

L E S S O N 1

Europe After the Roman Empire

THINKING FOCUS

What conditions after the fall of Rome led to the rise of feudalism?

Key Terms

- monastery
- feudalism
- hierarchy
- fief
- vassal
- oath of fealty
- knight

► *This Anglo-Saxon box lid from the 700s was carved from whalebone. It shows warriors attacking a fortress. What kinds of weapons can you see in the carving?*

When the barbarian Odoacer took command of Rome in A.D. 476, he removed the powerless emperor Romulus Augustulus. The Western Roman Empire lay like a skeleton fallen in its own useless armor.

To Romans, it must have seemed the end of the world. All along the 10,000-mile border of the empire, there was war. Oribasius, a Roman poet in the 400s, wrote:

See how swiftly death comes upon the world, and how many people the violence of war has stricken. Some lay as food for dogs; others were killed by the flames that licked their homes. In the villages and country houses, in the fields and in the countryside, on every road—death, sorrow, slaughter, fires, and lamentation.



Rise of the Germanic Kingdoms

The fall of Rome marked both the end of the ancient world and the beginning of a new era. Historians call this period, which lasted until about 1450, the Middle Ages, or the Medieval Period. Some have

called the early part of this period the “Dark Ages” because little that was written at that time has come down to us. Historians do know, however, that important changes took place in Europe.

New kingdoms were set up in the lands the Germanic invaders had conquered. The map below shows the barbarians' division of rule in Europe. One Germanic group called themselves the Franks, or "the bold." Find the part of Europe where the Franks settled.

A Conquering People

In 481, the 15-year-old warrior Clovis became king of the Franks. He led them for 30 years in wars that widened the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom. Eventually, it included most of what are now France and Germany. Clovis also led the Franks into Christianity.

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the only tie with the stability of earlier times was provided by the church of Rome. It continued such traditions of the empire as using Latin and making its center in Rome.

Elsewhere in Europe, monks formed religious communities known as **monasteries**. There they devoted themselves to preserving the ideas of ancient Rome and Greece as well as church writings.

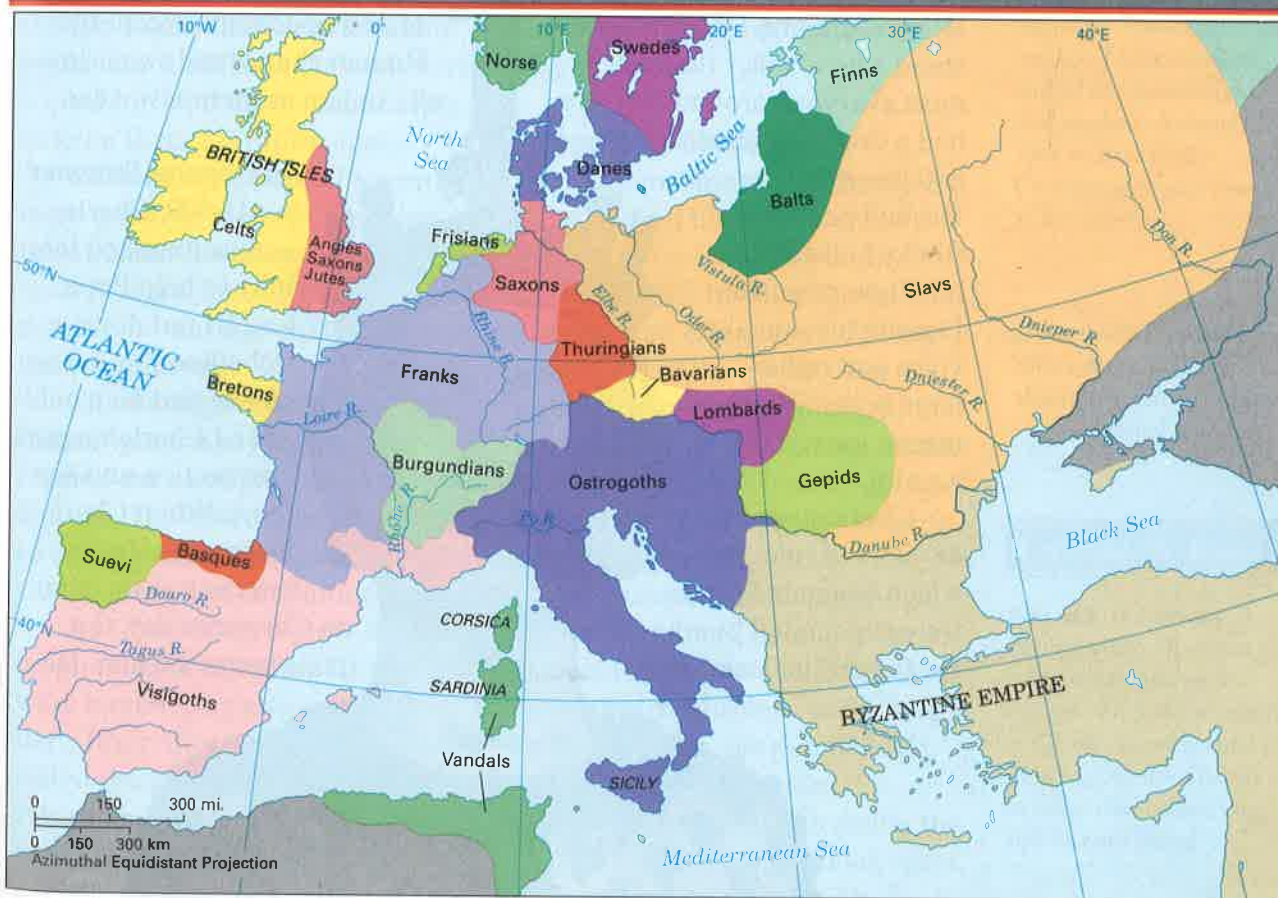
The church supported Clovis because it wanted to continue to serve Christians in the area ruled by the Franks. In order to do that, the church had



◀ This Roman eagle of gold and precious stones was made by an Ostrogoth goldsmith.

▼ Find present-day France and England on the map of Europe on page 524 of the Atlas. Which Germanic tribes settled in the areas that became France and England?

Barbarian Kingdoms



to cooperate with the king. Once Clovis had been baptized and had accepted the support of the church, the leaders of the church encouraged him to spread Christianity. "Every battle you fight is a victory for us," a bishop wrote to Clovis.

A New Royal Family

The sons and grandsons of Clovis were more interested in squabbling among themselves than in ruling the kingdom. A new family rose to power from within the king's household. The Mayors of the Palace, officials of the king, were the kingdom's real rulers.

It was a Mayor of the Palace, Charles Martel, or Charles the Hammer, who defeated Muslim invaders from Spain at Tours, France. Martel's victory against the Islamic armies in 732 made him a hero. It was said that he saved northern Europe for Christianity.

In 751, Martel's son, Pepin, asked the head of the church, Pope Zacharias, to recognize him as king. Pepin was the first king to rule with the blessings of the church. King Pepin's son Charles, who was called Charlemagne, would also rule with the church's support. ■

■ *What important changes took place in Europe after the fall of Rome?*

Charlemagne's Empire

Charlemagne was to become more than the king of the Franks. He would become emperor, the ruler of the former Western Roman Empire. Charlemagne stood a head taller than almost everyone around him. He had a drooping moustache and piercing blue eyes. His bull neck and stocky build made him look powerful. Despite his squeaky voice and rather large belly, Charlemagne looked like a warrior.

Charlemagne's 48 years of rule, which began in 768, were dominated by war. He fought the Lombards

in Italy, the Saxons to the north, the Avars and Slavs to the east, and others, 60 campaigns in all.

Charlemagne made his defeated opponents accept the Roman church and swear loyalty to him as their new ruler.

An Emperor Crowned

In 800, Charlemagne marched into Italy to help Pope Leo III put down a rebellion there. Leo knew that he would need Charlemagne's protection and support. When Charlemagne rose from kneeling at the altar on Christmas day, the pope surprised him. He

► *This gold likeness of Charlemagne at the cathedral of Aachen was made to hold his bones.*



placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and declared him emperor.

Charlemagne and the pope both knew that only the head of the Eastern Roman Empire at Constantinople could legally claim the title of emperor. But the title fit Charlemagne well. As emperor, Charlemagne dedicated himself to strengthening the church and bringing learning to his empire.

An Age of Learning

Although unable to read or write, Charlemagne liked to have men of letters around him. His greatest scholar was a religious man from England named Alcuin.

By Charlemagne's time, most of Europe's libraries had been destroyed during periods of war. Very few people knew how to read the few books that were left. Led by Alcuin, Charlemagne's scholars copied by hand these manuscripts to keep them for future ages.

Charlemagne himself longed to learn to write. He kept a writing tablet under his pillow while he tried to learn. But he eventually decided he was too old to master the written word.

Charlemagne also made sure that religious services were performed the same way throughout Europe. He forced illiterate clergy to become educated, and tried to rid the church of corruption.

As Charlemagne grew old, his empire began to unravel. Enemies were hammering away at its borders. From the east came a people called the Magyars. From North Africa and Spain, Muslims attacked. And from Scandinavia came a group of fearless warriors

known as Vikings. The map on page 260 shows these invasions.

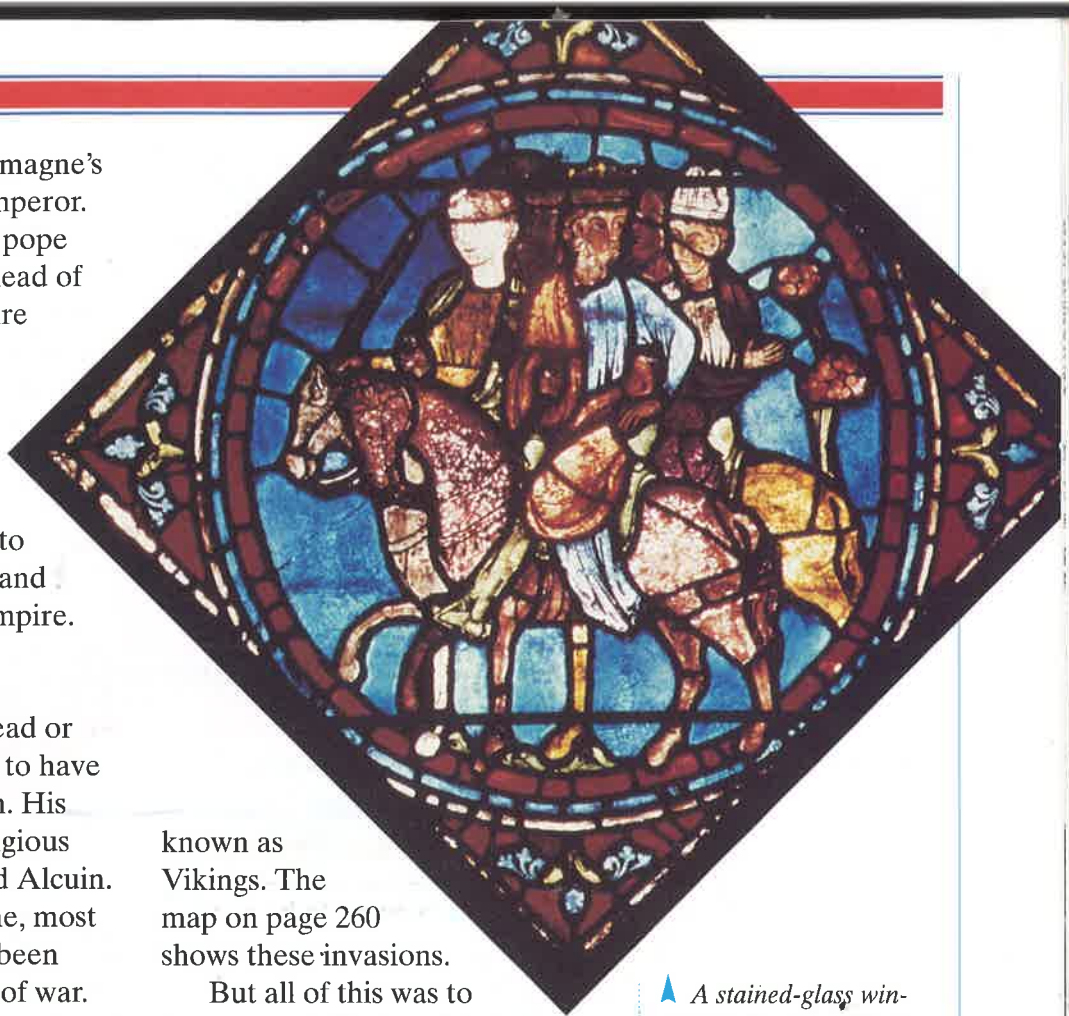
But all of this was to be someone else's problem. In 814, at the age of 72, Charlemagne died.

Europe After Charlemagne

Charlemagne's son, Charles the Pious, lacked his father's shrewdness and strength. Long before he died in 840, his sons, Lothair, Charles, and Louis, were fighting for control of the empire. For a while, the empire was divided among them, as you can see on the map on page 260. Their kingdoms came apart as landowners became more independent.

As Europe broke up into smaller kingdoms, people looked to local lords to defend them. With the Magyars, Muslims, and Vikings at their borders, the people had much need for protection.

After Charlemagne's death, the Vikings found Europe falling apart, and ready for the taking. The



▲ A stained-glass window in the cathedral at Chartres, France, tells the stories of Charlemagne and of his loyal knight and nephew, Roland. This section shows Charlemagne and two of his warriors.

How Do We Know?

HISTORY Historians know quite a bit about what Alcuin did and thought while he worked at Charlemagne's court. Many of Alcuin's letters to other churchmen can still be read today.