

# WHEN DID THE BREAK WITH ROMAN CIVILIZATION OCCUR?

## Part One: Roots of the Middle Ages lay in the Roman Era

As bizarre as this might seem, a good argument can be made, that the Middle Ages actually had their origins in the Roman era.

One of the hallmarks of the Middle Ages is that of a large group of serfs, farmers tied to the land, obligated to pay rent and taxes to the lords of the land. One thing that is crucial to understand about the genesis of the Middle Ages, however, is that this process of binding lowerclass farmers to the soil, began in the Roman era, no later than the time of Constantine. For it is in his reign, that laws binding these workers to the lands that they farmed, and forcing sons to adopt the same jobs that their fathers had, are found in the historical record.

We also find the accumulation of land under the control and ownership of the wealthy elites. Just as with the enserfment of the lowerclasses, this process also began in the Roman era. Archaeologists find many lowerclass workers seeking refuge on the large rural estates of wealthy landowners. Recall the Salvian reading on this process.

Another prominent feature of the Middle Ages is its emphasis on heavy cavalry. While the squadrons of heavily armed knights as the main striking force of the military didn't appear until the 700s AD, this shift toward cavalry did start in the Roman era. By the 500s, the Roman infantry, the legionary soldier, was no longer the main part of the force, but cavalry was. The Battle at Strasbourg in 357 was the last great battle the Romans fought, won by their infantry. The next set of battles that are described in enough detail by the ancient sources for us to see clearly, the reconquest of the West by Justinian in the 500s, feature cavalry, with the infantry lined up in the background.

The connection between the Roman era and the Middle Ages can also be seen linguistically. Some of the terms for aristocrats actually come from Latin terms used in the later Roman Empire for *general* and other offices. For example, the term *duke* comes from the Latin *dux*, and it meant "general." *Count* comes from the Latin *comes*, which literally meant "companion," and was a title of a member of a general's or emperor's staff.

Another aspect of the Middle Ages that actually arose in the Roman era was that of the Christian church. Even before the Middle Ages began, the Christian Church was very powerful. This trend started in 312, with Constantine's decree of tolerance for Christians, and continued as he set aside funds for the construction of churches, and decreed that clergy would not have to pay taxes. Additionally, the rise of a single cleric, the bishop, who would oversee all the churches of an entire region, started as early as the 100s.

And so one can see that the most distinguishing features of the Middle Ages—the reliance upon cavalry, control of the land by elites, as well as the decline of the free farmers into serfs, and the growth of the power of the Christian church—were well under way within the Roman era.

## Part Two: the Middle Ages started with the Germanic migrations

The traditional view of the start of the Middle Ages, has been that the Germanic migrations and invasions in the 400s AD is what caused the rupture with Roman civilization, and started Europe on the path to the Middle Ages.

It is true that there was a certain amount of devastation that followed in the wake of the Germanic migrations in the 400s. "For us," says Salvian, a priest of Marseilles in the 400s, "there is neither peace nor security." Another contemporary, Prosper of Aquitaine, cries, towards 416: "It is ten years since we fell beneath the sword of the Vandals and Goths; the people perished, even children and young maids they slew," . . . Those Germans who were untouched by Roman civilization (the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons) made devastating raids, and usually put to the sword many of their captives before they left. The war bands which took part in the great invasion of 406 in Italy and Gaul spread terror far and wide by their atrocious exploits; they transformed the town of Treier into a mass grave, in which the naked bodies of men and women were devoured by dogs and birds of prey. In southwestern France and in Spain the faithful and the clergy were beaten, thrown into chains, and burned alive. Everywhere, at the sack of cities and towns, women suffered the supreme outrage. Throughout the second half of the fifth century a contemporary witnesses that "the forest of swords mowed down the Italian nobility like corn." Later, in the sixth century, the savagery of the Lombards in Italy passed all bounds. "Murder is nothing to them," writes the annalist Paul Deacon. "Even as a sword leaping from the scabbard so did this fierce horde ravage, and men fell even as the ears of wheat beneath the sickle." In the East the same terrible sights were everywhere to be seen; men were massacred, women and children carried away, by the invading bands of Huns, Germans, and Slavs. Ostrogoths hacked off the arms of laborers and impaled the serfs in Illyria (Yugoslavia); Slavs crucified the peasants and artisans, whom they made prisoners, head downwards, or shot them full of arrows.

Jerome, writing in 396 AD to a friend to console him on the death of his young nephew, recounts the recent barbarian incursions into Roman territory:

For twenty years and more the blood of Romans has been shed daily between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Dardania, Dacia, Thessaly, Achaia, Epirus, Dalmatia, the Pannonias--each and all of these have been sacked and pillaged and plundered by Goths, Sarmatians, Quades, Alans, Huns, Vandals, and Marcomanni. How many of God's matrons and virgins, virtuous and noble ladies, have been made the sport of these brutes! Bishops have been made captive; priests and other clergymen have been put to death. Churches have been overthrown, horses have been stalled by the altars of Christ, the relics of martyrs have been dug up.

Mourning and fear abound on every side

And death appears in countless shapes and forms.

The Roman world is falling.... What a number of monasteries they captured! What many rivers they caused to run red with blood! They laid siege to Antioch and invested other cities on the Halys, the Cydnus, the Orontes, and the Euphrates [Rivers]. They carried off troops of captives. Arabia, Phoenicia, Palestine and Egypt, in their terror fancied themselves already enslaved.<sup>1</sup>

Salvian, writing in the 440s, viewed the arrival of the Germanic tribes as a sign that God was displeased with the debauched Romans, and was punishing them (the Romans) for their sins:

Almost throughout the Roman world peace and security have ceased.... First they poured out from their native land<sup>2</sup> into Germany, which lay nearest them, a country called barbarous, but under Roman control. After its destruction, the country of the Belgae burst into flames, then the rich estates of the luxurious Aquitanians, and after these the whole body of the Gallic provinces. This ruin spread gradually, however, in order that while one part was being visited with destruction, another might be reformed by its example. But when has there been any amendment among us, or what part of the Roman world, whatever its affliction, is corrected by it?<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, Salvian was upset that the Roman world was not repenting from what he saw were its sins (as can be seen in the last sentence in the above quotation). Regardless of whether one accepts Salvian's theological view here, it is clear for Salvian as well as his readers that the Germanic migrations were not A Good Thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter 60 (to Heliodorus), chapter 16.

<sup>2</sup> Most scholars believe that the Germans originated in Scandinavia.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Government of God*, 7.1,12

## Part Three: the Middle Ages started with the Islamic Invasion of the Mediterranean

Some historians have held that the damage the Germanic tribes caused in their invasions of the 400s AD was minimal, and that after the initial shock of their arrival, the Mediterranean economy nurtured by Rome continued, despite the change in political authority in western Europe from that century onward.

### The Roman way of life continued under the Germanic era

First of all, the number of Germans that poured into the Roman empire, compared to the number of Romans, was rather small. As a rule of the thumb, the population of the German migrants was no more than 5% of the population of the regions that they ventured into (this would include Spain and North Africa, in addition to France and Italy). There were only 80,000 Vandals and Alans who went into Roman North Africa in 429, which they conquered and ruled until the reconquest under Justinian, in the 530s. The native population in Roman Africa would have been several million, making the Germanic population a few percent of the Roman. In the mid-500s, a Roman army from Constantinople, numbering just under 21 thousand, conquered Italy from an Ostrogothic population estimated to be some 100,000 men, women, and children. Just before that reconquest, another Roman army departed from Constantinople 15,000 strong (including both Roman and allied soldiers), and this force reconquered Vandal Africa.

Second, the sparse Germanic population is also evident in other historical facts. The provinces of the Roman empire continued to speak Latin, as well as the local dialects that became what are known as romance languages (Spanish, French, and Italian). These provinces didn't adopt Germanic languages. In fact, there are no texts extant that demonstrate the Frankish language—even the leaders' proclamations were issued in Latin. Given that the Franks were the Germanic tribe that retained their rule the longest, and had conquered a large, prosperous region, one would have thought that in France, if nowhere else, would the Germanic tongue of these tribes have been retained.

Third, there is the fact that the Germanic kings continued to enforce Roman law in the territories that they absorbed. Germanic kings were kings of their own people, calling themselves *reges Gothorum, Vandalorum, Burgondionum, Francorum*, but they approached the Romans as Roman generals. Not only did they see themselves as Roman generals, but they continued and maintained the Roman civilian government in the territories they governed. The Romans had set up market tolls, which were tolls along the roads, in the ports, at bridges and fords, and elsewhere. The Frankish kings let them all stay in force and drew from them such great revenues that the collectors of this class of taxes figured among their most useful functionaries.

Fourth, it must be kept in mind that most of the cities in the Roman world survived the German migrations. A survey of cities in existence at the present day in France, in Italy and even on the Rhine and the Danube rivers in central Europe, gives proof that, for the most part, these cities now stand

on the sites of ancient Roman cities, and that their very names are often but a transformation of Roman names. Obviously the German barbarians couldn't have destroyed too many of those Roman cities. If, on the extreme frontiers of the Empire, certain towns were put to the torch, destroyed and pillaged, it is none the less true that the immense majority survived the invasions.

It is true that in the 400s, the Germanic tribes sacked Rome twice, once at the hands of the Visigoths in 410, and a second time at the hands of the Vandals in 455. Yet the barbarians left Rome after six and fifteen days, respectively, and were essentially after movable property (especially gold and silver). In at least the first instance, the Romans themselves told stories about how the invaders gave sanctuary to churches (and to refugees seeking protection therein).

Fifth, there is strong documentary reason to believe that the western lands conquered by Germanic tribes remained wealthy. Not only did the merchants bring a few luxury items (such as jewelry and silks) into the port of Marseille (on the French coast of the Mediterranean); they also brought wine, oil, spices, and papyrus. These latter goods are not rare, expensive luxuries, but commonplace goods consumed by middleclass as well as upperclass people—goods that require large shipments to be profitable. This indicates that there was much trade between the western and eastern halves of the Mediterranean.

Moreover, in the 400s through 700s, we find many actions (written about, in the ancient sources), that make sense only if there is a lot of money circulating. Many wealthy men offered kings a lot of money to be appointed bishops. Apart from the morality of the issue, the point here is that these men would not have offered large bribes if they felt that they could more than recoup the costs by collecting revenues as bishop, which they felt were sure to come into the church coffers—implying a fair amount of gold and silver that would come their way. The same goes for tax farming contracts that the government would put out to bid.

The Frankish kings granted large grants from their treasures: before 695 the Abbot of St. Denis drew an annuities (an annual payment) totaling 300 *solidi* (the *solidus* was a gold coin, about the weight and size of a nickel) from the government treasury. The kings lent money to the cities, paid missionaries, and bought or corrupted men at will. The retention of the Roman tariffs and the market-toll (taxes paid in Roman times, as well as after the Franks moved into the Roman west) were the essential sources of their wealth power. The 6000 *solidi* given by Childebert to the Church of Saint-Germain in Paris for the poor, and the munificence of Dagobert I, who covered the apse of Saint-Denis with silver, give us some idea of the wealth of these Frankish kings.

This view has been supported by archaeology as well. Archaeologists at Carthage, for example, have found increasingly large amounts of eastern pottery at Carthage, from about 430 to about 530 (when the Germanic Vandals occupied the region). But from 530 onward (after the Roman empire in the east re-conquered this region), eastern pottery declines, to a point where from about 600 onward, it is almost never found.

## **Part Four: The Middle Ages started with the Islamic Invasion of the Mediterranean, cont.**

The argument that the major break with Roman civilization took place with the Arabic invasion of the Mediterranean, is based on the idea that western Europe grew poorer after the Arabic invasions.

In the field of economics the contrast of France in the 600s, compared to the 800s, is especially striking. In the earlier era, Gaul was still a maritime country and trade and traffic flourished because of that fact. In the later period (when the empire of Charlemagne had been established), the French nation and economy was essentially an inland one. No longer was there any communication with the exterior; it was a closed state, without foreign markets, living in a condition of almost complete isolation.

The two eras (the 600s and 800s) also differ from each other in terms of taxation. In the first, most of the money of the French kings was taken from tolls (from crossing rivers and roads), as well as fees paid by the markets (where merchants gathered from all over to sell their goods). In the later era, most of the royal revenues were acquired from rents and fees paid by serfs farming their land, as well as tribute from conquered peoples. And so France was a major trading nation in the 600s, but was a landlocked, agricultural nation in the 800s.

This happened because the Arabs had control of the Mediterranean, and shut down the vast majority of the trade between the east and the west, going so far as to launch attacks along the French and Italian coasts. In 846, Islamic forces (70 ships) sacked the region around the city of Rome itself. After Syracuse (in Sicily) was captured in 878, the Pope was forced to pay the Muslims 25,000 gold coins a year. This situation was only stopped in 916, when an alliance of Christian forces (the Holy Roman Emperor, south Italian princes, and a Byzantine army) went to Naples to wrest it away from an alliance with the Arabs, and then, with their help, defeated the Islamic navy on the Garigliano River (a river in central Italy just south of Rome), where the Arabs had established a base and were launching raids in Italy. In 875, Islamic ships pillaged the coast of Rome. Louis II declared that Naples had become another Africa (a staging ground for Islamic raids). As Ibn-Khaldoun says, "The Christians could no longer float a plank upon the sea," although the Byzantine navy still retained mastery in the Aegean, around Greece. Papyrus, spices, and silks virtually disappeared from the 700s in France. Wine from the Levant had a similar fate, as did gold coins.

The Roman Empire in the east (the Byzantine empire) itself was cut off from its gold-producing regions around 650, and so the major trading partner of these Germanic kingdoms of the western Mediterranean was now unable to afford many products from the West, and consequently France saw fewer gold coins as the Carolingian era progressed.

The Mediterranean was henceforth at the mercy of the Muslim pirates. In the 9th century they seized the islands, destroyed the ports, and made their raids everywhere. The great port of

Marseilles, which had formerly been the principal emporium of western trade with the Levant, was empty. The old economic unity of the Mediterranean was shattered, and so it remained until the epoch of the Crusades. It had resisted the Germanic invasions: but it gave way before the irresistible advance of Islam.

As the Muslim fleets captured islands like Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia, France became cut off from the East, and the products that came from there gradually disappeared from France. By the end of the 700s, there was virtually no papyrus imported from the East, although it was still being made in Egypt. Spices become more rare in the 700s as well. Lists that contain food allowances to travelling monks and officials mention meat, bread, vegetables, salt, cheese—but no spices. In a similar fashion, little or nothing at all is heard of oil from Africa, wine from the Levant, and silks.

This increasing poverty is also seen in the content of the coins of France. In the 700s, the gold coins became more and more diluted with silver. From the mid-700s, silver coins were minted in France, with gold coins being rare exceptions.

**Another interesting point to keep in mind, when discussing the Arabic/Islamic role in the onset of the Middle Ages in western Europe, is that archaeologists in recent decades, have uncovered more and more evidence that (some of) the decline that has been attributed to the Arabs, actually started much earlier, in the late 500s and early 600s.** This can be seen in eastern pottery imports at Carthage, which declined soon after the Roman army reconquered that region in the 530s, to the point where they were almost non-existent from 600 onward. There are many other signs of a decline in the west as well. Pottery finds in Italy (evidence of occupied settlements) across these centuries show a definite pattern, one that started long before the Arabic conquests along the southern Mediterranean. And the fact that the decline at Carthage starts not from the late 690s, when the Arabs captured Carthage, but from a century and a half beforehand, suggests that the taxation imposed by the Roman empire, to finance that reconquest, as well as to fight the Persians and Slavs in the north, simply impoverished its territories. It is hard to lay all the blame for an economic decline at the feet of the Arabs, when this decline started long before Muhammad lived. Now this is not to say that the Arabic conquests didn't make western Europe poorer—the evidence cited above should be enough to document that the Arabic conquests did play a role in the economic decline of western Europe. It's just that the decline did in fact start before the Arabic conquests.

## Part Five: The Middle Ages as a Necessary Break from a Deadlocked Past

Instead of seeing the Middle Ages as a long period of decline, dating either from the Germanic or Arab invasions, others have seen the Middle Ages as a period of creativity, in which the limits of the ancient Roman world were arrived at, and society could only progress after the dissolution of the ancient society, based on huge estates worked by slave labor. Until this world was destroyed, new technologies that weren't needed when masses of cheap labor abounded, were now necessary with a decline in labor of the Middle Ages. And so the Middle Ages should be seen not as a centuries-long period of darkness, but as a period of creativity, in which new technologies allowed the population of Europe to double in less than 400 years after 1000 AD.

Although early medieval agricultural methods were at first in many respects far behind the most advanced Roman methods (most Roman farms produced a yield of four bushels of grain for every one bushel sowed; in the Middle Ages, this ratio dropped to two to one), in the long run the change was worth all it cost. The Middle Ages marked an advance over the ancient world, in a at least two main areas: the system of labor, as well as different agricultural technologies like plowing, harnesses, and strategies used in rotating crops.

### A Changing Society: Technology, Adaptation, and Invention.

*Plow:* The plow used in the Roman era is called the scratch plow. In the Middle Ages, the heavy plow was used, that had a few advantages. First, it cut the soil so violently (deeper, and then, turning the soil over, instead of simply poking into the soil, as with the scratch plow) that there was no need for cross plowing (plowing at a 90 degree angle to the furrows in the ground) as there was with the scratch plow. Second, the heavy plow created furrows, little ridges and valleys in each plowed row. In times of drought, water would drain into the valleys and ensure some crops would survive. In times of heavy rains, the crops on top of the ridges would not get flooded out. As a result, peasants could usually look forward to at least some crops to harvest even in bad years.

*Use of horses for plowing:* Traditionally, the ox was the beast of burden on farms. But the horse was introduced at this time. Although it could not pull any more than an ox, the horse did have two advantages. It could pull up to fifty percent faster than the ox, and it could work one to two hours longer per day. The one drawback was that the horse ate a lot. Overall, despite eating more, the plow horse could increase farm production as much as 30 percent for those peasants who could afford horses.

*Harnessing:* One of the chief difficulties derived from the ancient method of harnessing was that the harness was placed by means of a yoke resting on the high part of the back. The trouble, especially for the horse, was that a strap attached to the yoke above this area passed around the beast's neck. When he leaned forward to pull, this strap cut into his windpipe and greatly hampered his breathing. With the introduction of a lower harness, the horse could lean his full weight into his collar without

having his wind cut off. The horse collar let the horse pull from the chest rather than the neck. This increased the horse's pulling power from about 1000 lbs. (with the yoke harness) to as much as 5000 lbs with the horse collar. This meant that the animals could do more work, which was translated into higher yields per acre of farmland.

*Three field system:* Instead of the two field system, whereby half the land would lay fallow, and half would be farmed, with each field alternating every year, the three field system allowed for more land to be farmed, as only one of the three fields would lay fallow each year. Given that fallow land was plowed not once but twice (to prevent weeds), this provided for less work. Additionally, different crops were grown in the two fields that were planted, chosen according to when they would be harvested (winter and summer crops), as well as what crops would return nutrients to the soil, that others took out. For example, one summer crop was legumes, that take nitrogen out of the air rather than the soil, and when buried, actually replenish the soil with nitrogen. Another way of expressing the efficiencies of the three field system is that for every 600 acres of land converted from the two field to the three field system, there were an extra 100 acres of crops planted, with 100 fewer acres of plowing.

### **Type of Labor Used in the Middle Ages**

Of outstanding importance in the passage from Roman to medieval practice was the decline of slavery. Fewer slaves were acquired by war, and the Church staunchly opposed the enslavement of orthodox Christians, which meant that fewer and fewer slaves were available as the years went by. Most important of all, with the breakdown of the large-scale exchange-profit economy of earlier Roman times, which had required abundant capital, relatively stable conditions, and very careful supervision, including the keeping of accurate accounts, slaves became a burden. They had to be supported, even if crops were not abundant. To adopt peasant labor as a solution was the line of least resistance. Thereafter labor took care of itself. Large landowners no longer supported large slave populations, but instead, simply took a share of whatever crop was produced by the free (tenant) farmers where families had their own small pieces of land.

More proof of technological innovation going on during the Middle Ages is the massive population growth that took place in Europe. It has been estimated that between 1000 and 1340 the population of Europe increased from about 38.5 million people to about 73.5 million. The rate of growth was linked to increased agricultural production, which yielded a sufficient amount of food per capita, permitted the expansion of cultivated land, and enabled some of the population to become nonagricultural workers, thereby creating a new division of labor and greater economic and cultural diversity.