Chapter 15

A New Civilization Emerges in Western Europe

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

The postclassical period in the West is referred to as the Middle Ages. After recovering from the fall of Rome’s ancient empire, civilization gradually spread beyond the Mediterranean to the rest of western Europe. Most of the West was converted to Christianity, which became the most obvious unifying factor of this civilization. During the Middle Ages, Europe began to establish stronger ties with other Eurasian civilizations and with Africa. As a result of these connections, Europe learned new technologies.

II. Two Images

Muslim writers viewed Europe of the Middle Ages as tragically backwards, and in general Europe lagged behind other regions in sophistication. Yet medieval Europe also produced extraordinary intellectuals like Thomas Aquinas.

III. Stages of Postclassical Development

A. Introduction

The political structure of the West remained chaotic between the 5th and 10th centuries. The center of the postclassical West moved out of the Mediterranean to the northern plains that stretched from the Low Countries across France and into western Germany. The West remained vulnerable to continued invasions during this period. Given the political instability, cultural achievements in the first five centuries of the Middle Ages were limited.

B. The Manorial System: Obligations and Allegiances

Although there were kingdoms established, the most effective political organization was local. Manorialism—a system designed to establish communal agricultural activity—featured serfs, who farmed land belonging to lords in return for which, the militarized aristocracy provided protection. Technology was limited and production was dependent on the number of man hours applied to the tasks of agricultural labor. In addition to their labor, serfs were required to pay a portion of their produce to their lords. Serfs retained ownership of their houses and could pass property on from one generation to another.
C. The Church: Political and Spiritual Power

Perhaps the most effective supranational government during the five centuries after the fall of the Western empire was the Catholic Church. Popes attempted to appoint bishops, regulate doctrine, send missionaries, and sought to impose a centralized government based on the old Roman Empire. Germanic kings, such as Clovis of the Franks, converted to Christianity as a means of buttressing their own authority. Western monasticism provided another source of Church authority, helping preserve some ancient texts, and contributed to the spiritual focus of the early Middle Ages.

D. Charlemagne and His Successors

In the 8th century, the Carolingian family took over the Frankish monarchy. The most important of the Carolingian rulers was Charles the Great, or Charlemagne. Charles was able to unify much of western Europe under his control and to renew the title of emperor by 800. After his death, however, the Carolingian empire rapidly splintered into numerous successor kingdoms. After the decline of the Carolingian empire, the political history of western Europe consisted of the development of regional monarchies, although the title of emperor was retained. In the period immediately after the collapse of the Carolingian empire, rulers in Germany were most powerful. They called themselves Holy Roman emperors. In fact, the kingdom of the Germans was among the least centralized governments of the early Middle Ages.

E. New Economic and Urban Vigor

In the 9th and 10th centuries, a series of technological innovations began to increase agricultural productivity in western Europe and enhance economic prosperity. External invasions began to diminish, leading to greater political stability. Most importantly, the population of western Europe began to increase. The increased population both provided more labor for the agricultural system and also created a demand for other goods. Regional centers of trade and a merchant class developed. Whole regions, like northeastern Germany, were colonized by landlords and serfs. To encourage settlement, lords tended to relax the requirements of serfdom. In both the Low Countries and Italy, town life recovered or started anew. Towns remained small, but they were important contributors to the spread of literacy and the acceleration of the economic recovery. Within the towns, a formal education system, at first organized around cathedrals, began to emerge. From these foundations sprang the medieval universities, specializing in theology, law, and medicine.

F. Feudal Monarchies and Political Advances

From the 6th century, the most important political relationships involved feudalism—a system linking landlords in military alliances. Greater landlords provided protection and aid to lesser lords, called vassals, in return for loyalty and military service. Charlemagne's relatively fragmented empire accelerated the development of regional feudalism. While feudalism inhibited the growth of centralized states, it did help to end local warfare. Over time feudal monarchy based on the king's relationship to powerful regional vassals came into existence. Kings of France improved their position after the 10th century and began to develop a small bureaucracy. The Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced feudal monarchy into England. Because of the ability of William the Conqueror to introduce the feudal system abruptly, England was more centralized than other feudal monarchies. By the 13th century, a centralized system of feudal monarchy complete with a bureaucracy and links to regional administration existed in France.
G. Limited Government

Not all of western Europe managed to create centralized monarchies. Much of Germany, the Low Countries, and Italy remained fragmented into regional states and city-states. The power of the church limited political claims of some monarchs, and feudalism also created limits. In England the Magna Carta confirmed feudal rights, and parliaments, generally, resulted from the same sort of feudal balance between lord and vassals. In some cases local battles gave way to larger wars like the Hundred Years’ War.

H. The West’s Expansionist Impulse

Population growth and religious evangelism were the hallmarks of Western expansion. On the eastern frontiers of Germany and the southern frontiers of the Christian kingdoms of Spain, settlers moved outward into new regions. Scandinavian voyagers pushed ever farther to the north and west in their search for new trade routes and unsettled lands. The most dramatic aspect of Western expansion was the Crusades initiated by Pope Urban II in 1095. The first crusading effort resulted in the creation of Christian lordships in the Holy Land by 1099. Subsequent Crusades were less successful, and the focus on recovering the Holy Land was lost. The Fourth Crusade actually resulted in the conquest of Christian Constantinople.

I. Religious Reform and Revolution

Church reform arose in the 11th century to attack increasing secularism. In monasticism, the 13th century saw the founding of such reforming orders as the Franciscans and the Poor Clares, founded by St. Francis and St. Clare, both of Assisi. Pope Gregory VII launched an attempt to free the church hierarchy from secular manipulation in the late 11th century. The issue of lay investiture of bishops led to conflict between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire. Subsequent popes attempted to establish the supremacy of the church government over secular monarchies. A system of ecclesiastical courts arose to handle canon law, the legal system devised specifically for the church.

J. The High Middle Ages

During the 12th and 13th centuries, the postclassical West enjoyed its greatest creativity and economic prosperity. Tensions existed between the agents of regional control, the developing monarchies, and the Church’s claims to universal authority. The social order was increasingly forced to expand in order to deal with the new significance of urban residents and merchants.

IV. Western Culture in the Postclassical Era

A. Introduction

Christian culture provided the common denominator for western Europe.

B. Theology: Assimilating Faith and Reason

Until 1000, most theological inquiry was restricted to collection of ancient texts related to important theological questions. Efforts were made to incorporate logical thinking in theological inquiry. Use of logic, particularly reflecting the influence of Aristotle, led to new theological lines of inquiry after 1000. Peter Abelard was one of the more important theologians involved in
the process of eliminating contradictions in earlier theological works through the use of logic. Others, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, opposed the growing popularity of logic and rationalism and chose to stress the means to mystical union with the divine. The tension between rational inquiry and mystical devotion was also common to Islamic theology. The pursuit of rationalism within theology led to the growth of western universities and reinvigorated the study of ancient knowledge and imports from the Islamic world. Benefiting from the importation of ideas, Thomas Aquinas of the University of Paris attempted to summarize all knowledge in his Summae. His work marked the high point of scholasticism. Emphasis on classical knowledge tended to discourage new scientific discoveries. Scientific investigation accelerated after the 13th century.

C. Popular Religion

Less is known about popular belief than about theological investigation in the universities. Veneration of saints remained popular, as the masses sought intermediaries with God. Magic and popular festivals also remained features of popular piety.

D. Religious Themes in Art and Literature

Much art and architecture was devoted to the Church. Western artists concentrated on religious subjects almost exclusively. Medieval architecture developed from Roman models. During the 11th century, Gothic architecture replaced the more derivative Romanesque style. Writing in Latin was primarily devoted to theology, government, and law. Popular literature emerged in the vernacular languages of Europe. Although always with some reference to religion, vernacular literature often featured more earthly concerns.

V. Changing Economic and Social Forms in the Postclassical Centuries

A. Introduction

Economic activity and social structure also provided common elements for Western civilization during the postclassical period. The medieval economy rapidly departed from classical norms to develop a more expansive and productive economic life.

B. New Strains in Rural Life

Agricultural improvements after 800 allowed some peasants to become virtually free landholders. Lords used trade based on improved productivity to improve their standards of living. Tensions between peasants and lords emerged, as peasants sought greater freedom in the face of landlords' attempts to increase fees and exactions from the land. On the whole, however, the conditions of peasants improved as productivity surpassed that of the ancient world.

C. Growth of Trade and Banking

Greater agricultural production led to urbanization and more specialized commercial activities. Banking arose in Italy as well as southern Germany, the Low Countries, France, and Britain. As the market expertise of Western merchants increased, Italians began to connect Europe with other parts of Eurasia through Mediterranean trade routes. Commercial alliances resulted in the formation of urban leagues, such as the Hanseatic League of northern Germany. The development of banking helped create the business environment that spawned capitalism. Because governments were less centralized, merchants had greater freedom in the West than in other civilizations. Despite the beginnings of the capitalistic spirit, protectionist organization in
the form of the guilds dominated European cities. Both merchants and artisans grouped together to control their commercial and industrial endeavors, monopolize their businesses, and regulate training. Membership in guilds was the key to importance in urban politics. Despite the general conservatism of the guilds, western industrial technology did make strides to overtake other civilizations during the Middle Ages.

D. Limited Sphere for Women

As in other civilizations, the postclassical West increasingly limited the roles for women in the economy. Western women enjoyed some relative advantages: they were not confined to the household, veiled, or legally deprived of rights. Yet Western women found themselves increasingly limited by the power of male organizations. Patriarchal structures became more powerful.

VI. The Decline of the Medieval Synthesis

A. Introduction

After 1300, elements of the medieval culture began to change under the pressure of lengthy warfare, agricultural shortages, and plague. Plague diminished the population prompting a renewal of social tensions between peasantry and landlords.

B. Signs of Strain

There were numerous indications of the disruption of the medieval synthesis. The land-owning aristocracy lost its monopoly over the execution of war. Aristocratic life became progressively more mannered. The ability of the Church to manage the development of Christianity, the most important unifying element of the medieval West, declined during the later Middle Ages. As a result, popular heresies flourished. Scholasticism lost its dynamism, as it became more difficult to blend rationalism and religion. Intellectuals began to search for new emphases.

VII. The Postclassical West and Its Heritage

While medieval Europe did grapple with backwardness and vulnerability, it was a dynamic civilization. Developments in art, politics, and education still have an impact today. Some of these advancements came from imitation, particularly of the Muslim world. As in Japan, feudalism emerged. Unlike either Africa or Japan, the West was more expansive and established much more extensive contacts with other civilizations.

VIII. Global Connections: Medieval Europe and the World

Medieval Europe both feared and learned from the outside world. Vulnerable to invasion, it also worried about the growth of Muslim power. Many features were copied from Islam, while technology and products were imported from Asia, a process which accelerated during the era of Mongol power. Medieval Europe sought to learn from the outside world, while reducing the sense of threat.
TIMELINE

*Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.*

- Hundred Years’ War begins
- Black Death begins
- Charlemagne’s empire begins
- First Crusade called
- Norman invasion of England
- Magna Carta issued

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TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

*The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.*

- Middle Ages
- manorialism
- Black Death
- Clovis
- Charles Martel
- three-field system
- Hundred Years’ War
- Cluny
- Peter Abelard
- scholasticism
- Magna Carta
- Gothic
- serfs
- feudalism
- Benedict of Nursia
- Charlemagne
- three estates
- Pope Urban II
- Pope Gregory VII
- Bernard of Clairvaux
- Hanseatic League
- parliaments
- Vikings
- moldboard
- vassals
- Carolingians
- Holy Roman Empire
- William the Conqueror
- Crusades
- investiture
- Thomas Aquinas
- guilds
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map:

- Northern boundary of the ancient Roman Empire around 180 C.E.
- Boundaries of the following states: Holy Roman Empire, France, England

1. One of the themes of the postclassical world was the extension of ancient boundaries. How did the political boundaries of the medieval states compare with those of the ancient Roman Empire? In what direction did the expansion take place?

2. How many political units were there in the medieval world? How did this compare to the ancient West?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What defines the postclassical period in western Europe?
2. What were the signs of vitality in western Europe?
3. Define manorialism and feudalism.
4. What developments in the 9th and 10th centuries pointed the way to political and economic recovery?
5. Describe the various political units of western Europe between 1000 and 1400.
6. How was theology linked to classical rationalism during the Middle Ages?
7. What were the signs of economic prosperity after 1000?
8. What were the crises of the later Middle Ages?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.

1. In what ways did the medieval West carry on the culture of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations? In what ways did the people of the Middle Ages innovate?
2. Compare and contrast the medieval West from 1000 to 1500 with Islamic civilization during the same period.
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. In which of the following ways was the medieval West NOT like other civilizations?
   a. The medieval period saw the spread of civilization outside the Mediterranean zone core to new areas in northern Europe.
   b. New religious beliefs accompanied the spread of civilization.
   c. The medieval West remained culturally backward, compared to other civilizations.
   d. Western Europe participated in the emerging international community.

2. Following the fall of Rome, where was the center of the postclassical West?
   a. in the former Roman colonies of Spain and Portugal
   b. in Italy, particularly Rome
   c. in France, England, Germany, and the Low Countries
   d. Greece and the Balkan region

3. Manorialism was the system that
   a. described economic and political relations between landlords and their peasant laborers.
   b. secular authorities used to name bishops.
   c. defined relationships between members of the military elite.
   d. united the traditions of classical rationalism with medieval Christianity.

4. Which of the following statements concerning the early medieval manorial system is NOT true?
   a. It was technologically sophisticated.
   b. It had originated in the Roman Empire.
   c. Its obligations bore heavily on the serfs.
   d. Agricultural productivity was low.

5. What Frankish monarch was able to establish a substantial empire after 800?
   a. Clovis
   b. Charles Martel
   c. Pepin III
   d. Charlemagne

6. Where was the greatest concentration of urbanization after the 10th century?
   a. Italy and the Low Countries
   b. England and France
   c. France and the Holy Roman Empire
   d. England and Scandinavia
7. Which of the following was a result of the Crusades?
   a. Western knights carved out a kingdom in the Holy Land that lasted until the 15th century.
   b. The Fourth Crusade aided in the defense of Constantinople and preserved the integrity of the Byzantine Empire.
   c. The Crusades demonstrated a new Western superiority in the wider world.
   d. The Crusades helped to open the West to new cultural and economic influences from the East.

8. Vassals were
   a. grants of land given to lesser members of the military elite in return for military service.
   b. agricultural laborers in the manorial system.
   c. members of the military elite who received land in return for service.
   d. greater lords within the military elite who commanded military bands.

9. How did the intellectual endeavors of medieval scholars differ before and after 1000?
   a. Before 1000, scholars were limited to copying ancient texts, but after 1000 a greater synthesis of rationalism and theology was achieved.
   b. After 1000, they abandoned classical rationalism completely in favor of more mystical goals.
   c. Prior to 1000, more innovative classical techniques were utilized, but after 1000 the growing authority of the Church limited the use of classical authors.
   d. After 1000, classical rationalism eliminated more mystical approaches to Christian theology.

10. Which of the following was not a result of the Hundred Years’ War?
    a. Kings reduced their reliance on feudal forces in favor of paid armies.
    b. An English victory.
    c. Foot soldiers began to achieve parity or even an advantage over mounted knights.
    d. Devastation and antifeudal innovations.