

The Pelican History of Medieval Europe

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This is a short survey of the political history of medieval Europe from the time of Charlemagne to the end of the 15th century and the fall of Constantinople. As is well known in the 5th century the Roman empire divided into a western and eastern part. The western Latin and the eastern Greek known as the Byzantine empire. The Latin part was soon overrun by barbarians and fell apart as a political unity, while the eastern continued for almost a thousand years keeping the old civilization alive. Shortly before this division the Christian sects had gained political power and become the state church. The above-mentioned split would result in a corresponding religious one with the Roman Catholic church on one hand with a Pope, and a Greek Orthodox on the other. Relations between the churches were basically amiable and the hope of a eventual unification would be kept alive for a long time.

The fall of the Roman empire in the west had momentous consequences. There was a marked decline of civilization and order. Trade became marginalized, cities lost their importance, and instead a more primitive agricultural economy became predominant. It is traditionally referred to as feudal, meaning that there was an hierarchy. The basic unit was the estate on which serfs worked. Not legally slaves but bound to the soil and obligated to do service for the benefit of the landowner. The landowners in their turn may be subjects of a more powerful landowner, who in his turn might be a vassal of the king - *primus inter pares* - obliged to him to provide manpower to his army, which was also serve as his protection, as the state was now defunct. The memory of the Roman empire must have been seen as a Golden age of order and security, ravaged as the country had been by huge migrations of pagan people. There must have been a feeling of living at the end of times, which the millennial nature of Christianity could have done nothing but reaffirm. Two things were going on in the Middle Ages, an extension of Christianity and an expansion of Islam. The latter was stopped northwards by the presence of the Byzantine empire but spread rapidly all over North Africa and conquered the Iberian peninsula but was stopped at Tours in 732 by Karl Martell the grandfather of Charlemagne. Later in the 10th century the Arabs also conquered Sicily from the Byzantine empire, but their tenure was comparatively short, and the island was reconquered by the Normans.

The Roman Empire being defunct it was supposed to be replaced by the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans with the blessings and co-operation by the Catholic Church. However, in spite of some very able emperors it never reached the cohesive structure enjoyed by Rome, the emperors being elected by the local strongmen, and the empire remained divided and fractured well into modern times. In the early centuries of the Medieval period there was a political power struggle between the Pope and the Emperor. Initially the Pope had the upper hand. Gregory VII made sure that the Pope had the power to appoint bishops not the Emperor, and the name of Canossa is often invoked as a symbol. It refers to the German emperor Henry IV being banned by the Pope making a winter

journey of penitence to the Popes temporary residence up in the mountains. However, the triumph of the Pope was short-lived even if many of the achievements of his reign would last. Eventually secular power won out, but of course the influence of the Catholic church would be pervasive, if not politically, militarily or diplomatically. Those would indeed be severely curtailed and for some time the Popes no longer resided in Rome but in Avignon, and at some time in the 14th century there were actually a number of simultaneous Popes, which greatly damaged the prestige of the position.

There were no sense of nations, but some sense, at least among the elite, of being a European through a common Christian heritage. This manifested itself in the crusades taking place during the eleventh to the thirteenth century. The emergence of the Turks, another one of those Nomadic tribes from Central Asia, radicalized the situation in Jerusalem. Under the Arabs Christian pilgrims had been tolerated, not so anymore. The first attempt was a farce, subsequent attempts were more well-planned involving the co-operation of the European strong men. For some time there was success, Jerusalem was conquered as well as some part of the Syrian coast. But the Christian suzerainty of the Holy City was brief, and the eastern conquests were soon lost. Relations with the Byzantine were strained, initially the crusaders had hoped for a unification of Christendom, but there were fall-outs and the most serious sacking of Constantinople was not due to the Turks but crusading forces. Clearly the strength of Europe was not strong enough to challenge the Islamic states. But as noted above the Normans reconquered Sicily, and the Iberian peninsula was gradually being reclaimed by Christian states such as Castile, Aragon and Portugal. However, the last Moorish stronghold - Grenada - did not fall until the end of the 15th century.

The book concentrates on Western Europe, meaning primarily England, France and the city states of Italy and their trading empires. Flanders with its textile industry appears marginally as does the Hanseatic League of Northern Germany, growing important as Mediterranean trade suffered a relative decline due to the growing powers of the Turks. The key development is the emergence of England and France as nation states, a process provoked as well as inspired by the long Hundred Years War between England and France. The position of the English kings was a bit anomalous. Being both a sovereign king of England and a fief of the French one. France was the more powerful country by virtue of its riches, geographical extension and population, the latter being close to eight times that of England. However, the English with their incursions into France held the edge due to superior military prowess, the English long-bows are often mentioned. In the long run the position of England was untenable and they were driven out of France, except keeping a stronghold at Calais. The long war in France would have a follow-up in England in the form of a Civil War known as the War of the Roses which would reach its conclusion at the battle of Bosworth and the death of Richard III and the ascent of the Tudor dynasty.

Nothing is said about Scandinavia, only a little about the Teutonic knights and the Baltic States. As to the east the expansion of the Turkish empire posed a real threat to Europe. The Balkan was captured, and the Hungarians were seriously threatened. Rivalry between the Germans, the Poles and the Lithuanian, recently converted to Catholic Christianity would have led to a catastrophe had not the Turks been pressed by another nomad - Tamberline.

Intellectually contacts with the Arabs meant renewed and deepened contact with the Greek civilization, especially of Aristotle, which would have a crucial influence on rational Catholic thought i.e. scholasticism, and pave the way for the coming Renaissance, as would the economical upswing of the Italian city states and invigorated trading. The first seeds of the coming Reformation, which would break the universal power and influence of the Catholic church had already started in Bohemia with Jan Hus, who would be burnt on the stake as a heretic, but his impact would not.

Soon the Iberian states would come to power and the next stage of discovery and colonization be about to begin, shifting the focus on the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. But that would spell the end of the Middle Ages.

As noted the book has an English perspective and only that which pertains to English history gets a fair hearing. Although there is a lot on the early German emperors, the nature of that empire during the Middle ages, say from the twelfth century and on is not really touched upon, nor on what was really going on east of it. In particular the relationship between German and Slavic lands, a rather complicated and contentious history.

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