

8TH – 11TH CENTURIES: THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES, FROM POITIERS TO HASTINGS

by John McKeefery

The Bad News

If you had a time machine, you could travel back to Western Europe in the early middle ages. But why would you want to? It was a most disagreeable time in which to live – culturally backward, economically deprived and politically unsettled; a time when you would be thoroughly bored when you weren't scared half to death; a time in which life was truly nasty, brutish and short. The era has been defended as a transition period – and it certainly was that – but this is like comparing it to southern New Jersey, a not very pleasant place one has to pass through when travelling from Philadelphia to New York. It was a melancholy period in which “life was hard, hungry and dangerous.” (1/13). That being the case, why spend any time on it? Well, because it is, in fact, a transitional period and you do have to pass through it in getting from the fall of Rome to the high civilization of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Wealth is a function of trade because trade permits economies of scale and the specialization of labor. Economically, the Roman Empire was one gigantic free trade zone. Over the centuries, trade declined as a result of the barbarian incursions; and it collapsed when Islamic control of the Mediterranean all but destroyed Christian commerce, with the significant exception of Venice. By the early middle ages, Europe had largely become an economy without outlets. It became a relatively self-sufficient agrarian society that could, in good times, sustain little more than a subsistence standard of living.

For centuries, the ninety percent of the population who were agricultural laborers lived little better than the animals who shared their miserable huts. Like the animals who lived with them, they also slept on the dirt floor. They had no chimneys but only a hole in the roof to allow the smoke to escape as best it could. The so-called Carolingian Renaissance did not affect them very much. They had probably never in their lives lived more than ten miles from their birthplace, and their source of intellectual nourishment would have been the village priest, most likely a barely literate peasant of little more education than themselves.

They may have benefited from the fact that their lord's domain was not operated for profit, as this limited the motivation to exploit them. On the other hand, backward agricultural technology contributed to their extremely poor nutrition even as they labored to produce food. The adult agricultural worker was treated as a legal infant subject to corporal punishment at the whim of his overseer. Any notion of manorial

management as benevolent paternalism seems absurdly analogous to the pro-slavery propaganda of some American historians of the unlamented past – the myth of the happy, simple darkie who liked to sing as he worked for the good master he was lucky to have found.

“From the 7th to the 11th century Islam was incontestably the master of the Mediterranean. The navigation of the Christian peoples was restricted to a timid coastwise trade along the shores of the Adriatic and Southern Italy, and among the islands of the archipelago. For the first time since the formation of the Roman Empire, Western Europe was isolated from the rest of the world. In the second half of the 7th century all trade ceased on the shores of the Western Mediterranean and in less than half a century all the cities in the south of France had lapsed into a state of utter decadence.” (2/51f.).

This all-but-complete disappearance of the urban population was initially caused by the retreat of Roman imperial administration which had been based in urban centers. It was exacerbated by the collapse of trade and commerce. In France, the king no longer dwelt in a city because transport was so poor; if he had stayed in town, he could not have brought in the food needed to feed the court. Instead, he lived an itinerant life moving from one domain to the next as he emptied the barns and granaries of his estates. As commerce and urban life became increasingly feeble, there were no markets for agricultural products. At this time, all wealth was what we still call “real property,” and the basic social and economic relationship was that of landowner to tenant.

The Carolingians and The Empire

The decline in commerce resulted in a corresponding loss of royal revenue and the means necessary to maintain royal dominance. During this period, central authority disintegrated to the point that the king of France was less powerful than those local thugs whom we are pleased to call the aristocracy. Society didn't quite face a condition of complete anarchy because the protection racket known as feudalism provided a minimal degree of order and protection for the peasant, rather like the security provided to a ghetto youth by his membership in a gang. The king reigned, while actual administration was in the hands of an official whose title was *Mayor of the Palace*. This position would become the hereditary possession of the most powerful of the noble families, the Carolingians, who would, with the papal blessing, ultimately claim the throne of France. We can pick up their story just before the battle of Poitiers in 732.

When the Arabs crossed the Pyrenees and invaded Aquitaine, the Carolingian Charles Martel defeated them on the plains of Poitiers, about a hundred miles from Paris. The victory at Poitiers stopped the westward advance of the Arabs and made Charles master of the French kingdom. At

Poitiers, his army had been a militia of foot soldiers. In imitation of the Arabs, Charles transformed it into a cavalry thus obtaining the benefits of mobility in exchange for the advantage of numbers. He was to rely on a corps of mounted soldiers who required the time to train as military specialists, and the resources to maintain a horse and knightly equipage. They were to be supported by the toil of the peasant population whom they protected – when they weren't abusing them and ravaging their fields. Thus was born "the second estate" of professional warriors, after the first estate of priests.

In the first part of the eighth century, the Lombards in northern Italy threatened the safety of the Pope. The Pope responded by forming an alliance with Pepin, the son of Charles Martel, Mayor of the Palace. Pepin wanted to be king and the Pope wanted to be safe. In return for military assistance against the Lombards, the Pope supported Pepin's seizure of the crown of France thus legitimizing his reign. Pepin gave Lombard territory to the Papacy in what became known as "the Donation of Pepin." This made the Papacy a political power in Italy. While this acquisition of secular power would compromise the spiritual authority and integrity of the Pope, it also helped him to avoid the near total subordination of religious authority to secular ruler that was endured by the Patriarch of Constantinople and, much later, by the Archbishop of Canterbury. In the West, the basic structure of authority would be a bi-polar tension between Pope and Emperor which was conflicted but also dynamic. Pepin passed the French crown to his son, whom we know as Charlemagne – "Charles the Great." Charlemagne defeated the Lombards and assumed the crown of Lombardy.

In Charlemagne we see an attempt to restore a centralization of political authority and a revival of literacy. Before he was finished, Charlemagne ruled most of modern France as well as significant territory in Italy and Germany. On Christmas Day, 800, Pope Leo III crowned him emperor and created a new basis for monarchical rule. Western monarchs would henceforth see themselves as "kings by the grace of God."

The reforms in education attempted at the French capital have grandiosely been called "The Carolingian Renaissance." They were very important as a continuation and intensification of the preservation of classical civilization begun by the Celtic monks in preceding centuries, but they were no renaissance. There was little original work of any note and only one original philosopher, John Scotus Erigena, whose Neo-Platonic interpretation of the faith was condemned as heretical by the Church in the thirteenth century. "When we speak of Carolingian culture, we are dealing with the work of only a few dozen significant writers, scattered in monasteries all over Europe. There was no educated society to support a broader movement of culture. A handful of readable poems, a few useful encyclopedic compilations, some well-painted books – it seems hardly

enough to make a Renaissance. And yet there was a notable revival of classical studies and humane learning. Although the creative literary achievement of the ninth century was slight, the work of the monks was of decisive importance for the future. Without the texts they copied in the monastic *scriptoria*, there could not have been any medieval civilization as we know it, or any later Renaissance.” (3/142ff.).

Charlemagne’s empire began to disintegrate shortly after his death and was finally divided between three of his grandsons by the Treaty of Verdun of 843. This settlement founded the political distinction between France and Germany that has had such profound implications in European history. The Carolingian line ended in Germany in 911 and power devolved to tribal chieftains whom the Carolingians had made dukes. In 936, Otto I was crowned king in Germany. He was a strong king and in 962 became emperor of what would later be called the Holy Roman Empire, an entity that in one form or other continued down to the days of Napoleon. He strengthened his power by crushing a ducal uprising and inflicting a final devastating defeat on the Magyars. Like the Carolingians and William the conqueror, Otto was an ally of the Church which supported him against the dukes and became a most important bulwark of monarchy in Germany.

The Vikings

Scandinavia first entered the stage of European history with the devastating Viking invasions. At the same time, Italy and Sicily were again attacked by the Muslims while the Magyars attacked the central Danube region. As a result of these invasions, the ninth and tenth centuries were in some respects the period of greatest disintegration and darkness for much of Europe. The Vikings, or Northmen as they were called, “came at first by sea in little bands. They navigated in small ships with sail and oars that could easily penetrate estuaries and rivers like the Thames, the Seine, the Loire. These heathens were fierce fighters; they were masters of a hit-and-run technique of raiding that made it very difficult for the small land forces of a Europe already far gone in political subdivision to cope with them. At first, the Northmen came as mere piratical raiding bands who plundered the poorly protected coasts of Ireland and England. The booty they carried home to Norway and Denmark whetted their appetites, however, and soon they organized fleets of several hundred ships. With these fleets, they seized coastal lands and proceeded to winter there. Raiders prowled along the coasts of Spain, and even into the Mediterranean. The Northmen preyed on the unfortunate people on whom they descended and sometimes destroyed their settlements. The chronicles of western Europe during this period are full of accounts of their horrible deeds.” (4/190f.). In France, in 911, the king recognized the Viking chief,

Rollo who accepted Christianity and nominally became his vassal as Duke of Normandy. When Rollo's descendants under William I conquered England in 1066, they had become so acculturated that they were really Frenchmen.

With papal backing, William I landed in England and defeated Harold II at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. The English gallantly resisted the Norman attack but, fighting on foot and armed with axes, they could not overcome the technical advantage provided by the Norman cavalry and crossbowmen. For a few years, William crushed rebellions against Norman rule, running a very effective government. He built thousands of castles and protected the frontiers of his kingdom. "Not all changes were popular with the English, who had already lost heavily in terms of status, land holdings and public office. Taxation was heavier, forest laws were harsh and outside the common law. Norman efficiency produced the unique survey recorded in Domesday Book (1086)." (5/482). This was a property survey designed to increase the revenue from land taxes and, not surprisingly, it was very unpopular. Nevertheless, England prospered under Norman rule which also introduced Norman or Romanesque architecture into England. Norman churches are characterized by rounded arches and heavy pillars and tend to be small and dark inside having few windows to let in the light. They differed in function from the Gothic cathedrals of the High Middle Ages which were designed to attract the masses to public worship. By contrast, these were private chapels for the exclusive use of the political and religious elites.

The Church

The ninth and tenth centuries were an ignominious time for the Papacy. Professor Knox of Boise State University tells us that the "popes of the tenth century were a miserable lot, both by character and by circumstance. Rome was continually threatened by Muslims, and there was no king or emperor strong enough to defend against them. The papacy itself became controlled by local Roman noble families. Becoming Bishop of Rome was a matter of winning out in the various feuds that raged. Occasionally the German kings would come down and appoint good popes, but most of the time the Romans forced the election of extremely bad popes who were either incompetent or scandalously immoral." Similarly, monastic discipline had broken down and church offices were bought and sold on the open market. It was clearly a time for church reform, a reform that was to begin not in Rome but in Burgundy with a revitalization of the monastic movement, most notably at the Abbey of Cluny founded in 910. "For nearly two and a half centuries it was the heart of reform in the church. Its monks followed a version of the Benedictine rule and evolved something quite new, a religious order resting not simply on a uniform way of life,

but on a centrally disciplined organization. The Benedictine monasteries had all been independent communities, but the new Cluniac houses were subordinate to the abbot of the central house at Cluny itself; he was the general of an army (eventually) of thousands of monks who only entered their own monasteries after a period of training at the mother house. At the height of its power, in the middle of the twelfth century, more than three hundred monasteries throughout the West – and even some in Palestine--looked for direction to Cluny, whose abbey contained the greatest church in western Christendom after St. Peter's in Rome." (6/331). By the end of our period such powerful and reform minded figures as Gregory VII would soon mount the papal throne and elevate the power and authority of the Papacy to the apex of its history.

The Good News

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here!" Dante's famous warning would seem to be an appropriate greeting to anyone who had the bad taste to be born in western Europe during the early middle ages. And yet, by the end of our period the foundations were laid for what Kenneth Clark has aptly called a Russian spring because of the sudden blossoming of a high civilization and a standard of living unknown for centuries. "The year 1000 may be taken as a turning point. In Spain the Christians began extending their conquests southward; the Germans continued absorbing Slavic territories in the east; and the knights of Normandy and northern France conquered England, southern Italy, and Sicily, and then – with the first crusade of 1099 – the Holy Land as well. Towns and cities grew to keep pace with rising commerce." (7/36).

What caused this change? As a matter of linear causation, it seems hard to explain. What seems required is a systems analysis that describes the interaction of a number of mutually reinforcing events and developments that created a kind of cascade effect allowing the system to flower into the civilization of the High Middle Ages. For instance, we know that there were dramatic increases in both food production and population. The capability to produce more food allowed for population growth which in turn increased demand for food and motivated farmers to produce more. An increase in political stability also increased food production and thus made possible the renewal of urban life, which in turn led to an urban population naturally aligned with the forces of political stability and centralized authority. Significant technical improvements in agriculture were motivated by the growth in population but, in turn, made such growth possible. These advances included rotation of crops in a three-field system and the replacement of stone-age wooden tools with metal ones. "The most momentous advance was in animal traction and harness. In ancient times the traces were attached to a yoke anchored by a

strap around the animal's breast. The strap constricted the animal's windpipe; the harder he pulled the more he choked himself. Many old pictures show a horse tossing back his head in the effort to get air. Then sometime around AD 900, appeared the great invention of the rigid horse collar, which puts the strain on the horse's shoulders and frees the windpipe. The horse's pulling power is thus multiplied four or five times. He began to replace the slow and clumsy ox." (7/32ff).

So, by around the middle of the eleventh century, the essential conditions were finally in place for the emergence of the civilization of the High Middle Ages. The dramatic improvements in agricultural production would now provide the food surplus essential to support a gradual revival of commerce and urban life as well as an enhancement of general living standards to a level not known for centuries. The era of invasions from Viking, Islamic and Magyar marauders had finally come to an end. Stable monarchies were on the way to being established in England, France and Germany. The Church recovered from the crisis of the tenth century to the point that it would be the dominant authority in the High Middle Ages. The cultural legacy had been successfully preserved and would erupt in a genuine renaissance: in learning, most notably at the University of Paris; and, in the visual arts, most staggeringly with the Gothic revolution in cathedral architecture. By our standards, life was by no means pleasant or comfortable, and would not be so for many centuries. However, it was far better than it had been, and it was rapidly improving. It was no longer a time to abandon hope. The great adventure of western European civilization was about to begin.

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