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## *The Conception of Europe (Fourth to Eighth Centuries)*

The transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages is a historiographical convention. But for anyone seeking to understand the historical development of Europe, it seems an unquestionable reality, provided we reject the simplistic ideas expressed from the eighteenth century down to the mid-twentieth, according to which that transition constituted a cataclysmic event. One well-known historian went so far as to declare: “The Roman Empire did not die a natural death; it was assassinated,” the implication being that the birth of the Middle Ages stemmed from that assassination. Today, historians believe that the transition from antiquity to the Middle Ages resulted from a long and positive evolution, albeit one marked by certain violent and spectacular events. To underline this change of view, we are nowadays more inclined to use the expression “late antiquity” to refer to the period stretching from the fourth to the eighth century. This seems to me better suited to the general evolution of history in which revolutions are few and far between and in some cases illusory. All the same, even if the birth of the Middle Ages was not speedy, it nevertheless did shake the history of the western regions of the Euro-Asiatic landmass to its very foundations. The American historian Patrick Geary has convincingly shown that the Merovingian period was, strictly speaking, not yet part of the Middle Ages, but belonged, precisely, to late antiquity, the period of a long drawn-out transition in which Europe began to emerge. This happened in the course of the Christianization of the Roman Empire, which, as is well known, came about between the so-called Edict of Milan of 313, in which Emperor Constantine recognized the Christian religion, and the adoption

of Christianity as the official state religion by Theodosius I, who died in 395. The link between that decision of Theodosius and the subsequent history of Europe is clearly marked by the fact that, at his death, Theodosius divided the Roman Empire into two, giving each part to one of his sons as emperor: Honorius took the West, Arcadius the East. The Europe with which we are concerned evolved from the western empire.

### Christianization, Saint Augustine

The emergence of this Europe was conditioned by two essential phenomena of the fourth and fifth centuries, which we now need to consider. The first was the elaboration of a core of Christian doctrine based on the Bible and the New Testament, which the Church Fathers bequeathed to the Middle Ages. This is not the place to describe the personalities and achievements of all of these cofounders of Christianity. I shall mention only two, whose influence on the development of European culture was particularly strong: Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine. Saint Jerome (ca. 347–420) lived at the intersection of the West and the East, where for many years he was a hermit, so his life was not solely linked with the future of Europe. However, he deserves a mention here because he produced an important Latin translation of the Hebrew text of the Bible, which superseded the earlier Greek translation known as the Septuagint, which was considered to be defective. This Latin Bible was then used throughout the Middle Ages in various revised forms. The most interesting revision was that produced in the early thirteenth century by the University of Paris. It was based on a ninth-century version by Charlemagne's Anglo-Saxon councilor, Alcuin, and is known as the Vulgate.

The other Church Father of major importance is Saint Augustine (354–430). After Saint Paul, he was the figure who played the most important role in the establishment and development of Christianity. Let me cite just two of the works of this great medieval professor, for they are fundamental for European history. The first, *The Confessions*, presents a record of his conversion. Not only was it one of the most widely read works of the Middle Ages, but in the long term it must be recognized as the first in the long line of introspective autobiographies that have succeeded each other right down to the present day.

Augustine's other great work is as objective as his *Confessions* are subjective. *The City of God* was written following the sack of Rome by Alaric and his Goths, in 410. This episode terrified ancient Roman groups and new Christian ones alike, fueling a belief that the end of the world was

imminent. Augustine rejected such millenarian fears. Having suggested that the end of time would come at some probably distant future date known only to God, he went on to set out a program for relations between the City of God and the City of men. This work remained one of the greatest texts of European thought for centuries.

Augustinianism has been described in the following reductive terms: "A doctrine of unconditional predestination combined with free will giving access to salvation, as developed by Saint Augustine at the end of his life." But Augustine's thought throughout his life was far too rich to be limited to the theme of predestination. A fairer, yet still oversimplistic description of it might be that it constituted a quest for a balance between free will and grace. All medieval theologians without exception were to some extent followers of Augustine. There has also been talk of political Augustinianism, suggesting that Augustine exerted great influence over medieval rulers, attributing to them "a tendency to absorb the natural law of the state into supernatural justice and ecclesiastical law." However, that theocratic interpretation was severely criticized by Cardinal de Lubac. If there really was any such thing as political Augustinianism in medieval Europe, it would be better described as a desire to introduce moral and religious values into a government that observed a separation between God and Caesar. Augustinianism should thus be regarded as an ancient layer of European political ideology which the totally opposed layer of Machiavellianism, at the end of the Middle Ages, never quite managed to bury. Another of Augustine's legacies to the Middle Ages was a monastic rule, the only one that survived in the face of the Benedictine rule. It was mainly followed by urban clergy, in particular canons.

There survive 258 manuscripts of the *Confessions*, 376 of the *City of God*, and 317 of Augustine's *Rule*, but many others have been lost.

### The Cultural Founders of the Middle Ages

The impact of this legacy of intermingled ancient and Christian culture left to the Middle Ages and to Europe by the Church Fathers continued to be felt from the fifth to the eighth centuries, within the framework of a fusion between ancient Roman culture and developments characterized by the needs of the peoples that had come under barbarian sway. A number of great names stand out from this period, and Karl Rand has dubbed these figures the founders of the Middle Ages. It would also be fair to call them the cultural fathers of Europe.

The first is Boethius (484–520). He came from an old, aristocratic Roman family and entered the service of the barbarian king of the Ostrogoths, Theodoric. But he then became involved in a conspiracy favoring the Byzantine emperor, and subsequently died in prison. Up until the mid-twelfth century, the Middle Ages was indebted to him for all it knew of Aristotle. This knowledge was purveyed by Boethius' *Logica vetus* (The old logic). It contained, "in easily assimilable doses, the earliest basis for scholasticism." One typical example is its definition of a person: *naturae rationalis individua substantia*, "an individualized substance of rational nature." Abelard was to say of Boethius, "He constructed our faith and his own in an enduring fashion." The work that Boethius wrote while in prison, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, was widely read in the Middle Ages. He was one of the creators of medieval humanism and was also instrumental in getting music to be recognized as a superior cultural tool, in accordance with the ancient ideal.

Cassiodorus (ca. 490–580) was just as important for medieval European culture. He came from a great family of southern Italy and initially played a political role of the first importance in Ostrogothic Italy, acting as a mediator between the Romano-Byzantine world and barbarian society. Justinian's short-lived reconquest of Italy (539) brought his brilliant career to an end. He retired to the monastery of Vivarium in Calabria, where he set about providing for the intellectual education of the new peoples by translating a number of Greek works and making copies of Latin ones. He was the first to promote a Europe of books and libraries, the first to stress the sanctifying value of intellectual work and to suggest a new field of activity for monks: namely, study, the means of perfecting oneself and influencing others. The second part of his chief work, *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*, constitutes a veritable encyclopedia of the profane sciences, intended for the use of monks.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the encyclopedia was to be a favorite literary genre for clerical and lay scholars alike, for it provided a distillation of past culture and made it possible to press on further. For Europe, the encyclopedia, yet another legacy from the Greeks, was a key inheritance from the Middle Ages for, as is well known, it has been an essential instrument of instruction and culture from the eighteenth century down to the present day.

The third cultural founder was a Spaniard, Isidore of Seville, the greatest encyclopedist of the Middle Ages (ca. 570–636). Isidore, who came from a great Catholic Hispano-Roman family, became archbishop in about 600, at the time when the Visigoths abjured the Aryan heresy and converted to

orthodox Catholicism. His contemporaries called him “the most learned man of modern times.” His *Book of Etymologies* rests upon the conviction that names are the key to the nature of things and that profane culture is necessary for a sound understanding of the Scriptures. It constitutes the basis of Isidore’s attempt to summarize the whole of human knowledge; and for the people of the Middle Ages and their European descendants it became a kind of second Bible in the field of profane knowledge.

Finally, the fourth cultural founder was an Anglo-Saxon, Bede (673–736). He took over from the monks who had converted England, bringing with them the legacy of ancient culture from Italy. Bede’s work is also of an encyclopedic nature and was so widely read and used in the Middle Ages that he was given the title “Venerable” and was regarded as the last of the Church Fathers. His ecclesiastical history of the English people was the first attempt at a national history and, in the late ninth century, King Alfred translated it into the vernacular. Bede’s scientific work, which was inspired by the ecclesiastical need to compute and determine the liturgical calendar, was remarkable for its day. His *De temporibus* tries to establish a scientific way of measuring time. His *De temporum ratione* contains not only an account of how the mechanism of the tides is linked to the phases of the moon, but also a description of “the fundamental elements of the natural sciences.” Above all, perhaps, Bede, although nurtured by classical culture, as were most educated Anglo-Saxons of the Early Middle Ages, was prepared to turn his back on it and steer the Middle Ages toward the independent path along which Europe was to proceed.

### Gregory the Great

This group of founding scholars should also include Pope Gregory the Great. A number of important figures of the Middle Ages have recently been hailed as fathers of Europe (Saint Benedict and Charlemagne, for instance), and we shall in due course be considering whether that title is merited in their cases. But it has seldom been granted to Gregory the Great, who is probably more deserving of it than many others.

Gregory the Great, who was born in about 540 and died in 604, belonged to a patrician Roman family. In 573, as a prefect, he proved his worth as an organizer of the town’s food supplies. In his patrimonial estates, in Sicily, he created six monasteries and then himself retired to a seventh, in Rome, on the Caelius. Pope Pelagius II ordained him Deacon and sent him to Constantinople as a resident ambassador. When he reluctantly became pope in 590, at a time of serious flooding by the River Tiber and a Black Death

epidemic in Rome (“there is also a Europe of natural catastrophes”), he organized resistance, both material and spiritual, to these scourges. Fearing that the end of the world was nigh, he strove to ensure that as many Christians as possible were in a fit state to face the Last Judgment. To that end, he took action in many distant outposts of Christendom and produced several general works on piety. He defended Rome and the Church’s possessions in Italy against the Lombards. He sent the monk Augustine with a group of missionaries to reconvert England. And he set up two great models for Christians, one biblical, the other modern. The former was Job, a model of submission to God and of abiding faith in the face of many trials, to whom he devoted his *Moralia in Job*, a moral commentary on the Book of Job. The latter, modern, model was Saint Benedict, whose historical fame he ensured by devoting to him the entire second book of his *Dialogues*. He also composed a pastoral handbook for clerics entitled *Liber regulae pastoralis*; and he reformed the liturgical chant, thenceforth known as the Gregorian Chant.

Alongside all this religious and cultural activity, below the surface, in churches and schools (although only a minority had access to these), in the territories of the great estates a fusion and intermingling of barbarians (essentially Celts and Germans) and Latino-Europeans was taking place. Christianity was the vehicle for this intermingling. Following upon the legacies of antiquity, the next decisive cultural layer was that produced by Christianization.

The acculturation between barbarians and Romans had begun long before. The *limes* (boundary), though militarily effective until the third century AD, had not proved an impermeable cultural frontier. Bartering and present-giving, and contacts and exchanges had paved the way for the great cultural intermingling that occurred despite all the clashes and violence of what are known as the barbarian invasions. It is important to recognize that this ethnic and cultural intermingling was not limited to meetings between the peoples of the ancient Roman Empire and the invading barbarians. For within the barbarian peoples, too, regroupings of previously scattered tribes and peoples were being formed. On both sides of the ancient *limes* there was a far-flung and profound redistribution of peoples. It resulted in not only new, mixed peoples, but also, among the barbarians themselves, movements that involved ethnic regroupings or even produced larger groups known as *nations* in the Latin of those times. In this great intermingling at the time of Europe’s birth, a salient feature, right from the start, was the dialectic between unity and diversity, Christendom and nations, which even today is still one of the fundamental characteristics of Europe.

The amalgamation between barbarians and Romans either side of the *limes* began in the Roman Empire of the second and third centuries. It was followed by the arrival of waves of new so-called barbarian peoples.

### Invasions and Acculturation

The first great wave of new arrivals took place at the end of the third century, but it was above all the widespread invasion of Germans in Italy, in Gaul, and in Spain, in 406–7, at the time of Alaric's capture of Rome, that marked the major establishment of Germans within the Roman Empire. As Peter Brown has noted, in the fifth century, throughout Europe, the military frontier of the Roman Empire disappeared. To understand the great upheavals of that century in Europe, it is helpful to read an exceptional document recording the life of a holy man who witnessed those events on the frontier formed by the middle reaches of the Danube in Norica, in what later became Austria. That holy man was Saint Severinus whom Peter Brown calls the saint of open frontiers. He also tells us that, as a result of the implosion of Romans and barbarians, new cultural and social entities took shape here.

The German influx continued throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, following the entry of eastern Germans, Visigoths and Ostrogoths, and the great wave of Swabians, Vandals, and Alans, who had crossed the Rhine at the beginning of the fifth century. Gradually Burgundians, Franks, and Alamans pushed in toward western and southern Gaul. Meanwhile Jutes, Angles, and Saxons crossed the North Sea, forcing the Britons of Great Britain to retreat to the western tip of Gaul. The last Germanic conquest on the former territory of the empire was that of the Lombards, who pushed into Italy in the second half of the sixth century. To the east of the Rhine, the place of those invaders was taken by Saxons, Frisians, Thuringians, and Bavarians. The seventh century saw the beginning of a massive advance by Slavs, who proceeded, up until the ninth century, to settle down, mostly in the East, in the region of the Baltic Sea and the River Elbe, but also further west, centrally around the mountains of Bohemia, and eventually, moving toward the southwest, in the northern Balkans.

These invasions might well have led to major divisions between the new peoples. Most had been converted to Aryanism, which Latin Christians considered to be a heresy. We should therefore recognize that the waning of Aryanism and the conversion of Aryan barbarians to orthodox Catholicism spared what was to become Europe further confrontations. This period of the birth of Europe was nevertheless marked by many dramatic events.

Huns, invaders who were particularly feared, managed to advance right into Gaul, where their leader, Attila, a terrifying bogeyman to all Europeans except the Hungarians, was defeated by the Roman Aetius in the battle of the Catalaunian Fields, close to Troyes, and was then forced to withdraw. An event of particular importance was the conversion of the Franks, mediated by their leader Clovis, between 497 and 507. Despite the Frankish custom of inheritance which divided kingdoms between all the sons of the king, Clovis and his successors came to control a vast area. After the expulsion of the Visigoths, who were pushed into Spain, and the absorption of the kingdom of the Burgundians, this territory encompassed the whole of Gaul. The Ostrogoth Theodoric (496–526) set up a short-lived but brilliant kingdom in northeastern Italy, in the region of Ravenna, where Boethius became his councilor. The Visigoths, after their ejection from Gaul, founded an equally prestigious kingdom centered on Toledo. It has sometimes been claimed that Europe was the heir to Visigothic Spain, but in truth that inheritance was mainly constituted by the works of Isidore of Seville. It has also been said that the Visigoths were responsible for a more calamitous legacy: the measures that their kings and councils took against the Jews may have been the source of European anti-Semitism.

A single example suffices to show that it is not an exaggeration to describe the new network of relations as European. In 658, the Abbess Gertrude of Nivelles, close to present-day Brussels, died on Saint Patrick's Day. (Patrick had already become one of the North's major saints and was the future patron of the Irish.) *The Life of Gertrude* states that the abbess was "well known to all the inhabitants of Europe." So, at the level of the clergy at least, the new Christianized societies did feel that they belonged to a world that could be designated by the name Europe. The same text also testifies to an important development that even today deeply affects the main problems of European union. The political and cultural center of gravity of the western part of the Roman Empire had slipped from the Mediterranean to north of the Alps. The exemplary Gregory the Great had looked to Canterbury for leadership. The most powerful newly Christianized barbarian leader, Clovis, had made Paris, in northern Gaul, his capital. The Anglo-Saxon and, even more, the Irish monasteries were outstanding centers for the training of missionaries, who went forth to preach on the continent, like Saint Columban (543–615), who founded the Abbey of Luxeuil in eastern Gaul and that of Bobbio in northern Italy, while his disciple, Saint Gall, founded the monastery that bears his name in what is now Switzerland.

This shift northward of the center of gravity in the extreme west was also deeply linked with two events that had a most profound effect on the history



of Europe. The first was the loss of prestige suffered by the bishop of Rome and the threat to Rome represented by barbarians ranging from Goths to Lombards. Byzantium no longer acknowledged the superiority of the bishop of Rome. Rome was no longer the center of Europe either geographically or politically. The second event was the Muslim conquest. After Muhammad's death in 632, the Arabs and other converts to Islam, the Muslims, with lightning speed conquered the Arabian peninsula, the Near and the Middle East, and northern Africa, from Egypt to Morocco. From there, whether intent on raiding or on conquest, they launched themselves on to the opposite shore of the Mediterranean. Between 711 and 719, the Berbers of North Africa, who had converted to Islam, conquered most of the Iberian peninsula. By the beginning of the ninth century, they had occupied the ancient Roman islands of Corsica, Sardinia, Sicily, and Crete. This geographical rearrangement, besides setting up an opposition between northern Europe and southern, Mediterranean Europe, revealed the new importance of the outer edges of the new Christian Europe. The Celtic periphery was now joined by the Anglo-Saxon periphery and subsequently by the Norman, Scandinavian, and Slavic ones. The Mediterranean now represented an essential front for the Christian reconquest and other dealings with the Muslims.

Finally, a development that dealt a sad blow to Christianity was nevertheless perhaps beneficial to Europe. Northern Africa which, thanks to Tertullian and, above all, Saint Augustine, was one of the most important centers of Christianity within the Roman Empire, was ravaged, initially by the Vandals. In 430, Augustine himself died in Hippo, which the Vandals were then besieging. But it was above all the Muslim conquest in the seventh century that destroyed and eradicated the Christian civilization in North Africa. Europe no longer had cause to fear competition from an Africa that had played an essential part in the elaboration of Christian theology and a pioneering role in the struggle against heresies, in particular Donatism.

### **Government by Bishops and Monks**

Certain developments took place in the nations founded on the ancient demarcations of the Roman world and also in the new ethnic groups. But it was Christianization that, above all, brought uniformity to the West in the Early Middle Ages. In the first place, this whole area was governed by bishops whose power was increasing, in particular in the administration of towns. From the seventh century on, a higher ranking group emerged among the bishops: these figures were called archbishops. Under the

bishops, the Christian West was divided into territories in the main based on the ancient Roman administrative divisions. They were known as dioceses. Alongside the bishops and priests, new religious figures who had originated in the East appeared: the monks. In the West, most monks, despite their name, which means “solitary,” were not hermits but lived together in groups. They were cenobites, and they dwelt in monasteries which, however, were usually situated away from the towns, in more or less isolated valleys or forests. From the fourth century to the eighth, monks played an essential role in the Christianization of the pagan peasants. Many monks were itinerant. Outstanding among these were the Irish monks mentioned above, who exercised their apostolic mission across the board from eastern Gaul to northern Italy. But in effect the territory that they covered incorporated the whole of the Christianized West.

Religious women were also to be found within this new Christian space. Even before they came together in groups, likewise in monasteries (or rather, convents), they were characterized by their state of virginity. They thus embodied the new ideal of chastity, which was a feature of Christianity in general. However, although chastity and virginity were observed by monks and these virgins generally, bishops and priests did not yet practice celibacy

### **New Heroes: Saints**

At the head of these new religious institutions, new heroes emerged: the saints. In the earliest centuries of Christianization, the heroism of saints consisted in laying down their lives for the God of the Christians. They were martyrs. But as Christianity became increasingly widely accepted, the number of martyrs diminished and the most remarkable Christians came to be confessors, more and more of whom were likewise hailed as saints. The Church assured saints of a special destiny. The reward of paradise awaited them and, while still on earth, they became the objects of veneration or even of cults that promised salvation. According to Christian orthodoxy, only God performed miracles; but popular belief also attributed miracles to saints. Such miracles took place in special places, in particular wherever saints had been buried. Christians were cured or saved through contact with the bodies of saints, “these exceptional corpses,” as Peter Brown calls them. Like bishops, many saints belonged to the upper Romano-barbarian strata of society. The leaders of the new Christian society came from aristocratic families. The aristocracy was educated and it ensured that government fell to the new, Christian, elite.

### A New Way of Measuring Time

Monastic life deeply influenced European *mores*. It taught Christian society to organize its use of time. By both day and night, the monks themselves would gather together at regular intervals and at special times (the eight monastic or canonical hours) to recite prayers. From the monks, Christians also learned to pay attention to their regimen. The fasts observed by monks and pious laymen constituted not only a religious penitential rite but also a pattern of health-conscious behavior, comparable to blood-letting. The effects of epidemics could not be controlled; but the struggle against *gula*, gluttony, was at least a way of combating dietary excesses. Finally, the monks introduced a new rhythm of existence that affected life even outside their monastic societies: it involved a combination and alternation of work and leisure, prayer and *otium*.

The influence of Christianity was particularly marked in the field of time measurement. Although the Christian Middle Ages continued to use the Roman Julian calendar, important innovations were introduced: first and foremost, the weekly rhythm. The reference to divine creation in Genesis singled out Creation's seven-day time span: six working days, plus one of rest. Soon it became obligatory for all Christians to keep Sunday as a day of rest. Charlemagne even found it necessary to get the Church to agree to make exceptions in the cases of peasants for whom it was essential not to waste good weather in the completion of their rural tasks, in particular their harvesting. In the European world, right down to very recent times, this organization of human activity according to a weekly rota has probably provided the best means of alternating work and rest.

Christianity also introduced profound changes to the calendar. It gave the Christian era a new starting point when, in 532, the monk Dionysius the Little made the birth of Christ the new beginning of history. In point of fact, however, Dionysius made a mistake in his calculations, so the birth of Christ, which marks the beginning of the Christian era, was probably in 4 BC. On the other hand, for a long time the Church did not select a single date to mark the beginning of the year throughout Christendom. The dates most commonly chosen for the beginning of the year were 25 December (the Incarnation), 25 March (the Annunciation), and Easter, which was a movable feast. Hence the importance, throughout Christendom, of complex, accurate calculations, based on observations of the moon, to define and compute the date of Easter each year. The Christian calendar is a solar one, except for the insertion of a lunar portion at Easter. For the whole of the future Europe, except the Orthodox eastern region, the Christian calendar

ensured the promotion of the two great days that became the major yearly festivals: Christmas Day, marking the birth of Christ, which in the fourth century was fixed to 25 December; and Easter Day, the anniversary of the Resurrection of Christ, a movable feast. Apart from the great festivals devoted to Christ or to the Virgin Mary, the different days of the year were called after saints and marked the anniversaries of their deaths. The reorganization of the measurement of time also affected ordinary daily life. In the West, the seventh century witnessed an innovation the impact of which was widely felt, namely the introduction of church bells and the construction of bell-towers or campaniles. In the hands of the monks, the passing of the hours remained imprecise, but now bells announcing each hour could be heard both in the towns and in the countryside. This audible measuring of time was an innovation of capital importance.

### **The Remodeling of Space**

Christianity's remodeling of space was no less important than its remodeling of the measurement of time; and in both cases, the changes affected the whole of western Europe. Their organization led to new diocese divisions, although it took some time to define the territories of the various dioceses precisely. Networks linking particular points and particular regions were also set in place. The cult of holy relics led to the promotion of places that contained particularly famous ones. One such place was Tours, which harbored the relics of Saint Martin; another, even more prestigious, was Rome, with its relics of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. The cult of holy relics led to pilgrimages that forged links between the peoples of the extreme European west and, most importantly, the routes of these pilgrimages were soon organized into definite stages and networks. Relations were also established between the various monastic orders. In the seventh century, for example, the abbot of Saint-Aignan, in Orléans, founded the monastery of Fleury-sur-Loire, which became a great center of pilgrimages once it acquired the relics of Saint Benedict, which, following the invasion of the Lombards, had been abandoned on Mount Cassino in southern Italy. The role of such networks as these became even more important in the later Middle Ages.

### **Two Hostile Poles, Byzantium and Islam: The Choice of Images**

We need to return to two negative events that played an essential part in the genesis of Europe between the seventh and the fourteenth centuries. They

led to or at least consolidated the construction of a religious or national identity in the context of conflict and opposition. The notion of an “other,” particularly an opponent or an enemy, creates identity.

In the case of western Christendom, the hostile “other” was twofold. At first it was Byzantium. Several factors increased the distance that separated Latin and Byzantine Christians: Byzantine claims to dominate the whole of Christendom, Latin as well as Greek, along with Byzantium’s refusal to acknowledge the bishop of Rome, together with the difference of its liturgical language (Greek, not Latin) and various theological divergences. An extremely important decision taken by the Latin Church aggravated matters. The Byzantine world was rocked by the quarrel over images, which began with a bout of iconoclasm (a rejection of images) between 730 and 787. Following the second Council of Nicaea (787), Charlemagne, in his *Libri carolini*, firmly established the attitude of western, Latin Christianity. It was a moderate attitude that condemned both the destruction and rejection of images, or iconoclasm, and also image worship. In contrast to Judaism and Islam, both of which rejected images, and Byzantium, which was swept by bouts of iconoclasm, western Christendom sanctioned and revered images, as a form of homage to God, the Virgin, and the saints, although since those images were anthropomorphic it did not make them the objects of any cult. Apart from the Holy Ghost, the personae of the Godhead were portrayed with a human face. This constituted an important stage along the way that led to European humanism; it was a path that was to prove richly rewarding for European art.

The conflict with Islam from the seventh century onward was of a more virulent nature. Just as eastern Europe remained a part of the Byzantine world, Islam and Latin Christendom established their respective territories on either side of a border that served as a front, along which military conflicts often took place. After overrunning North Africa, Islam, in the shape of Arabized Berbers, launched an assault on Christian Europe. Between 711 and 719, they rapidly conquered the Iberian peninsula. The Christians retained a hold only along a northern fringe, particularly to the west, in the Asturias region. From northern Spain, the Muslims, whether intent on simply raiding or on extending their conquest, swept on northward across the Pyrenees. However, whatever their intentions, their advance was halted, in 732, by what is known as the Battle of Poitiers. This was the last Muslim invasion to penetrate to the north of the Pyrenees, although in the ninth century there were further Muslim conquests in the Mediterranean islands, in Italy, and in Provence.

European historiography has produced a number of divergent interpretations of the Battle of Poitiers. At one extreme are certain historians who

regard the battle as a mere skirmish of scant significance, since the Muslim conquest had already run out of steam. For others, in contrast, the Battle of Poitiers was a hugely important event, representing a triumph over Islam for Christianity, both in reality and in myth. For a highly aggressive anti-Muslim minority, Poitiers became a symbol. The truth lies somewhere between those two extremes. However, certain Christian chroniclers represented the Battle of Poitiers as a *European* event. One anonymous work, the *Continuatio hispana* (The continuation of the chronicle of Isidore of Seville), describes the Battle of Poitiers as a *victory for the Europeans*, who forced the people known in the West as the Saracens to retreat.

Three other changes or innovations also played a part in making the new extreme west of Europe homogeneous.

### The Ruralization of Europe

The first, which was of an economic nature, was the above-mentioned ruralization of a world that had been strongly urbanized under the Romans. Roads fell into disrepair, along with workshops, warehouses and irrigation systems, and agriculture declined. It was a technological regression in which the use of stone as a major building material diminished and wood made a comeback. The flow of town-dwellers returning to the countryside did not fill the gap left by demographic decline. In the place of the town, *urbs*, the *villa*, or large estate, now became the basic economic and social entity, with small manors as the units where people lived and farmed. The area at the disposal of these manors varied, but in most cases was quite small and capable of providing sustenance for no more than a single family.

The monetary economy shrank and bartering took its place. Long-distance trading almost disappeared, except for indispensable commodities such as salt. Recently, historians have tended somewhat to discount the decline of the towns. But in truth the only ones that continued to flourish to any degree were centers where bishops and the occasional barbarian chieftain resided, such as Tours, Reims, Lyon, Toulouse, Seville, Mainz, Milan, and Ravenna.

### Kingship and Barbarian Laws

Two other factors, one of a political, the other of a legal nature, contributed to the developing uniformity of the world under barbarian sway.

First, kings (much detested by the Roman world) now appeared at the head of the new political formations. They were kings of limited stature, really no more than tribal chieftains. The Anglo-Saxon kings, the Frankish kings from Clovis on, and the Burgundian, Gothic, Visigothic and Lombard kings wielded little power, even if they assumed the trappings of the Roman Empire. (In this respect, the prestige of a leader such as Theodoric, in Ravenna, was exceptional.) But kingship was nevertheless to enjoy a fine future in Europe.

Secondly, the laws promulgated by these kings were markedly barbarian in character. They consisted of lists of the tariffs, fines, and monetary or physical forms of compensation that applied to offenses and crimes. These varied according to the ethnic status and the social rank of the guilty parties.

We should not be misled by the presence of these laws, for they were of an extremely rudimentary nature even in the case of the edict produced by the last true heir to the Roman tradition in the West, the Ostrogoth Theodoric the Great. The Salic law of the Franks, written in Latin under Clovis, was particularly basic. Gondebaud, the king of the Burgundians, promulgated his Gombette law right at the beginning of the sixth century. The customs of the Visigoths were first codified by Euric (466–485), followed by Leovigild (568–586), and were then revised by Receswinth (649–672) for the use of both Visigoths and Romans, replacing the Breviary of Alaric (506), which had simplified the Theodosian code of 438 for the Romans, as did the *Lex Romana Burgundiorum*, among the Burgundians. The edict that Rotharis produced for the Lombards (643) was later expanded by several of his successors. At the beginning of the eighth century, the Franks inspired a *Lex Alamanorum*, followed in the mid-eighth century by a *Lex Baiavariorum*. Saint Martin, Archbishop of Braga from 579 on, composed a handbook entitled *De correctione rusticorum*, based on the legislation passed by various councils and synods. It laid down a program for the correction of the violent behavior of the peasants living in what is now northern Portugal.

Rudimentary though it was, this barbarian legislation resting upon the ruins of Roman law did ensure that the Europe of the Early Middle Ages continued to be based on law.