

## **Part 2: The Transformation of the Western Roman Empire**

Once established in the east, Constantine selected the city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus Strait as his capital. On May 11, 330, Constantine rededicated the city as New Rome, though it was popularly called Constantinople, or the city of Constantine. The city was close to both the Danube and Persian frontiers, was readily accessible by sea, and was easy to defend. The city, however, was not dedicated as a Christian city, though it quickly became just that, but it seems to have included a few pagan temples at first. For the most part, this transfer of the capital to Constantinople proved permanent for the eastern half of the empire, and it is symbolic of the transformation the Empire would experience over the next three centuries. Over the course of the fourth-century, emperors often divided the empire between their sons or with their brothers, though often not without conflict. In 395, the last sole emperor, Theodosius I, died, splitting the empire between his two young sons. The empire would never again be reunited under one emperor.

The two halves of the empire remained separate, however, not because they were two different empires, but because by 476, the Western Empire ceased to exist. There were multiple reasons for this. First, beginning in the late fourth century and increasing in the early fifth century, groups of Germanic peoples, also called the barbarians, began to enter the empire. These peoples however did not come completely uninvited into the empire. They often came not as invaders but as armies to whom the emperors and the various Roman warlords turned to fight the empire's enemies, such as other Germanic tribes, or even other rival emperors. These Germanic groups were often already Romanized, since they so often intermarried with the native population of the empire. Often, the imperial government gave them control over extracting tax revenue from regions in which they settled in order to pay them. However, because pay and

food were often in short supply, the barbarians often took more than their treaty with the empire allowed, and once they settled in a region, there was very little the empire could do to remove them, besides to bring in yet another group of Germanic people to remove them, but the new group usually also proved impossible to remove, and so the cycle continued. It is not clear why these Germanic peoples began to put more pressure on the Roman Empire. It could have been a result of population pressure as the Asiatic Huns moved into the territories of these Germanic tribes who had long ago since settled into an agrarian life but now found themselves pushed out of their homeland. It could also have been because of the increasing attractiveness of a Western Empire that was becoming weaker politically, making its borders more porous, and more in need of additional army auxiliaries drawn from the Germanic peoples to defend its wealth.

Two other factors in the disappearance of Roman authority were the twin problems of weak imperial leadership and the rise of powerful warlords of both Roman and Germanic ancestry. For example, when Theodosius I left his son Honorius I as emperor in the West in 395, the young emperor was only 11 years old and never really developed a decisive personality. Since he was so young, the Germanic general Stilicho actually controlled the government, hiring the Visigoths to assist him in his attempt to take control of the eastern government as well. This was ultimately a failure, and he eventually fell from power, and at the urging of the senate, the emperor ordered his assassination to avoid war with the eastern empire. The problem was that the leader of the Visigoths, Alaric, still expected the Roman senate to keep Stilicho's treaty with the Visigoths and to provide the promised payments, which the senate refused to pay.

This refusal was a result of another growing problem in the late Roman Empire. First, the local elite in the Western Empire became somewhat indifferent to supporting the empire and its army, often refusing to pay taxes and to participate fully in the government when called upon

to do so. Indeed, a local aristocrat in Rome or in Gaul might have an income ten times more than the total revenues of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Since the early days of the empire, the local elites were expected to collect the taxes in the cities and, if they could not collect enough, to pay the rest out of their own expenses. As the burden of taxation grew heavier in the fourth and fifth centuries and the aristocracy became wealthier, the aristocrats increasingly decided to withdraw to their country estates rather than to worry about funding the western empire's endemic civil wars. But such an attitude was often shortsighted, and the elite always seemed surprised when the emperor could not protect them. In the case of the Visigoths in 410, the senate decided to pay at the last minute once it was clear that Emperor Honorius, safe in his capital in Ravenna, would not lift a finger to assist the soul of the empire, the city of Rome. Alaric hardly wanted to abolish the empire, but desperately in need of supplies, he eventually grew impatient with negotiating with the emperor and the senate. So, on August 24, 410, he turned on the city of Rome and sacked it for three days. Alaric himself died a few months later, and soon the Visigoths left Italy and moved into southern Gaul and eventually Spain.

The Roman world was shocked and horrified by what had happened in 410. The theologian Jerome (d. 420), living near Bethlehem, wrote in horror: "Who would believe that Rome, built up by the conquest of the whole world, had collapsed, that the mother of nations had become also their tomb?" Jerome, the translator of the Hebrew and Greek bible into Latin known as the Latin Vulgate, was known for his dramatic flairs, so it is not surprising that he also said, "the bright light of all the world was put out," and "the whole world perished in one city." More serene, Augustine (d. 430), the Bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa, who had studied and taught rhetoric in Milan, wrote his massive *City of God* in response both to how pagans and Christians reacted to the sack. Many pagans blamed the sack on the steady Christianization of

the empire, claiming that the gods had withdrawn their protection from Rome, since its populace had withdrawn their worship from them. Augustine responded by lambasting the pagan gods of Rome as immoral, demonic beings and by highlighting all the disasters of Rome before Christianity. To Christians like Jerome who saw the sack of Rome as the beginning of the end of the world, Augustine calmly explained that the world could continue to exist without Rome. God had brought the empire into existence so that in the fullness of time, God the Son could be born as Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity may have been Romanized, but it no longer needed Rome to survive.

The pattern of weak leadership, civil war, and warlords continued after the death of Honorius in 423. Though the military dictators who propped up the various emperors should have concerned themselves with defending the empire, they often were more interested in preserving their own power. One such warlord, Flavius Aetius (d. 453), ignored the pleas of the governor of Roman Africa when the Germanic Vandals invaded, mainly because Boniface was a rival. Little by little the provinces of the Western Empire slipped out of the hands of the empire. Warlords and various emperors often tried to save one province by sacrificing another, hoping to regain the lost provinces later. But one by one they lost the provinces until all they had left was Italy where the Roman Empire began.

In 476, the Romanized Germanic warlord Odovacer removed the young Emperor Romulus Augustulus, whose father Orestes had appointed him as emperor in 475 but failed to pay Odovacer's men. This was not the first such coup in the fifth-century Western Empire, but usually warlords would appoint a new emperor. This time Odovacer did not even bother to appoint a new emperor. Instead, he recognized the imperial authority of the eastern emperor who had no interest in Odovacer. Instead, Zeno sent Theodoric the Great, the king of the

Ostrogoths, who had been a thorn in the side of the Eastern Empire, to invade Italy and remove Odovacer. By 493, Theodoric was triumphant in Italy, and Emperor Zeno named Theodoric a Roman patrician, a consul, and a master of soldiers, and the king continued to use the old Roman administration, recognizing the authority of Zeno. But in reality, Theodoric along with the other barbarian kings of the post-Roman West were virtually independent of eastern authority.

What remained after 476 in the Post-Roman West? By 500, Barbarian kingdoms and warlords had divided up what was left of the Roman Empire in Western Europe. By the end of the sixth century, the three major barbarian kingdoms on the continent included the Visigothic kingdom in Spain, the Frankish kingdom in Gaul (the core of modern France) ruled by the Merovingian dynasty until 751, and the Lombard kingdom in Italy, which had conquered much of Italy from the Byzantines who had reconquered the Roman homeland from the Ostrogoths during the reign of Justinian I, which we will get to later in this lecture. In general, within these new kingdoms, the barbarian population was very small; this is seen in the fact that the modern languages of French, Italian, and Spanish as well as their medieval, early modern, and modern dialects are Romance languages, not Germanic languages.

So, what factors allowed for the eventual gradual amalgamation of the Romanized native population with the newly arrived barbarian tribes? By the end of the sixth century, the barbarians themselves had undergone a religious transformation. When most of the Barbarians had entered into the Roman Empire, they were Arian Christians, but as the barbarian rulers in Spain and other regions converted to Catholic Christianity, the religious prohibitions on intermarriage between Catholic Christians and Arian Christians no longer prevented intermarriage between the original population and the barbarians. For instance, in Frankish Gaul, when the Merovingian King Clovis I, who reigned between 481 and 511, converted to

Catholic Christianity from either Arianism or Paganism, his conversion allowed him to garner more support from the Catholic Church, the native aristocracy, and the Catholic aristocracy in other regions under the control of Arian Christian barbarians. Likewise, when the Visigothic king Reccared of Spain converted to Catholic Christianity in 589, he also ended prohibitions on intermarriage between Visigoths and the Romanized Spanish.

In other ways, the new Germanic kingdoms differed much from the old Roman administration. The Germanic peoples, though envious of fancy Roman titles and often borrowing from Roman law in their law codes, did not consider themselves to be Romans. Under these various Germanic kings, the old Roman tax system broke down completely; instead, kings had to extract their revenues from the land they owned. Without a monetary economy, it also met Western Europe tended to localism. In Spain, the aristocracy ensured that no single family could establish a permanent royal dynasty, though Spain remained much more a cohesive unit than did Frankish Gaul. In Frankish Gaul, the aristocracy took advantage of the Merovingian kings' tendency to divide their kingdoms between their sons, beginning with Clovis himself. The sons and grandsons of the late king would then fight each other until there was only one male remaining. Though this meant eventually only one man would be king, such familial conflicts allowed aristocratic families to dominate. By the end of the seventh century, the Merovingian dynasty had virtually no power.

Even though the disappearance of Roman authority in the West was not nearly as dramatic as it might initially seem, the economic ramifications of the fifth century were profound. During the height of the Roman Empire in the third century, commerce and interregional exchange was intense, but after the fifth century, the economy became less complex and more localized. For example, before the fifth century, it was not unusual for someone in

northern Italy to eat off of pottery made in North Africa, but after the fifth century people used pottery locally made and of lower quality. Likewise, while those of modest means in the Roman Empire enjoyed houses with tiled roofs, after the fifth century, they were stuck with flea-infested thatched roofs. Even the cow suffered as it shrunk to a much a smaller frame due to a decrease in food production. No longer could wealthy aristocrats have their estates spread across the empire; instead, they were now less wealthy and fiercely local. Though economics might be boring at times, this economic simplification was probably one of the most significant results of the disappearance of Roman authority, and probably one of the biggest reasons the west could never be integrated back into the Eastern Empire.

After the disappearance of Roman authority in West, there was very little clear political authority outside of the barbarian kings. As result, local bishops gradually took over the administration of their cities. Ever since the conversion of Constantine, these bishops were increasingly and then almost exclusively drawn from the Roman elite. Later, as the Germanic warlords converted to Christianity, this meant that the bishops increasingly came from the Germanized aristocracy and, thus, were deeply tied to the dynastic and aristocratic rivalries of Frankish Gaul and Visigothic Spain.

An predominate example of a bishop-administrator was the bishop of Rome who by the end of the fourth century also had the title of pope. Because Rome was the largest city in the West, especially in Western Europe, and the imperial city (even if it was cut off from the empire) after 500, the prestige of the bishop of Rome spread as Christianity became more widespread in the old Western Empire, though his jurisdiction remained mainly confined to central Italy for several more centuries. Nevertheless, the bishops of Rome often cited Matthew 16:13-20 to uphold their primacy within the Church:

[Jesus] asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’

Thus, they believed Christ established his church not only on Peter’s faith but also on Peter himself whom Christ made the chief of the apostles. In addition, the Church of Rome also pointed out that not only did Peter die a martyr as the bishop of Rome, the city was further consecrated by the martyrdom of the Apostle Paul. Because of these ideas, popes after Constantine began to argue that Rome was the final court of appeals in the Western Church and beyond, and that the way the Roman Church did things, such as how they celebrated Easter, was the normative pattern for all churches. They ultimately claimed authority over all other bishops of the church, but it was a claim the other bishops often disregarded. The popes also had non-religious duties to perform as well, such as when Pope Leo I and a senatorial delegation supposedly convinced the Huns not to sack the city in the 450s.

No pope probably embodied both the ideal bishop and the stereotypical early medieval bishop than Pope Gregory I, who was pope from 590 to 604. Like most if not all bishops across early medieval Western Europe, he came from an aristocratic family. But unlike most bishops who entered the priesthood late in life after living a worldly life, Gregory from early age wanted to live a religious life. After serving as the Prefect of Rome in 572 at age 30, he retired to his family estate in order to establish a monastery where he lived until 579. After living in the monastery for seven years, Pope Pelagius called upon this capable aristocrat to go to Constantinople as a papal representative to the emperor, despite the fact that Gregory probably

did not know Greek that well. Upon returning to Rome in 586, Gregory I again returned to the spiritual solace of his monastery until 590.

In that year, multiple disasters hit the city. Plague broke out, famine struck the region, and then Pope Pelagius died. Desiring strong leadership, the clergy and people of Rome elected Gregory as pope. Knowing that they were coming for him to make him pope, Gregory attempted to hide from the Romans in a closet, but to no avail. He was duly ordained bishop and installed as bishop of Rome. Once on the seat of St. Peter, Gregory I threw himself into his new duties. Despite his preference for monastic isolation, he used the skills that he learned as city prefect to ensure a steady supply of grain for Rome, negotiate with the bothersome Lombards (a Germanic people that invaded the peninsula in the late sixth century) to stop attacking Rome, and organize the reconstruction of the city's walls. While all of these activities were typical for an early medieval bishop, he also consciously sought to fulfill his episcopal duties. For example, as pope, he composed the *Book of the Pastoral Rule*, which was essentially the first preaching manual in Western Christianity, explaining how preachers needed to shape their sermons around the needs of their audience. In addition to preaching and celebrating the sacraments for his flock, Gregory also sent missionaries to convert the distant Anglo-Saxons in Britain, who had never converted even to Arian Christianity before gradually taking over the former Roman province of Britain in the fifth century. By sending such missionaries, he extended the influence of the bishop of Rome beyond Italy and gave a new religious orientation to the former Western Empire. However, Gregory did not see himself as an overlord but took a new title, servant of the servants of God. Perhaps this reflected an influence on Gregory from Benedict of Nursia whose biography Gregory wrote and whose monastic rule later would become the most influential rule in medieval Western European monasticism.

What is monasticism? Monks sought to live a life of religious asceticism or self-denial, including fasting, celibacy, and other practices, in order to destroy their carnal desires and be completely conformed to Christ. The first Christian monks lived in the deserts of Egypt in the third century and tended to live alone in the desert; indeed, the word monk comes from the Greek word for alone. How did such a movement developed in a religion that emphasized the importance of community? Christians had long considered martyrs to be heroic super-Christians who suffered for Christ, but the end of the persecutions changed how Christians could attain holiness, since the option of martyrdom for the most part was unavailable. Instead, some Christians sought to become living martyrs through a life of asceticism. In addition, after the legalization of Christianity in the empire, many Christians feared that the discipline of the church was being lost, since more less than committed converts entered the church, which by the end of the fourth century was the official religion of the empire. There certainly might be something to what they feared, since beginning under Constantine, emperors favored Christians when granting government positions.

Among the most famous of these early ascetics was Anthony of the Desert (251-356) who as a rich young man attended church one day when he heard the gospel reading in which Christ told a rich young man to go, sell all he had, and give it to the poor. Anthony did so, placing his sister with a group of consecrated virgins, and then went out into the desert where he spent his life fasting, having visions of Satan appearing as a beautiful woman, and defeating his carnal desires. He also gained followers who wanted to come to him for advice, to imitate him, and to form a community around him. This impulse to live in community was common from the beginning among the ascetics, first as merely colonies of hermits for mutual support, protection, and religious services, and eventually, some came to realize that in order to fulfill the two great

commands: to love God and to love one's neighbor, one needed community. As Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) in Syria asked, referring to Christ washing the feet of his disciples the night he was arrested, "If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?" In addition, living a solitary life of extreme asceticism was simply too daunting for even the most pious Christian. While they still practiced asceticism in these communities, the ultimate sacrifice was not food or sex but the sacrifice of the will by obeying the head of the monastery, the abbot. This form of monasticism is called coenobitical monasticism,

Like Basil of Caesarea in Syria, Benedict of Nursia (483-547) in Italy decided that the communal form of monasticism best suited Western Europe. Initially, Benedict did not seek a life of coenobitical monasticism. Fleeing from the schools of the city of Rome as a young man, he started out as a hermit, performing great feats of asceticism, even throwing himself naked on a thorn bush to conquer the lusts of the flesh. However, as Benedict began to attract disciples who formed a community with Benedict as the abbot, he deemphasized asceticism. Instead, in the rule he wrote for his community at Monte Cassino, he emphasized obedience and love in community over great acts of asceticism. While he expected unquestioning obedience to the abbot, or father, he also envisioned the centrality of the mutual love between the abbot and the monks. He also integrated into the rule adaptability to individual, communal, regional, and cultural conditions. While the rule generally prohibited monks from eating meat, he made exceptions for monks in the infirmary. In addition, monks who labored in the fields were allotted a larger food allowance. He saw the monastery not as a school of asceticism, but as a school of holiness, emphasizing stability, obedience, poverty, and chastity. The great acts of asceticism were in denying one's will and dying to oneself in the daily pattern of prayer and work. In the future, this was to become the predominant rule across Western Europe. It

influenced laity and clergy alike who came to expect that their clergy to live a life of simplicity, humility, and celibacy, and the Benedictine rule would later inspire monks to become missionaries and, through copying manuscripts, preserve the classical works of antiquity

In the early sixth century when Benedict wrote the rule, Italy was suffering through a Byzantine war to retake the peninsula from the Ostrogoths, and later in the century when Gregory drew inspiration from Benedict's life, Italy had just suffered through the Lombard conquest of much of Italy. All these troubles, which are reflected in the rule's ardent quest for stability, were caused by the Eastern Roman Empire's renewed confidence and desire to retake what it had lost in fifth century. It is to the Eastern Roman Empire, better known as the Byzantine Empire, we will now turn.