CHAPTER 8

Empires and Borderlands: The Early Middle Ages, 750 - 1050

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. The Carolingians

When Pepin the Short deposed the last of the Merovingian kings of the Franks, he inaugurated a new ruling dynasty: the Carolingians. But both suffered from the succession custom of the Franks that caused a king to divide his kingdom among his sons.

A. The Leadership of Charlemagne

Ruthlessly seizing his deceased brother’s kingdom over the rights of his nephews, Charlemagne managed, in a reign of almost constant warfare, to make himself the mightiest ruler in western Europe, heading up an empire that was a dramatic departure from the small, loosely governed kingdoms that had prevailed since the end of the western Roman Empire.

1. Coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor

Ruling all of western Europe except for southern Italy, Spain, and the British Isles, Charlemagne’s coronation as a Roman emperor in 800 exemplified the two most prominent characteristics of the Carolingians: conscious imitation of the ancient Roman empire and an obligation to protect the Pope, in exchange for which the Pope sanctioned Carolingian rule.

2. Carolingian Rulership

Lacking a standing army and navy, professional civil servants, properly maintained roads, regular communications, a money economy and even a permanent capital city, the Carolingian system of government was personal, not institutional. Despite the use of capitularies (collections of written decrees) and counties (territorial units in which counts represented royal power), the strongest bond unifying the Carolingian realm was personal loyalty to the emperor. What little administration that did exist, however, depended entirely on the church, which the Carolingians supported and whose monasteries provided what literate administrators the Carolingians had.

3. The Carolingian Renaissance

Under Charlemagne’s patronage, there was a revival of interest in ancient literature and an intensified effort at education, including the establishment of a school staffed by the finest scholars in Europe, which made Charlemagne’s court a lively center of intellectual exchange.
B. The Division of Western Europe

The personal empire created by Charlemagne was not able to be maintained by his less capable successors, as subsequent generations continued to divide up what had been one empire, a fragmentation that increased warfare and violence.

II. Invasions and Recovery in the Latin West

In the ninth and tenth centuries, polytheist tribes raided the Christian heart of Europe, but Christianity not only survived, it eventually converted the invaders.

A. The Polytheist Invaders of the Latin West

Of the pagan raiders that harassed Christian Europe, the two most important were the Magyars, who eventually formed their own kingdom of Hungary and accepted Christianity, and the Vikings, who caused the most havoc in western Europe. By the mid-ninth century, the Vikings, or Northmen, were shifting from raiding to invading and settling, resulting in a lasting impact in France, Britain, and the North Atlantic.

B. The Rulers in the Latin West

The disintegration of the Carolingian order resulted in a shift of power from central, royal authority to local warlords.

1. Lords and Vassals

By the eighth century, the Germanic society of warriors led by chiefs had been formalized into relationships between lords and vassals. Vassals swore loyalty and obedience to their lord, and in return the lord promised to protect his vassal and sometimes granted him land which was called a fief, a system known as feudalism. In the disorder of the ninth and tenth centuries, lords gained extensive political and legal rights over the communities in their lands. Although in theory feudalism created a hierarchy of authority, in actuality the situation was more complex.

2. The Western European Kingdoms after the Carolingians

Feudalism transformed kings into the lords of other lords, in which maintaining royal authority was difficult. Kings sought to ensure loyalty by granting favors to loyal vassals and by emphasizing the sacred character of kingship, in the process enhancing the idea of kingship and encouraging the perception of the kingdom as more than the king's personal possession. The Saxon dynasty of East Francia, which consisted primarily of German-speaking tribes, promoted Christian missions to the Slavs and sponsored a revival of learning. In West Francia, the Capets established a mutually beneficial relationship with the church and made their crown hereditary, eventually giving the name of their feudal domain, France, to the entire kingdom. Anglo-Saxon England became united under
Alfred the Great and his successors, only to be conquered by Duke William of Normandy in 1066.

C. The Common People

Thanks to agricultural innovations, the population of Europe increased dramatically.

1. The Medieval Agricultural Revolution

The harnessing of new power sources – wind, water, and animal – combined with a heavier plow and a shift to a three-field system increased Europe’s food supply and produced a patterns of cooperation and collective decision-making among Europe’s peasants.

2. Manors and Serfs

A manor was essentially an agricultural unit, owned by a lord, which also served as a judicial unit. Peasants known as serfs were tied to a specific manor. They were unable to leave and under high levels of obligation to the lord, but possessed some legal rights. Other peasants owned their land outright, others worked lands they had no legal rights to at all, some were landless, but for all peasants life consisted of unremitting toil.

3. The Growth of Cities

The population growth fueled a revival of cities and increased the wealth of the merchants, leading the newly thriving cities to attempt to gain autonomy from their lords. Communes were established in Italy, while elsewhere townsmen often bought their urban rights.

D. The Spread and Reform of Christianity in the Latin West

Differences in theology, liturgy, and language caused the Catholicism of the west and the Orthodoxy of the east to grow further apart.

1. Conversions

In the frontiers of the Latin West, when a king or chieftain converted to Christianity, his people followed, although the inculcation of Christian principles and forms of worship took more time and effort. To combat the tendencies towards localism, bishops, heading up geographical areas known as dioceses, enforced correct belief and punished immorality.

2. The Power of the Saints

Saints – holy persons with a special relationship to the sacred – provided divine protection and interceded with God on behalf of individuals and communities. Material objects associated with the saints, called relics, were in high demand and often helped establish the legitimacy of political authority.
3. The Task of Church Reform

The success and growing wealth of the Church led to corruption, even of the papacy. The movement for reform came from the monasteries, especially the monastery of Cluny, which produced morally pure monks and a beautiful, simple, sung liturgy. From the monasteries reform spread to parish priests and bishops, and generated a desire among some churchmen to redefine the boundaries between secular and spiritual authorities.

III. Byzantium and Eastern Europe

Religious and linguistic differences increasingly separated Catholicism from Orthodoxy, with Eastern Europe becoming a buffer zone between western and eastern Christian civilizations.

A. Byzantium

In the eighth and ninth centuries Byzantium was also beset by invaders, and resisting them sapped the eastern empire’s strength.

1. The Macedonian Dynasty

The Macedonian dynasty strengthened Byzantium against invaders by pushing back the Muslims, converting the Slavs and Bulgars, and forging diplomatic relations with the Rus, eventually converting them to Christianity as well. The economy thrived and religious dissension ended, resulting in an impressive outpouring of scholarship.

2. Instability and Decline

The political stability and energetic leadership provided by the Macedonian dynasty began to erode in the eleventh century, leading to governmental stagnation, a deteriorating economy, and military decline. As a result, the Byzantine Empire was not able to fend off the Normans in southern Italy or the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor.

B. Borderlands in Eastern Europe

The weakening of Byzantium created problems in the Balkans, whose population was ethnically diverse and divided between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. These divisions complicated the process of state-building in Bulgaria, Poland, and Kievan Rus (later Russia).

IV. The Dynamism of Islam

When the Abbasids seized the caliphate from the Umayyads in 750, the political unity of the Islamic world fractured, leading to rival caliphates in Spain and, later, North Africa.
A. The Abbasid Caliphate

Although Arabs, the Abbasids considered all Muslims equal and the distinctive Islamic civilization that emerged under them fused Arabic, Persian, Syrian, and Byzantine elements, and eclecticism reflected in the Arabian Nights stories. Philosophical and scientific studies also thrived. Actual Abbasid political power ceased in 945, although the Abbasid caliphs continued as figureheads for another 300 years.

B. Islamic Civilization in Europe

Muslim raids contributed to the decline of cities on the coastal areas of the Christian Mediterranean, while Sicily and Spain became zones of intense cultural interaction between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. In Spain, the caliphate of Cordoba dominated early in this era, but the Christian kingdoms began to assert themselves and become the dominant power in the eleventh century.

C. Legends of the Borderlands

Border areas not only saw military conflict between Muslim and Christian, but also saw more peaceful interactions, and often loyalties were divided. The situation produced legendary heroes whose adventures live on in epics such as The Song of Roland, Digenes Akritas, and The Poem of My Cid.

V. Conclusion: An Emerging Unity in the Latin West

In the Early Middle Ages, the distinction between eastern and western Europe emerged based primarily upon different forms of Christianity, while interaction with Muslim powers and civilization helped define the southern border of Christian Europe. These factors helped develop a tentative unity among western European Christians, based primarily upon Roman Catholicism. However, by the end of this era, western Europe was also characterized by the system of lordship and vassalage, an agricultural economy built on manors, and a revival of cities.
TIMELINE

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

First recorded raid by the Danes in Anglo-Saxon England
Otto crowned emperor in Rome
William the Conqueror defeats last Anglo-Saxon king
Capture of Toledo from Muslims
Death of Basil II, emperor

______ 787
______ 962
______ 1025
______ 1066
______ 1085

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

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

Carolingian Renaissance
Counties
Marches
Feudalism
Fief
Knight
Lord
Vassals
Ottonian Renaissance
Agricultural revolution
Serfs
Communes
Liturgy
Cluny
Lay investiture
Simony
Macedonian Renaissance
Caliph
Spanish Reconquest
Charlemagne
Alcuin of York
Treaty of Verdun
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.

The Empire of Charlemagne
Regensberg
Aachen
Kiev
Novgorod
Moscow

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 limitations on early kingship?
2. How did Charlemagne construct an empire? How centralized was the government? Why did the empire disintegrate after his death?
3. What was the nature of the Carolingian Renaissance?
4. What sparked the reform movement within the Roman Catholic Church? How was the papacy able to regain prominence as moral reformers by the eleventh century?
5. What factors determined the dynamism of Islam and its rapid spread throughout Arabia and beyond?
6. What impact did Islam have on southern Europe? How is the complex relationship between Islam and Europe reflected in borderland epics so popular by the twelfth century?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

1. In reality, how voluntary is “An Oath of Voluntary Submission to a Lord” that is excerpted in the text? What does the vassal pledge? What does the lord pledge? Who has the advantage if they want to change the agreement?

2. In “An Arab Traveler Describes the Rus,” does Ibn Fadlan present a positive description? What does he admire about Rus culture? Do you think he considers the Rus “civilized”? Why or why not?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. How would you characterize the political organization of western Europe in the early Middle Ages? Did the creation of the Carolingian Empire actually restore the centralized political structure of the ancient Roman Empire?

2. Did the division of the Islamic world into competing caliphates enhance or detract from the Islamic political and cultural authority? How did these political struggles within the Islamic world impact relations with Europe?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following statements about Charlemagne is not true?

   A. He appointed a count to oversee each county and a margrave to oversee each march.
   B. He rebuilt the old Roman Empire, with borders extending from North Africa to northern Britain.
   C. He revitalized existing monasteries and endowed new ones.
   D. He fought frequently, especially to control the borders of the Empire.

2. Carolingian miniscule is a(n)

   A. royal decree.
   B. silver coin.
   C. military region.
   D. form of writing.

3. What statement is not true of both the Vikings and the Magyars?

   A. They sailed dragon ships.
   B. They attacked parts of Europe.
   C. They plundered for booty.
   D. They eventually settled down by the tenth century.

4. The Wessex king who stopped the Danish invasion and issued a new law code was

   A. Hugh.
   B. Alfred.
   C. Conrad II.
   D. Otto I.

5. The introduction of the heavy plow in northern Europe led to

   A. Cooperation among peasants to share plow teams.
   B. Long narrow fields.
   C. More nutritious and plentiful food.
   D. All of these.

6. A person who was bound to a certain piece of land, could not leave the land, but was legally entitled to a portion of the produce from the land, was a

   A. free peasant.
   B. cottager.
   C. serf.
   D. vassal.
7. The Cluny monastery was famous for
   A. Converting the Jews.
   B. Sending missionaries to the Slavs.
   C. Serving as a partner with local lords in lay investiture.
   D. Eliminating corruption and moral laxity.

8. Which statement about the Byzantine Empire in the ninth and tenth centuries is not true?
   A. The Pope and Latin Christians supported the expansion of Byzantine influence.
   B. The early Macedonian emperors provided dynamic leadership.
   C. Byzantine missionaries spread Christianity and Greek civilization.
   D. Thriving trade and commerce produced a strong economy.

9. Cyril and Methodius
   A. Defeated Bulgars.
   B. Made the Donation of Poland.
   C. Invented an alphabet for the Slavic language.
   D. Reigned in Kievan Rus.

10. Which ruler is correctly matched with his kingdom/domain?
    A. Harun al-Rashid – Abbasid Empire
    B. Alfonso VI – Poland
    C. Abd al Rahman – Kievan Rus
    D. Vladimir – Poland