

CHAPTER 10

A New Civilization Emerges in Western Europe

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The postclassical period in western Europe, known as the Middle Ages, stretches between the fall of the Roman Empire and the 15th century. Typical postclassical themes prevailed. Civilization spread gradually beyond the Mediterranean zone. Christian missionaries converted Europeans from polytheistic faiths. Medieval Europe participated in the emerging international community. New tools and crops expanded agricultural output; advanced technologies improved manufacturing. Mathematics, science, and philosophy were stimulated by new concepts.

Two Images. Although western European society was not as commercially or culturally developed as the great world civilizations, it had its own distinctive characteristics. Western political structures had many similarities with those of the other more recent civilizations of Japan, Russia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Europeans long lived under the threat of incursions from the stronger Islamic world. There were many indications of a developing, vital society: population growth, economic productivity, increased political complexity, technological innovation, and artistic and intellectual complexity. Major contributions to the development of Western civilization occurred in politics and social structure; in intellectual life, medieval striving produced the university and Gothic architectural forms.

Stages of Postclassical Development. From the middle of the 6th century C.E. until about 900, disorder prevailed in western Europe. Rome's fall left Italy in economic, political, and intellectual decline. The Catholic church remained strong. Muslim-controlled Spain maintained a vibrant intellectual and economic life but only later influenced European development. The center of the postclassical West was in France, the Low Countries, and southern and western Germany. England later joined the core. Continual raids by Scandinavian Vikings hindered political and economic development. Intellectual activity sharply diminished; most literate individuals were Catholic monks and priests.

The Manorial System: Obligations and Allegiances. Until the 10th century, most political organization was local. Manorialism was a system of reciprocal economic and political obligations between landlords and peasants. Most individuals were serfs living on self-sufficient agricultural estates (manors). In return for protection, they gave lords part of their crops and provided labor services. Inferior technology limited agricultural output until the 9th-century introduction of the moldboard plow and the three-field cultivation system increased yields. Serfs bore many burdens, but they were not slaves. They had heritable ownership of houses and land as long as they met obligations. Peasant villages provided community life and limited self-government.

The Church: Political and Spiritual Power. The Catholic church in the first centuries after 500 was the single example of firm organization. The popes headed a hierarchy based on the Roman imperial model; they appointed some bishops, regulated doctrine, and sponsored missionary activity. The conversion of Germanic kings, such as Clovis of the Franks, around 496, demonstrated the spiritual and political power of the church. It also developed the monastic movement. In Italy, Benedict of Nursia created the most important set of monastic rules in the 6th century. Monasteries had both spiritual and secular functions. They promoted Christian

unity, served as examples of holy life, improved cultivation techniques, stressed productive work, and preserved the heritage of Greco-Roman culture.

Charlemagne and His Successors. The Carolingian dynasty of the Franks ruling in France, Belgium, and Germany grew stronger during the 8th century. Charles Martel defeated Muslim invaders at Tours in 732. Charlemagne built a substantial empire by 800. He helped to restore church-based education and revived traditions of Roman imperial government. The empire did not survive Charlemagne's death in 814. His sons divided the territory and later rulers lacked talent. Subsequent political history was marked by regional monarchies existing within a civilization with strong cultural unity initially centered on Catholic Christianity. French, German, English, and other separate languages emerged, providing a beginning for national identity. The rulers reigning in Germany and northern Italy initially were the strongest; they called themselves Holy Roman emperors, but they failed to create a solid monarchy. Local lords and city-states went their own way.

New Economic and Urban Vigor. During the 9th and 10th centuries, new agricultural techniques—the moldboard plow, the three-field system—significantly increased production. Horse collars, also useful for agriculture, and stirrups confirmed lordly dominance. Viking incursions diminished as the raiders seized territorial control or regional governments became stronger. Both factors allowed population growth and encouraged economic innovation. Expanding towns emerged as regional trade centers with a merchant class and craft production. The need for more food led to colonization to develop new agricultural land. The demand for labor resulted in less harsh conditions for serfs. The growing urban centers increased the spread of literacy, revitalized popular culture, and stimulated religious life. By the 11th century, cathedral schools evolved into universities. Students studied medicine and law; later theology and philosophy became important disciplines. Art and architecture reached new peaks.

Feudal Monarchies and Political Advances. From the 6th century, feudalism, a system of political and military relationships, evolved in western Europe. Military elites of the landlord class could afford horses and iron weapons. The greater lords provided protection to lesser lords (vassals) who in return supplied military and other service. Feudal relationships first served local needs, but they later were extended to cover larger regions. Charlemagne acted in that fashion. Later rulers, notably the Capetian kings of France from the 10th century, used feudalism to evolve from regional lords to rulers controlling a larger territory. In their feudal monarchy, they began bureaucratic administration and specialization of official functions. William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066 and merged feudal techniques with a more centralized government. Royal officials, sheriffs, supervised local justice. The growth of feudal monarchies independently duplicated measures followed in other centralizing societies.

Limited Government. Western Europe remained politically divided. The Holy Roman Empire's territories in Germany and Italy were controlled by local lords and city-states. The pope ruled in central Italy. Regional units prevailed in the Low Countries. In strong feudal monarchies, power was limited by the church, aristocratic military strength, and developing urban centers. King John of England in 1215 was forced to recognize feudal rights in the Magna Carta. Parliaments, bodies representing privileged groups, emerged in Catalonia in 1000. In England a parliament, operating from 1265, gained the right to rule on taxation and related policy matters. Most members of societies were not represented, but the creation of representative bodies was the beginning of a distinctive political process not present in other civilizations. Despite the checks, European rulers made limited progress in advancing central

authority. Their weakness was demonstrated by local wars turning into larger conflicts, such as the Hundred Years War of the 14th century between the French and English.

The West's Expansionist Impulse. The ongoing political and economic changes spurred European expansion beyond initial postclassical borders. From the 11th century, Germanic knights and agricultural settlers changed the population and environmental balance in eastern Germany and Poland. In Spain and Portugal, small Christian states in the 10th century began the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from Muslims. Viking voyagers crossed the Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, and Canada. The most dramatic expansion occurred during the Crusades against Muslims in the Holy Land. Pope Urban II called the first in 1095. Christian warriors seeking salvation and spoils established kingdoms in the Holy Land enduring into the 13th century. Their presence helped to expose Europeans to cultural and economic influences from Byzantium and Islam.

Religious Reform and Evolution. The Catholic church went through several periods of decline and renewal. The church's wealth and power often led its officials to become preoccupied with secular matters. Monastic orders and popes from the 11th century worked to reform the church. Leaders, such as St. Francis and St. Clare, both from Assisi, purified monastic orders and gave new spiritual vigor to the church. Pope Gregory VII attempted to free the church from secular interference by stipulating that priests remain unmarried and that bishops not be appointed by the state. Independent church courts developed to rule on religious concerns.

The High Middle Ages. Postclassical Western civilization reached its high point during the 12th and 13th centuries. Creative tensions among feudal political forms, emerging monarchies, and the authority of the church produced major changes in political, religious, intellectual, social, and economic life.

Western Culture in the Postclassical Era. Christianity was the clearest unifying cultural element in western Europe, even though it changed as European society matured.

Theology: Assimilating Faith and Reason. Before 1000 C.E., a few church members had attempted to preserve and interpret the ideas of earlier thinkers, especially Aristotle and Augustine. The efforts gradually produced a fuller understanding of the past, particularly in philosophy, rhetoric, and logic. After 1000, the process went to new levels. Absolute faith in God's word was stressed, but it was held that human reason contributed to the understanding of religion and the natural order. Peter Abelard in 12th-century Paris used logic to demonstrate contradictions in doctrine. Many church leaders opposed such endeavors and emphasized the role of faith for understanding religious mysteries. St. Bernard of Clairvaux successfully challenged Abelard and stressed the importance of mystical union with God. The debates matched similar tensions within Islam concerning philosophical and scientific traditions. In Europe, there were increasing efforts to bridge this gap. By the 12th century, the debate flourished in universities, opening intellectual avenues not present in other civilizations. In China, for example, a single path was followed. The European universities produced men for clerical and state bureaucracies, but they also motivated a thirst for knowledge from other past and present civilizations. By the 13th century, Western thinkers had created a synthesis of medieval learning. St. Thomas Aquinas of Paris in his *Summas* held that faith came first but that human reason allowed a greater understanding of natural order, moral law, and the nature of

God. Although scholasticism deteriorated after Thomas, it had opened new paths for human understanding. Medieval philosophy did not encourage scientific endeavor, but a few scholars, such as Roger Bacon, did important experimental work in optics and other fields.

Popular Religion. Although we do not know much about popular beliefs, Christian devotion ran deep within individuals. The rise of cities encouraged the formation of lay groups. The cults of the Virgin Mary and sundry saints demonstrated a need for intermediaries between people and God. Pagan practices endured and blended into Christianity.

Religious Themes in Art and Literature. Christian art and architecture reflected both popular and formal themes. Religious ideas dominated painting, with the early stiff and stylized figures changing by the 14th and 15th centuries to more realistic portrayals that included secular scenes. Architecture followed Roman models. A Romanesque style had rectangular buildings surmounted by domes. During the 11th century, the Gothic style appeared, producing soaring spires and arched windows requiring great technical skills. Literature and music equally reflected religious interest. Latin writings dealt with philosophy, law, and politics. Vernacular literature developed, incorporating themes from the past, such as the English *Beowulf* and the French *Song of Roland*. Contemporary secular themes were represented in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Courtly poets (troubadours) in 14th-century southern France portrayed courtly love.

Changing Economic and Social Forms in the Postclassical Centuries. Apart from the cultural cement formed by the Catholic church, Western society had other common features in economic activity and social structure. The postclassical West demonstrated great powers of innovation. When trade revived in the 10th century, the West became a kind of common commercial zone as merchants moved commodities from one region to another.

New Strains in Rural Life. Agricultural improvements after 800 C.E. allowed some peasants to shake off the most severe manorial constraints. Noble landlords continued their military functions but used trade to improve their living styles. The more complex economy increased landlord-peasant tensions. From then until the 19th century, there were recurring struggles between the two groups. Peasants wanted more freedom and control of land, while landlords wanted higher revenues. In general, peasant conditions improved and landlord controls weakened. Although agriculture remained technologically backward when compared with that in other societies, it had surpassed previous levels.

Growth of Trade and Banking. Urban growth promoted more specialized manufacturing and commerce. Banking was introduced by Italian businessmen. The use of money spread rapidly. Large trading and banking operations clearly were capitalistic. Europeans traded with other world regions, particularly via Italian Mediterranean merchants, for luxury goods and spices. Within Europe, raw materials and manufactured items were exchanged. Cities in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia formed the Hanseatic League to encourage commerce. European traders, although entering into many economic pursuits as demonstrated in the 15th-century career of Jacques Coeur, still generally remained less venturesome and wealthy than their Islamic counterparts. The weakness of western governments allowed merchants a freer hand than in many civilizations. Cities were ruled by commercial leagues, and rulers allied with them against the aristocracy. Apart from taxation and borrowing, governments left merchants alone, allowing them to gain an independent role in society. Most peasants and landlords were not enmeshed in a market system. In cities, the characteristic institution was the merchant or

artisan guild. Guilds grouped people in similar occupations, regulated apprenticeships, maintained good workmanship, and discouraged innovations. They played an important political and social role in cities. Manufacturing and commercial methods in Europe improved, but they did not attain Asian levels in ironmaking and textile production. Only in a few areas, such as clock making, did they take the lead. By the late Middle Ages, the western medieval economy contained contradictory elements. Commercial and capitalistic trends jostled the slower rural economy and guild protectionism.

Limited Sphere for Women. As elsewhere, increasing complexity of social and economic life limited women's roles. Women's work remained vital to families. Christian emphasis on spiritual equality remained important, while female monastic groups offered a limited alternative to marriage. Veneration of the Virgin Mary and other female religious figures provided positive role models for women. Still, even though women were less restricted than those within Islam, they lost ground. They were increasingly hemmed in by male-dominated organizations. By the close of the Middle Ages, patriarchal structures were firmly established.

The Decline of the Medieval Synthesis. After 1300, postclassical Western civilization declined. A major war embroiled France and England during the 14th and 15th centuries. The sporadic fighting spread economic distress and demonstrated the weaknesses of the feudal order. At the same time, key sources of Western vitality degenerated. Agriculture could not keep up with population growth. Famines followed. Further losses came from the Black Death in 1348 and succeeding plagues. Tensions between landlord and peasants, and artisans and their employees, intensified.

Signs of Strain. There were increasing challenges to medieval institutions. The land-owning aristocracy, the ruling class, lost its military role as professional armies and new weapons transformed warfare. Aristocrats retreated into a ceremonial style of life emphasizing chivalry. The balance of power between church and state shifted in favor of the state. As the church leaders struggled to retain secular authority, they lost touch with individual believers who turned to popular religious currents emphasizing direct experience of God. Intellectual and artistic synthesis also declined. Church officials became less tolerant of intellectual boldness and retreated from Aquinas' blend of rationalism and religion. In art, styles became more realistic.

In Depth: Western Civilization. Western civilization is hard to define, since the classical Mediterraneans did not directly identify what "Western" was and because of the lack of political unity in Western Europe in the postclassical era. However, western Europeans certainly would have recognized Christianity as a common element. The rapid spread of universities and trade patterns increasingly joined much of western Europe. Furthermore, defining Western civilization is complicated because Europe borrowed so much from Asian civilizations.

The Postclassical West and Its Heritage. The Middle Ages has been regarded as a backward period between the era of Greece and Rome and the vigorous new civilization of the 15th century. This view neglects the extent of medieval creativity. Much of Europe had not previously been incorporated into a major civilization. Europeans, for the first time, were building appropriate institutions and culture. Medieval thinkers linked classical rationalism within a strong Christian framework. Classical styles were preserved but were surpassed by new expressive forms. Medieval economics and politics established firm foundations for the future. Western European civilization shared many attributes with other emerging regions; among its distinctive aspects was an aggressive interest in the wider world.

Global Connections: Medieval Europe and the World. Western Europe in the Middle Ages had a love-hate relationship with the world around it. Early on, Europe seemed threatened by Vikings, Asian nomads, and Islam. At the same time, Europeans actively copied many features from Islam and traded with Asians. Through selective acceptance of benefits from the world around them, this civilization developed a global awareness.

KEY TERMS

Middle Ages: The period in western European history between the fall of the Roman Empire and the 15th century. **Gothic:** An architectural style developed during the Middle Ages in western Europe; featured pointed arches and flying buttresses as external support on main walls.

Vikings: Seagoing Scandinavian raiders who disrupted coastal areas of Europe from the 8th to 11th centuries; pushed across the Atlantic to Iceland, Greenland, and North America.

Manorialism: System of economic and political relations between landlords and their laborers during the Middle Ages; involved a hierarchy of reciprocal obligations that exchanged labor for access to land.

Serfs: Peasant agricultural laborers within the manorial system. **Moldboard:** Heavy plow introduced in northern Europe during the Middle Ages; permitted deeper cultivation of heavier soils.

Three-field system: One-third of the land left unplanted each year to increase fertility.

Clovis: King of the Franks; converted to Christianity circa 496. **Carolingians:** Royal house of the Franks from the 8th to the 10th centuries. **Charles Martel:** Carolingian monarch of the Franks; defeated Muslims at Tours in 732. **Charlemagne:** Carolingian monarch who established a large empire in France and Germany circa 800.

Holy Roman emperors: Rulers in northern Italy and Germany following the breakup of Charlemagne's empire; claimed title of emperor but failed to develop centralized monarchy. **Feudalism:** Relationships among the military elite during the Middle Ages; provided protection to lesser lords in return for military service. **Vassals:** Members of the military elite who received land or a benefice from a lord in return for military service and loyalty.

Capetians: French dynasty ruling from the 10th century; developed a strong feudal monarchy.

William the Conqueror: Invaded England from Normandy in 1066; established tight feudal system and centralized monarchy in England.

Magna Carta: Great Charter issued by King John of England in 1215; confirmed feudal rights against monarchical claims; represented principle of mutual limits and obligations between rulers and feudal aristocracy.

Parliaments: Bodies representing privileged groups; institutionalized the feudal principle that rulers should consult their vassals.

Hundred Years War: Conflict between England and France (1337-1453).

Pope Urban II: Called First Crusade in 1095; appealed to Christians to free the Holy Land from Muslim control.

St. Clare of Assisi: 13th-century founder of a women's monastic order; represented a new spirit of purity and dedication to the Catholic church.

Gregory VII: 11th-century pope who attempted to free the Catholic church from interference of feudal lords; quarreled with Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV over the practice of lay investiture of bishops.

Peter Abelard: Author of *Yes and No*; a university scholar who applied logic to problems of theology; demonstrated logical contradictions within established doctrine.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux: Emphasized role of faith in preference to logic; stressed importance of mystical union with God; successfully challenged Abelard and had him driven from the universities.

Thomas Aquinas: Creator of one of the great syntheses of medieval learning; taught at University of Paris; author of *Summas*; believed that through reason it was possible to know much about natural order, moral law, and the nature of God.

Scholasticism: Dominant medieval philosophical approach, so called because of its base in the schools or universities; based on the use of logic to resolve theological problems.

Troubadours: Poets in 14th-century southern France; gave a new value to the emotion of love in the Western tradition.

Hanseatic League: An organization of north German and Scandinavian cities for the purpose of establishing a commercial alliance.

Jacques Coeur: 15th-century French merchant; his career demonstrates new course of medieval commerce.

Guilds: Associations of workers in the same occupation in a single city; stressed security and mutual control; limited membership, regulated apprenticeship, guaranteed good workmanship, discouraged innovations; often established franchise within cities.

Black Death: Plague that struck Europe in the 14th century; significantly reduced Europe's population; affected social structure.

Roman Catholic church: Church established in western Europe during the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages with its head being the bishop of Rome or pope.

Pope: Meaning papa or father; bishop of Rome and head of Catholic church.

Franks: One of the principal tribes of the Germanic peoples; settled in area of France during the folk migrations of the 4th and 5th centuries.

Benedict of Nursia: (480 – 550) Italian abbot who founded the monastery at Monte Cassino and the Benedictine order based on his teachings.

Three estates: The three social groups considered most powerful in Western countries; church, nobles, and urban leaders.

Ferdinand and Isabella: King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile married in 1469 to bring the kingdoms of Spain together to complete the reconquest of Spain from the Muslims.

First Crusade: (1096 – 1099) Crusade called by Pope Urban II which captured Jerusalem.

Third Crusade: (1189 – 1192) Crusade led by King Richard the Lionhearted to recapture the city of Jerusalem from Islamic forces led by Saladin; failed in attempt.

Fourth Crusade: (1202 – 1204) Crusade which by a strange series of events attacked and sacked Constantinople.

Francis of Assisi: (1181 – 1226) Son of wealthy merchant; he renounced his wealth and chose a harsh life of poverty; later founded the Holy Order of St. Francis.

Investiture: A formal conferring of power to clergy usually with robes or other Christian symbols.

Augustine of Hippo: (354 – 430) Bishop of Hippo who wrote *Confessions* and *City of God*, which formed the basis for the doctrine of man's salvation by divine grace for the church.

Roger Bacon: (1214 – 1292) English philosopher and scientist who withdrew from medieval scholasticism and focused on experimental science; influenced later thinkers of the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution.

Geoffrey Chaucer: English author who wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, a literary masterpiece written in the vernacular in which pilgrims were going to worship at the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury.

Romanesque: Architectural style which was an adaptation of the Roman basilica and barrel arch form.

***Beowulf*:** Anglo-Saxon epic poem dated to the 8th century which details Anglo-Saxon society through the adventures of the hero Beowulf.

***Romance of the Rose*:** Poem written by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung during the 13th century; details the ideas of courtly love.

Chivalry: Medieval code used by knights which included the ideals of courage, honor, and the protection of the weak.