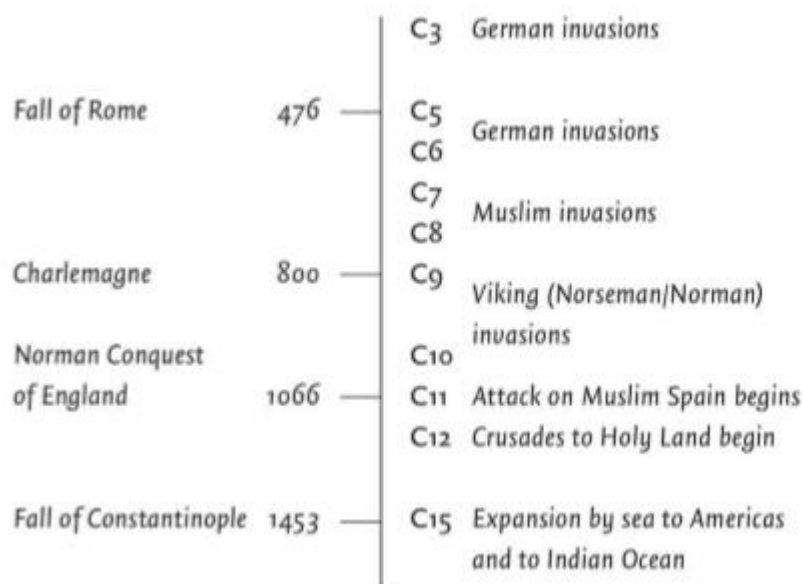
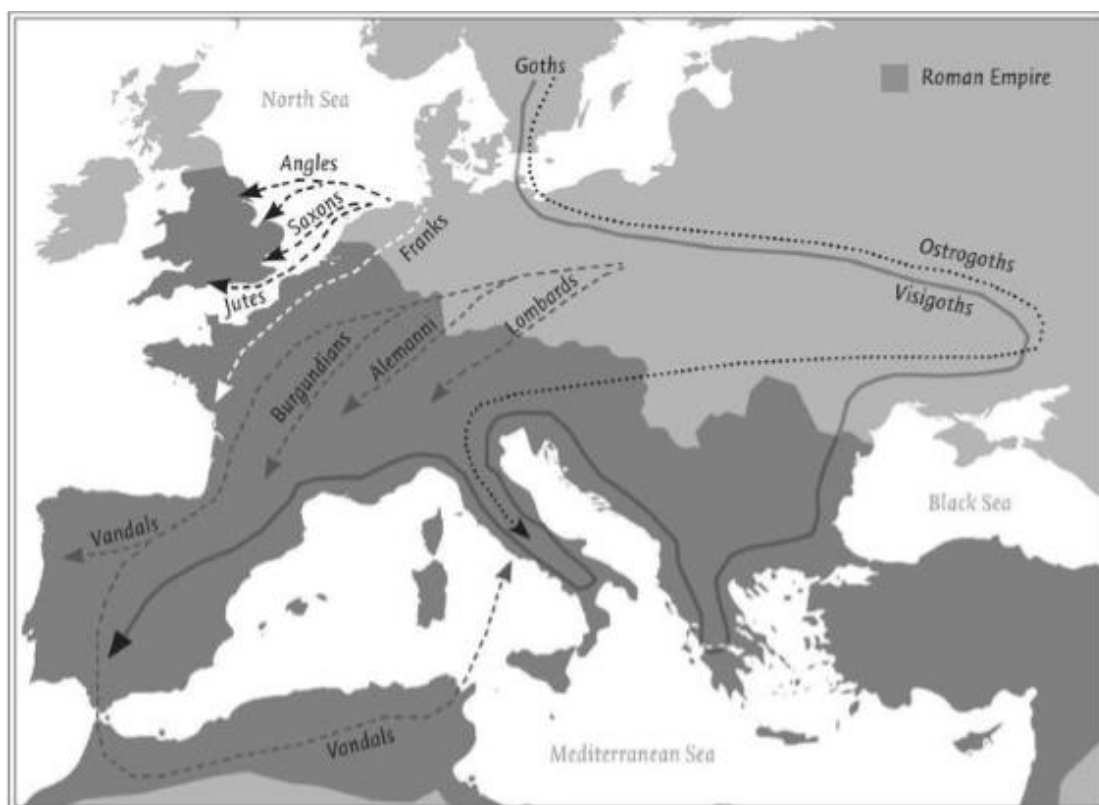


CHAPTER 3. *Invasions and Conquests*

THE GERMAN INVASION OF THE Roman Empire was the first of three great invasions. Following the Germans came the Muslims and then the Norsemen or Vikings. After years of turmoil, European society stabilised and then itself began expanding—in crusades to the Holy Land, to drive the Muslims from Spain, and then by sea to lay claim to the world’ s treasures.



We speak of the fall of the Roman Empire and we give it a date: 476 AD. But only the western half of the empire fell at this time. The eastern, Greek-speaking half survived for another 1000 years with Constantinople as its capital. This had originally been a Greek city with the name Byzantion (in Latin, Byzantium), which gave the eastern empire its name: the Byzantine Empire. We will discuss its fall later.



German invaders and the Roman Empire.

For the western empire, 'fall' gives a misleading picture—and so does a single date. There wasn't a massing of barbarians on the borders, a steady advance southwards, the Romans retreating, a last-ditch stand at Rome. It wasn't like that at all. This was a rather unusual invasion. You can follow the movements of the different German tribes on the map.

The northern borders had never been complete barriers. There had always been contact at recognised crossing places where Roman soldiers supervised the exchange of goods. Sometimes Rome had pushed beyond the usual boundaries; in the first century AD, Roman troops crossed the Rhine and advanced a long way into what is now Germany. That was a short-lived incursion because the Germans destroyed these legions, and in doing so got to know more about Rome.

In the third century AD, there had been a series of German invasions which

nearly destroyed the empire. It was a time of great instability in the rule of Rome; a number of emperors came and went very quickly and very little resistance was offered to the invaders. The empire survived but it now had enclaves of Germans settled within it. Constantine, the emperor who gave official support to Christianity in 313, followed this time of chaos and attempted generally to reorganise and strengthen the empire.

Germans settled within the empire were recruited into the Roman army so that in the battles to contain the invasions of the fifth century, Germans were fighting on both sides. Maybe half or even more of the Roman soldiers were Germans and Germans were also serving as generals. It seems a self-evident sign of the empire's weakness that Romans had to get Germans to fight for them. In the early part of the twentieth century, when racial thinking was very strong, there was a clear answer to why Rome fell: the Romans made the mistake of handing over their destiny to an inferior people. In this crude form the idea is, of course, now not entertained. But an empire relying on newcomers to defend it is not in good shape.

The Germans had no desire to take over the empire; they were invaders who did not intend to be conquerors. Their aim was to get part of the loot, to settle on land and to live well. They were quite happy to acknowledge the rule of the emperor.

The emperors, of course, did not want them marauding through their territories. They sent forth armies to defeat or eject the invaders; only occasionally were they successful. Usually the end point was that the Germans remained in more

or less independent enclaves. Finally there was very little left in the emperor's control. The Germans thought nevertheless that there should be an emperor. For a long time the invaders of Italy propped up a Roman as emperor. Finally one German general called an end to this farce. Instead of propping up puppets, he decided to rule openly himself. That is what happened in 476. Not a big, final battle. Odoacer, a German chieftain, took charge, but he did not call himself emperor. He called himself King of Italy. The regalia of the Emperor of the West—the crown and the great robes—he packed up and sent to Constantinople, where there was still an emperor, whose overlordship he acknowledged. The Germans were captured by the glory of what they had inadvertently conquered.

Instead of an empire in the west, there were now a series of mini-kingdoms, set up by the different German tribes. They rose and fell rapidly; they were unable to maintain the old Roman administration so the collection of taxes soon ceased. These conquerors were basically out of their depth; they were not experienced in running any sort of settled state. They were looking for help and found it in the old Roman landed class and the bishops. The melding of old and new was happening at the top, but how far down did it go?

It is hard to know in detail because there is very little written evidence from this period. The Germans were illiterate; it was a time of turmoil and chaos and few records survive. It is clear that it was not a massive invasion, with Germans driving the existing inhabitants before them. Nor was it a raid of male warriors. The Germans brought their women and children with them and intended to settle. In

some places they formed dense settlements; in others they were scattered quite thinly. To establish who settled where, historians have called on archaeological evidence. The Germans buried people in a different way from the Romans, so if many of the dead are buried in the German way, then German settlement can be assumed to have been fairly dense. Linguists can also help. If a name of a village changes at this time to something German, the assumption is that this was a dense German settlement. But perhaps this evidence is not strong enough; it might have taken only one German warlord to say the name was going to change. But if the names of the fields change, this is better evidence. It is actually the Germans who were doing the work in this part of the world.

For a time, Roman law and German law operated alongside each other. You were tried according to your ethnic origin. Roman law had clear principles of justice, which judges applied in particular cases. The early judges were makers of the law and their decisions were then gathered into codes; the greatest was assembled by the eastern emperor, Justinian, in the sixth century. German law, on the other hand, was a regularised form of vendetta, with judges holding the ring. Injured parties and their kin sought recompense from offenders and their kin. Even in cases of murder, the matter was settled by payment to the kin of the murdered person—how great the payment depending on the status of the victim, an aristocrat being worth three times an ordinary person.

The Romans established guilt or innocence by the examination of evidence and witnesses; the Germans in trial by ordeal of fire, water or battle. For example, a

suspect's arm was placed in boiling water; if the arm was not healed after three days, the suspect was guilty. Suspects were thrown into water; if they floated they were guilty, if they sank they were innocent. Two parties in dispute over land would be set to battle and the winner declared to be in the right.

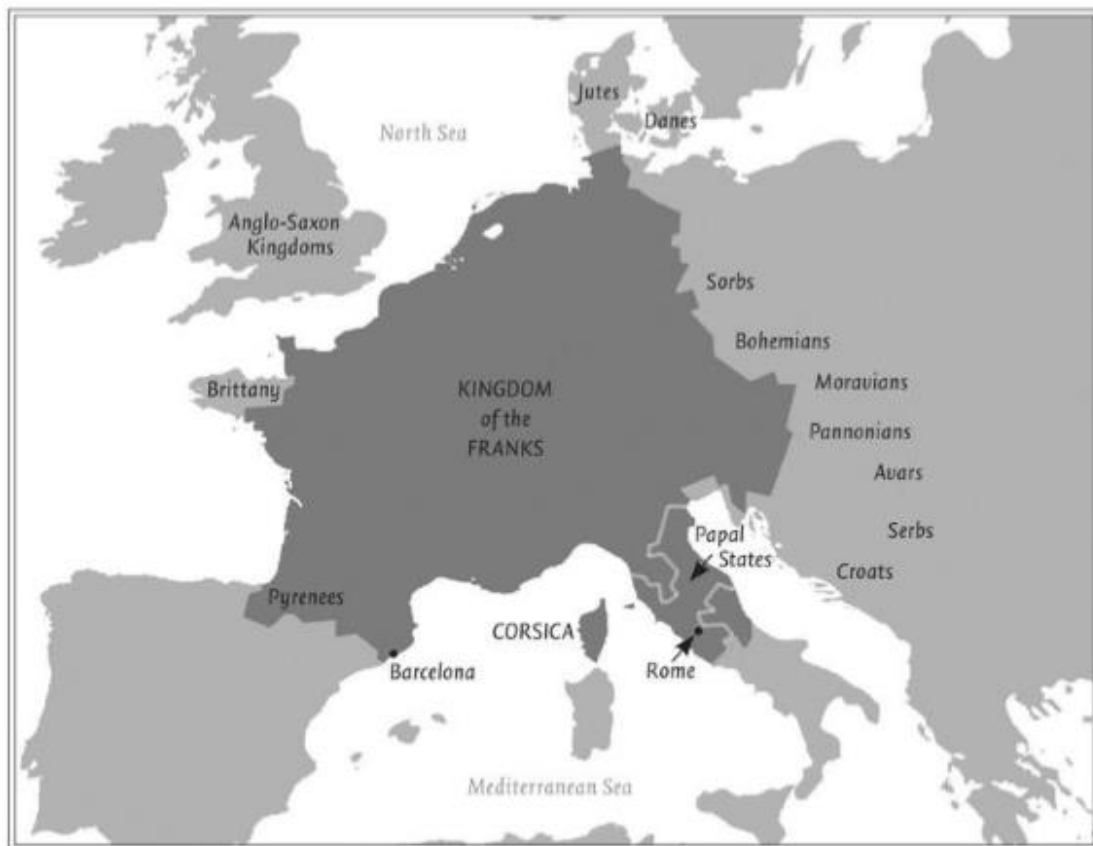
Gradually the two systems merged into one. Roman law held greater sway in the mix in Italy and southern France, German law in northern France. Everywhere, the trial by ordeal operated with priests present to ensure that God produced the correct outcome. In this matter the Roman church went the German way until the twelfth century, when the church was influenced by the rediscovery of Emperor Justinian's Code and priests were told not to participate in ordeals.

The Germans became Christian soon after the invasion, giving up their own gods and in other cases giving up Arianism, a heretical version of Christianity to which some Germans had been converted before the invasions. Arians believed that since Jesus was the son of God, he must be a lesser person and could not be the equal of God. For a time this heresy was strong in the east and was carried to the Germans by the missionary who had converted them.

So in many ways the 'fall of Rome' is misleading and most misleading in regard to religion: the official religion of the Roman Empire and its church survived and both were embraced by the invaders. This is the foundation point of European civilisation. We already have a formulation to embody it: German warriors supported a Roman Christian church which preserved Greek and Roman learning.

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ONLY ONE GERMAN TRIBE IN THE WEST produced a long-lasting state; this was the kingdom of the Franks, which grew, as you see on the map, to cover modern France and parts of Germany, Spain and Italy. The name 'France' derives from the Franks and hence is German in origin. The Frankish kingdom reached its greatest extent under the rule of Charles the Great or Charlemagne. After his death, the kingdom broke up. Modern France is not the direct descendant of the Frankish kingdom; France as we know it had to be put slowly together by its later kings.



The kingdom of the Franks grew to cover modern France and parts of Germany, Spain and Italy.

The German invasion of Britain took a different form. Most of modern England was in the Roman Empire; Scotland was not. The Romans went to Britain late—only in the first century AD—and they departed early. They left in 410 AD because the emperor wanted the troops stationed there brought back to defend the empire

against the Germans. When the Romans left, the native society of the Britons was still intact; it had not been obliterated by 300 years of Roman settlement. The Celtic language survived. Then in the fifth and sixth centuries, German peoples—the Angles, Saxons and Jutes—crossed the Channel and invaded England. This was more like a complete conquest. The Britons were over-run and their societies survived only in Scotland, Wales and in Cornwall.

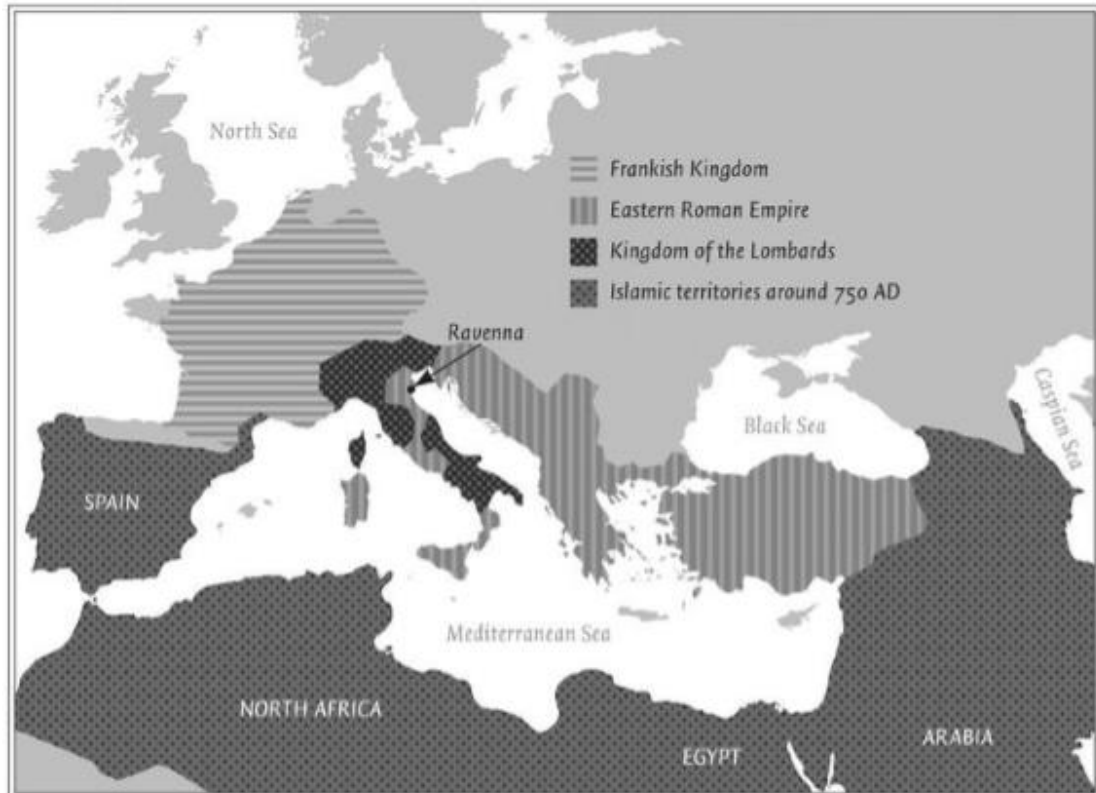
England became a completely German society, with a number of separate kingdoms, and pagan. The Angles, Saxons and Jutes were not Christians of any sort.

Then, from Ireland and from Rome, missionaries went to England to convert these newcomers to Christianity. The role of Ireland in the conversion of England is one of the amazing stories of the survival of Christianity. Christianity began in the far east of the Roman Empire; from there it spread throughout the empire; it then jumped the empire's boundaries and reached Ireland. Here it became Christianity of a special sort because it operated in a society that was not Roman. When the empire in the west was invaded, the Irish were safe; they then re-Christianised England and sent missionaries to Europe as well. The English came to look down on the Irish as 'Bog Irish' ; the Irish know themselves to be the saviours of Christendom.

The next great invasion was Islamic. It occurred in the seventh and eighth centuries, the two centuries immediately after the German invasions. The founder of the Islamic religion was Muhammad, a merchant in Arabia who received visions from God. The religion he developed by divine prompting is an offshoot of Judaism

and Christianity. Islam accepts Jesus and the Jewish prophets before him as true prophets but claims Muhammad is the last of the prophets, the true guide to Allah, the one God. Islam is a much simpler religion than Christianity; it lacks the Greek cleverness that gave Christianity a three-person god—Father, Son, Holy Ghost—separate but equal, separate but one. In Islam, God is the single Allah. Muslims were quite tolerant of Christians and Jews. Christians, on the other hand, regarded Muslims as deceivers and destroyers of the true faith.

Muhammad won over Arabia for his new faith by conquering its pagan tribes and forcing them to submit. In his life he was a more influential figure than Jesus: he founded a religion and established it in a wide territory. At the time of Jesus' death, there was nothing of Christianity. After Muhammad's death, his followers continued the conquests with even greater success. In short order they conquered not only tribes but established states, the Persian Empire and then a good deal of the Eastern Roman Empire in the Middle East and North Africa. They continued westwards along North Africa, now conquering states that had been established by German invaders, and then crossed into Spain. This had been a Roman province, then was invaded by the Visigoths who became Christian, and now it was Islamic. Here the conquests stopped. A Muslim army advanced well into France but was defeated at Tours by Charles Martel, leader of the Franks and grandfather of Charlemagne. The Franks saved Europe for Christianity.



The Muslim advance. Of the Eastern Roman Empire only the Balkans and modern-day Turkey survived. The eastern empire had also acquired territory in Italy, which had of course been part of the western empire. Italy had been invaded by Germans, but then the emperor in Constantinople thought it his Christian duty to recapture these lands. He regained small enclaves but at great cost. There was far more chaos and bloodshed caused by the attempt at reconquest than by the German invasions. Ravenna in northern Italy was one of the enclaves, which explains why that city still possesses beautiful Byzantine mosaics.

The Muslims were ruthless conquerors of Christians, but gentle rulers. They allowed Christians to continue their worship, but as nonbelievers they had to pay a tax; Muslims paid no tax. This was an incentive to convert to Islam. The Christians in the Eastern Roman Empire half welcomed the Muslims because they were upset at the version of Christianity that Constantinople was insisting they follow. Under the Muslims they could practise what they liked, but gradually Christianity died out in these lands. As more and more people converted to Islam, of course, the rule about tax had to be changed; everyone soon paid a tax on land in the normal way.

Spain under Muslim rule became, in the Middle Ages, the most civilised part of

Europe. On their journeys of conquest, the illiterate Arab tribesmen had learnt from the people they conquered: from the Persians, who sustained a highly cultivated civilisation, and from the Greeks in the Byzantine Empire. The Arabs carried the Greek learning with them to Spain, recorded and elaborated on it, and allowed scholars from northern Europe to come and make copies. The Jews, who held high positions in Muslim Spain, were often the translators. One person reading the document in Arabic (into which it had been previously translated from the Greek) translated it aloud into Spanish. A second person hearing the Spanish made a written draft in Latin. In its new Latin version, Greek learning, having been through three translations, was taken back to be studied in the universities of Christian Europe, which began to operate from the twelfth century. In this way, western Europe acquired Aristotle's writings on logic and works on medicine, astronomy and maths—the disciplines in which the Greeks were masters.

Let us summarise the outcome of three conquests. First, in western Europe a melding of German and old Roman and Christian. Second, in England a complete German takeover and then a reconversion to Christianity. Third, in the Muslim world—in the Middle East, North Africa and Spain—Christianity died out but Greek learning was preserved and transmitted to Christian Europe.

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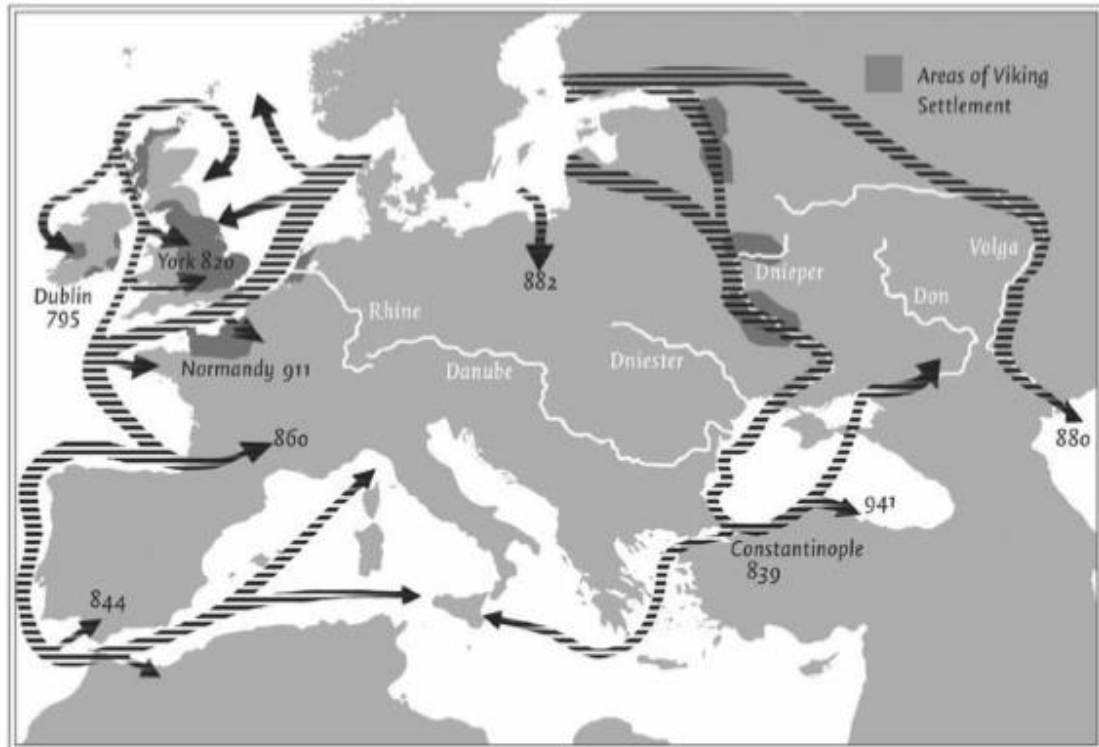
THE VIKINGS OR NORSEMEN were the last of the invaders, marauding through Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries, the two centuries immediately following the Muslim advance. Their homes were in the north—Sweden, Norway and

Denmark—and they came by sea. Their great longboats were a terrifying sight. They had a very shallow draught—they needed only about a metre of water under them—so they could sail a long way up the rivers. If the river got very shallow, they would launch small boats, which they carried with them, and continue. If they met some sort of barrier, they carried their boat around it and kept rowing. They penetrated far inland; in Russia they travelled from the Baltic to the Black Sea.



A Viking longboat. Its shallow draught enabled inland raids up rivers.

Their open boats could sail on the ocean only in summer. At first they came for the summer and then returned home. Their aim was plunder: precious objects, things they could carry back with them. But while they were looking for precious objects, they plundered to survive, seizing food, horses, women and taking more than they needed. They were determined terrorists. Not just raiding and robbing but plundering on a large scale, burning and looting; even things they could not carry away with them they destroyed. Their aim was to create total panic. People fled before them and they were merciless. In one of their sagas there was a warrior referred to as the children's man because he refused to impale children on the point of his lance.



The Vikings or Norsemen marauded through Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The Germans had come by land. The safest place from marauders seemed to be islands in rivers or offshore. Monasteries had been built in these places and now they were easily plundered by these sea-going raiders. Monasteries were highly attractive because they held precious objects made of gold and silver and great quantities of food, for they were a sort of agribusiness, growing and storing enough food for one or two hundred monks. At the mouth of the River Loire in France was a monastery on an offshore island. Every summer the monks would move further inland up the river, but the Vikings chased them in their longboats. The monastery moved about four or five times up the Loire and finally came to rest in what is now Switzerland, with the monks carrying their crosses of gold and their piece of the True Cross and portion of Christ's leg.

The Norsemen could range so widely without opposition because

governments were weak; they had no regular system of tax, and while they could put an army together, these invaders did not come by land. None of these little western European kingdoms had a navy. Charlemagne never had a navy and his empire, in any case, was gone. The Roman Empire had used the sea—the Mediterranean Sea held it together—but now a large part of that sea was in Muslim hands. In the states of Europe there was little trade carried by sea and the art of sailing was lost; Europe was turned inwards—and hence was vulnerable to a highly mobile invading force.

After a time the Norsemen brought their wives and children and settled permanently. The map shows their settlements, in Russia, northern France, England and Ireland. Dublin was originally a Norse city. England had a double dose of invasions: first the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and then the Norsemen on the eastern side of the island. Both groups of invaders spoke Germanic languages, from which English derives. The settlement in northern France took its name, Normandy, from its Norse inhabitants. The French king let them settle there on condition that they stopped their raiding.

About 100 years after the Normans had settled in northern France, the Norman Duke William with a few of his followers conquered England in the year 1066. This was just a takeover from the top; Duke William and his followers installed themselves as the new ruling class in England. The Normans spoke their own form of French, which then became part of the mix that formed English. England was a society of invaders, but after 1066 the country has not been invaded again.

After the tenth century, the incursions into Europe stopped. The Normans were persuaded to settle and missionaries went to Norway and Sweden and converted those countries to Christianity. Trade revived and towns expanded. European society was now stable and strong enough to send out its own expeditions.

The first task Christendom undertook was to drive back the Muslims. These were European-wide campaigns directed first to the re-conquest of Spain and then to recapturing the Holy Land of Palestine. The reconquest of Spain began in the eleventh century and took over 400 years to complete. It proceeded in instalments; coming from the north the Christians seized a wide swathe of territory, reestablished a Christian society, and then pushed south again. The last Muslims were driven from southern Spain in 1492, the same year that Columbus, under the patronage of Spanish monarchs, sailed westwards.

The crusades to the Holy Land began in 1095 and went on for almost two centuries. Imagine what it meant to Christians to know that the place where Christ died, the country where he taught, was in the hands of people whom they regarded as infidels and the active enemies of their religion. God must want them to remove this blasphemy. The pope encouraged and sanctioned the crusades. But only the first of these had any measure of success. Jerusalem was briefly regained for Christ and some of the crusaders made permanent settlements. Then the Muslims drove them out and all the subsequent crusades failed.

Crusades were co-operative efforts. By contrast, the expansion overseas to America and Asia from the fifteenth century was a competition between emerging

nation-states: first Spain and Portugal, then Britain, France and Holland. The first aim was to reach the spices and other riches of Asia. There were two routes: by sea around southern Africa, or westward across the Atlantic. When he came across America, Columbus was intending to reach China. It was more than ample compensation for this disappointment that the Spanish monarchy, which had sponsored him, gained access to the gold and silver of Central and South America. The Portuguese were the first to arrive in Asia; they were pushed aside by the French and English, who contested for the control of India, and by the Dutch, who wrested control of the East Indies (now Indonesia).

Luxury goods from Asia had long been reaching Europe, but they came from the east through the great capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople. Europeans took to the oceans partly because the route to the east had fallen into Muslim hands.

This was more truly a 'fall'. The Eastern Roman Empire had survived in the fifth century because the Germans had concentrated their attack on the west. The eastern empire may have also had a stronger economy and administration. However, it steadily began losing territory. A great slice went to the Muslim invaders coming out of Arabia in the seventh and eighth centuries. Then in the ninth century, the Turks rode out of the Asian steppes; they converted to Islam on their way south and west, and established their rule through the Middle East, seizing what is modern Turkey from the Byzantines. They crossed into Europe and finally held territory on all sides of Constantinople. They captured the city itself in

1453. The last Byzantine emperor died fighting with his troops.

And so the Roman Empire, reduced to a patch of territory and more Greek than Roman, came to an end. The great cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), built by Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, was converted into a mosque. The Turks themselves ran an empire, the Ottoman Empire. When it came to an end after World War I, modern Turkey was established as a secular state, though most of its people are Muslim. The great mosque that had been built as a church was turned into a museum.



Hagia Sophia, a cathedral built by Emperor Justinian in the sixth century AD, was converted into a mosque and is now a museum.

With the fall of Constantinople, Christian scholars who had preserved and studied the learning of classical Greece took themselves and their manuscripts to Italy. They were very readily received because in the Renaissance scholars were hunting for ancient manuscripts. Even before 1453, scholars in Italy had made contact with scholars in Constantinople to gain access to Greek learning and literature. Latin learning and literature had been preserved continuously in western Europe. Some Greek learning was preserved in Latin and although the whole of Roman literature had been influenced by the Greeks, the Greek originals only

arrived after a long interval and from the extremities—from Spain in the Middle Ages and from Constantinople in the fifteenth century.

