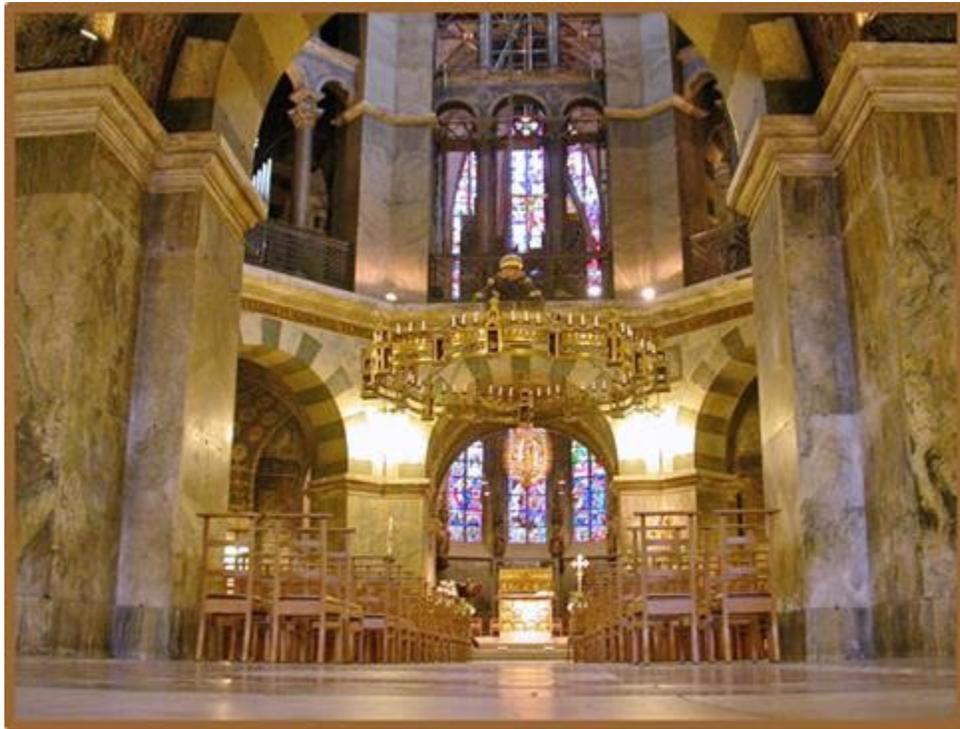


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WESTERN EUROPE ENTERS THE MIDDLE AGES



Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel: Photo Courtesy of Tobias Helfrick

Unit Overview

While the Muslims built their empire, Germanic tribes divided up Western Europe. Without Roman law and Roman military presence, trade nearly disappeared, and cities decayed. City dwellers fled to the countryside and struggled to survive. These events marked the beginning of the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period, an era that lasted for over one thousand years. It was a time filled with highs, such as the reign of

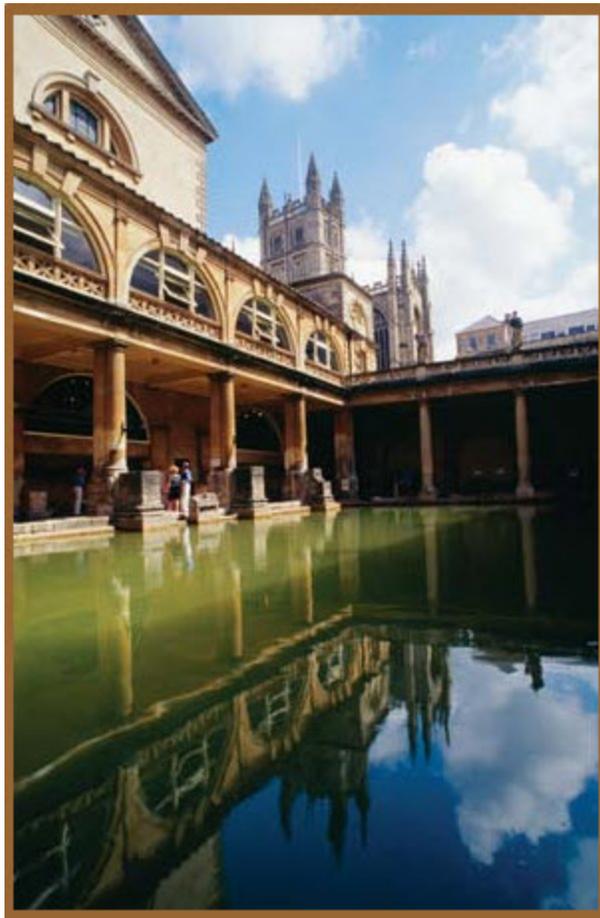
Charlemagne, and lows, like the terrorizing raids of the Vikings. Let's see how it all happened.

Life without the Roman Empire

By 500, the Germanic tribes had taken over the entire western sector of the Roman Empire. Germanic kingdoms replaced Roman provinces, and their borders changed constantly. The **Franks** controlled Gaul, the **Vandals** ruled North Africa, the **Visigoths** held power in Spain and the **Ostrogoths** were in charge of Italy. Britain, Rome's most distant province, was under constant attack from **Angles, Saxons and Jutes**. All of these tribesmen were primarily farmers and herdsman. They were accustomed to being governed by unwritten customs as opposed to written laws. This made them very different from the Romans.

The constant state of warfare ruined trade and caused the decline of towns and cities. The people who lived in them were left defenseless and moved to the countryside where they grew their own food to survive. These changes brought about an era of history known as the **Middle Ages** and began a way of life that would continue for nearly one thousand years. It has also been called the **Dark Ages** and the **Age of Faith**.

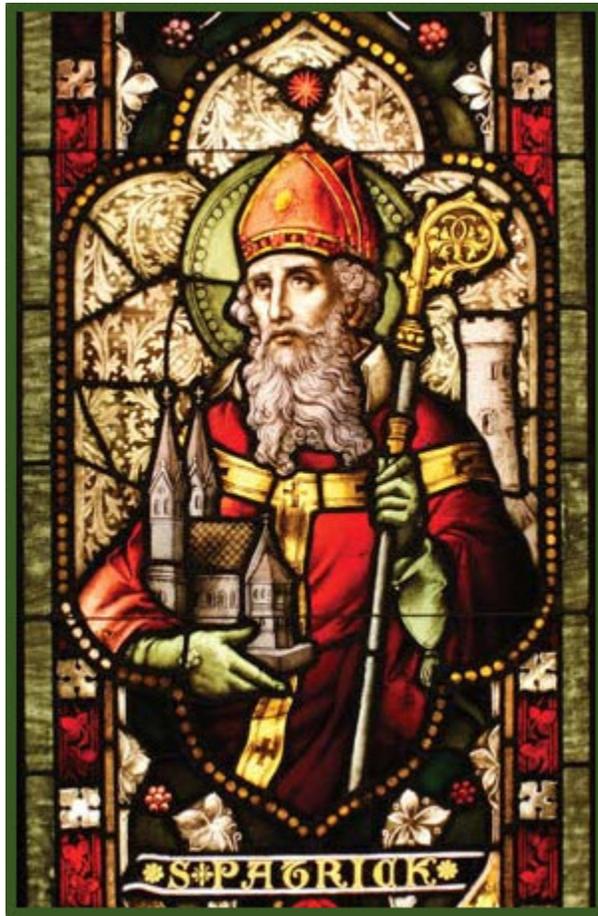
As Roman rule disappeared, **Latin**, the common language of the empire, also changed. When people from the German tribes entered the population, new words and dialects developed. Soon French, Spanish, Italian and other Roman-based or **Romance languages** evolved. As more individuals settled in rural areas, the importance of learning and education decreased. By 800, Christian priests were almost the only Europeans who could read and write.



Remains of Roman Baths: Somerset, England

When Roman law ceased to exist, the whole idea of government changed. The Germans did not see themselves as citizens of a state but as members of a family that followed a particular leader. Warriors pledged their loyalty to certain chieftains or lords. The lords gave their fellow tribesmen weapons, food and treasure as rewards for their service. This created a personal bond between the warriors and the lords, a practice that made orderly government nearly impossible.

In spite of the turmoil, one institution associated with the Roman Empire survived. The Roman Catholic Church, under the direction of the pope in Rome, remained strong and became the civilizing force of the age. Missionaries, such as **Patrick** of Ireland, succeeded in winning converts to Christianity. Christian communities in which groups of men or women gave up their possessions and lived simply became common. Women who chose to do this were called **nuns** and lived in **convents**. Men that followed this way of life lived in **monasteries** and were referred to as **monks**. They dedicated their lives to prayer and worship. The monasteries operated schools, maintained libraries and copied books. Through the efforts of monks, some of Rome's intellectual heritage survived.



An Artist's Rendition of St. Patrick in Stained Glass



The Reign of Charlemagne

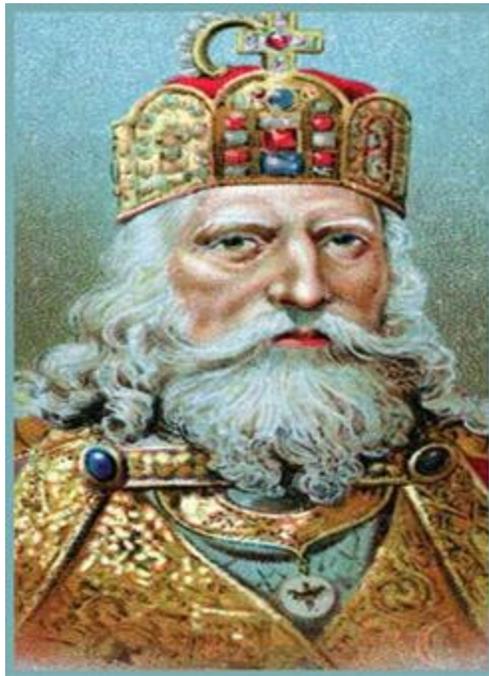
Although the divisions among the German tribes were deep, a brief period of unity occurred around 800. At this time, a grandson of Charles Martel put together an

empire that stretched across France, Germany and part of Italy. At almost seven feet tall, **Charlemagne** or Charles the Great was an impressive figure. During his forty-six year reign, he fought the Slavs in the east, the Saxons in the west and the Muslims in Spain. When **Pope Leo III** requested help to defeat a group of rebellious lords, Charlemagne moved his troops into Italy and ended the threat. To show his gratitude, Pope Leo crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans in a ceremony on Christmas Day, 800. This confirmed that much of the old Roman Empire had been reunited under a single ruler. Charlemagne's empire became known as the Holy Roman Empire.



Map of Charlemagne's Empire

Charlemagne was determined to unify Europe under the banner of Christianity, but this was not an easy task. At first, he sent missionaries to convert the Germanic tribes to the Christian faith. With the Saxons, however, this proved ineffective. Ultimately, Charlemagne offered his defeated enemies a choice. They could be baptized as Christians or die by the sword immediately. Villages that rebuilt their pagan altars after the emperor's forces left town were destroyed. For obvious reasons, the number of Christian converts soon increased.



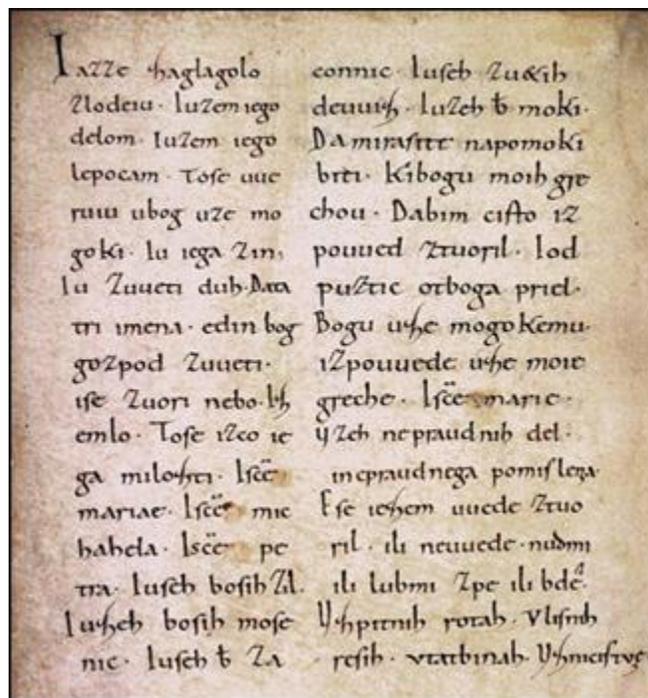
An Artist's Concept of Charlemagne

Charlemagne realized that it was easier to manage his kingdom if he enlisted the help of influential lords. He permitted them to control large territories, but he knew that their power had to be limited. For this reason, Charlemagne sent royal agents to make sure that the lords governed fairly and did not abuse their authority. He journeyed to every part of his realm annually. During these visits, the emperor settled disputes and handed out rewards for good work. **Einhard**, a historian living at the time and Charlemagne's biographer, described him as energetic, dedicated and hands-on leader.

Charles was large and strong, and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting; although his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects. His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but not so strong as his size led one to expect. His health was excellent, except during the four years preceding his death, when he was subject to frequent fevers; at the last he even limped a little with one foot.

Einhard: *The Life of Charlemagne*

Early Germanic kings had little interest in education, but Charlemagne changed this trend. He learned to read but found writing very difficult to master. Because he wanted his sons and daughters to be educated, Charlemagne established a school within his palace and visited the classes regularly. Keeping a watchful eye on their progress in reading, writing and math, Charlemagne demanded that his children take their studies seriously and had no patience with laziness. Church officials were also expected to improve their academic skills. For this reason, the emperor encouraged monasteries to open schools and libraries. Monks made hand-written copies of books to fill the library shelves. They produced a beautiful style of lettering, known as **Carolingian miniscule**. It is regarded as a rare art form today.



An Example of Carolingian Miniscule

Charlemagne died in 814, and without his strong presence, his sons and grandsons engaged in a bitter struggle for power. They finally settled matters in 843 with the **Treaty of Verdun**. This agreement destroyed the empire by splitting it into three separate parts. Although his kingdom did not survive after his death, Charlemagne's reign had a lasting impact. Under his rule, Christianity reached the northern areas of Europe and blended with German and Roman traditions. He also set an example of strong, efficient government that later rulers applied to strengthen their own leadership.



New Invasions

As Charlemagne's heirs argued among themselves, new waves of invaders hit Western Europe. Even though Charles Martel, Charlemagne's grandfather, had defeated the Muslims at the Battle of Tours, Islamic forces remained a threat. They continued their attacks for the next one hundred years after Charlemagne's death. At the same time, **Magyars**, a nomadic tribe struck from the east. Their raids devastated parts of Germany, France and Italy, until they were finally driven out about 950.



Map Showing the Viking Invasion Routes

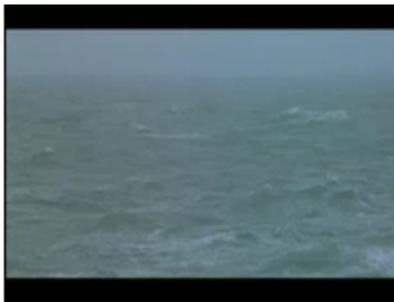
The most fearsome group, however, were the **Vikings**. They arrived from Scandinavia, a section of Northern Europe that now includes of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Beginning around 900, they plundered and burned communities located along Europe's

seacoasts and river banks. Some of their long, lean ships carried as many as three hundred warriors. The Vikings or Norsemen traveled deep ocean waters and shallow rivers with equal ease. Although they were destructive raiders, they were also traders and explorers. They opened new trade routes that linked Europe to the Mediterranean region. This increased the exchange of products and technology.



Painting of a Viking Ship

By 1000, the Viking raids subsided. Europeans found ways to respond quickly and became better at fighting off their attacks. Like the Germanic tribes, the Vikings gradually accepted Christianity and no longer plundered monasteries and churches. At last, Europeans were not threatened by outside invasions, but they had learned the importance of protection. Their desire for security led them to rely on feudalism, a system that had advantages and disadvantages.



What Happened Next?

The invasions of the Muslims, Magyars and Vikings had convinced Europeans that they needed protection for themselves and their homes. Although Charlemagne was an

exception, their kings proved to be weak leaders and were unable to provide security. To meet their needs and to restore order, Europeans relied on a different system called feudalism. Powerful lords exchanged land for promises of loyalty and military service. Everyone from nobles to peasants had a place in its hierarchy. In the next unit, you will see how knights, castles and vassals fit into this way of life. Before moving on, review the information in Unit 13; then, answer Questions 21 through 30.