A Brief Introduction to European Society in the Middle Ages and the Church's Role in the Society

Most Americans have some very basic knowledge concerning the Roman Empire and know something about the Reformation and the modern period, but have heard little about the Middle Ages.

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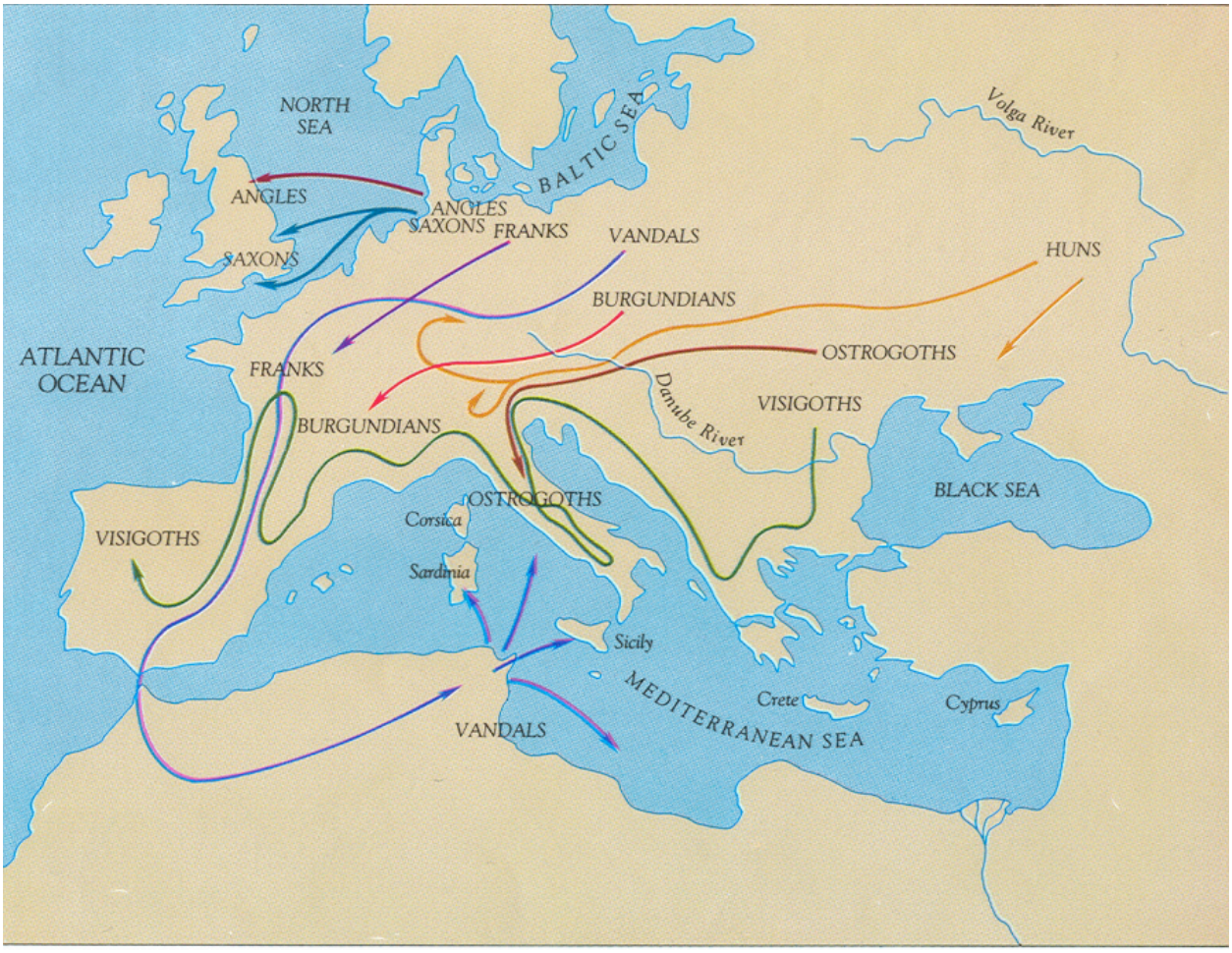
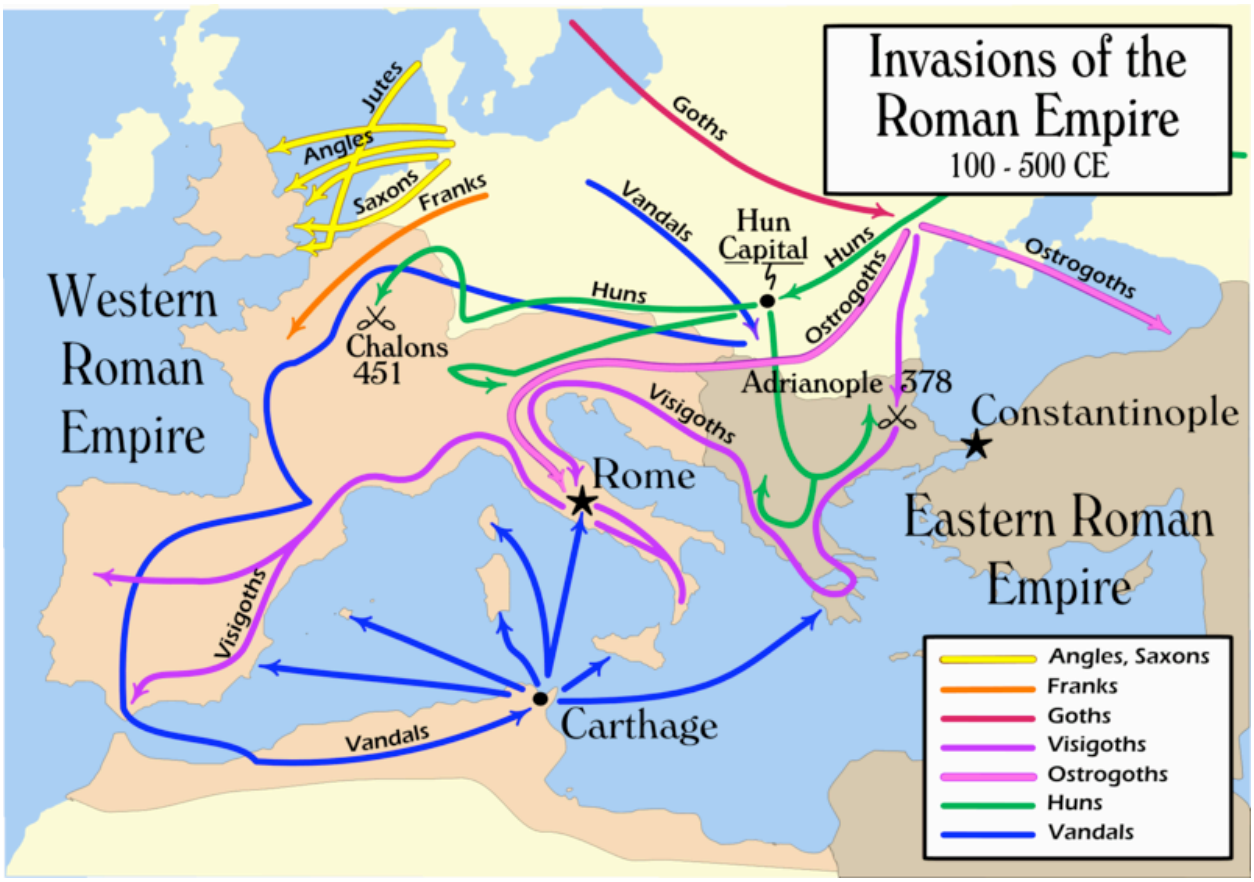
I. Transition from the Decline of the Roman Empire to the Early Middle Ages

- Economic Instability in the Later Roman Empire
  - Economic Crises in the Second and Third Centuries A.D. with Periods of Intermittent Stability Under Military Leaders
  - Political Crises Due to Division of Empire between Competing Soldier-Emperors
    - Ambition/Revolts—>Anarchy/Civil War→Decrease in Production Due to Breakdown of Central Authority, Rise of Inflation and Collapse of Currency (Debased and Inflated Coinage)→Those Responsible for Producing Basic Commodities Did Not Receive Back Benefits Equal to

Taxes Paid→Abandonment of Land to Avoid Taxes Owed→Irrigation Systems Not Maintained, So Land Becomes Unproductive
        - These changes ultimately meant that the demands of government/warfare exceeded what could be supported by the resources of the Empire.
- Military Challenges
    - Persian Wars (230-259)
        - Rising Sassanian Dynasty Claimed Rome's Eastern Provinces
        - Roman Emperor Valerian Taken Prisoner by Persians
    - Westward and Southward Movement of Various Germanic Peoples
        - These kin-based groups formed loose confederacies and were initially nomadic horseman. Where they settled for a period of time, they adopted agriculture and had various degrees of relationship with the declining Roman Empire (received tribute from the Romans, defended borders of Roman Empire, served as mercenary troops to support the regular army, later even dominated the officer corps of the army).



- Beginning in 249-267, the Goths moved south to conquer Dacia (southern Romania), leading the Emperor Aurelian to withdraw from Dacia in 270-275.
- Under pressure from the Huns, the Goths moved further south, crossing the Danube and entering Moesia (northern Bulgaria west to Serbia) in 376. The Roman Emperor Valens allowed them to settle in Moesia if the Goths agreed to defend it from the Huns and also to hand over their sons to the Romans. The Goths resented this arrangement and defeated the Romans at Adrianople in 378, demonstrating the superiority of their cavalry over Roman infantry and the Roman Emperor Valens was killed in battle.



- In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Germanic tribes (especially the two branches of the Goths—the Visigoths and the Ostragoths) moved further south and west, taking over Roman settlements and established independent kingdoms.

- During this period, the Vandals (another Germanic tribe) moved even farther west, taking over much of Spain and North Africa (modern Morocco and Algeria).

- The Huns swept into northern Italy and France, raiding and then withdrawing in order to find adequate food. They were not a Germanic tribe, but rather of Central Asian origin with a Mongoloid appearance, scarred faces and (possibly) bound heads, who lived on their horses and fought from horseback very skillfully, using a composite bow and bone tipped arrows.
    - Their most influential leader Attila was finally defeated by a confederation of Roman Visigothic forces in France at Chalons (451). Their forces being weakened, Attila's sons were defeated by a coalition of various Germanic tribes at Nedao (Nedava) in western Hungary in 454.

- Rome was sacked numerous times (387, 410, 455), as were other cities in northern Italy.

Conversion of the Germanic Peoples to Christianity

- To translate the Bible into the Gothic language, Ulfilas (Wulfila) (c. 310-383) drew letters from the Greek and Latin alphabet and from Gothic Runes (Elder Futhark) to represent the sounds of the Gothic language.
- Ulfilas adhered to Arian Christianity, as did most Goths in the fourth to sixth centuries

A Selection from Luke's Gospel in Ulfilas' Gothic Translation

- It took centuries for the Germanic peoples to be converted to Christianity, with the tribes in northeastern Europe and the Baltic states being converted from paganism only at a very late date.
    - See the chart in F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 64 (Map 5. Conversion of the Germanic peoples)

Consequences of the Barbarian Invasions

- Accelerated decentralization, decline in economic resources, withdrawl of Roman political and military personnel from most regions of the Empire.
- Church (bishops) were forced to step into the power vacuum and assume civic leadership and legal authority.
- The Church and its institutions became central to the preservation and transmission of literacy and intellectual culture.
    - Monasteries (and later cathedral schools) as centers of learning.
- The Church continued to provide a common language (ecclesiastical Latin), even as the general populace began speaking local languages (Romance [derived from Latin], Germanic, Celtic, etc.) that were not mutually comprehensible.
    - See language map in Rosamond McKitterick, *Atlas of the Medieval World*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004, p. 117.
- Most people lived near the subsistence level and depended upon local warlords and their retainers to defend their land from invasion by (other) barbarians. (Note the use of round watchtowers attached to castles and churches, as e.g. in Logan, p. 24; note also that this insecurity also placed restrictions upon mobility and trade.)
    - The relation between these local leaders (temporal power) and the Church (ecclesiastical power, yet also a major landholder) remained a subject of tension throughout the Middle Ages.
        - These tensions were increased by the drive of the see of Rome (a minor see prior to the fourth century) to be seen as being the successor to St. Peter and having a primacy and jurisdiction over all other bishops ordained in succession from the Apostles (Pope=Vicar of Christ).