PROBLEMS IN MEDIEVAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: A SELECTIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

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by

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Up to the nineteenth century there prevailed a certain point of view that colored every word written or spoken about the early Middle Ages. Essentially, this period was viewed by the pre-nineteenth century writers as being a "dark age" stigmatized by the triumph of Christianity and barbarism. These writers saw coming with the fall of Rome in 476, a dark shadow that was cast over Western Europe leaving humanity to wander in ignorance and superstition until the veil of darkness was finally rent by the Renaissance and Reformation of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries.

This concept of the early Middle Ages as a "dark age" received its original impetus from the writers of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment periods. The spokesmen of these movements condemned the Middle Ages on the grounds that during this era men lost the ability to understand the Greek and Latin classics, corrupted the language, and sacrificed rational thinking for faith in the supernatural. These writers were content to label the Middle

Ages as a "dark age" and to remove it from the pages of history as being unworthy of consideration by future generations.

In reaction to those concepts which had been forced upon the Middle Ages, there arose in the nineteenth century a group of scholars who attempted to present the medieval' period in a greater qualitative light. The leaders of the Romanticist and Nationalist movements saw the Middle Ages not as a period engulfed by darkness, but as an age possessing a particular brilliance of its own. For the romanticists the Middle Ages represented a period when men expressed themselves as they wanted. During this time the passions of men were allowed to run free. This particular school of thought could see a series of traits in medieval society that were never felt by the pre-nineteenth century writers. The nationalist historians likewise viewed the Middle Ages as a period of many positive attributes. Being concerned primarily with the development of the national state, this school of writers found in the Middle Ages the origin of these states. They could see in this period primitive achievements which were later to evolve into full-fledged statehood. Thus, these scholars saw existing in the Middle Ages a series of traits and values which led not to a condemnation of the period but praise. This was an age when the future states of Europe were being formulated and when man expressed himself in a care free manner.

This conflict of opinion which has been briefly sketched here concerning the nature and importance of the Middle Ages, is essentially the basic problem with which this present work will deal. This problem will be approached by offering a comparative study of those sources which have been influential in shaping medieval thought over the past three centuries. In essence, this work is not intended to present a new or unique thesis concerning the Middle Ages, but its value and usefulness lies within the fact that it brings together and offers a synthesis of those theses which have been essential in the development of Medieval history.

While the nineteenth century was responsible for beginning the task of rediscovering the Middle Ages, which the previous centuries had dismissed as useless, the greatest achievements in lighting this "dark age" have been made in recent decades. With the increase in number and ability of specialized scholars studying the various aspects of the classical and medieval civilizations, it is no longer possible to support many of the views tenaciously accepted by pre-nineteenth century scholars. For example, it is no longer plausible to accept the belief that the beginning of the Middle Ages was a "catastrophic" event heralded by the triumph of Christianity and barbarism, but rather, as modern research has indicated, it was an evolutionary process with the dates of its genesis varying with the consideration of each particular institution. Along with the study of classical

and medieval institutions which resulted in the disproval of the catastrophic theses, went the invalidation of those beliefs which held the Middle Ages to be a dark age containing little of value for the modern world. It is now generally accepted from the work of modern medievalists that this was a vital period best characterized as a period of incubation. It was out of the chaos following the fall of Rome that there emerged in the Western portion of the Roman Empire a distinctively different way of life from which the greater and more enlightened Western European civilization was to emerge. Just as modern research has pointed out, the true significance of the Middle Ages is not that it marked the end of classical civilization, but that it represented the beginning of a new way of life that was later to blossom into the Western European civilization. Thus, the major end sought by this work is to prove by a comparative study of essential medieval theses that the true significance of the Middle Ages is that it served as the incubation period for Western European civilization.

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Preface

One of the greatest problems confronting any historian is that of persuading his audience to view a particular period of the past without preconceived notions. This is an old story in the study of history and one that is as sad as it is old. Probably no other period in history has been so burdened with this task as has the Middle Ages. Despite the efforts of medievalists in recent decades to undo the false conceptions wrought by earlier scholars wearing glasses of various colors, many educated persons still persist in accepting those ideas and beliefs that are no longer tenable. For this reason, one of the objectives of this work will be to examine the past three centuries of medieval historiography in an attempt to reconstruct some of these fallacious beliefs and in the process illustrate the efforts of modern scholars to combat them. Naturally to present a definitive study of all the sources embodied in this vast span of years would be an impossible task. Thus, of necessity, the present work will deal with those sources which most adequately represent their respective periods while at the same time illustrating the development made in historiography.

Many of the historiographical problems that have arisen over the centuries have been created by the conflicts

of opinion concerning the beginning of the Middle Ages. Was this a "catastrophic" event heralded by the onslaught of Christianity, or was it an "evolutionary" process covering over two centuries of decay and devastation within classical civilization? Did the beginning of the Middle Ages mark the introduction of a "dark age" that was for centuries to engulf Western Europe, or was it the genesis of a new civilization that was soon to surpass even the golden-age of Rome? So significant have these two questions been in the development of medieval historiography that a second objective of this work will be to establish whether or not the beginning of the Middle Ages was a catastrophic event and if it was the beginning of a "dark age" containing little of value for the modern mind.

More specifically, our task will involve a consideration of when and under what circumstances the ancient world came to an end in Western Europe and the medieval began. In considering this problem, it will be necessary to examine the various institutions of the ancient and medieval world in an attempt to establish how and when the classical order became medieval. The method by which this problem will be approached is not intended to be a chronological history of the early Middle Ages, but rather a comparative study of those sources which have been essential in shaping medieval scholarship. By employing such an approach as this not only will it be possible to see the development being made by medievalists, but also to clear away some of the academic debris that is no longer tenable and serves only to obscure the study of

Medieval history. This will enable us to accomplish the last objective of this work, that of establishing the true significance of the epoch making era, the early Middle Ages.

The process of research and writing always gives rise to many unrepayable debts. I would especially like to acknowledge my indebtedness and express my gratitude to Professor Richard E. Sullivan for his professional guidance, personal interest, and constant encouragement which were so essential in the preparation of this manuscript. Also, special recognition must go to my wife, Marilyn Joyce, whose assistance and encouragement will always be unrepayable.

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Chapter I

THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE AGES: CATASTROPHIC OR TRANSITIONAL?

Within the shadows which marked the waning of the seventeenth century, the new seeds of science which had been sown through the investigations of such men as Descartes and Bacon, began to germinate and burst forth into full life in the eighteenth century movement known as the "Enlightenment."[1] Being strongly influenced by these scientific achievements the scholars of this, the "Age of Reason", began to apply those experimental and inductive methods, by which science was achieving its conquests, to such areas as ethics, politics, religion, and economics. With the new sun of reason beaming in the heavens of the rationalist, he would no longer accept anything which could not be supported by the trestle of rational thinking.

When this scientific concept of historical investigation is applied to the early Middle Ages, it is obvious that the period which witnessed such events as the triumph of Christianity and barbarism, will not be spoken of in very amiable terms. One of the personalities of this age whose

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[1] J. B. Black, The Art of History, (New York, 1926) p. 22.

writings contributed immensely to the darkening of the Middle Ages was the master mind and founder of the Rationalist school, the intrepid genius, Voltaire. Also listed among the rationalist numbers is the prolific and polished historian Edward Gibbon, whose Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, along with Voltaire's voluminous work mirrors most exquisitely this buoyant faith in science and reason.

While most rationalist writers saturate their work with the intellectual and philosophical problems in the development of humanity, Gibbon's work could best be described as a literary epic. Using the pristine or golden age of Rome as an absolute standard[2] against which all others are to be judged, he saw flowing with the wave of barbarians which engulfed Western Europe, the prospects of misery and desolation which would plague Europe for the next thousand years.[3] The country was exhausted by famine, pestilence, and war. To view the irretrievable ruin of populous districts which had once been adorned with flourishing cities, was a deplorable and painful sight.[4]

Although the material losses were greatly abhorred by the inhabitants, their most excruciating loss was that of

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[2]Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. J. B. Bury, 5th ed., Vol. I (London, 1923), p. 78.

[3]Gibbon, IV, p. 55.

[4]Ibid.

personal liberty.[5] Under the decaying rule of the Merovingians personal servitude and slavery were not only revived, but multiplied.[6] Paralleling their loss of individual liberty, the Romans found themselves exposed to the laws of the barbarians, which in comparison to the Roman legal code, revealed a colossal deficiency in humanity and justice.[7] The empire had communicated to the barbarian its language, law, and religion, only to find all in an unpalatable state of degradation and its citizens in personal servitude.

Voltaire, who looked upon human history as having been carried along chiefly by the clash of ideas and civilizations, is most adequately classified as an intellectual historian. While it is a laudable task, in the eyes of Voltaire, to record those ideas which advanced humanity or rendered greater happiness, it is also reasonable to ignore those which serve only to burden the memory. Thus, if silence is significant, Voltaire projects a most unique and profound criticism of the early Middle Ages. His treatment of this period receives no stationary position in the chronological development of his history and that which can be ascertained is only fragmentary and piecemeal until the reign of Charlamagne when the story develops a more concrete

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[5] Ibid., p. 56.

[6] Ibid., p. 132.

[7] Ibid., p. 123.

form.[8]

Voltaire's mode of approach to the barbarians appears to be a twin to Gibbon's. With the onslaught of barbarians, Western Europe was submerged in a state of profound devastation, inhumane poverty, and gross ignorance.[9] The only portrait which can be portrayed on the canvass of history of this vagrant mass is one of beastly tribes standing in dire need of being subdued by a civilized nation.[10] These conquerors subsisted upon rapine and theft while about them lay fallow vast regions of rich, fertile soil. They destroyed and ravaged numerous cities while founding none to replace them.[11] In short, the barbarians brought ruin and decay to all that they touched, while contributing nothing to the development of humanity.

In common with all the rationalists of the period, Gibbon and Voltaire disdained the triumph of Christianity because, as they contended, it was a superstitious growth fostered in a barbaric age and productive of fanaticism. Gibbon sees Christianity as being the prime factor which

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[8]Voltaire, The Works of Voltaire, "General History" (New York, 1901), XXIV. (Evidence of Voltaire's attitude concerning the early Middle Ages can be seen in his chapter headings as he passes from the fall of Rome to the age of Charlamagne as if nothing of value occurred during the four centuries that separated these two periods).

[9]Ibid., p. 6.

[10]Ibid., p. 14.

[11]Ibid., p. 111.

brought chaos to the social, political and military institutions of the empire, when they most desperately needed orderly operations.[12] With this weakening and undermining of the greatest civilization previously known to mankind, he could not avoid being antagonistic toward Christianity.[13] Yet he does pay tribute to its cohesive and sustaining powers, once the secular empire had disintegrated. If the decline of the Roman Empire was hastened by the triumph of Christianity, the victorious religion broke the violence of the fall as it mollified the ferocious temper of the conquerors and imparted unto them such virtues as justice and mercy.[14]

Voltaire's very articulate hostility for religion can best be explained by his profound disapproval of what he considered to be misbehaviour of the clergy. Christianity, which evolved from very humble origins, had been subjected to all manner of corruption, accretions and superstitions by the ingenius and ambitious clergymen for their own selfish ends. The results of such degrading behavior left the one institution that was intended to be the great binding force in the world as a prime source of devastation, destruction, and death.[15] These men had taken the newly formulated dogma

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[12]Gibbon, IV, p. 163.

[13]Gibbon, III, p. 324.

[14]Gibbon, IV, pp. 79, 80, 163.

[15]Voltaire, XXIV, pp. 85-87.

and used it as an instrument, supported by mysterious rites, to control the minds of the ignorant. Under this influence man lent himself to intolerance, persecution, burnings, and murders; all in the name of religion.[16] As a result of religion possessing man's mind with a capricious medley of cunning and simplicity, of brutality and artifice, the early Middle Ages is an era deeply scarred by decay, superstition and ignorance.

In conclusion it follows logically that Voltaire and Gibbon could not express themselves temperately or as uninterested spectators on this subject and as a result the positive side of these facts, strictly speaking, were not called to their attention. They failed to see the new principles of life and energy imparted to the world by the barbarians, and particularly by the Church. In virtue of their theme they could not do justice to the growth of the papal monarchy and the ecclessiastical organization of Europe, which sprang from the ashes of this decadent world, becoming in the course of centuries the nucleus of a new and more enlightened order. For Gibbon and Voltaire the course of European history in the Middle Ages is a "trough" in the development of humanity; it is truly a dark age.

As the eighteenth century passed away so did the approach used by the Enlightenment scholars which presented

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[16] Ibid., p. 96.

the Middle Ages as a dark period in the span of history. With the beginning of the nineteenth century there arose in reaction to the Enlightenment a school of thought known as the "Romantic School," whose purpose it was to present the Middle Ages in a much greater qualitative manner.[17] Being motivated by a desire to trace the development of the national state, the romanticist viewed the Middle Ages as a period when man expressed himself as he wanted. He let his passions express themselves in a free manner. This particular school of thought saw a series of traits and attributes existing in the medieval man that were never realized by the writers of the Enlightenment period.

Although the endeavors of this school were often saturated with an emotional appeal aimed at combatting the blighting theses of the eighteenth century, their work did serve to illuminate some of the darkened corners of the Middle Ages. Until the romanticist came to the front, the Middle Ages were actually as a sealed book with such men as Voltaire proclaiming, "the period deserves as little study as the doing of wolves and bears," and Gibbon's contempt for religion rendering him blind to the significance of the principle objects which he passed in the course of his journey.[18]

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[17]Harry Elmer Barnes, A History of Historical Writing, (Norman 1938), p. 207.

[18]G. P. Gooch, History and Historians, (New York, 1913), p. 11.

A most adequate representative of the nineteenth century philosophy is the sympathetic and patriotic expounder of French history, Jules Michelet. Looking at his work, The History of France, which is in itself a small library, we see the barbarians which embody the pages of his work are presented in a much greater qualitative nature than the repugnant picture of "the beast devouring the lamb" painted by the rationalists. "Can it not be said that in the Germanic successes over the empire, this revealed not a negative quality, but it illustrates that personal devotion and submission to order which have in every age been characteristic of these people."[19] These qualities simply reveal the sign of the eminently social, docile, and flexible genius of the Germanic races.[20]

These first major invasions of the Empire in 395 A.D. cannot accurately be described as a season of degradation, because the barbarians had long been quartered in the provinces of the empire and had absorbed much of their civilizing attributes. The land which they took was that which had already been removed from cultivation, and it was not uncommon for the invader to indemnify the landowners for his lost land.[21] It is true, as Michelet points out the warlike

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[19]Jules Michelet, History of France, I, (New York, 1951), p.78.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., p. 80.

heirarchy which governed the behavior of the barbarians, that this age stood below the civil order of past ages. However, this is not to suggest that this age can be dismissed as a "dark age", contributing nothing to the development of humanity, as the rationalists would have it. As Michelet has indicated in his work, it was during this period that the foundation was established for those institutions that were later to evolve into the much more enlightened age of the National State.

During the early Middle Ages when the political, social, and military institutions were floundering in the state of stagnation, it was the Church which retrieved the fallen reins of progression and guided the embryonic state to a more solid foundation.[22] While the "genius of the barbarians," which is a phrase coined by the romanticists to explain those early developments which they could in no other way explain, was being transformed into a usable and civil instrument, it was the Church which served as guardian of the West and guided the development into its most advantageous form.[23] Everything began to favor the absorption of society by the Church. Romans and barbarians, slaves and freemen, man and land, all flocked to her and took refuge in her maternal bosom.[24] When the Church began to suffer

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[22] Ibid., pp. 64, 65.

[23] Michelet, I, pp. 99, 100.

[24] Ibid., p. 101.

ill-effects from her too frequent contact with the barbarian world she was able to find refuge in the shelter of monasticism. The monastery served as an asylum for the Church just as the Church had served society, while Western Europe was forging her way through this period of transition.[25] The Church had taught the barbarians to bow their necks to the yoke of civilization and Christianity. The early Middle Ages is thus the foundation for a greater, more prosperous, and more enlightened order which is to come.

As the nineteenth-century was drawing to a close, scholars were still concerned with the development of the national state, but their mode of approach had been greatly altered by developments in other areas of research. No longer were they dominated by the emotional appeal of the Romanticists, but were now motivated by a more scientific outlook. With the appearance in 1894 of W. E. H. Lecky's, History of European Morals, we see a conscientious effort being made to apply the biological concepts of evolution to the realm of social change. His writing is illustrative of the cultural and historical implications of the evolutionary notions.[26] The major significance of Lecky's work is that it represents one of the first efforts to broaden history by penetrating behind the scenes of action.[27]

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Harry Elmer Barnes, A History of Historical Writing (Norman, 1938), p. 332.

[27] G. P. Gooch, History and Historians, (New York, 1913), p. 366.

Professor Lecky's entire thesis is based upon the debatable hypothesis that moral standards are in a constant state of progression.[28] From the reign of Constantine, when Christianity was first adopted as the accepted religion of the Empire, it began to exert a powerful influence upon the moral standards of the inhabitants which eventually brought about a series of changes resulting in the formation of those institutions, such as feudalism, which served as the direct forerunner of the national state. Although the Church itself may have been corrupted during this process, it did not hinder the evolution or moral development that was taking place within society.

The first stages of Lecky's evolutionary process sees the Church project on the pages of history as a very philantropic institution, imparting to its subjects a new sense of the sanctity of life and developing a much needed concept of universal brotherhood.[29] As long as the moral life of the Empire had been directed by the teachings of pagan religions there existed no knowledge of the true value of human life. Man had never ascertained from nature that it was wrong to slay, without provocation, his fellowman, as can be seen in the gladiatorial games of the day. Christianity dogmatically asserted the sinfulness of destroying human life for amusement and imparted to the

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[28]James J. Auchmuty, Lecky, (London, 1945), p. 50.

[29]William Edward Hartpole Lecky, History of European Morals, (New York, 1894), p. 18.

Empire a moral standard higher than any which then existed in the world.[30] This new moral code encouraged the subjects of the Empire to develop hospitals for the increasing number of orphans; discouraged the common practice of infanticide; and altered the severe penal code.[31] With the increasing strength of the Church within society there also arose a more humane law regulating the treatment of slaves. Although slavery was to persist until the fourteenth-century the slave-master relation became more liberal when the Church began to exercise its power of exclusion from communion to tyrannical masters.

While this first stage of Christianity came to be looked upon with adoration there soon arose a great ascetic movement which eventually diverted the enthusiasm of the Church into new channels. Emphasis was no longer placed upon the virtue of charity, but now passed to the newly accentuated chastity. Although this was to curb the outward works and material accomplishments of the Church, it did not hinder the moral development.

As the ascetic movement was evolving through its embryonic stages of development, that which was finally accepted by the West, under the masterful influence of St. Benedict, assumed a nature free of the hermetical deprivations

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[30] Ibid., p. 20.

[31] Ibid., pp. 27-43.

exercised in the East and as a result became more acceptable to the Europeans who, for climatic reasons, were less capable of performing such rigid ascetic feats.[32]

It was this institution which was to serve as the sole center of civilization during the chaotic period of the Germanic invasions in the fifth century. The monastery assumed the social, political and intellectual functions of the West.[33]

While the author believes it is possible to criticize many of the policies of the Church during this period, such as its inserting the fear of hell and demons into the mind of Europe, at the same time the establishment of the monk as the idol of society had a profound effect upon the moral development of Europe. As men sought refuge in the monastic haven their attitude toward such essential issues as labor was greatly altered. No longer was this looked upon as a task for slaves, but became a virtuous occupation for all men. Also, the monastery was responsible for inserting into society the virtues of passive obedience and humility which provided the foundation for the later acceptance of feudalism. All of these developments arose out of the chaos following the fall of Rome and were intimately related to

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[32]Cuthbert Butler, Benedictine Monarchism, (London, 1962). Butler has a very interesting work which deals with the evolution of the monastic movement and its effect upon Western Europe.

[33]Lecky, p. 179.

the Church. It was in this manner that a particular attitude was gradually acquired that assimilated with the monarchical and aristocratic institution of feudalism, which later flourished because they corresponded with the moral feeling of the time.

As these virtues of obedience and humility sufficiently saturated the moral fibers of society, and as the barbarian kings became more settled, the idol of society was eventually changed from the monk to a royal sovereign which can be illustrated, par excellance, by the reign of Charlamagne.[34] Although the institution of feudalism was not yet fully developed it was being formulated and with it the foundation of Western Europe was being laid, primarily as a result of the moral evolution which prepared the minds of Europe for such a change.

Although the nineteenth-century writers were successful in lighting some of the darkened corners of the Middle Ages, there still did not exist an adequate coverage of the true significance of the period. The romanticists of the nineteenth-century were primarily too emotional in their efforts to counteract the biased attacks of the Enlightenment to present an objective study of the age and the later scholars of the century, while overcoming this passionate approach and being more scientific in their study, were

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[34] Ibid., p. 271.

primarily concerned with the genesis of the national state, therefore, leaving much of the early Middle Ages still untouched. Thus, we can see that up to the twentieth-century there prevailed particular points of view that colored every word that was spoken or written concerning the early Middle Ages. The eighteenth-century scholars of the Enlightenment, being motivated by their newly formulated "Age of Reason", continued to present this vast span of years as a dark age deserving not one moment of study from their intellectually brightened day. Then came the romanticists reaction to the Enlightenment which served to present the Middle Ages in a better light, but still did not adequately examine the period as a whole. As the nationalist historians adopted a more scientific approach and tried to weigh each period of history equally, they were able to bring forth in a brief period sufficient evidence to show the Middle Ages were not a dark age, however, even they were not as impartial as they would liked to have been and as a result they became primarily concerned with the origin of the national state which led them to neglect the early Middle Age. We have then, with the beginning of the twentieth-century, one segment of the Middle Ages, that period from the fall of Rome to the Caroligian age, remaining in darkness.

Since World War I, many reputations have been made by men who assumed the task of lighting this remaining dark age, and it is with these scholars and their work that the major part of this paper will be concerned.

To force re-examination of long established ways of historical thinking requires both powerful and original minds, and fortunately the twentieth-century possessed many such men. But if there was any one man who upset the tranquility of the historians world, it was Henri Pirenne, the celebrated national historian of Belgium. Breaking with the encyclopedic character of past interpretation, which was concerned primarily with the political and religious questions of the Middle Ages, Pirenne began to ask new questions bringing new life to the nature of the past and in the process yielding greater knowledge and leading to new understanding.

One of the essential problems which must be solved in the course of our journey is that of the transition from the ancient world to medieval civilization. The artificial periodization of an Ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the Modern times is no longer adequate for the historians task, in that it denies the essential continuity of human experience. Prior to the twentieth-century it had become generally accepted that the "Ancient world" and the "Middle Ages" were easily distinguished the one from the other and that a distinct break came in the fifth-century with the disappearance of the Roman emperor in the West, the appearance of the Germanic "barbarian" kingdoms, and the triumph of Christianity.[35]

[35]Voltaire, The Works of Voltaire, "Annals of the Empire," pp. 7,8, Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. VII, p.308. "In these volumes, I have described the triumph of barbarism and religion"; Jules Michelet, History of France, "The national language and religion...Slumbered under Roman culture until the advent of Christianity," p. 62.

This "catastrophic" interpretation became the textbook point of view and, with some qualification, a controlling assumption of scholars as well.

From Pirenne's investigations, a radically different concept emerged to the forefront. Adopting what could rightfully be classified as a "modified" catastrophic thesis, he concluded that the Roman world - economically, culturally, and even in essence politically - continued in all particulars through the centuries of the German invasions. It was rather the impact of Islam in the seventh and eighth-centuries which, by destroying the unity of the Mediterranean, ended the Roman world and led to a strikingly different civilization in the Carolingian age.[36] We can see the critical era in the Pirenne thesis was no longer the fifth-century Germanic invasion, but the seventh and eighth-centuries which witnessed the triumphant entry of the sons of the Arabian desert, which brought an end to the heretofore classical unity.

However, the catastrophic thesis had already been seriously challenged before the appearance of M. Pirenne's Mohammed and Charlamagne by the distinguished Austrian scholar, Alfons Dopsch, in his classic, The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization, which appeared in 1923-24. Professor Dopsch holds that the famous "fall"

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[36]Henri Pirenne, Medieval Cities, (Garden City, 1926), p.27: Mohammed and Charlamagne, (New York, 1939), p. 293.

of the Roman Empire in the West was by no means the catastrophic overthrow of an advanced civilization by the primitive German barbarians. On the contrary, medieval civilization descends in an orderly evolutionary fashion from that of the late Roman Empire. In fact, the Roman world was won by the Germans gradually from within, by a peaceful penetration which went on for centuries during which they absorbed its culture and even, to a considerable extent, took over its administration.[37] "Rome did not fall in 476; it fell asleep without any convulsion."[38]

The attitude of the Germans to Roman organization, as conquerors after the fall of Roman rule, was conservative in their own interest, and they continued to develop their rich inheritance. Thus, Dopsch's emphasis is upon the "continuity" of this civilization and not disruption of those institutions which the Germans had so richly inherited.

Additional weight was added to the growing acceptance of a "transitional thesis", as opposed to the long accepted catastrophic view, with the publication in 1927, of Ferdinand Lot's, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Ages. While Pirenne saw no major

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[37]Alfons Dopsch, Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization, (New York, 1937), p. 386.

[38]Ibid., p. 386.

break in the dike of classical civilization until the seventh and eighth-centuries, and Dopsch not even then, Ferdinand Lot digresses to the second-century in citing the critical period of the Empire's existence. It was not external forces which brought Roman civilization to its knees, it was above all an internal disease that undermined it and brought "the dissolution of all its vital forces," which condemned it to death.[39] Within the second-century there were fatal maladies which reached their zenith during the third century and in the process heralded the entrance of the Middle Ages. While the details of these maladies which plagued the Empire will not be discussed until later chapters, it is evident that Lot would essentially argue that the Germanic invasions did not represent an epoch making episode in that the transition from ancient to medieval civilization was in the making before the barbarians exposed themselves as a serious threat. The noted Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, places such significance upon these internal maladies plaguing Rome as to suggest antiquity would have experienced the same end had the barbarians never appeared on the scene.[40]

Still another attempt was made to bridge the great gulf which separates the ancient and medieval worlds by

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[39]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Ages, (New York, 1931), p.84.

[40]Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe (New York, 1932), p. 84.

H. St. L. B. Moss in his work, The Birth of the Middle Ages, which appeared in 1935. While we have already seen various dates ranging from the third to the eighth century as the beginning of the Middle Ages, and each having its justification according to the importance attached to a particular aspect of European civilization, Professor Moss cites the year 395 A.D. as having as good as claim as any to be regarded in this light, for the death of Theodosius the Great in this year occurred at a moment most critical for Europe. For the past three years Theodosius had ruled supreme over Roman territory. Henceforth, there is to be a separation of East and West coupled with a gradual dismemberment of the Western provinces. One change, however, of greater importance than any other for the future of Europe, was introduced by Constantine, when the Christian Church was admitted to share in the government of the State. Only under Theodosius does the Roman Empire finally cease to hold the balance between Christian and Pagan. For this reason, if for no other, 395 can be accepted as the beginning of the Middle Ages in that it herald the founding of the Christian State.

Of the more recent scholarship, William C. Bark's Origin of the Medieval World serves as an adequate representative. Bark sets no specific dates for the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages, but does believe the critical period to have been the civil strife of the third century. Although there were extensive

efforts at recovery from those internal problems, by the end of the fourth-century the Middle Ages had begun. The collapse of the West as a centrally administrated part of the Roman Empire took place before the great barbaric victories. "The Western Empire ceased to exist when it proved incapable of resisting small bands of barbaric tribesmen."[41]

No date is given for this event because it was an evolution, reaching its culmination at different times with different institutions. The final breakdown simply represents the end of an experiment which had failed and this left the way open for a new experiment possessing new creative force.[42]

While it is reserved for the remaining chapters of this work to discuss the details and examine the variations of these twentieth century theses, it is obvious from the "variety" of dates given for the beginning of the Middle Ages that the loosely constructed catastrophic thesis is no longer plausible as a starting point for the Middle Ages. It is a matter now, not of one date but many dates, each involving the development of a particular phase of medieval civilization. No longer can the scholar be content to examine only the political and religious institutions, as did many of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers, but

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[41]William Carroll Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, (Stanford, 1958), p. 66.

[42]Ibid., p. 38.

now his sights must be broadened to include the economic, social and cultural transitions as well.

"Half a century ago, George Burton Adams, then the Dean of American Medievalists, ... observed that the history of Europe... had been so minutely investigated that on all important questions in this field there is now a nearly or quite general consensus of opinion among scholars."[43] Fortunately, however, the consensus has been proven to be not so general by the extensive specialized research of twentieth-century scholars. Leaving behind the biased judgments of the eighteenth-century and the emotional appeals of the nineteenth we turn now to a closer examination of the modern day research as a whole, in an effort to reconstruct a more adequate picture of the early Middle Ages.

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[43] Ibid., p. 5.

Chapter II

POLITICAL TRANSITION (3rd-6th Centuries)

As the hands of time moved into the midnight hour of the second century the little eddies which warned of the coming ebb were already swelling within the Roman Empire. The winds of civil strife which were brewing during this period burst forth with hurricane force upon the third century leaving the Mediterranean edifice trembling in chaos. To quell the numerous internal upheavals that plagued the Empire at this time required leadership possessing the wisdom of a Solomon and the strength of a Sampson, yet the Empire was forced to settle for the relatively lesser geniuses, Diocletian and Constantine.

While it has posed a problem for scholars to be dogmatically certain as to how far the reorganization of the Empire was due to Diocletian and how far to Constantine, it has been equally difficult to fathom the degree of success experienced by the reforms of these geniuses. Was the colossal edifice of classical civilization re-established upon a foundation sufficient to weather such events as the barbaric invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, or was it essentially a New Empire, ready to succumb with the slightest agitation? Did the reformers reincarnate the

robust and happy days of Augustus or was it merely a temporary lease on life prolonging the inevitable destiny of a withering age? The answers to these, and other similar problems, have been essential in molding the conflicting views concerning the formation and character of the early Middle Ages.

Viewing the political reform through the sympathetic eyes of Henri Pirenne we see the Empire as a mythical marathon runner who after receiving the proverbial second wind thrusts forward with renewed vigor and strength, dethroning not only the besetting internal maladies, but possessing sufficient stamina to outdistance any external threats posed by the pressing barbarians. The appearance of this uncivilized mass of humanity in the provinces of the Empire created no real problem for Pirenne because he was convinced that the invaders desired not to destroy the Mediterranean unity, but only to gain a spot in the brilliant sun of classical civilization. It was not the Germanic invasion that effected the great rupture between Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but the rapid and unexpected advance of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries.[1] The Germanic kings who established themselves within the Latin portion of the Empire did not possess the power of a true sovereignty, but were merely generals of the Roman army honoring the true supremacy of the Emperor.[2] The entire Imperial administration

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[1]Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne (New York, 1939), p. 284; Medieval Cities (Garden City, 1925), p.27.

[2]Ibid., p. 46.

was maintained. The Vandals in Africa were careful in the heat of their venture to retain the well established Roman institutions. The face of Spain and Gaul bore no marks of disfigurement as a result of the invasions and certainly the Goths brought no change in their respective areas.[3]

What has appeared to some students to denote a decisive alteration in the status quo, namely the Germanic invasions of the fourth and fifth centuries, long before the birth of the Prophet, Pirenne considers to be only a superficial political novelty. Nothing was changed by the Germans, who admired Roman institutions and wished to preserve that to which they had fallen heir.

They did not introduce a new form of government. Politically, they did no worse than to replace the old unified Roman State with a plurality of states.[4] In this analysis Pirenne seems to have proceeded on the assumption that if the Germans wrought no change, then no change took place. This proviso is fundamental for on it depends the validity of his thesis. Simply because the Germans desired no change is not sufficient evidence to claim that no changes occurred. As we shall see later, profound alterations in the status quo had already taken place before the Germans appeared on the scene.

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[3] Ibid., p. 49.

[4] Ibid., p. 125.

Closely akin to the Pirenne thesis, in many respects, is the general conclusion reached by the Austrian scholar Alfons Dopsch. His thesis supports not only the belief of a continuation of the established order following the migration of the Germans, but that things continued with vast improvement. By employing all the latest archeological findings, Professor Dopsch is convinced that the Germans did not behave as enemies of Roman culture, on the contrary, they preserved and developed it. The conquest of Rome took place on different lines from the conquest of other states in political history. "The Germans did not overrun and destroy it in a savage onslaught, and then build their primitive culture on its ruins. The Roman world was won from within, by a peaceful penetration which went on for centuries, during which time they absorbed its culture and even, to a considerable extent, took over its administration."[5] Dopsch believes the Germans did not destroy Roman civilization, but had restored and magnified the fame of Rome by means of Germanic strength.[6]

The political organization, which was now determined by the new rulers, was not a radical change which occurred instantaneously, but was the culmination of a process which had been in the makings since the first migrations. The

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[5]Alfons Dopsch, The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization (New York, 1931), p.386.

[6]Ibid.

old tribal existence which had so long served as the political entity of the Germans was changed considerably and had been forced into a unity which was crystalized into a tribal constitution after the final settlement. This amalgamation of various smaller tribes into greater units was brought about by the numerous wars encountered with the Romans, and as a result created a tribal kingship possessing a much larger following and at the same time concentrated greater political powers within the hands of the king.[7]

As the prowess of these militant kings increased and they obtained still larger followings by virtue of their conquests of smaller tribes, the ultimate end was the transition to a single monarchy. Following their final settlement a monarchical form of constitution was introduced as the accepted order.[8] Although that which arose was not an absolute monarchy, there was a change in the traditional democratic institutions. The authority which had formerly been vested in the people, in the assembly of free men, passed to the monarch and the system was decisively influenced by him.

Actually, as Dopsch sees it, this German institution was more acceptable to the Romans than their own corrupt order, in that many Romans left their possessions and position to seek refuge among the Germans. Thus, the

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[7] Ibid., p. 184.

[8] Ibid., p. 187.

abolition of Roman political sway was only a step in the long process of change, the readjustment, so to speak, "of a firm whose old name has for long ceased to describe the actual head of the business."[9]

It would appear from the two theses already examined that the political status of the ancient world was unaffected by the flood of barbarians that swept over Europe in the fourth century. However, this emphasis on the "continuity" of the political order, which has been somewhat exaggerated by Pirenne and Dopsch, becomes more valid as we turn our attention to the work of the noted French historian, Ferdinand Lot. Professor Lot returns our attention once more to the civil chaos which had its beginning in the second half of the second century. With his emphasis being upon the internal maladies which plagued the Empire, he is rather dubious concerning the degree of success experienced by Diocletian and Constantine in curing those economic, social and political sores. Granted, the political genius of these two men was capable of restoring a temporary vitality and stability to the Empire, but nothing could stop this internal degradation which continued with increased propulsion in the fourth and fifth centuries. Diocletian and Constantine were able to cover the outward signs of the disease, but the malignancy which

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[9] Ibid., p. 386.

had worked its way into the spiritual fibers of classical life could not be removed by the most skillful political surgeon.[10]

One of the key problems which must be considered in this transition from Ancient to Medieval civilization, as we have encountered already in the works of Dopsch and Pirenne, is the persistence of Roman political institutions in the West after the settlement of the Germans. Essentially, Lot would agree that those institutions to which the intruders had fallen heir continued to function with some degree of efficiency throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. The Visigoths, who were masters of Spain and two-thirds of Gaul, were no more than federates to the Empire, serving often quite admirably in the Roman service.[11] Although King Euric (468) repudiated the theoretical sovereignty of the Emperor, there still existed recognition of the Roman Empire. For example, one hundred years after the death of Euric, Visigothic coins still bore the name of the Emperor.[12] Furthermore, documents of the council continued to be dated in the Roman fashion with the name of the council in place. Also, the Roman financial administration continued with its defects and the legislation was entirely Roman.

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[10]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Age (New York, 1931) p. 60.

[11]Ibid., p. 243.

[12]Ibid., p. 245.

This sustenance of their political inheritance can be seen among other German tribes as well as with the Goths. The Burgundians were long conscious of their dependence in relation to the imperial government and constantly turned to the Emperor for their appointment of Roman titles.[13] It is also known that the Franks were often on the best of terms with the imperial government in Constantinople. Even those Frankish kings who were opposed to the sovereignty of the Emperor were not capable of becoming completely independent of the imperial tentacles. Of all the Germanic tribes, the Vandals in Africa were probably the most hostile to imperial control, but even they were careful to maintain many of the well established institutions of the Romans, such as their economic system.[14]

Thus, while it can be said that Lot essentially agrees with the "continuity" of the German's rich inheritance, this statement must be made with reservation. It is true they continued in many respects to carry on the trend of events, but the critical point is that which they had inherited had already experienced radical alterations before they received it.

Beginning with the civil chaos in the second half of the second century, it is evident that the political organization of Rome was experiencing profound changes. As a

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[13] Ibid., p. 246.

[14] Ibid., p. 248.

measure of expediency a permanent dictatorship was entrusted to the first citizen of the state, the Emperor, for the remedying of the social and political upheavals which threatened the existence of the Roman Republic.[15] Although the imperial magistracy did not aim at substituting a monarchy for the republic, this was what ultimately transpired.

It is precisely at the end of the second century that one can see an event taking place which reveals the true nature of the Roman Empire. With the assassination of the Emperor Alexander Severus and of his mother, we see in full light without concealment, the fundamental vice of Rome.[16] The Roman Empire, despite its appearance of brilliance, has no constitution. It rests on force alone, on brute force let loose by the lowest appetites. The true wielder of power in Rome was not the Emperor nor the Senate, but the army which proceeded to make and destroy possessors of the purple at will.[17] It is not possible here to retrace the history of the so-called period of the thirty tyrants; nevertheless, political upheavals continued to mount and by the end of the third-century had nearly shattered the Roman world to fragments. It was the appearance of

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[15] Ibid., p. 6.

[16] Ibid., p. 8.

[17] Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe (New York, 1932), pp. 34, 35. This work presents a conclusion concerning the political maladies of Rome that is very similar to Lot's.

Diocletian upon the front that marked the return to a relatively stable position and prevented the Empire from succumbing at this early date. Thus, we can see by the time the Germans effected their encroachment of the imperial soil, the Empire was already dying, "like an old man expiring from decay."

Still another thesis put forth concerning the beginning of the Middle Ages is that of H. St. L. B. Moss which stresses the death of Theodosius in 395 A.D. as the epoch making moment. At the death of Theodosius, the Empire was divided between his two sons, Arcadius, aged eighteen, inheriting the Eastern portion, and Honorius, aged eleven, the Western. This division in itself did not mark a new event. The power had been divided before this time and there were certain differences long existing between the Western provinces whose culture and city-life were largely the creation of Rome, and the Eastern district which still retained the Hellenistic traidition.[18] It was, however, from this time that the East and West began to drift apart until they were no longer reconcilable.

Yet, it is important to note that in the eyes of the fourth century contemporaries, the Empire was still one and indivisible. This continuity was recognized by the barbarians themselves and some of their leaders genuinely

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[18] H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1935) p. 14.

supported it.[19] Long after 476 A.D., the date most textbooks record as the fall of Rome, the years were still dated by the names of the two consuls, one in Rome, the other in Constantinople; and imperial legislation was still enacted in the name of both Emperors.

Professor Moss sees the stream of political events in the fifth and sixth centuries following two separate channels. Those areas outside of Italy were in a more rapid state of monarchical development than those within Italy. In areas such as Spain and Gaul the Roman senate had dwindled into a municipal council.[20] From the third century crisis onward, the course of political events within the Empire was marked by the desire for stability and this was secured by a resolute fixing and simplifying of all the elements of administration.[21] The Empire had to be saved at the expense of the public and this led to the development of a monarchy exercising strong efforts to turn the whole organism into a standardized machine for producing money and necessities. Some small degree of stability may have been achieved, but as we shall see later in the social effects of this critical period, it left the Empire idle and lifeless.

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[19] Ibid., p. 15.

[20] Ibid., p. 24.

[21] Ibid., p. 65.

Following the invasions monarchy still existed, but it was not of the Roman variety. The German kings were first and foremost military leaders and their success on the battlefield had increased their power immensely. Professor Moss agrees with Dopsch on this point, but he does not see the brilliance in it which blinds Dopsch. The German monarchy, which was being formulated along the fringe of the Empire, stood in contrast to that which had existed under Diocletian and Constantine. The assembly of free men which had continued to exist among the Germans under the late Roman Emperors, gave way under the Germanic kings to a new nobility of service gathered around the king in the form of seneschals, marshalls, constables, and other positions of civil and military authority. When compared to the Roman hierarchy of officials this system was very primitive.[22]

The Italian kingdom of Theodoric stood apart from those of the other German rulers, for here was employed extensive efforts to preserve Roman civilization.[23] Theodoric ruled over the Roman population of Italy as the Emperor's vice regent. There were no coins struck in his name and his laws were merely "edicts" applicable only to the Italian provinces. Here the Roman civil service remained

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[22] Ibid., p. 65.

[23] Ibid., p. 66.

intact; and at the courts there were no seneschals or marshalls, but practorion prefects. The senate continued to sit and was honored by Theodoric. Thus, we can conclude from this important analysis that the political transition did not occur at the same pace in all the Empire, but varied in different localities.

The monarchy, to which reference has already been made several time, is one of the more significant issues by which we can measure the degree of political continuity experienced in the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.

The change from a "magistracy" to a "monarchy", which received its impetus under Diocletian, was first sketched by Edward Gibbon in 1778. The picture which he presented of the political transition possessed a mechanical rigidity which gave it the false appearance of being the creation of a theorist.[24] The constitutional reforms of Diocletian were not the results of a priori speculation of a political theorist, but came about simply as a force of circumstance.

On the day following Diocletian's ascension to the throne (284), he realized that he would be no more successful in combatting the power of the army and retaining the reins of government within his own hands than his predecessors had been, unless certain changes were invoked. It was

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[24]Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, II, p. 385.

only too obvious that in the future the Empire could no longer be directed by a single ruler.[25] Wisdom suggested that Diocletian meet the situation half way and provide himself with a colleague who was neither a rival nor an enemy. Diocletian's attention was gained by the commander-in-arms, Maximian, to whom he was already bound by a close tie of friendship. Maximian, albeit unlettered and rude, was a superior military figure and consented to being the hands for the brain which was precisely what Diocletian was seeking.

Even this measure proved to be insufficient. The attacks of the Persians in Asia, and the Germans in Europe were too much for the two "Augusti." Thus, in 293, Diocletian went a step further in the division of power with the two Emperors taking a lieutenant who received the actual sovereignty, but with the title of "Caesar" which left them in subordination to his Augustus. The supreme power was divided, but there was no dismemberment of the Empire; legislative and administrative unity remained theoretically in the hands of the two "Augusti", but actually it was exercised undivided by Diocletian who remained the mainspring of the mechanism. Thus, what existed actually was an embryonic court with Diocletian at the head.[26]

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[25]Ferdinand Lot, p. 13.

[26]Ibid., p. 14.

The task of transforming the Empire from a magistracy to a monarchy which was undertaken by Diocletian, was continued by Constantine and his successors.[27] The palace and the court became the center of the State and the Empire was wholly contained therein. The old organs of sovereignty were no more than a shadow. The senate, stripped of its prerogatives, was a mere ruin. Although the senate did remain as a social class, more so in the East than in the West, the government became a court government with all its pettiness.

William Carroll Bark agrees that Diocletian and Constantine were powerful administrators and reformers, but "their methods in an extremely complicated situation calling for extraordinary insight, finesse, and encouragement of individual talent were imperceptive, clumsy and oppressive."[28] Dopsch and Pirenne may speak of "continuity" of the political inheritance of the Germanic tribes, as do Lot and Moss with specific reservations, but the emphasis which the first two place upon this rich inheritance is misleading in that what actually remained was only fool's gold. By the end of the sixth century, the ambitious monarchical regimes were little more than facades hiding a wide variety of grave political ills.[29] There may have remained some

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[27] Ibid., p. 86.

[28] William Carroll Bark, Origins of the Medieval World (Stanford, 1958) p. 42.

[29] Richard E. Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire (Ithaca, 1960) p. 39.

similitude of the old imperial order in the use of Roman administration and the recognition of the supremacy of the Emperor, but does this mean the Empire was saved? If so, it was only in the striking phrase of Rostovtzeff, as "a vast prison for scores of millions of men."[30] It is only when we turn to the economic, social, and cultural conditions of the third through the sixth centuries that this phrase attains fuller meaning.

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[30] M. Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, 1st ed., (Oxford, 1926) p. 478 (The second edition of this work which appeared in 1957 is in two volumns and contains many additional notes.)

Chapter III

ECONOMIC TRANSITION (3rd-6th Centuries)

Although it has required a legion of scholars working in many areas to rent the shroud of ignorance which so long enrapped the early Middle Ages, few of them deserve more credit than those who undertook the arduous task of reconstructing the edifice of late Roman and early Medieval economic institutions. While their fields of source material often appeared barren, the final harvest was plenteous, in that much was accomplished toward breaking, or at least changing, the entire concept of a "Middle Age."

Just as the cultivation of any virgin field of research is often subject to a stunted yield as a result of the scholar's biases and misconceptions, the original spade work in the economic institution of antiquity proved to be no exception. Many of the pioneers on this frontier, such as Henri Pirenne, were led astray as a result of their being blinded by the past brilliance of classical civilization. They could not conceive of a civilization possessing the grandeur which the Romans had once possessed, falling into a state of internal decay and succumbing so early in life. As a result of their blindness, they created a picture of late Roman and early Medieval economic institutions as

possessing a vitality and stability which actually did not exist. Although the errors of these early pathfinders are in our own age evident, as we shall see, it would be more than a minor misdemeanor to dismiss this original work as being futile, in that it was the labors of these men which served as the vital catalyst which solidified future interpretations.

Viewing, once more, the posthumously published work of Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne, we see the author exercising the same exuberant verbosity in stressing the economic continuity of classical civilization throughout this so-called "dark age", as he exercised in stressing the political continuity. He persistently maintains that while the appearance of the Germans may have initiated a brief reign of chaos, the calm returned after the tempest leaving the Mediterranean unity as it had existed prior to the invasions.[1] The author erroneously sees numerous utterances in the work of Gregory of Tours as indications that the economic unity of the Mediterranean continued to exist until the seventh and eighth centuries when the "mare nostra" finally became a Moslem lake.

Through the colored glasses of Pirenne this thesis of an economic continuity can easily be validated by a close scrutiny of the primary sources concerning the commercial

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[1]Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne, (New York, 1939), p. 75.

activity of the day. He became extremely dogmatic in reference to the flourishing commercial movement which he saw existing between the Eastern and Western portions of the Mediterranean. Although the emminent British scholar, Norman H. Baynes, has since suggested that the economic unity of the Mediterranean was shattered in the fifth century by the Vandal pirate fleet in Africa, Pirenne dismissed these piracies of the barbarians as only a hindrance to the trade which continued to move as actively as ever.[2]

In support of this extensive commercial activity which Pirenne sees existing, great emphasis is placed upon the large number of Oriental merchants that were present within the West during the fifth and sixth centuries. With the chief commercial agents of the day being the Syrians from the East, the author sees the redundant references to their presence as being proof of a commercial activity. Had there not been a considerable profit rendered during this period the appearance of the Syrians within the records of the West would have vanished much sooner than they did. Yet, Southern Gaul leaves evidence of large number of these Oriental merchants whose business it was to transport merchandise from the East to the West; and in addition to

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[2]Norman H. Baynes, "The Decline of Roman Power in Western Europe," The Journal of Roman Studies, XXXIII (1943), p.29-35. Archibald Lewis, Naval Power and Trade in the Mediterranean A. D. 500-1000, (Princeton, 1951), p.19; believes Baynes exaggerates the power of the Vandal fleet.

those who traveled to and fro there was also a large number who established permanent residence within Gaul.[3]

Further proof of a commercial continuity during the post-invasion period is the large number of luxuries that were to be found in the West. Frequent reference is made by Gregory of Tours to the numerous ivory carvings, decorative liturgical tunics, oriental curtains, and silks which existed in the West and could have had as their origins no other place than the Eastern Mediterranean. Also, there was a prodigious amount of table luxuries which must have proceeded from the East. The wines of Syria could be found in large quantities and the bitter herbs of Egypt were imported for ascetic consumption during the Lenten season. But most important was the extensive spice trade that existed.[4] M. Pirenne thinks it would be impossible to exaggerate the significance of Oriental spices in the West, in that they continued after the Germanic invasions, as before them, to form an important constituent of the everyday diet. Spices were to be found on practically every table in the West.

While the material already mentioned was essential in Pirenne's effort to support his economic thesis, one of the most vital points was the amount of gold that existed in the West after the invasion. If there was such an

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[3]Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne, p. 82.

[4]Ibid., p. 89.

extensive commercial activity it would demand an equally extensive amount of gold to have been present. Here Pirenne did not falter as he saw the Germanic kings, quite successfully, employing the imperial economic system. The abundance of gold which Pirenne saw flowing in the West at this time could not be described by even his lucrative storehouse of adjectives.

The Roman gold "solidus," which had been adjusted by Constantine, continued to serve as the monetary unit throughout the Empire. This monetary system, with which the Germans had long been acquainted while serving the Empire, was preserved after their final triumph as the accepted financial standard. Nothing attributes more clearly the persistence of the economic unity of the West during the fifth and sixth centuries than this retention of the Roman monetary system.[5] The economic standards of the barbarians were those of Rome and no alterations were made until the introduction of the silver monometallism during the Carolinian period. For Pirenne, there is no doubt that the economic unity of Rome continued with all its splendor into the post-invasion period.

Alfons Dopsch is another who maintains it is impossible to represent the post-invasion period as one when free commerce was restricted. The Germans, after peacefully

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[5] Ibid., p. 107.

penetrating the Empire, did not upset the existing order of trade, but actually served as a stimulant to it. The Gothic kings looked very favorably upon commercial activity and in the course of events even passed significant legislation which resulted in increased activity.[6] The Germans had long been in contact with Roman economic organizations and had developed considerable knowledge of its functions which permitted a continuation of these activities after their final settlement.

In regards to the large number of Oriental merchants living in the Western Mediterranean and their transporting from the East such products as silks, spices, paper and rare wines, it is wrong to suppose that trade in this early period of the Middle Ages was carried on exclusively, or even mainly, by foreigners, and that the trade was limited to luxuries.[7] The monasteries were not at this early date self-sufficient and yet they were capable of supplying their needs by purchasing such items as cloth and grain in the local market place and these are certainly not luxury items. Also, much of this trade was being carried on by the local population in addition to the efforts of the Syrians. Even the clergy can be seen engaging in extensive trade, under assumed names, in an effort to reap some of the lucrative rewards. The German participation in commercial activities

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[6]Alfons Dopsch, The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization (New York, 1937), pp.340-41.

[7]Ibid., p. 344.

should not be difficult to accept, says Professor Dopsch, because archaeological findings have proved that trade had been going on between Rome and the Germans since the third century, which gave them a considerable background in economic dealings.[8] This long established trade did not cease with the fall of Rome, but just assumed a new partner. Thus, the migration of the Germans into the Empire had not created economic chaos, but actually made new connections which in return created increased commercial activity.[9]

Migrations have always brought mankind closer together and has often brought different civilizations into touch so that gulfs were bridged and cultures could be transmitted one to the other. The migration of the Germans proved to be just such an event in that it eventually stimulated the economic life of the Mediterranean which continued to flourish until the ninth century.

Returning once more to the evidence produced by Dopsch's grave-diggings and other archaeological endeavors, he concludes that evidence has been sufficient to support the belief of a continuous employment of the Roman coinage by the Germans after the invasions. The coins which have been discovered illustrate that the Germans were familiar with the Roman currency and wanted to preserve it.[10] The lack

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[8] Ibid., pp. 347-48.

[9] Ibid., p. 348.

[10] Ibid., p. 359.

of German coins during the early invasion period does not mean they were incapable of producing their own, but actually indicates there was such a great abundance of Roman coins that the Germans had no need of minting new. When they did commence striking their own coins, which embodied the effigy of the Emperor, they were so genuinely produced that it is difficult to distinguish them from the Roman.[11] According to Dopsch, this is sufficient evidence to support the belief that the Germans actually possessed sufficient knowledge and craftsmanship to continue the imperial economic order.

While Pirenne and Dopsch are in general agreement concerning the continuity of the established economic order during the fifth and sixth centuries, this does not mean they are necessarily correct in their conclusion. Pirenne exhibits a unique ability to take the arrival of a few ships in the West, of which we are not even certain they came directly from the East, and construct a flourishing trade; while at the same time Professor Dopsch can make a mint out of the appearance of a few coins. William C. Bark may not have been too far wrong when he concluded that these men had not only the ability to make bricks without straw, but at times they didn't even need clay.[12] In order that a more

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[11] Ibid., p. 359.

[12] William C. Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, (Stanford, 1958), p. 13.

accurate account may be formulated of the late Roman and early medieval economic conditions, it will be necessary to turn now to the crisis of the third century and view its effect upon the economic institutions.

In the words of Ferdinand Lot, "It is an established fact that the Roman world underwent a serious economic upheaval . . . from the second half of the second century onwards."[13] With the advancement of the third century, this decline, which expressed itself most vividly in a debasement of the coinage, became more and more marked. The once stable imperial weight of the coins has now become extremely irregular and their make abominable. The portion of the base metal had risen to an astonishing 98.5 percent, with the silver coins becoming no more than a piece of copper or lead dipped in silver wash.[14] While Diocletian and Constantine were able to restore a sound coinage of the silver products, the gold "solidus," which was the basis of their economy, was already becoming rare. In spite of the measures to curb the economic maladies, unmistakable signs made it clear that ancient society was in a state of economic retrogression with the monetary economy yielding more and more to a natural economy.

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[13]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Ages, (New York, 1931), p. 55. H. St. L.B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages 395-814,(Oxford, 1935), p. 8 and Robert Latouche, The Birth of the Western Economy (New York, 1961),p. 3, also agrees that the Empire experienced profound economic upheavals during this period.

[14]Lot, p. 56; William Carroll Bark, p. 51.

Thus far there has been no mention of a natural economy because with all the gold which Pirenne and Dopsch saw existing within the West, they would have dismissed as ignorance any attempt to see the slightest degree of a natural economy prevailing within the Empire. However, the verdict of recent scholarship would not coincide with the conclusions of these two historians. By the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries, the Roman state had started the practice of receiving the land tax most often in kind and to these receipts in kind corresponded salaries in kind.[15] This is not meant to assert that a complete change from pay in money to pay in kind took place in the third century. There was by no means a thorough replacement of gold economy by a natural economy. It is best qualified as being a partial natural economy. As Professor M. Rostovtzeff has pointed out, there were wide variations of conditions within the Empire, and what went on in one part at any given time did not, of necessity, go on in all.[16] Evidence of this can be seen in the Eastern portion of the Empire as this segment of the ancient world was able to restore a relatively stable economy while the West passed into greater poverty.

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[15]Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 57; Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, p. 53; Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages, p. 9.

[16]Rostovtzeff, "The Decay of the Ancient World and Its Economic Explanation." Economic Historical Review, II, (1929-1930), pp. 200-201.

As a result of these profound economic upheavals which infested the ancient world, society became very disillusioned, indebted, and insecure with their present stations in life. As the very capable French scholar , Robert Latouche, has pointed out in his work, The Birth of Western Economy, the problems of the second and third centuries became so devastating in the fourth and fifth centuries that they were highlighted by an extensive exodus to the large estates.[17] Many individuals sought security by placing themselves into the hands of men more powerful in order that they might gain their guardianship and protection.[18] The residents of the city left their declining and insecure positions to seek refuge on the large estates. The small, free farmers, that were numerous at this time, became so indebted and unable to meet the demands of the fisc that they also relinquished their status as freemen to gain protection from their more powerful neighbor, the large landlord.

With the eclipse of city life the rural economy assumed a position of greatest importance in the survival of the medieval world. As we shall see in the next chapter, so significant was the agrarian class that the government was impelled to take action which would ensure the continued services of this economic entity. More important, however,

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[17]Robert Latouche, p. 21.

[18]Ibid., p. 23.

than the economic aspects of the large estates, was that they represented one of the few institutions that was capable of existing amidst an otherwise chaotic world. This system which brought together former slaves now freemen, small landowners weighed down with debts, barbarians, and the discontented elements of city life, was so successful that it was later to be adopted by the Germanic aristocracy and in the process became one of the moulding attributes of the new Western world.[19]

Additional repercussions set in motion by these economic upheavals can be seen in the deterioration of the military order. With the absence of specie entailing the disappearance of pay, the costly Roman army was soon replaced by barbarian troops using their won weapons, fighting under their own chiefs, and receiving land as payment for their services. Professor Lot is correct in his conclusion that, "the inevitable consequences of a system which allows services rendered to be rewarded by means of salaries in kind or the distribution of land...is the emergence of the so-called feudal system."[20]

We are now faced with a problem of highest importance. How can we explain the fact that the Roman world, economically prosperous at the end of the Republic period and during the

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[19] Ibid., p. 19.

[20] Latouche, p. 123.

first two centuries of the Empire, was now irreparably ruined? As Professor Lot explains it, the population had been steadily decreasing in number and their buying power was very poor.[21] The man of antiquity had few needs. Their food was simple as was the clothing which they required. Thus, with the frugality and simplicity in which man lived there was little opportunity for the development of industry.[22] Even the rich lived off the products of their own estates and their greatest need was in luxuries, which involved only a fragment of society and was absolutely inadequate to create or maintain a thriving industry.

While it is true that commerce held on infinitely more important positions in antiquity and the Middle Ages than did industry, even this never reached any tremendous volume in the West. Producing little the Roman world had little to sell, and as William C. Bark has stated, this unfavorable balance of trade created a constant drain on the Western economy.[23] After the transference of the capital from West to East in 330 A.D., the center of world trade had moved with it and from this time on Constantinople grows at the expense of Rome.[24]

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[21]Arthur, E. R. Boak, Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Empire, (Ann Arbor, 1955). Moses I. Finley, "Manpower Shortage," The Journal of Roman Studies, XLVIII (1958), p. 156-164, takes opposition to the significance which Boak places on the manpower shortage and states this is not the key to the decline of the Empire.

[22]Lot, p. 73.

[23]Bark, p. 47.

[24]Moss, p. 16.

In spite of the valid warnings of Professors Norman H. Baynes and M. Rostovtzeff, too little emphasis is still placed upon the role of the East concerning the economic life of the late Empire. It is only by looking at the East that the decline of the West can best be understood. What was saved out of the wreckage of the third century and the reforms of the fourth? Certainly not the Empire of Augustus. What was salvaged was a new opportunity for the Eastern Empire, and it is a mistake to consider that the complete Empire of classical times continued intact. The old Roman Empire gave up the ghost in the rigors, expedients, and compulsions that brought new life for the East. The East had experienced economic recovery but the West was quite otherwise. The East curbed those tendencies that ran free in the West.

As we have already seen in the writings of Pirenne and Dopsch, the Western economy, if not closely examined, will tend to give a false impression of robustness which it actually did not possess. Certainly there was gold remaining in the West through the sixth century, but how extensive was it and how long did it remain there? It is certain that a good deal of it had already found its way back to the East from whence it came.[25] It is well known that Constantinople escaped capture from the barbarians time after time by bribing the would-be attackers with gold,

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[25]Bark, p. 48.

whereas the West had to go through such difficulties without this advantage.[26] The East did not hesitate to sacrifice the West, nor Rome itself, as can be seen with the Visigoths and again with the Huns, in an effort to protect herself. The meaning is clear: the East could afford to buy protection with money; the poorer West could not and therefore had to suffer the fate the East escaped.

The West, no longer self-sustaining and an active partner, was in the process of being gleaned; its provinces were being plundered, its cities destroyed or abandoned. The trade of the West had fallen into the hands of the Oriental merchants, primarily the Syrians and Jews.[27] It is true, as Pirenne stated, that these Eastern merchants did prosper or they would not have remained in the West, but this was made possible, primarily, by the supply of gold that was arriving periodically in the West as tribute money to the Merovingian kings from the Eastern Emperors. This gave the West an appearance of prosperity which it actually did not possess. From the Eastern point of view these merchants were bold, capable businessmen, able to make money even under the unproductive, adverse conditions in the West. From the Western point of view they were foreigners, hated because of their wealth and Byzantine connections.[28]

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[26] Ibid., p. 48.

[27] Lot, p. 81.

[28] Bark, p. 50.

Professor Latouche is correct when he concludes that the presence of these Syrian merchants in the West was not to suggest prosperity, but decline. It was the deterioration of commercial activity resulting from the great invasions that spread over Gaul and Italy which brought these eastern traders with hope of making a substantial profit from the bundle of wares they had brought with them. Moreover, the goods in which they dealt were not always respectable with slaves being the most profitable of their wares.[29] Contrary to what Dopsch may believe, the Germans were too primitive in their economic manners to bring order out of the chaos and this presented tremendous opportunity for the foreign merchants.[30]

Also, as Professor Norman Baynes has pointed out, even the presence of these merchants in the West does not necessarily indicate that a coastal trade existed. The term "merchant" has been expanded by modern day economic historians to include more than was originally intended. Many of these persons who bore the title "merchant" were involved primarily with local trade. This is by no means to indicate that they were in communication with the East nor that their numbers were being replenished by new arrivals.[31]

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[29]Latouche, p. 123.

[30]Ibid.,p. 123

[31]Norman Baynes, "The Decline of the Roman Power in Western Europe. Some Modern Explanations," The Journal of Roman Studies, XXXIII (1943), pp. 310-316.

There is actually little to suggest that there was any tremendous commercial activity existing during the post-invasion period.

By the end of the sixth century, it is inconceivable to think that the barbarians continued an extensive economic program, for there was little to continue. It must be added, however, that there were efforts to use those economic institutions which did remain. There is evidence to support the fact that they continued to collect the indirect tax, such as tolls, but at the same time, were incapable of collecting the direct tax which would have been their greatest source of revenue. It is now evident that by no stretch of the imagination can it be maintained that a brilliant economy existed. Trade was stagnant, the coinage was debased, gold was rapidly being drained from the West, mines were depleted, and a partial natural economy was prevailing. Any accurate statement concerning the continuity of an economy order following the invasions must, of necessity, include these grave reservations.

In conclusion, we can see that the actual beginning of the Middle Ages economically was not a catastrophic break, but rather a gradual transition which permitted the Germans to retain a small degree of the classical economic order. Had the Germans been further removed from the stages of barbarism than they were, they may be could have salvaged more. But as we shall see, the events following the sixth century became even more deplorable than before.

Chapter IV

SOCIAL TRANSITION (3rd-6th Centuries)

In spite of the rigorous reform efforts of Diocletian and Constantine, the tide of social life within the Empire had descended to a level of rigidity and lifelessness. That there was no political life goes without saying, but there was scarcely any municipal life either. The prodigious expense of maintaining the Empire continued to mount while the ability of the populous to meet such an expense continually dwindled. The demands of the fisc had become most unbearable. The position of the Empire could be likened to that of a ruined landlord who tries to live with the same degree of public display after the cessation of his prosperity as he did before. With the growing strength of the barbarians and the inability of the State to cope with them, society lived with the constant threat of invasion. Not only had the Empire lost all power of conquest, but was rapidly losing even its capacity for assimilating the barbarians. With these conditions surrounding them the oppressed public became so ill at ease at their present position in life that exhaustive efforts were being made to flee it. Peasants were leaving the country, workmen abandoned their trade, and the decurion fled the municipal

senate.[1]

Haunted by the memory of the anarchy which had so nearly shattered the Empire in the third century by renewed threats of disorder, by the stirring of the barbarian hordes just beyond its ill-defended frontier, the government in the fourth century could see but one means of securing the Empire, which was vacilating amidst instability, and that was to be invoked at the expense of the public. It was during this low tide of social life that the government had recourse to the desperate measures of forcing men to remain in their economic status, regardless of the hardships which it inflicted, in an effort to preserve production, public service, and tax income.[2] Efficacious steps were taken to eliminate every possible outlet through which escape could be made. The daily watchword became, "Everyone at his post, or Roman civilization would perish." Thus, with this immobilizing philosophy dominant, the whole organism of society was soon transformed into a blighting standardized machine, destroying in the process the last remains of the already waning public spirit.

The method that we are describing by which various elements of society became bound to their stations was the institution enforced by Diocletian known as the Caste System. Although this institution was by no means novel at this time,

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[1]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Ages, (New York) 1931, p. 100.

[2]William Carroll Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, (Stanford, 1958), p. 47, 48.

as the ancient monarchies of Asia and Egypt had long used it to tie the peasants to the soil, it was now being expanded to include practically every phase of life.[3]

In their efforts to save the Empire, the emperors sought to embrace everyone that was essential to the continuation of the classical tradition. The first group to be affected by this regimentation was naturally those public servants whose fidelity to the state was most urgently needed.[4]

With much of the trouble existing within the Empire during the third and fourth centuries springing from the economic upheavals and the continual diminishment of specie, the State owned and operated mines became one of the earliest institutions to be regimented. With hope to curb these economic maladies, employment in the imperial mines consequently became regimented and eventually even hereditary. For who would have accepted voluntarily a life so horrible as that of an ancient miner?

Following a similar course the vast number of artisans who were needed to maintain the splendor of Rome, with their production of essential domestic utensils and other more decorative handicraft, were also affected by these saving efforts of the emperors, as their stations in life became

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[3]Ferdinand Lot, p. 108.

[4]Ibid., p. 101.

bound by a life sentence which was to pass from father to son. The son of a craftsman was required to marry the daughter of a fellow craftsman in an imperial attempt to perpetuate this institution, and if any artisan even contemplated escape from his position in society he was readily subjected to adverse treatment.[5]

As the regimentation of society continually gained in momentum, a comparable fate was soon to befall all civil servants. The armourers and smiths of the imperial factory were bound to their stations. Cartwrights, veterinary surgeons, weavers, and all posts of significance became frozen in organized "colleges," subject to a military type regulation and discipline. Those charged with the transportation of taxes, which were now being paid largely in kind, and with the preparation of these receipts for public usage, were also bound socially. The maintenance of buildings and even the gladiatorial games became tightly regulated institutions.[6] Theatrical personnel and charioteers were forbidden to leave the cities and even became subject to the obligation of fixed residence. It was only through such means as this that the State was assured of the continual service of its personnel.

Unfortunately, this system did not remain as a chain to bind civil servants alone, but was eventually expanded

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., p. 103.

to include other phases of life as well. For example, the imperial military organization was touched by this caste system. Roman citizens had long ceased to do military duty and the responsibility of recruiting new man power had become the task of the large landlords. Every lord was required to provide at least one or more recruits from amongst the so-called free men living on his estate.[7] Once these men were enlisted they were required to take an oath of allegiance which bound them to service, leaving their position unaltered, until their strength was exhausted which usually involved over twenty years of military duty. The soldiers were permitted to enter a contract of marriage, but the children of such a union was to be the property of the army. It is neither surprising nor difficult to understand that the value of an army whose function had fallen to the bonds of strict servitude soon became a disgrace and their achievements exasperatingly poor. Antiquity would have no doubt tumbled much earlier had it not adopted the practice of filling its ranks with barbarians.[8]

As we have already seen, by the close of the third century, it was no longer plausible for the Empire to attempt to survive from the rapidly diminishing fruits of commerce and industry. Thus, the basis of survival passed into the

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[7] Ibid., p. 105.

[8] Ibid., p. 106.

hands of peasants.[9] With this class now occupying such a strategic position within the life of the Empire it became necessary to coerce them in an effort to stabilize their production. Having become the new life line of classical civilization, the station of the coloni, or free farmer, was rapidly regimentized, placing them within the same strata of social organization as their contemporaries.[10]

During the early history of Rome, which witnessed the transformation from a Republic to an Empire, agricultural production never posed a real problem, as the labor force of the Empire was being steadily replenished by the slaves taken in conquest. However, as the period of Roman development drew to a close the captured labor supply began to diminish, making it necessary for the large landowners to develop a new method of production. The system which was then adopted was characterized by a division of the large estates into two sections with the lord retaining one portion and leasing the other to tenants. The portion that was retained by the owners was by far the lesser of the two, being composed primarily of his dwelling, a small area of arable land, and most of the forest and meadow region. The other portion, which was largely arable, was given to the tenants in return for a small sum of money and usually a tenth of his yield. While there were requirements placed upon the coloni, they were not strenuous and most important,

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[9] H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages, (Oxford, 1935), p.26.

[10] Bark, p. 56.

their station within society remained free.

By the end of the fourth century, the State had come to view the colonate as a vital necessity for the survival of society. With this view in mind the position of the coloni rapidly evolved from a free tenant to a position of life employment followed by a hereditary status or serfdom.[11] As Professor Moss has described it, "their personal freedom was curtailed... and if they even contemplated flight, they were to be bound in fetters."[12] The statement of Rostovtzeff of the Empire remaining as a vast prison for millions of men now seems apt indeed.[13]

City life within the Empire soon proved to be no exception as it too was destined to experience the same end which had bound the rest of society. With the decline of the economic status of antiquity, many of the important old families were left impverished. Preferring the peace and possibility of recovery which the countryside had to offer, many of them were fleeing the ruinous city life to seek recluse in their rural dwellings.

By a curious irony of circumstances, the state, which bound the colonus to the land and forbade him to leave it, kept the imperial agents (curiales), in the town and prevented them from escaping into the country.[14] During

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[11]Lot, p. 111.

[12]Moss, p. 26.

[13]M. Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire (Oxford, 1926) p.478.

[14]Robert Latouche, The Birth of Western Economy (New York, 1961), p.20.

the heyday of the Pax Romana, the collection of taxes had been assured by groups of publicans to whom it brought in enormous profits. From the end of the second century, however, volunteers could no longer be found for the task, since the tax was coming in slowly or not at all, and tax-farming had ceased to be a source of gain; it had even become a crushing burden. From that time onward the task of the curiales became an onerous one. The large landowners, for example, not only refused to cooperate with the curiales, but often armed their retainers to drive away the would-be tax collector. This, along with the numerous bad harvests, tended to ruin the curiales in that they were forced to make-up any deficiencies out of their own finances.[15] The result of this was that those offices of honor, once eagerly solicited by influential citizens, were no longer sought after. As was pointed out in Chapter Three, those on whom this office devolved fled from the towns seeking refuge in the country.

From the fourth century onwards rigorous measures, occupying several sections of the Theodosian Code, were being taken to slow down the exodus, to tie down the unfortunate curiales and prevent them from leaving the towns and moving their possessions to the country. By this particular

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[15] Moss, p. 29.

method of compulsion both the curiales and their descendents were forced to stay on in the cities and to continue to hold these offices which were certain to bring ruination to them in the future.[16]

The decay of industry and commerce since the end of the third century had contributed immensely to the rising significance of the large landed proprietors. In the fourth and fifth centuries Roman society could best be described as agrarian, with land remaining as the only stable source of wealth. These large landlords had become the monarchs of the countryside.

Within the same wave which brought this rising importance of the land, we find also the power of the patronage system expressing itself. The large landowners were acquiring, or claiming by force, individual rights which soon withdrew them from the authority of the magistrates. We have already made note of the problem which arose concerning the collectors of the imperial tax and the power which the landed aristocracy wielded concerning this issue. The lords also began to turn their estates into asylums where they received runaway slaves, the curiales who wanted to escape the burdens of city life, and anyone who had need or reason to escape the pressures of society.[17] The large

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[16]Latouche, p. 22.

[17]Lot, pp. 128, 129.

landowner came not only to command the coloni, but also any free man who lived in or around his estate. Under this system of power, in which the lords became judge and jury in the lives of their captives, most of the middle class was absorbed by their powerful tentacles. Exerting the patronage system to its limits, the landlords were capable of acquiring not only forced labor, but even small armies which in the end gave them sufficient strength to challenge the power of the State.[18]

With the regimentation of society and the growth of the aristocracy, most of the small landowners lost all that they possessed and naturally society would no longer have any interest in the maintenance of the Roman jurisdiction which had ruined them.[19] The Roman populous had been forced not only to give up their homes and possessions, but even worse, their privileges as free men. They had lost their place and rank within society. Being divided into two unequal groups, with the middle class being primarily displaced, society has already become medieval. We are witnessing here the development of a new society emerging from the ruin of classical civilization. Call it feudal as does Professor Lot, or only agrarian, as does Bark, but it is

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[18]Bark, p.80.

[19]Moss, p. 28; Bark, p. 80; Lot, p. 186.

certainly destined for a full-fledged feudalism in the future.

What we have been viewing here as a great social change, namely the destruction of the middle class, the acquisitions of many small landholders by the great proprietors, and the resulting vast increase in the power of the landed aristocracy, was the basic feature of the transition from late Roman to medieval society. This was a change from a more advanced, yet no longer workable imperial regime, to the simpler, but more practical, regime of the landed aristocracy.

The significance of this change, as Professor Bark has pointed out, could easily be misconstrued if not closely examined. There was feudalism existing in many areas of the West, such as in Spain and Gaul, but it was not sufficiently organized at this early date to be called a "system"[20] "The common social denominator was not feudalism, but the simpler agrarian state of society which resulted from the fall of Rome and the destruction of the middle class."[21] In conclusion we can say that while Professors Lot, Bark and Moss differ in their degree of emphasis placed upon the state of society at this time, with Professor Lot stressing

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[20] Bark, p. 87.

[21] Ibid.

more the feudal aspect than either Bark or Moss, in essence they would all agree that it was the decline of Rome that brought this particular society into being, and feudalism, far from being the cause, was but one of the results of its experiments.

Without going into a repetitious account of the Pirenne thesis we can see that essentially he persists in his same error when he concludes, "there is proof the society, after the invasions, was precisely what it had been before them."[22] As the above material has already adequately illustrated and proved, there was little of classical society left to continue. Pirenne is correct in one sense with his stressing the continuity of social conditions after the Germanic invasion, in that it actually made little difference to the colonus that his master was now a barbarian and a foreigner. The significant point, as we have seen, is that poverty and loss of freedom had already engulfed society before the barbarians effected their triumph. Pirenne's failure to see this has led him to over-emphasize the ability of the Germans in maintaining classical civilization as well as in over stating the significance of the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries. As has been already suggested, these fallacies render the Pirenne thesis of little value to medieval students today.

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[22]Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne, (New York, 1939), p. 88.

Professor Dopsch, equally as persistent as Pirenne, continues to dogmatically assert that the Germanic victory in the West served as a catalyst to stimulate the existing social order. To Dopsch the post-invasion period represents a great improvement in the social order of the Empire.[23] The stone of social and economic depression which rested upon the populous was removed and a political stability was instituted for the benefit of the masses. The enslavement of free men, which prevailed during the Germanic infiltration, was brought to an end. The new government of the Germans began to enact legislation directed at the protection of the free man and curtailed the action of the landed aristocracy.[24] Both the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths passed legislation to protect society from the fetters of the landowners.[25]

Such a picture of society as the one projected by Dopsch and Pirenne, tends to present the barbarians as being more Roman than the Romans themselves, with their remedy for the profound social ills. This misleading implication which Dopsch and Pirenne offer is fostered in the prodigious misconception of the degree of culture which the Germans

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[23]Alfons Dopsch, The Economic and Social Foundation of European Civilization, (New York, 1937), p. 387.

[24]Ibid., p. 297.

[25]Ibid., p. 227.

absorbed while serving the Empire. It is doubtful that the barbarians actually possessed any extreme degree of cultural attainment or they would have been more successful in their political endeavors. As Professor Richard E. Sullivan has so accurately stated in his, Heirs of the Roman Empire, the efforts of the German rulers to establish their kingdoms on the models of the Roman government ended in ignominious failure because they were too little removed from barbarism to make such a transition.[26] "The ambitious monarchical regimes of the sixth century were little more than facades hiding a wide variety of grave political ills."[27]

From the evidence that has been presented, it is more probable that the conclusion of Professor Lot which maintains, "there was no charge in the social conditions, the large proprietors, masters of the soil, dominated society," is closer to the actual historical happenings than Dopsch's story of a tremendous social improvement. Although the social conditions at the end of the sixth century appear to be in an unpalatable state of chaos, it is out of these conditions that society is soon to settle upon a concrete basis from which the edifice of Western European society can be formed.

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[26]Richard E. Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire, (Ithaca, 1960), pp. 38, 39.

[27]Ibid., p. 39.

Chapter V

CULTURAL TRANSITION (3rd-6th Centuries)

While the negative aspects of the early Middle Ages have received voluminous attention in the historical writings of past scholars, the positive side of this period has been sorely neglected. Although modern research has done much to remedy this evil, the intellectual damage inflicted by this repetitious neglect can easily be seen in the vast number of educated persons who still fallaciously conceive of the Middle Ages as a period of darkness containing little of value for the modern mind. It is true, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, that the early Middle Ages was a period which witnessed tremendous decay. The highly developed social, political and economic order of classical civilization was gasping for its last breath and the pristine age of Rome was a part of yesterday. But these negative attributes of decay and corruption should not be interpreted as being representative of the only significance of the Middle Ages. In addition to these changes which stress the ending of the old order of life, there were also much more important developments taking place which marked the beginning of something new and quite original which was soon to be expressed in all of man's thoughts, feelings, and outward behaviour. Thus, the primary thesis of this

chapter, and essentially of the work as a whole, is that something new, distinct and in many respects original, began to express itself in the Western European portion of the Empire and the elements of this development are clearly distinguishable by the sixth century. This something new which we shall attempt to reproduce can best be described as a new way of life, the beginning of a Western European civilization.

For several generations the historiography of medieval culture was dominated by two conventional schools of thought.[1] The first school, which has rightfully been labeled as "the saving school," maintains that the culture of Europe was the same as that of Rome. They interpret the years 400-1000 A.D., as a period when the classical elements of culture were being preserved. Throughout this age of disaster they saw intellectual giants who were instrumental in salvaging classical culture from the threats of extinction. These particular scholars see the first haven of safety coming in the fourth century when the classical tradition passed into the hands of certain Church Fathers. Although these Fathers, such as SS. Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose, were men of the Church, they were also classical scholars. The work of St. Augustine was saturated with classical style

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[1]For much of the material presented in this chapter, I am greatly indebted to a series of lectures presented by Professor Richard E. Sullivan at Michigan State University during the winter of 1963.

and wording. St. Jerome revealed in his Latin Vulgate a literary style which was definitely classical while St. Ambrose was strongly influenced by the classical ethical concepts which he conveyed in his work.[2]

In addition to the valuable material retained by the Church Fathers, there were also other geniuses engaged in this saving work as well. Donatus was a grammarian who set down valuable grammatical rules for the future in addition to preserving the work of some of the real classical scholars, such as Cicero, which later served as texts to keep alive the Latin vocabulary.[3] Boethius also receives a near sacred position in the eyes of the "saving school" as he is attributed both with keeping alive the philosophical manner of thinking in a difficult age and with contributing valuable translations of Plato and Aristotle.[4] Another of those heroes was Cassiodorus who in compiling a reading program for clergymen in his Institutes contributed what was later to become an important guide to the classical authorities.[5] Isadore of Seville, a Spaniard, also contributed with his dictionary composed of a conglomeration of classical knowledge.

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[2]Sullivan, "Conventional Views," Michigan State University (January 8, 1965).

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

This saving of the classical tradition continued to be pushed along on the Western fringe of the Empire by the monks in England and Ireland who were capable classical scholars. The work of such men as these continued to mushroom until it reached its zenith during the Carolingian renaissance where all that was going to be saved was brought together under the Carolingians and this served as the raw material out of which Western Europe was to be shaped.

What this first school of thought is trying to establish is that in two places along the fringe of the Empire, Southern Europe and the British Isles, there were men who appreciated the classical past and exerted strenuous efforts to preserve it.[6] The conclusion of this first conventional school would then be that the medieval mind of Western Europe was the outgrowth of what was saved from the classical world and was marked by little that was original.

The second conventional school of thought can best be classified as the "barbarization school" with their emphasis being placed upon the deterioration of classical culture. This thesis starts with the third century where its adherents see the classical tradition undergoing a profound debasement brought about by the introduction of a foreign element into the mainstream of classical life.[7] This foreign element,

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Tenney, Frank, "Race Mixture in the Roman Empire," American Historical Review, XXI (1915-1916), 689-708.

which had its origin in the East, brought with it irrational religious practices that were detrimental to the classical culture. When this mode of thought became dominant, it began to eat away at the rational thinking of antiquity with decay being the ultimate result. To this school of thought, the Patristic Age represented not renewed life for classical culture, but a debasement. The triumph of Christianity and the barbarians marked the end of the classical tradition as can readily be seen in the bastardized language that prevailed. They cite such references as the low Latin writings of Gregory of Tours to support their thesis of a barbarization of the cultural standards of antiquity.[8] This particular chain of thought which emphasizes the termination of classical culture portrays the early Middle Ages as possessing no culture while in its embryonic stages. They would conclude that Western Europe had to reconstruct its own culture out of the same ruins which had buried the classical tradition.

There is probably some truth in both of these views, but neither are adequate for the actual conditions that prevailed. The saving thesis makes too much out of the continuing of the classical tradition while slighting the significance of the Church, and the barbarization thesis is inaccurate in that it creates a picture of Medieval Europe completely void of any cultural life. As we shall see the

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[8]Sullivan, "Conventional Views," Michigan State University (January 11, 1965).

actual culture that developed in Europe following the fall of Rome was essentially new and original, marking an epoch-making event in the course of history.

In order that we may see the true significance of this new way of life that was being formulated in the West, it is necessary to go back to the Hellenistic period and examine the formation of the classical culture in an attempt to better accentuate the contrast between the ancient and medieval traditions. That element which marked the classical tradition, above all others, was the belief borrowed from the Greek cosmologists which maintained, in general, that it was within man's power to produce a perfect social order in this life. This philosophy came into being following a careful examining of the natural order of the universe which revealed to the Greek scholars there was a perfection about nature which suggested to them that man was capable of duplicating this orderly procedure in his own human world.[9] This concept of perfection was eminent in the writings of Plato which maintained there was a connection between the things of this world and perfection. While that which you may see may not be perfect, it has the potential of perfection.[10] Aristotle added to this growing belief when he concluded that it was within man's rational powers

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[9]Sullivan, "Crisis in Classical Culture," (January 13, 1965).

[10]Ibid.

to duplicate the system of nature. Man could inaugurate perfection by simply employing these tools of logic which he possessed. Aristotle taught man to believe that perfection was within his grasp.[11]

From the work of these early Greek philosophers we have the foundation of the concept which emphasizes the perfectibility of man. This belief, as we have seen, is based upon the perfection which the Greeks saw existing within nature. Efforts to effect this concept were introduced by the Greeks although they were never able to experience ultimate success. Their formation of the Greek city-state was an attempt to create a perfect political order through which man could reach complete perfection. Every phase of the Greek life was soon dominated by this concept as we can see in the Greek drama which was written to stress the superhuman strength of man and their architecture which was designed to perfect proportion. However, the Greeks were so busy deriving new areas of life in which this philosophy could be applied that they were never able to reap the final rewards of their work.

It was not until the victorious Romans adopted this Hellenic philosophy that it finally reached its full implications. The Romans, who were busily engaged in the building of the Empire, soon achieved a tremendous knowledge of the Hellenic philosophy and this, coupled with their

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[11] Ibid.

repeated military victories, suggested to the Romans that they were destined to reach this ultimate perfection. The writings of Livy and Virgil emphasized the ideal of perfection and brought society into a realization that such a goal was truly within their grasp.[12]

Although the Roman culture was based upon the same concept of perfection as the Greeks, the Romans were more successful in effecting their ends. An emperor was soon set up as a kind of philosopher king whose task it was to establish perfect peace and harmony. They believed they could bring this perfection to the world and in the process raise their people to a new level of morality. The perfect culture was now being formulated and they called it the Pax Romana.[13] With the reign of Augustus we enter into the golden age of classical civilization. It was an age so enlightened, advanced, and saturated with positive attributes such as justice and freedom that most Romans were convinced that they had established the perfect world order.

However, as much as the intellectual wanted to believe that he had created the perfect world order, the obvious fact was that there was no perfection. From this point of view Rome was actually a failure. Here was the so-called perfect world, but it was still possible for a person such as Nero to get control of the government. This led

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

many Romans to despair. Tacitus, the historian, speaks of the perfect order with grave trouble prevailing round about it. The Empire was still plagued by wars as the barbarian hammered away at its borders. The Roman senate was not what it was expected to be as corruption was often the order of the day.[14] To the twentieth century man this does not sound sufficient to condemn the Empire because we see such corruption and chaos daily, but to the Roman anticipating perfection, this was disillusionment. This marks the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire. Here they had created the perfect society and it would not work. They had exerted their intellectual faculties to the ultimate limits in an attempt to effect this scientific perfection only to find it would not work. Wars continued, corruption prevailed, and emperors lacked the individual ability to meet the tasks required of them. The result of this disillusionment was the fall of Rome.

In the second and third centuries B.C., man began to ask questions of a very important nature. With disorder the prevailing condition of the day, man began to doubt if he was as rational as the Greeks had once claimed. We can see at this time man's disillusionment with the power of reason as he tries to find comfort and security in the supernatural. There was a tremendous rise of philosophical mysticism with trying to escape reality in a union with the spiritual world.[15]

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[14] Sullivan (January 15, 1965).

[15] Ibid.

Some, such as the Epicureans turned to material pleasures for comfort while others, like the Stoics began to accept whatever was with no worry. Many people,unable to find comfort or security in these philosophies turned to mysticism and mystery religions. Others sought refuge in the study of astrology, but all represent a flight from the power of human reason. As men began to abandon this particular world view, they began to seek a new set of beliefs to direct their life and this they found in Christianity. It was here in this age, which some men have found convenient to label as the "Age of Faith," that we find the basis for the new way of life that is to serve as the basis for Western European Civilization.

While the significance of this cultural transition has been given a more accurate presentation among present day scholars this has not always been the case. Evidence of this is readily visible as our attention is commanded once more by the writings of certain twentieth century scholars which will reveal to us not only the historigraphical trend concerning European culture, but also those characteristics which so brilliantly distinguish it from the classical tradition.

Beginning once more with the classic of Henri Pirenne, Mohammed and Charlamagne, we see that he readily admits there was a decline in the classical science, arts and letters, following the third century. He then proceeds with a brief sketch of the intellectual conditions through

the fifth and sixth century in an attempt to prove that essentially the classical tradition continued to prevail. In a vain attempt to support this thesis of a cultural continuity, Pirenne recalls the names of Theodric's two chief ministers, Boethius and Cassiodorus.[16] With two short barren paragraphs given to these extraordinarily influential men, Pirenne tries desperately to use these brief references as props for his thesis. By presenting the secular side of these two men as representatives of the continuation of the ancient school of rhetoric, he seeks to dismiss the true significance which Christianity possessed within their lives and the Empire.[17] Of Christianity, Pirenne says it is true it was accepted into the Empire, but it was only with a few ascetics and intellectuals that its hold was really complete. In the main, society was still predominantly secular.

It is extremely misleading to say nothing of the role which Cassiodorus and Boethius played in the theological controversies of the day. None would have ever suspected from Pirenne's writing that Boethius has rightfully been labeled, "the first of the scholastics." Pirenne's work says nothing of the decadent state of classical rhetoric and literature, nor of the bitter struggle against the profane classical tradition in which the Church Fathers of the Patristic Age were so involved. It is definitely a mistake

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[17] Ibid., p. 120.

to use Boethius and Cassiodorus as props for the view that society was still secular and essentially unchanged.

Further attempts are also made by Pirenne to support his thesis of a continuity of classical culture by stressingthe continuity of classical art and defending the use of low Latin as not a decline, but rather maintaining the debasement was brought about by the Church in an effort to enlist literature as part of man's daily procedures.[18] Pirenne is here guilty of taking the one major institution, the Church, that was engaged in the formation of a newway of life and making it into an agent for the preservation of Rome. Pirenne's stressing of the continuity of classical order has rendered him blind to the major cultural developments in the early Middle Ages. This persistency in trying to support the thesis of a continuation of classical civilization has seriously impaired most of the academic value of Pirenne's work.

While in the past we have been able to follow the work of Ferdinand Lot as one of our most accurate and authoritative sources on the early Middle Ages, when we turn to the problem of cultural transition his work must be studied with the greatest of caution. The reason for this word of caution can be found in the fact that Professor Lot dismisses the work of the Church as a vital cultural force in the development of the Middle Ages. Just as Pirenne was

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[18] Ibid., p. 129.

guilty of being too closely allied with the "saving school" of cultural interpretation, Lot follows too closely in the fallacies of the second conventional school, in that, he sees all culture, of any worth, coming to an end with the fall of Rome. While classical culture had been centered around the bond between science and philosophy, this bond was ruptured during the transition from ancient to medieval culture and this proved to be detrimental in the quality of literature produced in the Middle Ages.[19] Although in the course of the fourth century, philosophy assumed a new partner, in the form of theology, Professor Lot maintains the literature produced from this union was extremely inferior to that produced during antiquity. The major fallacy in this judgment lies in the fact that Lot failed to see the change which had been effected in the medieval mind. No longer was society concerned with the rational, scientific approach to life, which had been so important to the ancient world, but the subject matter of greatest interest to the medieval mind revolved about theological problems, such as man's relation to God. The fact that the subject matter had changed from the classical scientific approach to the medieval theological concern, does not mean the minds considering the material were inferior to those of antiquity

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[19]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World and the Beginning of the Middle Age (New York, 1931), p.158.

as Professor Lot would suggest. Lot's failure to see the significance of theology to the medieval man has rendered him blind to the important role played by the Church in the shaping of Western Europe. For this reason, it is necessary that the student seek other sources than Lot concerning the cultural development of Western Europe.

Although Ferdinand Lot's work does have its fallacies, it is not necessary to disregard it in total. For example, after referring to Lot's work concerning the quality of classical art following the fourth century, it would be impossible to maintain, as Pirenne does, that the ancient style continued to function uncontaminated by outside impurities. As Lot illustrated, the greatest of the Roman arts, architecture, had already fallen into the mainstream of decay by the reign of Diocletian. The Roman genius which had long been evident in their highly skillful and decorative triumphal archs, public baths, and amphitheatres was no longer visible. They began to sacrifice skill for grandeur as can be seen in the colossal edifices constructed during the reign of Diocletian and Constantine which were erected with coarse material swamped in mortar rather than the fine stones deftly prepared in earlier periods.[20]

The fine arts also began to decay. After the second century art lost its qualities and taste with exceeding speed.

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[20] Ibid., p. 136.

This is evident from the inferior work accomplished in the plastic arts. The status that was being raised in this period lost all representational value in that only the heads presented individual features, but the gestures and details were all identical.[21] From the reign of Constantine on there is little of worth being produced within the Empire. Even of Constantine himself, we do not have one reliable portrait as a result of the decline in the plastic arts.

The decorative arts were experiencing tremendous change during the third century also. Lot has described what happened to the decorative arts during this period as a recrudescence of the Oriental influence. This Oriental influence was expressing itself in the colorful ornamentations and style which was now finding acceptance in the West duringthis period. Evidence of this can be seen in the change from the long accepted laurel as the ceremonial head-dress of the Emperors to a jeweled crown copied from the models of the Persian kings. The monarch's raiment became covered with a constellation of precious stones and the throne became adorned with the colorful goldsmith work.[22]

While Professor Lot has capably illustrated the decadence of classical culture during the later Roman Empire, if

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[21] Ibid., p. 137.

[22] Ibid., p. 141.

we were to accept his thesis completely we would have to dismiss the affects of Christianity as a cultural force during this period. It is true classical culture was coming to an end, but it is a major error to leave a vacuum in its place. There was a new cultural order being formulated during the early Middle Ages that was to shape the West, but to see it we must now direct our attention to sources other than Pirenne and Lot.

Moving from the work of Lot which has medieval culture existing in a realm of darkness, we turn to the writing of Christopher Dawson, who recognizes the significance of the Church during the fourth and fifth centuries, but does so by exaggerating the relationship between the Church and the classical tradition. According to Dawson, if Europe owes its political existence to the late Roman Empire and its spiritual unity to the Catholic Church, "it is indebted for its culture to a third factor, the classical tradition."[23] Professor Dawson believes it is indeed difficult for us to realize the extent of our debt, for the classical tradition has become so much a part of Western culture that we are no longer fully conscious of its influence on our mind. It survived the fall of Rome and remained through the Middle ages as the integral part of the intellectual heritage of the

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[23]Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe (New York, 1932), p. 58.

Christian Church and it arose with renewed strength to become the inspiration and model for the new European literature.[24] "It is almost impossible," says Dawson, "to overrate the cumulative influence of so ancient and continuous tradition."

Professor Dawson's support for this belief of a union between Christianity and the classical tradition goes something like this. Classical education was rapidly diffused throughout the Empire with most of the cities becoming the centers of intense educational activity. The rhetorical ideal of education became dominant and the rhetorician soon became the idol of society.[25] In the fourth century, however, the supremacy of the classical tradition seemed greatly threatened by the victory of the new religion. The Church acknowledged no debt to the classical tradition. The Christians had their own classic--the Christian Scripture--which was so fundamentally different in form and spirit from the pagan literature that there was, at first, no room for mutual comprehension. Nevertheless, there was going on a process by which the Church was preparing for the reception of the classical tradition.[26]

What Dawson is referring to at this point is that period in the fourth and fifth century known as the Patristic

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., p. 59.

[26] Ibid., p. 62.

Age. By this time most literary activity had fallen into the hands of the Church Fathers such as SS. Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome. According to Dawson, as early as the second century, educated converts such as Justin Martyr were beginning to address the cultivated public in their own language and were trying to show that the doctrine of Christianity was in harmony with the rational ideas of ancient philosophy. Dawson sees as a result of this program a far reaching synthesis of Christianity and Hellenistic thought, or as we have previously mentioned, a bond between theology and philosophy. The Fathers of the fourth century were essentially Christian rhetoricians who shared the culture and tradition of their pagan rivals, but represented the instrument of a new spiritual force. Only three centuries earlier Tacitus had pointed out that rhetoric had become an empty vessel because it no longer fulfilled a vital function in public life. "Greek oratory like a fire needs fuel to feed it...Christianity provided the fuel."[27]

Although what Professor Dawson says of the Patristic Age is true in that most of the spokesmen of this Age had been trained in the methods of the classical tradition, i.e., rhetoric and grammar, the bond which he sees between theology and philosophy is stated in the reverse order from which it should be. In his extreme effort to emphasize the continuation of classical rhetoric, his examination of the writings

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[27] Ibid., p. 63.

of someone such as St. Augustine slights the important fact that moral and theological problems preoccupied his work. While it is evident the Augustine continued to employ rational thinking in his writings, his philosophy is essentially that of a spiritual experience which is in discord with the classical tradition.

While the research of Dawson has been sufficient to fill the vacuum left in early medieval culture by Ferdinand Lot, there is still not an accurate sketch of the true nature of this new institution. It is only when we turn to the more modern writings such as William C. Bark that we can see the intellectual life of the Middle Ages was cast in a mold essentially different from that of classical antiquity.[28] As it is already evident, the old Greek union of science and philosophy was no longer dominate in the early Middle Ages. As we have noted in the later Roman Empire, the Hellenistic fires burned low with man's faith in science being drained of its vitality and the old ties with philosophy being dissolved.

With the dying out of the scientific partner of philosophy the people of Rome were not left to wander in pessimism. Soon after this break philosophy contracted a new alliance, this time with theology, to direct the intellectual life of the Empire. The significance of this

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[28]William C. Bark, Origins of the Medieval World (Stanford, 1958), p. 100.

union was not, as Dawson suggested, in that it continued to employ classical rhetoric, but as M. L. W. Laistner has pointed out, the thinkers and writers of the Patristic Age, by contrast to the old moribund state of secular life in the Empire, had complete faith in the urgency of what concerned them and wrote with energy and assurance.[29] There is being formulated at this time a completely new concept of life. No longer is man living in a universe which stresses his own greatness and ability as the Greeks had done, but the Christian world view was that of a universe ruled by an omnipotent transcendental God. Man could not think perfect, build perfect, nor be perfect. His thoughts and actions were now governed by his concern for God and not his own perfectability.[30] Thus, most of the literary work of this period came about as a result of the doctrinal conflicts between the different Church Fathers. While their literary tools may have been similar to antiquity, the subject matter was completely different.

The literature of the Patristic Age was concerned primarily with dogmatic treatises, exegeses, homiletics, and apologetics. While there were many heresies existing within the fourth and fifth centuries to stimulate the Church

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[29]M.L. W. Laistner, Thought and Letters in Western Europe (Ithaca, 1931), p. 54.

[30]Sullivan (January 22, 1965).

Fathers, we are concerned here with only those which took a firm hold in the West and thereby lead to a Latin Christian literature.

Of these doctrinal disputes which arose during this age, the Trinitarian controversy deserves a prominent place. The Orthodox definition of the Three Persons had first been clearly defined by the Council of Nicaea in 325 in an effort to settle once and for all the false teaching of Arius, who had defined the Second Person of the trinity as having been created by God and therefore not of the same nature with Him.[31] Despite the decision of the Council, Arianism was destined for a long life in the West. It won many adherent victories because the Germanic kings, when they abandoned their heathendom, were converted to the Arian form of Christianity.

Arianism was not to go unmolested in the West, however, with the pugnacious writings of Hilary (315-67) to hinder it. Hilary's writing was of such a nature as to inspire one medieval chronicler to record, "it is a fact universally agreed upon that thanks to the good work of Hilary our country of Gaul was freed from the defilement of heresy."[32]

Equally provoctive during this period was the stir created by the teachings of Pelagius. The essential teachings of Pelagianism which drew the greatest criticism from

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[31]Laistner, p. 56.

[32]Ibid.

the orthodox was his rejection of the doctrines of predestination and original sin. It can occasion no surprise that Peleagianism met with strong opposition and in its extreme form was short lived because both St. Augustine and St. Jerome condemned its tenets outright.[33] If a close examination is given to the anti-Pelagian writings of Augustine it becomes obvious that there was much more than a skillful example of dialectic. His discourse on the doctrines of "Predestination" and "Divine Grace" illustrate the significance of the union between philosophy and theology.[34]

The other writings of the period were equally as important in illustrating the basis on which the new culture of the West was to rest. The works of Origen, especially his allegorical exegesis of the Bible, received universal acclaim and not because of his classical style, but the subject matter. The works of Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine received like fame because of their theological significance.[35] While we must conclude that most of these men did employ certain tools of classical culture, as a result of being trained by the rhetoricians of the day, the essential point is that the subject of greatest concern had changed. Man was now predominantly concerned with theological matters and

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[33] Ibid., p. 61.

[34] Ibid., p. 63.

[35] Ibid., p. 69.

this is new and original and it is this that is to serve as the basis upon which the new culture is to be built.

It is also proper at this time to ask of history if there is reason for assuming, as Professor Lot does, that human genius flamed less brilliantly where man, for good reason, deflected speculative thought from the realm of science-philosophy to theology-philosophy. As we have already seen, the classical tradition had lost a great deal of its vitality and its followers seemed no longer convinced that the subjects with which they dealt were meaningful.[36] While some scholars may assume that the work of the Church Fathers represented wasted time, this is not true of those who know well and recognize the place they hold in the development of the thought process of the Western man.[37] Although they may have often expressed more passion in their style than intelligence, it remains true that the theological disputes most often dealt with problems of undying concern. The brilliance and sincerity with which these struggles were waged also gave strong impetus to the development of a method of thought keen, probing, and logical. It was for these reasons that the Patristic Age was instrumental in the formation, in later centuries, of the scholastic philosophy which represents one of the high points in the development of Western thought.[38] Thus, we must be careful in passing

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[36]Bark, p. 102.

[37]Ibid., p. 102.

[38]Ibid., p. 101.

judgment upon the Church Fathers in comparison with classical antiquity. The essential considerations is that by the fourth century a new intellectual attitude toward the world had been well launched; that this attitude was not of necessity either superior or inferior to that of classical antiquity, but simply different.[39]

Parting for a moment from the intellectual changes of the fourth and fifth centuries we can also see evidence of the cultural change that is taking place by examining the art of the early Middle Ages. In addition to the Orientalization that was taking place in the West, Professor Bark also sees some very important trends that were being introduced by the barbarians. It is true that classical art had been in the state of change since the second century, but it is wrong to call this a decline as does Lot.[40] With reservations, one could even conclude, as Pirenne, that for awhile much that was Roman remained, for in the greater part of Western Europe the Germanic invaders were a small minority. Gradually, however, an extensive modification did occur. The Oriental influence, which affected style and spirit, was certainly not a continuation of the old tradition and with the arrival of the barbarians there was introduced that art which was absorbed by the Goths while in Southern Asia. The old humanistic culture faded; the artistic absorption

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[39] Ibid., p. 102.

[40] Ibid., p. 32.

with the human face and form gave way to geometric form and classical architecture yielded to the minor decorative arts.[41]

The conclusion must be that in the new art of the later Roman Empire and the still newer art brought in by the barbarians, there was much that was vigorous and original, much that owed nothing to Rome, but derived its inspiration solely from the new needs and values of the emerging medieval world. Nothing better attests the creative genius of Western European civilization, even in the period of its youth, than the mighty products of its religious art which combined spiritual aspiration, warm human feelings, and the artistic excellence in a way unknown to pagans and classical antiquity.[42]

While certain elements of this new culture, such as the intellectual and artistic activities, were already expressing themselves in the first half of the fifth centuries there is still another change to be considered which even further accentuates the uniqueness of the new way of life. As Christopher Dawson so accurately pointed out, the Patristic Age was a period when the great centers of learning were still located within the major cities. This was important in that it meant that much of the intellectual

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[41] H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1935), p. 255.

[42] Ibid., p. 253; Bark, p. 99.

activity of the Church Fathers still retained certain elements of the classical tradition. What Dawson failed to adequately stress was the great changes that were being effected in Roman city life during fourth and fifth centuries. As we have seen in earlier chapters, the political and economic order of Rome was already in chaos. City life was becoming idle and lifeless. The social reforms of the Emperors, as you will recall, did not succeed in reviving city life, but actually served to sap the remaining vitality that existed and in the end brought to the forefront a new agrarian society. With this change, the cities which served as the breeding ground for the new Patristic culture was now decadent, but this is not to suggest that with the rise of an agrarian society that all cultural activity died out.[43] To understand exactly what happened in the chaos of the fifth century we must first make note of the fact that chronologically, when the Church Fathers were exercising dominance over the intellectual activities, a new movement arose in the Christian world which we know as monasticism.

The formation of the monastic movement illustrates an attempt by man to escape the influence from the world. These individuals were in protest to what was prevailing in life and tried to effectuate a return to gospel purity. They believed that in the social, political, and economic chaos, which was rampant during this period, that true

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[43]Sullivan, (January 25, 1965).

Christianity was being lost and the only way of preserving it was to flee the influence of the world.[44] While in its earliest stages, the monastic movement repudiated not only the world, but also world culture, that is Patristic culture. They exhibited a wholly anti-cultural attitude in being content to study the Scriptures alone and destroy anything, such as intellectual standards, artistic development, or any other activity that would distract man from God.

Strangely enough, it was monasticism that emerged in the fifty century as the cultural leader of the day. With the internal chaos that was being experienced in the West during the fifty century and the final triumphs of the Germanic barbarians, the monastic movement began to grow at an astounding pace. It became the refuge for much of the displaced, insecure society. The final victory of the barbarians had split the Roman world culturally, permitting the Patristic culture to continue in the metropolitan life of the East, but demanding alterations of the cultural life of the agrarian West. Thus it became the task of the monastery, as the only major unifying force left in existence, to reshape the cultural pattern of the West. While some attempts were made in the West to continue the Patristic culture, as can be seen in the monastery of Cassiodorus which emphasized the study of the writings of the Church Fathers, the order of society was

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[44]Cuthbert Butler. Benedictine Monarchism (New York, 1962).

not such as to permit the success of his efforts. It was the monastery and primarily the efforts of Benedict of Nursia and Gregory the Great that effected the change to a monastic culture which was to serve as the basis upon which Western European civilization was laid.

We can see then, with the decay of city life within the West, the Patristic culture had to undergo serious alterations at the hands of the monks. In regards to the valuable contributions presented by the monasteries, the noted French scholar Jean Leclercq has contributed heavily in destroying the long prevailing thesis that the monastery was detrimental to world development. Actually, it was this institution which was to serve as the very hub of the new culture. Although it is true the primary aim of the ofder created by St. Benedict was to draw man closer to God, Leclercq adequately proves there was also a vital intellectual aspect to monastic order as well.[45] A vital task in the lifeof every monk was to engage in regular reading. The material to which the monks had access was definitely of a narrow range with the major goal being the edification of the individual. With this end in mind their reading usually involved a study of the scriptures and selected commentories. We can see from this, there is a marked change from the old Patristic culture which permitted the free study of all

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[45]Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God, (New York, 1960), p. 22.

pagan literature as well.[46] The monks were required to read aloud to one another pausing from time to time to meditate upon certain texts in an effort to get closer to God. The list of materials from which the monks could read was officially organized by Gregory the Great and though it had a very limited range, it was extremely important in that it fulfilled a vital purpose in the life of man.

With the increasing interest in the monasteries concerning reading as one of the best ways of fixing their mind upon God, it became necessary for the monks to become better prepared for this task. The monasteries eventually became schools stressing the teaching of Christian grammar. The knowledge that was gained from the monastic schooling was employed first and foremost in the study of the Scriptures. Man's knowledge of the Bible became so concentrated that they could easily see in it allegorical meaning which could be employed to explain events happening in nature. As William C. Bark has suggested, no other subject offers better proof of the far reaching consequences of the fall of Rome and the birth of a new tradition than does education. The institutes of learning had now passed into new hands, those of Christians, and while this was primarily a matter of edification, it also meant the construction of

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[46] Ibid., p. 17.

a whole new system of education for a new world with new values and aims.[47]

The intellectual life of the monk was not completely tied to that of reading, but they also produced writings. An essential part of the life of any monk involved the copying of certain Latin classics in an effort to provide source material for the monastic schools. While this material was carefully selected in effort to use those that would be most beneficial to a Christian, the fact that they saved particular classics was an important fact for the later renaissance. The writings of the monks also included voluminous sermons and history of saint's lives. However, the greatest contribution of the monks in this area was in their liturgy. It was through liturgical incidents that they passed on their greatest talents. They produced volumes of poetry to be used in their liturgical exercises and much of this was put to music, such as the Gregorian chant.[48]

While the monk's life was primarily an attempt to escape the chaos of this world and to draw closer to God, he was actually laying the foundation of those thoughts and behavior that were to rule dominate in Western Europe until the eleventh century. While this has been by no means a definitive account of the cultural basis of Western Europe,

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[47]Bark, p. 31.

[48]Sullivan (January 29, 1965).

it has been sufficient to conclude that this was certainly not a continuation of classical culture, but the beginning of something new and original. We can also conclude that the early Middle Ages were far from being a dark age but was essentially the epoch making era that witnessed the founding of a new civilization. If it is justifiable for the history of nations to be so dogmatically concerned with the history of their founding fathers, as we can see in writings of our own country, then it is no less important for man to know and be concerned with the founding fathers and institutions of their civilization.

Chapter VI

THE MEROVINGIAN AND CAROLINGIAN DYNASTIES: PROGRESSION OR RETROGRESSION?

With the closing of the sixth century, the omens which warned of a changing world were clearly distinguishable within the dismal life of the Empire. The once robust political, economic, social, and cultural forces that had powered the engine of antiquity, now lay dormant within this new and changing world order. Those institutions which had once kindled a fiery patriotism within the Roman citizens has now given way to a new set of stimulants with the Church possessing a dominant influence. No longer were the minds of men concerned with the same thoughts and problems that had characterized the minds of men of antiquity.

While much of the material examined heretofore has dealt primarily with the death of an old order, which had proved to be impractical and no longer workable, this is not where the emphasis should come to rest. The true significance of this epoch-making age of transition is not to be found in death, but life. As Professor M. Rostovtzeff has so brilliantly expressed it, in the formula, "the decay of ancient civilization," the emphasis is not to be placed upon "civilization" but upon the term "ancient."[1]

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[1]Rostovtzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, 1st ed., (Oxford, 1926), p. 109.

Civilization did not come to a halt with the fall of Rome, but out of the rubble of the third through the sixth centuries is to emerge the greater and much more enlightened Western European civilization.

As we now expand our picture of the early Middle Ages chronologically into the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, we are soon confronted with another vital problem that has been very influential in the development of medieval historiography. The problem to which we are referring involves the relationship between the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties. Were these two periods simply a continuation of the highly developed classical tradition or do they represent a distinct change from the old world order? Was the first a reign of progress which the latter perverted into chaos? The answer to these, and other similar questions, will reveal to us not only a vital link in the development of medieval historiography, but also will permit us to see the true nature of the heirs of the Roman Empire.

Time after time in the preceeding chapters, we have seen the Merovingian dynasty presented by Henri Pirenne and Alfons Dopsch as a continuation of the classical tradition to which they had fallen heir. These men could see a remaining vitality in the forces of antiquity which continued to flourish after the Germanic invasions. While considerable doubt has already been cast upon their theses, we need only turn to additional sources to further check

the validity of their conclusions concerning the Merovingians.

Looking once more at the work of Ferdinand Lot, it soon becomes obvious that probably the most dismal aspect of Western European life after 600 was the decay of governmental institutions and the consequent reign of violence. By the end of the sixth century, four Germanic groups dominated Western Europe: the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, the Franks in Gaul, the Visigoths in Spain, and the Lombards in Italy. The political history of these states in the early Middle Ages presents a grim record of war, court intrigue, and grave injustice. The kingdom of the Franks in Gaul under the Merovingians might well serve to illustrate the fate of the Germanic state founded within the territory of the moribund Empire.

Although the Merovingian Franks were destined to experience a short lived zenith, there did occur during their early history certain religious and political happenings that were of profound importance. It was the accession of Clovis to the Merovingian throne, at the early age of fifteen, that heralded the beginning of the one spot of glory for the Merovingians. While Clovis proved to be a capable leader in a very difficult age, his reign is remembered primarily as a result of two events which took place that has occasioned some historians, such as Ferdinand Lot, to label his kingship as one of the epoch-making reigns in the history of Western Europe.[2]

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[2]Ferdinand Lot, The End of the Ancient World (New York, 1931), p. 371.

The first of these events, which proved to be of strategic importance to the Church, was the conversion of the pagan Clovis to an Orthodox form of Christianity. As noted in an earlier chapter, one of the greatest problems plaguing the embryonic Church in its newly acquired role as guardian of the West, was the provocative wide-spread acceptance of Arianism by the Germans. With this theological road block standing in the way of the Church, it was only natural that many of her philanthropic endeavors were subjected to stunted rewards. With most of the Germanic kings embracing the Arian form of religion, Christianity was constantly harassed by this ever present deterrent force. Until the accession of Clovis there existed nowhere in the West an orthodox Christian king of any prominence which meant the Church had to progress without benefit of a political leader to champion their cause. So great was the problem encountered by the Church during this period that the Catholic historian, Henri Daniel-Rops, has proclaimed, and with reason, that apart from the conversion of Constantine, the baptism of Clovis was the greatest event in the history of the Christian West.[3]

The actual conversion of Clovis was the culmination of a long, tedious effort on the part of his wife, Clotilda, and the Church. There is little doubt now existing that the

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[3]Henri Daniel-Rops, The Church in the Dark Ages (New York, 1959), p. 180.

marriage of Clovis to the Christian Clotilda was an event in which the Church claimed a vital role. Whether or not Clotilda had serious objections to this union with a pagan is not certain, but we can be sure that following the ceremonies she exercised extensive efforts to win her husband to the Orthodox faith. With the early pleas of his wife falling on deaf ears, an event was soon to occur that would lead to the conversion of the Frankish king. The scene of this event was the battlefield of the Alamans where Clovis was faced with the most definite possibility of being annihilated by his far superior enemy. Realizing the danger with which he was confronted, Clovis made the vow that if the God of his wife would deliver him victory in this critical moment he would accept the faith.[4] Experiencing a sound victory over his foes, Clovis remained true to his word and he, along with his followers, was lowered into the waters of Christian baptism. This created for the Church an open door through which it could advance against the predominance of Arianism. The significance of this event can be seen in the numerous military expeditions that followed as Clovis attempted to remove an Arian segment that opposed his conversion.[5]

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[4] Ibid., p. 189.

[5] Ibid., p. 192.

While the conversion of Clovis did possess vital significance for the Church, it must also be observed there were political advantages gained for himself. With the Church now supporting the military efforts of the Frankish king, he could advance upon his neighboring foes with a greater ease.[6] As a result, Clovis soon established himself as the most powerful king in the West. Following his decisive victories over the Burgundians and Visigoths it was evident that the whole of Gaul was soon to fall into the hands of the Franks. This ultimate conquest of Gaul by Clovis gave birth to a state more original in its political orientation and more vigorous in stature than any of the other barbarian kingdoms that arose out of the disintegration of the Roman world.[7] For example, the Merovingians had at no time been federates of the Empire, but existed in independence of Roman control. Thus, we can conclude, politically there emerged from the reign of Clovis a Frankish people united in such a way as to mark a notable achievement in the history of the West.

The death of Clovis, however, occasioned a change in the political history of the Frankish State that was far from complimentary. It was his reign which witnessed both the emergence and the zenith of the Merovingian dynasty. While he was capable of experiencing repeated success in his

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[6]Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 318.

[7]Ibid., p. 322.

political endeavors, these positive achievements were not to continue with his frail successors. While there was the occasional appearance of a capable leader, such as Dagobert, the true character of the remaining Merovingian dominance was one of violence. As Professor Moss has pointed out, the period immediately following the death of Clovis was one marred by murder, court intrigues, and revolts.[8] While all the successors of Clovis claimed absolute authority, between the end of the sixth century and the middle of the eighth their actual power dwindled to nothing.[9]

The causes of this decline were certainly numerous, but primarily the Merovingians kings proved to be incapable of jettisoning their barbaric political tradition and therefore created an atmosphere of violence and tyranny through their own unmitigated use of force to gain their political ends. Few royal dynasties in all history can match the record of violence and brutality of the rulers of the last half of the sixth century. It is foolish to maintain, as does Pirenne and Dopsch, that these barbarians possessed sufficient cultural achievements to operate a highly civilized way of life.[10] The episodes of the Merovingians

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[8]H. St.L.B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages (London, 1935), p. 193.

[9]Richard E. Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire (Ithaca, 1960), p. 39.

[10]William C. Bark, Origins of the Medieval World (Garden City, 1958), p. 14.

are recounted by Gregory of Tours with such a cold bloodedness as to become disconcerting.

Even more ferocious than the Merovingian kings were their wives, especially Brunhilda, a Visigothic princess married to King Sigebert and referred to by her contemporaries as the "Second Jezebel," and Fredegunda, the slave mistress of King Chilperic, who became his queen after strangling his first wife, the sister of Brunhilda.[11] The hatred which already existed between Brunhilda and Fredegunda was fanned even more by Fredegunda arranging for the death of Sigebert and by urging her husband, Chilperic, to seize the inheritance of Brunhilda's son. The atrocities of these indomitable queens dominated the history of the last part of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh. At least, however, it can be said of these personalities that they were forceful and dynamic, which is more than can be said of those who are to reign in the seventh and eighth centuries.[12]

These kings, having only the vaguest notion of public welfare, seldom attempted anything resembling positive service for their subjects. Continuing with ancient Germanic customs, they treated the state as private property to be divided among their male heirs, thus breeding vicious family quarrels that consumed their energies. These same

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[11]Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire, p.38; Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages, p. 139; Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 329.

[12]Sullivan, p. 40.

blunders can be seen when we examine their economic resources. As we have already seen in previous chapters, Pirenne and Dopsch believe that the maintenance and administration of an effective economic order never posed any real problem for the extremely capable Germans. Yet, as we look at the facts of the period we see not only were there little economic resources inherited by the barbarians, but that which they did inherit soon slipped into decay as a result of their inability. To the Franks a treasury was simply for personal advantages such as to avoid an immediate danger, or to take revenge. Such a use of finances as this does not suggest in any form a high understanding of economic principles.

Not only did the Frankish kings illustrate a profound misconception of the uses of a treasury, but when it was being rampantly exhausted they showed even less knowledge of how to replenish it.[13] It is generally accepted that the land tax constituted the chief source of income in an agrarian society such as existed by the end of the sixth century. Yet, in spite of their inheritance of a well organized land tax system, fully equipped with registers and a customs system for the collection of the taxes, the Merovingians proved incapable of maintaining it.[14] They made

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[13]Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, p. 14; Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 351.

[14]Bark, p. 15.

little use of this major source of income and let it slip away. This was both economically and politically a fatal blunder, for it led inevitably to the impoverishment of the monarchy. Thus we can see that the conclusion of Professor Bark is correct as it maintains it was not the invasion of the Moslems that destroyed the Merovingian economy, as Pirenne would have it, but their own inability to perfect and retain their own inheritance. The Merovingians plagued by barbarism, lack of resources, inadequate concept of government, and a host of other problems, never succeeded in dominating their situation. They became, as Einhard has described them, "do-nothing" kings who were content to ride in their open carts from one of their estates to another, and to intrigue among kinsmen for bits of territory.[15] To liken the reign of these barbaric kings to the past reign of the Roman monarchs, in whose hands rested the welfare of the public, is an idea bordering on fantasy.[16]

Since the Merovingian state rested primarily on the king, the Frankish monarchy was essentially a personal government. It is true, as Professor Lot maintains, that when the rulers' force weakened from one cause or another the whole machine was out of order.[17] An absolute government can exist only as long as it wins forgiveness for its

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[15]Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire, p. 41.

[16]Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 347.

[17]Ibid., p. 354.

harshness by rendering special services to the public. But the Merovingians performed no such services. They realized that their government was being served only from fear and rewards so the kings began to increase the degree of both.[18] The last word in politics became, "bribe your rival's faithful followers." With no real institutions to support it, the Frankish monarchy was at the mercy of chance. Providing no security nor justice for the bulk of society, the decay of the Merovingian was hastened on by civil wars.

Unable to provide more than a rudimentary government, the Merovingian kings were forced to share the political power with the great landowners.[19] The fact of a rising aristocracy, which we have already seen gaining prestige in the later Roman Empire, was accelerated under the Germanic kings primarily because the king lacked sufficient revenue to finance the services of government. The only recourse was to call upon their subjects to render political services at private expense, especially military service in the maintenance of internal peace and order. It is natural that to such a request only the wealthy were able to respond and as a price for their services they demanded additional grants of land from the private estate of the king and the right to govern these grants as a private realm.[20] It was

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[19]Bark, Origins of the Medieval World, p. 15; Lot, The End of the Ancient World, p. 356; Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire, p. 41.

[20]Lot, p. 56.

through this process that the king soon depleted his private resources and at the same time divided his power. While this was going on the nobles acquired more land, instituted private government and subjected the bulk of the population to their immediate authority. The king made an attempt to ensure the fidelity of his landlords by requiring each of them to take a personal oath of allegiance, a process known as "commendation", which placed the nobles in a special category above the mass of the people. From this time on the energies of the king are directed at guarding their position against the encroachment of their powerful vassals.[21]

These early steps in the evolution of what eventually was to be called the feudal system created tremendous strife within the West. The line of authority between the king and nobles was so indefinite as to ensure a continual struggle between them. It is true, however, as Professor Sullivan has suggested, this new system provided a basis for the restoration of order. "The powerful nobles, each entrenched in a small area, could protect and control the population in their immediate localities."[22] No one could deny that this system was primitive compared to the regime of Rome, but under it the West began to develop its own characteristic political organization.

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[21]Sullivan, p. 42.

[22]Ibid.

As we have already indicated, Western Europe also suffered a gradual, but desperate, economic depression between 600-750 A.D. If the causes of this decline were confused, the manifestations were clear. Commerce continued to diminish until the mid-eighth century it was practically non-existent. The failures of trade paralyzed city life to such an extent that it was not uncommon, as Professor Moss has recorded, to see grass growing in the streets of the blightful cities. With this ending of a commercial activity, the populous was forced to resort to agriculture as a means of livelihood.[23] The agricultural life, which we have previously noted, was centered around the high estate known as a latifundia or manor, which was already nearly self-sufficient. Small farmers deprived of markets, together with wandering refugees from the dying cities now made up the labor force on these large estates.[24] This decline of trade and city life which created the agrarian society drastically reduced the standard of living in the West hastening the division into two classes of landlord and serf. This is just another marked difference of the new way of life that was developing in Western Europe during the early Middle Ages.

While the Germanic kingdoms of Western Europe painfully constructed a new basis for their society in a

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[23]Moss, p. 205.

[24]Sullivan, p. 43.

political order which was dominated by the landed aristocracy and an economic system which was compared of self-sufficient manors, the religious institutions were also undergoing a comparable transformation. As Europe once more began to assume the character of an organized society it was obvious, from its now agrarian orientation, that it was impossible for the old modes of propagating culture through the cities to operate.[25] Although the state was in no condition to perform such a task, the Church, which was in some respects more powerful than the State, and in all respects better organized, could.

Being confronted with the onerous task of preserving and stimulating civilization, the Church in the West, during the seventh century, found itself in a position quite unlike that of other periods. From the fifth century on the Western Church could no longer depend upon the beneficient support of a strong organized government. Thus, the task which befell Christianity had to be undertaken with the bishops fulfilling an active role within secular affairs and running the risk of becoming worldly themselves. With political and economic duties demanding much of their time, the religious responsibilities of the clergy began to suffer. Consequently these secular positions became positions of wealth and power creating vicious struggles for the episcopal sees with the strong ultimately

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[25] Bark, p. 110.

winning over the pious. The typical bishop of the eighth century was a warlike figure not overly concerned with spiritual affairs, and his shortcomings were reflected in the declining quality of priests. These men were unlettered, ignorant of the rudiments of doctrine, unfamiliar with liturgy and lax in moral life.

During this period in which the clergy became secularized as a result of its all too frequent contact with the world, there were positive elements taking place that were of extreme importance. In this age of weak and aimless rulers, secular government had abandoned all responsibility for the welfare of their subjects. The Church with more positive leadership shouldered the burdens of caring for the weak. It maintained the only existing hospitals and schools; its ideas of justice and mercy penetrated and tempered the harsh Germanic law codes; and as Professors Dawson and Daniel-Rops have emphasized in their works, the Church was important in helping to shape political actions through the efforts of educated clergymen serving in a political capacity.[26]

Another accomplishment of the Church during the period was its continual success in winning converts through the efforts of its missionaries. According to William C. Bark there was only one way of extending the Christian culture to the pagan world and that was to be

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[26]Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe (New York, 1932), p. 180; Daniel-Rops, The Church in the Dark Ages, p. 230.

achieved by sending agents out to live and work in the agrarian communities under barbarian rule.[27] Once the peasants of Rome had been won to Christianity, it was possible for the Church to turn its attention to new fields. The center of attraction now passed to the far west of the Empire and the territory of the Anglo-Saxons. Although both the Irish and Roman missionaries exerted strong influence in England, the Roman forces eventually predominated, especially in organizing the new converts and in instituting the outward practices of the Church. This was very important to the Church in that some of its most devoted allies and servants were to come from the Anglo-Saxon monks and missionaries. This can be illustrated, par excellence, in the person of St. Boniface who in the eighth century was so essential in the concession and civilizing of Germany.[28]

The missionaries operating in these barbaric communities represented the force of civilization with their assaulting barbarism on barbaric soil and in the process made Christianity a basis for communication throughout Western Europe. Through such efforts as these, the nascent Western European civilization began to spread and to develop. Under proper leadership it was much easier for religious

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[27]Bark, p. 110; Dawson, p. 174.

[28]Bark, p. 111; Sullivan, p. 47; Moss, p. 209.

reform to be instituted in these areas which had just been newly established than where it had already been bound by tradition. England, for example, became the center of piety and learning for the whole West during the seventh and eighth centuries with her churchmen eventually exercising a strong influence outside of England as well.

While both the extension of the Church's role in society and the expansion of its jurisdiction into new geographical areas were of tremendous importance, there occurred during this period a third accomplishment which left the previous two achievements resting in its shadow. What we are referring to at this point was the restoration and deepening of the spiritual life within the West which was accomplished primarily by both the growth of the Benedictine monastic order and the power of the papacy. This need for a restoration of the spiritual life, which is certainly evident, was created as a result of the increased role of the Church in society and the expansion of Christianity among the barbaric nations. Although it may be true that the conversion of the Germanic nations illustrates, as Christopher Dawson claims, the superiority of Christian culture, this does not erase the fact that it also proved detrimental to the spiritual life. The method by which many of these tribes were transformed from their pagan ways was characterized by what the Protestant historian, Philip Schaff has termed "wholesale conversion."[29]

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[29]Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. IV, (New York, 1895), p. 18.

The Church, using the conversion of Clovis as a guide, first sought to convert the leaders of the Germans which in turn meant the followers of these Germanic kings would also accept Christianity. While the emphasis which Professor Schaff places upon these mass conversions tends to do harm to the importance of the missionary expeditions, it is true such conversions usually result in little change of life.[30] The true spiritual effects of such a conversion proved to be very shallow and it isn't until we have the growth of the papacy and the increasing importance of the Benedictine Monks, that the spiritual life of the West began to mature.

Upon examining the increasing power of the papacy during the seventh and eighth centuries we must return for a moment to the sixth century to see that the prestige of the Church had first been seriously threatened by the resurgent power of the Eastern Roman Empire and then by the invading Lombards in Italy. The threat from the East came with the conquest of Italy by the Eastern Emperor Justinian in his efforts to reshape the old Roman Empire. This Eastern victory placed over Italy a political master who insisted upon dictating religious policy and who responded to the claims of Rome to religious supremacy by supporting the counter claims of the patriarchs of Constantinople.[31]

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Sullivan, p. 48.

Coupled with this East-West religious struggle was the military threat posed by the pressing Lombards upon the borders of Italy. In 568 A.D. the invasion of these barbarians thrust the Italisn peninsula into war and constantly threatened the downfall of Rome.

While the Church was at this critical juncture, the Roman Papacy was saved from these menacing forces by the inspiring genius, Pope Gregory the Great (590-604). The reign of this Christian giant was so significant that some scholars, such as Philip Schaff, has cited his reign as the beginning of ecclesiastical history of the Middle Ages.[32] Descending from a noble family, the young Gregory received a good education designed to prepare him for service in the Imperial government. Soon disillusioned with the state of society, Gregory abandoned his public career and retreated to a Benedictine monastery. Being a man of deep religious fervor and hardheaded practical sense, Gregory launched a policy of making the papacy politically and economically independent while increasing its spiritual leadership in the Christian world.[33] With land being the primary instrument of wealth and power the Church, which was the largest landholder in the West, was capable of progressing with its political and economic independence.

Although Gregory's efforts to establish an independent secular power were tremendous, they did not exhaust his

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[32]Schaff, IV, p. 5; Moss, p. 136.

[33]Sullivan, p. 48.

energies. He was yet to earn his greatest fame which was derived from his abilities as a spiritual leader.[34] Gregory was especially gifted in stating Christian doctrine in a language suitable to the mentality of Western Europe. It was he who dispatched the first missionaries to England which later proved to be one of the most important events in the history of the early Middle Ages.[35] Under his guidance, the Roman see assumed a new prominence throughout all Christendom. As Professor Sullivan has pointed out, the efforts of Gregory were of such significance that it is usual to speak of "Roman" Christianity being spread in the seventh and eighth centuries.[36]

The spread of the Church's influence as a political and spiritual leader was greatly aided by the wide acceptance of Benedictine monasticism. St. Benedict of Nursia (480-543), born an Italian nobleman, gave up a very promising public career to become a monk. Being strongly repelled by the licentiousness, decay, and corruption that was existing in Italy during the sixth century, Benedict abandoned his inheritance of wealth in an attempt to flee the world and please God.[37] After spending three years of

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[34]Moss, p. 135.

[35]Ibid., p. 209.

[36]Sullivan, p. 50.

[37]Cuthbert, Butler. Benedictine Monarchism (New York, 1962), p. 24.

solitude within a cave, his reputation for piety became so well known that many disciples flocked to his refugee seeking his leadership. Parting at this time from the eremitical way of life, which was predominent among monks in the East, Benedict set about creating a monastic order which was neither harsh nor burdensome.[38] Although the order which he established at Monte Cassino was extremely strict in general principle, St. Benedict permitted a rather remarkable amount of liberty to his followers concerning points of detail. For example, he permitted complete liberty to the different communities in the selection of appropriate food and clothing. The essential point of Benedict's Rule was contained in the idea that God could best be served by a community of dedicated men who divided their energies between prayer, study and manual labor. This, in comparison to the Eastern monastic order was an easy rule. What Benedict had in mind was the establishment of a manner of life, self-denying, hard, but not a life of great austerity.[39] It was required of the monks, however, that they take a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience thereby cutting themselves off from the material, personal and political problems of the outside world.

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[38] Ibid., p. 24; Daniel-Rops, The Church in the Dark Ages, p. 269.

[39] Butler, p. 26.

Throughout the seventh and eighth centuries, the monasteries continued to grow and provide an incalculable service to the West. As William C. Bark has so accurately stated, the spreading of the Christian culture among the pagans and the raising of spirituality within the West became the task of the monks. They helped to guide the bewildered Europeans in the proper performance of the Roman rituals and played a major role in its dissemination. However, these early pioneer monks were much more than transmitters of religion.[40] They served as teachers to the ignorant barbarians and were the leaders in the reorganization of charitable activities. Along with the gospel, they also spread among the pagan, technical knowledge and skill. The well organized monastic estates served as models for good farming. On the whole, this was a period of considerable creative activity in Western Christendom starting with the Western Church being able to exist in its own right.

Culturally, this period which witnessed the atrocities of the Merovingians was also marked by a decline in cultural life.[41] There were, however, some positive developments made during this period. Among them were the efforts to preserve elements of the classical culture. The Benedictine monks, taking seriously the orders of their founding fathers to study, laboriously copied the works of certain

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[40]Bark, p. 115.

[41]Sullivan, p. 52.

classical authors and Church Fathers for their tiny libraries. To use these works they needed Latin, and therefore, compiled simple textbooks for its study. Schools were established to teach rudimentary knowledge and in the process a tenuous link was there maintained with the dying classical world.

There was also a brilliant cultural life in the Irish monasteries in this period. With this knowledge finding its way to England in the seventh and eighth century, by avenue of the Irish missionaries, there emerged a long line of monastic scholars who produced histories, theological discussions, poetry, Biblical commentaries, and even scientific tracts. The most famous of the English scholars was Bede, whose influence was being felt throughout the West.[42] These islands of intellectual activity prevented total sterility in Western European cultural life and served as a basis upon which future cultural achievement could be constructed.

It was a vital fact that the Church controlled the feeble intellectual life of Western Europe at this time in that the monastic scholars naturally selected the aspect of classical culture that best suited their religious needs while disregarding that which was more secular. Although this was a residue of the old classical tradition remaining

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[42]Schaff, IV, p. 18; Daniel-Rops, p. 278.

in this culture, that which ultimately emerged was essentially a new Christianized culture which became one of the distinguishing features of Western European civilization.[43]

As we have already seen, the Merovingian dynasty of the Frankish kings experienced such decline during the seventh and eighth centuries that they were eventually labeled as "do-nothing" kings. Before they were formally replaced by the Carolingians, their authority was being rapidly usurped.[44] Having gained prominence in the seventh century by acquiring extensive estates in Austrasia, the Carolingians soon achieved greater prestige than any other noble family by establishing hereditary control of the position of Mayor of the Palace in the service of the Merovingian rulers of that subkingdom in the northeastern part of the Frankish realm.[45] The chief responsibility of this office was the management and disposition of the greatest source of wealth and power existing at this time, the land. It was through a systematic exploitation over a considerable period that the Carolingians were able to develop a strong following by extending to the Austrasian nobles parcels of royal land in return for loyal support,

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[43]Sullivan, p. 54; Bark, pp. 102-107.

[44]Lot, p. 342.

[45]Sullivan, p. 57.

the Carolingians mayor of the palace succeeded in commanding greater loyalty among the nobles than did the weaker king.

The first Carolingian to stand out clearly in history was Pepin of Heristal. While posing as a champion of the Merovingian king of Austrasia, whom he served as Mayor of the Palace, Pepin waged war on the Mayor of the Palace of Neustria who was trying to exalt his branch of the Merovingian family.[46] By virtue of a decisive military victory in 687 at Tertry, Pepin established dominance over Neustria which was followed by control of Burgundy. His victory not only checked the territorial disintegration of the State, but also reinstituted a single political regime.

Followed by his illegitimate son, Charles Martel, the same policy continued to flourish with the strengthening of the Mayor's position.[47] Charles was essentially a ruthless warrior who crushed internal resistance to the authority of the monarch and beat back foreign attackers. His successful reign was followed by the able leader, Pepin the Short, who continued to strengthen the position of the Mayor. The most important action undertaken by Pepin was the active support of the most progressive religious force of the era. Since the conversion of Clovis, the Frankish rulers had traditionally posed as protectors of Christianity.

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[46]Lot, p. 342; Moss, p. 198.

[47]Moss, p. 199.

However, the efforts of these "do-nothing" kings did not always experience the happiest results as protector of the Church. Being threatened already by the rising aristocracy, the Merovingian kings were reluctant to encourage any institution that would serve to further sap the already declining authority of State. As a result, the kings policy tended to encourage the growth of a Frankish national church which had little connections with the rest of the Christian world.[48] The outcome was an increasing corruption of religious life which had already reached scandalous proportions early in the eighth century. This movement was checked, however, from the moment the Carolingians gained power. The Mayors of the Palace gave active support to the missionary efforts. Charles Martel aided St. Boniface, the English Benedictine, in his journeys which were designed to organize bishopries, recruit priests, and found monasteries among the newly Christianized lands along the frontier of the Frankish kingdom. Pepin's religious policy went even further than accepting responsibility for the welfare of the Frankish Church; before the end of his reign he had shouldered the burden of actually protecting the papacy.

This alliance between Rome and the Franks arose out of their mutual need for assistance. The Church, which so long depended upon the Eastern Emperors for its protection,

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[48] Ibid., p. 207.

now had to seek refuge elsewhere. With the East being faced with the onslaught of Islam and the emergence of the theological dispute between the East and West concerning the use of icons in worship, the Western Church was left to the mercy of the pressing Lombards.[49] With these problems confronting the Church, the Popes turned to the rising Carolingians who had already shown themselves favorably inclined toward the papacy with their interest in the missionary and reforming work.

With the Church appealing to Pepin for assistance, the Carolingian Mayor found it very difficult to refuse the request in light of the problems which he confronted. Still only Mayor of the Palace, he served kings who did nothing while he fought the wars, kept the peace, and promoted the true religion. To change this preposterous situation involved a serious risk of rebellion. The Franks, like all Germans, believed that God had bestowed a special sanctity on those who carried royal blood in their veins and to bestow the crown upon anyone but a member of the royal family was sacrilege.[50] Brute strength was not enough to transfer the kingship so Pepin therefore sought some authority whose approval of this act would supply the necessary aura of legality and receive wide acceptance.

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[49]Daniel-Rops, p. 375; Moss, p. 214.

[50]Sullivan, p. 62.

In 749 A.D., Pepin sent a legate to Rome requesting a papal opinion about a change of dynasty, and the Pope answered, "it is better that the man who has the real power should have the title of king instead of the man who has the title but no power."[51] With this sanction, the Frankish nobles elected Pepin king of the Franks in 751. Both the Protestant historian, Philip Schaff and the Catholic historian, Henri Daniel-Rops, cite this as the essential step in the formation of a Christian Western Europe.[52]

Although the Carolingians had been experiencing extensive growth during the seventh and early eighth century, it was Pepin's son, Charles the Great, who brought the dynasty to its full glory. His powerful physique, unbounded energies and personal courage made him a natural leader of the Frankish warriors.[53] Charles initial success came by avenue of military conquest which brought into his control an Empire embracing more territory than had been controlled by any single ruler in the West since the fall of Rome. While Charlamagne greatly expanded his Empire as a result of his military prowess this was never the sole aim of his endeavors. Instead, he regularly attempted to introduce strong political institutions which would make

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[51] Ibid.

[52] Schaff, p. 233; Daniel-Rops, p. 381.

[53] Schaff, p. 240.

the conquered people truly his subjects.

Equally important in Charles' program for incorporating new territories was his insistence upon the Christianization of the conquered people and the immediate institution of a Church organization. While the Protestant historian Philip Schaff takes issue with Charlamagne's methods of converting such people as the Anglo-Saxons by the sword, the other historians believe the ends accomplished in the strengthening of the Christian West justified the means.[54] While there are certainly pros and cons to such a method as that employed by Charlamagne, it is certain that positive results were obtained. One of the most important achievements of this Frankish king was that he managed to convince most of his subjects that he was more than a greedy conqueror. Instead he was hailed as a champion who protected his Christian subjects and rendered services for their betterment. This, it will be recalled, was one of the major shortcomings of the earlier Merovingian rule.

While expending an extraordinary amount of energy as leader of the successful military ventures, Charles also sought to improve the quality of government. His main concern became the establishment of peace and order among his subjects. He made efforts to provide competent courts

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[54]Schaff, p. 243; Daniel-Rops, p. 415.

and to create a body of local officials.[55] However, the decline of money economy in the Carolingian State and the reduction of the king's income made this very difficult. Those who served the king loyally could only be paid in grants of land with the inevitable risk they would use then to defy the king.[56] To limit the danger involved in such a system, Charlamagne attempted to bind his officials with personal oaths of alliance and to control their actions by use of the "missi", itinerant agents sent out from the royal court to regulate the actions of his vassals.[57] In the strong hands of Charles, this system not only worked amazingly well, but succeeded in re-establishing the prestige of the monarchy as a civilized and useful institution.

The indefatigable Charles further distinguished himself by the order in which he promoted the cultural life of his court and realm.[58] He delighted himself in the constant surroundings of the greatest minds of the West at this time. The group drawn from all over Europe, was dominated by the great Alcuin who had already established

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[55]Sullivan, p. 69.

[56]Moss, p. 230.

[57]Ibid., p. 232.

[58]Schaff, IV, p. 241; Daniel-Rops, p. 423; Dawson, p. 196; Moss, p. 235.

quite a reputation for himself in England.[59] The main function of his palace school, founded at Aachen, was to prepare students recruited from among the sons of the Frankish nobles and who were destined for service in the royal court or high office in the Church. These scholars generated such a notable revival of Latin and Patristic culture that the era has been labeled in history as the "Carolingian Renaissance." This period was so significant as to lead some scholars, such as Dawson, to refer to it as the direct forerunner of the later Italian renaissance. In any respect, during the reign of Charlamagne the cultural level of the West was certainly lifted to new heights.

In the year 800 there occurred an event in the life of Charles that has generated much acclaim from medieval scholars. Charles realized that Christianity was the strongest bond of unity in his diverse Empire and it was this belief that reinforced his own personal piety and led him to develop a stronger policy with the support of the chief religious leaders of the period. With vigor he pressed forward the reform of the Church began by his father. Nowhere in Christendom was there a greater champion of the faith. The culmination of Charles' vigorous religious policies resulted in the much disputed event of Christmas Day, 800 A.D., which witnessed the coronation of Charlamagne as Emperor of the West. Who was responsible for the

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[59] Moss, p. 236.

decision that resulted in the elevation of the Frankish king to the exalted dignity of Emperor? What motivated those responsible to act as they did? What exactly did they think they were achieving by their extraordinary actions? The answer to these questions have stimulated considerable controversy among certain scholars.

Generally most scholars subscribe to the view that the event of 800 must be attributed to Charlamagne himself.[60] C. Delisle Burns argues that Charlamagne arranged for his own coronation simply to enhance his reputation as a conqueror,[61] but such a belief as this is probably too Machiavellian to describe the actual motives involved in the event. Christopher Dawson, on the other hand, believes that the coronation was the political manifestation of the fact that a new civilization, basically Christian in its orientation, had finally come into existence. For Dawson, the coronation was an attempt to bring to life the City of God that St. Augustine had spoken about in the early fifth century.[62] Charlamagne was striving to give expression to

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[60]Richard E. Sullivan, The Coronation of Charlamagne (Boston, 1959), p. X.

[61]C. Delisle Burns, The First Europe, A Study of the Establishment of Medieval Christendom (London, 1947), pp. 569-578.

[62]Dawson, pp. 214-223; Daniel-Rops, p. 374.

the belief that a Christian society needed a Christian Emperor to continue its pursuit of Christian ends.

In opposition to the ideas suggested above was the school of thought, of which Ferdinand Lot was a member, that relieved Charlamagne of any responsibility for the coronation. In claiming he had little to gain from such an act, other than additional problems, they lay responsibility for the coronation upon the Church. It was the papacy that was to gain from such an act, thus it was they who instigated it. Perhaps the most provocative suggestion concerning the nature and importance of the affair of Christians Day, 800, has come from the pen of Henri Pirenne. He argues that most developments in the Carolingian period resulted from the impact of the Moslems on the Mediterranean world. As will be recalled, he sought to prove that for at least two centuries after the Germanic invasion political, social, economic, cultural, and religious life continued unchanged. But then in the seventh century the Moslems shattered the unity of the Mediterranean world and thereby killed Roman civilization. Thus, the Moslems were responsible for the emperorship of Charlamagne; in Pirenne's own words "without Mohammed, Charlamagne would have been inconceivable."[63]

However we interpret it, the coronation of Charlamagne spelled an eventful change in the direction of historical

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[63]Henri Pirenne, Medieval Cities (Princeton, 1925), p. 18.

development. As Professor Sullivan has concluded, either it represents the establishment of a Western European ruler who claimed supremacy over society, or the act represented the expression of the claims of the papacy to direct society and to designate its temperal rulers. It makes no difference which of these alternatives one chooses or whether he reaches some kind of compromise involving all of them. What is significant was that the coronation of Charlamagne marked a turning point in history. There is now a new and unique form of society being formulated in the Western European portion of the Empire which possesses a peculiar relation with Christianity which separates it from the other world powers. Western Europe has now been launched on its own.

It is quite evident by now that the Carolingian dynasty does not represent a period of decline or retrogression but is, in comparison to the do-nothing kings of the Merovingians, a marked improvement in human development. The political order has once more undertaken the responsibility of providing protection and rendering services to the subjects under its control. The economic order has been altered to meet the needs of an agrarian society and the cultural standards have experienced a tremendous upsurge.

Thus, from the work accomplished by more recent scholars, it is no longer feasible to ascertain, as does Pirenne and Dopsch, that the Merovingian dynasty represented

a continuation of the classical tradition which came to an end under the Carolingians. For all practical purposes, the world of antiquity had succumbed much earlier than the Carolingian period and this age, rather than representing decline, is an age of progress. It was during this era that we see the profile of Western European civilization coming more sharply into focus and however insignificant it may appear, claiming its rightful position beside the Eastern Roman Empire and the Arabic world. A new phase in world history has now been launched.

Chapter VII

THE RISE OF THE MOSLEM EMPIRE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Few events in history can be looked upon with greater amazement than those which witnessed the rapid transformation of the wandering sons of Arabia into a unified political state and their entrance upon the stage of world history as leading actors. So amazing was their rapid growth that it has enticed the very capable scholar, Henri Pirenne, to list it as the major cause heralding the beginning of the Middle Ages. Although we have previously seen the dubious nature of the Pirenne thesis, we have yet to establish the true significance of this cosmic event in relation to that which was transpiring in Western Europe at this time. However, before we proceed to this task let us first see a brief sketch of the formation of this new world force.

The chief characteristics of the Arabian desert prior to its sixth century ascendency could best be described as a fusion between individualism and chaos. The Bedouin tribes that inhabited the arid northern portion of Arabia were essentially semi-barbaric clansmen who pugnaciously guarded their flocks, customs, gods, and proud independence.[1]

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[1] H. St. L.B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1935), p. 144.

In comparison to a brilliant Rome or Persia, the life of these nomads was painfully simple and poor. So tenaciously did they cling to their individual primitive customs that it seemed doubtful that any force existed capable of overcoming the backwardness of their ways.

A striking contrast to his wandering northern brethren is the sedentary Arab of the fertile Southern fringe who was accustomed to an urban life. Their strategic location along the major trade routes between the East and West brought to these southern communities knowledge of the outside world which the far removed northern clans did not experience. One of the major cities along the caravan route, through which merchants regularly passed leaving both products and ideas, was the chief meeting place of the desert dwellers, Mecca.[2] Not only was Mecca one of the leading commercial centers of Arabis, but it was also the capital of religion. Here was located the Kaaba, a tiny temple which housed the mysterious black stone which drew pilgrims from all parts to receive its supernatural blessings.[3] It is here, in the complex life of Mecca, that a force is to arise capable of shattering the long prevailing disunity of Arabia and weld it into a major world power.

It was Mohammed, citizen of Mecca and Prophet, who was to eventually unleash the Arab forces upon the stages

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[2] Ibid., p. 145.

[3] Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe (New York, 1932), p. 130. Moss, p. 145.

of Mediterranean history. Born about 570, Mohammed was orphaned at an early age and was taken in by an uncle who directed him into a very affluent career of trade. So little is known of the early life of the Prophet that it is reasonable to conclude that he experienced little more than a normal childhood. Mohammed first steps into the light of history at the age of twenty-five when he was wed to the wealthy widow merchant, Kadijah. Obtaining from this union economic self-sufficiency, he now has a great deal of leisure at his disposal in which he could pursue his own inclinations.[4]

As a result of his newly found leisure, Mohammed was often noticed secluding himself and engaging in deep meditation in a little cave on the outskirts of Mecca. It was during one of his many visits to this secluded haven, that Mohammed was confronted with the voice of Gabriel which persistently summoned him, "as the sound of reverberating bells," to accept the divinely appointed position of apostle to which God had destined him.[5] As a result of the impenetrable cloud of legend which has been built up by his followers concerning this calling, we can not be dogmatically certain of the various foreign elements involved. Perhaps it is true, as Professors Dawson and Moss suggest,

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[4]Philip K. Hitti, The Arabs, A Short History (Chicago, 1943), p. 25.

[5]Ibid., p. 112.

that as a result of his frequent contacts with Judaism and Christianity on his commercial journeys, the Arabian beliefs and superstitions were discredited, creating within his mind the need for a new monotheistic religion.[6] Needless to say, to the followers of Mohammed this conclusion is sheer blasphemy, but it is safe to conclude that the religion of Mohammed was very similar to that of the Old Testament and most certainly fitted the needs of his fellow Arabs.

Mohammed's first announcement of his new mission was received with laughter and scorn from his polytheistic friends in Mecca. His early message which stressed the worship of one God and the rewards awaiting in Paradise anyone who would obey His commandments was soon transformed into a fiery message concerning the Day of Judgment, as he was confronted with the ridicule of the Meccans. This new religion held little appeal for the individualistic Meccans and further, his assault upon polytheism was resented, particularly by those in Mecca who profited greatly from the annual pilgrimage of the desert tribes to the old Gods at Mecca.[7]

After preaching for more than a decade to his unresponsive townsmen, Mohammed decided to leave iniquitous

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[6]Dawson, p. 131; Moss, p. 143.

[7]Richard E. Sullivan, Heirs of the Roman Empire, (Ithaca, 1960), p. 25.

Mecca for its rival Yathrib, whose residents showed an interest in his teachings and invited him to come and act as arbiter to pacify their quarreling factions. The "hegira," or emigration, which occurred in 622, led to the changing of the name of the city from Yathrib to Medina, "the city of the Prophet." More significant, however, this event represented a turning point in Moslem history. While it is clear the origin of Islam was purely religious, after the migration to Medina political elements began to exert a strong influence in the Prophet's teachings as can be seen in the series of "revelations" which he received embodying a civil and penal code. Henceforth, the "Prophet" was slowly being overshadowed by the "statesman."[8]

Increasingly Mohammed began to stress the obligation of his followers to wage "holy war" against the non-believers for the glorification of God. On one occasion God spoke to the Prophet saying, "Oh! Prophet, arouse the believers to combat. Twenty resolute men of faith will strike fear in two hundred infidels; a hundred of them will put a thousand of the faithless to flight."[9] This sense of mission, coupled with habit of warfare already characteristic of the Arab way of life, supplied the spark

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[8]Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present, 6th ed., (London, 1963), p. 116.

[9]Sullivan, p. 25.

for the military actions of the new community. With this divinely inspired force at his command, Mohammed turned against his former tormentors and in 630 was able to make a triumphal entry into Mecca, where he destroyed the false idols and introduced the worship of one God.[10] For the next two years delegates from the surrounding tribes made their way to Medina to offer allegiance to the prince-prophet. Most likely these missions were acts of convenience rather than conviction, but they did serve to bring the territory under the authority of one man.[11] When the Prophet's death came in 632, he was the leader of a large confederation of Arab tribes whose allegiance was built upon the acceptance of a strong leader and a common religion. Having at last conquered their long existing disunity, the Arabs prepared to confront the outside world.

In many respects Christopher Dawson is correct when he maintains the power of Islam, as a religion, rested in its simplicity.[12] The most important point in their simple creed was the uncompromising monotheism. The most serious of all sins to a Moslem was to establish a partner equal to God. The followers of Mohammed viewed their leader as the last in a series of prophets sent down by God. The earlier

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[10]Hitti, History of the Arabs, 6th ed., p. 118.

[11]Ibid., p. 119.

[12]Dawson, p. 132.

vessels of the Lord had received only part of the divine truth and the converts of these earlier religions had lost or abused the original Word. God's final revelation was revealed to man through the Prophet, Mohammed, and was intended for all the world.

Completed shortly after the death of the Prophet, the Koran was the record of the revelation he had received from God.[13] With particular emphasis being placed upon the rewards awaiting the faithful and the tortures in store for the wicked, Mohammed imposed upon his followers an overwhelming sense of the urgency of religious obedience and moral righteousness. In the course of his journey, Mohammed prescribed a simple set of religious practices to be followed by the faithful. There was first a statement of faith to be taken in which they recognized not only the omnipotence of God, but also the legality of His Prophet. Also, the believers were required to pray five times daily in an established fashion. This mode of prayer was to be a private affair, but public prayer had also developed in Mohammed's time. On Fridays, the faithful would assemble in a specially erected mosque where they followed a prayer leader in rendering homage to God. Other obligations of the faithful were the giving of alms to support the poor, fasting during holy seasons, and making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their life.[14] With the establishing

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[13]Tor Andrae, Mohammed (New York, 1936), p. 70.

[14]Dawson, p. 133.

of Islam, the world gained its third monotheistic religion and the similarity which it possesses in regards to the other two, Judaism and Christianity, may explain the relative ease with which man has been converted from one to the other.

With the death of Mohammed in 632, there was a momentary threat that the community which he had developed would disintegrate. Leaving no method of successions, many of the tribes that had joined the Prophet began to disperse and returned to their primitive clanish life.[15] It was obvious that no one could fill his position as the true prophet; still the infant community needed leadership. At the most critical moment some of his friends took the matter into their own hands and designated Abu-Bakr to serve as "caliph", or successor to the Prophet. During his two year reign (632-634) he was occupied primarily with restoring defecting tribes back to the community.[16] It was his work that virtually completed the unification of the Arabs.

It was the two able successors of Abu-Bakr, Omar (636-644) and Othman (644-656), who led the attack on the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires which vaulted the desert warriors into the limelight of world history. To understand the rapid ascendency of this once primitive tribe

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[15] Hitti, History of the Arabs, 6th ed., p. 139.

[16] Hitti, The Arabs, A Short History, pp. 42-52.

into a cosmic power it is necessary to examine both the Arabs and their foes at the time of the conquest. One of the prime factors which must be borne in mind is the war-like spirit which was always second nature to the desert dwellers. In addition to this was the far more important intense religious enthusiasm which made "holy war" a supreme act of consecration and self-sacrifice. For the Moslems to die in "the path of God" was of the highest ideal.[17] It is easy to understand how the professional armies of the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires were no match for men antimated by such a spirit as this. When this force confronted the Persian Empire which was already riddled by internal dissention and weakened by the attacks of Heraculius, it completely destroyed its foe and by 650, occupied all of its territory. The Eastern Roman Empire which was equally enfeebled by religious division and the attacks of many enemies during the preceeding half century, relinquished its provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt with ridiculous ease when confronted by these religious warriors embodied with a contempt of death. Thus, when the already weakened Eastern Empires met with the religiously inspired warriors, they were competently displaced from their old positions of supremacy and new masters came to the forefront.

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[17]Hitti, History of the Arabs, 6th ed., p. 141.

With the death of Othman, the advances of the Arabs were once more brought to a temporary halt. The succession question which had never been sufficiently solved erupted this time into bloody civil wars. But it was out of this strife the experienced military leader, Moawiya, emerged victor and in 661 established the Umayyad dynasty and with it a hereditary method of succession.[18] The most significant result of this action was that it removed the caliphate from being primarily a religious office. However, with the formation of this dynasty (661-750) the internal stability returned and the Arab armies resumed their conquest.

The Umayyads now pressed their attack westward through North Africa. With the same rhythmic effect as one domino knocking over another, the Byzantine possessions fell into the hands of the Arabs. By the end of the seventh century, the Moslem authority stretched all the way to the shores of the Atlantic. But this was not the termination point of the attackers. In 711, they pushed across the Straits of Gibraltar where the decrepit Visigothic kingdoms torn by internal strife collapsed like a house of cards.[19] Once established in Spain, small raiding parties began toventure across the Pyrenees into the kingdom of the Franks, but there the Arabs met a much more formidable foe. In 732, exactly one hundred years after the death of

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[18] Ibid., p. 183.

[19] Moss, p. 156.

Mohammed, the Frankish prince, Charles Martel, turned back the Saracen forces at the battle of Tours marking the Westward limits of the Moslem Empire.[20] Although this decisive battle has been hailed as the salvation of Western Christendom from the infidel, the fact of the matter is that the force of the Moslem invasion was already spent.[21] Being plagued by internal dissention between the Arab and African Berber elements, by 732 the Moslem strength was exhausted.

Although the battle of Tours appears to be a vital victory for Western Europe, the real threat to European civilization was actually at the other end of the Mediterranean. During their far-flung campaigns the Umayyad princes found time and energy to pound away at the Byzantine Empire. On at least two occasions, 673 and 717, the Arabs were on the brinkof bringing total destruction to Eastern Roman Empire. Had this actually occurred the back door to Europe would have been left completely open to the mercy of the invaders. However, by a skillful regrouping of its forces and tapping its reserve this mighty fortress at Constantinople was to stand unpurposely protecting the entrance to Western Europe until the much later fourth Crusade when the Europeans themselves were

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[20]Hitti, History of the Arabs, 6th ed., p. 215.

[21]Moss, p. 156; Alphons Dopsch, Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization (New York, 1937), p. 285.

responsible for the downfall of this strategic landmark.

With this brief sketch of the Arab ascendency behind us, we turn now the more important task of establishing the significance of the cosmic event in relation to Western Europe. While much of the material previously examined in this work has revealed the futility of Pirenne's efforts to establish this rapid onslaught of the Arabs as the beginning of the Middle Ages, this is not to suggest that it had no effect upon Western Europe. To see evidence of this we need only to examine the internal development of the Moslem Empire as it attempted to establish a workable administration of its possessions which now embodied a portion of three continents.

Following the period of conquest the Umayyads found the problem of administration to be more difficult in peace than in war. What Mohammed had established was a vague theocratic state in which he as Prophet exercised political authority. His successors, unable to sustain such a theocracy, instituted the practice of distributing to each of the Arab warriors a share of the booty and tribute exacted from the conquered people in an attempt to retain control of the Empire. Such a system as this only bred greed and disappointment making it necessary for the Umayyads to institute a more orderly system of control. In 661, when they first gained control of the government they moved the capitol to the city of Damascus. Moawiya, the founder of the dynasty, had long served in Syria where he had closely

observed the intricate workings of the Eastern Roman Empire. Once in power he proceeded to establish a bureaucratic government resembling the Roman system.[22] Although this political development was to possess an effective administration, it also reveals the limitations of the Arabs as they had to resort to the systems of their conquered subjects to establish a workable political order. As we shall see, this policy of adopting the customs of their subjects was not to stop here, but mushroomed to include many phases of life.

Evidence of this need of the Arabs to employ the long established customs and knowledge of their conquered subjects can be seen in the cultural realm of the Empire. Aside from their language, religion, and primitive poetry, the Arabs actually had little in the way of culture to offer the world. The subjects whom they had conquered were greatly their superior in literature, learning, art, science and philosophy.[23] Down to the end of the Umayyad dynasty in 750 their one great cultural achievement was in architecture.[24] Here they developed a style of workmanship suited to their own religious needs. Mohammed himself had built a mosque at Medina consisting of an enclosed courtyard,

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[22]Moss, p. 160; Dawson, p. 137.

[23]Ibid., p. 240.

[24]Moss, p. 160.

partially roofed and containing a pulpit from which he could preach and lead services of prayer. As time progressed, the mosques became increasingly elaborate. Probably the most famous is the one erected in Jerusalem, called the Dome of the Rock. Built by a caliph determined to create a Moslem structure superior to the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock embodied many features of Byzantine architecture especially its dome and colorful mosaics.

As a result of the Arabs having little to offer their conquered subjects and much to gain from them, Christopher Dawson's emphasis concerning the first century of Moslem history is not upon its rapid westward expansion as Pirenne would have it, but upon the fact that this represented a period of incubation.[25] The Moslems, recognizing their primitive ways, were willing to sit at the feet of their conquered subjects absorbing all the qualities of their long established culture. That which emerged from the Umayyad dynasty was not a pure Moslem culture, and still less Arabic, but it represented a cosmopolitan product, being shaped by all the various elements within the Empire. Thus, the significance of this period lies within the fact that the Arabs put themselves into a position to become heirs to all the earlier civilizations existing within the lands they had conquered.

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[25]Dawson, p. 137.

Additional weight is added to this idea of a fusion of cultures by H. St. L.B. Moss. As he points out, Islamic art was not the sudden creation of new style, but a combination of all that they had fallen heir to.[26] The typical mosque of this period featured the long colonnated halls of Egypt, the horseshoe archs and stucco exterior of Persia, and the Byzantine vaults supported by marble columns. This same admixture can be seen in most of the accomplishments of the Arabs. Today when we speak of Arabic medicine, Arabic philosophy, or Arabic mathematics, it is not meant they were Arabic in origin, but they were preserved and transmitted by way of the Arabic Empire.[27]

This fusion of cultures that was taking place during the Umayyad dynasty burst forth in the eighth century reign of the Abbasid dynasty in a full renaissance. With the spread of the Arabic tongue as a common language, the way was paved for the later spread of this cosmopolitan culture which was to have a profound effect upon the development of the medieval world.[28]

Thus we can conclude that while the Moslems were not directly responsible for the beginning of the Middle Ages, they had a profound influence upon the development of Western Europe. It was by avenue of their provinces in

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[26]Moss, p. 173.

[27]Hitti, History of the Arabs, 6th ed., p. 240.

[28]Dawson, p. 152.

Spain that a great deal of ancient knowledge passed into the hands of European scholars. Brief though this account of the Arabs may be, we can see that by the end of the ninth century there were three distinct powers existing in the world; the superior Arab dynasty, the declining Byzantine Empire, and the embryonic, but growing, Western European civilization, and it is around these the course of future history is to revolve.

CONCLUSION

As we come to the end of our long journey covering three centuries of historiography and seven centuries of actual historical happenings, perhaps the most valuable conclusion that can be derived from such a study as this is that the present should not worship nor be dominated by the shrines of past history. True historical study involves a double operation of both raising questions and seeking answers. The success and usefulness of history rests with the historian who seeks his answers by a systematic method, carefully probing and free from blinding prejudices. The dangers that are engendered when a scholar is dominated by the past can be seen in the work of such otherwise capable historians as Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, and Henri Pirenne, whose probing vision became fatally blurred by the past brilliance of classical civilization. As a result of their blindness, many fallacious ideas were transmitted and their work ultimately became null and void as a valid historical source deserving the attention of future generations.

The beginning of the Middle Ages to a scholar who has lost the ability to probe carefully his material and has succumbed to the forces of blind prejudices, represents a

catastrophic event herald by the onslaught of some external force upon the much superior civilization of antiquity bringing with it an inferior way of life. Such historians as this, stand as a man who "...sees through a glass darkly ...," failing to conceive the blatant internal maladies already plaguing classical civilization. They do not see the life destroying problems in the economic sphere of antiquity as the Romans were unable to capitalize upon their golden opportunities to establish and maintain a balanced economic enterprise. The moribund state of society and the political incompetence of the Roman leaders passed unnoticed to their prejudice eye. As a result, the true significance of the early Middle Ages lies hidden in the ignorance of their ways.

It is only from the superior research of such historians as Ferdinand Lot, Christopher Dawson, H.St. L.B. Moss, and William C. Bark that it becomes evident that the early Middle Ages represents neither a catastrophic event nor the beginning of a "Dark Age." As we have seen in the first five chapters of this work, the origins of the Middle Ages were deeply rooted in the decline of Rome and came to life through a gradual transition. The fact that in the formation of this new era in the West, several conditions and forces occurred together and reciprocally influenced each other cannot be overemphasized. The political institutions, the religions ideas and systems, the mode of thought

and expression, and the social and economic organization, all worked together to provide a sound and satisfactory basis for the lives and dreams of medieval man. While the writings of twentieth century historians may at times disagree on minor issues and degrees of emphasis, their common conclusion is now undisputable. As they have stressed and supported so scholarly, civilization did not come to an end with the fall of Rome nor with the emergence of the Arab forces upon the world, but arose in a new and different form to launch man upon a new phase of history.

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influenced by the new schools of science. William Edward Hartpole Lecky, History of European Morals, Vol. I (New York, 1894) reveals the impact which the biological theory of evolution had upon sociological writing.

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provide the most fascinating reading. Particular emphasis concerning the life of the Prophet, Mohammed, can be obtained from the work, Mohammed (New York, 1936) by the able scholar Tor Andrae.

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