

Frankish Rulers and the Rise of the Church

The decline of the Roman Empire brought about many changes in Western Europe. Between the years 500 and 1500 A.D. came a period called the **Medieval Age** or the **Middle Ages**.

One of the reasons for the decline of the Roman Empire was that their lands were constantly invaded by barbarians or Germanic tribes. Once Rome fell, these raids did not stop. Western Europe was constantly in a state of warfare which brought about the collapse of the region.

Trade was disrupted by the many invasions from both land and sea. Businesses collapsed and once prosperous cities went into an economic depression. Many areas were abandoned as money became scarce.

Due to the downfall of the cities across Western Europe, more people left the cities and moved to the countryside where they changed their lifestyles. The common people became peasant farmers and lived as workers for their lords in a system called Feudalism.

Another factor that changed was the decline in learning. The Germanic tribes could neither read nor write. The use of Latin, as a common language, began to disappear. New dialects developed from region to region. New words and phrases became part of everyday speech. By the 800s, French, Spanish, and other Roman-based languages had evolved from Latin. The once unified empire was now rapidly breaking apart.

The Germanic people lived in small communities. They lived by a system of unwritten rules and traditions. Family ties and personal loyalties were more important than citizenship and a public state. The community leader was a chief or a lord, and all of his warriors pledged loyalty to him. In peacetime, these followers lived in their lord's hall. He gave them food, weapons and treasure in return for their loyalty. In times of war, they fought by his side and believed it to be a disgrace if they outlived him. It was impossible to establish any large, orderly government within these territories.

In the old Roman province of Gaul (France), the Germanic people were called the Franks. Their leader was a man called **Clovis**. His wife, **Clothilde**, urged him to convert to her faith, Christianity. In 496 Clovis fought against other Germanic tribes and won. He credited his new religion for these victories. Clovis and 3,000 of his men were then baptized by a local bishop and became devout Christians. He soon united the Germanic peoples and by 511 A.D. had formed one kingdom, honored and welcomed by the church in Rome. This would be the start of a partnership between Western European kingdoms and the Roman Catholic Church.

By 600 A.D. Christianity had now taken hold in the old Roman Empire. To adapt to these rural areas, the church began to build religious communities called **monasteries**. Men who joined had to first give up all of their possessions, take a vow to become a servant of God and then they became known as a **monk**. A woman who did the same was called a **nun**.

These monasteries became the centers for rural education and learning. Laws were written by an Italian monk and nun who were brother and sister. Around 520 A.D. the monk **Benedict** and his sister **Scholastica**, wrote rules for their religious communities that would be the model for other religious communities in Western Europe.



On the left is a copy of an original painting showing Benedictine Monks at work writing religious texts. They are sitting in the garden of the monastery, an area that was always cared for by the monks as it was their place of refuge when the weather allowed.

In 731 A.D., the **Venerable Bede**, an English monk, wrote a history of England, which is considered the best historical writing of the Middle Ages. During the 600s and 700s, monks had hand-written beautiful copies of religious writings, decorated with ornate letters and pictures.



This is the cover of one of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Lindisfarne is in the north of England and was a monastery for learning. It is built on a peninsula into the sea that becomes an island at high tide. Locally, it is called Holy Island.

This is the Gospel According to St. John. The Latin words mean:
“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.”

The first powerful pope was **Gregory I** (Gregory the Great) who became head of the Church in Rome in 590 A.D. Under Gregory, the **papacy** also became a **secular** or worldly power that became involved with not only religion but politics and how areas of Western Europe were to be run by their rulers. Gregory used Church money to repair the old roads, raise his own army, build himself a palace and help the poor. He even negotiated peace treaties with warring barbarians, one being with the Lombards who were constantly invading Italy during his reign. Soon Gregory I ruled the area from Italy to England* and from Spain to Western Germany.

*[It was Gregory that sent missionaries to England. A monk named Augustine converted many people in the British Isles and he was made the first archbishop of Canterbury (St. Augustine of Canterbury) which made Canterbury the center of the Christian Church in England].

It was not just the pope that began to spread his power. When Clovis died in 511, he had extended his rule over most of what we call today France. By 700 A.D., an official known as the major domo, or mayor of the palace, had become the most powerful person in the kingdom. In his official role, this mayor had full charge of the royal families' households and all of the lands or estates that his families owned. Unofficially, he also commanded the army and was the person who made the rules of how this kingdom was to be run on a day to day basis. In effect, the mayor of the palace had total rule over the kingdom.

In 719, one such mayor was **Charles Martel (Charles the Hammer)** and he had more power than the king of the Franks. He instructed his army to extend the Frank's territories to the north, south and east. In 732, at the **Battle of Tours**, his army defeated a Muslim raiding party that came from Spain. The Battle of Tours was a great victory for the Christians. If the Muslims had won, then Western Europe may have become part of the vast Muslim Empire. Charles Martel became a hero.

When Charles Martel died, he was succeeded by his son, **Pepin the Short**. Pepin was not satisfied with just being the mayor; he wanted to become the king. In a deal he made with the pope, Pepin fought the Lombards who were invading central Italy and threatening Rome. Pepin defeated the Lombards and the pope anointed him "**king by the grace of God.**" It was now that the reign of the Frankish rulers began the **Carolingian Dynasty** which lasted from 751 to 987.

Pepin the Short died in 768 and his empire was left to his sons, Carloman and Charles. Carloman died in 771, leaving Charles in control of the kingdom. Charles took on the names Charles the Great or better known as **Charlemagne**.



Charlemagne

Under his control, the Carolingian empire quickly expanded. He fought the Muslims in Spain and other tribes within the Germanic kingdoms. He captured new lands in the east and south and wherever his empire grew, so did Christianity. For the first time since the Roman Empire, Western Europe was one kingdom. By 800, Charlemagne's empire was larger than the Byzantine Empire as it included all of France, part of Spain, half of Italy and all of German Saxony.

In 800 Charlemagne and his army went to Rome to put down a local rebellion. In gratitude for his services, **Pope Leo III** crowned Charlemagne as the “**Roman Emperor**”.

This event started the union between the Germanic powers, the Church, and the heritage of the Roman Empire.



Once crowned emperor, Charlemagne became more absolute as a ruler by limiting the authority of his nobles. Charlemagne sent agents to each part of his kingdom to make sure that the landholders were being fair rulers of his people. By controlling these lands he was constantly adding to the wealth of the Carolingian empire.

Charlemagne was noted for his advancements in learning. His kingdom was open to all scholars, especially from England, Germany, Italy and Spain. He ordered the monasteries to open schools to train future monks and priests. Libraries were built as Charlemagne encouraged monks to make more handwritten copies of Latin books.

A year before he died, Charlemagne made his son, Louis the Pious, the new emperor. Louis was devoutly religious and not a good leader. When he died, his three sons, Lothair, Charles the Bald, and Louis the German began a civil war as to determine who was to inherit the empire. The civil war ended in 843 when the **Treaty of Verdun** was signed. The treaty stated that Charlemagne's old empire was to be divided into three sections.

The Treaty of Verdun was the start of the downfall of the Carolingian kings as their central authority had diminished and the leaders that followed were not as strong as Charlemagne.