


Module 8: The Early Middle Ages

Topic 1 Content: The Franks and the Age of Charlemagne

Introduction

THE FRANKS AND THE AGE OF CHARLEMAGNE



INTRODUCTION

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Decline of the Western Roman Empire

<p>The decline of the Western Roman Empire occurred for a variety of reasons, but ultimately, Rome collapsed due to internal problems and invasions by foreigners. The invaders were from a variety of Germanic tribes who had been living on the northern borders of the Roman Empire for decades. As signs arose that the Western Roman Empire was weakening, huge numbers of Germanic peoples invaded the Roman Empire, and eventually drove the last Roman emperor from his throne. By 500 A.D. (C.E.), the Western Roman Empire was broken into numerous Germanic kingdoms that would come to play an important role in European civilization.</p>	0
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Germanic Invaders


The Germanic peoples who invaded the Western Roman Empire were made up of many different tribes that never unified into one empire, but once in power set up separate tribal kingdoms. For example, the Angles and Saxons settled in England, the Visigoths settled in Spain, the Ostrogoths settled in Italy, the Franks settled in France, and the Vandals settled in North Africa. The Germanic kingdoms were culturally similar, in that these peoples generally could not read or write, were militaristic, had no written laws, were rural, and were non-Christians. Questions remained as to whether customs and traditions of the Roman Empire would survive amidst the Germanic invasions and settlements.

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The Franks and Clovis I


<p>The Franks were the most powerful of the Germanic kingdoms in Europe. By the early fifth century, several small Frankish kingdoms were unified under one ruler of the Marovingian family, Clovis I. Early Germanic tribes practiced paganism; however, Clovis' wife was Catholic and convinced her husband to convert to Catholicism in 496. Clovis' conversion to Catholicism influenced populations over a widespread area, and enabled him to receive the support of the Roman Catholic Church and the majority of the Catholic population. Moreover, Clovis used his military power to conquer an area that stretched from the Pyrenees Mountains to western Germany. It encompassed much of modern-day France.</p>	0
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Charles Martel

<p>By the seventh century, the Frankish kings acted like figureheads, while statesmen called mayors of the palace held the real power. One such leader, Charles Martel, seized power in 718. Although he cared more about his power than having a title like king or emperor, Martel established the beginnings of an empire that would be ruled by his family, the Carolingians. A brilliant military leader, Martel often defeated his enemies by attacking when they least expected it, or feigning retreat to trap his adversaries. His military prowess enabled him to brutally defeat his enemies and earn the nickname "Martel," the French word for "hammer." In 732, Martel famously prevented the Islamic invasion into Europe beyond modern-day Spain in the Battle of Tours. This event is considered the turning point in halting the spread of Islam and preserving Christianity as the religion of Europe.</p>	0
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Pepin the Short

Although Charles Martel did not covet a title of king or emperor, his son and successor, Pepin the Short, sought to be crowned king by the Pope. In 754, Pepin was crowned king. This marked the first time in recorded history that a pope made someone civil ruler. When Pepin died in 768, his son, Charlemagne, inherited the crown.

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Charlemagne


<p>Also known as Carolus Magnus, or Charles the Great, Charlemagne united western Europe and brought France, Germany, and part of Italy under his control. This unification came to be known as the Carolingian Empire. Many churches, roads, and schools were built in order to further unite the empire. As a skilled administrator, Charlemagne appointed counts, or German nobles, to act as representatives in local areas. He also dispatched <i>missi dominici</i>, or “messengers of the lord king,” to make sure the counts were carrying out the king’s wishes.</p>	0
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Charlemagne's Coronation

<p>In 799, Pope Leo III asked Charlemagne for help defending rebelling nobles in Rome. The Pope was so grateful for Charlemagne's support that in 800, he crowned him Emperor of Rome, a display of the enduring concept of the Roman Empire three hundred years after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the rise of the Byzantine Empire. The coronation of the Frankish ruler created a new Christian kingdom of Roman subjects called Christendom, and represented the merging of Roman, Germanic, and Christian elements. Charlemagne further strengthened his power over the church by implementing a program of reform in an effort to deepen the piety of his subjects.</p>	0
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The Treaty of Verdun

The Treaty of Verdun, signed in 843, marked the first of several treaties that divided Charlemagne's empire equally among his three grandsons. Like the division of Clovis' kingdom, the new regional borders of the Carolingian Empire ignored existing cultural and geographical boundaries. It grouped together people from different cultures and divided them with physical barriers, such as mountains. Consequently, the fragmented empire soon experienced disunity and conflict. In some areas, the instability and shifting power endured until the early twentieth century.

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Carolingian Renaissance

Although Charlemagne was illiterate, he was known as a patron of learning. He embraced literature, art, architecture, astronomy, and arithmetic, among other disciplines. Promoting education in his kingdom provided an educated clergy and capable administrators for Charlemagne's government. Benedictine monks worked in monasteries, copying texts such as the Bible and many classical Greek and Latin works. In fact, the majority of surviving works written by ancient Romans were copied by monks during this time, which came to be known as the Carolingian Renaissance.

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