



1958

1. The Heirs of the Roman Empire: Byzantium, Islam, and Medieval Europe


Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/contemporary_sec2

 Part of the [Byzantine and Modern Greek Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), and the [Islamic World and Near East History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Bloom, Robert L. et al. "1. The Heirs of the Roman Empire: Byzantium, Islam, and Medieval Europe. Pt. II: Medieval, Political, and Economic Development: Feudalism and Manorialism." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 1-6.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/contemporary_sec2/1

This open access book chapter is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

1. The Heirs of the Roman Empire: Byzantium, Islam, and Medieval Europe

Abstract

The fall of Rome did not, as many contemporaries had expected, preface the end of the world. Rather, it was the end of a world, of a way of life which had characterized the Mediterranean basin for centuries. Amid the ruins of Greco-Roman Civilization, three new civilizations arose in the old imperial territories and their borderlands. One of these new civilizations -- the Western - is our major interest and its first phase -- the medieval -- will here demand our closer attention. The other two -- the Byzantine and the Islamic -- were Eastern and influenced rather than fathered the Western World of today. Therefore, these Eastern civilizations need be treated here only briefly. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Roman Empire, Byzantine, Constantinople, Islamic, Greek

Disciplines

Byzantine and Modern Greek | Classics | History of Christianity | Islamic World and Near East History | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section II: Medieval, Political, and Economic Development: Feudalism and Manorialism](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

II. MEDIEVAL POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: FEUDALISM AND MANORIALISM

1. The Heirs of the Roman Empire: Byzantium, Islam, and Medieval Europe

The fall of Rome did not, as many contemporaries had expected, preface the end of the world. Rather, it was the end of a world, of a way of life which had characterized the Mediterranean basin for centuries. Amid the ruins of Greco-Roman Civilization, three new civilizations arose in the old imperial territories and their borderlands. One of these new civilizations -- the Western -- is our major interest and its first phase -- the medieval -- will here demand our closer attention. The other two -- the Byzantine and the Islamic -- were Eastern and influenced rather than fathered the Western World of today. Therefore, these Eastern civilizations need be treated here only briefly.

Byzantine Civilization derived its name from Byzantium, the Greek city which Constantine rebuilt, renamed Constantinople, and made his capital in 330. After the division of the empire in 395, the Eastern Roman Empire was centered here for over a thousand years, for long periods with outlying possessions in the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Despite the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the Byzantine emperors still regarded themselves as the direct successors of the Caesars. Their sophisticated civil servants continued to follow many Roman administrative techniques. Roman law received its supreme embodiment in a code or summary made by the Byzantine emperor, Justinian, in the sixth century. Byzantine merchants acted as middlemen between the Orient and the Occident. In an age when urban life had virtually vanished in the West, Constantinople remained a proudly imperial city -- "Tsargorod" (city of the Caesars) to the Slavs and "Miklegard" (mighty city) to the Northmen.

Although the Byzantines called themselves Romans, their language was Greek and their distinctive civilization was a mixture of Roman, Greek, Christian, and Oriental borrowings. In Constantinople secular Greek learning was preserved with a reverence which, if it approached stagnation, was stagnation at a high level. Byzantine Christians developed their own Greek Orthodox Church, independent of Rome and pervading Byzantine life. Both that Church and the ritual surrounding the sacred

person of the emperors show the influence of the Orient.

Despite its impressive achievements, Byzantium was weakened by internal strains and by attacks from both Western Christians and Moslems. When, in 1453, it was finally captured by the Moslem Turks, it was only a pale shadow of past greatness. Nevertheless, before its demise it had performed four functions of importance to the West. (1) It had helped hold off the Moslems until Western Europe was strong enough to stand on its own. (2) It had spread many features of Byzantine religion, art, and literature in the Balkans and Russia, thereby helping to perpetuate the division between the latter and the West. (3) It had preserved much of that part of Greco-Roman Civilization which had been forgotten in the West. When, late in Byzantium's life, the West was once again receptive, intellectual treasures of the past flowed westward along the reopened trade routes of the Mediterranean. (4) Finally, the Classic heritage preserved at Constantinople strongly influenced another new and neighboring civilization -- the Islamic -- and through it reached Europe indirectly. *considered themselves Romans*

(the way)
Islam was a new religion proclaimed by an Arab trader, Mohammed (570-632), known to his followers as the Prophet. Simplicity itself, Islam taught obedience to the will of the one, true, and indivisible God (Allah). In the century after Mohammed's death, his followers (called Moslems) conquered and in most cases converted the inhabitants of a crescent-shaped band of territory running from Spain along north Africa to the gates of Constantinople itself. Moslem raids were launched against the northern coast of the Mediterranean, and eventually Constantinople, the Balkans, Persia, and part of India submitted to Islam. From the beginning, the Prophet's teachings had shown the impress of neighboring Christian, Jewish, and primitive religions. After the conquests, the original Moslems, simple desert nomads, absorbed many of the features of the civilizations of their more sophisticated converts. The resulting synthesis was a new Islamic Civilization embracing a great Arabic-speaking area in which goods and ideas moved fairly freely. *Recognize the prophets, & Christ as a prophet, because of Mohammed's traveling. No intense mixing of Christians.*

For the history of Western Civilization in its formative years, Islam had a fourfold significance. (1) Moslem expansion was added to the already numerous disruptive movements that had been at work in the Mediterranean basin since the fall of Rome. (2) Islamic Civilization borrowed and preserved many features of the earlier civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean. The tales of Sinbad the Sailor reflect the extent of Islamic commerce. Byzantine imperial administrative techniques were used in the Islamic Empire. Islamic scholars were familiar with Greek philosophy, medicine, and geometry. The so-called Arabic numerals, including the zero, were borrowed from India. In architecture, Moslems took the pointed arch, probably from Syria, and developed a pleasing elegant style of their own. (3) This cultural heritage was transmuted by the addition of discoveries made by the Moslems themselves. In mathematics,

Division between East & West was brought about because of cities (Rome, Byzantium) People thought of a third Rome (Moscow) before the Bolsheviks.

both the name and substance of algebra were their invention. They contributed to the knowledge of astronomy and geography. Their chemistry was largely alchemy, directed toward transforming base metals into gold; but incidentally they made many discoveries, as the Arabic roots of the words alcohol, alkali, and alembic suggest. Islamic science was probably at its best in medicine. While Western physicians were dabbling with spells and incantations, Moslem physicians in the great Bagdad hospital were writing clinical descriptions of the symptoms and progress of smallpox. (4) Finally, both borrowings and inventions were transmitted by the Arabs to the West, through Byzantium, Sicily, and Spain. To such Spanish Moslem centers of learning as Cordova and Granada came Western scholars anxious to receive the contributions of a civilization which in secular knowledge, as late as the tenth century, was ahead of their own in all respects save only perhaps the political. *Caliph was the spiritual leader.*

Islam is a way of life. No race distinctions.

The third civilization to arise from the ruins of imperial Rome was the Western. In the conventional divisions of the history of Western Civilization, the first thousand years, lying between the year 500 and the year 1500, are called the Middle Ages. Although the limitations of such chronological divisions are obvious, this millenium does have a unity which justifies its separate treatment. The label "Middle Ages" (and its adjective, medieval) was first used in the fifteenth century by men who thought of themselves as modern and who wished to set apart the thousand years which lay "in the middle" between them and the much-admired antique civilizations of Greece and Rome. Even today, "Medieval" and "Middle Ages" are sometimes incorrectly used as synonyms for barbarism. *Nevertheless, it is important to remember that medieval culture made some noteworthy achievements. Remote though it may seem, the Middle Ages was the springtime of Western Civilization.*

Geographically, medieval culture was born and remained centered northwest of the Mediterranean basin in a region which had seemed to the Romans semi-barbarian or even worse. Here was a well-watered land covered with extensive forests. The climate was invigorating, with cold winters and mild summers. Deep and fertile but heavy soils promised rich rewards to those who could clear the land and till it. Above all, it was in the area between the Seine and Rhine Rivers, in what is now northern France and western Germany, that such characteristic features of medieval culture as its architecture and system of government were developed. From this center, elements of a distinctive culture spread to southern France, Italy, and Spain, to eastern Germany, northward to Scandinavia, and westward to the British Isles.

In the year 800 the king of the Franks, Charlemagne (Carolus Magnus, Charles the Great), attempted to revive the Roman Empire in the West when, on Christmas Day, he was crowned emperor in Rome by the pope. His realm extended from northern Spain to eastern Germany and Austria, and from the shores of the Baltic to southern Italy. However, after his death this empire was divided among his grandsons and fell to pieces,

among which are discernible the germs of such later-day states as Italy, France, and Germany. Without the unifying force of a vigorous common culture and a strong European-wide economy, revival of a lasting empire was impossible. Nevertheless, it was in just this territory ruled over by the Carolingians (the family of Charlemagne) that the foundations of Western Civilization were laid.

Geography and history no doubt helped the Franks in their creative task. Important also was the fact that whereas the other Germanic tribes had accepted and long adhered to Arian Christianity, the Franks at the time of Clovis had accepted the same form of orthodox Christianity as the Romans among whom they settled. Finally, whereas the Germanic tribes who settled in Italy were absorbed by the local population, the areas of Frankish settlement were much less Romanized, facilitating the creation of something new. Never having moved far from their original homeland, the Franks had not lost their cohesion as had the other Germanic tribes.

The careers of Clovis and, even more, of Charlemagne illustrate the three elements which fused to start Western Civilization: the Germanic, the Greco-Roman, and the Christian. Germanic tribes contributed concepts of law, forms of political organization, and, above all, themselves; mind and body -- minds to turn a culture into a civilization and a labor force to clear the land. From Rome came such elements as an international language (Latin) and an imperial tradition. Christianity contributed the dominant religious faith. In the fusion of the three during the Dark Ages, Western Civilization was born.]

To call the early Middle Ages -- from about (500 to about 1000) -- the Dark Ages does ignore this creativity, but it underscores the fact that this was also a time of destruction and testing, during which the future of Europe was almost certainly in doubt. The Germanic and other invasions had destroyed the political and economic foundations on which Roman Civilization had been built. [Instead of the imperial system of government, the only arrangement that seemed workable was a localized one.] Town life, so vital in the Roman world, virtually disappeared. The famous Roman roads fell into disrepair. Municipal institutions vanished; walls and buildings crumbled and were not rebuilt; and the town sites themselves were either deserted or inhabited by only a fraction of their former population. Ruined villas and overgrown fields marred the face of the countryside. The total population of France in 950 was probably less than at any time during the previous thousand years. The flourishing international commerce of the western Mediterranean world in Roman times was disrupted by invasions and gave way to a near subsistence economy with a minimum of trade. Instead of producing a varied cultural life, men's energies were devoted to mere survival, to getting enough to subsist and to avoid being killed. There was time for little else. Although undoubtedly much of the evidence of life in this period has long since

Inventiveness was at a low level. People were overwhelmed for a time. Momentary flowerings here & there.

disappeared, it seems safe to say that there was very little in the way of painting, architecture, sculpture, literature, or philosophy. Some skills appear to have been lost completely. Writing almost fell into this category. If we can believe his biographer, even the mighty Charlemagne could never learn to write, despite valiant efforts. The use of Greek all but disappeared, and Classical Latin was supplanted by a different written form, much like the spoken Latin of the later empire.

What crumbs of Classical learning survived in the West were preserved by the Church, which gradually lessened its suspicion of this learning and even tried to make use of it. Now education -- even literacy -- became virtually a clerical monopoly. Almost all scholars in the Dark Ages were churchmen, who copied salvaged manuscripts, composed what few new books were written, and taught in the schools attached to cathedrals or monasteries. Valuable though the Church's work of preservation was for the future, during the five hundred years of the Dark Ages it seemed largely sterile. What was preserved was fragmentary. The few better-educated churchmen were haunted by an agonizing sense of how slight was their comprehension of a great cultural tradition. The copyists in the monasteries often did not understand what they were copying, recognizing only that it surpassed their own creative ability. [Scholars were reduced to producing mere compendiums, in which fragments of Classical lore were rearranged at about the level of a modern student's lecture notes.]

Nevertheless, the Dark Ages did create Western Civilization. [About the tenth century the pulse of Western Europe speeded up.] So far as we can tell from the scanty and inaccurate records, population began an increase which continued until about 1300 when it leveled off. Old town sites were re-occupied, while the existence at the present day of numerous Newtowns, Newtons, Neuburgs, and Villeneuves (as well as the less obvious Novgorod in Russia) illustrates the creation of new settlements. Steadily clearings encroached on the forest, bringing new land into cultivation. New institutions were created. There was a quickening interest in things of the mind. A new type of architecture appeared, called Romanesque on the Continent and Norman in England. It was heavy and solid with the small windows and massive walls of fortifications and with simple ornamentation. It expressed admirably the rude grace, the strength, and the simplicity of a new and vigorous culture.

[Just why medieval man managed to pull himself out of the Dark Ages still puzzles historians, and our answers can be only tentative. Some choose to put the answer in terms of challenge and response. The challenge was the collapse of both the Roman and the Germanic ways of life. [Only two responses were possible: life among the ruins or the organization of a new way of life. However, this does not explain why the latter alternative prevailed. The growing sense of security which is evident after the tenth century is probably both cause and effect of this change. A man could now hope to build a house,

plant a crop, clear new land, and so on with a good chance of surviving to benefit from his work. The last of the invaders (Northmen from Scandinavia and Magyars from the east) settled down among their predecessors. Gradually the gallant efforts of the Church softened manners somewhat while saving souls. In some areas, for example, it imposed in the eleventh century the Truce of God (a prohibition of fighting during certain periods) which was enforced by the joint efforts of the bishops and secular magnates. More effective in restoring a minimum of order was the institution of a new system of government in Western Europe: feudalism.