Western Europe after the Fall of the Western Roman Empire

By the time it had reached its zenith during the second-century of the Common Era, the Roman Empire had developed into one of the greatest civilizations the ancient world had ever known. Cities scattered across an imperial region that stretched from the North Sea to the Red Sea had flourished under a well-ordered governing body housed in Rome. These regional centers stood unfortified in the countryside, while armies stationed along the Rhine, the Danube, and the Euphrates sustained the *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace. By the beginning of the third-century, though, the empire was in the midst of crisis. Indeed, over the course of this century, “internal anarchy” and “foreign invasion” would so radically transform the great Roman realm that during the fourth-century it was ultimately spilt in two. Although the prominence of Rome would be reestablished in the eastern part of the empire during the early fourth-century reign of Constantine, as the fifth-century began it became increasingly clear that the western part of the empire could no longer be sustained. What led to this gradual collapse of the Western Roman Empire? And further, how did what we call “Western Europe” emerge out of the crumbling expanse that was the Roman imperial West? To attempt to answer these questions, we must begin by examining how the Roman Empire was originally established.

The Establishment of the Roman Empire

Although the Roman “golden era” is generally understood by historians as extending from the reign of Trajan through that of Marcus Aurelius, it may be that the essential character of this age began to be defined during the reign of Octavian, who ruled as Roman Emperor from 27 BCE until his death in 14 CE. Octavian rose to power out of the internecine struggle that ensued following the murder of Julius Caesar. The enemies of Caesar, chaffing under what they felt was his dismantling of republican rule, had seized on every opportunity to accuse him of seeking to make Rome into a dictatorial monarchy. Eventually a senatorial conspiracy of some sixty individuals developed under the influence of Gaius Cassius Longinus and Marcus Junius Brutus, and when the imperious Caesar entered the Senate on March 15, 44 BCE, “characteristically without a bodyguard,” he was stabbed to death. While the assassins saw
themselves as heroes who had cleansed Rome of the “tyrannical Caesar,” their actions ultimately left Rome in a state of political chaos. Having failed to define a clear-cut plan by which the Roman “Republic” could be restored, the conspiratorial senators created the conditions for thirteen years of bloody civil war.

While Caesar’s death had left open the possibility that the very capable Mark Antony would succeed him, the ill-fated ruler had designated his eighteen-year-old grandnephew, Gaius Octavius, as his heir, leaving him three-quarters of his incredible wealth. Even though Octavius was rather sickly, and certainly inexperienced, he surprised many by coming to Rome to claim his legacy. Once there, he was able to win the support of many of Caesar’s followers and to gather a formidable army around him. The Senate, attempting to retain as much power as possible, sought to hold on to imperial power by setting Octavius over against Mark Antony. Seeking to solidify his own power, Octavius requested that the Senate make him one of Rome’s two chief “consuls,” or “magistrates of the state.” When the Senate refused, Octavius led his army on a march on Rome, where, in 43 BCE, he finally secured the position of consul he so desperately desired. He also declared the assassins of Caesar criminals and took the name C. Julius Caesar Octavianus, although modern historians identify him as Octavian during this period of his career.

Brutus and Cassius, although being branded outlaws by Octavian, possessed an army of their own, and so had little to fear from the newly constituted ruler when he initially came to power. Once Octavian formed an alliance with Mark Antony and M. Aemilius Lepidus, though, everything changed in Rome. These three figures took control of the empire and had themselves appointed “triumvirs to put the republic in order.” Ironically, this “Second Triumvirate” eventually became so powerful that it was able to rule almost dictatorially. Greed and a seemingly constant struggle for power afflicted the Triumvirate from the very beginning. In order to control the republic, and each other, Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus began to impose oppressive prohibitions on their people. They also defeated the army of Brutus and Cassius, virtually assuring that republican rule would never return to Rome. Each of the members of the Triumvirate received a “command”: Lepidus, the least powerful among the three, was given Africa; Antony took control of the “rich and inviting” East; and Octavian received the West.

For his part, Octavian was forced to deal with a number of difficult political and social issues in the West. Realizing that it would be all but impossible to control even the western territories he presently
commanded without the counsel of others, he now began to develop alliances with a small number of talented and loyal advisors. One of his key consultants and diplomatic agents during and after the time he was a member of the Second Triumvirate was Gaius Maecenas, an ally of Etruscan noble descent who helped Octavian negotiate the precarious relationships he shared with Lepidus, Antony, and different, sometimes dangerous political factions that surrounded him. He was also wise enough to become a “patron of the arts,” counting among his clients both Virgil and Horace. The latter two were particularly important to Octavian, as they were able to paint him as a “restorer of traditional Roman values, as a man of Roman virtues, and as the culmination of Roman destiny.” Increasingly, Octavian became associated with Italy and the West, as well as with “order, justice, and virtue.”

While Octavian was dealing with issues in the West, Mark Antony was spending most of his time in Alexandria with Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt. When he made the ill-advised decision to attack Parthia (in the Persian East) in 36 BCE, Octavian promised to send troops from the West in order to aid Antony’s campaign. When the struggle with Parthia began to produce disastrous results, and no troops were forthcoming from Octavian, Mark Antony was forced to turn to the East for assistance. This basically meant increasingly allying himself, both politically and militarily, with Cleopatra. Octavian took this opportunity to characterize himself as the true representative of the West, while identifying Antony as a man of the East and a mere “dupe of Cleopatra,” who, he claimed, was trying both to render Alexandria the center of the Roman empire and to install herself as its ruler. Antony, of course, resisted this characterization of both himself and of his relationship with Cleopatra, although he did not help his cause when he agreed to a ceremonial festival in Alexandria during which he and Cleopatra sat on golden thrones and proclaimed her “Queen of Kings” and her son, by Julius Caesar, “King of Kings.”

Having displaced Lepidus, Antony and Octavian realized that they alone were now locked in a struggle for the soul of the empire, one, it seemed, that must inevitably end in violence. The issue was settled at the famous Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, where Agrippa, Octavian’s best general and future son-in-law, managed to flank the eastern enemy on both “land and sea,” finally compelling and winning a decisive naval battle. Although Antony and Cleopatra escaped to Egypt, Octavian tracked them to Alexandria, where the star-crossed lovers took their own lives. Having survived the brutal struggle for power with the
other members of the Second Triumvirate, Octavian, at thirty-two, became “absolute master of the entire Mediterranean world.” But although his power was now enormous, he still faced great difficulties: “He had to restore peace, prosperity, and confidence. All of these required establishing a constitution that would reflect the new realities without offending unduly the traditional republican prejudices that still had so firm a grip on Rome and Italy.”

Even though Octavian faced a great many problems after displacing his political rivals, he was also blessed with advantages that allowed him to overcome these obstacles. Most importantly, the people of the empire were anxious to see an end to the terrible civil wars that had left Rome so fragmented. Although this wide-spread longing for peace and prosperity led many in the empire to turn a blind-eye to Octavian’s gradual rise to unprecedented imperial power, he was nevertheless cautious about his ascendancy, remembering all to well Caesar’s fateful attempt to gain total control of the vast Roman empire. Octavian, then, proceeded to gather power slowly, eventually becoming a dominating monarch even as he retained the trappings of republican order in Rome. In the end, although he ostensibly shared imperial power with the Senate and the military, control of what was now becoming the true Roman Empire would lie squarely in the hands of this “first citizen” (princeps) of Rome.

In 27 BCE, having bided his time for four years, Octavian was able to consolidate his power by shrewdly coming before the Senate and claiming that he wished to give up his imperial authority. The Senate, in what was certainly a well-rehearsed, complicitous response, pleaded with him to reconsider his decision. Bowing to their wishes, Octavian agreed “only” to keep control over the provinces of Spain, Gaul, and Syria, to preserve his position as proconsul with authority over the military, and to retain his administrative consulship in Rome. The other provinces in the empire would continue to be governed by the Senate, although because those that were controlled by Octavian were border provinces, and also because they contained twenty of Rome’s twenty-six legions, his power “remained undiminished.” The well-trained members of the Senate, though, reacting with almost “hysterical gratitude” to Octavian’s purported acquiescence to their dominance, granted him even more extensive honors, among them the “semi religious” name of Augustus, a title that “carried implications of veneration, majesty, and holiness.”
From this point forward, historians identify Augustus as Rome’s first emperor and his administration as the Principate, a designation that many scholars believe Octavian would have appreciated as it successfully covers over the “unrepublican nature of the regime and the naked power on which it rested.” Augustus made significant changes in the empire, drastically reducing its inefficiency and corruption, which protected the realm from the maneuverings of overly ambitious individuals. He also purged the Senate of those he felt were unscrupulous and began to recruit new members from wealthy men who were thought to be of “good character”; and even though he ultimately possessed overwhelming power, Augustus continued to treat the Senate with “respect and honor.” In regard to the city of Rome itself, he divided it into wards that carried with them elected officials; gave it its first public fire department and “rudimentary police force”; created organizations to ensure that the city possessed an adequate water supply; and instituted policies to ensure that grain distribution to the poor was closely monitored and controlled. As historians Donald Kagan, Steven Ozment, and Frank Turner point out: “The Augustan period was one of great prosperity, based on the wealth brought in by the conquest of Egypt, on the great increase of commerce and industry made possible by general peace and a vast program of public works, and on a strong return to successful small farming by Augustus’s resettled veterans.”

It was, of course, during the rule of Augustus that Jesus was born, probably between 6 and 4 BCE. Raised in a Jewish community in Nazareth, in the northern part of what is today Israel, Jesus was baptized and began preaching at some point during the late 20s of the first-century. After a relatively short ministry, he was crucified by the Roman “procurator” Pontius Pilate, sometime between 30 and 33 CE. The most important accounts of the life of Jesus are to found in the four Gospels (“good news”) of the Christian New Testament. Although attributed to the figures Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the true authors of these narratives are unknown, as the texts originally circulated anonymously until names were appended to them by second-century Church Fathers. The first of the Gospels to be written was that attributed to Mark, who probably composed it sometime between 67 and 70 CE. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke (who also wrote the Book of Acts, a companion piece to his Gospel) followed that of Mark; Matthew’s probably being written during the late 70s or early 80s, Luke’s during the mid-to-late 80s. The last of the four Gospels, attributed to John, was probably written sometime during the 90s, as the first-century came to a close. Although none of the Gospel writers was a direct disciple of Jesus, all of their texts being written
long after his death, they provide us with narratives clearly produced by men of faith. Whether or not they thought that Jesus was the incarnate “Son of God,” it seems certain that all four believed that he had come into the world in order to redeem humanity and to offer immortality to those who accepted him as lord and savior.

Significantly, Jesus was born into a Jewish world that was deeply influenced by the idea of “messianic expectation.” The Jewish notion of the messiah, which is very different from that of Christianity, traces its scriptural roots back to an Old Testament account presented in 2 Samuel. Here God promises the great king David that a future salvific figure will come in his line in order to usher in a period of peace and stability for Israel:

Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever (2 Samuel 7: 11-16).

In the Jewish tradition, this figure, the mashiah, or “anointed one,” is not thought to be divine in any way, as according to Judaism this latter, Christian notion of messiahship represents a perversion of the glory and uniqueness of God. By the time Luke’s gospel was written during the 80s, however, the followers of Jesus had begun to think of him as a different kind of messianic figure. Identified by Luke as a heavenly “savior,” Jesus began to be known in the early Christian community as “Christ,” or Christos, the Greek word that translates the Jewish term mashiah, but one which now indicated that Jesus as the Christ was a divine messianic figure. This powerful belief in Jesus’ divine messiahship would have profound implications for the burgeoning Roman Empire.

Jesus himself had little influence on anyone outside of the comparatively small circle of Jews to whom he preached during his lifetime. By the end of the first century of the Common Era, though, his message was beginning to attract an increasing number of followers. One of the issues that problematized the spread of Christianity was whether or not this fledging movement was actually something different from Judaism, or simply another of the various sects of the latter, long-established monotheistic tradition. Jesus himself had given no indication that he had come into the world in order to define a new religious
tradition; in fact in the Gospels he says quite clearly that his message was meant for the Jews and not for the gentiles. After his death, however, a former Pharisaic Jew, Saul of Tarsus, who became the most vocal and surely the most important disciple of Christianity after his life-changing “epiphany” (appearance to him of the crucified Christ) on the road to Damascus, began to spread the message of Jesus as the Christ far beyond the Jewish community.

A Roman citizen whose powerful New Testament letters, or “Epistles,” were addressed to cities such as Corinth, Galatia, and Ephesus, Saul, who would come to be known by his Greco-Roman name Paul, was able to travel and spread the message of Jesus to people throughout the many regions of the empire because of the peace and prosperity that existed there during the first-century. His extremely inclusive notion of Jesus as the crucified and resurrected savior of the world was especially appealing to non-Jews across the empire, for as Paul made clear, the salvific message of Jesus was offered to everyone and it did not require gentiles, regardless of who they were, to convert to Judaism in order to become “Christians.” Central to Paul’s understanding of Christianity was the idea that the followers of Jesus must be “evangelists,” or messengers, who should spread the “good news” of God’s gracious gift of his crucified Son. He also taught that Jesus would return for an “apocalyptic” Day of Judgment. This parousia, or “second coming,” would occur when least expected, suddenly, in the “twinkling of an eye,” as Paul wrote in his first Letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 15: 51-53).

Although Paul was executed in Rome sometime around 60 CE, his evangelism, and that of his followers, allowed Christianity to spread across the Roman Empire, especially within the cities and among the poor and enslaved. The religious rites of early Christianity were probably restricted to a simple celebration of a communal meal, the agape, or “love feast,” followed by a “Eucharistic” ceremony during which the “Lord’s Supper” was reenacted by way of the consumption of unleavened bread and unfermented wine. There were, most probably, also prayers, hymns and readings from both the Jewish Scriptures and, ultimately, from the Gospels, Acts, and Letters of the “new testament.” Although the Christian message was particularly appealing to the most disaffected members of the empire, not all of the followers of Jesus were marginal members of the community. Indeed, many Christians were part of what we might understand today as the middle class, and some were quite wealthy. Because of this, it became customary
for those of means to provide for the poor so that the latter could continue to participate in communal worship services. These benevolent acts of “common love” brought Christian communities together in a way that allowed them to focus their attention on the plight of the weak, the sick, and the unprotected. This show of concern for others who were “less fortunate” distinguished Christianity as a movement that offered all people of the world, even those who were poor, enslaved, or female, the possibility of experiencing a sense of communal compassion. Because the movement was based on these foundational “charitable” principles, Christianity stood in marked contrast to both the civil religion of Rome and to the “pagan cult religions” that had flourished throughout the empire. It was also different from those other, more established movements in that it claimed that salvation was open to everyone, that God cared about each and every human soul, and that a “spiritual equality” existed among those who practiced the faith.

As Christianity evolved during the second-century, it was necessary for it to develop some kind of organizational structure. Gradually, the increasingly complex affairs of the early churches were placed in the hands of presbyters, or “elders,” and deacons, or “those who served.” Upon this foundation, individual churches began to build up an “episcopal” structure consisting of bishops (episkopoi) who were initially elected by their congregations to oversee worship and to supervise the gathering of funds, but who eventually began to extend their authority to outlying villages and towns. Ultimately, the ever increasing power of the bishops was supported by the doctrine of “Apostolic Succession,” which “asserted that the powers Jesus had given his original disciples were passed on from bishop to bishop by ordination.” By the second-century, these bishops began to define what would become the universal or “catholic” nature of the Church by developing an ideology of doctrinal “orthodoxy” (right belief) and “orthopraxis” (right practice) among the various Christian communities of the empire. They also acted as intermediaries between the civil and religious worlds, and eventually began to gather together in councils in order to reconcile difficult ecclesiastical issues, to establish theological standards, and even to “expel as heretics” those who would not accept their opinions.

Ironically, Christianity’s second-century push toward “catholicism” evoked a sense of distrust and even animosity from both the pagan world and the imperial government. Because Christianity had been understood by the imperial authorities of the first-century as merely another Jewish sect, its followers, like
other Jews, were protected under Roman law. But as this increasingly radical movement became more and more popular, and more and more organized, it became clear that it was quite different from Judaism.

Christianity was understood by Roman administrators as a “mysterious and dangerous” movement, one whose followers not only denied the existence of the pagan gods but also refused to worship the emperor, a practice that was deemed treasonous. Further, their “love feasts” were reported to be scandalous scenes of sexual depravity, while their “alarming doctrine of the actual presence of Jesus’ body in the Eucharist was distorted into an accusation of cannibalism.” Suspicious of the “privacy and secrecy that marked Christian life,” which Roman administrators felt was a violation of their traditional rejection of “any private association, especially any of a religious nature,” Claudius expelled the Christians from Rome, while Nero sought to make them scapegoats for the tragic fire that struck the city in 64 CE. Indeed by the end of the first century, Christianity came to be understood as such a threat to the internal stability of the empire that leaders in Rome made it a crime to practice the faith.

**Roman Expansionism, Imperial Crisis, and the World of Constantine**

After the death of Augustus, his successors finally dispensed with the republican illusion he had created. The ruler came to be called *imperator*—thus Emperor—as well as Caesar; the former title indicated the ruler’s control of the military, the latter his connection to the “imperial house.” Although Augustus, because his power was ostensibly voted to him by the Senate, could not legally designate a successor, he made it clear whom he felt should follow him by bestowing favors upon certain individuals and allowing them to “share in imperial power and responsibility.” As the emperorship passed through the most important members of the “Julio-Claudian Dynasty,” Tiberius (r. 14-37 CE), Gaius (Caligula, r. 37-41 CE), Claudius (r. 41-54 CE), and Nero (r. 54-68 CE), the “monarchical and hereditary” structure of the regime became obvious. Perhaps even more significantly, the “naked military nature of imperial rule” became clear after the death of Gaius in 41 CE, when the Praetorian Guard pulled a shaking, terrified Claudius from behind a curtain and forcibly installed him as emperor. By 68 CE, when the incompetent and hugely unpopular Nero died, the realm had reached a point of political chaos. The next year would see no
fewer than four men become emperor, as the members of different Roman armies succeeded in placing their respective commanders on the throne.

Vespasian (r. 69-79 CE), the first emperor of the Flavian Dynasty, as well as the first not to trace his origins to Roman nobility, would emerge victorious from out of the turmoil that ensued during the “Year of the Four Emperors.” A hardened soldier who stemmed from the Italian middle-class, Vespasian proved to be a good administrator and a political realist. He also resisted all attempts by sycophants to link him to noble ancestry. On his death bed, facetiously indicting the practice of deifying emperors, he memorably proclaimed: “Alas, I think I am becoming a god.” Although Vespasian was followed to the throne by his sons, Titus (r. 79-81 CE) and Domitian (r. 81-96 CE), the Flavian Dynasty ended with the assassination of Domitian, who left no close relative to succeed him. Because of this, the Senate put Nerva (r. 96-98 CE) on the throne in order to avoid more political unrest. Nerva would come to be known as the first of the five “good emperors”; the others being Trajan (r. 98-117 CE), Hadrian (r. 117-138 CE), Antonius Pius (r. 138-161 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 CE).

By the time Augustus died in 14 CE, the Roman Empire was already vast, extending as it did across all of Europe, most of northern Africa, and into Asia Minor. Although the very size of the realm made it difficult to rule, the ingenuity of Rome’s military and administrative ideas allowed it to keep the empire in check. Although under Augustus the army was reduced from 60 legions to just 28, the imperial forces, which were primarily responsible for holding the empire together, nevertheless became truly professional. During the previous era of the Roman Republic, generals had usually recruited armies, not only providing them with weapons but also paying them. Fearing that one such general might become a threat to his rule, Augustus established a “central military treasury” from which he drew funds in order to pay the members of his legions. Although enlistment required a commitment of twenty years, the legionnaires were pleased to receive a steady income instead of having to rely for their income on booty taken during war. Under imperial rule, they were paid well and occasionally received bonuses; they even had what might be considered a retirement plan, which assured them a pension, most often consisting of parcels of land.
Significantly, because members of Rome’s armed forces spent such long periods of time serving the empire, they regularly lived much of their lives far from Italy, often on imperial frontiers. Stationed in these faraway places, these men spread their customs and language among foreign peoples. Although members of the imperial forces were not allowed to marry until the beginning of the third-century, before this they often entered into relationships with foreign women, created families, and settled in colonial provinces once they retired from service. As these provincial territories grew in size and prestige, they attracted merchants and trade, and, in some cases, became important centers of Roman civilization.

As powerful and efficient as the imperial military was, however, it was barely able to protect the empire from the forces massed along its borders. The origins of this problem with foreign peoples can be traced to the early imperial period and the reign of Augustus. After the civil wars ended and Augustus came to power, he involved himself in quelling tribal uprisings in the western part of the empire between Italy and France. He also worked to pacify Spain, while in 12 CE his stepson Drusus (Nero Claudias Drusus Germanicus) conquered Germany. Despite its obvious successes, though, Rome’s early imperial conquests did not come without difficulties. Spread across their wide-ranging borders, the legions of Rome were often stretched extremely thin. This was the case in the Balkans, for instance, where an uprising by the Pannonians, which began in 6 CE, raged for three years before it was finally put down by Tiberius and 100,000 men. It was also the case in regard to what was without question the “greatest disaster” of the early imperial period. In Germany, in the year 9 CE, three Roman legions commanded by the general Publius Quintilius Varus were ambushed and destroyed by a Germanic tribe commanded by Herrmann. This catastrophic defeat led the aging Augustus to abandon his campaigns along Rome’s northern frontier and to adopt a fateful “policy of caution and restraint.”

Although Rome would continue to grow its empire through a practice of offensive expansionism for a century after the death of Augustus in 14 CE, during the course of the second-century it began to rely more and more on an imperial policy that was defensive in character. This was certainly the case in regard to the political and military policy decisions made by Hadrian, the third of the “five good emperors.” Upon coming to power, Hadrian immediately abandoned the eastern territories that had been taken by his predecessor Trajan. Determining that it would be beyond the capability of Rome’s armies to maintain
permanent frontier borders as far away as the Persian Gulf, Hadrian withdrew his forces from that part of
the world and reestablished the eastern imperial frontier at the Euphrates.

Perhaps what was most notable about Hadrian’s reign is that he spent half of it outside of Italy. Part of this was due to his unquenchable curiosity about the world, one that led him to explore the far reaches of the empire. Of greater importance, though, was his desire to learn more about how better to administer to and defend the empire. The latter of these concerns, the defense of the empire, was of particular import for Hadrian, and thus he spent a good deal of his time away from Italy involving himself in the “inspection, maintenance and improvement of the Roman army.” Significantly, as historian Michael Grant points out, “one of the first fruits of this active military policy, following upon a minor reverse on the British frontier, was the best preserved of all the fortifications of the empire, Hadrian’s wall from Tyne to Solway, manned by fifteen thousand auxiliaries watching over the bare brown hills that rolled away to the still unconquered north.” The construction of this important Roman fortification came about after Hadrian and his engineers surveyed the seventy-three mile span across the width of northern Britain and then designed a stone wall that could stretch across the entire distance, linking together sixteen forts and numerous smaller guard posts and watchtowers. The wall was meant not only to demonstrate Rome’s military might even on its far northern frontier, but also to separate out undesirable peoples who might attempt to make their way within the imperial borders. From the end point of Hadrian’s British Isle fortification in Solway, the Roman line of defense now extended eastward along the North Sea, and then, in a chain of additional frontier towns and forts, “down the Rhine to the Danube rivers to the Black Sea.” From there, it “ran south from the Black Sea coast, down the valleys of the Tigres and Euphrates rivers, and turned west across Palestine, Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa, all the way to Morocco on the North African Atlantic coast.”

Although there had been little fighting within the empire during the time of Hadrian’s enlightened rule, and even though the empire became much more communal and cosmopolitan during his reign, that he was so resolute in his attempts to strengthen both the military and the frontier defenses of the realm says a great deal about the increasingly fragile state of Rome’s imperial boundaries during the second half of the second-century. Although Hadrian’s successors, Antoninus and Marcus Aurelius, would continue to seek
to make administrative improvements and to enhance their own learning in order to become better emperors, by the time the latter died in 180 CE it was clear that the “golden age” of Rome was over. Indeed, Marcus Aurelius would be the first Roman emperor who was forced to fight major defensive wars on three fronts: one against the Parthian Empire of Persia (161-180); and two others against “barbarian” armies on the Danube River (167-175 and 177-180). After his untimely death in a military camp on the Danube, his dysfunctional son Commodus (r. 180-192) became Emperor. Although Commodus was able to end the conflicts on the Danube, he did so by offering the invaders an overly generous and lenient treaty, an act that, ironically, generated even more interest on the part of foreign peoples in waging war on Rome. In regard to the empire itself, Commodus displayed “utter indifference” toward provincial administrators and the military, successfully breaking down much of the communal good will that had been built up by the four “good emperors” who had preceded him.

After Commodus was strangled to death in 192 CE, civil war ensued for the next year, until the Severan dynasty was finally established in 193 CE (CE 193-235). As was the case with the Principate after the death of Augustus, though, the members of the Severan dynasty tended to fear the military; thus, during this time, the governance of Rome was basically left in the hands of warring armies. After the last Severan emperor was murdered by his own troops in 235, fifty years of bloody civil war, invasions, and the rise of new foreign threats followed. The period proved to be so anarchic and dangerous, in fact, that of the fifty men who became emperor during this span, only one died a natural death.

Adding to the chaotic state of the empire during this problematic period was the long economic decline that Rome experienced as it struggle through the third-century. Although economic vulnerability had always been a part of the Roman Empire, it appears that during the third-century Rome’s fiscal liabilities became even more acute, especially after it “stopped plundering newly conquered people.” In addition to this, Rome was struck with a devastating third- and fourth-century outbreak of bubonic plague, one which effectively reduced the population of the empire by as much as twenty percent between CE 250 and 400. This resulted in shrinking markets, a reduction in the volume of trade, and diminished international exchange, which in turn acted to weaken “the relationship of various parts of the empire.” As Norman Cantor suggests, the economy also suffered for other reasons, most notably because of Rome’s
“failure to develop an industrial technology.” This lack of industrialization created an economically stagnant situation across the empire, one which was characterized by a lack of specialized production and an increase in the dominance of the latifundia, the great cash crop plantations that were owned by wealthy Romans. Becoming prominent features of the empire during the era of the Roman Republic, the existence of the latifundia forced a shift in Rome’s agriculture base away from the grains that were the chief crops of the free Roman farmer, to crops like wine, wool, and olive oil. Seeking to extract the maximum amount of profit from the agricultural goods they produced, Roman plantation owners came to rely heavily on slave labor to work their lands. This was still the case during the third-century of the Common Era, but after the wars of conquest stopped around 200 CE, and the slave population started to decline, plantation owners began to enlist the service of coloni, or Roman “sharecroppers,” whose small farms had been snatched up by these wealthy landlords.

Because Roman administrators during the third century were consumed by external threats they did little to address the destructive conditions that haunted the empire. The much needed reconstruction of the empire would have to await the rise to power of Diocletian (r. 284-305), a “rough-hewn soldier and shrewd administrator.” Realizing that the empire had grown too large for one man to control, Diocletian decreed that Rome would now be ruled by a “tetrarchy,” four men with power divided amongst them. Diocletian and Maximian would share the title of Augustus, while Galerius and Constantius would each bear the lesser title of Caesar. This administrative system, which allowed each man control over his own geographical territory, appeared not only to offer a solution to the military problems that had plagued the empire for over fifty years, but also seemed to insure the possibility of a peaceful imperial succession. Diocletian would reign as the senior Augustus, controlling the provinces of Thrace, Asia, and Egypt, or the Prefecture of the East; while Maximian would reign as the junior Augustus, controlling Italy Africa, and Spain, or the Prefecture of Italy. As one Caesar, Galerius would be in charge of the Danube frontier and the Balkans, or the Prefecture of Illyricum; while Constantius, as the other Caesar, would control Britain and Gaul, or the Prefecture of Gaul. The two Caesars were designated as successors to the western and eastern parts of the empire, and their “loyalty was enhanced by marriages to daughters of the Augusti.” In a sense, this system of succession was reflective of that which had been in place during the reign of the “good emperors,” who had chosen their heirs to the throne not from among their own family members, but
from “the ranks of the ablest men.” Such a process, it seemed, promised “orderly and peaceful transitions instead of assassinations, chaos, and civil war.”

In 305 CE, Diocletian unexpectedly retired, also compelling Maximian to step down from his position as co-emperor. However, Diocletian’s vision of a smooth succession, with Galerius and Constantius now becoming the new Augusti, failed miserably, as bitter civil war immediately ensued. Indeed, by 310 CE three generals were vying for control of the empire: Licinius in the East; Maxentius in Italy; and Constantine, whose power base was in Gaul and Britain, the poorest and least populated region of the Roman world. Although he was badly outnumbered by the forces of Maxentius, Constantine threw caution to the wind and proceeded to march over the Alps and upon Rome. At the famous battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome, he “defeated and killed his enemy,” making him ruler over the western part of the empire. From 312 until 324 he shared the rule of the empire with Licinius, at which point he “defeated and deposed his eastern rival and became sole ruler of the Roman world.”

Contemporaries were amazed by Constantine’s seemingly miraculous victory at the Milvian Bridge. He later claimed that his triumph was indeed a miracle, having been preordained by the Christian God. Constantine’s claim of divine intervention was supported by historians. In his work on the Death of Persecutors, for example, the Latin writer Lactantius reported that Constantine was instructed in a dream to place the Standard of Christ—the crossed chi and rho that was the Christian monogram—on his men’s shields in order to assure their victory. For his part, Eusebius, in his Life of Constantine, wrote that just before they began to ascend the Alps, Constantine and his army saw a flaming cross in the sky and the inscription “By this sign thou shalt conquer.” The sight, claimed Eusebius, demonstrated the power of the Christian God, “whose standard the army henceforth carried.”

Though it is unclear what really happened at the momentous Battle of the Milvian Bridge, that Constantine deemed Christianity acceptable as a religion within the Roman Empire is certain. Where Diocletian had persecuted Christians, doing his best to rid the realm of this ever expanding movement, Constantine made the practice of Christianity legal in the empire by issuing his Edict of Milan in 313 CE. Ironically, once the religion was made legal within the Roman Empire, a great struggle over the question of Christian orthodoxy ensued. As “heresies” emerged (beliefs contrary to those of the “Catholic Church”)
and began to threaten the “unity of an empire that was now Christian,” they took on a “political character
and inevitably involved the emperor and the powers of the state.”

This was especially true in regard to what was termed the “Arian Controversy.” Named after the
Alexandrian priest Arius (ca. 280-336 CE), Arianism concerned the relationship of God the Father to God
the Son. Arius argued that although the Father was eternal, Jesus as the Son was a created being, and thus
did not share the substance of God. As Arius himself said, “The Son has a beginning, but God is without
beginning.” For Arius, then, “Jesus was neither fully man nor fully God, but something in between.” His
position, argued Arius, did away with the difficult doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God was somehow
three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but still one substance and essence. Although much less
complex and much more philosophically defensible than the doctrine of the Trinity, for the major adversary
of Arius, the future bishop of Alexandria, Anthanasius, the Arian position was seriously flawed. In
particularly, Anthanasius argued, it undercut the Christian notion of salvation that was predicated on the
salvific event of Christ crucified and resurrected. Only if Jesus were fully human and fully God, said
Anthanasius, could “the transformation of humanity to divinity have taken place in him and be transmitted
by him to his disciples.” According to Anthanasius, “Christ was made man that we might be made divine.”

In order to address this growing controversy, which had literally split the Church, Constantine
called a council of Christian bishops in the city of Nicaea in 325. Gathering in this city not far from
Constantinople, the bishops argued over a point of orthodoxy, which for Constantine was merely political,
but for them concerned salvation itself. They finally came down on the side of Anthanasius, embodying
the priest’s ideas on the matter in the Nicene Creed. Arianism did not die out, though, as many bishops and
some future emperors were Arians. Indeed, as we shall see, this controversy would remain an issue even
after the collapse of the empire in the West.

In the end, although he took a very different position on Christianity than did Diocletian,
Constantine did follow the lead of his predecessor in ensuring the “production of essential goods and
services as well as the collection of taxes” within the empire. He also made the empire more stable by
issuing rather draconian decrees that bound his people to particular occupations in the regions they
inhabited. Perhaps most importantly, though, he moved the capital of the empire from Italy to the site of
the old Greek colony of Byzantium, ultimately renaming it Constantinople.

The Fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Rise of Western Europe

In moving the Roman capital to the city of Byzantium, Constantine ensured the continuation of the
empire in the more stable eastern part of the realm. In fact, during the fourth and fifth centuries, the eastern
part of the empire, with its “prosperous cities, strong commercial economy, productive peasantry, and
larger population,” thrived. But as historian Edward Peters makes clear, unlike in the east, the western
regions of the empire “felt the consequences of having fewer people, less productive and fewer cities, [and]
a less-developed economy.” In addition to this, extending what had begun to occur during Rome’s “third-
century crisis,” the western peasantry now became even more oppressed by the wealthy land owners of the
latifundia.

The declining conditions in the West left the northern and western frontier regions of this part of
the empire increasingly open to attacks by members of so-called Germanic tribes, such as the Burgundians,
Vandels, Franks, Angles, Saxons, Lombards and Goths. These peoples of Germania, as the Romans called
the area beyond the frontiers of the Rhine and the Danube, were often referred to with the rather derogatory
label of “barbarians.” Just who were these “barbarians” of Germania? This is an extremely difficult
question to answer, as the term barbarian, and indeed the designation “Germanic tribes” itself, was used to
identify the members of extremely diverse groups of peoples. First of all, it is necessary to point out that
the Romans referred in a general sense to people who existed beyond their imperial borders as externae
gentes, the “people living outside.” They broke down this overarching category of externae gentes further
after comparing the cultures of non-Roman peoples to the elite culture and social organizations of Rome.
Within the framework of this system of sub-classification, a foreign people might be understood as a
populus, “virtually identical to Roman standards; a gens, not yet culturally developed or politically
organized; or a natio . . . a ‘horde,’ a body of individuals supposedly related by common descent, but
lacking the technical and intellectual culture or sociopolitical organization of a gens.”
These Roman divisions were, in a certain sense, related back to the Greek classification for foreign peoples. For the Greeks, foreigners who could learn to speak and read Greek were considered “potentially respectable members of the *oikumene*”; those who were unable to master Greek were considered *barbaroi*, or “barbarians,” peoples whose languages, to the ears of the Greeks, were nothing more than a jumble of incomprehensible noise. The Romans borrowed this Greek term, *barbaroi*, Latinizing it as *barbari* and applied it to the *externae gentes* in general, and, in particular, to the *nationes*, the “hordes” who existed beyond the frontiers of the empire.

Although different German tribes had been in contact with the Romans from the second-century before the Common Era, they had little impact on imperial society; nor, it seems, had they been “much influenced by Roman civilization”:

The men did no agricultural work, but confined their activities to hunting, drinking, and fighting. They were organized on a family basis by clans, hundreds, and tribes. They were led by chiefs, usually from a royal family, elected by the assembly of fighting men. The king was surrounded by a collection of warriors, whom the Romans called his *comitatus*. Always eager for plunder, these tough barbarians were attracted by the civilized delights they knew existed beyond the frontier of the Rhine and Danube Rivers.

During the third-century CE, the most aggressive of the German tribes had been the Goths, a people who ultimately split into two great kingdoms, the western Visigoths and the eastern Ostrogoths. The Goths had initially made their way from their ancestral home near the Baltic Sea into an area in southern Russia. By the middle of the third-century of the Common Era they began to put pressure on the northern Danube frontiers of the Roman Empire. In roughly 250 CE, they were able to break through the Roman defenses and overrun the Balkan provinces. In order to meet this threat, and that of the Persian Sassanids in the East, the Romans took the calculated risk of pulling some of their legions away from the western frontiers. Unfortunately, this weakening of defenses in the West led other Germanic peoples, particularly the Franks and the Alemanni, to attack and overrun the borders in those regions.

By the fourth-century, then, different groups of Germanic peoples had been fixtures on the frontiers of the Roman Empire for hundreds of years. Although, as we have just seen, some of these groups had attacked the border regions of the empire, the interaction between the Romans and the Germans had
been relatively peaceful throughout the first two centuries of the Common Era. The Romans had even “imported” some of these people into the empire as “domestics, slaves, and soldiers.” Interestingly, some of these “barbarian” soldiers rose to positions of leadership in the Roman legions, even becoming famous throughout the empire. By the end of the fourth century, however, the relationship between the Romans and the Germans began to change radically as a “great influx of Visigoths” swept toward the western frontiers of the empire. The Visigoths were expert horsemen and fierce warriors, who had themselves been pushed to the borders of the Roman Empire by the vicious Huns, who stemmed from what is today Mongolia. They originally made their way to southern Gaul and Spain, and once there, they entered into a political and military contract with the Roman emperor Valens (r. 364-378), agreeing to act as his foederati, or “special” allies, who would protect the eastern frontier of the empire. Instead of being regarded as valued members of the empire, though, the Visigoths received harsh treatment from Valens. They finally rebelled against the emperor, defeating him and his forces at the Battle of Adrianople in 378.

Disturbed by defeats like that at Adrianople and sensing the growing weakness of the West, Rome rather passively began to allow the settlement of German tribes in the very heart of the western empire. In large part because of this attitude, in 406 CE the Vandals were able to cross over the Rhine and within a mere thirty years control much of North Africa and a good deal of the Mediterranean. Following after the Vandals, the Burgundians eventually settled in southern Gaul, while the most important group in regard to the early history of Western Europe, the Franks, settled northern and central Gaul; the Salian Franks along the seacoast and the Ripuarian Franks along the Rhine, the Seine, and the Loire Rivers.

Although the settlement of these “barbarians” within imperial borders was clearly a major blow to both the pride and status of the Romans, perhaps what was even more devastating was the series of attacks leveled against the “eternal city” of Rome, itself. In 410 CE the Visigoths, led by Alaric (ca. 370-410 CE), “revolted and sacked Rome”; in 452 CE the Huns, led by Attila, the “scourge of God,” invaded Italy; and in 455 CE, the former capital city was overrun by the Vandals. As a result of all of this, by the middle of the fifth-century power in the western empire passed decisively from the Roman emperors to barbarian chieftains. By the end of the fifth-century, barbarians had completely overwhelmed the western empire,
with the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Franks in northern Gaul, the Burgundians in Provence, the Vandals in Africa and the western Mediterranean, and the Angles and Saxons in England.

As scholars are quick to point out, this shift in power from the Romans to the different “barbarian” groups that now commanded the western region of the empire did not make Western Europe into a “savage land.” The Germanic peoples who now controlled the western empire were willing, and even anxious to adopt the culture of the people that they had conquered. Indeed, with the exception of Britain and northern Gaul, across the west, Roman language, law, and government mingled together with Germanic institutions. Much of this had to do with the fact that the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, and the Vandals were already Christian when they arrived in the West. They were, however, Arians, as the bishops who had converted them to Christianity had been followers of Arius. This gave rise to an intense hostility against the barbarians among Roman Christians, who believed Arianism to be heretical. Despite this, though, the German peoples were great admirers of Roman culture and had no desire to see it disappear. Ultimately, around 500 CE, the Franks, under their powerful king, Clovis, and supported by bishops in Rome, converted to the post-Nicaea, “Catholic” form of Christianity. As Roman Christians, the Franks were instrumental in conquering and converting the Goths and other barbarians in Western Europe to “orthodox” Christianity.

The church had become increasingly important in the West as this part of the empire began to crumble. After Christianity had been made legal by Constantine, and especially after it had become the “state religion” under Theodosius (r. 379-395) at the end of the fourth century, the political structure of the church had mirrored that of the imperial government. Church government was centralized and formed into a hierarchy, with bishops in the major cities around the empire all looking for spiritual guidance from the bishop of Rome, the papa, or father, who eventually became the Pope. As the western empire declined, Roman governors left the cities and their populations began to migrate to the countryside, where the “resulting vacuum of authority was filled by local bishops and cathedral chapters.” The local cathedral, especially in this tenuous time, became the “center of urban life,” while the local bishop filled the role of governing authority. Although the church, like the royal government, was challenged by the decline of the western empire, it was able to survive the period of both Germanic and Islamic invasions and remain a “potent civilizing and unifying force”: 
It had a religious message of providential purpose and individual worth that could give solace and meaning to life at its worst. It had a ritual baptism and a creedal confession that united people beyond the traditional barriers of social class, education, and gender. And alone in the West, the church retained an effective hierarchical administration, scattered throughout the old empire, staffed by the best educated minds in Europe and centered in emperorless Rome.

The Catholic Church would ultimately follow the path of the empire and split apart into western and eastern halves. Although much of this had to do with the linguistic and cultural differences that marked the eastern Greek and western Latin parts of the empire, there were also important ecclesiastical differences between the churches of the West and the East. Like the administrative structure of its western cousin, the structure of the Eastern Church also reflected that of the secular state. Denying the authority of the Pope, however, the Eastern Church appointed a Patriarch, who tended to be tightly controlled by the Roman emperors. This Patriarch oversaw archbishops serving in key cities, who in turn were responsible for the local clergy. Unlike the Roman church, which did not allow its clergy to marry, the Eastern Church permitted the marriage of priests, but forbid bishops to marry. Further diverging from the Roman church, the Eastern Church allowed its laity to divorce and it used vernacular languages in its worship services.

Beyond these ecclesiastical differences, there were also three other major issues that separated the churches of the East and West. First, was the issue of “doctrinal authority.” The church in the East put more stress on the authority of the Bible and on “ecumenical” (empire-wide) councils rather than on the decrees of the “bishop of Rome.” The Eastern Church rejected the Roman bishop’s claim that he had special authority based on Peter’s commission from Jesus found in the Gospel of Matthew. The second issue had to do with the Roman church’s addition of the so-called *filioque* phrase to the Nicene Creed, an “anti-Arian clause” that stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds “also from the Son” (*filioque*) as well as the Father. Because the Eastern Church tended to compromise doctrinally with the still powerful Arian Christians, this creedal addition was problematic for them. The third issue concerned what came to be called the “iconoclastic controversy.” In 725 the eastern Emperor, Leo III, banned the use of images in Eastern Churches, claiming that they subverted the power and majesty of God. Leo ran into heavy opposition in attempting to enforce the ban in the West, as the members of the Western Church cherished their religious iconography. In order to punish the West for refusing to follow his decree, Leo “confiscated
papal lands in Sicily and Calabria,” placing them under control of the “subservient Patriarch” in
Constantinople. Because these papal lands brought in a substantial amount of revenue, the Roman church
“could not but view the emperor’s action as a declaration of war.”

Pressured not only by this confrontation with Leo, but also by a renewed threat from the Lombards
of northern Italy, the Roman church seemed as if it might go under. The Western Church, however, had
long been safeguarded by the Franks; and now, during the time of this new crisis, it once again turned to
these protectors. Sealing one of the most significant political alliances of the Middle Ages, Pope Stephen II
(r. 752-757) called upon the Franks and their ruler, Pepin III, not only to defend the church against the
threat of the Lombards, but also to act as a “counterweight to the Eastern emperor.” In the end, this
“marriage of religion and politics created a new Western Church and empire; it also determined much of
the course of Western history into our time.”

Clovis (ca. 466-511), the king under whom the Franks had converted to the “Catholic” form of
Christianity in 500 CE, was the man who founded the first Frankish dynasty, the Merovingian, called after
Merovich, an early leader of one branch of the Franks. He and his Merovingian successors were not only
able to unite the Salian and Ripuarian Franks, but, as was already mentioned, were also able to bring the
Burgundians and the Visigoths under control. They eventually established the kingdom of the Franks in
ancient Gaul, “making the Franks and the Merovingian kings a significant force in Western Europe.”
Ironically, the Merovingian rulers had a difficult time managing their sprawling kingdoms, as they found
themselves in a constant struggle to define a centralized government that commanded “transregional
loyalty” while “powerful local magnates strove to preserve their regional autonomy and traditions.” The
Merovingian kings sought to deal with this issue by entering into pacts of alliance with the “landed
nobility” and by creating the royal office of “count.”

Interestingly, the counts who served the Merovingians were unpropertied subjects of the crown to
whom the king granted large amounts of land with the expectation that they would, in turn, be loyal to him
and his kingdom. In the minds of the Merovingian kings, the creation of this royal office and the bestowal
of lands on the unpropertied would act to offset the power of the notoriously untrustworthy nobility.
Unfortunately for the kings, the vast majority of the counts who served them allowed their greed to
overwhelm their loyalty. Often they were based far from the domain of the monarch, and thus, once they were placed in office by the king, they became “territorial rulers in their own right.” This ultimately resulted in the fragmentation of the Frankish kingdom into independent regions and ever smaller principalities.

By the seventh-century, the king of the Franks was a ruler in name only, as the real power in the realm became concentrated in the office of the “mayor of the palace,” the spokesperson for the great land holders of the three large areas into which the Frankish kingdom had been divided: Neustria, Austrasia, and Burgundy. It was through this office that the second great Frankish dynasty, the Carolingians, came to power. The Carolingians controlled the office of the mayor of the palace from the time of the ascent to that position of Pepin I (d. 639) of Austrasia until 751 CE, when, with the help of the pope, they seized the Frankish crown. Pepin I, or Pepin the Elder, was a wealthy and powerful land owner who served the Merovingian king Clotaire II as mayor of the palace of Austrasia from CE 584 to 629. His grandson, Pepin of Herstal, although he too served the Merovingian king and held only the mayor’s position, became the true ruler of the Frankish kingdom in 687 CE. Pepin of Herstal was succeeded by his illegitimate son, Charles Martel, after whom the dynasty is called, as the name Carolingian comes from the Latin word for Charles, Carolus.

Significantly, Charles Martel was able to build up a large cavalry by granting lands to powerful noblemen as “benefices,” or “fiefs,” in return for their promise to serve as the king’s army. These lands that Charles so benevolently bestowed upon the nobility were taken from the church, which by this time, as we have seen, had grown more and more dependent upon the protection of the Franks against the Eastern emperor and the Lombards. When Charles demanded that their lands be turned over to the nobles, the church was forced to acquiesce and surrender these properties. By establishing in this way a relatively strong relationship with the landed aristocracy, Charles and the Carolingians were able to succeed politically where the Merovingians had failed. Where the Merovingians had sought to counteract the power of the nobility by elevating the weak, the Carolingians strengthened their realms by soothing the egos of the nobles instead of by challenging them.
The church also played a role in the Carolingian rise to power. Charles Martel and his successor, his grandson Pepin III, or “Pepin the Short,” used the church to placate disgruntled tribes that had been conquered by the Carolingians: the Frisians, Thüringians, Bavarians, and in particular, their long-time enemies, the Saxons. Eventually, conversion to the Nicene form of Christianity became an integral part of the “successful annexation of conquered lands and people.” This arrangement benefited not only the Carolingian kings, but also the Roman Church, as Christian bishops in the West who served in missionary districts were appointed lords and accorded all the privileges of this office. The church did not only assist in Carolingian expansion, though, as Pope Zacharias (r. 741-752) also “sanctioned Pepin the Short’s termination of the vestigial Merovingian dynasty and supported the Carolingian accession to outright kingship of the Franks.” With the blessing of the pope, Pepin was “proclaimed king by the nobility in council in 751.”

Charles the Great, or Charlemagne, the son of Pepin the Short, carried on his father’s tradition of the Carolingian king acting as the “papal protector of Italy.” Having convincingly defeated King Desiderius and the Lombards in northern Italy in 774, Charlemagne now proclaimed himself “King of the Lombards” and proceeded to expand his realm by “subjugating surrounding pagan tribes,” especially the Saxons, “whom the Franks brutally Christianized” and then scattered in small groups across their vast territory. The Muslims, who had been repelled by Charles Martel, were now pushed back beyond the Pyrenees, while the Avars, a vicious tribe related to the Huns, were thoroughly destroyed. By the time the great Charlemagne died in 814, his kingdom “embraced modern France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, almost the whole of western Germany, much of Italy, a portion of Spain, and the island of Corsica.”

Charlemagne, it seems, had notions of becoming more than just the King of the Franks. Encouraged by his “ambitious advisors,” he began to envision himself as an imperial ruler reigning over both the state and the church. Although cautious not to offend the emperors of the East by making his desires too explicit, he nevertheless had his “sacred palace city” of Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) constructed in the manner of the great cities of the “ancient Roman” and contemporary emperors of the East. In regard to the church, although he did grant it a certain amount of independence, he watched over it as an ever-vigilant parent. As Charles Martel and Pepin III had successfully done before him, Charlemagne used the
church to maintain “social stability and hierarchical order” within the realm. Hand-in-hand with the papacy he was ultimately able to create a “Frankish Christian Empire.”

It was, perhaps, on Christmas Day, 800, that Charlemagne’s imperial dreams were fulfilled, as it was then that Pope Leo III (r. 795-816) crowned him emperor. Although the coronation was an attempt by the pope to increase the power of the church and to gain some leverage over the headstrong king, after the event Charlemagne’s control over both church and state remained undiminished. As was the political custom, Charlemagne ruled his kingdom through the use of the royal office of the count. Under his rule, there were as many as two hundred and fifty of these royal appointees who were strategically assigned to the administrative districts into which the kingdom had been divided. The Carolingian count was usually a local magnate who already possessed an armed force and in whose self-interest it was to serve the king. The count had three basic responsibilities: “to maintain a local army loyal to the king; to collect tribute and dues, and to administer justice throughout his district.”

Here, in relation to this Frankish notion of the office of the count, we see the foundations of medieval “feudal society” begin to emerge. Feudalism is a difficult concept to define. The term itself seems to have come into use during the eighteenth-century, and to have been popularized by the political philosopher Montesquieu. Karl Marx, of course, used it to designate pre-capitalist societies. During the nineteenth-century, though, scholars began to use the word in relationship to western Europe and the Middle Ages. Since then, there have been sharp divisions among scholars concerning just what the nature of feudalism was. As medieval historian Norman Cantor points out, “one school regards feudalism as a group of political and legal institutions, as a system of decentralized government. . . .” Seen from this perspective, feudalism would be understood to have emerged during the second half of the ninth century as the Carolingian empire collapsed. This school does not believe that feudalism was linked to any particular form of economic system. Rather, it sees feudalism as a “system of political and legal relationships involving freemen.” With this in mind, it sharply distinguishes between feudalism and “manorialism,” which it sees as an “agrarian system involving dependant peasants.”

The alternative position, and the one that will be adopted here, is that which was offered up by the French, Annales school scholar, Marc Bloch. As Cantor, says, Bloch was “not prepared to define feudalism
purely in political and legal terms.” Rather, he understood the concept as one that defined a much more holistic system that consisted of political, economic, ecclesiastical, and cultural elements. Put another way, for Bloch, feudalism was understood as a system encompassing all aspects of life.

As has already been pointed out, even the Carolingians struggled to maintain an effective centralized government during the Middle Ages. This was so because at this time the western world was characterized by the threat of famine, disease, and invasion. Beyond this, the districts of the different kingdoms were spread over an expansive area, and the men who ruled them, even under strong kings like Charlemagne, often became a “law unto themselves.” Subject to these conditions, the weak sought out the strong for protection. This process of placing oneself under the protection of a stronger individual traces its origins to the problems that emerged within Merovingian society. Because the Merovingian kings were never able to command loyalty from either the nobles or the counts they had put in place, it became customary during the sixth and seventh centuries for weaker “freemen” who feared for their lives to seek out other, “stronger freemen” to protect them. This system was mutually beneficial, as the latter were able to build up armies and become local “magnates,” or men of influence, while the former were able to resolve the problem of simple survival. The freemen who gave themselves over to these other, stronger freemen were referred to as *ingenui in obsequio*, or “freemen in a contractual relation of dependence.” Men who gave themselves to the king in this way were called *antrustiones*. All of those who functioned within this system were called “vassals,” or “those who serve,” from which “evolved the term *vassalage*, meaning the placement of oneself in the personal service of another who promises protection in return.”

The system of vassalage involved promising “fealty” to one’s lord. As the eleventh-century Bishop Fulbert so eloquently put it:

He who swears fealty to this lord ought always to have these six things in memory: what is harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, practicable. Harmless, that is to say, that he should not injure his lord in his body; safe, that he should not injure him betraying his secrets or the defenses upon which he relies for his safety; honorable, that he should not injure him in his possessions; easy and practicable, that that good which his lord is able to do easily he make not difficult, nor that which is practicable he make not impossible to him.
Both kings and nobles alike sought to acquire as many vassals as they could, simply because power during the Middle Ages “lay in numbers.” Because it eventually became impossible to maintain large numbers of vassals in the “lord’s manor,” the practice was instituted of supporting these feudal underlings by granting them land as a “tenement.” Vassals were expected to live on these “benefices,” or “fiefs,” and to maintain their horses and weapons in good order so that they would be ready to fight.

The feudal practice of vassalage obviously placed a great deal of power in the hands of the lords. Indeed, as Cantor makes clear, “lordship [was] the indispensable element in feudalism.” The economic power of the lords came primarily from their control of large estates and a “dependent peasantry.” It is here, in regard to the lord’s economic power, that we may come to understand the “manorial” agrarian system that was mentioned earlier. Manors varied in size from one locale to another. A small manor could consist of as few as a dozen households, each with an allotment of land of roughly thirty acres. The smallest manors, then, probably had approximately three hundred and fifty acres of arable land, not counting forests, common meadows, and the demesne, land set aside exclusively for the lord’s use. On the other extreme, a large manor might have consisted of up to 50 households spread across as many as five thousand acres.

In return for laboring on the lord’s demesne, peasants were allotted parcels of arable land under the “open-field system, where the fields were subdivided into strips.” They were allowed to graze animals in the common areas and to gather dead wood from the forests, but had many restrictions placed on them by the lord of the manor. In general, peasants were treated according to their “personal status and the size of their tenements.” A freeman who possessed a small parcel of land not subject to the claims of the lord could become a serf by surrendering his property to a wealthier landowner in exchange for his protection. The freeman would then receive his land back from the lord under a contractual agreement. Although he no longer owned his property, “he had full possession and use of it, and the number of services and amount of goods he was so supply to the lord were carefully spelled out.” Those peasants who placed themselves under the protection of the lord, but who possessed very little property, became unfree serfs. Unlike free serfs, who retained some control over their own lives, unfree serfs were subject to the dictates of their manorial overseers, spending as many as three days per week working the land of the lord. Peasants who
came to the lord with absolutely nothing “had the lowest status and were the least protected from the excessive demands on their labor.”

While the economic power of the lords came from their control of large estates, their political and military power stemmed from the control they had over “freeman soldiers” and the “decentralized governmental and legal institutions” characteristic of the Middle Ages. Indeed, by the time of the Frankish kingdoms, lordship became the “basic social and political institution” of the medieval world. This can be seen in the structure of the comitatus, or “war band” of the German tribes, which was based on the ideal of the loyalty of warriors to their chieftain in return for his protection and generosity with the spoils of conflict. The vassalage system of the sixth and seventh centuries, then, may be understood as an extension of the German comitatus, with freemen willingly putting themselves at the disposal of their lord or king. As Cantor points out, though, initially these military vassals were nothing more than “gangs of thugs” who fought on behalf of their warlord. They were far removed from the glorious chivalric knights who were depicted in the great chansons de geste (songs of great deeds) of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Although political and military vassalage is often thought to be associated with the notion of land grants given for heroic deeds, most vassals before the eighth-century were landless. It was only after the superiority of the mounted cavalry became evident, and more enlightened warlords began to build their armies around the “mailed and mounted soldier,” that vassalage truely began to be connected to land ownership. This was so because even though the chevalier, or “knight” was superior to the foot soldier, his equipment was extraordinarily expensive. If a warlord wanted an “army of knights among his vassals” he found it to his advantage to “invest” his chevaliers with manorial estates, from which they could draw an income in order to outfit themselves for battle. The growing association of vassalage with the “fief” eventually began to raise the social status of the vassal. Less and less a mercenary thug, the vassal himself was now becoming a “local lord,” often controlling one, or sometimes more than one manor.

In the final stage of the development of feudalism, “governmental and legal authority” was gradually passed from the state into the hands of the “king’s great feudal vassals.” Characteristic of the ninth-century, this late stage of feudalism was the result of the last Carolingian kings inability to control their own lords. Although wealthy land owners had always had power over the dependant peasantry within
the feudal system, the “passing of public power into private hands in the ninth century” represented a radical reconfiguration of feudal society. The feudal lords had now wrested from the ever more “feeble” monarchy the authority to collect taxes, to “hold courts to hear important pleas,” and to hang criminals in their “duchies and counties.” As the tenth-century unfolded in France, the great powers that had once been possessed by the Carolingian kings were “swallowed up in the private feudal courts, which exercised overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions in a crazy patchwork of decentralized authority.”

Food for thought: What is Feudalism’s Legacy?

As the Norman Cantor tells us in his work on *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, the “values that served feudalism and the feudal lords were these three”:

> [F]irst, that military prowess is a social good because only the strong man can provide peace and protection; second, that the bonds of personal loyalty are the sinews of the social order and only the relationship of one man to another can give sanction to political and legal obligations; third, that these bonds of loyalty are arranged in an ascending and descending order, stretching through society and on to heavenly regions.

Cantor examines these three values in reverse order. He suggests that the third value concerning the connection between society and heaven was important because it allowed feudal relationships not only to be accepted by men of the church, but to receive their blessings. Indeed, according to Cantor, by the end of the tenth century, the originally cautious French clergy were staunch advocates of the feudal system, holding it up as an example of the “divinely ordained hierarchical order of the world.” The second value, says Cantor, that concerning loyalty, was “useful to ambitious kings and dukes who sought to impose a sovereign power over the landed society in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.” Beyond being significant because it allowed this sad and disturbing manipulation of allegiance, though, loyalty was of significance because it seemed to arouse a “new sensitivity to personal relationships” during the Middle Ages. Finally, in regard to the first value, that concerning the social worth of military power, this became “transmuted into the ideal of aristocratic leadership in society.” Unfortunately, as Cantor points out, “feudal recognition of the intrinsic goodness of physical strength was perpetuated in the moral sanction of the stronger over the
weaker that became essential to the operation of the European states system from the twelfth to the twentieth century."