the Roman Church and its English archbishop, whose seat was the cathedral in Æthelbert's capital at Canterbury. Bede credited the Roman pope for initiating this remarkable achievement,

gions of Britain and from there to the Continent. The Irish missionary Columbanus (540–615), for example, was the founder of Merovingian monasteries at Luxeuil (France) and Bobbio (Italy). Important monasteries were also established on the island of Iona, off the western coast of what is now Scotland, and at Lindisfarne, off Britain's northeastern coast. In all of these cases, close ties were forged between monks and local tribal leaders or powerful families, much to the political and economic gain of all parties.



ABBEY CHURCH, ISLAND OF IONA. This tiny island off Scotland's west coast is the site of many Iron Age forts and has been home to a monastic community since the sixth century. Missionaries from Iona were instrumental in converting the Celtic tribes of northern Britain to Christianity.

Most monastic foundations of the seventh century were deliberately located in rural areas and at strategic trading crossroads, where they played a crucial role in trade and governance. Indeed, the material advantages of monastic innovation were a powerful incentive toward Christian conversion in the communities which benefited from improved living conditions. Prosperity was also a powerful advertisement for authority: a lord or chieftain who had the support of a monastery and the beneficent Christian God was obviously worthy of loyalty. Because monasteries played such a key role in economic development and political order, lords often granted them special privileges, helping to free them from the control of local bishops and giving them jurisdiction over their own lands. Thus, monasteries became politically powerful, not only because they had been founded by powerful men but because they were lordships in their own right.

Frequently, these new foundations were double monasteries that accommodated women as well as men; but often, they were established for women only. In either case, they were usually ruled by abbesses drawn from noble or royal families. Monasticism thus became a road to political power for women, too. It also gave women—commoners as well as queens—freedoms they did not

vingian Gaul wealthier and more stable than any other region of northwestern Europe. Approximately 550 monasteries were thriving by the year 700, more than 300 of which had been established in the preceding century alone. Frankish bishops also prospered along with their cities, amassing most of their landed possessions by the end of the seventh century, possessions from which their successors would continue to profit until the time of the French Revolution.

This massive redistribution of wealth reflected a fundamental shift in the economic center of gravity of the Frankish kingdom. In the year 600, the wealth of Gaul was still concentrated in the south, where it had been throughout the late Roman period. By the year 750, however, the economic center of the kingdom lay north of the Loire, in the territories that extended from the Rhineland westward to the North Sea. It was here that most of the new monastic foundations of the seventh century were established.

Behind this shift in prosperity lay a long effort to bring under cultivation the rich, heavy soils of northern Europe. This effort was largely engineered by the new monasteries, which harnessed the peasant workforce and pioneered agricultural technologies adapted to the cli-

mate and terrain. The most important invention was a heavy, wheeled plow capable of cutting and turning grassland sod and clay, soils very different from those of the Mediterranean. This innovation in turn necessitated the development of more efficient devices for harnessing animals (particularly oxen) to these plows. Gradually warming weather (see [Chapter 8](#)) also improved the fertility of the wet northern soils, lengthening the growing season and so making possible more efficient crop-rotation systems. As food became more plentiful, the population began to expand. Although much of Frankish Gaul remained a land of scattered settlements separated by dense forests, it was far more populous by 750 than it had been in the time of Clovis. All these developments would continue during the reign of Charlemagne and beyond.

The Power of Monasticism

As we have just seen, the seventh century witnessed a rapid increase in the foundation of monastic houses all over northwestern Europe. Although monasteries had existed in Gaul, Italy, and Hispania since the fourth century, most were located in highly Romanized areas. In the fifth century, a powerful monastic movement began in Ireland as well, and eventually spread to the Celtic re-

she pleased her master and found favor in his eyes. So he determined that she should set out the drinking cup for him in his chamber and, honored above all others as his housekeeper, stand at his side always ready to serve him. . . . She gained such happy fame that, when the said lord Erchinoald's wife died, he hoped to unite himself to Balthild, that faultless virgin, in a matrimonial bed. . . .

[But] when she was called to the master's chamber she hid herself secretly in a corner and threw some vile rags over herself so that no one could guess that anyone might be concealed there. . . . She hoped that she might avoid a human marriage bed and thus merit a spiritual and heavenly spouse. . . . Thereafter it happened, with God's approval, that Balthild, the maid who escaped marriage with a lord, came to be espoused to Clovis, son of the former king Dagobert. Thus by virtue of her humility she was raised to a higher rank.

Source: Excerpted from *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. and trans. John E. Halborg, Jo Ann McNamara, and E. Gordon Whatley (Chapel Hill, NC: 1992), pp. 268–70.

Questions for Analysis

1. Judging from what you have learned about the prevalence of the slave trade in ancient and early medieval

civilizations, what might you speculate about Balthild's actual role in Erchinoald's household?

2. Balthild would have been a contemporary of the king buried at Sutton Hoo. Is it likely that she would have been a Christian when she was sold into slavery in England? Why or why not?
3. In light of Balthild's later status as a queen and regent for her son, why would her biographer stress that she was "careful and plotting evil for none"? To what allegations or incidents might the author of this life be responding?

In Gaul, however, the often brutal conflicts between rival Merovingian kings did not materially disrupt the strength and sophistication of their governance. Many elements of late Roman local administration survived throughout this period. Latin literacy, fostered by a network of monasteries linked to the Frankish court, remained an important element in this administration, providing a foundation on which Charlemagne would later build. Even the cultural revival associated with the reign of Charlemagne (see below) really began in the late seventh century at the monastic foundations fostered by members of the Merovingian family and other powerful lords. Such monasteries grew remarkably during the seventh century, becoming the engines that made Mero-

quests, the Franks succeeded in annexing the Lombard kingdom of northern Italy, most of what is now Germany, portions of central Europe, and—taking advantage of the weakened Umayyad caliphate—Catalonia, just beyond the Pyrenees. These conquests seemed to set a seal of divine approval on the new Carolingian dynasty. More important, they provided the victorious Franks with spoils of war and vast new lands that enabled Charlemagne to reward his closest followers.

Many of the peoples Charlemagne conquered were already Christians. In the northern territory of Saxonia (Saxony), however, Charlemagne's armies campaigned for twenty years before subduing the pagan inhabitants and forcing their conversion. This created a precedent that linked military conquest with conformity of belief, and it would be repeated by Charlemagne's successors in Baltic and Slavic lands.

To rule his new empire, Charlemagne enlisted the help of the Frankish warrior class he had enriched and raised to positions of prominence. These counts (*comites* in Latin, “followers”) supervised local governance within their territories. Among their many duties were the administration of justice and the raising of armies. Charlemagne also established a network of other local officials who

convened courts, established tolls, administered royal lands, and collected taxes. To facilitate transactions and trade, he created a new coinage system based on a division of the silver pound into units of twenty shillings, each worth twelve pennies: a system that would last into the 1970s in parts of continental Europe and in Britain (when it was replaced by a decimal-based currency). As noted above, much of the silver for this new coinage originated in the Abbasid caliphate and was payment for furs, cloth, and especially slaves captured in Charlemagne's wars, who were now being transported to Baghdad. The silver, in turn, circulated as far north as Scandinavia and the Baltic Sea region.

Like Carolingian administration generally, this new monetary system depended on the regular use of written records, which means that the sources supporting historical research on Charlemagne's empire are numerous. But Charlemagne did not rely on the written word alone to make his will felt. Periodically, his court sent special messengers, known as *missi*, on tours through the countryside to relay his instructions and report back on the conduct of local administrators. This was the most thorough system of governance known in Europe since the height of the Roman Empire, reaching many parts of the Continent that the Romans had never occupied. It set

Pepin therefore turned to the Frankish bishops, who were also unwilling to support him without backing from Rome. To gain this support, Pepin traded on his family's support of the monastic movement. The pope, for his part, saw that a powerful leader of the Franks could be a potential ally in his political struggle with the Byzantine emperors over iconoclasm (which the papacy opposed), and in his military struggle against the Lombard kings for control of central Italy.

So Boniface, acting as papal emissary, anointed Pepin king of the Franks in 751. Anointing was a new ritual, but it had a powerful biblical precedent: the ceremony by which the prophet Samuel had made Saul the first king of Israel, by anointing his head with holy oil (see [Chapter 2](#)). Indeed, the significance of the Old Testament precedent would grow under Pepin's son Charlemagne (associated with David) and his grandson Louis the Pious (associated with Solomon).

To contemporary observers, however, the apparent novelty of these proceedings underscored the uncertainty of the times: a legitimate king had been deposed and a new king elevated. And as we will see, this king-making process was the first step on a long road that would ultimately limit the power of later medieval kings

and modern constitutional monarchs alike. It eventually established the principle that kingship is an office that can be occupied, at least theoretically, by anyone; and by extension, if a ruler is ineffectual or tyrannical, he can be deposed and replaced.

The Reign of Charlemagne

The Franks benefited from Pepin's military leadership. In 759, he finally defeated the Muslims of Narbonne and extended Frankish control to the Mediterranean coast. But his grip on the title of king was a tenuous one; and when he died in 768, it seemed likely that the Frankish kingdom would break up into mutually hostile regions: Austrasia, Neustria, and the new region of Aquitaine. That it did not was the work of Pepin's son, Charles: known to the French as [Charlemagne](#) and to the Germans as Karl der Grosse ("Charles the Great") because both modern nations claim him as their founding father. It is from him, as well as from his grandfather Charles Martel, that this new Frankish dynasty takes the name "Carolingian" (from *Carolus*, the Latin form of "Charles").

When Charlemagne came to power in 768, he managed to unite the Franks by the tried and true method of attacking a common, outside enemy. In a series of con-

king's right-hand man and enforcer. He took the title *maior domus* ("great man of the house") and began to exercise royal authority while maintaining the fiction that he was merely a royal servant. He did this effectively for more than twenty-five years. After his death, his illegitimate son Charles Martel ("the Hammer"; 688–741) further consolidated control over both the Merovingian homeland and the Frankish royal administration. For two generations, the Merovingian kings were largely figureheads in a realm ruled by Charles Martel and his sons.

Charles Martel is sometimes considered the second founder (after Clovis) of the Frankish kingdom. His claim to this title is twofold. First, in 733 or 734, he repelled a small Muslim force sent by the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus, which was attempting to expand its reach across the Pyrenees and into the rich farmlands of Aquitaine (the Bordeaux region of modern France). Charles and his army met them in battle between the cities of Poitiers and Tours, some 150 miles from the Merovingian stronghold at Paris. This victory won him great prestige, and he successfully advanced Frankish power southward toward the Muslim-held region of Narbonne.

At the same time, Charles was fostering an alliance with Benedictine missionaries from England, who were

attempting to convert the Low Countries and central Germany to Christianity. Charles's family had long been active in the drive to conquer and settle these areas, and he understood clearly how missionary work and Frankish expansion could go hand in hand, and so assisted these conversion efforts. In return, the leader of the English Benedictines, Boniface (c. 672–754), brought him into contact with the papacy.

Although Charles never sought to become king himself, he was so clearly the effective ruler of Gaul that the Franks did not bother to choose a new king when the reigning Merovingian ruler died in 737. But then Charles himself died in 741, and his sons Carloman and Pepin were forced to allow the election of a new king while they exercised power behind the scenes. This compromise did not last long, however. In 750, Carloman withdrew from public life by entering a monastery, and Pepin decided to seize the throne for himself. This turned out to be harder than he may have expected. Even though the reigning king was ineffectual, Frankish identity was bound up with loyalty to Clovis's descendants; and although tribal leaders had the power to elect a new king, they were reluctant to do so.

THE EMPIRE OF CHARLEMAGNE

Toward the end of the seventh century, tensions among noble families in the Merovingian heartland of Neustria and in the Frankish border region of Austrasia were increasing (see map on [page 238](#)). The Austrasian nobles had profited from their steady push into the “soft frontier” east of the Rhine, acquiring wealth and military power in the process, while the Merovingians, settled in Neustria, had no such easy conquests at their disposal. Moreover, Merovingians had given a considerable portion of their land to monasteries during the course of the seventh century, which decreased their wealth and their capacity to attract followers. A succession of short-lived kings then opened the door to a series of civil wars, and finally to a decisive challenge to the dynasty.



THE EMPIRE OF CHARLEMAGNE IN 814. When Charlemagne died in 814, he had created an empire that embraced a large portion of the lands formerly united under the western Roman Empire. ■ *What were the geographical limits of his power?* ■ *How were these limits dictated by the historical forces we have been studying?* ■ *Along what lines was Charlemagne's empire divided after his death?*

Kings and Kingmakers

In 687, an Austrasian nobleman called Pepin (635/45?–714) came to power by making himself the Frankish

THE LINDISFARNE GOSPELS. This page from one of the astonishing illuminated (“light-filled”) books produced by the monastery at Lindisfarne shows the opening of the Gospel of John. ■ *Why would monastic scribes have devoted so much time, energy, and skill to the decoration of this text? How do these artistic motifs compare with those featured on the metalwork found at Sutton Hoo (see [page 233](#))? ■ What conclusions can you draw from these similarities?*

Gregory was also a statesman and leader in the model of his Roman forebears. Within Italy, he ensured the survival of the papacy against Lombard invaders by clever diplomacy and expert management of papal estates and revenues. He maintained good relations with Byzantium while asserting his authority over the other bishops of the Roman Church. His support of communities living under the *Rule* of Saint Benedict (see [Chapter 6](#)) helped make [Benedictine monasticism](#) the predominant monastic force in the West. Yet Gregory’s influence was not always benign. He was the first prominent theologian to articulate the Church’s official policy toward Jews, which became increasingly negative. Building on Gregory’s example, later popes would insist that the Jews’ alleged role in Christ’s crucifixion and their denial of his divinity had

deprived them of their rights in a Christian world.



THE COVER OF THE LINDAU GOSPELS. This book, bound in gilded silver and encrusted with jewels and ivory cameos, was presented by Pope Gregory the Great to a Lombard queen around the year 600. ■

DISPUTED LEGACIES AND NEW ALLIANCES

When Charlemagne died in 814, his empire descended intact to his only surviving son, Louis the Pious. Under Louis, however, the empire disintegrated and was eventually divided among his three sons in 840. Western Francia (the core of modern France) went to Charles the Bald; eastern Francia (which became key principalities of Germany) went to Louis the German; and a third kingdom (stretching from the Rhineland to Rome) went to Lothair, along with the imperial title. But when Lothair's line died out, in 856, this fragile compromise dissolved into open warfare, as the East and West Franks fought over Lothair's former territories and the imperial power that went with them. The heartland of this disputed domain, known to the Germans as Lotharingia and to the French as Alsace-Lorraine, would continue to be a site of bitter contention until the end of the Second World War (see Chapter 26).

The Collapse of the Carolingian Empire

Louis the Pious faced an impossible situation of a kind we have studied many times before: the task of holding together an artificial constellation of territories united by someone else. Charlemagne's empire had been built on successful conquests; however, by 814, he had pushed the borders of his empire beyond the practical limits of his administration. To the southwest, he now faced the Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus, and to the north, the pagan inhabitants of Scandinavia. In the east, his armies were too preoccupied with settling the territories they had already conquered to secure the Slavic lands that lay beyond. At the same time, the pressures that had driven these conquests—the need for land and plunder to cement the allegiance of followers—had become ever more pronounced as a result of their very success. The number of counts had tripled, from approximately 100 to 300, and each of them wanted more wealth and power.

Frustrated by the new emperor's inability to reward them, the Frankish aristocracy turned against him and on each other. Smoldering hostilities among Austrasians, Neustrians, and Aquitanians—which Charlemagne had stifled by directing their energies elsewhere—flared up again. As centralized authority broke down, the vast majority of the empire's free inhabitants found themselves increasingly dominated by local lords who treated them

Roman Empire,” as it came to be called (see [Chapter 9](#)). In the year 800, however, Pope Leo was entirely under Charlemagne’s control. Yet Charlemagne’s biographer, Einhard, later claimed that the coronation was planned without the emperor’s knowledge.

Why, then, did he accept the title and, in 813, transfer it to his son Louis? For one thing, it was certain to anger the imperial government in Byzantium, with which Charlemagne had strained relations. And the imperial title did not add much to Charlemagne’s position since he was already the de facto emperor in his own right.

Historians still debate this question. What is clear, in any case, is the symbolic significance of the action. Although the Romans of Byzantium no longer influenced western Europe directly, they continued to regard it (somewhat vaguely) as an outlying province of their empire. Moreover, the emperor in Constantinople claimed to be the political successor of Caesar Augustus. Charlemagne’s assumption of the title Emperor of the Romans was therefore a clear slight to the reigning empress Irene (r. 797–802), whose occupation of the imperial throne was controversial because she was a woman. It also deepened Byzantine suspicion of Charlemagne’s cordial relationship with Byzantium’s enemy, Harun al-Rashid, the Ab-

basid caliph of Baghdad.

But for Charlemagne’s successors—and for all the medieval rulers who came after him—the assumption of the imperial title was a declaration of independence and superiority. With only occasional interruptions, western Europeans continued to crown Roman emperors until the nineteenth century, while territorial claims and concepts of national sovereignty continued to rest on Carolingian precedent. Whatever his own motives may have been, Charlemagne’s revival of the western Roman Empire was crucial to the developing self-consciousness of western Europe.

Glossary

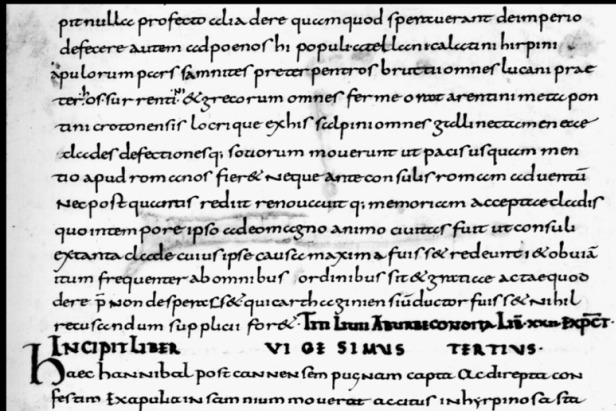
[Carolingian Renaissance](#)

A cultural and intellectual flowering that took place around the court of Charlemagne in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

[Charlemagne](#)

(742–814) As king of the Franks (767–813), Charles “the Great” consolidated much of western Europe under his rule. In 800, he was crowned emperor by the pope in Rome, establishing a problematic precedent that would have wide-ranging consequences for west-

logical and pastoral tracts. But their primary efforts were devoted to collating, correcting, and recopying ancient Latin texts, including, most important, the text of the Latin Bible, which had accumulated many generations of copyists' mistakes in the 400 years since Jerome's translation (see [Chapter 6](#)).



ROMAN HISTORY IN CAROLINGIAN MINUSCULE. The very survival of Livy's history of the Roman Republic, originally written during the reign of Augustus Caesar, is due to the Carolingian Renaissance. Furthermore, the clear layout and beautifully formed script of this manuscript copy helped readers without detailed knowledge of Latin to make out the words. For example, the first two words of the head-

ing near the bottom are *Incipit Liber* ('[Here] begins the book'), and the sentence following it begins with a reference to the Carthaginian general Hannibal.

To detect and correct these errors, Alcuin and his associates gathered as many different versions of the biblical text as they could find and compared them, word by word. After determining the correct version among all the variants, they made a new, corrected copy and destroyed the other versions. They also developed a new style of handwriting, with simplified letter forms and spaces inserted between words, so as to reduce the likelihood that subsequent copyists would misread the corrected texts. Reading was further facilitated by the addition of punctuation. This new style of handwriting, known as Carolingian minuscule, is the foundation for the typefaces of most modern books—including this one.

The Revival of the Western Roman Empire

On Christmas Day in the year 800, Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III. Centuries later, popes would cite this epochal event as precedent for the political superiority they claimed over the ruler of the "Holy

is closely modeled on both Hellenistic and Roman coins.

These ideas were not new in the late eighth century, but they took on a new importance because of the extraordinary power Charlemagne wielded. Like other rulers of this period, Charlemagne was able to appoint and depose bishops and abbots, just as he did the counts and other officials who administered his realm. He extended his authority by changing the liturgy of Frankish churches, reforming the rules of worship in Frankish monasteries, declaring the tenets of Christian belief, ruthlessly prohibiting pagan practices, and forcibly imposing basic Christian observances on the conquered peoples of Saxony.

As the dominant political power in central Italy, Charlemagne was also the protector of the papacy. Although he acknowledged the pope as the spiritual leader of Christendom, Charlemagne dealt with the bishop of Rome much as he did other bishops in his empire. He supervised and approved papal elections, and he also protected the pope from his many enemies. To Charlemagne, such measures were clearly required if God's new chosen people, the Franks, were to avoid the fate that befell biblical Israel whenever Hebrews turned away from obedi-

ence to God.

The Carolingian Renaissance

Similar political motivations lay behind the phenomenon known as the [Carolingian Renaissance](#), a cultural and intellectual flowering that took place around the Carolingian court. Like their biblical exemplars David and Solomon, Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious considered it a crucial part of their role to be patrons of learning and the arts. In doing so, they created an ideal of the court as an intellectual and cultural center: an ideal that would profoundly influence western European cultural life until the First World War (see Chapter 24).

Behind the Carolingians' support for scholarship was the conviction that learning was the foundation on which Christian wisdom rested, and that such wisdom was essential to the salvation of God's people. Charlemagne therefore recruited intellectuals from all over Europe to further the cause of scholarship and [classical learning](#). Foremost among these was the Anglo-Saxon monk Alcuin, whose command of classical Latin established him as the intellectual leader of Charlemagne's court. Under Alcuin's direction, Carolingian scholars produced much original Latin poetry and an impressive number of theo-

Christianity and Kingship

In keeping with the traditions established by his father and grandfather, Charlemagne took his responsibilities as a Christian king seriously. Moreover, as his empire expanded, he came to see himself as the leader of a unified Christian society, Christendom, which he was obliged to defend. Like his contemporaries in Byzantium and the Muslim world—as well as his Roman predecessors—he recognized no distinction between religion and politics. Indeed, he conceived kingship as a sacred office created by God to protect the Church and promote the salvation of Christian people. Religious reforms were therefore no less central to proper kingship than were justice and defense. In some ways, a king's responsibilities for his kingdom's spiritual welfare were more important than his other, secular responsibilities.



CHARLEMAGNE'S IMAGE OF AUTHORITY. A silver penny struck between 804 and 814 in Mainz (as indicated by the letter *M* at the bottom) represents Charlemagne in a highly stylized fashion, as a Roman emperor with a military cloak and laurel wreath. The inscription reads *KAROLUS IMP AVG* (Charles, Emperor, Augustus) and his portrait

dealing with Jews and Christians, dissent within Islam itself was another matter. Under the strong rule of the caliphates, some different groups had learned to coexist; but with the disappearance of these centralized states, it became difficult to reconcile the ideal of universality with the realities of regional and ethnic differences.

Glossary

Vikings

(800–1000) The collapse of the Abbasid caliphate disrupted Scandinavian commercial networks and turned traders into raiders. (The word *viking* describes

the activity of raiding.) These raids often escalated into invasions that contributed to the collapse of the Carolingian Empire, resulted in the devastation of settled territories, and ended with the establishment of Viking colonies. By the tenth century, Vikings controlled areas of eastern England; Scotland; the islands of Ireland, Iceland, and Greenland; and parts of northern France. They had also established the beginnings of the kingdom that became Russia and made exploratory voyages to North America, founding a settlement in Newfoundland (Canada).

dynasty in Persia was one of the forces that contributed to the escalation of Viking raids. A major cause of this decline was the gradual impoverishment of the Abbasids' economic base, the agricultural wealth of the ancient Tigris-Euphrates basin, due to ecological crises and a devastating revolt by the enslaved African workforce there. Tax revenues from the Abbasid caliphate also declined as provincial Muslim rulers in North Africa, Egypt, and Syria retained larger and larger portions of those revenues for themselves. As their sources of income became depleted, the Abbasids were unable to support their large civil service and the mercenary army on which they relied for defense. This army consisted largely of slaves and hired troops whose loyalties lay with the individual rulers who employed them, not the caliphs. Massively expensive building projects, including the construction of the new Abbasid capital at Baghdad, further exacerbated the fiscal, military, and political crisis.

Behind the Abbasid collapse lay two fundamental developments of great significance for the future of the Islamic world: the growing power of regional rulers and the sharpening religious divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ites, and among the Shi'ites themselves. In 909, regional and religious hostilities came together when a local Shi'ite dynasty known as the Fatimids seized con-

trol of the Abbasid province of North Africa. In 969, the Fatimids succeeded in conquering Egypt as well. Meanwhile, another Shi'ite group, rivals of both the Fatimids and the Abbasids, attacked Baghdad in 927 and Mecca in 930, seizing the Kaaba. Although an Abbasid caliphate would continue to exist in Baghdad until 1258, when invading Mongol armies destroyed it (see [Chapter 10](#)), its empire had effectively disappeared by the 930s. In its place, a new order began to emerge, centered around an independent Egyptian kingdom and a new Muslim state based in Persia, the ancestor of present-day Iran.

In al-Andalus, disputes over succession within the Umayyad dynasty were matched by new external pressures. In the mid-ninth century, the small Christian kingdoms of northern and eastern Iberia began to encroach on Muslim territory, increasing the internal difficulties of the Umayyad caliphate. By the opening years of the eleventh century, the caliphate had dissolved, to be replaced by a host of smaller kingdoms, some of which paid tribute to the Christian rulers of the north.

The fractured political unity of the Islamic world deepened the religious divisions that had always existed among Muslim groups. Whereas Islamic rulers were relatively tolerant of religious and cultural differences when

one another—despite Bede’s wishful history of an “English church and people.” Yet in a direct response to the Viking threat, a loosely unified kingdom emerged for the first time under Alfred the Great (r. 871–899). His success in defending his own small kingdom from Viking attacks, combined with the destruction of every other competing royal dynasty, allowed Alfred and his heirs to assemble effective armed forces, institute mechanisms of local government, found new towns, and codify English laws. In addition, Alfred established a court school and fostered a distinctive Anglo-Saxon literary culture. Although the Anglo-Saxon vernacular had been a written language since the time of the Roman missions, it now came to rival Latin as a language of administration, history, scholarship, and spirituality. Moreover, oral traditions of poetic composition and storytelling were preserved and extended, as exemplified by the epic *Beowulf*. Until the eleventh century, Anglo-Saxon was the only European vernacular used for regular written communication.



A DRAGON-PROWED VIKING LONGBOAT. This manuscript illumination—from a book copied in Anglo-Saxon England—depicts one of the vessels terrifyingly well known to the shore-dwelling peoples of northwestern Europe. Concerted efforts to ward off Viking invasions led to the establishment of the first unified English kingdom.

The Disintegration of the Islamic World

As noted previously, the declining power of the Abbasid

against this common enemy, and thus may have come to share a sense of common identity.



PATTERNS OF VIKING ACTIVITY AND SETTLEMENT, c. 800–1100. The Vikings were instrumental in maintaining commercial contacts among northern Europe, Byzantium, and Islam until the eighth century, when changing historical forces turned them into raiders and colonists. ■ *What area was the original homeland of the Vikings?* ■ *What geographic region did the Vikings first conquer, and why?* ■ *The areas marked in green show territories that were later targeted by pillagers. Why would the Vikings have avoided settlement in these areas?*

The overall effect of the Viking diaspora and settlement on Europe continues to be a matter of scholarly controversy. The destruction caused by raiding is undeniable, and many of the monasteries of Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic lands were destroyed—along with countless precious books and historical artifacts. Yet the Vikings were not the only source of disorder in the ninth and tenth centuries. The civil wars and local political rivalries that had replaced the centralized states of Charlemagne and the Islamic caliphates contributed mightily to the chaos of the post-Carolingian world and made the Vikings' successes easily won. Nor were the Vikings a source of disorder alone. In Ireland and eastern England, Vikings founded a series of new towns. And as long-distance traders, they transported large quantities of silver into western Europe, fueling the European economy.

Alfred the Great and the Unification of England

In those few regions where people did succeed in fending off Viking attacks, the unifying force of victory was strong. The best example of this phenomenon is England, which had never been part of Charlemagne's empire and had remained divided into small kingdoms at war with

as if they were serfs. At the same time, internal troubles in the Abbasid Empire caused a breakdown in the commercial system through which Scandinavian traders brought Abbasid silver into Carolingian domains. Deprived of their livelihood, these traders turned to raiding, which is what the Norse word *viking* means. Under these combined pressures, the Carolingian Empire fell apart, and a new map of Europe began to emerge.

The Impact of the Viking Invasions

Scandinavian traders were already familiar figures in the North Sea and Baltic ports of Europe when Charlemagne came to power. They had begun to establish strategic settlements from which they navigated down the rivers to Byzantium (through the Black Sea) and the Abbasid caliphate (through the Caspian Sea). But when the power of the Abbasids declined, Viking raiders turned to plunder, ransom, tribute collection, and slaving. At first, these were small-scale operations; but soon, some Viking attacks involved organized armies numbering in the thousands. The small tribal kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxons and Celts made the British Isles easy targets, as were the divided kingdoms of the Franks.

By the tenth century, the Vikings controlled independ-

ent principalities in eastern England, Ireland, the islands of Scotland, and the region of France that is still called “Norseman-land” (Normandy). A Viking people known as the Rus’ established the beginnings of a kingdom that would become Russia. At the end of the tenth century, Vikings ventured farther west and colonized Iceland, Greenland, and a distant territory they called Vinland (Newfoundland, Canada). In 1016, a Viking army placed a Danish king on the English throne.

The threat of Viking attacks began to diminish after Scandinavia’s conversion to Christianity, which proceeded from the late tenth century onward. But it was more effectively mitigated by the fact that Viking populations quickly assimilated into the cultural and political world of northwestern Europe. By 1066, when the “Norsemen” of Normandy conquered England, the English—many of whom were descended from Vikings themselves—perceived them to be French. Driving this rapid assimilation may have been the raids of the Magyars, a non-Indo-European people who crossed the Carpathian Mountains around 895 and carried out a number of devastating campaigns throughout continental Europe before settling in what is now Hungary. The disparate inhabitants of the new Viking colonies may have been forced to unite