

2.2 Western Europe During the Middle Ages

For 500 years, much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. The rest of the continent was controlled by groups of people the Romans called “barbarians” because they did not follow Roman ways. When Rome fell to invading barbarians in 476 C.E., Europe was left with no central government or system of defense. Many invading groups set up kingdoms throughout Western Europe. These kingdoms were often at war with one another. The most powerful rulers were those who controlled the most land and had the best warriors.



In 800 C.E., Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman emperor by Pope Leo III.

Christianity the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus

Charlemagne the leader of the Franks from 768 to 814 C.E., who unified most of the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire

Charlemagne’s Empire One powerful group during this time was the Franks (from whom modern-day France takes its name). The Franks were successful because they had developed a new style of warfare. It depended on troops of knights, heavily armed warriors who fought on horseback. To get and hold power, a ruler needed the services and loyalty of many knights. In return for their loyalty and service, the ruler rewarded knights with land and privileges.

One of the early leaders of the Franks was an ambitious young warrior named Clovis. In 481 C.E., at the age of 15, Clovis became leader of the Franks. Five years later, he defeated the last great Roman army in Gaul at Soissons. During his 30-year **reign**, he led the Franks in wars that greatly extended the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.

Clovis also helped lead the Franks into **Christianity**. Clovis married a Christian woman, Clotilda, and eventually was bap-

tized into the Roman Catholic Church. Many of his followers became Christians, as well.

The most important leader of the Franks was **Charlemagne** (SHAR-luh-main), which means “Charles the Great.” This impressive king ruled for over 40 years, from 768 to 814. Writings from that period say that he was six feet four inches tall—extremely tall for his time—and “always stately and dignified.” Legend has it that he read very little and couldn’t write, yet he loved to have scholarly works read to him. He encouraged education and scholarship, making his court a center of culture. Most important, he unified nearly all the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire. One of the poets at his court called him the “King Father of Europe.”

Charlemagne built his empire with the help of a pope—Leo III, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was a central part of society during this time. For Charlemagne, the blessing of the Church sent the message, “God is on my side.” For his part, Leo needed the support of someone with an army. In return for Charlemagne’s help, the pope crowned him Holy Roman emperor in 800 C.E.

Charlemagne’s empire survived many attacks. After his death in 814, however, it quickly fell apart. The weak rulers who followed him could not defend the empire against new waves of invasions. Still, these kings helped prepare the way for the system of **feudalism** by following Charlemagne’s example of rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for military service.

A Need for Order and Protection In the 9th and 10th centuries, Western Europe was threatened by three main groups. Muslims, or the followers of the religion of Islam, advanced from the Middle East and northern Africa into what is now Spain. The Magyars, a central Asian people, pressed in from the east. Vikings swept down from present-day Norway and Denmark.

The Vikings were fierce warriors who struck fear in the people of Europe. At times, the Vikings’ intent was to set up colonies. But they were best known for their terrifying raids on towns and religious centers.

Picture a Viking attack. The people of the town are at early morning church services when an alarm bell starts to peal. Vikings! Long, shallow wooden boats have brought the Vikings close to shore. Now they leave their boats and run toward the town with swords and axes raised over their heads. People are running in all directions. Several villagers who try to resist are killed. Others are seized by the Viking raiders and taken back to the ships.

Clearly, the people of Western Europe needed to figure out new ways to defend themselves. To protect themselves and their property, they gradually developed the system we call feudalism. Let’s find out how it worked.

feudalism the economic and political system of medieval Europe in which people exchanged loyalty and labor for a lord’s protection

A raiding party of Vikings attacked the walled city of Paris in 885 C.E.



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