Chapter 17: THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN SOCIETY IN WESTERN EUROPE

While other parts of the world were experiencing unprecedented prosperity during the postclassical era, Europe's economy underwent a sharp constriction with the fall of the Roman Empire. Long-distance trade did not entirely disappear, significant developments took place in agricultural production, and there were brief periods of government consolidation; nevertheless, early medieval Europe was a world dominated by rural self-sufficiency and political decentralization. In spite of its seeming "backwardness" compared to the other great empires of the postclassical world, Europe was laying the foundation for the development of the powerful society that would emerge during the high middle ages. That foundation rested on

- Hard-won political order, restored out of disruption caused by the fall of the Roman Empire, centuries of destructive invasions, and dramatic depopulation. This order was based on a highly decentralized but flexible system that vested political, military, and judicial authority in local and regional rulers.
- A long, slow process of economic recovery based first on increased agricultural production within the rural manorial system to be followed by gradually increasing trade, industry, and commerce and the eventual reurbanization of Europe.
- The cultural unity provided by the Christian church based in Rome. During this period Roman Christianity provided the impetus for cultural continuity and unity in Western Europe. The office of the papacy and the monastic movement were two powerful institutions that helped to preserve Roman traditions and develop and consolidate a uniquely European culture.

The Germanic Successor States (c. 500 CE)
- Last Roman emperor deposed by Germanic Odoacer, 476 CE
- Administrative apparatus still in place, but cities lose population
- Germanic successor states:
  - Spain: Visigoths
  - Italy: Ostrogoths
  - Gaul: Burgundians, Franks
  - Britain: Angles, Saxons

The Quest for Political Order
- The Franks & the Temporary Revival of Empire
  - Heavy influence on European development
  - Little exposure to Roman traditions
  - Strong agricultural base
  - Shifts center of economic gravity to Europe
  - Firm alliance with western Christian church
o Clovis (481 – 511) Major Frankish leader
  ▪ Destroys last vestiges of Roman rule in Gaul
  ▪ Dominates other Germanic peoples
  ▪ Franks establish themselves as preeminent Germanic people

o Clovis’s Conversion
  ▪ Paganism, Arian Christianity popular among Franks
  ▪ Clovis and army chooses Roman Catholicism
  ▪ Influence of wife Clotilda
  ▪ Political implications:
    ▪ Alliance with western church

• Gregory of Tours on the Conversion of Clovis
  “And the king was the first to be baptized by the bishop... And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity were baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3,000 were baptized.”
  - History of the Franks

• Charlemagne
  o Capital at Aachen, Germany
    ▪ Charlemagne’s Administration
    ▪ Constant travel throughout empire
    ▪ Imperial officials: missi domini ("envoys of the lord ruler")
    ▪ Continued yearly circuit travel

• Charlemagne as Emperor
  o Hesitates to challenge Byzantines by taking title “emperor”
    ▪ Yet rules in fact
  o Pope Leo III crowns him as emperor in 800
    ▪ Planned in advance?
    ▪ Challenge to Byzantium

• Decline & Dissolution of the Carolingian Empire
  o Louis the Pious
    ▪ Son of Charlemagne
    ▪ Lost control of courts, local authorities
    ▪ Civil war erupts between three sons
    ▪ Empire divided in 843
  o Invasions
    ▪ South: Muslims
    ▪ East: Magyars
- North: Vikings
  - Norse expansion begins c. 800 CE
  - Driven by population pressure, hostility to spread of Christianity
  - Superior seafaring technology
  - Sailed to eastern Canada, northeastern US
  - From village of Vik, Norway (hence “Viking”)
  - Shallow draft boats, capable of river travel / open seas
  - Attacked villages, cities from 9th century
  - Constantinople sacked three times
  - Carolingians had no navy, dependent on local defenses

The Establishment of Regional Authority
- England
  - Viking invasions force consolidation of Angles, Saxons & other Germanic peoples under King Alfred (r. 871-899)
  - Builds navy & fortifies cities
- Germany & France
  - King Otto of Saxony (r. 936-973) defeats Magyars, 955
  - Proclaimed emperor by Pope in 962
  - Establishment of Holy Roman Empire
  - France endures heavy Viking settlement
  - Loss of local autonomy

Early Medieval Society
- Concept of Feudalism
  - Lords & vassals
  - Increasingly inadequate model for describing complex society
  - Ad hoc arrangements in absence of strong central authorities
- Lords & Retainers
  - Local nobles take over administration from weak central government
  - Nominal allegiances, esp. to Carolingian kings
  - Increasing independence
  - Formation of small private armies
  - Incentives: land grants, income from mills, cash payments
  - Formation of hereditary class of military retainers
  - Development of other functions ~ justice, social welfare
- Potential for Instability
  - Complex interrelationship of lord-retainer relations
  - Rebellion always a possibility
  - Nevertheless, viable large states developed (Germany, France, England)
- Origins of Serfdom and Obligations
  - Origins
    - Slaves, free peasants in both Roman & Germanic societies
    - Heavy intermarriage
Appeals to lords, special relationships
- Mid-7th century: recognition of serf class
- Midway between slave & free peasant
  - Obligations
    - Right to pass on land to heirs
    - Obligation to provide labor, payments in kind to lord
    - Unable to move from land
    - Fees charged for marrying serfs of another lord
- Manors
  - Large, diverse estates
  - Lord provides governance, police, justice services
  - Serfs provide labor, income

Economics of Medieval Society
- Agriculture
  - Agricultural center moves north from Mediterranean
  - 8th century iron-tipped plow introduced in Europe
  - Draft animals bred
  - Water mill technology
  - Agricultural output insufficient to support growth of cities
- Trade
  - Mediterranean Trade
  - Norse Merchant-Mariners
    - Commerce or plunder as convenient
    - Link with the Islamic world for trade

The Formation of Christian Europe (pages 449-454)

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