

Germanic Kingdoms in the West

Writers in the 17th century called the five centuries between the years 400 and 900 the “Dark Ages” because they knew so little about them. These years were “dark” or hidden to their understanding. These writers of the 1600s knew only that “barbarians” had overrun the Roman Empire and that much of the ancient learning of Greece and Rome had been lost.

Much of classical civilization was indeed lost between 400 and 800. Travel was dangerous, commerce came almost to a standstill, and agricultural methods did not improve. Central political control and social order disappeared amid wars and their destructive effects. The standard of living in Gaul, Italy, and Germany fell disastrously from what it was in the days of the Roman Empire.

But the Dark Ages present more than just a tale of destruction. During those centuries, the Greco-Roman world and the “barbarians” were brought into the heart of the Christian Faith and its Church. The virtues of the northern people—heroism, perseverance, and personal loyalty—were being transformed by the Christian-Roman traditions of faith, intellectual investigation, compassion, moral responsibility, and legal wisdom. Greco-Roman civilization was not lost in the Dark Ages; it was remade into Christendom.

Christendom is the name given to the civilization that arose from the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, and Israel. Beginning in the Dark Ages, Christendom developed in western and eastern Europe and later spread to North and South America.



The North Invades the South

The greatest migration of peoples in human history took place in the fourth through sixth centuries. During that time, Germanic tribes and nations descended on the provinces of the Roman Empire and claimed the lands of Gaul and Iberia.

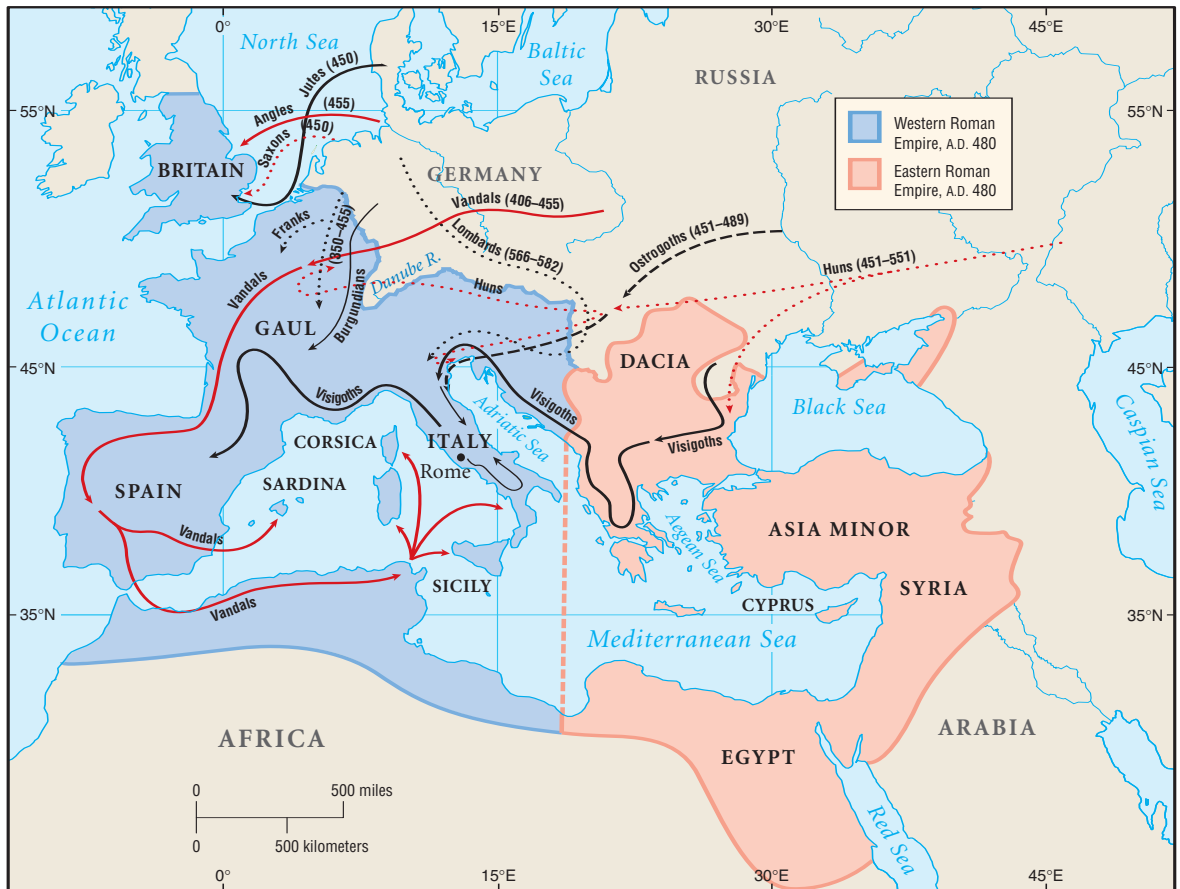
The Germanic peoples were formerly spread across the forests south of the Baltic Sea and the plains and river valleys of Eastern Europe. During the later years of the Roman Empire, they moved with their families and herds into the Danube and Rhine valleys, and from there into Western Europe—Gaul, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula. Beginning in the fourth century, a new wave of Germanic tribes moved down from the southern coasts and forests of the Baltic Sea region, through Dacia and Hungary, and into Roman lands.

For a hundred years, the imperial armies made use of some Germanic tribes as allies against other Germanic peoples. Then, in the later years of the empire, the Romans allowed several Germanic tribes to move their families as settlers and colonists into empty or underpopulated lands in Gaul or along the Danube River. Because of mistakes made by Roman commanders, the tribes finally moved into the empire of the West as conquerors, ruling over a much larger Romanized population. They set up kingdoms of their own, independent of the Roman emperors in Constantinople.

The Germanic tribes that had given warriors to the armies of Rome for a century or more regarded themselves as part of the Roman world. They did not think of themselves as Germans, but Romans. To these immigrants, to be Roman was to be Christian, to belong to the religion of the empire. Many of the Germanic tribes had

been converted generations before by Arian missionaries and were proud of their faith.

**Germanic warriors
pillage Rome**



Germanic movements into the Roman Empire

The Germanic World

Though they did not consider themselves one people, the Germanic nations had similar cultures that distinguished them from the peoples of the Mediterranean civilization. So it is that we can speak of Germanic languages, social organization, or law.

Language and Social Classes

Though Germans of one tribe did not understand the language spoken by Germans of another tribe, their languages were related. Germanic language is a branch of the great Indo-European language family, which includes

Persian, Greek, and Latin. There are three distinct Germanic language branches: Eastern, or Gothic (now wholly lost); Western (from which come modern German, Dutch, and English); and Northern (from which come Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish).

The Germans' long history of migration and their constant fights with the other peoples of the eastern plains had made them into a warrior-hunter society. War was necessary to defend the tribe, and the people devoted all their resources to it. All free men were expected to learn the use of arms—spear, sword, axe, and shield. Women, too, sometimes took up spear and shield and joined their men on the battle line. Those in the tribe who fought and hunted best were the elite, and from them came the kings and their circle of comrades in arms.

demigod: a being who has more power than a human being but less than a god

The Germanic “kings” traced their family lines back to mythological gods or **demigods** of an ancient heroic age. Germanic leaders were expected to rely on the counsel of the tribal elders, men who had earned their peers' respect or represented some powerful family. These elders also chose the next leader or deposed the present leader if they found him cowardly or unfit. The old songs tell tales of bad kings, like Hermanreich, who ruled the Goths so badly that they finally drove him out in disgust.

Germanic leaders were protected by a band of comrades—their cousins and friends, or the best warriors of the tribe who were supported by the king and fought beside him in battle. These companions were expected to protect their lord with their lives, and they swore oaths of loyalty that they dared not break. These warriors could expect a similar loyalty from their lord, who became famous through their deeds as well as by his generosity to them in dividing the spoils of battle and giving his own wealth to them and their families. One of the king's titles was “Ring-giver,” for the gold rings he gave as gifts to his warriors.

Germanic Law

The Germans were not ruled by written codes or by the edicts of kings or magistrates; for the Germans, the word “law” meant “age-old custom.” Even the lowest free man could appeal to the customary law of the tribe for justice. But each tribe had a different law, and at first those laws were not written down. Instead, they were memorized and passed along by the bards or the council elders.

When people were accused of a crime under Germanic law, they were considered guilty until they proved their innocence. To prove their innocence, those who were accused could appeal to eyewitness testimony and to three kinds of “evidence”: the oath, the ordeal, and the combat.

In taking an oath, the accused called on a god to support him for telling the truth or punish him for lying. Christian Germans swore by God's power or on the altar of a church. In an ordeal, the oath taker underwent severe pain or torture to prove he was telling the truth. The clean healing of the wound resulting from the injury was also a sign of a true oath.

Trial by combat involved a fight, perhaps to the death, with a court-appointed opponent or with one's accuser. It was believed that the god invoked in the oath would award the victory to the man who had sworn truthfully. Christian Germans said God would save the innocent. Some Christians, however, said God did not decide justice through violent combats or ordeals.

The Gods of the North

Before accepting Christianity, the Germanic peoples worshiped fierce and frightening gods. In Germanic myth, the gods were forever at war with the giants and demons of the ice and cold. These divine beings were not thought to be very concerned with human life; indeed, they demanded human sacrifice. The human sacrifice of captives and slaves to the gods continued in the far northern part of Europe until the Christian Faith brought an end to the terrible practice.

What knowledge we have of Germanic gods we get through the stories of the Norse gods, who must have been similar to the gods of the other Germanic peoples. The major gods of the Norsemen were all war gods—the brothers Wodin, Thor, and Tiw ruled the Germanic **pantheon**. They required men's lives in battle. Recklessness on the battlefield was considered



An eighth-century Viking stele, with depictions of the Norse god Odin (Wodin) riding Sleipnir, his eight-legged horse, and Valkyries guarding the gates of Valhalla

The Days of the Week

The names for the days of the week in English come from the names of ancient German gods: the Sun, the Moon, Tiw, Wodin, Thor, and Freia. The Roman god, Saturn, gave his name to the last day, Saturday. Can you spot the gods' names in our modern version of the days' names?

pantheon: the gods of a people or nation; also, a temple dedicated to all the gods



Thor, Norse God of Thunder. He is the enemy of the giants whom he intimidates with his hammer. His chariot wheels make the thunder. Undated woodcut.

a religious act, sacred to Thor. Men who were brave and fought well would be taken to Valhalla (the “gods’ hall”) after death to feast with the gods.

According to German myths, the world would end one day in a colossal battle of the gods with the giants. Mankind would perish in the conflict. The world would end in a final defeat. Because of this belief in universal destruction, the Germans believed that, in this life, only courage in the face of certain defeat proved human worth. Germanic songs and poems celebrated courageous defeat as much as victories and successes. Even when they became Christian, the Germans saw courage as the greatest virtue. No one was to give up the Christian Faith, not even under threat of torture and death. The Germanic soul rejoiced in the stories of the martyrs.

The Visigoths in the Iberian Peninsula

As you learned in the previous chapter, the Visigoths moved into southern Gaul after the death of their leader, Alaric (who had sacked Rome in 410). After pushing the Vandals over the mountains into Iberia, the Visigoths drove them out of the Iberian Peninsula altogether. Thus the Visigoths added the Roman province of Hispania to their realm.

In southern Gaul and Hispania, the Visigoths made a huge kingdom centered on the city of Toulouse in Gaul. The kingdom stretched from the

Loire River to the Mediterranean coast, and it went from the Alps, over the Pyrenees, into the Iberian Peninsula. The family of Alaric, called the Baltings (because they claimed descent from the legendary hero, Balto), ruled the Visigothic kingdom for two centuries until the last Balting died in battle with the Franks.

Southern Gaul was, at first, the most important part of the Visigothic kingdom, since it contained both the capital and the richest lands. But in 507, in fierce battles, the Franks drove the Visigoths from most of Gaul. The Visigoths established their kingdom in Hispania, making Toledo their new royal capital.

These aggressive immigrants were only a tiny percentage of the population in Hispania, the Roman province that eventually became Spain. Arian Visigothic monarchs ruled the Catholic descendants of the Roman provincials in the peninsula from 476 until 713. With the Visigoths came Arian bishops and clergy; an Arian form of the liturgy (in Gothic and Latin), and a Gothic-language Bible that had been translated by Wulfilas in the fourth century. Most of the Visigoths, however, heard their own language only in the liturgy or the Gothic Bible, since they had come to speak Latin. To their Catholic subjects in Hispania and Gaul, whose liturgy and Scriptures were entirely in Latin, these Visigothic rulers were heretics and foreigners.

The Visigoths were an unruly lot. They fought among themselves constantly, and they assassinated many of their kings. They elected their kings; but once elected, a king had to beware rivals in his own country as well as enemies from outside the kingdom.

The Visigoths preserved a significant part of the Greco-Roman heritage. For two-and-a-half centuries, Visigothic rulers, intellectuals, and artists tried to preserve as much as possible of the classical culture of Greece and Rome.

Catholic monasticism flourished in Visigothic Hispania, especially in the sixth and seventh centuries. During this period, many saints were associated with these centers of Catholic spirituality. Monasteries were



Portraits of the Visigothic kings Athaulf and Athanagild



Crown of Recceswinth. The treasure of Guarrazar (Toledo, Spain) was discovered amongst the remains of a hidden Visigothic city in 1855. The most priceless items of the treasure are two votive crowns engraved with the names of the kings Suintila and Recceswinth.

also centers of learning. Monks were often writers, editors, copyists, librarians, and school teachers.

The Illustrious Family of Severianus

For two generations, one family of mixed Latin and Gothic blood greatly influenced the Visigothic kingdom. The family had no particular last name, but all its members in question were descendants and relatives of Severianus, a Catholic Latin, and his wife, who was a Gothic convert from Arianism to Catholicism. This couple lived in Cartagena (Murcia) on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. Later, they moved west to Seville.

Severianus' children, grandchildren, and in-laws included three bishops, a king, a martyr, a princess, an abbess, and a very successful mother. The Church venerates five members of the family as saints: Sts. Leander and Isidore, both bishops of Seville; St. Fulgentius, bishop of Ecija and Cartagena; St. Florentina, an abbess; and Queen Theodosia, who married Leovigild, a Visigothic king. The next generation of Theodosia's children was just as important: it included St. Hermenegild and his brother, King Reccared, as well as Hermenegild's wife, a Frankish princess named Ingunthis.

Tragedy in a King's Family Leovigild was one of the most formidable of the Visigothic monarchs. He subdued rebellions and conquered parts of the Iberian Peninsula not previously controlled by the Visigoths. He also sought to unify his kingdom. To do this, he tried to force Arianism on his Catholic subjects, who made up approximately 90 percent of the population. The attempt backfired, bringing personal tragedy to the king's own family.

Leovigild's first wife, Theodosia, was Catholic; but she died before he was elected to the throne. The newly elected monarch quickly married Goswintha, widow of the previous ruler and an enthusiastic Arian. She insisted that her stepsons be raised in the Arian faith. In 579, Leovigild married his eldest son, Hermenegild, to Goswintha's 13-year-old granddaughter, Ingunthis, a Frankish princess. The old queen tried to force Ingunthis to convert to Arianism, but Ingunthis was as fiercely Catholic as her grandmother the queen was passionately Arian. King Leovigild grew so tired of the quarreling in his palace that he sent Prince Hermenegild and his young wife south, to Seville, and gave him the grand title, Duke of Baëtica.

Leander, a member of the family of Severianus and Hermenegild's uncle, was bishop of Seville at the time. When Ingunthis arrived in Seville, she joined with Bishop Leander in converting Hermenegild. The Arian king and queen were furious. Because Leander had brought Hermenegild into the Catholic Church, Leovigild for a time banished the bishop from Seville.

Hearing of his son's conversion, Leovigild summoned him to return to Toledo. Hermenegild refused. Instead, seeing the harsh way Leovigild treated Catholics, Hermenegild led a rebellion against his father. Southwestern Spain declared its independence from Toledo, and Hermenegild was crowned king in Seville.

But Leovigild—a great warrior and strong leader—recaptured the rebel cities one by one. When Hermenegild was seized in Cordova, Leovigild banished him to distant Valencia. On Easter day, 585, Hermenegild was martyred because he refused to receive Easter communion from an Arian bishop. His young wife, Ingunthis, only 18 years old, died shortly after. Leovigild did not long survive them; he died a year later, leaving the kingdom to his second son, Reccared.

The Arians Become Catholic

Ten months after ascending the throne, King Reccared privately accepted the Catholic Faith. He and his uncle, Bishop Leander, spent the next two years paving the way for the conversion of the Visigothic people. The arrangements included the celebration of an assembly of Catholic and Arian religious leaders.

On May 8, 589, in the city of Toledo, the Arian bishops—along with the Visigothic civil and military leaders and King Reccared himself—solemnly made a public announcement of their conversion to Catholicism. Reccared officially forbade Arianism in the realm. After more than a century of religious conflict, the small minority of ruling Arian Visigoths accepted the faith of the people they had conquered.

This momentous event, which would color so much of Spain's history from then on, took place at the Third Council of Toledo. The renowned assembly became the model for many future national assemblies. The councils of Toledo were to become one of the most important institutions of the Visigothic monarchy. They were a unique sign of the close cooperation that developed between Church and state.

After Reccared's long and productive reign, the Visigoths enjoyed little political stability. Reccared's grandson was assassinated, and the old cycle of quarrelsome rivalries began again. In this troubled state, the Church remained a source of stability. The bishops held the Visigothic kingdom



Reliquary of Saint
Isidore [detail]

together by their wisdom as well as by their spiritual authority. They counseled the kings and lords, saw to the administration of government, and handled foreign affairs. The Church took up some of the responsibilities the kings were unable to fulfill.

Adding to the civilizing work of the bishops, monasteries brought their orderly life and free schooling to all social classes. The Visigothic church made Spain a beacon of learning and civilization in the early Middle Ages. St. Isidore of Seville, one of the children of Severianus, wrote an encyclopedic work, the *Etymologies*, in which he collected all the learning known in his time. The *Etymologies* deals with grammar, logic, medicine, God, the angels, man, birds and beasts, geography, law, food, clothing, ships, and houses, among other topics. The *Etymologies* helped preserve much of Greek and Roman wisdom and knowledge. It was an important text for the centuries to come.

The Vandals in North Africa

Over the frozen Rhine and into the province of Gaul in the winter of 406 poured the whole Vandal nation, bringing their wagon trains of children and household goods. The Emperor Gratian had not paid them for their services in guarding the imperial border, and so they descended on the southern half of Gaul. They were angry at Roman treachery and scornful of the civilized weaklings who had betrayed them.

Checked on the north by the Franks and harried by the Visigoths leaving Italy, the Vandals crossed into the Iberian Peninsula in 409 with their allies, the Suevi. There they looted the old Roman towns of Hispania and the cities on the coast. The arrival of Visigoth bands in the 420s forced the Vandals to move on to regions not yet plundered—the rich provinces of North Africa, the undefended grain lands of the empire.

Left without a male heir to their ancient royal family, the Vandals elected Genseric as king. Genseric was both a cripple (from a childhood accident) and the son of a slave, but he had overcome both these handicaps by his ferocity in battle and persuasive oratory. He achieved election as king through clever political maneuvering and the murder of rivals.

In 429, Genseric led his people across the Straits of Gibraltar on ships whose crews were forced to carry them or die. One by one the towns of the grain lands fell to the fierce warriors, until Genseric's horde was at the gates of Carthage. A Vandal army besieged Hippo, where St. Augustine rallied his townspeople to resist. The aged bishop died during the siege, falling ill from the general starvation and sickness that finally forced his people to open the gates to the barbarians. Carthage itself fell to Genseric's trickery when a traitor within the city opened a gate.

Knowing that the road to further loot was the sea, Genseric built a fleet of warships and had trained his men to sail them. Piracy filled his coffers quickly. He conquered Sardinia and Corsica and left them suffering under a Vandal **garrison**. He landed in Sicily and overran the huge island in a year. Then he landed on Italian shores and marched on Rome. Despite the bribe paid by Pope St. Leo the Great, Genseric's warriors entered the city in 455 and looted and burned for two weeks. He took away the last treasures of pagan Rome, including the sacred vessels, the Great **Menorah** and the serving basins, brought to Rome by Titus in A.D. 71 from the sack of the Temple of Jerusalem.

The Vandals, lords as well as fighting men, carved out huge estates for themselves from the imperial grain fields of North Africa. The Roman population, helpless before them, was enslaved or reduced to serfdom. The Vandals were Arians, though they were less given to Christian forgiveness and virtue than their Germanic neighbors, the Visigoths, were. Genseric's Arianism gave him the excuse to loot Catholic churches and to confiscate Church lands. Catholics were made to pay a harsh tax for not converting to Arianism, and Catholic bishops were thrown into prison.

Vandal cruelty to Catholics only increased after Genseric's death. His successors used the excuse of religion to try to bleed more money out of their subjects. Medieval writers found many stories to tell of martyrdom at the hands of the Vandal lords.

garrison: troops stationed in a territory or at a base camp
menorah: a seven-branched candelabrum used in Jewish worship; in ancient times, the Jerusalem temple had a large menorah



Menorah



Clovis, King of the Franks, in a turbulent war scene from the fifth century, A.D.

But in becoming used to the luxuries and easy life of wealth, the warriors grew corrupt, fat, and lazy. Their sons were not made to learn the rigors of a warrior's life, and the Vandal ruling class lost its ferocity.

At his death, Genseric left his kingdom to his son, Hunneric, who kept the kingdom alive through the profits from piracy and the treacherous treaties his father had made with his neighbors. But after Hunneric, no king could stop the decline of the Vandal nation. Divided from their subjects who hated them, the Vandals could not stand against the armies of the Eastern Roman emperor Justinian in 533. They disappeared as a distinct people, mixing in with the highly diverse local population of North Africa.

The First Catholic Germanic Kingdom

In 394, at the invitation of Emperor Theodosius, a confederation of tribes moved into Gaul to take service with the Roman armies. These *Franks* (meaning “free men”), as the tribes began to call themselves, had lived for centuries in what is now Belgium and along the Rhine and Main rivers in Germany. They had been allies of the Roman legions. The Frankish

kings all claimed descent from a mythic hero, Merovech (after whom they called themselves Merovingis).

When Roman power collapsed in Gaul, the Frankish kings moved their people onto the farms and into towns there which belonged to Romans. And there was no Roman opposition. Only the Catholic bishops and

priests maintained what shreds of Roman government and order that remained.

The Franks were not Christian and had accepted little of the Roman way of life. They still fought without armor and on foot and went to war largely unclothed, armed with a spear, a sword, and a battle-axe called the *francisca* (or “little freedom”). They obeyed their chiefs only when those chiefs were successful in battle.

The Merovings

In 481, Clodevech, the 16-year-old chief of one of the Frankish tribes, secured his father’s claim to kingship by exterminating all his cousins and rivals. At age 21, this chief, known to history as Clovis, led his tribe into the Seine valley. He killed the Roman governor there, taking the towns of Soissons, Rouen, Reims, and Paris. Then he marched through the Loire River valley to the borders of Brittany and secured his western border. Safe on one front, he moved against his cousins along the Rhine and killed them one by one. By 491, Clovis held all the Frankish princedoms except Cologne. He slew every prince of Meroving blood who fell into his hands, and he did his best to exterminate all other members of rival families who could lay claim to his throne.

Clovis’ conquests brought him into contact with the Burgundians, another Germanic invader nation, to the south. He sent ambassadors and married their princess, Clotilde, the Burgundian king’s niece. Clotilde, a devout Catholic, was determined to convert her new husband to the Christian Faith. According to legend, when Clovis was awaiting a battle with the Germanic Alamanni, his wife said he would conquer only if he agreed to serve the one true God, the Lord of Hosts and Judge of all battles. Clovis cried out, “O Christ Jesus, as a suppliant I crave your glorious aid; and if you grant me victory over these enemies, I will believe in you and be baptized in your name!” The Franks then drove the Alamanni from the field in defeat.



The Merovings believed they were descended from a mythic hero named Merovech.



Clovis, the first Catholic Germanic king

In fulfilling his contract with the Christian God, Clovis had himself baptized at Reims by Bishop Remigius (St. Remi) on Christmas Day, 496. Referring to Clovis' ancestor, Sigambrius, a legendary Frankish villain, Remigius declared, "Bow your neck, Sigambrian, and adore that which you have burned and burn that which you have adored."

Clovis was the first Germanic king who adopted the faith of his Roman subjects; they and their clergy from then on served him with a loyalty no Arian Visigoth, Ostrogoth, or Vandal could ever win from his Roman subjects. The Catholic bishops, who had kept all local government from disappearing, gave Clovis a working governmental organization along with their faith. Their loyalty reinforced his sword. Bishop Avitus of Vienne declared, "Your faith is our triumph. Every battle you fight is a victory for us."

Clovis' conversion moved the rest of his people to follow him. In a single generation, the old Frankish paganism disappeared, and the Franks became Catholic. However, even after his baptism, Clovis remained as cruel, unscrupulous, and treacherous as he had ever been. In his later years, Clovis persuaded his cousin, the prince of Cologne, to kill his own father and claim the throne. For this crime (to which Clovis had pushed him), Clovis marched on the son and put him to death as a father-slayer. Thus he disposed of his last Meroving rival.

In 511 Clovis died, dividing his kingdom among his four quarrelsome sons. They followed their father's treacherous example more than that of their Catholic Faith. One of Clovis' sons ordered his own son burned alive for offending him. Another of Clovis' sons was killed by his conspiring sons, who then fought among themselves until only one was left. Clovis' last surviving son, Clothar, divided the Frankish realm between *his* two sons. For more than a century two Frankish kingdoms—Austrasia, the east kingdom along the Rhine Valley, and Neustria, the west kingdom comprised of northern Gaul—warred and plotted against each other and with their neighbors, the powerful Frankish dukes of Burgundy and Aquitaine.

The Rise of the Mayor of the Palace

The Meroving kings were served by **chancellors**, called "mayors of the palace," who increasingly took on themselves the task of ruling the kingdom. The last Merovingians ruled no more than the lands of their small

chancellor: the secretary or chief magistrate of a king

farms; the mayors of the palace commanded the armies and passed laws in the king's name. Because they believed the Meroving kings were sacred, the Franks refused to abandon the royal line. At last, in 688, a new mayor took office; he would rescue the Frankish kingdom from the corruption of the Merovingians and advance both Frankish power and the Christian Faith at home and abroad. He was Pepin the Younger.

Pepin restored the Frankish kingdom to the boundaries it had in Clovis' time, and he defended the kingdom from outside attack. He sent missionaries into the forests and valleys of Germany to convert the last pagan tribes on his borders. St. Willebrord and his 12 companions preached the Gospel to the Frisians, and St. Boniface converted the heathen Hessians. Pepin's son, Charles, as mayor of the palace was so successful in putting down a rebellion among the tribes east of the Rhine that he was given the nickname of *Martellus* or *Martel* (meaning "Hammer.") Charles Martel established his rule over all the Frankish lands.

Pepin's great-grandson, Pepin the Short, finally removed the Merovingian kings from power and ruled in his own name as king. He was crowned by St. Boniface at Reims in 751. Pepin the Short began a new line of Frankish kings, called the Carolingians. They were named for his father, Charles Martel (Charles is *Karl* in Frankish and *Carolus* in Latin, from which comes the name "Carolingian"). Charles Martel's grandson was Charles (known to history as Charlemagne), who revived the Roman Empire in the West.



Charles Martel in battle

The Kingdom of The Ostrogoths

After the death of the Western Roman Emperor Valentinian III in 455, the imperial court withdrew into the walls of Ravenna. Since the imperial armies were composed entirely of German mercenaries, their commander—called the “Master of Horse”—was the real ruler of the Western Roman Empire, not the emperor himself.



**Romulus Augustulus
surrenders to Odoacer
the Insignia of Empire.**

The Last Emperor

In 475, one Orestes—a Roman who had served as Attila the Hun’s Latin secretary and had married into the Roman aristocracy—bribed the Senate at Ravenna into naming his young son emperor. The new boy emperor was called Romulus Augustulus—*Romulus*, from the legendary founder of Rome, and *Augustulus*, “little Augustus,” after the founder of the Roman Empire.

The German troops had been promised one-third of Italy for themselves if they went along with the election of the new emperor. But Romulus Augustulus and his father Orestes made the fatal mistake of refusing to honor the promise. So the troops elected as king their own commander—a Goth named Odoacer. In 476 Odoacer removed the boy emperor, giving him a villa at Naples and a fortune in gold; Orestes was beheaded. Odoacer styled himself king of the Germans in Italy, claiming the lands of the Western Roman Empire for himself. But only Italy and the



The Germanic kingdom

coasts of the Adriatic Sea were under his control. The imperial **regalia** were sent to the eastern emperor, Zeno, in Constantinople.

With this revolt, the great empire founded by Augustus almost 500 years earlier simply vanished from the West.

The Amaling King

In 488, the Eastern Emperor Zeno financed an invasion of Odoacer's Italian territories and chose Theodoric, the young king of the Ostrogoths, to carry it out. Theodoric was the heir of the Amalings, the hereditary royal line of the Ostrogoths. To save Theodoric from family rivals, his father had sent him to the imperial court in Constantinople to be raised and trained in military skills.

regalia: the emblems or symbols of royalty (from the Latin *regalis*, meaning “regal” or “royal”)

Theodoric spent 10 years among the Greeks and Romans. He then spent 20 years with his own people, whom he led in successful campaigns against the Huns, Burgundians, and Avars. He had already distinguished himself among his people as a great warrior and orator, a man wise in council and brave in war. Emperor Zeno thought that he could trust Theodoric to restore Italy to imperial control.

After subduing Odoacer, however, Theodoric declared himself king of Italy and took over the imperial court at Ravenna. A new emperor in Constantinople sent him the crown, robes, and regalia of the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus.

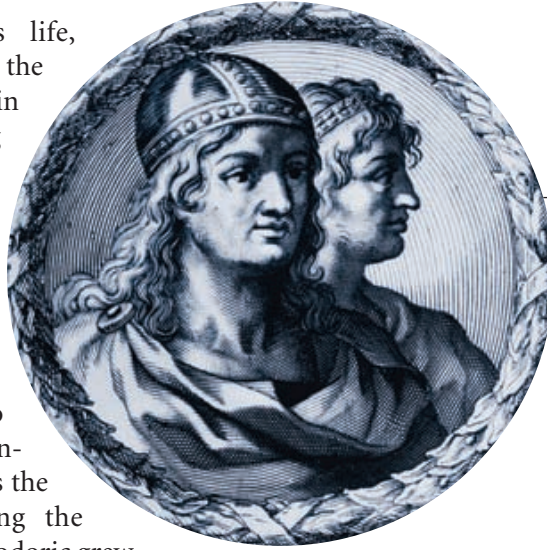
As king, Theodoric set about rebuilding Italy. He repaired aqueducts and city walls, cleared drainage ditches, and dredged canals. Each year, he set aside 200 pounds of gold from his revenues to repair and maintain the public buildings and palaces of Rome and Ravenna.

Under Theodoric, the Ostrogoths continued to govern themselves by their tribal customs; but the king wisely used Roman law to govern his Italian subjects and had them tried in Roman courts of law. Theodoric's kingdom lasted 33 years under his rule and some 25 more years after his death.

Theodoric was determined to accustom his Goths to Roman ways—and he encouraged his Roman subjects to learn Gothic honesty and openhandedness. But the Ostrogoths were Arians, and they had their own Arian bishops and church organization. That meant dual churches in the one kingdom and constant friction between the Roman Italians and the Ostrogoths. Still, no other Germanic nation seemed so capable of forming a new civilized state on the ruins of the old Roman Empire. And no other Germanic prince was so fitted to the task of mediating between two cultures as was Theodoric. Though an Arian, Theodoric tolerated Catholic Christians and Jews. He had declared that “religion is a thing which the king cannot command, because no man can be compelled to believe against his will.”

Theodoric's daughter married Alaric II, king of the Visigoths. When Alaric died at the hands of the Franks, she called on her father to defend his grandson, Amalric. Theodoric's armies drove the Franks out of Provence and Aquitaine and crossed the Pyrenees to defeat a rival claimant to the Visigoth throne. Theodoric ruled the Visigoths in his grandson's name for the next 11 years. The two Gothic kingdoms were one. At its height, Theodoric's kingdom stretched from Italy to Hispania and from Sicily on the south to the Loire River on the north. It was the largest kingdom in the West since the days of the empire.

Toward the end of his life, Theodoric became afraid that the Eastern Roman Emperor Justin in Constantinople was plotting to kill him. Theodoric accused his Roman subjects, particularly the Senate, of planning to assassinate him. Theodoric condemned several senators to death because of anonymous letters that claimed they were plotting to assassinate him. Among the senators the king put to death was the philosopher Boethius. During the remaining years of his life, Theodoric grew ever more fearful and mentally unstable.



Theodoric the Great, King of the Ostrogoths and Alaric II, King of the Visigoths

After his death, the Ostrogoth's kingdom passed to Theodoric's grandson, Amalric. Since the new king was still a boy, his mother, Amalasuatha (Theodoric's daughter), served as **regent**. Amalric died in his late teens, and the kingdom fell into the usual Germanic disunity and feuding. A 20-year war with the armies of the Eastern Roman Empire ended the Ostrogoths' kingdom in the general ruin of Italy.

regent: one who governs a kingdom for a king or queen who is too young to govern

Chapter Review

Summary

- Germanic peoples came from the region of the Baltic Sea and the plains and river valleys of Eastern Europe. During the late Roman period, they moved south and east into Western Europe and then began to cross the boundaries of the empire.
- The Roman emperors allowed some Germanic tribes to settle within the empire, using them as allies against other Germanic tribes. Eventually, Germanic tribes moved into the empire as conquerors and permanent rulers.
- Germanic nations had similar cultures, though they did not consider themselves one people. They spoke related languages; were divided by similar social classes; governed themselves by customary, not written,

laws; and were warrior societies. Germanic nations held that courage was the highest virtue.

- Pagan Germans worshipped fierce gods who were thought to fight wars against giants and demons of the ice and cold. Brave warriors who died in battle were thought to be taken to the hall of these gods, called Valhalla. Many Germanic tribes were converted to Arianism.
- After sacking Rome in 410, the Visigoths withdrew from Italy and established a kingdom in southern Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula. Driven from southern Gaul by the Franks in 507, the Visigoths continued to rule Hispania for over two centuries. The Visigoths, who were Arian, ruled a much larger population of Romans, who were Catholic.
- A Visigothic king in Hispania, Leovigild, married Goswintha, a zealous Arian. Through her influence and to unify his kingdom, Leovigild tried to force Arianism on his Catholic subjects. But it did not work. Even his son, Hermenegild, who became Catholic through the influence of his wife, Ingunthis, refused to obey his father. After an unsuccessful rebellion, Hermenegild was martyred for refusing to receive communion from an Arian bishop.
- Leovigild's second son, Reccared, himself became Catholic; and with Bishop Leander of Seville, Reccared brought the Visigoths into the Catholic Church. He officially forbade Arianism in his realm.
- The Visigoths had driven another Germanic nation, the Vandals, out of the Iberian Peninsula. Led by their king, Genseric, the Vandals went to North Africa, where they set up a kingdom after plundering the Roman settlements and capturing Carthage. Genseric led his people in an invasion of Sicily and Italy, conquering Corsica and Sardinia, and in 455 looted and sacked Rome itself. The Arian Vandals persecuted the Christians in the conquered lands.
- Clovis, the Merovingian king of the Franks, conquered large sections of Gaul, seizing also the lands held by other Frankish kings. Though a pagan (along with the rest of his people), Clovis became the first Germanic king to become Catholic through the influence of his Burgundian wife, Clotilde.
- After Clovis' death, his kingdom was divided between his four sons. Over the next two centuries, the Merovingian kings became merely figureheads, their mayors of the palace carrying on the actual work of ruling. Finally, Pepin the Short, the Carolingian mayor of the palace, removed the last Merovingian rulers from power and was crowned king in 751.

- Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, overthrew Odoacer, the German king who had deposed the last Roman emperor in the West. Theodoric made himself king of Italy. He governed Italy and other lands he subsequently ruled wisely and well for most of his reign. Though an Arian, he treated Catholics with tolerance. But, at the end of his life, fearing a plot against him by the Eastern Roman Emperor and the Catholic senators in Italy, he assassinated several senators. After Theodoric's death, his Ostrogothic kingdom fell into disunity.

Key Concepts

Council of Toledo: held in 589; unified the Catholic and Arian churches of Spain

king: a Germanic title for the ruling chief of the people, either an hereditary office or elected by the principal nobles. A Germanic king ruled through custom and tribal connections.

Germanic law: age-old custom, traditional justice

Merovingians: the line of the Frankish kings claiming descent from the legendary hero, Merovech

Carolingian: the line of Frankish kings descended from Charles Martel (Carolus Martellus)

Dates to Remember

400–900: the “Dark Ages”

476: end of the Roman Empire in the West. The last emperor of Rome, Romulus Augustulus, abdicates to his Germanic master of horse, Odoacer.

488: Theodoric defeats Odoacer and is proclaimed king of Italy by the Eastern Emperor Zeno.

496: Clovis, king of the Franks, baptized as a Catholic by St. Remigius

589: King Reccared officially bans Arianism in Hispania.

751: Pepin the Short, Mayor of the Palace, is crowned king of the Franks.

Central Characters

Alaric (370–410): king of the Visigoths, sacked Rome in 410

St. Isidore (560–636): bishop of Seville; wrote the famous *Etymologies*, the medieval encyclopedia

Reccared (d. 601): son of Leovigild, converted to the Catholic Faith and brought the whole Visigothic people into the Catholic Church

Genseric (d. 477): king of the Vandals, led them into North Africa; sacked Rome in 455

Clovis (466–511): king of the Franks, and the first German ruler to convert to the Catholic Faith

Pepin the Short (714–768): son of Charles Martel, grandfather of Charlemagne, Mayor of the Palace, crowned king of the Franks in 751; founded the Carolingian line of kings

Romulus Augustulus (dates unknown): last emperor of the Western Roman Empire; abdicated to Odoacer in 476, marking the end of the Roman Empire in the West

Theodoric (454–526): king of the Ostrogoths, king of Italy; ruled the largest territory of any kingdom in the West until his death

Questions for Review

1. Why were the Germanic tribes able to sweep across the Roman Empire?
2. In what way were the Germanic kings different from the Roman emperors?
3. What were the main differences in government between the Germanic nations and the Roman Empire?
4. Did the Germans have a written law? How did they decide questions of justice? What is trial by combat? Trial by oath? Trial by ordeal?
5. After whom are the days of the week named?
6. Which Germanic people actually sacked the city of Rome?
7. What do the names “Visigoth” and “Ostrogoth” signify?
8. Who married the Frankish king, Clovis? How did she manage to convert him to the Catholic Faith?
9. What was a “mayor of the palace”? Which mayor of the palace became the king of the Franks?
10. Who were the Merovingians? The Carolingians?
11. How did Theodoric bring peace between the Arians and Catholics in his kingdom?

Ideas in Action

1. Write a report on the Germanic gods (a good source is Roger Lancelyn Green’s *The Saga of Asgard*). How are they similar to the Roman and Greek gods?

2. Discuss why Germanic peoples valued courage so much. Why should such an idea have sprung from a pagan people like the Germans? How is the Germanic ideal of courage acceptable to the Christian Faith? What is the value of suffering or defeat? Can one “lose” and still “win”?
3. Make a map of the Germanic kingdoms that replaced the Western Roman Empire.
4. On a map of Europe, find the original homelands of the Germanic peoples. Where are the Scandinavian lands? Where are the steppes? Where is the Danube River?

Highways and Byways

The Theory of Courage

The Germanic ideal of courage (which the English writer J.R.R. Tolkien called the “Theory of Courage”) is summed up in the great Anglo-Saxon poem, “The Battle of Maldon.” Here are the last words of an old warrior challenging his men to fight on even after their lord has been struck down. Outnumbered and out-fought—but with unflinching courage—the band of English warriors, old men and boys, stand against a Viking raiding party:



J.R.R. Tolkien

*Old Byrhtwold spoke then, bent in long service,
Shaking his ash spear, shield-ready, after age:
“Mind must be clearer, heart still the harder,*

*Courage the keener, as our strength is strained.
Lies here our leader, leveled by axes,
Bravery beaten down. Lost and lamenting,
Forever in sorrow, he who will shrink now
From war-play and peril. Old though I am, here
I purpose to perish, lie by my lord,
The hand loved and long-honored.”*