

EARLY MEDIEVAL MONARCHIES:
FROM BARBARIAN TRIBES TO POWERFUL MEDIEVAL KINGDOMS

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Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages were periods of great transition. From the third through the ninth centuries, Europe endured dramatic shifts that ebbed and flowed as power shifted from the unified Roman Empire to the multitude of small tribal groups that overran it. These tribes, ruled by powerful warlords, also changed over time. They coalesced, divided, merged, evolved, faded away, and expanded erratically. Numerous monarchies eventually emerged, growing from small tribal groups to larger and more sophisticated entities that foreshadowed the great kingdoms of the High and Later Middle Ages. The increasingly larger and more complex kingdoms that emerged during the tumultuous post-Roman transitional period exhibited characteristics that lead to the nation states of Europe today, yet they still maintained a ghostly resemblance to the Roman Empire they replaced.

The Third Century Crisis of the Roman Empire ushered in a period of instability that Diocletian and Constantine tried desperately to stabilize. The Eastern Empire, based in Constantinople, slowly grew in power while the Western Empire, based in Rome and Ravenna, fragmented under the pressure of numerous waves of barbarian migrations. The Battle of Adrianople in 378, Alaric's sack of Rome in 410, and Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 are just a few of the key events that chronicle the collapse of Roman influence in the West. The determined military campaigns of Justinian I in the sixth century fell short of reviving the West. In fact, George Ostrogorsky noted, "Justinian had meant his reign to inaugurate a new era, but it really marked the close of a great age."¹ Within just a few decades, many of Justinian's gains were lost, and the West had no real hope of Roman rejuvenation. Thus, the Eastern Empire focused its attention on the "New Rome" of Constantinople and transitioned to a culture that became more Greek than Latin, particularly under the seventh century emperor

¹ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 78.

Heraclius.² His conquest of the Persians had the unintended consequence of paving the way for the westward expansion of Islam, endangering an important thread of continuity remaining from the fallen Western Roman Empire—Christianity. Muslims, Germanic barbarians, Slavs, and numerous other invaders diffused into Europe and the Mediterranean, providing a catalyst for the metamorphosis of the region into something very different from the Roman Empire prior to the Third Century Crisis.

The tribes most directly responsible for the collapse of the West, such as the Goths and Vandals, conquered very large areas of the former Roman Empire, but they initially failed to achieve much more than a modicum of the cohesiveness and interconnectedness that characterized the Roman Empire at its height. According to Thomas Brown, “Local government was the weak spot of all early medieval monarchies,” indicating that the tribes struggled to maintain unity at the grass-roots level.³ Warlords often struggled to corral ambitious aristocrats and potential rival warlords. If local government was problematic, there was certainly less cohesion among the barbarian tribal groups at the regional level and little or no cohesion over the great expanses of territory under the control of the large tribal confederations. Thus, a resident of what is now France might have, at that time, considered himself a Bordelais (resident of Bordeaux), a Gasconian, or an Aquitanian rather than a Frank. Loyalties, if they existed at all, were strongest at the local level.

Despite the apparent lack of unity within barbarian tribes, there were certainly similarities between them. Some characteristics resembled those of the Romans. According to Edward James, barbarian society was stratified with a hierarchy that put slaves and the semi-free peoples

² Ibid., 106.

³ Thomas Brown, “The Transformation of the Roman Mediterranean, 400-900,” in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

on the bottom and aristocrats and royalty on the top.⁴ Certainly, the Roman Empire's plebeians, patricians, magistrates, and emperors illustrate a similarity with the barbarian hierarchy. As some of the smaller tribes fell to or blended into larger and more powerful tribes, the warlords became monarchs with courtiers and bureaucrats who played increasing roles in the larger and more complex political and social structures. Eventually, the barbarian tribes developed hybrid cultures that adopted and adapted many aspects of the Roman culture they helped to dismantle. Odoacer, while having deposed Romulus Augustulus in 476, ending the Western Empire, sought to maintain favorable relations with the Byzantines by sending Romulus's imperial regalia to Constantinople as a gesture of goodwill.⁵ Odoacer's recognition of Byzantine power and authority showed a very Romanesque sense of concern for diplomacy and keeping up appearances. Byzantine emperor Zeno rewarded Odoacer with the status of Patrician, and Odoacer used the Latin term *rex* as he reigned as the new king of Italy.

Ironically, Odoacer's goodwill gesture was not enough, and his relationship with Byzantine emperor Zeno soured quickly. The Byzantine's hired the Ostrogoths under Theodoric the Great to eliminate Odoacer, and the earliest post-Roman monarchy over Rome and Ravenna soon fell. The damage had been done, however, and it was clear that the Ostrogoths and other tribes had the real power in the West, not the Romans.⁶ The Ostrogoths maintained their hold on the traditional heartland of the Roman Empire for over half a century, a great source of regret for the Byzantines. It was not until Justinian, through the brilliance of his generals Belisarius and Narses, subdued the Ostrogoths that an emperor calling himself a Roman had control over Ravenna and Rome. While some scholars, such as Ostrogorsky, view Justinian's Italian conquest

⁴ Edward James, "The Northern World in the Dark Ages, 400-900," in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 76.

⁵ J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian, Vol. 1* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 407.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

as a pyrrhic victory for the Byzantine Empire, Rome and Ravenna remained under Byzantine control for nearly two centuries until the slow spread of the Lombards throughout Italy reached its climax under kings Liutprand in 712 and Aistulf in 751. By the mid-eighth century, however, Europe was a dramatically different place. The Franks had grown very powerful, and their relationship with the papacy led them to drive the Lombards out of much of their newly acquired land in Italy. By the late 700s, Charlemagne considered himself king of the Franks and of the Lombards, and his son Pippin became king of Italy.⁷

Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 and the subsequent rise and fall of kingdoms in Italy that continued until Charlemagne's victory over the Kingdom of the Lombards in 774 exemplifies the instability of many early medieval monarchies. Tribal possessions often fluctuated over time as competing powers saw weaknesses or reacted to perceived threats. Often, tribes were displaced, but not destroyed. For example, after Charlemagne's victory in 774, the Lombards retained control of portions of southern Italy. Some regions enjoyed, or endured, long-lasting rule by one tribe or another, and other regions of Europe suffered a virtual parade of conquerors. The aspirations of Zeno, Justinian, and other Byzantine emperors damaged some monarchies and promoted others. The papacy had a similar effect as it played one tribe against another. Pope Gregory the Great decried the Lombards and their deleterious effects on Italy.⁸ Two centuries later, Pope Hadrian asked Charlemagne of the Franks for help in ousting the Lombards. One tribe, the Franks, was hired to oust another, the Lombards.

The increasingly longer holds on Italy enjoyed by the Ostrogoths, Lombards, and the Franks illustrate the trend in the sixth through eighth centuries of larger and more cohesive monarchically controlled regions. Over time, these regions began to exhibit the emerging

⁷ James in Holmes, 95.

⁸ Brown in Holmes, 10.

characteristics of the early medieval kingdoms of Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire, Alfred's England, and Bolesław's Poland. They also provided a glimpse into the future of Europe, ruled by great monarchs such as Richard I the Lionheart and Frederick I Barbarossa. Much transition remained, however, before the early medieval monarchies could achieve such a high level of sophistication and stability.

One of the most important events in the rise of early medieval monarchies and the development of medieval Christendom was the reign Clovis I of the Franks. Clovis was born a pagan, plundering churches and rejecting Christianity at the beginning of his reign.⁹ In the fifteenth regnal year, however, a dramatic battlefield conversion experience prompted him to turn his back on the pagan gods and accept Christian baptism at Rheims.¹⁰ An important, perhaps the most important, aspect of Clovis's conversion was that he was baptized a Catholic. The Goths were predominately Arian Christians, so having the powerful Merovingian Frank under the umbrella of Catholicism was extremely significant. Thenceforth, the Franks and the Church had a unique relationship that had great implications for Central Europe. A successor of Clovis, Charles "the hammer" Martel, waged war against the Muslims at the pivotal Battle of Tours (Poitiers) in 732. While historians, such as Edward James, debate whether this battle saved Christian Europe from an Islamic takeover, the battle certainly secured Martel's place in the upper echelon of powerful Christian warrior kings of the Middle Ages.¹¹ Charlemagne deepened the relationship between the Franks and the Church by accepting Pope Hadrian's invitation to subdue the Lombards. Charlemagne's relationship with the Church was particularly strong,

⁹ Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks* 2.27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.30.

¹¹ James in Holmes, 90.

leading to the creation of the Holy Roman Empire. On Christmas Day in the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “Emperor and Augustus.”¹²

The fusion of Roman and Frankish cultures reached its apogee when Charlemagne received the Roman title “Emperor and Augustus.” He spoke and read in both Frankish and Latin, exemplifying the fusion and evolution of the Roman and Frankish cultures.¹³ In time, Latin replaced Frankish as the dominant language of the Carolingians, eventually leading to the Romance language of French. Charlemagne’s personal library contained numerous Latin texts, whether or not he could read them, which included both sacred and classical works. Charlemagne read, or had read to him, Saint Jerome’s Vulgate Bible and Augustine’s *City of God*, as well as works by Roman authors such as Horace, Cicero, and Livy.¹⁴ Because he was a devout Christian, he was free to enjoy the sacred works, but merely used the classical works to hone his skill with reading and writing Latin. Perhaps this blend of both sacred and classical prompted Charlemagne to focus his attention on standardizing the speaking and writing of Latin, which ultimately led to the “Carolingian minuscule.” Under this script system, letters became uniform and properly aligned. Capital letters marked the beginnings of sentences and proper nouns, and lower case letters emerged. Also, spaces indicated when one word ended and another began.¹⁵ The Carolingian focus on Latin and the minuscule script exemplify the great cultural flowering known as the Carolingian Renaissance, which produced many achievements that remain with us today.

The Carolingian Franks were not the only innovators in Europe during the Early Middle Ages. Other early monarchies, such as Anglo-Saxon England under Alfred the Great and Poland

¹² Einhard *Life of Charlemagne* 28; Lewis Thorpe, trans., *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin, 1969), 81.

¹³ James in Holmes, 94.

¹⁴ Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 235.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

under Boleslaw Chrobry the Brave, also left lasting influences on Europe that persist to the modern era. Having learned a great deal from the example set by the Franks, Alfred built a series of forts, launched an effective navy, and developed a large-scale military levy from the population to ensure adequate defense against the Viking enemies that attacked on all sides.¹⁶ Like Charlemagne, Alfred was a scholar who read the Bible and numerous works on philosophy and theology. Unlike Charlemagne, Alfred was adept at reading and writing to the point that he translated many works and wrote many of his own, including an advanced law code.¹⁷ Boleslaw of Poland, like Charlemagne and Alfred, was dedicated to religion. Thus, the Church became an integral part of his empire. Also influenced by the Franks, Boleslaw established church hierarchies to build up the infrastructure of his empire that stretched across Bohemia and Poland.¹⁸ The stability and longevity of Boleslaw's empire mirrored the empires of Charlemagne and Alfred, as well as the great monarchies that dominated the High and Later Middle Ages.

Like the Gothic and Lombardic tribal kingdoms, the impressive monarchies of Charlemagne, Alfred, and Boleslaw represent a link in the chain between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the grand monarchies of the High and Later Middle Ages. The initial tribal kingdoms, such as those of Odoacer and Theodoric, filled the vacuum after the collapse of Rome, but lacked cohesion and proved fleeting. By the 700s, the numerous tribes or tribal confederations either merged together or were absorbed into larger tribes that controlled increasingly larger areas. Charlemagne, for example, helped stitch the individual regions of the Frankish empire together through Christianity, education, and, of course, military might.¹⁹ The monarchies of the Early Middle Ages lead Europe through the tumult of the collapse of the

¹⁶ Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (London: Penguin, 2009), 457.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 461.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 490.

¹⁹ James in Holmes, 96-97.

Western Empire and helped reshape Europe into a new entity that blended Roman and barbarian culture into something quite different. They foreshadowed the empires of William the Conqueror, Philip II Augustus, and Robert the Bruce, ushering in a new phase of transition in post-Roman Europe.

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