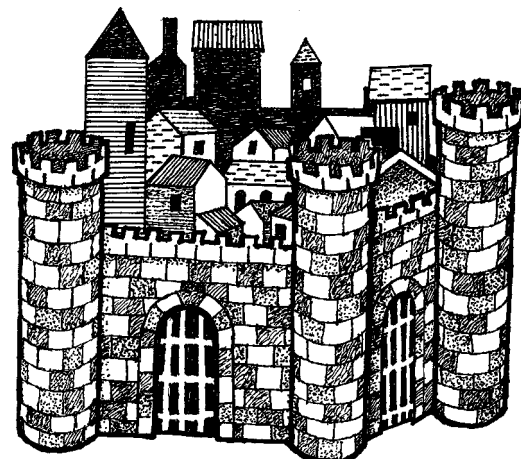


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# Creating the Middle Ages

Before you read any further, write in the blanks below the first images that come to mind when you hear the term *Middle Ages*.



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In the study of Western Civilization, historians have typically relied on three primary time frames. These divisions of Western history help the historian and the student of history understand how Western Civilization has developed in stages. The three time frames are generally referred to as the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era.

The Ancient World spans the development of civilization through Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. With the fall of the Roman Empire around A.D. 500, historians begin looking at a new stage in the advancement of Western Civilization: an era called the Middle Ages.

Historians created the term Middle Ages to identify a long period of European history from the fall of Rome to the rise of a new era, the Modern World, which begins around 1500. The word *middle* is used to identify an era which lies between two others—one ancient, the other modern.

The Middle Ages are also known as the medieval period. The term comes from two Latin words: *medium*, meaning “middle,” and *aevum*, meaning “age.” From their beginning to their end, the Middle Ages comprise a thousand years of European history. Many changes come to Europe during these centuries.

With the rise of the medieval world, the center of the western world continues to move further west. During the Ancient period, the center of the western civilized world was the Near East (known as the Middle East today), a region which included Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Persia, and other places.

With the rise of the Greeks, the center of the civilized world shifted to the west to the region of the

Mediterranean Sea. As the Romans became more dominant over the western world, civilization shifted to the north, further into Europe, as the Roman Empire spread into Gaul, Britain, Spain, and the region of the Germanic tribes. Thus, the history of the Middle Ages marks the shift from not only the ancient world to the medieval world, but a geographic shift from the Mediterranean further north across the European continent.

Much change came to Western Civilization during the Middle Ages. In fact, so much change occurred that historians divide the Middle Ages into three categories of time:

- The Early Middle Ages—500 to 1000
- The High Middle Ages—1000 to 1300
- The Late Middle Ages—1300 to 1500

In each of these three eras of European medieval history, important changes occurred. The world of Europe in the year 1500 was very different from the experiences of Europeans in A.D. 500.

By the close of the Middle Ages, great kings ruled over powerful states such as France and England; Columbus discovered the New World for Europe; the Portuguese sailed around Africa and reached the East; and the invention of gunpowder rendered medieval castles and knights outdated.

In this book, we will be looking at the world of the Europeans during the Early and High Middle Ages. During these centuries, Western Civilization made great strides toward our time, helping to create the modern world in which we live.

# The End of the Roman Empire

During the centuries, the Roman Empire faced many challenges. Difficult situations came and went, Rome coped, and life went on within the Empire. However, with the weakening of Rome from A.D. 200 into the 400s, the Empire finally faced too many problems. The end for Imperial Rome came during the 5th century.

Economic, political, military, and social problems all worked against Rome in those centuries. But these internal challenges were made more difficult by forces outside the Empire. These challenges came in the form of foreign invasion.

Throughout the history of the Empire, neighboring powers had occasionally marauded and plundered its fringes. In the later stages of Imperial Rome, the Empire faced great pressure from the north. It was here that roaming tribes of ferocious Germans (considered barbarians by the Romans) began to move against the power of Rome.

The Germanic tribes lived in the region of Europe from the Rhine River on the western edge of Roman Gaul (modern-day France) to the east as far as modern-day Russia. They comprised many different tribes. Nearly all of these tribal groups were semi-nomadic. They practiced a limited agriculture and raised herds of cattle and sheep. In fact, their economy was so primitive that their standard of value was not money, but cattle.

These “barbarian” groups enjoyed close family ties and tribal allegiances. They told each other stories of great warriors and battles. They practiced a religion which included several gods. Some of these deities provided names of the days of our week, such as Wotan, the chief of the gods (Wednesday is named for him); Thor, the god of power (Thursday); Thiu, the god of war (Tuesday) and Freya, goddess of fertility (Friday).

While the Germanic tribes were always present to the north, they did not prove to be a significant threat to Rome until the later days of the Empire. Marius battled them successfully in 101 B.C. Julius Caesar conquered them in Gaul during his campaigns in the 1st century B.C. However, in A.D. 9, the Roman ruler Augustus and his army met German warriors in the dark forest north of the Rhine river and faced dramatic defeat. After this military loss,

the Roman Empire established the Rhine and Danube Rivers as the northern frontier border of the Empire.

Throughout the century-and-a-half of the Pax Romana, the Germanic tribes did not prove to be a significant challenge to the power of Rome. But during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 161–180), the Germanic tribes began to menace the Roman frontier. This lasted for nearly a century. The tribes of the Franks and the Goths proved to be the most bothersome.

After about A.D. 300, the Germans again slipped into a quieter mode and did not raid against the Romans to any significant degree for nearly 75 years. Through these decades, Rome was able to keep the Germanic tribes at bay by playing them off one another, maintaining a policy of “divide and conquer.”

However, by the 4th century, the Germans were warring again, restless for land and the riches of the Empire. Meanwhile, a new group of invaders was on the horizon, the Huns. They were not Germanic, but Asiatic. The Huns were a nomadic Mongolian people who began raiding eastern Europe in the 300s.

One Roman writer described these terrifying new raiders:

Their mode of life is savage. They need no fire or prepared food but live on wild roots and the flesh of any kind of animal, eaten half raw; they warm it a little by putting it between their thighs and the back of their horses. Like unreasoning beasts, they are utterly ignorant of right and wrong. They burn with lust for gold.

When the Huns entered eastern Europe in A.D. 372, they began conquering a tribe of Germans called the Ostrogoths (meaning the *East Goths*). In no time at all, the Huns proved to be a problem for the Roman Empire and its future.

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## Review and Write

Describe the lifestyle of the Germanic tribes who were neighbors to the Roman Empire.

# The Germanic Invasions

The Huns, an invading Asiatic tribe of horsemen, began menacing the Ostrogoths of eastern Europe in A.D. 372. The Romans observed these events with a watchful eye. While the Eastern Gothic people fell under the influence of the Huns, another Germanic tribe, the Visigoths (meaning the West Goths) began to fear their new Asiatic neighbors.

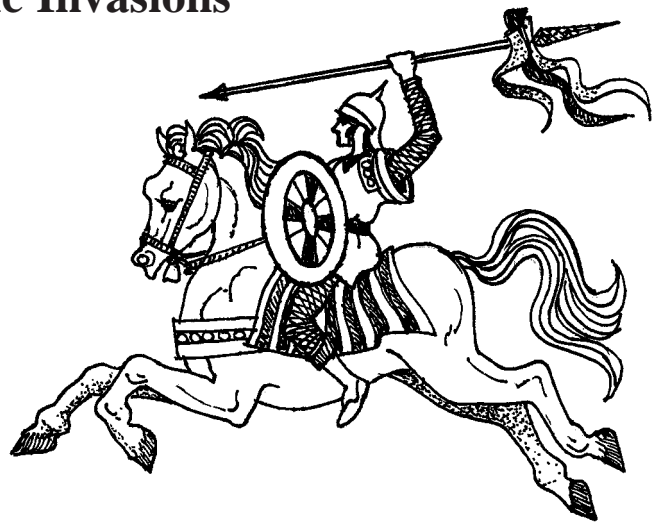
In 376, the Visigoths turned to the Roman Empire and requested permission from Rome to cross the Danube River into Roman lands. By doing this, the Visigoths were asking Rome for protection. When the Romans agreed, the Visigothic people streamed into the Empire. The Roman emperor, Valens, allowed the Visigoths to enter the Roman frontier lands with the intention of using them in the Roman army.

However, all did not go well. Roman officials along the frontier regions treated the Visigoths with little respect and did not distribute land to them as they were promised. Desperate for food and a home, the Visigoths turned on their hosts, the Romans, and began attacking Roman towns and villages. When Emperor Valens led an army against the Visigoths at Adrianople (modern-day Edirne, Turkey), the Visigoths defeated them and killed Valens.

The Emperor Theodosius managed to fend off most invasions during his reign, but after 395, a Visigothic leader named Alaric, led raids onto the Italian peninsula and attacked the city of Rome in A.D. 410, sacking the Imperial capital. To bring peace, the Imperial government was forced to give Roman territory in southern Gaul to the Visigoths, where they established an extensive kingdom.

Soon after this defeat, other barbarian tribes began to menace the Empire, invading at will across the frontier borders. After being pushed out of Gaul by the Visigoths, a tribe called the Vandals migrated to Roman Spain and then to northern Africa, where they established a kingdom. In 455, the Vandals reached their height of power and campaigned across the Mediterranean, landed in Italy and succeeded in sacking Rome. During the same period, the Burgundians moved into central Europe and the Franks settled in northern Gaul.

Ultimately, a weakened Rome had no alternative but to retreat in the face of these repeated German



invasions into its territories. Roman army units were withdrawn from frontier posts, and legions of border troops were pulled deeper into the Empire. After the withdrawal of such troops from England in A.D. 407, the British Isles were left without Imperial protection. Over the next 50 years, German tribes—including the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons—raided the countryside. The Celtic people there, left by the Romans, were nearly destroyed by these Danish invaders.

Few of these new Germanic kingdoms lasted longer than a couple of centuries. Only two—the Angles and Saxons in Britain, and the Franks in Gaul (the name would later be used in renaming the region *France*)—managed to remain powerful over the long run.

All these invasions, even the sacking of Rome twice, did not bring the Empire to an immediate end, however. But Roman rule was slipping fast. Germans were serving as officers and soldiers in the Roman army by this time. In 475, a German commander of Roman forces named Orestes led a coup and had his son, Romulus Augustus, placed on the Roman throne. The next year, another German commander, Odovacar, killed Orestes and deposed his son. This coup in A.D. 476 is considered by some historians as the year of the fall of the Roman Empire.

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## *Review and Write*

Why did the Roman government have so much trouble coping with German tribes on their borders?