

FOUNDED UPON THE ROCK: PART IV:
THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES AND THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIAN EUROPE

I. In the early Middle Ages, the focus shifted from the centrality of Greek and Roman civilization to the formation of new cultures, the new nations of Europe, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic civilization.

A. During the classical era, from about the fifth century B.C. to about the early sixth century A.D., the area around the Mediterranean Sea was in many ways united, first by Greek culture and then by the Roman Empire (with other empires, such as the that of Egypt, Carthage in and Persia also competing for dominance.)

B. The division was thus not between what we would consider Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. For the Mediterranean Sea was not so much of a barrier as a means of transportation between the various nations of the Mediterranean.

1. The harsher lands to the north, the desert to the south and in Arabia, and the borders of the eastern empires were more of a barrier separating what was considered classical civilization from others. There were the barbarian lands to the north, the Parthian and Persian Empires to the east, Ethiopia and some vague notion of nations to the south, and legends about magical lands to the west over the Atlantic.

2. Within the Roman Empire, there would also be a division between the West, which was mostly Latin speaking, and the East, where Greek was more of the universal language. Although there were many exceptions, the western Roman Empire tended to emphasize more efficiency and simplicity, whereas the eastern Roman Empire tended to emphasize more beauty and mystery.

C. But in the early Middle Ages, Christianity was central to the formation of new nations in what we now call Europe. And both the idea of Europe and the distinction between eastern and western Europe, along with the identity of many nations, took form during this time.

1. The nations to the west tended to stay with the Latin tradition associated with Rome. The nations of eastern Europe (with the notable exception of Poland) tended to be go with the eastern tradition associated more with the Byzantine Empire. The eastern traditions developed around Constantinople and the new nations of eastern Europe, as well as what is now called the Middle East, which came to be dominated by Islam. In 1054, there was a formal division between most of the eastern churches in this area and the Pope, creating what we now call the Orthodox churches. Some of the people in the eastern traditions remained with the Pope, or rejoined the Church later, creating what we call the eastern Catholic Churches. There are now 21 Orthodox Churches, and 22 eastern Catholic Churches. Of the eastern Catholic Churches, 21 parallel the traditions of the various Orthodox Churches; and the Maronite church from Lebanon is only Catholic.

2. Most of what we consider to be North Africa and the Middle East (along with most of Spain for the time being) became Muslim. Eventually, there would be divisions within the Muslim world, with Egypt and the rest of northern Africa dominated mostly by the Sultan of Egypt and what we now call the Middle East dominated more by the Sultan of Bagdad, and Spain largely on its own. These religious differences mostly defined the division between Europe, on the one hand, and north Africa and the Middle East on the other.

D. In Europe, the former barbarian tribes gradually became Christian and formed new nations. Islam spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and into parts of Europe. And the Byzantine Empire fought for its life, gradually recovered and sent missionaries to eastern Europe, often with dramatic success.

II. Even as the Roman Empire was ended in the west, the Church continued to spread the faith and build up societies.

A. The monks performed numerous roles in the early Middle Ages that would help resettle Europe as a Christian civilization.

1. The monks emphasized a simplicity and order of life to govern the monasteries and convents, an order that would bring about peace in a chaotic world.

2. There was an emphasis on combining work and prayer, with a particular focus on studying the Scriptures in general and the psalms in particular. The steady effort helped re-cultivate farmland that had fallen into disuse; and the prayerfulness gave a sense of the divine on earth.

3. One of the works of monks was also copying out old texts, a service that helped preserve many of the works of Greece and Rome, which would otherwise have been lost.

4. Because of their unity and determination, the monks were ideally suited to set up lasting missions in pagan lands. Even in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Irish monks began mission to Scotland and the England, followed up by missions to the Germanic nations.

B. In 589, the Visigoths, who ruled in what is now called Spain, came over to Catholicism when the king Riccared ceased being Arian and joined the Catholic Church.

1. In the mid 6th century, the Visigothic aristocracy and monarch in Spain was basically Arian, although the majority of the population seemed to have maintained the Catholic faith.

2. King Leovigild became king of the Goths in Spain in the 6th century and had two sons, Hermenegild and Reccared.

3. He arranged for a marriage between Hermenegild and Igunthis, a princess of the Franks, who was Christian. Although only 12 or 13, she resisted all attempts to make her Arian and instead, with the help of Bishop Leander of Seville, converted Hermenegild to Christianity in 579.

4. This conversion and political difference led to conflict with Leovigild, who prevailed and executed Hermengild in 586. However, Leovigild died shortly thereafter, and Riccared became king.

5. But then in 587, Riccared came over to the Catholic faith, and took the Visigoths with him, ensuring the prevalence of Catholicism on the Iberian peninsula.

C. And with the decline of the western Roman Empire, the papacy became more prestigious, for it was the source of order and unity, although the Popes had to struggle to keep their independence.

1. The most famous Pope (and Benedictine monk) of the early Middle Ages was Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-606), who defended the Church and helped establish Christianity in Western Europe.

a. He was a learned statesman and eventually became the prefect (a sort of mayor) of Rome at a time when the city had declined dramatically.

b. He left that position to be a monk at a new monastery he established in Rome. But because of his talents, Pope Pelagius II sent him to be the papal ambassador to Constantinople. Shortly after he returned to his monastery, Pope Pelagius died and Gregory was elected Pope.

c. The Lombards had settled in Northern Italy and were threatening Rome and all the rest of Italy. Plague and famine had also broken out in central Italy. And the eastern emperor was of little help, for he was at continual war with the Persian Empire further east and had less and less success against the barbarians.

d. After much prayer, the plague came to an astonishing end. Gregory was able to arrange food shipments from the eastern lands of Italy. He also negotiated with the Lombard king to keep him away and increased contact with the kings of the Franks and the Visigoths.

e. When the situation stabilized, he sent Saint Augustine to England to convert that nation; and he encouraged others to engage in missionary activity.

f. Early into the papacy, he wrote The Rule of Pastoral Care, a guide for bishops and pastors. That Rule would become the guiding text for pastoral ministry in the western Church.

2. As the sixth and seventh century progressed, the Popes were the only stable influence in most of Italy. Meanwhile, they kept trying to maintain alliances with the kings of the Visigoths in Spain, the Lombards in Italy, the Franks in what is now France, and the various kings in Ireland, Scotland and England. The difficulties in communication and transportation, however, made direct and control over the bishops and the local churches difficult.

D. With the Benedictine monks working from the south, along with Irish missionaries from the north, almost all of England, Scotland and Wales were Christian by the mid-7th century. A dispute did break out about whose traditions to follow, the more informal, but also more austere Irish, or the more stable, rules based monks of the Benedictine tradition. A synod in Whitby in the year 663 or 664 was originally called to decide the proper date for Easter ended up being a debate between the two sides. The most powerful English monarch, the King of Northumbria, sided with the Benedictines; and their tradition became dominant in England, and to a lesser degree, Scotland and Wales.

E. The Lombards, who took over northern and much of central Italy in the late sixth and seventh centuries, became a threat to both the Pope in Rome and the Byzantine Empire, the latter of whom eventually lost control of Italy. The missionaries from Rome, however, gradually brought the Lombards over to the Catholic faith during the seventh century, although the Lombards still periodically caused trouble for the Popes.

F. In the east, after the death of Justinian, the Byzantine Empire struggled to maintain its control over northern Africa and Italy and fought wars with the Persian Empire. These struggles weakened the eastern Roman Empire, even though it did prevail in the conflicts with the Persian Empire.

1. A time of relative peace between the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Empire came to an end after the increasingly unpopular Emperor Maurice was overthrown and murdered. The military chose as his replacement a low ranking officer named Phocas.

2. The Persian Emperor Chosroes II had been a good friend of Maurice, began a slow invasion of the Byzantine Empire. Phocas was soon overthrown by the more able general Heraclitus. But, sensing weakness, the Persian Empire closed; and, in 611, Chosroes launched an all-out invasion, which included the capture of Jerusalem and the Holy Land in 613 and 614.

3. When the fall of Constantinople seemed imminent, the Patriarch Sergius gave the Emperor the Church's full treasury to pay for peace with the Slavs and Avars to the north and build up a new army. With his superior tactics Heraclitus drove the Persians back and, after Chosroes was killed, forced a peace on his successors.

4. However, the wars had weakened the Byzantine Empire, especially because Heraclitus tried to pay Sergius back by raising revenue in the Empire.

5. The Empire was also in the midst of strife over monophysitism and monothelitism, heresies that maintains that Jesus had only one nature or one will, not two, a divine and human. Pope Honorius did not help the issue by basically ignoring it and advising people to put the dispute off to a later day.

III. Suddenly, in the sixth century, the religion of Islam was established and came to dominate the Middle East and North Africa. In the seventh century, the forces of Islam even threatened the very existence of the Byzantine Empire.

- A. A merchant from a prosperous family named Mohammad (570-633) believed he had visions from heaven to establish the new religion; the Koran is the official versions of these visions, although it was apparently written only some time later.

B. Muhammed lived in Arabia and was surrounded by pagan religions that were gradually becoming discredited. And with the Byzantine and Persian Empires much weakened by their wars, there was a spiritual and political void. Muhammed took full advantage of the occasion and had some success gaining converts during his lifetime, starting in the city of Medina in 622, which is year 1 in the Muslim calendar.

C. After his lifetime, especially under the influence of his successors Abu Bakr and Caliph Omar, Islam spread with astonishing speed.

1. The rest of the Persian Empire collapsed under Muslim advances. Arabia, Syria, and Egypt were all Muslim by 644 and soon all of North Africa was as well.

2. The area around Jerusalem remained Christian, but was isolated. There were also numerous Christians in areas controlled by the Muslims, but they were under the rule of the Muslim government, had to pay a “himmii” tax, and experienced social disabilities.

3. The Muslim dominance spread both due to the effectiveness of the leaders and to the fact that it was relatively easy to understand. As Fr. John Vidmar wrote, “One of the weaknesses of Islam is also its strength: simplicity” The Catholic Church Through the Ages (2005) 92. The Muslim faith also had a clear, strict moral code (particularly helpful in a chaotic age) and a relative equality among people, at least in comparison to paganism and aristocratic societies.

D. The new caliphate besieged the city of Constantinople itself in 718. The city held out and repulsed the invaders, largely with the use of “Greek fire” that burned Muslim ships. But the empire was vastly weakened.

E. The Muslims meanwhile moved into Spain and conquered most of that peninsula, which they called the kingdom of Al-Andalus. The Visigothic kingdom collapsed, although some Christians held out in what is now northern Portugal and Spain.

F. The Muslim forces then swept into France. They were finally stopped at Tours in southern France in 732 by the armies of Charles Martel, who was the Mayor of the Palace (essentially the chief of staff) for the Frankish king.

IV. This victory by the Franks helped lead to the rise of the Carolingian dynasty and the Holy Roman Empire.

A. The kings of the Franks, descendants of Clovis, became generally weak figures by the eighth century; and powerful Frankish nobles increased in prestige and influence. The Frankish chiefs of staff, called Mayors of the Palace, were increasingly in charge of what was left of the court of the Kings of the Franks. Due to the threats of the Muslims, as well as the overall chaos in society, there was an increased need for a strong national leader; and the Mayors of the Palace began taking more and more in charge.

B. In 750, the Pope recognized Charles Martel's son, Pepin the Short as the true king in about 750. When Charles Martel died in 741, Pepin and his brother Carolman were co-heirs to this office, but Carolman entered a monastery in 747, leaving Pepin as sole Mayor of the Palace. With the augmented prestige of being king, Pepin conquered the Lombards of northern Italy, who were still threatening Rome; and under Frankish influence, the conversion of the Lombards was completed.

C. During the reign of Charles Martel, Pepin the Short, and the co-regency of his brother Carolman, St. Boniface and his fellow monks entered the German lands and encouraged the conversion of that people. In 722, Pope Gregory II consecrated Boniface as bishop of the Germanic peoples and spiritual leader of the Germanic peoples in that area. He continued this ministry, later as Archbishop of Mainz until 747, when he was martyred by pagan forces.

D. One of Pepin's son was named Charles, or as we know him now, Charles the Great or Charlemagne. He eventually became the most powerful monarch in the early Middle Ages, and would be the model of kings for centuries thereafter.

1. After Pepin's death in 768, Charles and his brother (also named Carolman) co-ruled over the Franks until 771 when Carolman died. Once he gained sole control of the Frankish kingdom, Charlemagne extended his kingdom to all of France, modern day Germany, northern Italy, northern Spain, and parts of eastern Europe.

2. To help the Pope maintain independence, he declared that central Italy was the realm of the Pope. That land would come to be known as the Papal States.

3. Charlemagne was a devout Christian and an effective leader. As ruler, he emphasized the rule of law and education, reduced squabbling among local nobles. With improvements in law enforcement, transportation and the enforcement of agreements, more trade arose in continental Europe than had been known for centuries. The capital of his kingdom Aachen, in modern day northwestern Germany, became the center of scholarship in Europe. The decades surrounding Charlemagne's rule have thus become known as the Carolingian renaissance.

4. In the year 800, Charlemagne brought his army to Rome and gave Pope Leo III crucial assistance in retaining control of the city when rebels threatened to overthrow and kill him. Then, in St. Peter's Basilica on Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne, "by the grace of God, Emperor of the Romans." Thus began the new Holy Roman Empire, which would last in one way or another for another 1000 years.

- Charlemagne himself did not use the title as much, and only eventually agreed that it would be hereditary. But his advisors and his people very much supported the idea of restoring the vision of a Christian Roman Empire in the west.

V. There was a short time of peace and prosperity in western and central Europe, but it eventually faded under the Viking attacks and the overall decline of civil rule.

A. After Charlemagne's death, his sons divided the realm into three parts, with the eastern part roughly modern day France, the western part most of modern day Germany, and a central part in between containing what is now roughly Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and northern Italy. That central portion would continue to be called the Holy Roman Empire.

- The tradition among the Franks was to divide the kingdom among male heirs, which led to further divisions of the kingdoms, although there would also be combinations due to marriages and other alliances. The Holy Roman Empire thus became only the loose confederation of realms, who sometimes fought among themselves, and with neighboring kingdoms.

B. Likewise, in England and Ireland, there was no united kingdom. The mainland of England had four prominent kings, although even together they did not control all of the land. That situation paradoxically did lead to an increased prestige of the monasteries and of the Church.

C. Then a new threat arose in the north as the Vikings began their raids, threatening all of western and northern Europe.

1. The Vikings were a people from Scandinavia who were loosely organized, but also fiercely loyal to family ties. They developed excellent and versatile ships and strong fighting skills.

2. They began raiding England and Ireland in the eighth century and the mainland of Europe in the 830s, and no authorities seemed able to stop them.

3. In England, King Alfred the Great (871-899), the king of Wessex, gained great fame and prestige by fighting off the Vikings, and at times making agreements with them. His prestige would make his kingdom of Wessex the centerpiece of the developing country of England.

4. The Frankish kings at times tried to make them allies or even give them areas so that they would be more civilized. The most prominent of these efforts occurred in 911 when King Charles the Simple of France recognized the right of the Viking king Rollo to rule over the area of western France now called Normandy. King Charles understood that Rollo would be his vassal, but the Vikings understood that they would be more independent. Rollo did accept baptism, and the Vikings of that area gradually came over to the Christian faith.

5. The Vikings also settled in southern Italy and Spain and establish there the kingdom of the Normans (Norsemen.)

6. The Viking raids eventually ended as the Vikings themselves became Christian and began to cultivate the regions they controlled. For example, St. Olaf King of Sweden (980-1022) and St. Olaf King of Norway (995-1030) both converted to

Christianity and were killed in part because of their attempt to bring Christianity to those nations; after their deaths, their efforts then bore great fruit in those nations. Meanwhile, King Cnut of Norway, (990-1035) conquered England and later became King of Norway; and in these roles very much supported the Church and, despite some personal vices, became a model for Christian kings. Other Christian Vikings settled in Sicily and southern Italy, establishing what would be called the Kingdom of the Normans.

7. Thus, far from destroying Christianity in Europe, the Vikings by becoming Christian brought the faith further north.

D. In 895 or 896, the Magyars, a Slavic tribe that had been living in what is now Ukraine, invaded what is now Hungary. They conducted raids over western Europe until King Otto I of France defeated them at the Battle of Lechfield in 955, a victory that paved the way for him to succeed to the title Holy Roman Emperor. They continued rulings as a pagan nation in what became known as Hungary because the people of Europe associated the Magyars with the Huns of old. However, in 1001, St. Stephen, the King of the Magyars, converted to Christianity. And, under his influence that that of his successors, that people as well came into the faith.

E. In Rome, the Popes also had many struggles for independence with the nobility, who were often more interested in worldly power and prestige than in holiness.

1. As the Holy Roman Empire declined in prestige and power, Pope Nicholas I, known as Nicolas the Great, did guide Europe by his strong leadership and clear teachings during his reign from 858 to 867. And he was influential in the conversion of the Czechs, the Moravians and the Bulgarians. However, after his death, the pontificate experienced a time of decline until the early 11th century.

2. Powerful Roman families, who had more interest in using the Popes and cardinals for their own gain than for that of the Church, tried to gain influence.

3. Increasing rivalries also caused strife among the families of Rome and all of Italy. For example, in 896. Pope Stephen VII had his predecessor Pope Formosus (who was of a rival family) dug out of his grave, tried for misconduct and convicted in what became known as the Cadaver Synod. The next Pope, Leo V, retried Pope Formosus, acquitted him, and reburied him.

4. Other Popes were attacked and sometimes murdered by rival families. Meanwhile, the absence of strong leadership in Rome and in many nations made clerical discipline and learning much more difficult.

VI. The Pope and the eastern bishops and emperor did, however, help promote the faith, although they also had some disputes.

A. From the early 6th century to the late 8th century, there was little contact between East and West due to the difficulties of travel and communication.

B. As peace began to be restored, the two sides of the Church came into contact more. The discussions were sometimes fruitful. For example, when the iconoclastic heresy, a view that forbade images portraying God or the angels or saints, bishops in the east and west joined together for the Second Council of Nicea in 787 and affirmed the theology of sacred images.

C. Saints Cyril and Methodius received support from both sides as they prepared for the evangelization of the Slavic nations, which involved creating a written alphabet (called the Cyrillic alphabet) to teach the faith. Cyril died in 869, but in the 870s St. Methodius and his monks entered the Slavic nations of eastern Europe and spread the faith there with rapid success.

1. Thus, in what is now Bulgaria, King Boris of the Bulgars had become Christian in 865. But the missionaries helped spread the faith among that people.

2. In the late 9th century the people of Bohemia began converting to the Christian faith, a process helped by St. Wenceslas, duke of that region from 907 – 935.

3. In 966 King Mieszko I of Poland became Catholic and joined the western tradition of Christianity, partially due to the influence of his wife Dobrawa. With him, most of the nobles joined the Church and with them the Polish nation. King Mieszko tended toward the more western version of Christianity, even though the Poles were Slavic. This combination made this area a link between east and west.

4. Most of the other peoples of what is now eastern Europe joined the eastern traditions of Christianity and developed their traditions, forming many of what is now the Orthodox churches and eastern Catholic churches.

D. Several tribes, including many Vikings, eventually established a nation known as Kiev Rus, which consisted of most of modern day Ukraine and the western part of modern day Russia. Their most powerful monarch, King Vladimir (980-1015) decided that the nation would become eastern Christian; and his decree was basically successful, with the result that Russia and Ukraine are mostly Orthodox Christian to this day.

E. As trade and communication increased, there were some disputes between the Papacy and the eastern bishops over the authority of the Pope.

1. The issue almost came to a head with the Photian controversy.

a. In 858, the Byzantine Emperor deposed Patriarch Ignatius of Constantinople on grounds of misconduct and replaced him with Photius.

b. Pope Nicholas I opposed this move. He did not necessarily disagree with replacing Ignatius, but it had been done without his consent; and

Photius was also denying final papal authority. Thus, a dispute arose over who was the legitimate patriarch.

c. After about 20 years, the issue was resolved after Ignatius died. The Pope recognized Photius; for his part Photius and other representatives agreed that the Pope was essential for defending the faith. The sides likely understood that idea in different ways, but for now the dispute was resolved.

2. Another dispute arose over the Nicene Creed.

a. The original Nicene Creed had said only that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. During Charlemagne's reign, it became popular in the West to include the words "and the Son" to indicate that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Pope approved of the change; and it gradually became the standard in the West.

b. But eastern bishops disagreed with the change. Some said that the new formula was wrong. Other bishops said that it could be read as legitimate, but they still maintained that the Pope could not authorize additions to the Creed without an ecumenical council. The issue was never quite resolved. But as communications between east and West diminished again in the tenth century, it faded for a time.

VII. In western Europe, feudalism was increasing taking hold in society, and was having a large influence in the Church and in church state relations.

A. Feudalism gradually arose in the ninth and tenth century as a system that tried to reestablish society on the basis of a hierarchy of nobles and commoners, who were all bound together by oaths and a commitment to the land. It was basically an attempt to reestablish order in a society that desperately needed it in the face of declining security. And, for all of its inequality, it did largely accomplish that end. The highly structured institutions of obligations between the various levels of nobility, fighters, and commoners recreated a more stable order and better defenses for nations, towns, and lands.

B. Otto I, the Holy Roman Emperor from 936 to 973, came up with the idea of incorporating the clerical hierarchy as lords in the feudal order. He thought that this arrangement would benefit both sides.

1. On the one hand the king would have nobles who presumably took their oaths very seriously and had at least more moderate lifestyles than many of the other feudal nobles. In addition, because bishops, abbots and most priests were celibate, a clerical lord would not have descendants who may grow in power and challenge the king.

2. For the Church, this arrangement gave her more stability and a stronger position in society. And a good king could help maintain church discipline.

3. However, a central problem was that, when bishops and other clergy were also

nobles, they had a divided loyalty, partially to the Pope and partially to the king. In addition, religious controversies often became political ones, involving political and military tactics not really fitting for a religion based upon the idea that one should seek first the kingdom of God. Furthermore, the qualities of a useful noble and a good bishop were different, a fact that would lead to some appointments that were not a good idea for one side or the other.

C. Under the Holy Roman Emperors Otto I, II and III and St. Henry II, who together ruled until 1002, this system increased in influence and was generally respected as helpful to both sides. And other European kings, particularly in France and England, likewise employed this system. For the time the benefits of increased order and unity seemed to be strong. And so the situation led to greater peace and order for about 100 years.

D. There were also reform efforts within the Church.

1. For example, in 910 a noble founded a Benedictine monastery in Cluny, which was meant to get back to the original Benedictine discipline that monasteries had been often neglecting. Under its second abbot, Odo, the monastery not only succeeded in that goal, but attracted the notice of other monasteries, who put themselves under the general authority of Cluny in order to have better discipline themselves. Thus began the Cluniac reform effort, which included 2000 monasteries by the year 1100.

2. Along similar lines, the Cistercian order was founded in 1098 to get back to the old monastic discipline of a simple lifestyle and extensive prayers each day. The Cistercians were also very successful both in recruiting members and obtaining land from nobles who were only too happy to have it worked by such an orderly group of people. There were 600 such Cistercian monasteries within 50 years after the order was founded.

3. The German Emperors, along with other monarchs, were also promoting clerical reform. This effort reached Rome and, starting in the late 10th and early 11th century, as the Roman noble families gradually lost influence, and more capable Popes were taking office. In 1059, Pope Nicolas II established the rule that only cardinals could vote for the Pope, which heavily diminished outside influence. The next Pope elected was a Cluniac monk named Hildebrand, who took the name Gregory VII. He in turn increased clerical discipline and learning.

4. However, this very success led to issues of control. With greater discipline and prestige, as well as the restoration of much of society, the Popes wanted full authority over the appointment of bishops and over Church affairs generally.