CHAPTER 7

Byzantium, Islam, and the Latin West: The Foundations of
Medieval Europe, 550 – 750

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Byzantium: The Survival of the Roman Empire

After the death of Justinian, the Byzantine Empire lost territory and suffered economic set-backs, leading its emperors to militarily reorganize Byzantium. Key Roman institutions continued from late antiquity: the emperor and his bureaucracy, the army, and the Orthodox Church.

A. An Embattled Empire

By 750, a much smaller Byzantine Empire was struggling for survival against many enemies.

1. The Balkan Front: Avars, Slavs, and Bulgars

The nomadic and fierce Avars created an empire of conquered peoples, among whom were the Slavs. While some Slavic communities managed to free themselves of Avar rule, others migrated across the Balkans, seizing Byzantine lands and maintaining a constant pressure on Byzantium’s northwestern frontier, along with the Bulgars.

2. The Italian and North African Fronts

Already semi-autonomous, Byzantine possessions in North Africa fell to the Muslims, while those in Italy fell to the Lombards.

3. The Persian Front

The chronic struggle between the Byzantine and Persian empires reached a climax in a war which Byzantium won, but at such a cost that both it and Persia were vulnerable to the Muslims.

4. The Islamic Front

The armies of Islam seized Egypt, raided deep into Byzantine territory, and laid siege to Constantinople itself. While Byzantium survived, for now, Islamic raiders continued to harass Byzantine lands.
B. Emperor, Army, and Church

These three institutions did much to enable Byzantium to withstand the attacks against it.

1. Imperial Administration and Economy

Absolute in power, the emperor governed through a large, hierarchical bureaucracy, but could not keep the economy from declining as territory and trade routes were lost to the Muslims.

2. The Military System

Reorganizing Byzantium into four military districts, the emperor managed to maintain the military strength necessary to prevent the empire from collapsing, while the Byzantine navy successfully used “Greek fire” to keep Arab forces at bay.

3. The Church and Religious Life

The dominant form of Christianity in Byzantium was Orthodox Christianity, led by the Patriarch of Constantinople, who in turn was controlled by the emperor. Monasteries offered refuge and assistance to the poor and marginal, and among the few who were educated, an explicitly Christian education replaced a classical one.

4. Icons and the Iconoclastic Controversy

Byzantines believed that icons enabled believers to encounter a holy presence, and Emperor Leo’s attempt to suppress icons was fiercely resisted, and later overturned.

II. The New World of Islam

Originating in the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century, Islam quickly spread and its followers had established an Islamic Empire by 750.

A. Arabs Before Islam

Before Islam, Arabs were tribal people linked by a common language who lived in diverse communities, followed different religions, and had no unity.

B. The Rise of Islam

Islam is based on the Qur’an, a book that records the revelations made to the prophet Muhammad. From these revelations and other teachings, Muhammad forged a religious community that drew in the Arab tribes and, by Muhammad’s death in 632, had unified Arabia.
1. Islam as Revealed to Muhammad

A monotheistic religion, Islam holds that Muhammad was the last in a line of prophets of God that began with Abraham. Islam enjoins five principles on its believers: faith in the one God and in Muhammad as his prophet, prayer five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, charity, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. These principles, especially the pilgrimage, helped to create a common Muslim identity.

2. The Islamic Community After Muhammad

After his death, Muhammad was succeeded by Abu Bakr as the first caliph. A minority of Muslims would not accept Abu Bakr and eventually they formed the Shiite sect of Islam. In preserving the Islamic community in Arabia, Abu Bakr created a highly trained Muslim army.

3. Attacks on the Byzantine and Persian Empires

After Abu Bakr’s death in 634, the Muslim armies swept out of Arabia through Persia and across North Africa, their advance halted only by civil war over the caliphate.

C. The Umayyad Caliphate

The Umayyad family won the civil war in 661 and established a dynasty that would last until 750.

1. Conquests

The resumption of wars of conquest to spread the faith led Muslim armies into Spain, but they were defeated in France and successfully resisted by the Nubians and the Byzantines. The Muslim armies also advanced across Central Asia until they were defeated by the Chinese.

2. Governing the Islamic Empire

The Umayyads turned the caliphate into a hereditary monarchy and developed a new administrative system that produced a highly centralized and autocratic regime.

3. Settlements and Cities

Arab settlers followed the Muslim armies to the newly conquered lands where the Muslims built new cities and transformed old ones, as the buildings that once supported Greco-Roman culture gave way to Islamic mosques.

4. Becoming Muslims

Understanding themselves as a community of faith, the Muslim conquerors sharply distinguished between Muslims and non-Muslims, and only converts to
Islam could gain full participation in the Islamic community. Muslims did not forcibly convert other monotheists but did convert polytheists by the sword.

5. Peoples of the Book

The Umayyad caliphate distinguished its subjects not by ethnicity but by religion and allowed other monotheists – Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians – to practice their religion freely, although they had less status than Muslims and had to pay extra taxes.

6. Commercial Encounters

The Umayyads fostered long-distance commerce, with both overland camel caravan trade and maritime trade, by maintaining peace within their far-flung borders and creating a new currency. Along with the exchange of goods was an exchange of valuable ideas and scientific knowledge.

III. The Birth of Latin Christendom

By 750, several new kingdoms emerged in what had been the western part of the Roman Empire. The kingdoms were politically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, yet shared certain social and religious characteristics.

A. Germanic Kingdoms on Roman Foundations

The Germanic peoples who established these kingdoms maintained their own cultural identity despite borrowing from Roman law. Christianity provided another unifying force.

1. Anglo-Saxon England

Roman civilization vanished more completely from Britain than anywhere else in Europe and left virtually no mark on the culture of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons who established kingdoms there.

2. The Franks: A Dual Heritage

Following the collapse of imperial authority in Gaul, the Franks, under their ruler Clovis, established a large, powerful kingdom, which later split into the realms that would eventually become France and Germany.

3. Visigoths in Spain

The Visigoth kings of Spain failed to impose their Arianism on the local population, instead converting to Catholicism themselves before being defeated by invading Muslim armies.
4. Lombards in Italy

Lombard rule in Italy suffered from internal division as well as pressure from the Byzantines and Franks, and eventually the Frankish king Charlemagne crushed them in 774.

5. The Growth of the Papacy

Through clever diplomacy and shrewd political maneuvering, the popes were able to build up support in western Europe and eventually make themselves the independent rulers of part of Italy.

B. Different Kingdoms, Shared Traditions

With the exception of England, Germanic rulers blended Roman and Germanic traditions in government and law in order to unify their kingdoms with Christianity also serving as a common bond.

1. Civil Authority: The Roman Legacy

Germanic rulers such as Clovis continued to maintain parts of the Roman administrative system, controlling all appointments to these offices and also adopting the Roman practice of the monarch being the source of all law.

2. War Leaders and Wergild: The Germanic Legacy

The leaders of the Germanic tribes had been war chiefs and the personal loyalty of warriors to their leader continued to be an important element in the Germanic kingdoms, as did the hierarchical networks of clan and kin, which revenged any harm done to one of their own unless appeased by financial compensation for that person’s worth – the wergild.

3. Unity Through Law and Christianity

By 750, all of the western kingdoms had become Catholic, which facilitated the intermarriage of Germanics and Romans and helped give unity to the kingdoms. Unity was also enhanced when Romans increasingly chose to live according to Germanic, and not Roman, law.

4. Women and Property

The influence of Roman law on Germanic societies can be seen in the way that Germanic settlers came to accept a woman’s right to inherit land.

C. The Spread of Catholic Christianity in the New Kingdoms of Western Europe

Missionary monks played a key role in the spread of Catholic Christianity throughout the new kingdoms.
1. Converting the Irish

Never part of the Roman Empire, Ireland also never developed any sort of urban living, and so its missionaries, like Patrick, had to adapt the institutional and educational structures of the Church to an overwhelmingly rural environment. They did this by establishing monasteries, which became centers of learning, eventually sending out their own missionary monks to establish monasteries elsewhere.

2. Converting the Anglo-Saxons

Irish monks seeking to convert England found themselves working with missionary monks sent from Rome. The two groups disagreed on several practices, a dispute that was finally resolved in Rome’s favor, in 664.

3. Monastic Intellectual Life

The monks sent from Rome were Benedictines, who emphasized religious learning and whose monasteries became centers of learning and intellectual activity. Part of this was the copying of manuscripts, and while most of these were religious, the monks preserved classical texts as well. Monks also wrote books and transported books to new places, as well as operating schools.

4. Jews in a Christian World

A religious minority throughout Latin Christendom, the specific circumstances of Jews’ lives varied depending upon in which kingdom they resided. While Christian attitudes towards Jews tended to be hostile, actual treatment of the Jews ranged from persecution to protection.

IV. Conclusion: Three Cultural Realms

Between 550 and 750, western Europe, the Mediterranean world, and the Middle East were transformed into three distinct realms: the Orthodox Christian Byzantine Empire, the Islamic caliphate, and Latin Christendom, united in Catholicism but, unlike the other two, politically fragmented. Each realm shared something of the heritage of ancient Rome, as well as ancient religious traditions, especially Judaism, yet each was distinctly different – differences that would come into sharp focus in the ensuing centuries.
TIMELINE

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

Charles Martel defeats Muslims at Poitiers
Bubonic Plague strikes Mediterranean
Muhammad born in Mecca
Muslims conquer Spain
Umayyad dynasty rules from Damascus

_____ 542
_____ CA. 570
_____ 661-750
_____ 711
_____ 732

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

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

Iconoclasm
Icons
Mosque
Pillars of Islam
Caliphate
Clans or kin groups
Wergild
Scriptorium
palimpsests
Exarchate of Ravenna
Iconoclastic Controversy
The Kaaba
Islam
Mecca
Medina
Muhammad
The Pact of Umar
Sutton Hoo
Clovis
Charles Martel
Gregory the Great
Benedict of Nursia
Bede
Lindisfarne Gospels

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.

Mecca
Poitiers
Carthage
Constantinople
Medina
Anitoch

Pickup map from Kishlansky Study Guide, page 75
MAKING CONNECTIONS

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

1. What were the inherent difficulties in maintaining unity in the Byzantine Empire? How did religious differences (including iconoclasm) contribute to disunity?
2. What was the administration of the Byzantine Empire?
3. What was the nature of social organization in pre-Islamic Arabia? Why was Mecca important?
4. How did the Arabic language aid in the extension of the Umayyad caliphate?
5. What new kingdoms emerged in what used to constitute the western part of the Roman Empire? Despite their diversity, ethnically and linguistically, what did they have in common?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

1. In “The Pact of Umar: Islam Encounters the Great Faiths of the Ancient Middle East,” what restrictions did the Christians accept on their public actions? Their private actions? Their interactions with Muslims? What can we infer about the perceived threat from Christians?
2. What are Leo III’s major indictments of Islam in “Failure of Communication between Emperor and Caliph”? Does he recognize any middle ground with Caliph Umar II? What are the implications for Muslim-Christian relations?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. To what extent can it be said that Islamic expansion was predicated on trade? What important concept would be missing from this analysis?
2. How did the new kingdoms of Latin Christendom borrow from the heritage of ancient Rome, especially its network of cities. What role did Roman law play in these societies?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which term is correctly matched with its description?

   A. Greek fire – Christian memento credited with special curative or protective significance
   B. Monophysite – Byzantine military district
   C. Theme – form of napalm used in battle
   D. Exarch – governor with civilian and military authority in certain Byzantine areas

2. Emperor Leo III was an iconoclast because he

   A. prohibited the use of images in the Orthodox Church.
   B. venerated images as a part of religious worship.
   C. decorated churches with mosaic images.
   D. cooperated with Muslims regarding images in Syria.

3. Which statement about Muhammad is not true?

   A. He was a caravan merchant.
   B. He sometimes served as a mediator.
   C. He founded the Umayyad Caliphate.
   D. He taught a monotheistic religion.

4. Which term associated with Islam is incorrectly matched with its description?

   A. Khadija – Muhammad’s wife
   B. Qu’ran – holy book of Islam
   C. Ka’aba – sacred black stone in Mecca
   D. Jihad – flight from Mecca to Medina

5. The capital of the Umayyad Caliphate was

   A. Mecca.
   B. Damascus.
   C. Medina.
   D. Constantinople.
   E. Baghdad.
6. Mercia, Wessex, and Northumbria were
   A. Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.
   B. Frankish kings.
   C. Visigothic cities.
   D. Lombardi conquests.

7. Which statement about Clovis is not true?
   A. He was a Salian Frank.
   B. He converted to Catholic Christianity.
   C. He defeated the Visigoths at the battle of Vouille.
   D. He was respected for his humane and gentle nature.

8. In Germanic law, compensation was paid for personal injury based on a person’s
   A. Palimpsest.
   B. Dirham.
   C. Wergild.
   D. Farsis.

9. Iona and Lindisfarne were important
   A. Missionaries.
   B. Monasteries.
   C. Anglo-Saxon gods.
   D. Salian laws.

10. What happened in a scriptorium?
    A. Manuscripts were copied.
    B. Women inherited land.
    C. Land disputes were settled.
    D. Warriors swore loyalty to a chieftain.