CHAPTER 6

Late Antiquity: The Age of New Boundaries, 250 – 600

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Crisis and Recovery in the Third Century

Between 235 and 284, civil war and invasion caused economic collapse and the breakdown of imperial administration before a new emperor halted the decline and shored up the empire.

A. The Breakdown of the Imperial Government

Following the assassination of Emperor Severus Alexander in 235, military coup followed military coup and emperors and would-be emperors neglected the empire’s borders, allowing invaders to break through. Power fragmented and inflation spun out of control.

B. The Restoration of Imperial Government

Diocletian rescued the empire through military, administrative, and economic reforms that fundamentally transformed it.

1. Diocletian’s Reforms

Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two parts, East and West, each with its own emperor, and set up a system to regularize the succession. He enhanced the authority of the emperor and restored Roman military power by reorganizing the army and limiting its role in political affairs. He also reorganized the empire’s administrative system, supported by a new tax system which placed the greatest burden on the peasants. In the face of the widening social and economic divisions that resulted, Diocletian sought cultural unity through religious persecution, trying to destroy Christianity.

2. Unintended Consequences

While Diocletian’s reforms stabilized and preserved the Roman Empire, they also altered the character of the empire through three unintended consequences: 1) power shifted away from the traditional urban aristocracy and civic life itself decayed; 2) decentralization and fragmentation of economic and political power in the western provinces as peasants turned to landowners for protection; 3) the center of gravity within the empire shifted decisively to the east, where the empire’s wealth and political might were increasingly concentrated.
II. Christianizing the Empire

While Diocletian succeeded in strengthening the Roman Empire militarily, administratively, and economically, he failed to stem the growth of Christianity.

A. Constantine: The First Christian Emperor

An ambitious young general, Constantine, overthrew Diocletian’s succession system and reunited the empire under the rule of one man, himself, while keeping the empire divided administratively and in other ways continuing Diocletian’s reforms. But unlike Diocletian, Constantine, convinced his military success was due to the Christian God, became a Christian, paving the way for the eventual Christianization of the empire and transforming Christianity from a persecuted to a favored religion – now yoked to the imperial office. The city Constantine founded, Constantinople, would become not only an administrative center and imperial capital, but a religious center as well.

B. The Spread of Christianity

With imperial support, Christianity spread rapidly throughout the empire in the fourth century.

1. The Rise of the Bishops

The spread of Christianity led to more complexity in that religion’s internal organization, as an early distinction between clergy and laity developed into a hierarchical administrative structure that paralleled Roman imperial administration. This structure linked Christian communities into the Christian Church, and within this structure, bishops emerged as important figures, who became not only teachers, defenders, and definers of the faith, but managers of economic resources that they often used to help the poor. With Constantine’s conversion, bishops became incorporated into imperial affairs as well. By 400, the bishop of Rome was claiming primacy over the other western bishops.

2. Christianity and the City of Rome

As Christianity spread, churches, hospitals, and monasteries replaced temples, bathhouses, and circuses in Roman cities, just as Christian festivals and holidays superseded traditional celebrations. Nowhere was this more evident than in Rome itself.

3. Old Gods Under Attack

The exclusivity of a monotheistic religion like Christianity made the diverse range of religious expression of a polytheistic culture intolerable, and Christians attacked “paganism” both in public practice and private belief.
III. New Christian Communities and Identities

The unity of faith produced by the spread of Christianity was undercut by divisions caused by different interpretations of the faith, as well as differences in languages, that produced distinct communities.

A. The Creation of New Communities

By providing a well-defined set of beliefs and values, Christianity fostered the growth of large-scale communities in which Christian principles had to be integrated with daily life and older ways of thinking.

1. Christian Doctrine and Heresy

The Church insisted on the right to interpret its sacred texts and expected its interpretations to be accepted by all Christians, but Church leaders themselves often conflicted on interpretation, so councils of bishops met in order to resolve doctrinal differences – especially regarding the nature of the Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ. The decisions of these councils became correct or orthodox belief, and those who continued to hold other views were now guilty of wrong belief or heresy.

2. Communities of Faith and Language

Differences in interpretation combined with differences in language to produce “zones” that cemented different communal and ethnic identities within the Christian world.

3. The Monastic Movement

Near the end of the third century, as the Church grew in wealth and political and religious hierarchies were increasingly connected, a movement known as asceticism called on Christians to subordinate physical needs and temporal desires in a quest for spiritual union with God. The first ascetics lived harsh, solitary lives, but as ascetics joined together to form communities, monasticism was born and monastic communities soon spread throughout the eastern and western provinces.

4. Monasticism, Women, and Sexuality

In monastic communities, some women found independence and exercised an authority and influence that would not have been possible for them otherwise. Monasticism, however, also reinforced negative ideas about women and sexuality.

5. Jews in a Christian World

With the spread of Christianity, Jews were no longer one people among hundreds of different peoples in the Roman Empire, but a distinct, non-Christian group that found itself liable to marginalization and discrimination.
B. Access to Holiness: Christian Pilgrims

The Christian practice of undertaking a religious journey to visit a sacred place, called a pilgrimage, offered a new means to participate in religious culture. Pilgrimages helped foster a shared sense of Christian community.

C. Christian Intellectual Life

Actively participating in the empire’s intellectual life, many Christians examined the meaning of Christian life in the context of classical learning.

1. Early Christian Hostility to Classical Learning

Classical learning, including the values it embodied, had long provided a common cultural bond among aristocratic men. It was criticized as dangerous by some Christian leaders when Christianity was still a marginalized and persecuted religion.

2. The Reconciliation of Christianity and the Classics

After the conversion of Constantine, church leaders at first grudgingly accepted the practical necessity of classical learning, and influential churchmen soon drew freely from classical texts and methods of discussion. In the western empire, monasteries, especially Benedictine ones, became important in the preservation in classical learning even as the traditional schools of classical learning disappeared.

3. Neoplatonism and Christianity

A spiritualized version of Plato’s philosophy, neoplatonism had a great impact on Christianity, especially Christian thinking about the soul and asceticism.

4. Christianity’s View of the Empire in History

Christian historians such as Eusebius promoted the idea that the development of the Roman Empire was part of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind. The decline of that empire led other Christians, such as Augustine, to formulate a new interpretation of the Roman Empire as only one of many earthly empires that rise and fall in human history, all of which were spiritually insignificant.

IV. The Breakup of the Roman Empire

The Roman government lost control of its Latin-speaking western half, while the Greek- and Syriac-speaking eastern half remained under the control of the emperor in Constantinople.
A. The Fall of the Rome’s Western Provinces

One of the most hotly debated topics in history, the causes of the fall of the Western Roman Empire were complicated and multi-faceted.

1. Invasions from the North

The cumulative effect of unwise decisions, weak leadership, and military failure allowed Rome to slowly but surely lose her western provinces.

2. The Empire of Attila

Both sophisticated and brutal, Attila, the ruler of the Huns briefly established an empire that challenged Rome in the east, but fell apart quickly after his death.

3. Cultural Encounters After the End of Roman Rule

Roman culture did not end with Roman political power but did have to negotiate with new Germanic masters, with varying outcomes in the west.

B. The Birth of Byzantium

While the western provinces were transformed, the Roman Empire continued without interruption in the east.

1. Christianity and Law Under Justinian

Justinian asserted the power of the emperor over matters of Christian faith, and attempted to create a Christian society by joining Roman law to military force, in the process both reforming Roman law and suppressing local law.

2. Reconquering the Provinces in the West

Justinian’s determination to retake the western provinces provoked fierce resistance and prolonged fighting in Italy, with devastating consequences for both Italy and Byzantium.

3. The Struggle with Persia

Justinian fought several brutal wars with the Persian Empire to the east, which was much more dangerous to Byzantium than the western Germanic kingdoms. Accordingly, Justinian devoted more resources to this conflict, which continued under his successors. The drain on Byzantine resources of the Persian conflict ensured that Byzantium would not be able to maintain any lasting control over the western provinces.
V. Conclusion: A Transformed World

The collapse of Roman rule in the West and the establishment of Germanic kingdoms there, transformed the West as Christian and Roman civilizations merged and continued in Byzantium.

TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Attila rules the Hunnic Empire
Reign of Justinian
Constantine wins control of western empire
Romulus Augustulus, last western empire, deposed

_____ 312
_____ 434-453
_____ 476
_____ 527-565

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

Tetrarchy
Great Persecution
Papacy
Paganism
Heresies
Orthodox
Arians
Chalcedonians
Christendom
Monophysites
Asceticism
Monastic movement
Mishnah
Pilgrimage
Talmuds
Corpus of Civil Law
Diocletian
Battle of the Milvian Bridge
Constantine
Life of Antony
Benedict
Council of Nicaea
Visigoths
The Huns
Haghia Sophia
Justinian
Code of Justinian

MAP EXERCISE

*The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in this chapter. Locate the following places on the map.*

Hippo
Trier
Ravenna
Milan
Nicaea

Pickup map from Kishlansky study guide, page 42
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What were the internal and external causes of the third century crisis for the Roman Empire?
2. Through what reforms did Diocletian restore the empire? Were all the reforms effective?
3. What impact did Constantine’s acceptance of Christianity have on the Roman Empire?
4. What was monasticism? Discuss its origins.
5. What Germanic tribes successfully invaded the Roman Empire following the fourth century A.D.? Where did they establish kingdoms? What was their relationship with the local Gallo-Roman elites?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

1. What physical traits does the historian in “The Huns, Monstrous Invaders” associate with the uncivilized barbarians? In what ways does he compare them with animals? Based upon his description, what traits would he consider “civilized”?

2. In “A Roman Aristocrat Learns Gothic,” Sidonius teases Syagrius about his command of “the German tongue.” What advice does Sidonius give his friend to help him avoid becoming a “barbarian” himself? What does the letter imply about the connections between civilization and language?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. Is it accurate to say that the Roman Empire fell? How would it be necessary to modify that statement? What date would you pick for the fall of the Roman Empire?

2. What was the impact of Christianity on the Roman Empire? How did the various theological controversies help to establish Christianity within the system of authority of the Roman Empire? What was the relationship of Christianity to the Germanic tribesmen?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Why did Diocletian reform the Empire?
   A. To stop assassinations of emperors and conquer Germany.
   B. To make government more efficient.
   C. To stop assassinations of emperors.
   D. To make government more efficient and stop assassinations of emperors.

2. The tetrarchs were
   A. leaders of the Gallic Empire.
   B. rebels from Palmyra.
   C. two senior and two junior emperors.
   D. four provinces in the eastern border region of the Roman Empire.

3. The doctrine of Petrine Succession
   A. claimed the primacy of the pope in Rome over other bishops.
   B. reduced the violence in selecting Roman Emperors.
   C. established sees in Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch.
   D. Established a Christian dating system.

4. The Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate
   A. made Christianity the official religion of the Empire.
   B. transformed the festival of the Unconquered Sun into a Christian holiday.
   C. ended the persecution of Christians.
   D. tried to restore traditional Roman religious practices.

5. Which statement about Constantine is not true?
   A. He won the Battle of Milvian Bridge.
   B. He abandoned interest in the eastern part of the Empire, assuming it lacked wealth and resources.
   C. He claimed Christ’s favor as a factor in a military victory in 312.
   D. He appointed praetorian prefects in each sector of the Empire to maintain imperial authority.

6. Which statement about the Council of Nicea is true?
   A. It settled the controversy about the Holy Trinity.
   B. The Nicene Creed was reversed at the Council of Chalcedon.
   C. Pope Leo I called the Council.
   D. It made Arianism the official doctrine of the Christian Church.
7. Which author is correctly matched with his writing?
   A. Augustine of Hippo – The Rule
   B. Benedict of Nursia – Enneada
   C. Athanasius – The City of God
   D. Jerome – Vulgate Bible

8. The Battle of Adrianople (378) marked the
   A. Sack of Rome.
   B. defeat of the Huns.
   C. first major defeat of the Roman army.
   D. Visigothic invasion of Africa.

9. Which term is correctly matched with its description?
   A. Coloni – head bishop
   B. Solidus – false belief
   C. Metropolitan – peasants tied to the land
   D. Quadrivium – geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music

10. The Byzantine Emperor who compiled Roman law and tried to reconquer land lost in
    North Africa and Italy was
    A. Theodoric
    B. Justinian
    C. Attila
    D. Chosroes I