

SIXTH CENTURY: THE DARK AGES

by John McKeefery

THE CLASSICAL BACKGROUND

The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC precipitated a period of civil war from which Caesar Augustus emerged as virtual emperor. He initiated an epoch of imperial expansion that culminated in the second century in a Pax Romana throughout the Mediterranean world. During this period, Europe enjoyed a standard of living that was historically unprecedented, and not be achieved again until the nineteenth century in Europe and America.

In the third century, threats from barbarian tribes combined with political instability to bring the empire to a crisis, exemplified by the fact that the century saw twenty two men ascend the imperial throne. In 284, Diocletian addressed the situation by dividing the empire and re-organizing it along Eastern authoritarian lines. In 323, Constantine moved the capital to Constantinople and made Christianity the state religion.

In the later fourth century, a new crisis was precipitated by the raids of fierce nomads from the Asian steppes. There had been a gradual filtering of Germanic tribesmen into imperial service for some time. However, when the Huns invaded Germanic lands, entire tribes fled from their aggression and this movement of peoples overwhelmed imperial defenses. At the Battle of Adrianople in 378, the Visigoth cavalry defeated a Roman army and the emperor himself was killed. Germanic tribes entered Roman territory to serve under their own chiefs and fight against other barbarian tribes on behalf of the empire. In 406, hordes of Germanic tribes crossed the frozen Rhine River, invaded imperial territory and carved out their own kingdoms. In 410, the city of Rome was captured and sacked by Alaric, the Visigoth. In 476, Odoacer deposed the Western Emperor, spurned the imperial title and ruled as King of Italy with only nominal allegiance to the emperor in Constantinople.

The story of the sixth century is that of transition from a classical to a medieval society in Western Europe. The transition is symbolized by the dominance of Justinian at the beginning of a century that ends with the pontificate of Gregory I and the rise of the Franks. However, we must not neglect the threads of continuity – the classical background to the medieval world.

Above all, there is the dream of imperial restoration that did not die with Justinian's failure but haunted European politics for many centuries, and may not have been extinguished even in our own time. The fifth century did not witness any sudden disruption of life in the Mediterranean. Kenneth Clark observes that "life must have gone on in an apparently normal way for much longer than one would expect. It always does." Further, the characteristic features that we associate with the Middle Ages – e.g. the retreat from urban life, a rigid social caste system and serfdom –

seem to have originated in the latter Roman Empire.

To contrast second century Rome with Medieval culture is unfair. The end of the Roman Empire in the West was not the crucial historic cleavage in European history. As Kenneth Clark points out, civilization "might have drifted downstream for a long time" were it not for the Islamic intrusion of the seventh century. Indeed, one might speculate more optimistically. Perhaps if that ferocious assault on the West had not occurred, a positive reversal of the downward flow of civilization might have been possible. Finally, what if a most regrettable combination of features (the warrior's code of honor, an intolerant theology and a fearful, bigoted, brutal Christian society) had not dictated a policy of Reconquista toward Islam, not only in Spain, but also in Jerusalem? Would a more civilized synthesis between Christianity and Islam have been possible? Were the Dark Ages really necessary? Need they have been so prolonged?

JUSTINIAN AND THEODORA

The emperor Justinian (c.482-565) was the well educated son of a Slavonic peasant. He was also the nephew of Justin I, an illiterate peasant whose military prowess helped him to become emperor. Justinian served in Justin's government and, at his uncle's death in 527, Justinian and Theodora succeeded him as co-emperors. Four years later, the Nika revolt threatened to topple the regime. Thanks to the leadership of Belasarius, Justinian's great general, and the courage and decisiveness of Theodora, this crisis was mastered. The revolt, which resulted in the destruction of much of Constantinople, was ruthlessly suppressed with massive loss of life. It is reported that 35,000 rebels were killed in a single day. This was a society in which one could not feel quite safe either from the violence of the mob or from the despotism of the ruler – and could not be fully confident of the rationality of either. It has been described by Procopius as a licentious society "where sexual morality was apparently non-existent, where adultery and promiscuity were rampant [pun intended ??] and chastity unknown."

Speaking of Procopius, it would seem that Justinian was more fortunate in the woman he chose as wife than in the biographer fate thrust upon him. The *Secret History* by Procopius is an exercise in biographical hostility that makes Lytton Strachey read like James Boswell. It depicts the emperor as a weak willed, indecisive man slavishly controlled by the magically erotic arts of his grossly immoral wife.

Theodora (c.500-548) was a noted actress who has been described as Constantinople's most notorious courtesan. Procopius depicts her as insatiably lustful and appallingly vulgar, as well as sadistically ruthless. But she was Justinian's trusted counselor, generous to the poor and courageous and decisive in crisis. She was apparently a beautiful and intellectually gifted woman who was also imperially willful. She was a close friend of Antonia, the wife of Justinian's general, Belisarius. If we

are to believe Procopius, Antonia's powers of licentiousness and erotic enslavement were even greater than her own. In the end Theodora turned against Belisarius and Procopius, who was his secretary, seems to have blamed Theodora for his downfall. However, even without the enmity of Theodora, Belisarius' position was inherently insecure – the dilemma of a great and popular general attempting loyally and effectively to serve an autocrat without becoming a dangerous rival.

The aspect of Byzantine life most difficult to understand is the intense interest of all classes in disputes over abstruse points of theology. Questions about the precise nature of the Trinity or the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Christ could incite the mob to a dangerous fury. This was an anxiously magical world in which natural disasters were perceived as divine judgments on the emperor. He could be seen as responsible for floods, earthquakes and epidemics and, presumably, for a visitation of the bubonic plague that arrived from the Far East in the 540's leaving countless dead. Recurrent attacks of the plague may have killed off a third of the population leaving the survivors in a state of fearful despair.

For better or worse, Justinian was a ruler capable of visions of greatness. His domestic achievements include monumental architecture and legal reform to which is added the somewhat dubious distinction of having, in 529, closed the Neoplatonic Academy of Athens – for centuries the chief exponent of pagan philosophy. In the same year, appeared a complete re-codification of Roman Law, which still provides the foundation for much of the law of Western Europe.

The rebuilding of Hagia Sophia is only the greatest of many architectural achievements. Under Justinian's reign Constantinople became the artistic capital of the West. However, as Sonia's father observes in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, all this fanciness costs money. Justinian was not one to let his vision be inhibited by petty concerns of fiscal prudence or the appropriate limits of taxation. Further, the foreign policy of Justinian entailed enormous expenses for military and diplomatic efforts. Justinian needed to defend against the Persian Empire while pursuing his grandiose vision of the reconquest of Italy – a conception as magnificent as it was ultimately impossible: the restoration of the empire of the Caesars.

Justinian died in 565. He had conquered Italy at the cost of thousands of lives and enormous human misery. After Justinian's death, Italy was to remain in imperial hands for all of three years. In 568, the Lombards crossed the Alps and permanently settled in the north of Italy; and this country would not be united again until the nineteenth century. Ultimately, in the eighth century, the Lombards were to be swallowed up by a new empire in the West under Charlemagne. For this reason, it is fitting that we now consider the rise of the Franks.

THE RISE OF THE FRANKS

Throughout the fifth century, The Franks and other German tribes invaded Gaul, the largest, wealthiest and most important province in Western Europe. The Franks crossed the Rhine in 406. In the same year, Clovis converted to orthodox Christianity, as opposed to the Aryanism of rival German tribes. He thus won the support of the Gallo-Roman population, achieving a religious and political unity that allowed his regime to survive the disintegration of the Roman Empire, and later to serve as a foundation for the empire of Charlemagne.

Once again, one is struck by the extent to which this was a theological age. Gregory of Tours begins his History of the Franks by emphatically asserting his orthodox Catholicism and his allegiance to the position of the Council of Nice (325) which condemned Aryanism, the view that Christ was not consubstantial with God the Father. In such an atmosphere, the conversion of Clovis in 439 becomes one of the pivotal events in Western history. It allowed him to ally with the old Roman senatorial class. Former Gallo-Roman aristocrats assimilated with those Franks who owned vast estates and became bishops and ministers of state in the new order. Gregory of Tours was himself a member of a prominent senatorial family that had already produced several bishops.

Clovis reigned from 481 to 511 in a society that has been described as despotism tempered by assassination. He conquered most of Gaul with the notable exception of Burgundy, codified the laws and really founded the French nation. Nevertheless, like his successors until the late eleventh century, he was a crude and barbarous savage. If this was true of the king, what would we expect of the rest of society?

In fact, it was a brutal and generally lawless society in which violent crime and vendetta were commonplace. Drunken brawls tended to end in homicide which in turn resulted in bloody retaliations. Armies were more interested in ravaging and looting than in waging war. Assassins did not want for employment and affluent families engaged in savage quarrels. Life certainly does seem to have been nasty, brutish and short. Norman Cantor states that at "least until the twelfth century, the lives of medieval peasants differed little from that of beasts in the field. They toiled, they bred and they died." Their greatest worry was paying taxes and Gregory of Tours tells us that their greatest horror was to be imprisoned where they would be chained to a log and left to rot. Their religion has been described as a hodgepodge of saints, relics and demons.

This was truly a barbaric society. The Pange Lingua was written by Fortunatus who was a contemporary of Gregory of Tours – the sole poet and sole historian. After them, all culture disappeared. The men of that time were as unrestrained in their criminality as they were profoundly credulous and superstitious. Crane Brinton describes these men and women as behaving "with a child's bright violence, a child's lack of adult sense of proportion, or merely sense of probable consequences, a child's cruelty and love of being loved. And like all children, they are romantics,

always to be blessed or damned. Like children, they know regrets, but not conscience."

True enough, but what about the crimes and cruelties of the cultivated society of the Byzantine court, for example, the judicial murder of Boethius in 525? Here we read of comparable horrors perpetrated by those who don't even seem to know regrets, but only ruthless ambition. They do not strike us as children, but as pagans who are intensely exercised over honor and abstruse issues of Christian theology, but seem untouched by what we think of as Christian ethics expressed in a gospel of love. They do not strike us as impulsive, constantly erring children, constantly seeking forgiveness from a divine parent. They seem colder than that. To respond to Brinton, we can say that they are not romantics and seek neither to be blessed nor damned. However, such a response does not mitigate our horror at the extent to which the people of this time don't seem troubled even by the claims of empathic compassion, much less of an adult conscience. Perhaps, it is no wonder that there were those of more tender moral sensibilities who embraced an ideal of asceticism and the monastic life.

MONASTICISM

At the end of the third century, Saint Anthony retired to a hermit's life in the Egyptian desert. His example was followed by others who watched, prayed and struggled against temptations, real and imaginary, struggled with demons and mortified the flesh. Some of them chose to live together and in the next century, this new form of spiritual community established itself first in the Levant and then spread to the West. In the crumbling society of fifth century Gaul, many men and woman of intellect and character sought refuge from a changing world. They were attracted to the monastic ideal and sought personal salvation in a life of unrestricted worship and service to God in prayer and in the discipline of an ascetic rule. They were criticized by some who saw their withdrawal from active life as a dereliction of social responsibility. Some churchmen were upset at the loss of some of their most zealous parishioners. Yet the institution prospered and many of the greatest churchmen of the age were monks. Landowners founded communities or endowed existing ones with lands. Under Clovis and his successors, the monastic movement flourished in France as a refuge for those seeking an escape from life's noisy struggle. In their seclusion, they had little influence on the larger world and the life of the church.

By contrast, in Ireland there developed a monastic tradition whose influence was to radiate so widely and so profoundly that one author, with characteristic Celtic hyperbole, has told its story under the title *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. However, it would be difficult even for an Irishman to exaggerate the importance of the work that Irish monasticism accomplished. Saint Columba was a central figure in an extensive book-

copying enterprise that preserved much of what we possess of classical culture. After founding a number of abbeys in Ireland, he traveled to Scotland where he founded Iona in 563. In 585, another Irish monk, Saint Columbanus, landed on the continent and founded a new form of monastic life. It was organized around a set of rules enforced by harsh corporal punishment in which monks were scourged for even the smallest peccadilloes. His followers founded many monasteries in the early seventh century. These were communities of preaching monks who sought to play an active role in the church. They promulgated a severe doctrine of the need for penance and expiation for every mistake according to a fixed rule. They were successful in fostering a keen sense of sinfulness among the people, a stereotypically Irish contribution to human happiness. A more moderate approach to monasticism was taken by Saint Benedict who founded Monte Cassino in 529, the same year that Justinian closed the Neoplatonic Academy of Athens. However, the Benedictine rule only became known in France a hundred years later.

Monasticism was one of the great institutional foundations of the church in the medieval world. The other foundation was the evolution of papal power – the transformation of the Bishop of Rome into "Supreme Pontiff," a transformation begun by Pope Gregory I.

GREGORY THE GREAT

Gregory the Great was a lawyer. He was also one of the wealthiest men in Rome and prefect of the city in 573. He was well educated and destined for a career at the highest levels of public service. However, the religious training of his early years dominated his life and, for this reason, he shed political ambition and chose the life of a cloistered monk. He used his father's property for the founding of six monasteries. He turned his palace into a monastery and entered it, living in seclusion according to the rule of Saint Benedict. Though he ruined his health with fasting, he always remembered this period of monastic discipline and retreat as the happiest period of his remarkable life. However, Gregory was not to be allowed to remain in contemplative withdrawal. In 579, he was sent by Pope Pelagius II to the emperor's court at Constantinople where he spent six years as papal envoy. Upon his return to Rome, he lived at his monastery while serving as confidential advisor to the Pope. Pelagius died in 590 and the people of Rome insisted that Gregory succeed him.

In Rome, twenty years of warfare had devastated agricultural production leaving an impoverished population at the mercy of Byzantine officials who were neglectful when they were not oppressive. In her study on *The Formation of Christendom*, Judith Herrin writes that the "image of Rome as a ruined and abandoned city, made famous by Gibbon's description of the Forum, dates back to this time . . . In contrast to Rome . . . Ravenna flourished under Byzantine rule . . . To anyone looking at Byzantine Italy in the 550's . . . Ravenna was obviously the capital,

while Rome and other major cities were neglected . . . In the vacuum left by senatorial flight, the church became a directing force in and around Rome, securing supplies and distributions of food to the poor as best it could . . . It was to their Bishop that Romans looked for the city's protection and their own well-being . . . The center of Rome was full of ruins and empty buildings, temples, baths and theaters no longer used." It was also afflicted by the plague despite the sanitary methods Gregory employed in an unsuccessful attempt to combat it. When more enlightened methods failed, Gregory organized a demonstration of public penance.

In addition to responding to poverty, plague and a general breakdown of civil government, Gregory had to personally deal with the Lombard threats to Rome. Indeed, he virtually ruled Italy, negotiating treaties, paying troops and appointing generals. The church was the largest land owner in Italy and Gregory was a tireless administrator of the patrimony of Saint Peter, the internal organization of the Italian church and the discipline of the clergy. He worked for the conversion of England and established diplomatic contact with Visigoth Spain.

Gregory may have been virtual ruler of Italy, but in the rest of Western Europe, he was only the titular head of a very decentralized church run by local bishops. In France, the Merovingian rulers asserted supremacy in church affairs. Gregory laid the foundation for the future by asserting a supremacy over local bishops that the papacy was not yet able to enforce. He also challenged the claim of the Patriarch of Constantinople to precedence over the bishop of Rome even though Gregory never denied that he was himself subject to the emperor in Constantinople. For all his energy and determination, Gregory was in poor health throughout his pontificate. He was racked with gout and unable to walk when he died in 604 at the age of sixty four. What are we to make of his legacy?

As an apologist of the Enlightenment, Will Durant is understandably quite harsh in his assessment. Noting that Gregory believed that Man, if left to himself,

“would heap sin upon sin, and richly deserve everlasting damnation [in Hell] . . . a dark, bottomless, inextinguishable fire [which] . . . never destroys the damned or lessens their sensitivity to pain . . .

In a softer mood, Gregory developed Augustine's doctrine of purgatory . . . and comforted those whom he had terrified by reminding them of God's grace, the intercession of the saints, the fruits of God's sacrifice, the mysterious saving effects of sacraments available to all Christian penitents . . . [Gregory] dominated the end of the sixth century as Justinian had dominated its beginning . . . In mind he was the first complete medieval man...He preached with power that religion of terror which was to darken men's minds for centuries; he accepted all the miracles of popular legend, all the magical efficacy of relics, images and formulas; he lived in a world haunted with angels, demons, wizards and

ghosts. All sense of rational order in the universe had departed with him; it was a world in which science was impossible, and only a fearful faith remained.”

Well, perhaps! But it is just possible that Durant, writing in the late 1940's, was being somewhat ahistorical. Durant wrote not only after the eighteenth century Enlightenment had been achieved, but at a moment and in a country where it was about to reap its most extravagant fruit; and at a time when its promise still seemed unclouded. By contrast, Gregory had to lead men after Justinian's attempt to reunite the empire had not only failed; but failed at devastating cost to the people whom Gregory was trying to lead. Gregory was always convinced that the end of the world was immanent. Given the condition of his world, this hardly seems unreasonable.

One can lead men with a vision of earthly progress; but only if significant advances are achievable, if not for themselves, then for their children. After Justinian's time, men could only be led by validating their daily experience – that this life was indeed a vale of tears – and by offering them a sense of meaning and dignity in a creed of sin and redemption that provided an alternative vision of progress – the pilgrim's spiritual progress that culminates in the promise of paradise after death. Gregory did this in the sixth century and Islam would inspire its warriors to fight and die with the same promise. Durant is correct in perceiving that the age of faith in the promise of paradise had begun. There was, perhaps, no plausible alternative for a thousand years.