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The Foundations of Christian Society in Western Europe

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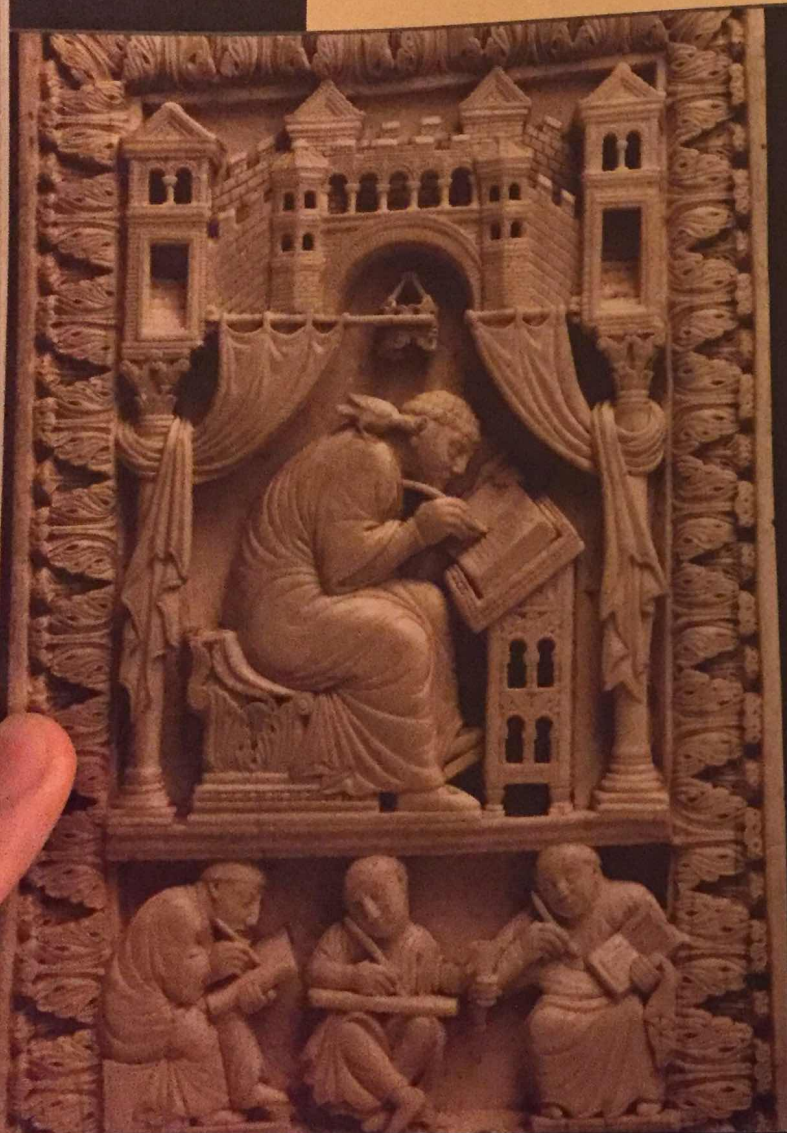
In 802 C.E. a most unusual traveler made his way from Baghdad to Aachen (in modern Germany), capital of the western European empire ruled by Charlemagne. The traveler was an albino elephant, a diplomatic gift from the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne. The elephant—whom Harun named Abu al-Abbas, in honor of the Abbasid dynasty's founder—was born in India and went to Baghdad as a present from an Indian king. From Baghdad the animal accompanied an embassy overland to Syria, then traveled by ship from Beirut to Malta and Rome, and finally went overland north to Charlemagne's court. Abu al-Abbas must have shivered through the cold, damp winters of western Europe, yet he overawed and amazed all who beheld him until his death in 810.

Charlemagne was not friendly to Islam. At the battle of Tours (732 C.E.) his grandfather, Charles Martel, had defeated a Muslim army that ventured into Frankish territory after Muslim forces had conquered most of the Iberian peninsula. Charlemagne himself fought Muslim forces in northern Spain. One of the battles from his campaign—in a much fictionalized version—provided the story line in later centuries for a popular poetic work called the *Song of Roland*. Nevertheless, in spite of his personal religious preferences, Charlemagne found it both necessary and convenient to have diplomatic dealings with Harun al-Rashid.

Charlemagne dispatched at least three embassies to Baghdad and received three in return. The embassies dealt with several issues: the safety of Christian pilgrims and merchants traveling in Abbasid-controlled Syria and Palestine, relations between Charlemagne's realm and neighboring Muslim Spain, and policy toward the Byzantine empire, which stood between western Europe and the Abbasid caliphate. Charlemagne's realm was weak and poor compared with the Abbasid empire, and by the mid-ninth century it was well on the way to dissolution. For about half a century, however, it seemed that Charlemagne and his successors might be able to establish a centralized imperial state in western Europe. His dealings with Harun al-Rashid—and the unusual odyssey of the elephant Abu al-Abbas—indicated that Charlemagne had the potential and the ambition to establish a western European empire similar to the Byzantine and Abbasid realms.

Historians refer to the era from about 500 to 1500 C.E. as the medieval period of European history—the “middle ages” falling between the classical era and modern times. During the early medieval period, from about 500 to 1000 C.E., European peoples recovered from the invasions that brought the Roman empire to an end and laid the political, economic, and cultural foundations for a new society. Europeans did not rebuild a powerful society as quickly as did the Abbasids in southwest Asia or the Tang and Song emperors of China: like India

OPPOSITE: An ivory book cover carved in the tenth century depicts Pope Gregory I at his writing desk.



during the postclassical era, early medieval Europe was a politically disunited and disorganized region. Unlike India, though, Europe mostly disengaged from hemispheric communication and exchange. Only about the tenth century, after the establishment of effective political authority and a productive agricultural economy, were western European peoples able to reenter the larger trading world of the eastern hemisphere.

Three developments of the early medieval era served as foundations for the development of the powerful European society that emerged after 1000 C.E. First, following the disruption caused by invasions and depopulation, the peoples of western Europe restored political order. Unlike their counterparts in southwest Asia and China, they did not return to centralized imperial rule but, instead, resorted to a decentralized political order that vested public authority mostly in local and regional rulers. Second, European peoples began a process of economic recovery. They did not build large cities or generate a powerful industrial economy like those of the Byzantine, Abbasid, Tang, and Song empires. But they boosted agricultural production by increasing the amount of land under cultivation and introducing new tools and techniques, thus laying an agricultural foundation for trade and rapid economic development after the tenth century. Third, European peoples built an institutional framework that enabled the Christian church based in Rome to provide religious leadership and maintain cultural unity throughout western Europe. Thus, just as Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and eastern Christianity shaped cultural values in other lands, western Christianity emerged as the principal source of cultural authority in western Europe.

The Quest for Political Order

After toppling Rome's authority in the late fifth century C.E., Germanic invaders established successor states throughout the western Roman empire. From the fifth through the eighth century, continuing invasions and conflicts among the invaders left western Europe in shambles. For a brief moment during the late eighth and early ninth centuries, it looked as though one group of Germanic invaders, the Franks, might reestablish imperial authority in western Europe. If they had succeeded, they might have played a role similar to that of the Sui and Tang dynasties in China by reviving centralized imperial rule after a hiatus of several centuries. By the late ninth century, however, the Frankish empire had fallen victim to internal power struggles and a fresh series of invasions by Muslims, Hungarian Magyars, and Vikings. Political authority in early medieval Europe then devolved to local and regional jurisdictions, and Europeans fashioned a decentralized political order.

Germanic Successor States

In 476 C.E. the Germanic general Odoacer deposed the last of the western Roman emperors, but the administrative apparatus of the Roman empire did not immediately disappear. Provincial governors continued to rule in their territories, aided by Roman bureaucrats and tax collectors, and Roman generals continued to field armies throughout the crumbling empire. Cities of the western Roman empire, however, lost population during the fifth century, as invasions and contests for power disrupted trade and manufacturing. This decay of Roman cities hastened imperial decline. Deprived of legitimacy and resources supplied from Rome and the other major cities of the empire, imperial institutions progressively weakened.

By the late fifth century, the invaders had organized a series of Germanic kingdoms as successor states in place of the Roman empire. Visigoths conquered Spain during

Germanic Kingdoms



Map 17.1 Successor states to the Roman empire, ca. 600 C.E. While the eastern Roman empire remained largely intact, the western Roman empire underwent dramatic transformation during the fifth and sixth centuries. How did the successor states in western regions get along with the Byzantine empire in the eastern Mediterranean?

the 470s, for example, and established a kingdom there that survived until the Muslim invasions of the early eighth century. Ostrogoths dominated Italy from the fifth century until Justinian's forces reasserted imperial authority there during the 530s. The departure of Byzantine armies from Italy created a power vacuum, which the Lombard people quickly moved to fill. Although they did not establish a tightly centralized monarchy, the Lombards maintained their hegemony throughout most of Italy from the mid-sixth until the mid-eighth century. Meanwhile, beginning about the mid-fifth century, Gaul fell under the control of other Germanic peoples, including the Burgundians, who settled in the southern and eastern regions, and the Franks, who brought the more northerly and westerly regions under their control. Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic peoples from Germany and Denmark crossed the English Channel and established regional kingdoms in Britain.

Thus, throughout the western portion of the Roman empire, Germanic peoples gradually displaced the authority and institutions of Rome. As they did so, they absorbed a great deal of Roman influence. Many of them converted to Christianity, for example, and others adapted Roman law to the needs of their own societies. None of the Germanic peoples possessed the economic and military resources—much less the

political and social organization—to dominate all the others and establish their hegemony throughout western Europe. Nevertheless, the Franks built an impressive imperial state that organized, at least temporarily, about half of the territories formerly embraced by the western Roman empire.

The Franks

Even though their empire survived for only a short time, the Franks profoundly influenced the political, social, and cultural development of western Europe. Rather than participate actively in the commercial world of the Mediterranean basin, the Franks constructed a society that drew on the agricultural resources of continental Europe. As a result, the center of gravity in western Europe shifted from Italy to the northern lands of France, Germany, and the Low Countries. Furthermore, the Franks oversaw the development of decentralized political institutions, which influenced European politics and society for a millennium and more. Finally, they made a firm alliance with the western Christian church and helped Roman Christianity maintain its cultural and religious primacy in western Europe.

The Franks and the Temporary Revival of Empire

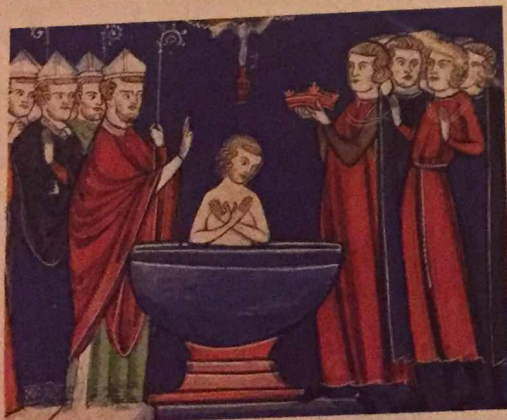
As Roman authority crumbled during the late fifth century, the Franks appeared unlikely to play a prominent role in European affairs. They had little experience in government and little exposure to Roman society. Some of their ancestors had lived within Roman boundaries since about the third century, and a few had probably converted to Christianity. But the Franks had developed a group identity only during the third century C.E., much later than the other Germanic peoples. Not until the fifth century did a strong military and political leader emerge from their midst. That leader was Clovis, who ruled the Franks from 481 until his death in 511.

Clovis

Under Clovis the Franks became the preeminent military and political power in western Europe. In 486 Clovis led Frankish forces on a campaign that wiped out the last vestiges of Roman authority in Gaul. Then he imposed his authority on the Franks themselves. Finally, he organized campaigns against other Germanic peoples whose states bordered the Frankish realm in Gaul. By the time of his death, Clovis had thoroughly transformed the Franks. No longer were they just one among many Germanic peoples

inhabiting a crumbling Roman empire. Instead, they ranked as the most powerful and dynamic of the peoples building new states in western Europe.

One reason for the Franks' rapid rise had to do with religion. Originally, all the Germanic invaders of the Roman empire were polytheists who honored a pantheon of warlike gods and other deities representing elements of nature such as the sun, moon, and wind. As they settled in and around the Roman empire, many Germanic peoples converted to Christianity. Most of them accepted



Clovis's Conversion

A manuscript illustration depicts the baptism of Clovis witnessed by church officials (left) and Frankish nobles (right), while a dove descends from above, indicating divine approval of the event.

Arian Christianity, which was popular in much of the eastern Roman empire. In both Rome and Constantinople, however, church authorities followed the decisions of church councils at Nicaea and Constantinople and condemned Arian views as heretical. Unlike other Germanic peoples, the Franks remained mostly pagan until the time of Clovis, who converted to Roman rather than to Arian Christianity along with his army. Clovis's conversion probably reflected the influence of his wife, Clotilda, a devout Christian who had long urged her husband to adopt her faith.

The Franks' conversion had large political implications. By adopting Roman rather than Arian Christianity, the Franks attracted the allegiance of the Christian population of the former Roman empire as well as recognition and support from the pope and the hierarchy of the western Christian church. Alliance with the church of Rome greatly strengthened the Franks, who became the most powerful of the Germanic peoples between the fifth and ninth centuries.

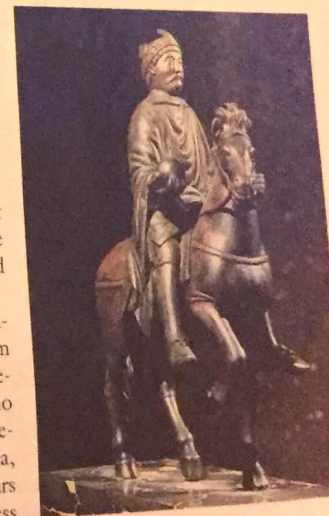
After Clovis's death the Frankish kings lost much of their authority, as aristocratic warriors seized effective control of affairs in their own regions. Nevertheless, Clovis's successors ruled the Frankish kingdom until the early eighth century, when the aristocratic clan of the Carolingians displaced the line of Clovis and asserted the authority of the central government. The Carolingian dynasty takes its name from its founder, Charles (*Carolus* in Latin)—known as Charles Martel ("Charles the Hammer") because of his military prowess. In 732 at the battle of Tours (in the central part of modern France), he turned back a Muslim army that had ventured from Spain—recently conquered by Muslim warriors from north Africa—to reconnoiter lands north of the Pyrenees mountains. His victory helped persuade Muslim rulers of Spain that it was not worthwhile for them to seek further conquests in western Europe. Charles Martel himself never ruled as king of the Franks but, rather, served as deputy to the last of Clovis's descendants. In 751, however, Charles's son claimed the throne for himself.

The Frankish realm reached its high point under Charles Martel's grandson Charlemagne ("Charles the Great"), who reigned from 768 to 814. Like King Harsha in India, Charlemagne temporarily reestablished centralized imperial rule in a society disrupted by invasion and contests for power between ambitious local rulers. Like Harsha again, Charlemagne possessed enormous energy, and the building of the Carolingian empire was in large measure his personal accomplishment. Although barely literate, Charlemagne was extremely intelligent. He spoke Latin, understood some Greek, and regularly conversed with theologians and other learned men. He maintained diplomatic relations with the Byzantine empire and the Abbasid caliphate. The gift of the white elephant Abu al-Abbas symbolized relations between the Carolingian and Abbasid empires, and the animal accompanied Charlemagne on many of his travels until its death.

When Charlemagne inherited the Frankish throne, his realm included most of modern France as well as the lands that now form Belgium, the Netherlands, and southwestern Germany. Charlemagne was a conqueror in the mold of the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman empire. By the time of his death in 814, Charlemagne had extended his authority to northeastern Spain, Bavaria, and Italy as far south as Rome. He campaigned for thirty-two years to impose his rule on the Saxons of northern Germany and repress their rebellions. Beyond the Carolingian empire proper, rulers in eastern Europe and southern Italy paid tribute to Charlemagne as imperial overlord.

The Carolingians

Charlemagne



A bronze statue depicts Charlemagne riding a horse and carrying an orb symbolizing his imperial authority.

Sources from the Past

Gregory of Tours on the Conversion of Clovis

St. Gregory (538–594 C.E.) was bishop of Tours in central Gaul for the last twenty-one years of his life. During that period he composed a *History of the Franks*, which is the chief source of information about the early Franks. Gregory clearly embellished the story of Clovis's conversion to Christianity, but his account indicates the significance of the event both for Clovis and for the Roman church.

The queen [Clotilda] did not cease to urge him [Clovis] to recognize the true God and cease worshiping idols. But he could not be influenced in any way to this belief, until at last a war arose with the Alamanni, in which he was driven by necessity to confess what before he had of his free will denied. It came about that as the two armies were fighting fiercely, there was much slaughter, and Clovis's army began to be in danger of destruction. He saw it and raised his eyes to heaven, and with remorse in his heart he burst into tears and cried: "Jesus Christ, whom Clotilda asserts to be the son of the living God, who art said to give aid to those in distress and to bestow victory on those who hope in thee, I beseech the glory of thy aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies, and I shall know that power which she says that people dedicated in thy name have had from thee, I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods, but, as I see, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them. I now call upon thee, I desire to believe thee, only let me be rescued from my adversaries." And when he said this, the Alamanni turned their backs, and began to disperse in flight. And when they saw that their king was killed, they submitted to the dominion of Clovis, saying: "Let not the people perish further, we pray; we are yours now." And he stopped the fighting, and after encouraging his men retired in peace and told the queen how he had had merit to win the victory by calling on the name of Christ. . . .

SOURCE: Gregory of Tours. *History of the Franks*. Trans. by E. Brehaut. New York: Columbia University Press, 1916, pp. 39–41. (Translation slightly modified.)

Charlemagne's Administration

Charlemagne established a court and capital at Aachen (in modern Germany), but like Harsha in India, he spent most of his reign traveling throughout his realm to maintain his authority. Such constant travel was necessary because Charlemagne did not have the financial resources to maintain an elaborate bureaucracy or an administrative apparatus that could implement his policies. Instead, Charlemagne relied on

Then the queen asked saint Remi, bishop of Rheims, to summon Clovis secretly, urging him to introduce the king to the word of salvation. And the bishop sent for him secretly and began to urge him to believe in the true God, maker of heaven and earth, and to cease worshiping idols, which could help neither themselves nor any one else. But the king said: "I gladly hear you, most holy father; but there remains one thing: the people who follow me cannot endure to abandon their gods; but I shall go and speak to them according to your words." He met with his followers, but before he could speak, the power of God anticipated him, and all the people cried out together: "O pious king, we reject our mortal gods, and we are ready to follow the immortal God whom Remi preaches." This was reported to the bishop, who was greatly rejoiced, and bade them get ready the baptismal font. . . . And the king was the first to ask to be baptized by the bishop. . . . And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity and was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3,000 were baptized.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

To what extent was Clovis's conversion a case of religious transformation and to what extent a political act?



Map 122 The Carolingian empire, 814 C.E. Notice the location of Charlemagne's capital at Aachen and also the extent of his empire. What geographical challenges did he face in his efforts to hold his empire together?

aristocratic deputies, known as counts, who held political, military, and legal authority in local jurisdictions.

The counts often had their own political ambitions, and they sometimes pursued policies contrary to the interests of the central government. In an effort to bring the counts under tighter control, Charlemagne instituted a new group of imperial officials known as *missi dominici* ("envoys of the lord ruler"), who traveled every year to all local jurisdictions and reviewed the accounts of local authorities.

Charlemagne built the Frankish kingdom into an empire on the basis of military expeditions and began to outfit it with some centralized institutions. Yet he hesitated to call himself emperor because the imperial title would constitute a direct challenge to the authority of the Byzantine emperors, who regarded themselves as the sole and legitimate successors of the Roman emperors.

Only in the year 800 did Charlemagne accept the title of emperor. While campaigning in Italy, Charlemagne attended religious services conducted by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day. During the services, the pope proclaimed Charlemagne emperor and placed an imperial crown on his head. It is not certain, but it is at least possible that Charlemagne did not know of the pope's plan and that Leo surprised him with an impromptu coronation: Charlemagne had no desire for strained relations with Byzantine emperors, who deeply resented the use of the imperial title in western Europe as a pretentious affront to their own dignity and authority. In any case, Charlemagne had already built an imperial state, and his coronation constituted public recognition of his accomplishments.

Charlemagne as Emperor

Decline and Dissolution of the Carolingian Empire

If Charlemagne's empire had endured, Carolingian rulers might well have built a bureaucracy, used the *missi dominici* to enhance the authority of the central government, and permanently reestablished centralized imperial rule in western Europe. As it happened, however, internal disunity and external invasions brought the Carolingian empire to an early end.

Charlemagne's only surviving son, Louis the Pious (reigned 814–840), succeeded his father and kept the Carolingian empire together. Lacking Charlemagne's strong will and military skills, however, Louis lost control of the counts and other local authorities, who increasingly pursued their own interests and ignored the central government. Moreover, even before Louis's death his three sons disputed the inheritance of the empire and waged bitter wars against one another. In 843 they agreed to divide the empire into three roughly equal portions, and each of them took one portion to rule as king. Thus, less than a century after its creation, the Carolingian empire dissolved.

Even if internal disunity had not resulted in the dismemberment of the Carolingian empire, external pressures might well have brought it down. Beginning in the late eighth century, three groups of invaders pillaged the Frankish realm in search of wealth stored in towns and monasteries. From the south came Muslims, who raided towns, villages, churches, and monasteries in Mediterranean Europe from the mid-ninth to the late tenth century. Muslim invaders also seized Sicily as well as several territories in southern Italy and southern France. From the east came the Magyars, descendants of nomadic peoples from central Asia who had settled in Hungary. Expert horsemen, the Magyars raided settlements in Germany, Italy, and southern France from the late ninth to the mid-tenth century. From the north came the Vikings, most feared of all the invaders, who began mounting raids in northern France even during Charlemagne's reign.

The Viking invasions represented one dimension of a much larger process of Norse expansion. It is possible that Norse expansion reflected population growth fueled by increased agricultural productivity in Scandinavia. It is possible also that some Vikings lashed out at Christian communities that sent missionaries who sought to abolish pagan gods and beliefs. The principal cause of Norse expansion, however, was probably the quest for wealth through trading and raiding in the Carolingian empire and neighboring lands.

Norse expansion depended on a remarkable set of shipbuilding techniques and seafaring skills that Scandinavian mariners developed during the seventh and eighth centuries. They built rugged boats outfitted with sails that enabled them to travel safely and reliably through the open ocean as well as more sheltered waters such as the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. Venturing forth from their homes in Norway and Denmark, they reconnoitered much of the north Atlantic Ocean and established settlements in the Shetland Islands, the Faeroes, Iceland, and Greenland. About the year 1000 C.E., a small group even established a colony at Newfoundland in modern Canada and explored the Atlantic coast of North America at least as far south as modern-day Maine in the United States. Norse colonies in North America survived no more than a few decades, and even the colony in Greenland eventually disappeared about 1500 C.E. after a cooling global climate made it difficult to cultivate food crops there. Nevertheless, the colonies in Greenland and North America demonstrate the ability of Norse peoples to travel safely over long stretches of open ocean. Those remarkable seafaring skills made it possible for Norse cultivators to migrate from their homelands and establish new agricultural communities in the north Atlantic basin.

Most Norse seafarers were merchants seeking commercial opportunities or migrants seeking lands to settle and cultivate. Some, however, turned their maritime skills more

toward raiding and plundering than trading or raising crops. These were the Vikings. The term *Viking* originally referred to a group that raided the British Isles from their home at Vik in southern Norway. Over time, however, the term came to refer more generally to Norse mariners who mounted invasions and plundered settlements from eastern Europe to Mediterranean lands.

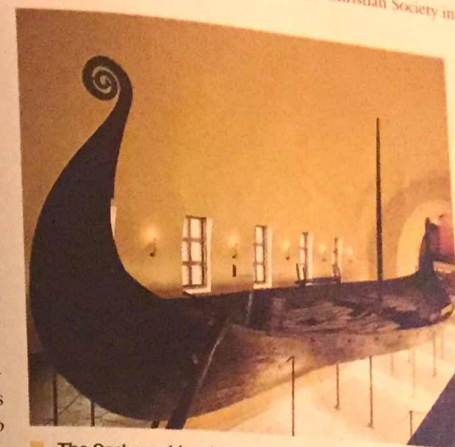
The Vikings sailed shallow-draft boats that could cross heavy seas but then could also navigate the many rivers offering access to interior regions of Europe. Viking sailors carefully coordinated their ships' movements and timed their attacks to take advantage of the tides. Fleets of Viking boats with ferocious dragon heads mounted on their prows could sail up a river, arrive unexpectedly at a village or a monastery far from the sea, and then spill out crews of warriors who conducted lightning raids on unprepared victims.

The first Viking invaders began to attack unprotected monasteries in the 790s. As they learned from experience, Viking forces mounted larger and more daring raids. In 844 C.E. more than 150 Viking ships sailed up the Garonne River in southern France, plundering settlements along the way. Sometimes large fleets of Viking ships even attacked sizable cities. In 845 a menacing fleet of some 800 vessels materialized without warning before the city of Hamburg in northern Germany; in 885 a Viking force consisting of at least 700 ships sailed up the Seine River and besieged Paris; and in 994 an armada of about 100 ships sprinted up the Thames River and raided London. Bypassing relatively close targets in Russia, Germany, England, Ireland, France, and Spain, some Vikings ventured into the Mediterranean, where they plundered sites in the Balearic Islands, Sicily, and southern Italy. By following the Russian rivers to the Black Sea, other Vikings made their way to Constantinople, which they raided at least three times during the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Establishment of Regional Authorities

The Carolingians had no navy, no means to protect vulnerable sites, and no way to predict the movements of Viking raiders. Defense against the Magyars and the Muslims as well as the Vikings rested principally with local forces that could respond rapidly to invasions. Because imperial authorities were unable to defend their territory, the Carolingian empire became the chief casualty of the invasions. After the ninth century, political and military initiative in western Europe passed increasingly to regional and local authorities.

Responses to ninth-century invasions took different forms in different lands. In England, which bore the brunt of the earliest Viking raids, invasions prompted the series of small kingdoms established earlier by Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic



The Oseberg ship, pictured here, is the best-preserved Viking vessel from the early middle ages. Built about 800 C.E., it served as a royal tomb until its discovery in 1903. A ship this size would accommodate about forty men.

The Vikings

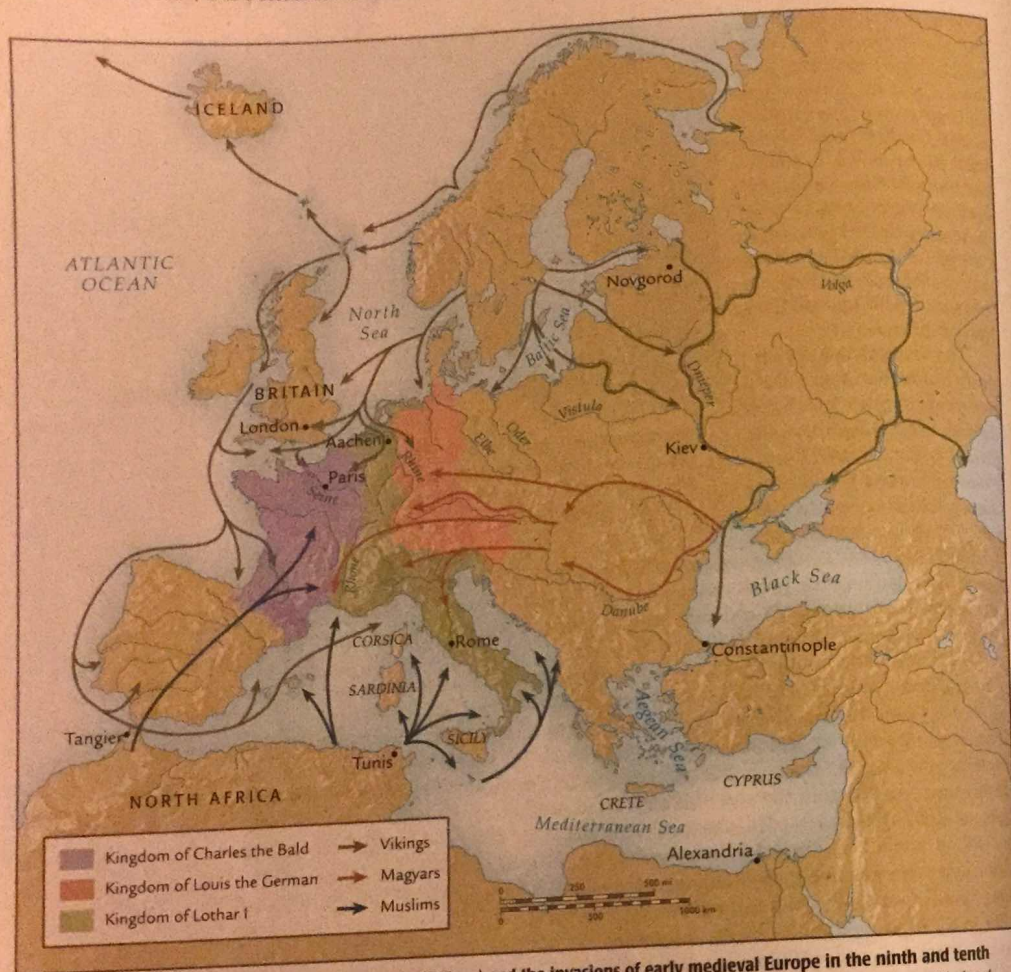
Louis the Pious

Invasions

Norse Expansion

Magyars (MAH-jahrs)

England



Map 173 The dissolution of the Carolingian empire (843 C.E.) and the invasions of early medieval Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries. The various invaders of early medieval Europe took many routes and attacked both coastal and interior regions. What were the political and economic effects of the invasions?

peoples to merge into a single larger realm. The leader of that effort was King Alfred (reigned 871–899), who expanded from his base in southern England to territories farther north held by Danish invaders. Alfred built a navy to challenge the Vikings at sea and constructed fortresses on land to secure areas that he conquered. Danish settlers continued to occupy agricultural lands, but by the mid-tenth century Alfred's successors had established themselves as kings of all England.

In Germany the response to invasion brought the end of Carolingian rule and the formation of a more effective state under a new dynasty. When Carolingian authorities were unable to prevent invasions by the Magyars, local lords took matters into their own hands. The most successful of them was King Otto I of Saxony (reigned 936–973).

In 955 he faced a large Magyar army at Lechfeld near Augsburg and inflicted a crushing defeat that effectively ended the Magyar threat. Otto also imposed his authority throughout Germany, and twice he led armies into Italy to support the papacy against Lombard magnates. On his second venture there in 962, the pope proclaimed him emperor and bestowed an imperial crown on him. Otto's realm was really a German kingdom rather than an empire, but the imperial title survived until the nineteenth century, and later rulers of the Holy Roman Empire dated the foundation of their state to Otto's coronation in 962. In Germany, as in England, then, response to ninth-century invasions led to the organization of an effective regional state.

In France the end of Carolingian rule led to the proliferation of local authorities. Counts and other subordinates of the Carolingians withdrew allegiance from the central government, ruled their territories in their own interests, and usurped royal rights and prerogatives for themselves. They collected taxes, organized armed forces, built castles, and provided justice without reference to the Carolingians or other central authorities. Meanwhile, Vikings established many settlements in northern France, where they carved out small, independent states. The devolution of political and military responsibility to local authorities in tenth-century France encouraged the development of a decentralized political order.

The emergence of effective regional kingdoms and local authorities prevented the return of centralized imperial rule like that of the Carolingians or postclassical societies in China, southwest Asia, and the eastern Mediterranean region. Like postclassical India, medieval Europe became a society of competing regional states. By putting an end to the ninth-century invasions and establishing a stable political order, these states laid a foundation for social, economic, and cultural development.

Early Medieval Society

Historians once used the term *feudalism* to refer to the political and social order of medieval Europe. They spoke routinely of a “feudal system” based on a neat hierarchy of lords and vassals, who collectively took charge of political and military affairs.



Danish Vikings prepare to invade England in this manuscript illustration produced at an English monastery about 1130.

France

Increasingly, however, scholars are abandoning the term *feudalism* because it distorts and oversimplifies the understanding of a complicated society. It is more helpful to view early medieval Europe as a society in which local political and military elites worked out various ad hoc ways to organize their territories and maintain order in the absence of effective central authorities. The arrangements they adopted had deep implications for the lives of political and military elites themselves and also for their relationships with commoners.

Organizing a Decentralized Society

After the dissolution of the Carolingian empire, European nobles built a decentralized society as they sought to protect their lands and maintain public order during a period of weak central authority and periodic invasions from outside. Local nobles, such as the Carolingian counts or other authorities, took responsibility for maintaining order in their own territories. These nobles usually owed at least nominal allegiance to a higher authority, most often a Carolingian king descended from Louis the Pious. In fact, though, the nobles acted with growing independence: they collected rents and fees, administered local affairs, mobilized armed forces, decided legal disputes, and sought to enhance their own authority at the expense of their superiors.

Lords and Retainers

To organize their territories the local nobles built military and political relationships with other prominent individuals in their territories. In doing so, they drew on military talent during the later Roman empire and the early Frankish kingdom, and they mobilized small private armies by attracting armed retainers into their service with grants of land or money. During the ninth and tenth centuries, as the Carolingian empire dissolved, local authorities revived those recruitment practices. Local lords provided grants that enabled their retainers to support themselves and their families. Usually those grants were parcels of land, but they sometimes took other forms, such as the right to income generated by a mill, the right to receive rents or payments from a village, or even a payment of money. The grants enabled retainers to devote their time and energy to the service of their lords rather than the domestic tasks of cultivating food and providing for families. The grants also provided resources that retainers needed to maintain horses and acquire expensive military equipment such as armor and weapons. In exchange for their grants, retainers owed loyalty, obedience, respect, counsel, and military service to their lords.

Indeed, relationships between lords and retainers became stronger because political leaders increasingly attracted followers by offering them rights over land, and they increasingly recognized the prerogative of their supporters to pass those rights along to their heirs. In effect, these ties established close relationships between local political and military authorities. These relationships became extremely important for the larger social order because retainers increasingly exercised political and legal rights over their holdings. Retainers became responsible for the organization of local public works projects, the resolution of disputes, and the administration of justice. As a result, political authorities and military specialists merged into a hereditary noble class that lived off the surplus agricultural production that it extracted from cultivators.

Potential for Instability

This decentralized political order developed into a complicated and sometimes even confusing network of relationships between lords and retainers. A lord with several retainers might himself be a retainer to a higher lord, who in turn might be one of several retainers to a yet greater lord in a web of relationships extending from local communities to a king. In some ways, dependence on the personal relationship between lord and retainer introduced an element of instability into the political order, since retainers—

particularly those with many retainers of their own—sometimes decided unpredictably to pursue their own interests rather than those of their lords. Unless lords could discipline and control their retainers, this decentralized political order had strong potential to lead to political chaos, as in post-Carolingian France, where ambitious local authorities largely ignored central authorities and pursued their own interests.

Yet it was also possible for high-ranking lords to build powerful states on the foundation of relationships between lords and retainers. The tenth-century rulers of England and Germany, for example, monitored their retainers and prevented them from becoming too independent. And during the high middle ages (discussed in chapter 20), the kings of both England and France depended on relationships with their retainers in building powerful, centralized monarchies.

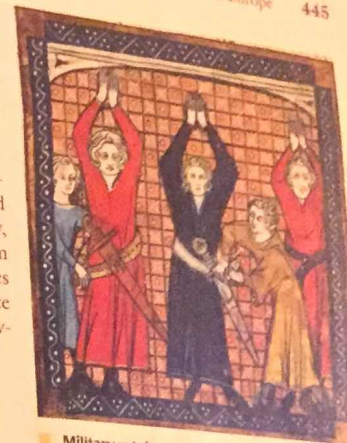
Serfs and Manors

Military, political, and legal affairs were the business of a small governing elite composed of lords and their retainers. But the establishment of a decentralized political order in early medieval Europe had important implications for the lives of all classes of people. Benefices held by political elites consisted most often of land cultivated by peasants who lived on the land and delivered a portion of their production to their superiors. Only by tapping that surplus agricultural production could lords and their retainers secure the material resources they needed to maintain their control over military, political, and legal affairs.

The development of a decentralized political order accompanied fundamental changes in European society, particularly for slaves and free peasants. Both Roman and Germanic societies had recognized enslaved and free classes, and for several centuries after the fall of the western Roman empire the population of western Europe consisted mostly of slaves and free peasants. As European society regained stability following the collapse of the Roman empire and the Germanic invasions, these slaves and free peasants worked at the same kinds of agricultural tasks and frequently intermarried. Free peasants often sought protection from a lord and pledged their labor and obedience in exchange for security and land to cultivate. Beginning about the mid-seventh century, rulers and administrators recognized intermediate categories of individuals neither fully slave nor fully free. Though not chattel slaves subject to sale on a master's whim, these semifree individuals, known as *serfs*, owed obligations to the lords whose lands they cultivated.

Serfs usually had the right to work certain lands and to pass rights to those lands along to their heirs, so long as they observed their obligations to landlords. Those obligations included both labor services and payments of rents in kind, such as a portion of a serf's own harvest, a chicken, or a dozen eggs, at specified times during the year. Male serfs typically worked three days a week in the fields of their lords and provided additional labor services during planting and harvesting seasons, while women churned butter, made cheese, brewed beer, spun thread, wove cloth, or sewed clothes for the lords and their families. Some women also kept sheep and cattle, and their obligations to lords included products from their herds. Because landlords provided them with land to cultivate and sometimes with tools and animals as well,

Serfs' Obligations



Military retainers receive swords that indicate their close relationship with a local lord who accepts them as partners in authority.

serfs had little opportunity to move to different lands. Indeed, they were able to do so only with the permission of their lord. They even had to pay fees for the right to marry a serf who worked for a different lord.

Manors

During the early middle ages, the institution of serfdom encouraged the development of the manor as the principal form of agricultural organization in western Europe. A manor was a large estate consisting of fields, meadows, forests, agricultural tools, domestic animals, and sometimes lakes or rivers, as well as serfs bound to the land. The lord of the manor was a prominent political or military figure. He and his deputies provided government, administration, police services, and justice for the manor. If a dispute arose between serfs, for example, the lord and his deputies restored order, conducted an investigation, and determined how to resolve the conflict. Many lords had the authority to execute serfs for serious misconduct, such as murder or other violent crimes.

By the Carolingian era, manors dominated rural regions in much of France, western Germany, and the Low Countries, as well as southern England and northern Italy. In the absence of thriving cities, manors became largely self-sufficient communities. Lords of the manors maintained mills, bakeries, breweries, and wineries, and serfs produced most of the iron tools, leather goods, domestic utensils, and textiles that the manorial community needed. Small local markets, often organized near monasteries, supplied the products that residents of manors could not conveniently manufacture for themselves. During the high middle ages, craft skills developed on manors would help fuel an impressive round of economic development in western Europe.

The Economy of Early Medieval Europe

During the early middle ages, economic activity in western Europe was considerably slower than in China, India, southwest Asia, and the eastern Mediterranean region. Agricultural production suffered from repeated invasions by Germanic peoples, Magyars, Muslims, and Vikings, which seriously disrupted European economy and society. The decay of urban centers resulted in diminished industrial production and trade. By the tenth century, however, political stability served as a foundation for economic recovery, and western Europeans began to participate more actively in the larger trading world of the eastern hemisphere.

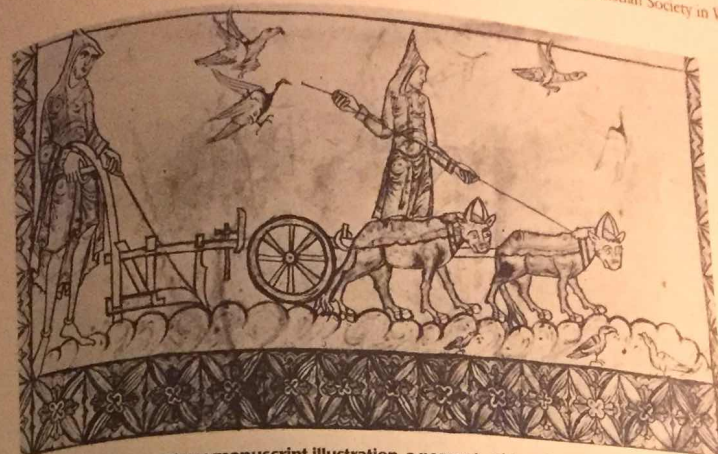
Agriculture

With the establishment of the Frankish kingdom and the Carolingian empire, the European center of gravity shifted from the Mediterranean to more northern lands, particularly France. But the agricultural tools and techniques inherited from the classical Mediterranean world did not transfer very well. In light, well-drained Mediterranean soils, cultivators used small wooden plows that basically broke the surface of the soil, created a furrow, and disrupted weeds. This type of plow made little headway in the heavy, moist soils of the north.

Heavy Plows

After the eighth century a more serviceable plow became available: a heavy tool equipped with iron tips that dug into the earth and with a mould-board that turned the soil so as to aerate it thoroughly and break up the root networks of weeds. Though known as early as the second century, this heavy northern plow did not see widespread use until the Carolingian era. The heavy plow was a more expensive piece of equipment than the light Mediterranean plow, and it required cultivators to harness much more energy to pull it through moist northern soils. Once hitched to oxen or draft horses, however, the heavy plow contributed to significantly increased agricultural production.

As the heavy plow spread throughout western Europe, cultivators took several additional steps that increased agricultural production. Under the direction of their



In this twelfth-century manuscript illustration, a peasant guides a heavy, wheeled plow while his wife prods the oxen that pull the plow.

lords, serfs cleared new lands for cultivation. They constructed water mills, which enabled them to take advantage of a ready and renewable source of inanimate energy, thus freeing human and animal energy for other work. They developed a special horse collar, which enabled them to rely less on slow-moving oxen and more on much speedier horses to draw their heavy plows. As a result, they were able to increase the amount of land under cultivation. They also experimented with new methods of rotating crops that enabled them to cultivate land more intensively than before.

The agricultural surplus of early medieval Europe was sufficient to sustain political elites such as lords and their retainers, but not substantial enough to support cities with large populations of artisans, crafts workers, merchants, and professionals. Whereas cities had thrived and trade had linked all regions of the Roman empire, early medieval Europe was almost entirely a rural society that engaged in little commerce. Manors and local communities produced most of the manufactured goods that they needed, including textiles and heavy tools, and they provided both the materials and the labor for construction and other large-scale projects. Towns were few and sparsely populated, and they served as economic hubs for the areas immediately surrounding them rather than as vibrant centers integrating the economic activities of distant regions.

A Rural Society

By no means did trade entirely disappear from western Europe. Local markets and fairs offered opportunities for small-scale exchange, and itinerant peddlers shopped their wares from one settlement to another. Maritime trade flourished in the Mediterranean despite Muslim conquests in the region. Christian merchants from Italy and Spain regularly traded across religious boundary lines with Muslims of Sicily, Spain, and north Africa, who linked Europe indirectly with the larger Islamic world of communication and exchange. By the end of the early medieval era, about 1000 C.E., food crops that in earlier centuries had made their way throughout much of the Islamic world were beginning to take root also in Mediterranean Europe. Hard durum wheat, rice, spinach, artichokes, eggplant, lemons, limes, oranges, and melons all made their way to Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain because of European participation in the larger trading world

Mediterranean Trade

Sources from the Past

Life on an Early Medieval Manor

Some useful insights into the lives and experiences of common people come from a decree known as the "Capitulary de Villis" issued by the emperor Charlemagne in 807 C.E. as a guide for stewards of Carolingian estates. The decree envisions a community with sophisticated agricultural and craft skills. Probably few estates observed all provisions of Charlemagne's decree, but the capitulary nonetheless communicates clearly how lords hoped to control their manors and profit from their production.

Each steward shall make an annual statement of all our income: an account of our lands cultivated by the oxen which our ploughmen drive and of our lands which the tenants of farms ought to plough; an account of the pigs, of the rents, of the obligations and fines; of the game taken in our forests without our permission; . . . of the mills, of the forest, of the fields, of the bridges, and ships; of the free men and the hundreds who are under obligations to our treasury; of markets, vineyards, and those who owe wine to us; of the hay, firewood, torches, planks, and other kinds of lumber; of the waste lands; of the fruits of the trees, of the nut trees, larger and smaller, of the grafted trees of all kinds; of the gardens; of the turnips; of the fish ponds; of the hides, skins, and horns; of the honey, wax, of the fat, tallow and soap; of the mulberry wine, cooked wine, mead, vinegar, beer, wine new and old; of the new grain and the old; of the hens and eggs; of the geese; the number of fishermen, [metal] smiths, sword-makers, and shoemakers; . . . of the forges and mines, that is iron and other mines; of the lead mines; . . . of the colts and fillies; they shall make all these known to us, set forth separately and in order, at Christmas, in order that we may know what and how much of each thing we have. . . .

[Stewards] must provide the greatest care, that whatever is prepared or made with the hands, that is, lard, smoked meat, salt meat, partially salted meat, wine, vinegar, mulberry wine, cooked wine . . . mustard, cheese, butter, malt, beer, mead, honey, wax, flour, all should be prepared and made with the greatest cleanliness. . . .

[Stewards should ensure] that in each of our estates, the chambers [living quarters] shall be provided with counterpanes, cushions, pillows, bed clothes, coverings for the tables and benches; vessels of brass, lead, iron and wood; andirons, chains, pot-hooks, adzes, axes, angers,

cutlasses and all other kinds of tools, so that it shall never be necessary to go elsewhere for them, or to borrow them. And the weapons, which are carried against the enemy, shall be well cared for, so as to keep them in good condition, and when they are brought back they shall be placed in the chamber.

For our women's work they are to give at the proper time, as has been ordered, the materials, that is the linen, wool, woad, vermillion, madder, wool-combs, teasels, soap, grease, vessels and the other objects which are necessary.

Of the food products other than meat, two-thirds shall be sent each year for our own use, that is of the vegetables, fish, cheese, honey, mustard, vinegar, millet, panic [a grain similar to millet], dried and green herbs, radishes, and in addition of the wax, soap and other small products; and they shall tell us how much is left by a statement, as we have said above; and they shall not neglect this as in the past; because from those two-thirds, we wish to know how much remains.

Each steward shall have in his district good workmen, namely, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, silversmiths, shoemakers, [wood] turners, carpenters, sword-makers, fishermen, foilers [fine metalworkers], soap-makers, men who know how to make beer, cider, berry, and all other kinds of beverages, bakers to make pastry for our table, net-makers who know how to make nets for hunting, fishing and fowling, and the others who are too numerous to be designated.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

On the basis of the "Capitulary de Villis," how would you characterize the conditions of material life in the Carolingian countryside?

SOURCE: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1900. (Translation slightly modified.)

of the eastern hemisphere, even if western European merchants were not nearly so prominent as their Byzantine, Arab, Persian, Indian, Malay, and Chinese counterparts.

Maritime trade flourished also in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. Most active among the early medieval merchants in the northern seas were Norse seafarers, kinsmen of the Vikings who raided lands from eastern Europe to the Mediterranean. Norse traders followed the same routes as Viking raiders, and many individual mariners no doubt turned from commerce to plunder and back again as opportunities arose. Norse merchants called at ports from Russia to Ireland, carrying cargoes of fish and furs from Scandinavia, honey from Poland, wheat from England, wine from France, beer from the Low Countries, and swords from Germany. By traveling down the Russian rivers to the Black Sea, they were able to trade actively in both the Byzantine and the Abbasid empires. Thus, like Mediterranean merchants, Norse mariners linked western Europe with the Islamic world. Indeed, the Carolingian empire depended heavily on this connection: Norse merchants took Scandinavian products to the Abbasid empire and brought back silver, which they traded at Carolingian ports for wine, jugs, glassware, and other products. The silver transported from the Abbasid empire by Norse merchants was a principal source of bullion used for minting coins in early medieval Europe and hence a crucially important element of the western European economy.

By 900 the results of political stability and agricultural innovation were clearly evident in population figures as well as trade. In 200 C.E., before the Roman empire began to experience serious difficulties, the European population stood at about thirty-six million. It fell sharply over the next four centuries, to thirty-one million in 400 and twenty-six million in 600—a decline that reflected both the ravages of epidemic diseases and the unsettled conditions of the early middle ages. Then, gradually, the population recovered, edging up to twenty-nine million in 800 and thirty-two million in 900. By 1000 European population once again amounted to thirty-six million—the level it had reached some eight centuries earlier. By the end of the early middle ages, western Europe was poised to experience remarkable economic and demographic expansion that vastly increased European influence in the eastern hemisphere.

Norse
Merchant-Mariners

Population

The Formation of Christian Europe

By the time the Roman empire collapsed, Christianity was the principal source of religious, moral, and cultural authority throughout the Mediterranean basin. In the northern lands of Gaul, Germany, the British isles, and Scandinavia, however, Christianity had attracted few converts. Germanic invaders of the Roman empire sometimes embraced Arian Christianity, but not until the conversion of Clovis and the Franks did Roman Christianity enjoy a powerful and energetic sponsor in lands beyond the Mediterranean rim. One of the most important developments of the early middle ages was the conversion of western Europe to Roman Christianity. The Franks, the popes, and the monasteries played important roles in bringing about that conversion. The adoption of Roman Christianity ensured that medieval Europe would inherit crucial cultural elements from classical Roman society, including the Latin language and the institutional Roman church.

The Politics of Conversion

Clovis and the Franks won the support of the church hierarchy as well as the Christian population of the former Roman empire when they converted to the Roman faith. Their alliance with the Roman church also provided them with access to educated and

The Franks and the Church

literate individuals who could provide important political services. Scribes, secretaries, and record keepers for the Frankish kingdom came largely from the ranks of churchmen—priests, monks, bishops, and abbots—since very few others received a formal education during the early middle ages.

A deep commitment to Roman Christianity became a hallmark of Frankish policy. Clovis, his successors, and the Carolingians viewed themselves as protectors of the papacy. Charlemagne mounted a military campaign that destroyed the power of the Lombards, who had threatened the popes and the city of Rome since the sixth century, and brought most of central and northern Italy into the expanding Carolingian empire. In exchange for that military and political support, the Carolingians received recognition and backing from the popes, including the award of Charlemagne's imperial crown at the hands of Pope Leo III.

Charlemagne not only supported the church in Italy but also worked to spread Christianity in northern lands. He maintained a school at his court in Aachen where he assembled the most prominent scholars from all parts of his empire. They corrected texts, made careful copies of the Bible and classical Latin literature, and taught Christian doctrine to men preparing for careers as priests or church officials. Charlemagne ordered monasteries throughout his empire to establish elementary schools, and he even tried to persuade village priests to provide free instruction in reading and writing. Those efforts had limited success, but they certainly increased literacy in the Latin language as well as popular understanding of basic Christian doctrine. Charlemagne's efforts also resulted in an explosion of writing: not since the fall of the Roman empire had western Europe produced so much writing.

The Spread of Christianity

Charlemagne sometimes promoted the spread of Christianity by military force. Between 772 and 804 he waged a bitter campaign against the Saxons, a pagan people inhabiting northern Germany. Alongside his claim to political hegemony, he insisted that the Saxons adopt Roman Christianity. The Saxons violently resisted both the political and the religious dimensions of Charlemagne's campaign. In the end, though, Charlemagne prevailed: the Saxons not only acknowledged Charlemagne as their political lord but also replaced their pagan traditions with Christianity.

Pagan ways did not immediately disappear from western Europe. Even within the Carolingian empire, pockets of paganism survived for several centuries after the arrival of Christianity, particularly in out-of-the-way areas that did not attract the immediate attention of conquerors or missionaries. Moreover, beyond the Carolingian empire were the Scandinavian lands, whose peoples resisted Christianity until the end of the millennium. By the year 1000, however, Christianity had won the allegiance of most people throughout western Europe and even in the Nordic lands. By sponsoring the Roman church and its missionaries, Charlemagne helped establish Christianity as the dominant religious and cultural tradition in western Europe.

The Papacy

Apart from the political support it received from the Franks, the Roman church benefited from strong papal leadership. When the western Roman empire collapsed, the papacy survived and claimed spiritual authority over all the lands formerly embraced by the empire. For a century after the dissolution of the western Roman empire, the popes cooperated closely with the Byzantine emperors, who seemed to be the natural heirs to the emperors of Rome. Beginning in the late sixth century, however, the popes acted more independently and devoted their efforts to strengthening the western Christian church based at Rome and clearly distinguishing it from the eastern Christian church based at Constantinople. The two churches differed on many issues by

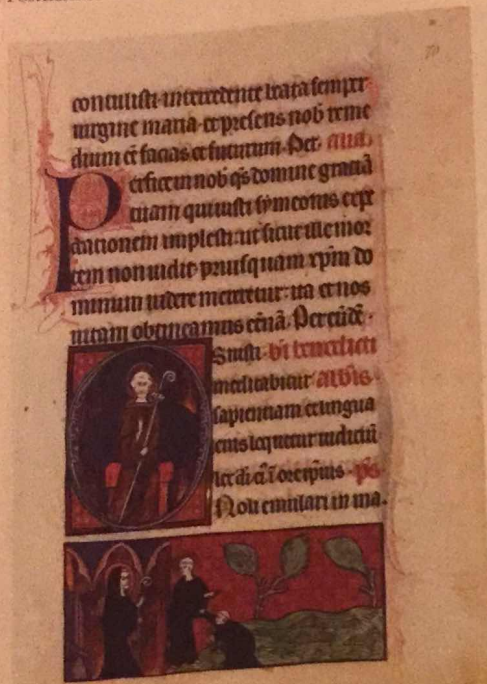


Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne emperor in a manuscript illustration. The coronation symbolized the firm alliance between the Franks and the western Christian church.

the eleventh century, and in 1054 the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other. After the eleventh century the two branches of Christianity formed distinct identities as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

The individual most important for providing the Roman church with its sense of direction was Pope Gregory I (590–604 C.E.), also known as Gregory the Great. As pope, Gregory faced an array of difficult challenges. During the late sixth century the Lombards consolidated their hold on the Italian peninsula, menacing Rome and the Roman church in the process. Gregory ensured the survival of both the city and the church by mobilizing local resources and organizing the defense of Rome. He also faced difficulties within the church, since bishops frequently acted independently of the pope, as though they were supreme ecclesiastical authorities within their own dioceses. To regain the initiative, Gregory reasserted papal primacy—the claim that the bishop of Rome was the ultimate authority in the Christian church. Gregory also made contributions as a theologian: he strongly emphasized the sacrament of penance,

Pope Gregory I

The Conversion
of England

A fourteenth-century manuscript illustration shows St. Benedict with his crozier, the staff carried by abbots to symbolize their position (above), and meeting with two monks beside a fishpond at their monastery (below).

missionary activity. France and Germany offered plentiful opportunities to win converts, particularly as the Frankish kingdom and the Carolingians brought those lands under their control. Some of the popes' most effective missionaries were monks. Pope Gregory himself was a monk, and he relied heavily on the energies of his fellow monks in seeking converts in England and elsewhere.

Monasticism

Christian monasticism had its origin in Egypt. During the second and third centuries, many devout Christians sought to lead ascetic and holy lives in the deserts of Egypt. Some lived alone as hermits, and others formed communes where they devoted themselves to the pursuit of holiness rather than worldly success. When Christianity became legal during the fourth century, the monastic lifestyle became an increasingly popular alternative throughout the Roman empire. Monastic communities cropped up in Italy, Spain, Gaul, and the British isles as well as in the eastern Mediterranean region.

During the early days of monasticism, each community developed its own rules, procedures, and priorities. Some communities demanded that their inhabitants follow extremely austere lifestyles that sapped the energy of the monks. Other communities

which required individuals to confess their sins to their priests and then to atone for their sins by penitential acts prescribed by the priests—a practice that enhanced the influence of the Roman church in the lives of individuals.

Gregory strengthened the Roman church further by extending its appeal and winning new converts in western Europe. The most important of his many missionary campaigns was one directed at England, recently conquered by Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic peoples. He aimed his efforts at the kings who ruled the various regions of England, hoping that their conversion would induce their subjects to adopt Christianity. This tactic largely succeeded: by the early seventh century Christianity had established a stable foothold in England, and by 800 England was securely within the fold of the Roman church.

Gregory's successors continued his policy of expanding the Roman church through

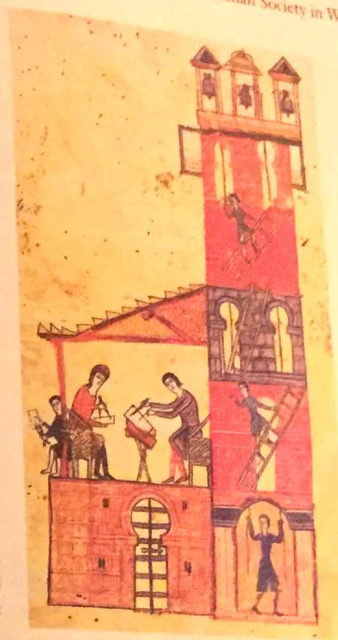
did not establish any clear expectations of their recruits, with the result that monks frittered away their time or wandered aimlessly from one monastic house to another. Those haphazard conditions prevented monasteries from mounting effective Christian missions.

St. Benedict of Nursia (480–547 C.E.) strengthened the early monastic movement by providing it with discipline and a sense of purpose. In 529 St. Benedict prepared a set of regulations known as Benedict's *Rule* for the monastic community that he had founded at Monte Cassino, near Rome. The *Rule* did not permit extreme asceticism, but it required monks to take vows to lead communal, celibate lives under the absolute direction of the abbot who supervised the monastery: poverty, chastity, and obedience became the prime virtues for Benedictine monks. The *Rule* also called for monks to spend their time in prayer, meditation, and work. At certain hours monks came together for religious services and prayer, and they divided the remainder of the day into periods for study, reflection, and manual labor.

Monasteries throughout Europe began to adopt Benedict's *Rule* as the standard for their own houses. Through the influence of St. Benedict's sister, the nun St. Scholastica (482–543), an adaptation of the *Rule* soon provided guidance for the religious life of women living in convents. Within a century most European monasteries and convents observed the Benedictine *Rule*. During the following centuries the Roman church generated many alternatives to Benedictine monasticism. Yet even today most Roman Catholic monasteries observe rules that reflect the influence of the Benedictine tradition.

Strengthened by the discipline that the Benedictine *Rule* introduced, monasteries became a dominant feature in the social and cultural life of western Europe throughout the middle ages. Monasteries helped to provide order in the countryside, for example, and to expand agricultural production. Monasteries accumulated large landholdings—as well as authority over serfs working their lands—from the bequests of wealthy individuals seeking to contribute to the church's work and thereby to merit salvation. Particularly in France and Germany, abbots of monasteries dispatched teams of monks and serfs to clear forests, drain swamps, and prepare lands for cultivation. Indeed, monasteries organized much of the labor that brought about the expansion of agricultural production in early medieval Europe.

Like Buddhist monasteries in Asian lands and charitable religious foundations in Muslim lands, European monasteries provided a variety of social services. They served as inns for travelers and places of refuge for individuals suffering from natural or other



St. Benedict

St. Scholastica

Monasteries were the principal centers of literacy in western Europe during the early middle ages. In this manuscript illustration, one monk copies a manuscript, another makes geometric calculations, a third cuts parchment, two work on the building, and one more rings the bells that call monks and members of the surrounding community to religious services.

Monastic Rules

Monasticism
and Society

calamities. They served as orphanages and provided medical treatment for the ill and injured. They often set up schools and offered at least some rudimentary educational services for local regions, and large monasteries provided more advanced instruction for those preparing for the priesthood or high ecclesiastical positions. Some monasteries maintained libraries and scriptoria, where monks copied works of classical literature and philosophy as well as the scriptures and other Christian writings. Almost all works of Latin literature that have come down to the present survive because of copies made by medieval monks. Finally, monasteries served as a source of literate, educated, and talented individuals whose secretarial and administrative services were crucial for the organization of effective government in early medieval Europe.

Because of the various roles they played in the larger society, monasteries were particularly effective agents in the spread of Christianity. While they organized life in the countryside and provided social services, monks also zealously preached Christianity and tended to the spiritual needs of rural populations. For many people a local monastic church offered the only practical opportunity for them to take part in religious services. Monks patiently and persistently served the needs of rural populations, and over the decades and centuries they helped to instill Christian values in countless generations of European peasants.

Like societies in China, India, southwest Asia, and the eastern Mediterranean region, western European society experienced drastic change during the postclassical era. In some ways western Europe had the most difficult experience of all the postclassical societies. In China, southwest Asia, and the eastern Mediterranean, societies were able to preserve or reestablish centralized imperial rule that maintained order and stability while also facilitating trade and encouraging economic development. India did not generate an imperial form of government, but because of the subcontinent's geographic location and productive capacity, India participated actively in the larger economic and commercial life of the eastern hemisphere. In contrast, rulers of early medieval Europe did not reinstate an imperial form of government—except for the short-lived Carolingian empire—and western Europeans did not participate actively in the larger trading world of the eastern hemisphere. The standards of material life in early medieval Europe—as measured by agricultural and industrial production, volume of trade, and the extent of urban settlement—stood well below those of other postclassical societies.

Yet, just as postclassical developments deeply influenced the evolution of societies in other lands, the early medieval era was a crucial period for the development of western Europe. In the absence of a durable centralized empire, western Europeans found ways to maintain relative order and stability by decentralizing political responsibilities and relying on local authorities for political organization. Over the longer term the decentralized political order of medieval Europe discouraged the revival of empire and encouraged the emergence of regional states that organized their communities into powerful societies. During the early middle ages, western Europeans experimented with agricultural techniques that enabled them to expand production dramatically, conduct increased trade, and rebuild urban centers. Finally, western Christianity preserved elements of classical Roman society and established a foundation for cultural unity in western Europe, just as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and eastern Christianity served as sources of cultural authority in other societies.

CHRONOLOGY

476	Fall of the western Roman empire
480–547	Life of St. Benedict of Nursia
481–511	Reign of Clovis
482–543	Life of St. Scholastica
590–604	Reign of Pope Gregory I
751–843	Carolingian kingdom
768–814	Reign of Charlemagne
800	Coronation of Charlemagne as emperor
814–840	Reign of Louis the Pious
843	Dissolution of the Carolingian empire
871–899	Reign of King Alfred
936–973	Reign of King Otto I of Saxony
955	Battle of Lechfeld
962	Coronation of Otto I

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