

Part One: Role of Germanic invasions of 400s AD has been over-emphasized¹

Drive into the Middle Ages actually started in the Roman Era

One of the hallmarks of the Middle Ages is that of a large group of serfs, farmers tied to the land, obligated to pay rent and taxes to the lords of the land. One thing that is crucial to understand about the genesis of the Middle Ages, however, is that this process of binding lowerclass farmers to the soil, began in the Roman era, no later than the time of Constantine. For it is in his reign, that laws binding these workers to the lands that they farmed, and forcing sons to adopt the same jobs that their fathers had, are found in the historical record.

We also find the accumulation of land under the control and ownership of the wealthy elites. Just as with the enserfment of the lowerclasses, this process also began in the Roman era. Archaeologists find many lowerclass workers seeking refuge on the large rural estates of wealthy landowners.

There was some destruction with the Germanic migrations

It is true that there was a certain amount of devastation that followed in the wake of the Germanic migrations in the 400s. "For us," says Salvian, a priest of Marseilles in the 400s, "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," . . . Those Germans who were untouched by Roman civilization (the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons) 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;

¹ Much from these readings have been plagiarbased on the section "The Early Middle Ages: Continuity or Break?" found in *Critical Issues in History*, Vol. 1, (Ancient Times to 1648), pp. 94-119.

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.

Part Two: The role of the Germans in the fall of Roman civilization has been over-emphasized

First of all, the number of Germans that poured into the Roman empire, compared to the number of Romans, was rather small. 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 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 (no greater than 2 percent of the Italian population). The Goths at the battle of Adrianople could put only 8,000 warriors into the field (Adrianople was the first time the Goths defeated the Romans in a major battle). 100,000 Visigoths conquered Spain from the Romans. The Burgundians settled in northern Italy, and they numbered only 25,000.

The sparse Germanic population is also evident in other historical facts. The provinces of the Roman empire continued to speak Latin, as well as the local dialects that became what are known as romance languages (Spanish, French, and Italian). These provinces didn't adopt Germanic languages. In fact, 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.

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.

Second, there is no reason to believe that the German migrations disrupted the local system of land ownership. 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. Leases and contracts throughout this period indicate no disruption in the system of land ownership.

Third, there is the fact that the Germanic kings continued to enforce Roman law in the territories that they absorbed. Germanic kings were kings of their own people, calling themselves *reges Gothorum, Vandalorum, Burgondionum, Francorum*, but they approached the Romans as Roman generals. Theodoric, as a Roman viceroy, promulgated edicts, but not laws. There was a cavalcade when Clovis was made an honorary consul. Not only did they see themselves as Roman generals, but they continued and maintained the Roman civilian government in the territories they governed.

Fourth, it must be kept in mind that most of the cities in the Roman world survived the German migrations. A 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 those Roman cities. The supposed dislike of the barbarians for towns is an admitted fable to which reality has given the lie. 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.

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 great revenues that the collectors of this class of taxes figured among their most useful functionaries.

Part Three: Western Lands Conquered by Germanic Tribes Remained Wealthy

The monetary system of the 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—the same coinage as was used in the Roman east. This is shown by the coins that were minted: the *solidus*, the *triens*, and the *denarius* (all Roman coins). They used 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. In this connection it is worth noting that the mints continued for a long time, under the Frankish kings, the custom of representing the bust of the Emperor on the coins and of showing on the reverse of the pieces the *Victoria Augusti* and that, carrying this imitation to the extreme, when the Byzantines substituted the cross for the symbol of that victory the Frankish kings 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. Not only did the merchants bring a few luxury items (such as jewelry and silks) into the port of Marseille (on the French coast of the Mediterranean); they also brought wine, oil, spices, and papyrus. These latter goods are not rare, expensive luxuries, but commonplace goods consumed by middleclass as well as upperclass people—goods that require large shipments to be profitable. This indicates that there was much trade between the western and eastern halves of the Mediterranean.

The Roman emperors always insisted, from the time of Augustus Caesar onward, the sole right to mint gold coins. The barbarians were given the right to strike copper and silver coins with their own names and images, but gold could be lawfully struck only with the portrait and name of the Roman Emperor. Along with this pretension went the Byzantine claim that no foreign prince could call himself Emperor (Basileus) on equal terms with this ruler of Constantinople. Altogether, these pretensions suffered no serious challenge for a long time. The Vandals and the Ostrogoths never struck gold coins with the effigies of their sovereigns. The Franks never did so continually, until the reign of Clotair II (584-630).

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. Therefore at this

time, there must have been a very active trade with the wealthy East, that brought to the Frankish realms the gold that we find mentioned in the contemporary writings.

Moreover, in the 400s through 700s, we find many activities written about, that make sense only in a highly liquid, money economy—in other words, if there is a lot of gold circulating. 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.

The Frankish 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 (taxes paid in Roman times, as well as after the Franks moved into the Roman west) were the essential sources of their wealth 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 these 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. The importance of the revenue from the *tonlieu* among the Visigoths may be deduced from the fact that breaches of trust on the part of the farmers were punished by death, as under Roman law. The registers of the taxes were always kept by them and the kings paid their officials .

Part Four: Western Europe Grew Poorer after the Arabic Invasions

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 (70 ships) sacked the region around the city of Rome itself, and St. Peter's Basilica (along with another one, the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls). After Syracuse (in Sicily) 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 in 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.

One can also see the decline in wealth and trade in France, by comparing France in the Merovingian and Carolingian eras. In the first, most of the money of the French kings was taken from tolls (from crossing rivers and roads), as well as fees paid by the markets (where merchants gathered from all over to sell their goods). In the Carolingian era, most of the royal revenues were acquired from rents and fees paid by serfs farming their land, as well as tribute from conquered peoples.

The Roman Empire in the east (the Byzantine empire) itself was cut off from its gold-producing regions around 650, and so the major trading partner of these Germanic kingdoms of the western Mediterranean was now unable to afford many products from the West, and consequently France saw fewer gold coins as the Carolingian era progressed.

Pirenne (166-67—perhaps from a secondary book on Pirenne?) on the collapse in trade: The Mediterranean was henceforth at the mercy of the Saracen pirates. In the 9th century they seized the islands, destroyed the ports, and made their *rabzias* everywhere. The great port of Marseilles, which had formerly been the principal emporium of western trade with the Levant, was empty. The old economic unity of the Mediterranean was shattered, and so it remained until the epoch of the Crusades. It had resisted the Germanic invasions: but it gave way before the irresistible advance of Islam.

As the Muslim fleets captured islands like Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia, France became cut off from the East, and the products that came from there gradually disappeared from France. By the end of the 700s, there was virtually no papyrus imported from the East, although it was still being made in Egypt. Spices became more rare in the 700s as well. Lists that contain food allowances to travelling monks and officials mention meat, bread, vegetables, salt, cheese—but no spices. In a similar fashion, little or nothing at all is heard of oil from Africa, wine from the Levant, and silks.

This increasing poverty is also seen in the content of the coins of France. In the 700s, the gold coins became more and more diluted with silver. From the mid-700s, silver coins were minted in France, with gold coins being rare exceptions.

This is not to say that the role of the Muslims in the Middle Ages was all negative

As a matter of fact, the cultural accomplishments of Muslim civilization in the Middle Ages must rank as higher than that of Christian western Europe. Indeed, many scholars in the Middle Ages actually went and studied in Islamic universities in Spain. Averroes was a Muslim scholar in Spain who wrote commentaries on Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas referred to Averroes as “the Commentator,” and modeled the pattern of his own writings (referred to as the Scholastic Method) on the writings of Averroes and other Islamic writers.

Muslims brought the number zero, as well as the numbers we use now (which are mistakenly referred to as “Arabic numerals,” which were however borrowed from India) into Europe. Adelard of Bath provided Europe with its first Latin texts outlining the trigonometric sine functions—by way of translating Arabic texts from earlier eras.

Part Five: the Middle Ages as a Necessary Break from a Deadlocked Past

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. Until this world was destroyed, new technologies that weren't needed when masses of cheap labor abounded, were now necessary with a 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 it cost. 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.

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. Another way of expressing the efficiencies of the three field system is that for every 600 acres of land converted from the two field to the three field system, there were an extra 100 acres of crops planted, with 100 fewer acres of plowing.

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 peasant labor 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 where families had their own small pieces of land.

More 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. The rate of growth 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.