Late Antiquity and the Emergence of the Medieval World

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND FOCUS QUESTIONS

THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

Q What reforms did Diocletian and Constantine institute, and to what extent were the reforms successful?

THE GERMANIC KINGDOMS

Q What changes did the Germanic peoples make to the political, economic, and social conditions of the Western Roman Empire? What were the main features of Germanic law and society, and how did they differ from those of the Romans?

DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Q How and why did the organization of the Christian church and its relations with the state change during the fourth and fifth centuries? What were the chief characteristics of Benedictine monasticism, and what role did monks play in both the conversion of Europe to Christianity and the intellectual life of the Germanic kingdoms?

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Q How did the Byzantine Empire that had emerged by the eighth century differ from the empire of Justinian and from the Germanic kingdoms in the west?

THE RISE OF ISLAM

Q What was the basic message of Islam, and why was it able to expand so successfully?

CRITICAL THINKING

Q In what ways were the Byzantine and Islamic civilizations different from the civilization developing in western Europe? In what ways were they similar?

BY THE THIRD CENTURY, the Roman Empire was experiencing a number of problems as well as witnessing the growth of a new religion—Christianity. To restore the empire, the emperors Diocletian and Constantine initiated a number of reforms that created the so-called Late Empire. Constantine also converted to Christianity, starting a process that gave the Late Empire a new state religion.

After Constantine, the Late Roman Empire survived, but in the west it increasingly faced incursions of Germanic tribes. By the second half of the fifth century, new political arrangements were taking shape that brought the collapse of the old imperial structure in the west and the emergence of a series of Germanic kingdoms in western Europe that would form the basis of a new civilization. In these kingdoms, the Christian church also played a role as it drew these Germanic tribes to its faith.

The conversion to Christianity of the pagan leaders of the Germanic tribes was sometimes dramatic, at least as reported by the sixth-century historian Gregory of Tours. Clovis (KLOH-viss), leader of the Franks, married Clotilde, daughter of the king of the Burgundians. She was a Christian, but Clovis refused her pleas to become a Christian, telling her, “Your god can do nothing.” But during a battle with the Alemanni, when Clovis’s army
was close to utter destruction, "he saw the danger; his heart was stirred; and he raised his eyes to heaven, saying, 'Jesus Christ, I beseech the glory of your aid. If you shall grant me victory over these enemies, I will believe in you and be baptized in your name.'" When he had uttered these words, the Alemanni began to flee. Clovis kept his vow and became a Christian.

While the Germanic kingdoms were putting down roots in the west, the eastern part of the old Roman Empire, increasingly Greek in culture, continued as the Byzantine Empire. Serving as a buffer between Europe and the peoples to the east, the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire also preserved the intellectual and legal accomplishments of Greek and Roman antiquity. At the same time, a new culture centered on Islam emerged in the east; it spread through large parts of the old Roman Empire, preserved much of Greek culture, and created its own flourishing civilization. This chapter, then, concerns the transformation of the Roman world in late antiquity, the heirs of the Roman Empire, and the new world—the medieval world—they began to create.

The Late Roman Empire

**Focus Question:** What reforms did Diocletian and Constantine institute, and to what extent were the reforms successful?

At the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, the Roman Empire gained a new lease on life through the efforts of two strong emperors, Diocletian and Constantine, who restored order and stability. The empire was virtually transformed into a new state, the Late Roman Empire, which included a new governmental structure, a rigid economic and social system, and a new state religion—Christianity.

The Reforms of Diocletian and Constantine

Diocletian had risen through the ranks to become a prominent military leader. After the murder of the emperor Numerian by his praetorian prefect, Diocletian executed the prefect and was then hailed as emperor by his soldiers. Diocletian's own rise to power led him to see the need for a new system for ruling the Roman Empire.

**Political Reforms** Diocletian (284–305) created a new administrative system for a restructured empire. The number of provinces was increased to almost one hundred by creating smaller districts superintended by more officials. The provinces were in turn grouped into twelve dioceses, each headed by an official called a vicar. The twelve dioceses were grouped into four prefectures (see Map 7.1), and the entire Roman Empire was divided into two parts, east and west. Each part contained two prefectures and was ruled by an "Augustus." Diocletian ruled the east, and Maximian (mak-SIM-ee-un), a strong military commander, the west. Each Augustus was assisted by a chief lieutenant or "vice-emperor" called a "Caesar," who theoretically would eventually succeed to the position of Augustus. This new system was called the **tetarchy** (rule by four). Diocletian had obviously come to believe that one man was incapable of ruling such an enormous empire, especially in view of the barbarian invasions of the third century. Each of the four tetrarchs—two Augusti and two Caesars—resided in a different administrative capital. Diocletian, for example, established his base at Nicomedia in Bithynia. Despite the appearance of four-man rule, however, it is important to note that Diocletian's military seniority enabled him to claim a higher status and hold the ultimate authority.

Soon after Diocletian’s retirement in 305, a new struggle for power ensued. The victory of Constantine (306–337) in 312 led to his control of the entire west, although he continued to share imperial authority with Licinius (li-KIN ee-uuss), a fellow emperor. Twelve years later, in 324, Constantine’s army routed Licinius’s forces, and Constantine established himself as the sole ruler.

Constantine continued and even expanded the autocratic policies of Diocletian. Under these two rulers, the Roman Empire was transformed into a system in which the emperor had far more personal power than Augustus, Trajan, or any of the other emperors had had during the **Pax Romana**. The emperor, now clothed in jeweled robes of gold and blue, was seen as a divinely sanctioned monarch whose will was law. Government officials were humble servants required to kneel before the emperor and kiss his robe. The Roman senate was stripped of any power and became merely the city council for Rome.

Diocletian and Constantine greatly strengthened and enlarged the administrative bureaucracies of the Roman Empire. Henceforth, civil and military bureaucracies were sharply separated. Each contained a hierarchy of officials who exercised control at the various levels. The emperor presided over both hierarchies and served as the only link between them. New titles of nobility—such as **illustris** (ee-LOO-strayss) ("illustrious ones") and **illustrissimi** (ee-LOO-stree-see-mee) ("most illustrious ones")—were instituted to dignify the holders of positions in the civil and military bureaucracies.

**Military Reforms** Additional military reforms were also instituted. The army was enlarged to 400,000 men, including units filled with Germans. By the end of Constantine’s reign, a new organization of the army had also been put in place. Military forces were divided into two kinds: garrison troops, which were located on the frontiers and intended as a first line of defense against invaders, and mobile units, which were located behind the frontier but could be quickly moved to support frontier troops when the borders were threatened. This gave the empire greater flexibility in responding to invasion.

**Economic and Social Trends** The political and military reforms of Diocletian and Constantine greatly
enlarged two institutions—the army and the civil service—that drained most of the public funds. Although more revenues were needed to pay for the military and the bureaucracy, the population was not growing, so the tax base could not be expanded. Diocletian and Constantine devised new economic and social policies to deal with these financial burdens. Like their political policies, these economic and social policies were all based on coercion and loss of individual freedom.

To fight inflation, in 301 Diocletian resorted to issuing an edict that established maximum wages and prices for the entire empire. It was applied mostly in the east, but despite severe penalties, like most wage and price controls, it was largely unenforceable. The decline in the coins in circulation forced Diocletian to collect taxes and make government payments in produce. Constantine, however, managed to introduce a new gold coin, the solidus, and new silver coins that remained in circulation during his reign.

In the third century, the city councils, which had formed one of the most important administrative units of the empire, had begun to decline. Since the curiales (KUR-ee-all-a-yess) (the city councillors) were forced to pay expenses out of their own pocket when the taxes they collected were insufficient, the wealthy no longer wanted to serve in these positions. Diocletian and Constantine responded by issuing edicts that forced the rich to continue in their posts as curiales, making the positions virtually hereditary. Some curiales realized that their fortunes would be wiped out and fled the cities to escape the clutches of the imperial bureaucracy. If caught, however, they were returned to their cities like runaway slaves and forced to resume their duties.

Coercion also came to form the underlying basis for numerous occupations in the Late Roman Empire. To maintain the tax base and keep the empire going despite the shortage of labor, the emperors issued edicts that forced people to remain in their designated vocations.
Hence basic jobs, such as bakers and shippers, became hereditary.

Free tenant farmers—the coloni—continued to decline and soon found themselves bound to the land as well. Large landowners took advantage of depressed agricultural conditions to enlarge their landed estates. Free tenant farmers, unable to survive on their own, became dependent on these large estates and soon discovered that the landlords, in order to guarantee their supply of labor, had obtained government cooperation in attaching the coloni to their estates. One imperial edict stated: “And as for coloni themselves, it will be proper for such as contemplate flight to be bound with chains to a servile status, so that by virtue of such condemnation to servitude they may be compelled to fulfill the duties that befit free men.”

In addition to facing increased restrictions on their freedom, the lower classes were burdened with enormous taxes, since the wealthiest classes in the Late Roman Empire were either exempt from paying taxes or evaded them by bribing the tax collectors. These tax pressures undermined lower-class support for the regime. A fifth-century writer reported that the Roman peasants welcomed the Visigothic invaders of southern Gaul as liberators because the enemy was more lenient to them than the tax collectors.

In general, the economic and social policies of Diocletian and Constantine were based on an unprecedented degree of control and coercion. Though temporarily successful, in the long run such authoritarian policies stifled the very vitality the Late Empire needed to revive its sagging fortunes.

**CONSTANTINE’S BUILDING PROGRAM** Constantine was especially interested in building programs despite the strain they placed on the budget. Much of the construction took place in the provinces, since Rome had become merely a symbolic capital. It was no longer an imperial administrative center, as it was considered too far from the frontiers. Between 324 and 330, Constantine engaged in his biggest project, the construction of a new capital city in the east, on the site of the Greek city of Byzantium, on the shores of the Bosphorus. Named the “city of Constantine,” or Constantinople (modern Istanbul), it was developed for defensive reasons; it had an excellent strategic location. Calling it his “New Rome,” Constantine endowed the city with a forum, large palaces, and a vast amphitheater. It was officially dedicated on May 11, 330, “by the commandment of God,” and in the following years, many Christian churches were built there.

Constantine did not entirely forget Rome. Earlier he was responsible for building public baths and the triumphal Arch of Constantine, erected between 312 and 315. Constantine was also the first emperor to build churches for the Christian faith in Rome, including the first basilica dedicated to Saint Peter, built on the supposed site of Saint Peter’s burial. Constantine also gave grants to Christian leaders in Rome, enabling them to assume a more conspicuous role in the city. These acts by Constantine are a reminder of the new role Christianity was beginning to play in the Late Empire.

The Emperor Constantine. Constantine played an important role in restoring order and stability to the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century. This marble head of Constantine, which is 8 feet 6 inches high, was part of an enormous 30-foot-tall seated statue of the emperor in the New Basilica in Rome. Constantine used these awe-inspiring statues throughout the empire to build support for imperial policies by reminding his subjects of his position as an absolute ruler with immense power. Being depicted with his eyes cast up toward heaven also emphasized Constantine’s special relationship with God.

**The Empire’s New Religion**

In the fourth century, Christianity flourished as never before, and the emperor Constantine played an important role in its new status.

**THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE** Constantine’s support for Christianity supposedly began in 312, when his army was about to fight a crucial battle against the forces of Maxentius (mak-SEN-shuss) at the Milvian Bridge, which crossed the Tiber River just north of the city of Rome. According to the traditional story, before the battle, Constantine saw a vision of a Christian cross with the words, “In this sign you will conquer.” Having won the battle, the story goes, Constantine was convinced of the power of the Christian God. Although he was not baptized until the end of his life, in 313 he issued the famous Edict of Milan, which officially tolerated the existence of Christianity.

After Constantine, all of the emperors were Christian with the exception of Julian (360–363), who tried briefly to restore the traditional Greco-Roman polytheistic religion. But he died in battle, and his reign was too short to make a difference. Under Theodosius (thee-uh-DOH-shuss) I “the Great” (379–395), Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. Once in control, Christian leaders used their influence and power to outlaw pagan religious practices. Christianity had triumphed.
ORGANIZATION AND RELIGIOUS DISPUTES By the fourth century, the Christian church had developed a system of government based on a territorial plan borrowed from Roman administration. The Christian community in each city was headed by a bishop, whose area of jurisdiction was known as a bishopric or diocese. The bishoprics of each Roman province were clustered together under the direction of an archbishop. The bishops of four great cities, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, held positions of special power in church affairs because the churches in these cities all asserted that they had been founded by the original apostles sent out by Jesus.

One reason the church needed a more formal organization was the problem of heresy. As Christianity developed and spread, contradictory interpretations of important doctrines emerged. Heresy came to be viewed as a teaching different from the official “catholic” or universal beliefs of the church. In a world where people were concerned about salvation, the question of whether Jesus’s nature is divine or human took on great significance. These doctrinal differences also became political issues, creating political factions that actuallywarred with one another. It is highly unlikely, though, that ordinary people understood the issues in these debates.

One of the major heresies of the fourth century was Arianism, which was a product of the followers of Arius, a priest from Alexandria in Egypt. Arius postulated that Jesus had been human and thus not truly God. Arius was opposed by Athanasius, a bishop of Alexandria, who argued that Jesus was human but also truly God. Emperor Constantine, disturbed by the controversy, called the first ecumenical council of the church, a meeting composed of representatives from the entire Christian community. The Council of Nicaea, held in 325, condemned Arianism and stated that Jesus was of “the same substance” as God: “We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.” The Council of Nicaea did not end the controversy, however; not only did Arianism persist in some parts of the Roman Empire for many years, but even more important, many of the Germanic Goths who established states in the west converted to Ariant Christianity (see “The Germanic Kingdoms” later in this chapter). As a result of these fourth-century religious controversies, the Roman emperor came to play an increasingly important role in church affairs.

The End of the Western Empire

Constantine had reunited the Roman Empire and restored a semblance of order. After his death, however, the empire continued to divide into western and eastern parts as fighting erupted on a regular basis between elements of the Roman army backing the claims of rival emperors. By 395, the western and eastern parts of the empire had become virtually two independent states. In the course of the fifth century, while the empire in the east remained intact under the Roman emperor in Constantinople (see “The Byzantine Empire” later in this chapter), the administrative structure of the empire in the west collapsed and was replaced by an assortment of Germanic kingdoms. The process was a gradual one, involving the movement of Germans into the empire, military failures, struggles for power on the part of both Roman and German military leaders, and the efforts of wealthy aristocrats to support whichever side seemed to offer them greater security.

THE GERMANS During the first and second centuries C.E., the Romans had established the Rhine and Danube rivers as the empire’s northern boundary. The Romans called all the peoples to the north of the rivers “Germans” and regarded them as uncivilized barbarians. In fact, the Germans comprised several different groups with their own customs and identities, but these constantly changed as tribes broke up and came together in new configurations. At times they formed larger confederations under strong warrior leaders. The Germans lived by herding and farming and also traded with people living along the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire. Their proximity to the Romans also led to some Romanization of the tribes. They were familiar with the Roman use of coins rather than barter and also gained some knowledge of both the Latin language and Roman military matters.

Although the Romans had established a series of political frontiers along the Rhine and Danube rivers, Romans and Germans often came into contact across these boundaries. For some time, the Romans had hired Germanic tribes to fight other Germanic tribes that threatened Rome or enlisted groups of Germans to fight for Rome. In any case, until the fourth century, the empire had proved capable of absorbing these people without harm to its political structure. In the second half of the fourth century, this situation began to change.

GERMAN MIGRATIONS In the late fourth century, the Germanic tribes came under new pressure when the Huns, a fierce tribe of nomads from the steppes of Asia (see the box on p. 184), moved into the Black Sea region, possibly attracted by the riches of the empire to its south. One of the groups displaced by the Huns was the Visigoths (VIZ-uh-gathz), who in 376 asked the Roman emperor Valens (VAY-lenz) (364–378) to allow them to cross the Danube and farm in the Balkans in return for providing troops for the Roman military. But the Roman military commanders mistreated them, as one ancient German historian recounted:

[They] crossed the Danube and settled Dacia Ripensis, Moesia, and Thrace by permission of the Emperor. Soon famine and want came upon them…. Their leaders… begged the Roman commanders to open a market. But to what will not the “cursed lust for gold” compel men to assent? The generals, swayed by greed, sold them at a high price not only the flesh of sheep and oxen, but even the carcasses of dogs and unclean animals…. When their goods and chattels failed,
Opposing VIEWPOINTS

Two Views of the Huns

The first selection is a description of the Huns by Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330–c. 393), who has been called the "last great Roman historian." Ammianus wrote a history of Rome from 96 C.E. to his own day. Only the chapters that deal with the period from 354 to 378 have survived. Historians believe that his account of the Huns is largely based on stereotypes. The second selection is taken from an account by Priscus, an envoy from the Eastern Roman Empire to the court of Attila, king of the Huns from 434 to 453. His description of the Huns in 448 is quite different from that of Ammianus Marcellinus.

Ammianus Marcellinus,
The Later Roman Empire

The Huns... are quite abnormally savage. From the moment of their birth they make deep gashes in their children's cheeks, so that when in due course hair appears its growth is checked by the wrinkled scars. They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of bridges. Still, their shape, however disagreeable, is human; but their way of life is so rough that they have no use for fire or seasoned food, but live on the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any sort of animal, which they warm a little by placing it between their thighs and the backs of their horses. They have no buildings to shelter them, but avoid anything of the kind;... not so much as a hut thatched with reeds is to be found among them... They wear garments of linen or of the skins of field-mice stitched together, and there is no difference between their clothing whether they are at home or abroad. Once they have put their necks in some dingy shirt they never take it off or change it till it rots and falls to pieces from incessant wear. They have round caps of fur on their heads, and protect their hairy legs with goatskins. Their shapeless shoes... make it hard to walk easily. In consequence they are ill-fitted to fight on foot, and remain glued to their horses, hardy but ugly beasts, on which they sometimes sit like women to perform their everyday business. Buying or selling, eating or drinking, are all done by day or night on horseback, and they even bow forward over their beasts' narrow necks to enjoy a deep and dreamy sleep. They sometimes fight by challenging their foes to single combat, but when they join battle they advance in packs, uttering their various warcries. Being lightly equipped and very sudden in their movements they can deliberately scatter and gallop about at random, inflicting tremendous slaughter; their extreme audacity enables them to force a rampart or pillage an enemy's camp before one catches sight of them. None of them plows or ever touches a plow-handle. They have no fixed abode, no home or law or settled manner of life, but wander like refugees with the wagons in which they live. In these their wives weave their filthy clothing, mate with their husbands, and give birth to their children, and rear them to the age of puberty.

Priscus, An Account of the Court of Attila the Hun

[We were invited to a banquet with Attila.] When the hour arrived we went to Attila’s palace, along with the embassy from the western Romans, and stood on the threshold of the hall in the presence of Attila. The cup-bearers gave us a cup, according to the national custom, that we might pray before we sat down. Having tasted the cup, we proceeded to take our seats, all the chairs being ranged along the walls of the room on either side. Attila sat in the middle on a couch; a second couch was set behind him, and from it steps led up to his bed, which was covered with linen sheets and coverlets. [First the king and his guests pledged one another with the wine.] When this ceremony was over the cup-bearers retired and tables, large enough for three or four, or even more, to sit at, were placed next the table of Attila, so that each could take of the food on the plates without leaving his seat. The attendant of Attila first entered with a dish full of meat, and behind him came the other attendants with bread and other dishes, which they laid on the tables. A luxurious meal, served on silver plate, had been made ready for us and the other guests, but Attila ate nothing but meat on a wooden platter. In everything else, too, he showed himself temperate; his cup was of wood, while to the guests were given goblets of gold and silver. His dress, too, was quite simple, affecting only to be clean.

Q: What motives may have prompted Ammianus Marcellinus to describe the Huns so harshly? How does the account of Priscus differ, and what strategies of the Huns do you detect here to impress and overawe foreigners? How reliable do you think these descriptions of the Huns are? Why?
the greedy traders demanded their sons in return for the necessities of life. And the parents consented even to this.3

Outraged at the Romans' behavior, the Visigoths revolted. In 378, Emperor Valens and an army of 40,000 soldiers confronted the Visigoths at Adrianople. The emperor was killed, and two-thirds of the Roman army was left dead on the battlefield.

The loss was not fatal, although the new emperor, Theodosius I, resettled the Visigoths and incorporated many of their soldiers into the Roman army. Some of the Visigoths even became army leaders. By the second half of the fourth century, Roman policy allowed Roman army units to be composed entirely of Germanic tribes, known as federates, or allies of Rome.

THE THREAT OF THE GERMANS The existence of such military groups proved dangerous to the Late Empire. This was especially evident after Alaric (AL-uh-rick) became the leader of the Visigoths. Between 395 and 401, Alaric and his soldiers moved through the Balkans and then into Italy, seeking food and cash payments from Roman officials. When the city of Rome refused his demands in 408, Alaric marched to the gates and besieged the city, causing the senate of Rome to agree to pay 5,000 pounds of gold and 30,000 pounds of silver for his withdrawal. Two years later, frustrated in his demand that the Visigoths be given part of northern Italy, Alaric and his forces sacked Rome for three days. Alaric died soon after, and his Visigothic followers left Italy, crossed the Alps, and moved into Spain and southern Gaul as Roman allies (see Map 7.2).
By this time, other Germanic tribes were also passing into the Roman Empire and settling down. In the early fifth century, the Burgundians arrived in southern Gaul, while the Franks moved into northern Gaul. Another group, the Vandals, under their leader Gaiseric (GY-zuh-rik), moved through Gaul and Spain, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into North Africa, and seized Carthage, the capital city, in 439.

As the Germanic tribes moved into the empire and settled down, Roman forces were often withdrawn from the provinces, effectively reducing the central authority of the emperors. In 410, for example, the emperor Honorius (hoh-NOR-ee-us) recalled the last Roman legions from Britain. As one ancient commentator remarked, "Honorius sent letters to the cities in Britain, urging them to fend for themselves." With the withdrawal, the Saxons, who had arrived earlier as Roman allies, now expanded their control in Britain. Within another decade, both Spain and Gaul had also become free of imperial authority.

**ROLE OF MASTERS OF THE SOLDIERS** By the middle of the fifth century, the western provinces of the Roman Empire had been taken over by Germanic peoples who were in the process of creating independent kingdoms. At the same time, a semblance of imperial authority remained in Rome, although the real power behind the throne tended to rest in the hands of important military officials known as Masters of the Soldiers.

These military commanders controlled the government and dominated the imperial court. The three most prominent in the fifth century were Stilicho (STIL-i-koh), Aetius (ay-EH-shus), and Ricimer (RISS-uh-mur). Stilicho and Ricimer were both Germans, whereas Aetius was a Roman. Although all three propped up emperors to maintain the fiction of imperial rule, they were also willing to cooperate with the Germans to maintain their power. But even the Masters of the Soldiers were never safe in the bloody world of fifth-century Roman political life. Stilicho was executed by order of Emperor Honorius. Aetius was killed by Emperor Valentinian (val-en-TIN ee-un) III, who was in turn assassinated by a group of Aetius's German bodyguards, who sought to avenge their betrayed leader. Ricimer died a natural death, an unusual event in fifth-century Rome. No doubt, the constant intrigue at the center of the Western Empire added to the instability of imperial rule.

By the mid-fifth century, imperial authority in the west was still operating only in Italy and small parts of Gaul. Even Rome itself was not safe. In 455, after the Romans broke a treaty that they had made with Gaiseric, leader of the Vandals, Gaiseric sent a Vandal fleet to Italy and sacked the undefended city of Rome. Twenty-one years later, in 476, Odoacer (oh-doh-AY-sur), a new Master of the Soldiers, himself of German origin, deposed the Roman emperor, the boy Romulus Augustulus (RAHM yuh-luss ow-GOOS chuh-luss). To many historians, the deposition of Romulus signaled the end of the Roman Empire. Of course, this is only a symbolic date, since much of direct imperial rule had already been lost in the course of the fifth century. Even then the empire remained, as Odoacer presented himself as a German king obedient in theory to the Roman emperor Zeno (ZEE noh) in Constantinople.

By the end of the fifth century, Roman imperial authority in the west had ceased. Nevertheless, the intellectual, governmental, and cultural traditions of the Late Roman Empire continued to live on in the new Germanic kingdoms.
The Germanic Kingdoms

**Focus Questions:** What changes did the Germanic peoples make to the political, economic, and social conditions of the Western Roman Empire? What were the main features of Germanic law and society, and how did they differ from those of the Romans?

By 500, the Western Roman Empire was being replaced politically by a series of kingdoms ruled by German kings (see Map 7.3). Although the Germans now ruled, they were greatly outnumbered by the Romans, who still controlled most of the economic resources. Both were Christian, but many of the Germans were Arian Christians, considered heretics by Romans who belonged to the Christian church in Rome, which had become known as the Roman Catholic Church. Gradually, the two groups merged into a common culture, although the pattern of settlement and the fusion of the Romans and Germans took different forms in the various Germanic kingdoms.

**The Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy**

Zeno, the Roman emperor in Constantinople, was not pleased with Odoacer’s actions and plotted to unseat him. In his desire to act against the German leader, Zeno brought another German tribe, the Ostrogoths (AHSS-truh-gathhss), into Italy. The Ostrogoths had recovered from a defeat by the Huns in the fourth century and under their king Theodoric (thee-AHD-uh-rik) (493–526) had attacked Constantinople. To divert them, Emperor Zeno invited Theodoric to act as his deputy to defeat Odoacer and bring Italy back into the empire. Theodoric accepted the challenge, marched into Italy, killed Odoacer, and then, contrary to Zeno’s wishes, established himself as ruler of Italy in 493.

**Map 7.3 The Germanic Kingdoms of the Old Western Empire.** The Germanic tribes filled the power vacuum created by the demise of the Roman Empire, building states that blended elements of Germanic customs and laws with those of Roman culture, including large-scale conversions to Christianity. The Franks established the most durable of these Germanic states.

**Q** How did the movements of the Franks during this period correspond to the borders of present-day France?
Theodoric and Ostrogothic Italy

The Ostrogothic king Theodoric (493–526), who had been educated in Constantinople, was determined to maintain Roman culture rather than destroy it. His attempt to preserve civilitas, the traditional Roman civic culture, was well expressed in the official letters written in his name by Cassiodorus, who became master of offices in 525. Theodoric’s efforts were largely undone by opposition from the Roman nobility and especially by Justinian’s reconquest of the Italian peninsula shortly after Theodoric’s death.

Letters of Cassiodorus

King Theodoric to Colossaeus

We delight to entrust our mandates to persons of approved character. . . .

Show forth the justice of the Goths, a nation happily situated for praise, since it is theirs to unite the forethought of the Romans and the virtue of the Barbarians. Remove all ill-planted customs, and impress upon all your subordinates that we would rather that our Treasury lost a suit than that it gained one wrongfully, rather that we lost money than the taxpayer was driven to suicide.

King Theodoric to Unegis, the Sword-Bearer

We delight to live after the law of the Romans, whom we seek to defend with our arms; and we are as much interested in the maintenance of morality as we can possibly be in war. For what profit is there in having removed the turmoil of the Barbarians, unless we live according to law? . . . Let other kings desire the glory of battles won, of cities taken, of ruins made; our purpose is, God helping us, so to rule that our subjects shall grieve that they did not earlier acquire the blessing of our dominion.

King Theodoric to All the Jews of Genoa

The true mark of civilitas is the observance of law. It is this which makes life in communities possible, and which separates man from the brutes. We therefore gladly accede to your request that all the privileges which the foresight of antiquity conferred upon the Jewish customs shall be renewed to you, for in truth it is our great desire that the laws of the ancients shall be kept in force to secure the reverence due to us. Everything which has been found to conduct to civilitas should be held fast with enduring devotion.

King Theodoric to All the Goths Settled in Picenum and Samnium

The presence of the Sovereign doubles the sweetness of his gifts, and that man is like one dead whose face is not known to his lord. Come therefore by God’s assistance, come all into our presence on the eighth day before the Ides of June [June 7], there solemnly to receive our royal largesse. But let there be no excess; by the way, no plundering the harvest of the cultivators nor trampling down their meadows, since for this cause do we gladly defray the expense of our armies that civilitas may be kept intact by armed men. Q

In what ways do the letters of Cassiodorus illustrate Theodoric’s efforts to preserve the traditional Roman civic culture? Judging from the letters, what were the obstacles to Theodoric’s goal?

THEODORIC’S RULE  More than any other Germanic state, the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy managed to maintain the Roman tradition of government. The Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, had received a Roman education while a hostage in Constantinople. After taking control of Italy, he was eager to create a synthesis of Ostrogothic and Roman practices (see the box above). In addition to maintaining the entire structure of Roman imperial government, he established separate systems of rule for the Ostrogoths and Romans. The Italian population lived under Roman law administered by Roman officials. The Ostrogoths were governed by their own customs and their own officials. Nevertheless, although the Roman administrative system was kept intact, it was the Ostrogoths alone who controlled the army. Despite the apparent success of this “dual approach,” Theodoric’s system was unable to keep friction from developing between the Italian population and their Germanic overlords.

Religion proved to be a major source of trouble between Ostrogoths and Romans. The Ostrogoths had been converted earlier to Christianity, but to Arian Christianity, and consequently were viewed by western Christians and the Italians as heretics. Theodoric’s rule grew ever harsher as discontent with Ostrogothic rule deepened.

END OF THE OSTROGOTHIC KINGDOM  After Theodoric’s death in 526, it quickly became apparent that much of his success had been due to the force of his own personality. His successors soon found themselves face to face with opposition from the imperial forces of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire. Under Emperor Justinian (juh-STIN-ee-un) (527–565) (see “The Reign of Justinian” later in this chapter), Byzantine armies reconquered Italy.
between 535 and 552, devastating much of the peninsula in the process and destroying Rome as one of the great urban centers of the Mediterranean world. The Byzantine reconquest proved ephemeral, however. Another German tribe, the Lombards, invaded Italy in 568 and conquered much of northern and central Italy. Unlike the Ostrogoths, the Lombards were harsh rulers and cared little for Roman structures and traditions. The Lombards’ fondness for fighting each other enabled the Byzantines to retain control of some parts of Italy, especially the area around Ravenna, which became the capital of imperial government in the west.

The Visigothic Kingdom of Spain

The Visigothic kingdom in Spain demonstrated a number of parallels to the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy. Both favored coexistence between the Roman and German populations, both featured a warrior caste dominating a larger native population, and both continued to maintain much of the Roman structure of government while largely excluding Romans from power. There were also noticeable differences, however. Perceiving that their Arianism was a stumbling block to good relations, the Visigothic rulers in the late sixth century converted to Latin or Catholic Christianity and ended the tension caused by this heresy. Laws preventing intermarriage were dropped, and the Visigothic and Hispano-Roman peoples began to fuse together. A new body of law common to both peoples also developed.

The kingdom possessed one fatal weakness, however—the Visigoths fought constantly over the kingship. The Visigoths had no hereditary monarchy and no established procedure for choosing new rulers. Church officials tried to help develop a sense of order, as this canon from the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 illustrates: “No one of us shall dare to seize the kingdom; no one shall arouse sedition among the citizenry; no one shall think of killing the king.” Church decrees failed to stop the feuds, however, and assassinations remained a way of life in Visigothic Spain. In 711, Muslim invaders destroyed the Visigothic kingdom itself (see “The Rise of Islam” later in this chapter).

The Frankish Kingdom

Only one of the German states on the European continent proved long-lasting—the kingdom of the Franks. The establishment of a Frankish kingdom was the work of Clovis (c. 482–511), the leader of one group of Franks who eventually became king of them all.

THE RULE OF CLOVIS Around 500, Clovis became a Catholic Christian. He was not the first German king to convert to Christianity, but the others had joined the Arian sect of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church regarded the Arians as heretics, people who believed in teachings that departed from the official church doctrine. Clovis found that his conversion to Catholic Christianity gained him the support of the Roman Catholic Church, which was only too eager to obtain the friendship of a major Germanic ruler who was a Catholic Christian. The conversion of the king also paved the way for the conversion of the Frankish peoples. Finally, Clovis could pose as a defender of the orthodox Catholic faith in order to justify his expansion at the beginning of the sixth century. He defeated the Alemani (al-uh-MAH-nee) in southwest Germany and the Visigoths in southern Gaul. By 510, Clovis had established a powerful new Frankish kingdom stretching from the Pyrenees in the west to German lands in the east (modern-day France and western Germany).

Clovis was thus responsible for establishing a Frankish kingdom under the Merovingian (mehr-evin-jee-un) dynasty, a name derived from Merovech, their semilegendary ancestor. Clovis came to rely on his Frankish followers to rule in the old Roman city-states under the title of count. Often these officials were forced to share power with the Gallo-Roman Catholic bishops, producing a gradual fusion of Latin and German cultures, with the church serving to preserve the Latin culture. Clovis spent the last years of his life ensuring the survival of his dynasty by killing off relatives who were leaders of other groups of Franks.

THE SUCCESSORS OF CLOVIS After the death of Clovis, his sons divided the newly created kingdom, as was the Frankish custom. During the sixth and seventh centuries, the once-united Frankish kingdom came to be partitioned into three major areas: Neustria (NOO-stree-euh) in northern Gaul; Austrasia (au-STRAY-zhuh), consisting of the ancient Frankish lands on both sides of the Rhine; and the former kingdom of Burgundy. All three were ruled by members of the Merovingian dynasty. Within the three territories, members of the dynasty were assisted by powerful nobles. Frankish society possessed a ruling class that gradually intermarried with the old Gallo-Roman senatorial class to form a new nobility. These noble families took advantage of their position to expand their own lands and wealth at the expense of the monarchy. Within the royal household, the position of major domus (may-YOR DOH-moos), or mayor of the palace, the chief officer of the king’s household, began to overshadow the king. Essentially, both nobles and mayors of the palace were expanding their power at the expense of the kings.

At the beginning of the eighth century, the most important political development in the Frankish kingdom was the rise of Charles Martel, who served as mayor of the palace of Austrasia beginning in 714. Charles Martel led troops that defeated the Muslims near Poitiers in 732 and by the time of his death in 741 had become virtual ruler of the three Merovingian kingdoms. Though he was not king, Charles Martel’s dynamic efforts put his family on the verge of creating a new dynasty that would establish an even more powerful Frankish state (see Chapter 8).