

## **Middle Ages: a Decline that Started with Germanic Invasions<sup>1</sup>**

*This first article takes up the point that the Germanic invasions from 400 onward caused a massive break with the earlier Roman era, and pushed western Europe into the Middle Ages. The argument here is that the Germanic migrations displayed dramatic changes in property ownership, law, the status of lower-income farmers, as well as having caused widespread destruction.*

### **Property Rights**

[The invasions had] disastrous results upon society and upon economic conditions. Humanity has rarely experienced misery as great as that of this period. The masses lost heavily by the change of masters. The western Roman empire saw landed estates change hands. This transfer worked in favor of an aristocracy formed predominantly of Germanic (mingled with Roman) elements, to the detriment of the class of small free farmers, whose number and influence naturally diminished very quickly. The estates of the aristocrats, which since the end of the empire had been tending to absorb the land of the smaller farmers fleeing enforced labor or harsh taxation, thus grew even larger as a result of the invasions. At the same time the primitive forms of landownership, the collective property of the village and of the family, reappeared in the civilized West, where the Roman genius had brought about the prevalence of individual private property.

### **Inequality getting entrenched**

Far from bearing with them into the empire democratic principles of liberty and equality, the Germans only spread therein the oppression of poor by rich and of weak by strong, and subjected the masses to an oligarchy of chiefs of warbands, who were the masters of men and lands alike. Rome had fused within herself all classes and all races, and had brought them into an equality under her laws. The Germanic customs established profound inequalities between the diverse peoples of the barbarian states. In Gaul there were as many as seven different codes of law, according to the origin of the inhabitants: Romans, three tribes of Franks (Salian, Riparian, and Chamavian), Burgundians, Visigoths, and Alamanni. High barriers separated the different social ranks, to each of which a different penal legislation was applied, shamefully indulgent towards

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this reading is based on excerpts from the section "The Early Middle Ages: Continuity or Break?" found in *Critical Issues in History*, Vol. 1, (Ancient Times to 1648), pp. 94-119.

the upper classes and barbarously harsh towards the lower, for whom were reserved the punishments of mutilation and torture. The aristocracy, alone in its pride, was at pains to prevent any rise in the social scale by forbidding marriages between its members and those of other classes, on pain of a loss of rank. Freeman of Germanic origin were allowed to retain their status, but where the Germans settled in larger numbers, the Roman landowner class was either enserfed or killed off. In the more Romanized areas (in southern Gaul, Spain, and Italy), a small group of free farmers was allowed to remain. Thus the barbarians solved the problem of agricultural labor and were able to live in idleness upon the work of the old Roman landowners and cultivators. And so in the Italian peninsula the Lombards reduced all the free population, even the priests, to the condition of the Roman or Germanic coloni (farm laborers).

### **Enserfment of lower classes**

Serfs came to be indistinguishable from slaves, as both groups didn't have the ability to leave the large estates where they worked. The penal legislation of the barbarians multiplied the number of these slaves, by decreeing slavery as the punishment for the slightest misdemeanor. The enumeration of the cruel punishments to which men of servile condition were subjected--the loss of ears, nose, eyes, tongue, hands, and genital organs--and the various tortures to which they were submitted fills whole columns of the barbarian codes, until the reader cannot restrain a shudder. Mankind had passed far away from that great humanitarian movement which from the second to the fourth century had left its trace on Roman legislation upon slavery.

### **Germanic tribes caused widespread destruction**

All the guarantees with which the expiring civilization of the ancient world had surrounded the life and possessions of the individual disappeared in the anarchy let loose by the barbarians. Even the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Franks, who were already half Romanized by a long sojourn within the empire, decided to raid and attack Roman sites in what was left of the Empire. "For us," says Salvian, a priest of Marseilles, "there is neither peace nor security." Another contemporary, Prosper of Aquitaine, cries, towards 416: "It is ten years since we fell beneath the sword of the Vandals and Goths; the people perished, even children and young maids they slew," . . . Fiercer still were those Germans who were untouched by Roman civilization: the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons who made devastating raids, and usually put to the sword a tenth of their prisoners before they left. The war bands which took part in the great invasion of 406 in

Italy and Gaul spread terror far and wide by their atrocious exploits; they transformed the town of Treier into a mass grave, in which the naked bodies of men and women were devoured by dogs and birds of prey. In southwestern France and in Spain the faithful and the clergy were beaten, thrown into chains, and burned alive. Everywhere, at the sack of cities and towns, women suffered the supreme outrage. Throughout the second half of the fifth century a contemporary witnesses that "the forest of swords mowed down the Italian nobility like corn." Later, in the sixth century, the savagery of the Lombards in Italy passed all bounds. "Murder is nothing to them," writes the annalist Paul Deacon. "Even as a sword leaping from the scabbard so did this fierce horde ravage, and men fell even as the ears of wheat beneath the sickle." In the East the same terrible sights were everywhere to be seen; men were massacred, women and children carried away, by the invading bands of Huns, Germans, and Slavs. Ostrogoths hacked off the arms of laborers and impaled the serfs in Illyria (Yugoslavia); Slavs crucified the peasants and artisans, whom they made prisoners, head downwards, or shot them full of arrows. Augustine, in describing the Visigothic sack of Rome under Alaric, stated that at least they left the churches alone (implying that they destroyed much of everything else).

## Middle Ages: a Decline that Started with the Arabic Invasions<sup>2</sup>

*A century ago, Belgian historian Henri Pirenne shocked the scholarly world by rejecting what was then an established consensus, at least since Gibbon wrote in the late 1700s, that the Germanic migrations of the 400s AD and beyond, constituted a massive change from the Roman era—in other words, ushered in the era of the Middle Ages. Pirenne, in denying this, insisted that the shock of these migrations was only short-term, and that the economy and in fact, much of life continued precisely as it was before. However, the Islamic invasions of the 600s and 700s were a different story—trade with the wealthy East slowed to a standstill, forcing a poorer West to fight for its life. In short, Pirenne argued for a high degree of continuity from the Roman to the Germanic eras, and a strong degree of discontinuity when the Islamic Arabs came to power in the Mediterranean.*

The ill treatment that the barbarians gave to the Roman cities is a generalization that wasn't always true. If, on the extreme frontiers of the Empire, certain towns were put to the torch, destroyed and pillaged, it is none the less true that the immense majority survived the invasions. A statistical survey of cities in existence at the present day in France, in Italy and even on the banks of the Rhine and the Danube, gives proof that, for the most part, these cities now stand on the sites where rose the Roman cities, and that their very names are often but a transformation of Roman names. Obviously the German barbarians couldn't have destroyed too many of the Roman cities.

These cities in themselves long retained a considerable importance. Their municipal institutions did not suddenly disappear upon the arrival of the Germanic tribes. Not only in Italy, but also in Spain and Gaul, they kept their decurions. These decurions were local magistrates, who would collect taxes, at the city level throughout the Roman empire.

It is also well established that these cities were the centers of an economic activity which itself was a survival of the preceding civilization. The import and export of goods and merchandise, was carried on to a considerable extent. It was an important factor in the maintenance of society. An indirect proof of this is furnished by the institution of market-tolls. Thus were called the tolls set up by the Roman administration along the roads, in the ports, at bridges and fords, and elsewhere. The Frankish kings let them all stay in force and drew from them such copious revenues that the collectors of this class of taxes figured among their most useful functionaries.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of this reading is based on excerpts from the section "The Early Middle Ages: Continuity or Break?" found in *Critical Issues in History*, Vol. 1, (Ancient Times to 1648), pp. 94-119.

The monetary system of the Merovingian Frankish kings (who ruled France from the mid-400s to the mid-700s) establishes a strong connection between the economy of the Byzantine Empire, and that of France at this time—and such strong connections could only be maintained by much trade going back and forth. The early Frankish coinage was Roman, or better, Byzantine. This is shown by the coins that were minted: the *solidus*, the *triens*, and the *denarius*. They used the traditional Roman coins, as the same metals to mint them (gold and silver), as well as the traditional weights of the coins. The coins were even minted with the same images engraved by the royal mints in the Byzantine east. For a long time, these Frankish coins showed the bust of the Emperor on one side, and on the back, a lady symbolizing the victories of Augustus Caesar. And when the Byzantines substituted the cross for the symbol of that victory, the Merovingian Frankish dynasty did the same. The only possible explanation for a politically independent dynasty in France, molding its currency to the Byzantine empire in the east, can be that commercial relations between the two regions were so strong, that it was necessary that the coins of both countries have the same values, so that merchants could use coins from each, interchangeably. This shows that, despite the immigration of the barbarian Franks into Roman Gaul, commercial activity still remained the same.

Not only did the merchants bring a few luxury items (such as jewelry and silks) into the great port of Marseille (in Greek and Roman times, *Massalia*). They also brought wine, oil, spices, and papyrus that would be used by the common people.

If the bulk of the commerce in Merovingian Gaul was to be found in the hands of oriental merchants from Syria, their influence, however, should not be exaggerated. Side by side with them, and according to all indications in constant relations with them, are mentioned indigenous merchants. Gregory of Tours (500s AD) does not fail to supply information concerning them. He shows the king consenting to a loan to the merchants of Verdun, whose business prospers so well that they soon find themselves in a position to reimburse him. He mentions the existence in Paris of a market or bazaar. He speaks of a merchant profiteering during the great famine of 585 and getting rich.

The picture which the commerce of Merovingian Gaul presents is repeated, naturally, in the other maritime Germanic kingdoms of the Mediterranean--among the Ostrogoths of Italy, among the Vandals of Africa, among the Visigoths of Spain.

### Contemporary Evidence of Wealth of Germanic Kings

The Merovingian kings granted large grants from their treasures: before 695 the Abbot of St. Denis drew an annuities (an annual payment) totaling 300 gold *solidi* from the government treasury. The kings lent money to the cities, paid missionaries, and bought or corrupted men at will. The retention of the Roman tariffs and the market-toll were

the essential sources of their power. The 6000 *solidi* of alms given by Childebert to the Church of Saint-Germain in Paris for the poor, and the munificence of Dagobert I, who covered the apse (the forward section of a church, where the choir would often stand) of Saint-Denis with silver, give us some idea of the wealth of the Frankish kings.

And the Ostrogothic sovereigns were even richer. And the same may be said of the Visigoths: in 631 the pretender Sisenand offered 200,000 gold *solidi* to the Frankish king Dagobert I in order to obtain his support against the Visigothic king Suintila, ruling Spain.

These constant mintages, and what we know from other sources concerning the kings' wealth in gold, and the wealth of the Church and of private individuals, proves that there was a very considerable stock of gold in the West; and yet there were no gold mines operating at this time. How could all this gold be generated by a purely agricultural economy, in which goods were sold only in the nearest village? Surely there was much trade between the Greek east and France in this time.

Moreover, at this time there were many activities that can only be explained by a highly liquid, money economy. Many wealthy men offered kings a lot of money to be appointed bishops. Now aside from the morality of the issue, the point here is that these men would not have offered large bribes if they felt that they could more than recoup the costs by collecting revenues as bishop, which they felt were sure to come into the church coffers—again—implying a money economy (even if taxes and tithes were paid in kind, they would have to have been able to sell them to recoup the bribes). The same goes for tax farming contracts that the government would put out to bid.

### **Population of Germans not that great**

As a rule of the thumb, the population of the German migrants was no more than 5% of the population of the regions that they ventured into (this would include Spain and North Africa, in addition to France and Italy—the entire western Roman empire). The historical sources are across the board, unanimous in the relatively small size of the Germanic tribes that moved into the western Roman empire, and the small armies they retained.

There were only 80,000 Vandals and Alans who went into Roman North Africa, which they conquered and ruled until the Arab conquests in the 700s. The native population in Roman Africa would have been some 7-8 million, making the Germanic numbers some 1 percent of the Roman. Italy's population in the 400s was 5-6 million; the Ostrogoths who occupied it were 100,000 in total. Another way of illustrating the small Germanic populations of the time, is to recall that the Muslims who took Spain did so with a

Berber army of only 10-15,000 (as well as co-operation from disgruntled Germanic nobles).

The sparse Germanic population is also evident in other historical facts. There are no texts extant that demonstrate the Frankish language—even the leaders' proclamations were issued in Latin. Additionally, there was only a scant trace of Germanic in the surviving romance languages (apart from a few borrowed words). There is no phonetic or syntactical influence from Germanic into French; although French does have some 300 loan words. This is strange, given that the Franks, as well as other Germanic tribes, ruled France for centuries. Much the same goes in regards to Spain and Italy, as well.

Narses marched 20,000 troops (mostly barbarians) into Italy and re-conquered it in 551, defeating the Goths at the Battle of Taginae. This same force also defeated the Franks at Capua (the Battle of Casilinum, or the Volturnus) in 554.

Clearly the Germanic population wasn't large enough to cause a severe disruption in the Roman world. In fact, given that the arrival of the Germans meant that the Roman empire didn't have to maintain a large budget for defense, it very well could have been seen as an alleviation of some of the misery caused by the very large Roman government.

## Land Tenure

The German migrations did not interrupt the Roman land tenure much at all. There is no evidence that massive land-redistribution took place, or especially, divisions of pre-existing estates. He said what would have happened was the confiscation of estates, with the peasants now working for a German master instead of a Roman one. There are instances of Germans purchasing estates—but not of Germans taking land and dividing it up among numerous German freemen, etc. In particular, P. noted that leases and contracts throughout this period indicate no disruption in the system of land tenure and ownership.

## Islamic Invasions bring about a new era

In the field of economics the contrast, which the Carolingian (named from the new Frankish dynasty, including the rule of Charlemagne—Carolus Magnus in Latin) period shows to Merovingian times, is especially striking. In the days of the Merovingians, Gaul was still a maritime country and trade and traffic flourished because of that fact. The Empire of Charlemagne, on the contrary, was essentially an inland one. No longer was

there any communication with the exterior; it was a closed State, a State without foreign markets, living in a condition of almost complete isolation.

This happened because the Arabs had control of the Mediterranean, and shut down the vast majority of the trade between the east and the west, going so far as to launch attacks along the French and Italian coasts. In 846, Islamic forces sacked the city of Rome itself, and St. Peter's Basilica (along with another one, the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls). The Italian cities of Brundisi and Tarento were ravaged in 838. After Syracuse was captured in 878, the Pope was forced to pay the Muslims 25,000 gold coins a year. This situation was only stopped in 916, when an alliance of Christian forces (the Holy Roman Emperor, south Italian princes, and a Byzantine army) went to Naples to wrest it away from an alliance with the Arabs, and then, with their help, defeated the Islamic navy on the Garigliano River (a river in central Italy just south of Rome), where the Arabs had established a base and were launching raids into Italy. . In 875, Islamic ships pillaged the coast of Rome. Louis II declared that Naples had become another Africa (a staging ground for Islamic raids). As Ibn-Khaldoun says, "The Christians could no longer float a plank upon the sea," although the Byzantine navy still retained mastery in the Aegean, around Greece. Papyrus, spices, and silks virtually disappeared from the 700s in France. Wine from the Levant had a similar fate, as did gold coins

## Middle Ages: a Necessary Break from a Deadlocked Past<sup>3</sup>

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

Although early medieval agricultural methods were at first in many respects far behind the most advanced Roman methods (most Roman farms produced a yield of four bushels of grain for every one bushel sowed; in the Middle Ages, this ratio dropped to two to one), in the long run the change was worth all its cost. Roman agriculture, despite all its contributions and achievements, had been following a blind alley; before new advances could be made, much of the way had to be retraced and a new beginning undertaken in simpler conditions. The Middle Ages marked an advance over the ancient world, in at least two main areas: the system of labor, as well as different agricultural technologies like plowing, harnesses, and strategies used in rotating crops.

### Type of Labor Used in the Middle Ages

Of outstanding importance in the passage from Roman to medieval practice was the decline of slavery. Fewer slaves were acquired by war, and the Church staunchly opposed the enslavement of orthodox Christians, which meant that fewer and fewer slaves were available as the years went by. Most important of all, with the breakdown of the large-scale exchange-profit economy of earlier Roman times, which had required abundant capital, relatively stable conditions, and very careful supervision, including the keeping of accurate accounts, slaves became a burden. They had to be supported, even if crops were not abundant. To adopt tenancy as a solution was the line of least resistance. Thereafter labor took care of itself. Large landowners no longer supported large slave populations, but instead, simply took a share of whatever crop was produced by the free (tenant) farmers. Families had their own small pieces of land; and custom soon dictated the laborers' days of work on the lord's own land. It is highly significant that the combining of tenure with service, though not unknown in the Late Empire, became widely established only after the invasions. An invention is spread abroad only if

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there is a strong feeling of social necessity, and before the end of the Empire there were such abundant supplies of labor, much of it slave labor, that no such feeling was expressed.

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

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

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

*Harnessing:* One of the chief difficulties derived from the ancient method of harnessing was that the harness was placed by means of a yoke resting on the high part of the back. The trouble, especially for the horse, was that a strap attached to the yoke above this area passed around the beast's neck. When he leaned forward to pull, this strap cut into his windpipe and greatly hampered his breathing. With the introduction of a lower harness, the horse could lean his full weight into his collar without having his wind cut off. The horse collar let the horse pull from the chest rather than the neck. This increased the horse's pulling power from about 1000 lbs. (with the yoke harness) to as much as 5000 lbs with the horse collar. This meant that the animals could do more work, which was translated into higher yields per acre of farmland.

*Three field system:* Instead of the two field system, whereby half the land would lay fallow, and half would be farmed, with each field alternating every year, the three field system allowed for more land to be farmed, as only one of the three fields would lay fallow each year. Given that fallow land was plowed not once but twice (to prevent weeds), this provided for less work. Additionally, different crops were grown in the two

fields that were planted, chosen according to when they would be harvested (winter and summer crops), as well as what crops would return nutrients to the soil, that others took out. For example, one summer crop was legumes, that take nitrogen out of the air rather than the soil, and when buried, actually replenish the soil with nitrogen.

One over-arching proof of technological innovation going on during the Middle Ages is the massive population growth that took place in Europe. It has been estimated that between 1000 and 1340 the population of Europe increased from about 38.5 million people to about 73.5 million, with the greatest proportional increase occurring in northern Europe, which trebled its population. The rate of growth was not so rapid as to create a crisis of overpopulation; it was linked to increased agricultural production, which yielded a sufficient amount of food per capita, permitted the expansion of cultivated land, and enabled some of the population to become nonagricultural workers, thereby creating a new division of labor and greater economic and cultural diversity.