

ORGANIZATION AND RELIGIOUS DISPUTES By the fourth century, the Christian church had developed a system of government based on a territorial plan borrowed from Roman administration. The Christian community in each city was headed by a bishop, whose area of jurisdiction was known as a bishopric or diocese. The bishoprics of each Roman province were clustered together under the direction of an archbishop. The bishops of four great cities, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, held positions of special power in church affairs because the churches in these cities all asserted that they had been founded by the original apostles sent out by Jesus.

One reason the church needed a more formal organization was the problem of **heresy**. As Christianity developed and spread, contradictory interpretations of important doctrines emerged. Heresy came to be viewed as a teaching different from the official “catholic” or universal beliefs of the church. For people deeply concerned about salvation, the question of whether Jesus’s nature is divine or human took on great significance. These doctrinal differences also became political issues, creating political factions that actually warred with one another. It is unlikely that ordinary people understood the issues in these debates.

One of the major heresies of the fourth century was **Arianism** (AR-ee-uh-niz-um), which was a product of the followers of Arius (AR-ee-uss), a priest from Alexandria in Egypt. Arius postulated that Jesus had been human and thus not truly God. Arius was opposed by Athanasius (ath-uh-NAY-shuss), a bishop of Alexandria, who argued that Jesus was human but also truly God. Emperor Constantine, disturbed by the controversy, called the first ecumenical council of the church, a meeting composed of representatives from the entire Christian community. The Council of Nicaea (ny-SEE-uh), held in 325, condemned Arianism and stated that Jesus was of “the same substance” as God: “We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.”²

The Council of Nicaea did not end the controversy, however; not only did Arianism persist in some parts of the Roman Empire for many years, but even more important, many of the Germanic Goths who established states in the west converted to Arian Christianity (see “The Germanic Kingdoms” later in this chapter). As a result of these fourth-century religious controversies, the Roman emperor came to play an increasingly important role in church affairs, especially by taking responsibility for calling church councils.

The End of the Western Empire

After Constantine’s death, the empire began to divide into western and eastern parts as fighting erupted on a regular basis between elements of the Roman army backing the claims of rival emperors. By 395, the western and eastern parts of the empire had become virtually two independent states. In

the course of the fifth century, while the empire in the east remained intact under the Roman emperor in Constantinople (see “The Byzantine Empire” later in this chapter), the administrative structure of the empire in the west collapsed and was replaced by an assortment of Germanic kingdoms. The process was a gradual one, involving the movement of Germans into the empire, military failures, struggles for power on the part of both Roman and German military leaders, and the efforts of wealthy aristocrats to support whichever side seemed to offer them greater security.

THE GERMANS During the first and second centuries C.E., the Romans had established the Rhine and Danube Rivers as the empire’s northern boundary. The Romans called all the peoples to the north of the rivers “Germans” and regarded them as uncivilized barbarians. In fact, the Germans comprised several different groups with their own customs and identities, but these constantly changed as tribes broke up and came together in new configurations. At times they formed larger confederations under strong warrior leaders. The Germans lived by herding and farming and also traded with people living along the northern frontiers of the Roman Empire. Their proximity to the Romans also led to some Romanization of the tribes. They were familiar with the Roman use of coins rather than barter and also gained some knowledge of both the Latin language and Roman military matters.

Contacts between Romans and Germans were common across the boundaries established along the Rhine and Danube Rivers. In fact, for some time, the Romans had hired Germanic tribes to fight other Germanic tribes that threatened Rome and enlisted groups of Germans to fight for Rome. Until the fourth century, the empire had proved capable of absorbing these people without harm to its political structure. As that century wore on, however, the situation began to change as the Germanic tribes came under new pressures from invaders.

GERMAN MIGRATIONS In the late fourth century, the Huns, a fierce tribe of nomads from Asia (see the box on p. 180), began moving into the Black Sea region and forced the Germanic inhabitants westward. In 376, one of the largest groups, which came to be known as the Visigoths (VIZ-uh-gahthz), asked the Roman emperor Valens (VAY-linz) (364–378) to allow them to cross the Danube and farm in the Balkans in return for providing troops for the Roman military. But the Roman military commanders mistreated them, as one ancient German historian recounted:

Soon famine and want came upon them. . . . Their leaders . . . begged the Roman commanders to open a market. But to what will not the “cursed lust for gold” compel men to assent? The generals, swayed by greed, sold them at a high price not only the flesh of sheep and oxen, but even the carcasses of dogs and unclean animals. . . . When their goods and chattels failed, the greedy traders demanded their sons in return for the necessities of life. And the parents consented even to this.³

Two Views of the Huns

THE FIRST SELECTION IS A DESCRIPTION of the Huns by Ammianus Marcellinus (am-ee-AY-nuss mar-suh-LY-nuss) (c. 330–c. 393), who has been called the “last great Roman historian.” Ammianus wrote a history of Rome from 96 c.E. to his own day. Only the chapters that deal with the period from 354 to 378 have survived. Historians believe that his account of the Huns is largely based on stereotypes. The second selection is taken from an account by Priscus, an envoy from the Eastern Roman Empire to the court of Attila (uh-TILL-uh or AT-ih-luh), king of the Huns from 434 to 453. His description of the Huns in 448 is quite different from that of Ammianus Marcellinus.

Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*

The Huns . . . are quite abnormally savage. From the moment of their birth they make deep gashes in their children’s cheeks, so that when in due course hair appears its growth is checked by the wrinkled scars. . . . They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals. . . . Still, their shape, however disagreeable, is human; but their way of life is so rough that they have no use for fire or seasoned food, but live on the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any sort of animal, which they warm a little by placing it between their thighs and the backs of their horses. They have no buildings to shelter them; . . . not so much as a hut thatched with reeds is to be found among them. . . . They wear garments of linen or of the skins of field-mice stitched together, and there is no difference between their clothing whether they are at home or abroad. Once they have put their necks in some dingy shirt they never take it off or change it till it rots and falls to pieces from incessant wear. They have round caps of fur on their heads, and protect their hairy legs with goatskins. Their shapeless shoes . . . make it hard to walk easily. In consequence they are ill-fitted to fight on foot, and remain glued to their horses, hardy but ugly beasts, on which they sometimes sit like women to perform their everyday business. Buying or selling, eating or drinking, are all done by day or night on horseback, and they even bow forward over their beasts’ narrow necks to enjoy a deep and dreamy sleep. . . .

They sometimes fight by challenging their foes to single combat, but when they join battle they advance in packs, uttering their various warcries. Being lightly equipped and

very sudden in their movements they can deliberately scatter and gallop about at random, inflicting tremendous slaughter; their extreme nimbleness enables them to force a rampart or pillage an enemy’s camp before one catches sight of them. . . . None of them plows or ever touches a plow-handle. They have no fixed abode, no home or law or settled manner of life, but wander like refugees with the wagons in which they live. In these their wives weave their filthy clothing, mate with their husbands, and give birth to their children, and rear them to the age of puberty.

Priscus, *An Account of the Court of Attila the Hun*

[We were invited to a banquet with Attila.] When the hour arrived we went to Attila’s palace, along with the embassy from the western Romans, and stood on the threshold of the hall in the presence of Attila. The cupbearers gave us a cup, according to the national custom, that we might pray before we sat down. Having tasted the cup, we proceeded to take our seats, all the chairs being ranged along the walls of the room on either side. Attila sat in the middle on a couch; a second couch was set behind him, and from it steps led up to his bed, which was covered with linen sheets and coverlets. . . .

[First the king and his guests pledged one another with the wine.] When this ceremony was over the cupbearers retired and tables, large enough for three or four, or even more, to sit at, were placed next to the table of Attila, so that each could take of the food on the dishes without leaving his seat. The attendant of Attila first entered with a dish full of meat, and behind him came the other attendants with bread and other dishes, which they laid on the tables. A luxurious meal, served on silver plate, had been made ready for us and the other guests, but Attila ate nothing but meat on a wooden platter. In everything else, too, he showed himself temperate; his cup was of wood, while to the guests were given goblets of gold and silver. His dress, too, was quite simple, affecting only to be clean.

Q *What motives may have prompted Ammianus Marcellinus to describe the Huns so harshly? How does the account of Priscus differ, and do you detect any strategies of the Huns to impress and overawe foreigners? How reliable do you think these descriptions of the Huns are? Why?*

Sources: Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*. From *THE LATER ROMAN EMPIRE* by Ammianus Marcellinus, selected and translated by Walter Hamilton (Penguin Classics, 1986). Translation copyright © Walter Hamilton, 1986. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd. Priscus, *An Account of the Court of Attila the Hun*, From *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, trans. J. B. Bury.

Outraged at this treatment, the Visigoths revolted. In 378, Emperor Valens and an army of 40,000 soldiers confronted the Visigoths at Adrianople. The emperor was killed, and two-thirds of the Roman soldiers were left dead on the battlefield.

The loss was not fatal, although the new emperor, Theodosius I, resettled the Visigoths and incorporated many of their soldiers into the Roman army. Some of the Visigoths even became army leaders. By the second half of the fourth

century, Roman policy allowed Roman army units to be composed entirely of Germanic tribes, known as **federates**, or allies of Rome.

THE THREAT OF THE GERMANS The existence of such military groups proved dangerous to the Late Empire. This was especially evident after Alaric (AL-uh-rik) became the leader of the Visigoths. Between 395 and 401, Alaric and his soldiers moved through the Balkans and then into Italy, seeking food and cash payments from Roman officials. When the city of Rome refused his demands in 408, Alaric marched to the gates and besieged the city, causing the senate of Rome to agree to pay 5,000 pounds of gold and 30,000 pounds of silver for his withdrawal. Two years later, frustrated in his demand that the Visigoths be given part of northern Italy, Alaric and his forces sacked Rome for three days. Alaric died soon after, and his Visigothic followers left Italy, crossed the Alps, and

moved into Spain and southern Gaul as Roman allies (see Map 7.2).

By this time, other Germanic tribes were also entering the Roman Empire and settling down. As one contemporary observer noted, “the barbarians, detesting their swords, turned to their plows and now cherish the Romans as comrades and friends.”⁴ In the early fifth century, the Burgundians arrived in southern Gaul, while the Franks moved into northern Gaul. Another group, the Vandals, under their leader Gaiseric (GY-zuh-rik), moved through Gaul and Spain, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar into North Africa, and seized Carthage, the capital city, in 439.

As the Germanic tribes moved into the empire and settled down, Roman forces were often withdrawn from the provinces, effectively reducing the central authority of the emperors. In 410, for example, the emperor Honorius (hoh-NOR-ee-uss) recalled the last Roman legions from Britain. As one ancient



MAP 7.2 German Migration Routes. In the fifth century, various groups of Germans migrated throughout the Western Roman Empire. Pressure from Huns in the east forced some tribes to move west into the empire, and many tribes already in the empire became involved in conflicts. Some fought the Roman forces, while others were induced to move to the empire’s far regions.

Q How far did the Vandals travel and in what period of time?

commentator remarked, “Honorius sent letters to the cities in Britain, urging them to fend for themselves.”⁵ With the withdrawal, the Saxons, who had arrived earlier as Roman allies, now expanded their control in Britain. Within another decade, both Spain and Gaul had also become free of imperial authority.

ROLE OF MASTERS OF THE SOLDIERS By the middle of the fifth century, the western provinces of the Roman Empire had been taken over by Germanic peoples who were in the process of creating independent kingdoms. At the same time, a semblance of imperial authority remained in Rome, although the real power behind the throne tended to rest in the hands of important military officials known as Masters of the Soldiers.

These military commanders controlled the government and dominated the imperial court. The three most prominent in the fifth century were Stilicho (STIL-i-koh), Aetius (ay-EE-shuss), and Ricimer (RISS-uh-mur). Stilicho and Ricimer were both Germans, whereas Aetius was a Roman. Although all three propped up emperors to maintain the fiction of imperial rule, they were also willing to cooperate with the Germans to maintain their power. But even the Masters of the Soldiers were never safe in the bloody world of fifth-century Roman political life. Stilicho was executed by the guards of Emperor Honorius. Aetius was killed by Emperor Valentinian (val-en-TIN-ee-un) III, who was in turn assassinated by two of Aetius’s German bodyguards, who sought to avenge their betrayed leader. Ricimer died a natural death, an unusual event in fifth-century Rome. No doubt, the constant infighting at the center of the Western Empire added to the instability of imperial rule.

By the mid-fifth century, imperial authority in the west was still operating only in Italy and small parts of Gaul. Even Rome itself was not safe. In 455, after the Romans broke a treaty that they had made with Gaiseric, leader of the Vandals, Gaiseric sent a Vandal fleet to Italy and sacked the undefended city of Rome. Twenty-one years later, in 476, Odoacer (oh-doh-AY-sur), a new Master of the Soldiers, himself of German origin, deposed the Roman emperor, the boy Romulus Augustulus (RAHM-yuh-luss ow-GOOS-chuh-luss). To many historians, the deposition of Romulus signaled the end of the Roman



Basilica di San Giovanni Battista, Monza, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library

Stilicho, a German Master of the Soldiers. Half-Vandal and half-Roman, Stilicho was the power behind the imperial throne from 395 to 408. Emperor Honorius ordered his execution in 408. These ivory panels show Stilicho at the right, in Vandal clothing, with his wife and son at the left.

Empire. Of course, this is only a symbolic date, since much of direct imperial rule had already been lost in the course of the fifth century. Even then the empire remained, as Odoacer presented himself as a German king obedient in theory to the Roman emperor Zeno (ZEE-noh) in Constantinople.

By the end of the fifth century, Roman imperial authority in the west had ceased. Nevertheless, the intellectual, governmental, and cultural traditions of the Late Roman Empire continued to live on in the new Germanic kingdoms.

The Germanic Kingdoms

FOCUS QUESTIONS: What changes did the Germanic peoples make to the political, economic, and social conditions of the Western Roman Empire? What were the main features of Germanic law and society, and how did they differ from those of the Romans?

By 500, the Western Roman Empire was being replaced politically by a series of kingdoms ruled by German kings (see Map 7.3). Although the Germans now ruled, they were greatly outnumbered by the Romans, who still controlled most of the economic resources. Both were Christian, but many of the Germans were Arian Christians, considered heretics by Romans who belonged to the Christian church in Rome, which had become known as the Roman Catholic Church. Gradually, the two groups merged into a common culture, although the pattern of settlement and the fusion of the Romans and Germans took different forms in the various Germanic kingdoms.



CHRONOLOGY The Late Roman Empire

Diocletian	284–305
Constantine	306–337
Edict of Milan	313
Construction of Constantinople	324–330
Valens	364–378
Battle of Adrianople	378
Theodosius I “the Great”	379–395
Division of the empire	395
Alaric and Visigoths sack Rome	410
Vandals sack Rome	455
Odoacer deposes Romulus Augustulus	476



MAP 7.3 The Germanic Kingdoms of the Old Western Empire. The Germanic tribes filled the power vacuum created by the demise of the Roman Empire, building states that blended elements of Germanic customs and laws with those of Roman culture, including large-scale conversions to Christianity. The Franks established the most durable of these Germanic states.

Q How did the movements of the Franks during this period correspond to the borders of present-day France?

The Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy

Zeno, the Roman emperor in Constantinople, was not pleased with Odoacer's actions and plotted to unseat him. In his desire to act against the German leader, Zeno brought another German tribe, the Ostrogoths (AHSS-truh-gahthss), into Italy. The Ostrogoths had recovered from a defeat by the Huns in the fourth century and under their king Theodoric (thee-AHD-uh-rik) (493–526) had attacked Constantinople. To divert them, Emperor Zeno invited Theodoric to act as his deputy to defeat Odoacer and bring Italy back into the empire. Theodoric accepted the challenge, marched into Italy, killed Odoacer, and then, contrary to Zeno's wishes, established himself as ruler of Italy in 493.

THEODORIC'S RULE More than any other Germanic state, the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy managed to maintain the Roman tradition of government. The Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, had received a Roman education while a hostage in

Constantinople. After taking control of Italy, he was eager to create a synthesis of Ostrogothic and Roman practices (see the box on p. 184). In addition to maintaining the entire structure of Roman imperial government, he established separate systems of rule for the Ostrogoths and Romans. The Italian population lived under Roman law administered by Roman officials. The Ostrogoths were governed by their own customs and their own officials. Nevertheless, although the Roman administrative system was kept intact, it was the Ostrogoths alone who controlled the army. Despite the apparent success of this "dual approach," Theodoric's system was unable to keep friction from developing between the Italian population and their Germanic overlords.

Religion proved to be a major source of trouble between Ostrogoths and Romans. The Ostrogoths had been converted earlier to Christianity, but to Arian Christianity, and consequently were viewed by western Christians and the Italians as heretics. Theodoric's rule grew ever harsher as discontent with Ostrogothic rule deepened.

Theodoric and Ostrogothic Italy

THE OSTROGOTHIC KING THEODORIC (493–526), who had been educated in Constantinople, was determined to maintain Roman culture rather than destroy it. His attempt to preserve *civitas* (see-VIL-ih-tahs), the traditional Roman civic culture, was well expressed in the official letters written in his name by Cassiodorus (kas-ee-uh-DOR-uss), who became master of offices in 525. Theodoric's efforts were largely undone by opposition from the Roman nobility and especially by Justinian's reconquest of the Italian peninsula shortly after Theodoric's death.

Letters of Cassiodorus

King Theodoric to Colossaeus

We delight to entrust our mandates to persons of approved character. . . .

Show forth the justice of the Goths, a nation happily situated for praise, since it is theirs to unite the forethought of the Romans and the virtue of the Barbarians. Remove all ill-planted customs, and impress upon all your subordinates that we would rather that our Treasury lost a suit than that it gained one wrongfully, rather that we lost money than the taxpayer was driven to suicide.

King Theodoric to Unigis, the Sword-Bearer

We delight to live after the law of the Romans, whom we seek to defend with our arms; and we are as much interested in the maintenance of morality as we can possibly be in war. For what profit is there in having removed the turmoil of the Barbarians, unless we live according to law? . . . Let other kings desire the glory of battles won, of cities taken, of ruins made; our purpose is, God helping us, so to rule that our

subjects shall grieve that they did not earlier acquire the blessing of our dominion.

King Theodoric to All the Jews of Genoa

The true mark of *civitas* is the observance of law. It is this which makes life in communities possible, and which separates man from the brutes. We therefore gladly accede to your request that all the privileges which the foresight of antiquity conferred upon the Jewish customs shall be renewed to you, for in truth it is our great desire that the laws of the ancients shall be kept in force to secure the reverence due to us. Everything which has been found to conduce to *civitas* should be held fast with enduring devotion.

King Theodoric to All the Goths Settled in Picenum and Samnium

The presence of the Sovereign doubles the sweetness of his gifts, and that man is like one dead whose face is not known to his lord. Come therefore by God's assistance, come all into our presence on the eighth day before the Ides of June [June 7], there solemnly to receive our royal largesse. But let there be no excesses by the way, no plundering the harvest of the cultivators nor trampling down their meadows, since for this cause do we gladly defray the expense of our armies that *civitas* may be kept intact by armed men.

Q In what ways do the letters of Cassiodorus illustrate Theodoric's efforts to preserve the traditional Roman civic culture? Judging from the letters, what were the obstacles to Theodoric's goal?

Source: From *Letters of Cassiodorus*, translated by Thomas Hodgkin (London: Henry Frowde, 1886), p. 210, 219, 229, 280.

END OF THE OSTROGOTHIC KINGDOM After Theodoric's death in 526, it quickly became apparent that much of his success had been due to the force of his own personality. His successors soon found themselves facing opposition from the imperial forces of the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire. Under Emperor Justinian (juh-STIN-ee-un) (527–565) (see "The Reign of Justinian" later in this chapter), Eastern Roman armies reconquered Italy between 535 and 552, devastating much of the peninsula in the process and destroying Rome as one of the great urban centers of the Mediterranean world. The Eastern Roman reconquest proved ephemeral, however. Another German tribe, the Lombards, invaded Italy in 568 and conquered much of northern and central Italy. Unlike the Ostrogoths, the Lombards were harsh rulers and cared little for Roman structures and traditions. The Lombards' fondness for fighting each other enabled the Eastern Romans to retain control of some parts of Italy, especially the area around Ravenna, which became the capital of imperial government in the west.

The Visigothic Kingdom of Spain

The Visigothic kingdom in Spain demonstrated a number of parallels to the Ostrogothic kingdom of Italy. Both favored coexistence between the Roman and German populations, both featured a warrior caste dominating a larger native population, and both continued to maintain much of the Roman structure of government while largely excluding Romans from power. There were also noticeable differences, however. Perceiving that their Arianism was a stumbling block to good relations, in the late sixth century the Visigothic rulers converted to Latin or Catholic Christianity and ended the tension caused by this heresy. Laws preventing intermarriage were dropped, and the Visigothic and Hispano-Roman peoples began to fuse together. A new body of law common to both peoples also developed.

The kingdom possessed one fatal weakness, however—the Visigoths fought constantly over the kingship. The Visigoths

did not have a hereditary monarchy and lacked any established procedure for choosing new rulers. Church officials tried to help develop a sense of order, as this canon from the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 illustrates: “No one of us shall dare to seize the kingdom; no one shall arouse sedition among the citizenry; no one shall think of killing the king.” Church decrees failed to stop the feuds, however, and assassinations remained a way of life in Visigothic Spain. In 711, Muslim invaders destroyed the Visigothic kingdom itself (see “The Rise of Islam” later in this chapter).

The Frankish Kingdom

Only one of the German states on the European continent proved long-lasting—the kingdom of the Franks. The establishment of a Frankish kingdom was the work of Clovis (c. 482–511), the leader of one group of Franks who eventually became king of them all.

THE RULE OF CLOVIS Around 500, Clovis became a Catholic Christian. He was not the first German king to convert to Christianity, but the others had joined the Arian sect of Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church regarded the Arians as heretics, people who believed in teachings that departed from the official church doctrine. Clovis found that his conversion to Catholic Christianity gained him the support of the Roman Catholic Church, which was only too eager to obtain the friendship of a major Germanic ruler who was a Catholic Christian. The conversion of the king also paved the way for the conversion of the Frankish peoples. Finally, Clovis could pose as a defender of the orthodox Catholic faith in order to justify his expansion at the beginning of the sixth century. He defeated the Alemanni (al-uh-MAH-nee) in southwest Germany and the Visigoths in southern Gaul. By 510, Clovis had established a powerful new Frankish kingdom stretching from the Pyrenees in the west to German lands in the east (modern-day France and western Germany).

Clovis was thus responsible for establishing a Frankish kingdom under the Merovingian (meh-ruh-VIN-jee-un) dynasty, a name derived from Merovech, their semilegendary ancestor. Clovis came to rely on his Frankish followers to rule in the old Roman city-states under the title of count. Often these officials were forced to share power with the Gallo-Roman Catholic bishops, producing a gradual fusion of Latin and German cultures, with the church serving to preserve the Latin culture. Clovis spent the last years of his life ensuring the survival of his dynasty by killing off relatives who were leaders of other groups of Franks.

THE SUCCESSORS OF CLOVIS After the death of Clovis, his sons divided the newly created kingdom, as was the Frankish custom. During the sixth and seventh centuries, the once-united Frankish kingdom came to be partitioned into three major areas: Neustria (NOO-stree-uh) in northern Gaul; Austrasia (aw-STRAY-zhuh), consisting of the ancient Frankish lands on both sides of the Rhine; and the former kingdom of Burgundy. All three were ruled by members of the



CHRONOLOGY The Germanic Kingdoms

Theodoric establishes an Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy	493
Clovis, king of the Franks, converts to Christianity	c. 500
Reconquest of Italy by Byzantines	535–552
Lombards begin conquest of Italy	568
Muslims shatter Visigoth kingdom in Spain	711
Charles Martel defeats Muslims	732

Merovingian dynasty. Within the three territories, members of the dynasty were assisted by powerful nobles. Frankish society possessed a ruling class that gradually intermarried with the old Gallo-Roman senatorial class to form a new nobility. These noble families took advantage of their position to expand their own lands and wealth at the expense of the monarchy. Within the royal household, the position of *major domus* (my-YOR DOH-moos), or mayor of the palace, the chief officer of the king’s household, began to overshadow the king. Essentially, both nobles and mayors of the palace were expanding their power at the expense of the kings.

At the beginning of the eighth century, the most important political development in the Frankish kingdom was the rise of Charles Martel, who served as mayor of the palace of Austrasia beginning in 714. Charles Martel led troops that defeated the Muslims near Poitiers (pwah-TYAY) in 732 and by the time of his death in 741 had become virtual ruler of the three Merovingian kingdoms. Though he was not king, Charles Martel’s dynamic efforts put his family on the verge of creating a new dynasty that would establish an even more powerful Frankish state (see Chapter 8).

During the sixth and seventh centuries, the Frankish kingdom witnessed a process of fusion between Gallo-Roman and Frankish cultures and peoples, a process accompanied by a significant decline in Roman standards of civilization and commercial activity. The Franks were warriors and did little to encourage either urban life or trade. Commerce declined in the interior, though seacoast towns maintained some activity. By 750, Frankish Gaul was basically an agricultural society in which the old Roman estates of the Late Empire continued unimpeded. Institutionally, however, Germanic concepts of kingship and customary law replaced the Roman governmental structure.

Anglo-Saxon England

The barbarian pressures on the Western Roman Empire had forced the emperors to withdraw the Roman armies and abandon Britain by the beginning of the fifth century. This opened the door to the Angles and Saxons, Germanic tribes from Denmark and northern Germany. Although these same peoples had made plundering raids for a century, the withdrawal of the Roman armies enabled them to make settlements instead. They met with resistance from the Celtic Britons, however, who still controlled the western regions of Cornwall, Wales, and Cumberland at the beginning of the seventh century (see Map 7.3). The German invaders

eventually succeeded in carving out small kingdoms throughout the island, such as Mercia, Northumberland, and Kent. This wave of German invaders would eventually be converted to Christianity by new groups of Christian missionaries (see "The Conversion of England" later in this chapter).

The Society of the Germanic Kingdoms

As the Germans infiltrated the Roman Empire, they were influenced by the Roman society they encountered. Consequently, the Germanic peoples of the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries were probably quite different from the Germans that the forces of Augustus encountered in the first century C.E. Moreover, there was a meaningful fusion of Roman and German upper classes in the new kingdoms. In Merovingian Frankish lands, upper-class Gallo-Romans intermarried with Frankish nobles to produce a new ruling class. Each influenced the other. Franks constructed Roman-style villas; Gallo-Romans adopted Frankish weapons.

The crucial social bond among the Germanic peoples was the family, especially the extended or patriarchal family of husbands, wives, children, brothers, sisters, cousins, and grandparents. In addition to working the land together and passing it down to succeeding generations, the extended family provided protection, which was sorely needed in the violent atmosphere of Merovingian times.

GERMANIC LAW The German conception of family and kinship affected the way Germanic law treated the problem of crime and punishment. In the Roman system, as in our own, a crime such as murder was considered an offense against society or the state and was handled by a court that heard evidence and arrived at a decision. Germanic law tended to be personal. An injury by one person against another could lead to a blood feud in which the family of the injured party took revenge on the kin of the wrongdoer. Feuds could result in savage acts of revenge—hands or feet might be hacked off, eyes gouged out, or ears and noses sliced off. Since this system had a tendency to get out of control and allow mayhem to multiply, an alternative system arose that made use of a fine called *wergeld* (WURR-geld). This was the amount paid by a wrongdoer to the family of the person who had been injured or killed. *Wergeld*, which means "money for a man," was the value of a person in monetary terms. That value varied considerably according to social status. The law of the Salic Franks, which was first written down under Roman influence at the beginning of the sixth century, stated: "If any one shall have killed a free Frank, or a barbarian living under the Salic law, and it have been proved on him, he shall be sentenced to 8,000 denars. . . . But if any one has slain a man who is in the service of the king, he shall be sentenced to 24,000 denars."⁶ An offense against a noble obviously cost considerably more than one against a free person or a slave.

Under German customary law, compurgation and the ordeal were the two most commonly used procedures for

determining whether an accused person was guilty and should have to pay *wergeld*. Compurgation was the swearing of an oath by the accused person, backed up by a group of "oathhelpers," numbering twelve or twenty-five, who would also swear that the accused person should be believed. The ordeal functioned in a variety of ways, all of which were based on the principle of divine intervention; divine forces (whether pagan or Christian) would not allow an innocent person to be harmed (see the box on p. 187).

THE FRANKISH FAMILY AND MARRIAGE For the Franks, like other Germanic peoples of the Early Middle Ages, the extended family was at the center of social organization. The Frankish family structure was quite simple. Males were dominant and made all the important decisions. A woman obeyed her father until she married and then fell under the legal domination of her husband. A widow, however, could hold property without a male guardian. In Frankish law, the *wergeld* of a wife of childbearing age—of value because she could produce children—was considerably higher than that of a man. The Salic law stated: "If any one killed a free woman after she had begun bearing children, he shall be sentenced to 24,000 denars. . . . After she can have no more children, he who kills her shall be sentenced to 8,000 denars."⁷

Since marriage affected the extended family group, fathers or uncles could arrange marriages for the good of the family without considering their children's wishes. Most important was the engagement ceremony in which a prospective son-in-law made a payment symbolizing the purchase of paternal authority over the bride. The essential feature of the marriage itself involved placing the married couple in bed to achieve their physical union. In first marriages, it was considered important that the wife be a virgin so as to ensure that any children would be the husband's. A virgin symbolized the ability of the bloodline to continue. For this reason, adultery was viewed as pollution of the woman and her offspring, poisoning the future. Adulterous wives were severely punished (an adulterous woman could be strangled or even burned alive); adulterous husbands were not. Divorce was relatively simple and was initiated primarily by the husband. Divorced wives simply returned to their families.

For most women in the new Germanic kingdoms, their legal status reflected the material conditions of their lives. Archaeological evidence suggests that most women had life expectancies of only thirty or forty years and that about 10 to 15 percent of women died in their childbearing years, no doubt due to complications associated with childbirth.

For most women, life consisted of domestic labor: providing food and clothing for the household, caring for the children, and assisting with numerous farming chores. This labor was crucial to the family economy. In addition to clothing and feeding their own families, women could sell or barter clothes and food for additional goods. Of all the duties of women, the most important was childbearing because it was crucial to the maintenance of the family and its properties.