10.3: The Rise of Islam, Carolingian Europe, New Kingdoms, and a Revived Byzantium

The Rise of Islam and Early Contact with Western Europe

Religious beliefs in the Eastern Empire and Persia were in flux during the late 6th and early 7th centuries. Judaism was an active proselytizing faith, and at least one Arab political leader converted to Judaism. Christianity had active missions competing with the Persian’s Zoroastrianism in seeking converts, especially among residents of the Arabian Peninsula. All strands came together with emergence of Islam in Arabia during the lifetime of Muhammad. After Muhammad’s death in 632, Islamic forces went on to conquer much of the Eastern Empire as well as Persia, starting with Syria in 634–635 and later as far as Egypt in 640–641, Persia between 637 and 642, North Africa in the later 7th century and the Iberian Peninsula in 711. By 714, Islamic forces controlled much of the peninsula, a region they called Al-Andalus.

The Islamic conquests only slowed in the middle of the 8th century. The first check was the defeat of Muslim forces at the Battle of Poitiers in 732, which led to the reconquest of southern France by the Franks. But the main reason for the ebbing of Islamic conquests in Europe was the overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty and its replacement by the Abbasid dynasty. The Abbasids moved their capital to Baghdad and their interests were more concerned with the Middle East than Europe. The Abbasids lost control of sections of the Muslim lands — with Umayyad descendants taking over the Iberian Peninsula along with the Aghlabids controlling North Africa and the Tulunids ruling Egypt. By the middle of the 8th century, new trading patterns were emerging in the Mediterranean, with trade between the Franks and the Arabs replacing the old Roman patterns of trade. Franks traded timber, furs, swords and slaves to the Arabs in return for silks and other fabrics, spices, and precious metals. (101)
Trade and Economy

The barbarian invasions of the 4th and 5th centuries caused disruption in trade networks around the Mediterranean. African trade goods disappear from the archeological record slowly, first disappearing from the interior of Europe and by the 7th century they are usually only found in a few cities such as Rome or Naples. By the end of the 7th century, under the impact of the Muslim conquests, African products are no longer found in Western Europe, and have been mostly replaced by local products. The replacement of trade goods with local products was a trend throughout the old Roman lands that happened in the Early Middle Ages. This was especially marked in the lands that did not lie on the Mediterranean, such as northern Gaul or Britain. What non-local goods that appear in the archeological record are usually luxury goods. In the northern parts of Europe, not only were the trade networks local, but those goods that were produced were simple, with little use of pottery or other complex products. Around the Mediterranean Sea, however, pottery remained prevalent and appears to have been traded over medium range networks and not just produced locally. (101)

Church and Monasticism

Christianity was a major unifying factor between Eastern and western Europe before the Arab conquests, but the conquest of North Africa sundered maritime connections between those areas. Increasingly the Byzantine Church, which became the Orthodox Church, differed in language, practices, and liturgy from the western Church, which became the Catholic Church. The Eastern Church used Greek instead of the western Latin. Theological and political differences emerged, and by the early and middle 8th century issues such as iconoclasm, clerical marriage, and state control of the church had widened enough that the cultural and religious differences were greater than the similarities. The formal break came in 1054, when the papacy and the patriarchy of Constantinople clashed over papal supremacy and mutually excommunicated each other, which led to the division of Christianity into two churches — the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.
The ecclesiastical structure of the Roman Empire survived the barbarian invasions in the west mostly intact, but the papacy was little regarded, with few of the western bishops looking to the bishop of Rome for religious or political leadership. Many of the popes prior to 750 were in any case more concerned with Byzantine affairs and eastern theological concerns.

The Early Middle Ages witnessed the rise of monasticism in the West. The shape of European monasticism was determined by traditions and ideas that originated in the deserts of Egypt and Syria. Most European monasteries were of the type that focuses on community experience of the spiritual life, called cenobitism, which was pioneered by Pachomius (d. 348) in the 4th century. Monastic ideals spread from Egypt to western Europe in the 5th and 6th centuries through hagiographical literature such as the Life of Anthony. Benedict of Nursia (d. 547) wrote the Benedictine Rule for Western monasticism during the 6th century, detailing the administrative and spiritual responsibilities of a community of monks led by an abbot. Monks and monasteries had a deep effect on the religious and political life of the Early Middle Ages, in various cases acting as land trusts for powerful families, centres of propaganda and royal support in newly conquered regions, and bases for mission and proselytization.

In addition, they were the main and sometimes only outposts of education and literacy in a region. Many of the surviving manuscripts of the Roman classics were copied in monasteries in the early Middle Ages. Monks were also the authors of new works, including history, theology, and other subjects, which were written by authors such as Bede (d. 735), a native of northern England who wrote in the late 7th and early 8th century. (101)
The Frankish kingdom in northern Gaul split into kingdoms called Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgundy during the 6th and 7th centuries, under the Merovingians who were descended from Clovis. The 7th century was a tumultuous period of civil wars between Austrasia and Neustria. Such warfare was exploited by Pippin, the Mayor of the Palace for Austrasia who became the power behind the throne. Later members of his family line inherited the office, acting as advisors and regents. One of his descendants, Charles Martel (d. 741), won the Battle of Poitiers in 732, halting the advance of Muslim armies across the Pyrenees.

Across the English Channel in the British Isles, the island of Britain was divided into small states dominated by the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, Wessex, and East Anglia, which were descended from the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Smaller kingdoms in present-day Wales and Scotland were still under the control of the original native Britons and Picts. Ireland was divided into even smaller political units, usually known as tribal kingdoms, which were under the control of kings. There were perhaps as many as 150 local kings in Ireland, of varying importance.
The coronation of Charlemagne as emperor on Christmas Day 800 is regarded as a turning-point in medieval history, marking a return of the Western Roman Empire, since the new emperor ruled over much of the area previously controlled by the western emperors. It also marks a change in Charlemagne’s relationship with the Byzantine Empire, as the assumption of the imperial title by the Carolingians asserted their equivalency to the Byzantine state. There were a number of differences between the newly established Carolingian Empire and both the older Western Roman Empire and the concurrent Byzantine Empire.

The Frankish lands were rural in character, with only a few small cities. Most of the people were peasants settled on small farms. Little trade existed and much of that was with the British Isles and Scandinavia, in contrast to the older Roman Empire which had its trading networks centered on the Mediterranean. The administration of the empire was from an itinerant court that traveled with the emperor as well as through approximately 300 imperial officials called counts, who administered the counties which the empire had been divided into. Clergy and local bishops served as officials, as well as the imperial officials called missi dominici, who served as roving inspectors and troubleshooters. (101)
Carolingian Renaissance

Charlemagne’s court in Aachen was the center of the cultural revival sometimes referred to as the “Carolingian Renaissance”. The period saw an increase in literacy, developments in the arts, architecture and jurisprudence, as well as liturgical and scriptural studies. The English monk Alcuin (d. 804) was invited to Aachen and brought the education available in the monasteries of Northumbria. Charlemagne’s chancery — or writing office — made use of a new script today known as Carolingian minuscule, allowing a common writing style that advanced communication across much of Europe. Charlemagne sponsored changes in church liturgy, imposing the Roman form of church service on his domains, as well as the Gregorian chant form of liturgical music in the churches.

An important activity for scholars during this period was the copying, correcting, and dissemination of basic works on religious and secular topics, with the aim of encourage learning. New works on religious topics and schoolbooks were also produced. Grammarians of the period modified the Latin language, changing it from the Classical Latin of the Roman Empire into a more flexible form to fit the needs of the church and government. By the reign of Charlemagne, the language had become enough different from the classical that it came to be called Medieval Latin. (101)

Breakup of the Carolingian Empire

The breakup of the Carolingian Empire was accompanied by invasions, migrations, and raids of external foes. The Atlantic and northern shores were harassed by the Vikings, who also raided the British Isles and settled in both Britain and Ireland as well as the distant island of Iceland. A further settlement of Vikings was made in France in 911 under the chieftain Rollo (d. around 931), who received permission from the Frankish king Charles the Simple (r. 898â€“922) to settle in what became Normandy. The eastern parts of the Frankish kingdoms, especially Germany and Italy, were
under constant Magyar assault until their great defeat at the Battle of the Lechfeld in 955. The breakup of the Abbasid dynasty meant that the Islamic world fragmented into a number of smaller political states, some of which began expanding into Italy and Sicily, as well as over the Pyrenees into the southern parts of the Frankish kingdoms. (101)

New Kingdoms and a Revived Byzantium

Efforts by local kings to fight back the invaders led to the formation of new political entities. In Anglo-Saxon England, King Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) in the late 9th century came to a settlement with the Viking invaders, with Danish settlements in Northumbria, Mercia, and parts of East Anglia. By the middle of the 10th century, Alfred’s successors had conquered Northumbria, and restored English control over most of the southern part of the island of Great Britain. In northern Britain, Kenneth mac Alpin (d. c. 860) united the Picts and the Scots into the Kingdom of Alba. In the early 10th century, the Ottonian dynasty had established itself in Germany, and the Ottonians were engaged in driving back the Magyar. Their efforts culminated in the coronation in 962 of Otto I (r. 936–973) as emperor.

In 972, Otto secured the recognition of his title by the Byzantine Empire, and sealed the recognition with the marriage of his son Otto II to Theophanu, a daughter of an earlier Byzantine Emperor Romanos II (r. 959–963). Italy was drawn into the Ottonian sphere by the late 10th century, after a period of instability, with Otto III spending much of his later reign in Italy. The western Frankish kingdom was more fragmented, and although a nominal king remained theoretically in charge, much of the political power had devolved to the local lords.

Missionary efforts to Scandinavia during the 9th and 10th centuries helped strengthen the growth of kingdoms there. Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian kingdoms gained power and territory in the course of the 9th and 10th centuries, and some of the kings converted to Christianity, although the process was not complete by 1000. Scandinavians also expanded and colonized throughout Europe. Besides the settlements in Ireland, England, and Normandy, further settlement took place in what became Russia as well as in Iceland. Swedish traders and raiders ranged down the rivers of the Russian steppe, and even attempted to seize Constantinople in 860 and in 907. Christian Spain, initially driven into a small section of the peninsula in the north, expanded slowly south during the 9th and 10th centuries, establishing the kingdoms of Asturias and LeÅn in the process. (101)

Figure 8-8: Illustration of the brothers Cyril and Methodius bringing Christianity to the Slavic peoples from Wikimedia is

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The frescoes at Saint Benedikt at Mals, Italy are contemporary with those at neighboring Saint John at Müstair. They belong to a limited set of surviving frescoes of the Carolingian period. The frescoes are mostly distributed in three niches in the altar wall, showing Jesus Christ flanked by pope Gregory the Great and Saint Stephen. On the walls separating the niches are donor portraits below a troop of 12 angels, and scenes showing Gregory writing his *Dialogi* and disputing with Paulus Diaconus (Paul the Deacon) alongside scenes showing Paul of Tarsus and a fragment of a scene from the life of Saint Benedict. (102)

Figure 8-9: *Scenes of saints’ lives* by James Steakley is licensed under Public Domain

Mosaics were created by assembling small pieces of colored glass, stone, pigments, and other materials. The mosaics were created in Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel at Aachen, whose interior remains adorned with arch-to-dome mosaics. Like the Byzantine mosaics that influenced their design, those that adorn Charlemagne’s chapel feature floral motifs and classicized figures in various poses against largely gold backgrounds. (102)
The most famous mosaic in Charlemagne’s chapel showed an enthroned Christ worshiped by the Evangelist’s symbols and the 24 elders of the Apocalypse. This mosaic no longer survives, but a restored one remains in the apse of the oratory at Germigny-des-Prés (806), discovered in 1820 under a coat of plaster and depicting the Ark of the Covenant adored by angels. (102)


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