

The Legacy of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages in the West

The Roman Empire reigned from 27 BCE to 476 CE throughout the Mediterranean world, including parts of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. The fall of the Roman Empire in the West in 476 CE marked the end of the period of classical antiquity and ushered in a new era in world history. Three civilizations emerged as successors to the Romans in the Mediterranean world: the Byzantine Empire (in many ways a continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire), and the civilizations of Islam and Western Europe. These three civilizations would become rivals and adversaries over the course of the succeeding centuries. They developed distinct religious, cultural, social, political, and linguistic characteristics that shaped the path each civilization would take throughout the course of the Middle Ages and beyond.

The Middle Ages in European history refers to the period spanning the fifth through the fifteenth century. The fall of the Western Roman Empire typically represents the beginning of the Middle Ages. Scholars divide the Middle Ages into three eras: the Early Middle Ages (400–1000), the High Middle Ages (1000–1300), and the Late Middle Ages (1300–1500). The Renaissance and the Age of Discovery traditionally mark the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period in European history. The legacy of the Roman Empire, and the division of its territory into three separate civilizations, impacted the course of world history and continues to influence the development of each region to this day.

Byzantine Empire

The Byzantine Empire emerged out of the eastern portion of the Roman Empire, with its capital based in the city of Constantinople. In 395 CE the Roman Empire was divided into an eastern and western region. From that point onward the Western Roman Empire steadily deteriorated as it divided into smaller separate kingdoms. The Byzantine Empire, however, continued to prosper, and survived until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Around 500 CE, the Byzantine Empire encompassed the Greek and Balkan Peninsula, Asian Minor, Palestine, and Egypt.

Throughout most of its history, the Byzantine Empire was one of the leading economic, military, and cultural powers in Europe. In the eleventh century, the Empire lost significant territory in Asia Minor to the Turks. Byzantine strength in the region fluctuated until the late twelfth century, when the empire once again went into decline. In 1204 the Byzantine Empire suffered another crushing blow following the Fourth Crusade, during which time it was technically dissolved and partitioned into two domains: Greek and Latin. In 1261 the empire was reunited; however, civil wars in the fourteenth century once again attenuated its power, eventually leading to the empire's collapse when the Ottomans took Constantinople in 1453.

The Byzantines continued to employ a traditional Roman style of government and law. Byzantine Emperor Justinian I (527–565) attempted to restore the Roman Empire to its prior status by trying to recover the western portions of the Empire. Although he did not succeed in doing so, Justinian did succeed in retaining the use of Roman law. Referred to as Justinian's Code, the *Corpus Juris Civilis* was used as the

basis of civil law throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, and in some places continues to be used to this day.

Although holdovers from the Roman Empire continued to be used during the Byzantine era, Byzantine social and religious features were primarily influenced by Greek culture. The formal language of the new empire was Greek (as opposed to Latin) and the official religion was Orthodox Christianity (as opposed to Roman polytheism). The reign of Justinian I also brought about a flourishing of Byzantine culture. Justinian's rule also saw the construction of the church of Hagia Sophia. This famous church, located in Constantinople, served as the center of Eastern Orthodox Christianity through the Middle Ages and beyond.

The city of Constantinople developed as one of the largest cities in Europe, with a population of approximately one million people during the Middle Ages. The culture of Constantinople represented a diverse combination of Roman, Greek, Persian, and Semitic ethnicities. The cultural and religious development of Constantinople differed greatly from other contemporary cities in Western Europe. This was particularly true of its religious evolution. Unlike in Western Europe, the Byzantine church and state were inextricably linked, and the Byzantine emperor was regarded as both a secular and a religious figure. The Byzantine Empire refused to recognize the sovereignty of the Roman pope and instead recognized the patriarch of Constantinople. In 1054, the Eastern and Western traditions of the Christian church split, referred to today as the Great Schism. The Byzantine Empire continued to observe Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

Islamic Empire

Another significant presence in the old territories of the Roman Empire was the Islamic civilization. The prophet Muhammad founded Islam, and from this new religion grew a strong imperial power. The primary language of the Islamic Empire was Arabic. Unlike in Eastern or Western Europe, Muslims did not have an institutionalized church or clergy. Muslims were expected to observe the teachings of the Koran, the Five Pillars of Faith, temperance, and sobriety. Muslims were also expected to make a pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca at least once in their lives. In addition to abiding by the tenets of the Koran, Muslims also lived according to Shari'ah law (Islamic law). The mosque emerged as the site of worship, prayer, and teaching.

After Muhammad's death in 632 CE there was a crisis over the rules of succession. Disputes over Muhammad's successor (caliph) eventually led to the division of Islam into two factions: Shias and Sunnis. Shia Muslims developed as a more conservative faction who believed that only a descendant of Muhammad's family could be eligible to rule and act as an intermediary between God and man. Sunnis held a more liberal opinion regarding succession, arguing that any capable Muslim could be eligible for election as the caliph.

From the seventh century through the fifteenth century the Islamic empire moved westward, and at one point had successfully conquered nearly fifty percent of the former Roman Empire. By the eighth century the Islamic Empire had expanded into parts of the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Indian subcontinent.

This gave the Islamic Empire access to some of the key trading routes of the Mediterranean. During the Battle of Tours (732) the Muslims fought Frankish and Burgundian forces, but ultimately failed to make substantial inroads into Europe.

The empire was divided into several provinces after disputes over the proper protocol for succession. Caliphates were established in Damascus, Baghdad, North Africa, and Spain. The Islamic economy revolved around commerce and trade with China and the Mediterranean, as well as the manufacture of luxury goods such as silk, spices, carpets, and jewelry. Islamic culture also valued learning and education. Arabic science and mathematics flourished during this period, as seen in the perfection of algebra and the adoption of the system of Arabic numbers by the West.

The first signs of the collapse of the Islamic Empire started around the eleventh century, following a Turkish invasion. During this period Christian Europe began to launch a series of crusades against the Muslims and their control over the eastern portions of the Mediterranean and Palestine. Military attacks aside, the empire was already operating on tenuous grounds. The Islamic Empire had no centralized political entity and stretched geographically from Spain to India, uniting diverse groups of people only through language (Arabic) and religion (Islam). Throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Ottoman Turks (who had converted to Islam in the ninth and tenth centuries) successfully gained power and territory, culminating in their victory at Constantinople in 1453.

Western Europe

Of all three civilizations to emerge following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Western Europe started off as the least powerful and likely to thrive. Western Europe's culture blended Germanic languages with a Judaeo-Christian belief in faith and monotheism, and it maintained several customs from the classical period, such as its political and literary traditions and a philosophical emphasis on reason.

The development of Western Europe changed dramatically over the course of the Middle Ages. Throughout the entire period (500–1500), Western Europe was united by a common religion (Christianity) and a common language among the educated (Latin). Vernacular languages spoken throughout Europe primarily stemmed from Latin or Germanic roots. By the High Middle Ages (1000–1300) Western Europe had moved from a region of small and weak economies and governments to a strong and expansionistic civilization.

The Early Middle Ages (400–1000)

The Early Middle Ages was a time of prosperity and growth for the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations. Western Europe, on the other hand, produced very few literary, artistic, or cultural creations, which is why the period has been referred to as the “dark ages.” The early portion of this period was an extremely violent phase for Western Europe. Consistently under threat of invasion from external forces, such as the Byzantines, Slavs, and Scandinavians, there was also no shortage of internal hostility and bloodshed. Frankish kings of German ethnicity (referred to by the Romans and

Greeks as “barbarians”) struggled to establish their own monarchies and battled one another for power and domination. While this fighting destabilized the Western Roman world, it laid the foundations for the future nation-states of Western Europe.

By the end of the Early Middle Ages, Western Europe began to stabilize politically and economically. The Frankish empire thrived during the Carolingian dynasty, especially during the reign of Charlemagne. Charlemagne’s appointment as emperor in 800 CE by Pope Leo III fostered a revival of the politics, culture, and society of Western Europe. Referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance, this revival was primarily undertaken by elite scholars and clergymen in Charlemagne’s court. But alas, Charlemagne’s empire would not last long after his death. Due in part to infighting among Charlemagne’s descendents, the empire was divided into three kingdoms. The hostility between the descendents of Charlemagne would continue to shape the development of Western Europe from the tenth century up through the twentieth century.

During the Early Middle Ages the feudal system was also introduced to Western Europe, contributing to agricultural stability and prosperity. The feudal system developed after the fall of the Carolingian dynasty as a form of social, political, and economic organization and stabilization. The major features of feudalism symbolized the characteristics of the Early Middle Ages. Its basic structure resembled a small kingdom, with the primary emphasis on the relationship between lords, vassals, and the peasantry. The lord, roughly defined as a nobleman, owned a large piece of land (comparable to an average present-day county). He would then grant parcels of land (called fiefs) to knights or vassals. The vassal, or Lord of the Manor, would then divide up his land further and allow peasants to live on it in exchange for their labor. This relationship formed the basic principles of manorialism, the major social and economic component of feudalism. Serfdom emerged during this same time as well, as the condition of bondage of peasants under manorialism specifically and feudalism more broadly.

The High Middle Ages (1050–1300)

The agricultural and economic effects of feudalism led to a new phase in Western European history. Agricultural advances, such as the three-field rotation system and the heavy plow, helped produce an enormous increase in Western Europe’s food supply and population growth. The High Middle Ages also saw an increase in trade. After the Italians defeated the Muslims, trade through the Mediterranean and long-distance trade became available for Western European merchants. The Italian cities were at the forefront of this revived commercial activity. Similar advances in commerce were taking place in Scandinavia between the British and French. This led to the complexity of a monetary economy and banking system throughout Europe.

One of the most significant outcomes of this booming commercial activity was the revival of towns and urban life in Western Europe. Many new towns were created alongside rivers and coasts to accommodate the new culture of commerce and trade. The development of medieval towns produced a new socioeconomic class that operated outside of the traditional feudal structure. This new class comprised

merchants and skilled artisans who were an intricate part of this new commercial revolution.

Politically, the High Middle Ages saw the creation of national monarchies in England and France. In 1066 William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded England. William brought feudalism to England and helped centralize the state. By the thirteenth century England developed the origins of a parliamentary government, symbolized in many ways by the Magna Carta (1215), which limited the power of the king.

Under the Capetian dynasty (987–1328) the French state evolved in the opposite direction politically, as it started to lay the foundation for absolutism, which bestowed the king with absolute power. Germany and Italy failed to unify and create national monarchies. Instead, they evolved into divided and smaller distinct territorial units. At the beginning of the High Middle Ages the Holy Roman Empire was arguably the strongest and most highly centralized governing body in Europe. By the end of the period (ca. 1300) it had fragmented into multiple states. This opened up a large power vacuum, which led to violence and hostility that would continue until the unification of Italy in the 1830s and Germany in 1871.

During the High Middle Ages the papal monarchy in Western Europe was an extremely strong and influential presence. The period saw papal reform and the creation of new monasteries throughout Europe. The Crusades also occurred during this period (from 1095 to 1272), demonstrating the strength of Christianity in the region and illustrating the ability of the papacy to rally tens of thousands of Christians to fight the Turkish Muslims to recover the Holy Land. The Crusades also increased the financial and military power of European kings and opened up new trading routes and opportunities for European merchants.

The Late Middle Ages (1300–1500)

The majority of the Late Middle Ages was marked by tragedy, chaos, and crisis. Food shortages and famine ravaged Western Europe in the first decades of the fourteenth century. As a result of these shortages there was extreme inflation and an increase in taxes, which in turn led to peasant uprisings in France (1358) and England (1381). However, the primary cause of death and devastation in the fourteenth century occurred as a result of the bubonic plague, or the Black Death (1348–1350). The Black Death was absolutely devastating to Western Europe's population, wiping out one-quarter to one-half of the population in a matter of two to three years. The Black Death also contributed to the declining strength of the medieval church, as many Europeans began to lose faith as a result of the plague.

The Hundred Years War (1337–1453) between England and France over control of French territories defined the military and political climate of Western Europe during the Late Middle Ages. England also experienced internal conflicts during the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485), when two rival families initiated a civil war over control of the throne. The war resulted in King Henry VII, the first monarch from the Tudor dynasty, ascending to the throne. In parts of the German states and in Spain, members of the Habsburg dynasty rose to power in the fifteenth century and held the title of Holy

Roman Emperor from the fifteenth century until World War I. Ultimately, although Western Europe experienced violence and devastation during the Late Middle Ages, it emerged from this period stronger than before, poised for transformational developments such as the Italian Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.

Summary:

- After the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, three civilizations—Byzantine, Islamic, and Western European—inherited its legacy.
- The period following the fall of the Western Roman Empire is referred to in European history as the Middle Ages (500–1500). This period is traditionally divided into three eras—the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages.
- At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Western Europe was the weakest of the three civilizations. However, over the course of the period this slowly changed, as Western Europe grew increasingly centralized, wealthy, and powerful.