

2015

## Early Medieval World (Chapter 2 of World History, A Short, Visual Introduction)

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### Recommended Citation

Corning, Caitlin, "Early Medieval World (Chapter 2 of World History, A Short, Visual Introduction)" (2015). *Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies*. 76.  
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**Early  
Medieval  
World**

The fifth through the tenth centuries was a period of significant transformation for Europe. As a result of the Germanic invasions and the collapse of the economy, the last Roman Emperor in the West, Romulus Augustulus (475–76), was deposed in 476. The Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire would continue in a much-truncated form until the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453. Not only did the Germanic tribes continue their expansion into the Roman territories in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Arabs conquered substantial territory in the seventh and eighth, and Viking, Magyar, and Arab attacks tore apart Europe in the ninth and tenth. All these groups added to the mix of cultures that created the medieval world.

### **FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE WEST**

There is no simple answer for why the western half of the Roman Empire collapsed in the fifth century. As far back as Diocletian (284–305), there had been the idea that the empire was so large it would be better managed by at least two emperors. From 395 onwards, this was the case. On the whole, the rulers in the West from 395 to 476 were not very capable and faced insurmountable problems. In comparison to the East, the West had a smaller population and a less-stable economic system. Increasing Germanic settlement and invasions in the West only added to these troubles.

As the fifth and sixth centuries continued, the two halves of the empire moved further apart. Roman imperial administration disappeared in the West, though not in the East. The West continued to use Latin, while the East emphasized Greek. In the West, the Germanic tribes established new kingdoms, fragmenting the unity of the old Roman state, and urban settlements collapsed. The West would remain significantly more rural until the High Middle Ages.

## BYZANTINE EMPIRE TO EARLY SEVENTH CENTURY

Historians use the term “Byzantine Empire” to identify the eastern half of the Roman Empire after the collapse of the West in 476. However, to the rulers in Constantinople, they were still the Roman emperors. Justinian (527–65), one of the most important of the early Byzantine emperors, was determined to reconquer lost territory. Relatively easy victories in North Africa and Spain raised hopes that the Reconquest would be successful. However, Italy proved much more difficult. For almost twenty years (535–53), Byzantine forces attempted to defeat the Ostrogoths. While eventually successful, these wars left the Italian peninsula ravaged and the Byzantines suffering under high taxes and economic troubles. Soon thereafter, the Byzantine Empire lost much of its northern Italian territory with the invasion of the Lombards. Justinian’s reign also witnessed the arrival of Slavs, Bulgars, and Avars into the Balkans, and significant warfare in the Middle East against the Sassanid Persian Empire.

By the reign of Heraclius (610–41), the war with the Persians reached a crisis. In the early part of his reign, the Persians took Syria, Palestine, parts of Egypt, and invaded the Anatolian heartlands. Nevertheless, from 622 to 628, Heraclius was able to advance as far as the Persian capital at Ctesiphon, forcing a peace treaty that restored much of the lost Byzantine territory. However, many of their cities had been ravaged, and there were economic worries and religious divides. Both empires were exhausted militarily. These problems help to explain the rapid gains of the Arab tribes after 632.



## RISE OF ISLAM (610–1000)

Muhammad (c. 571–632) was born in Mecca to a minor branch of one of the leading clans of the city. In 610, he claimed that the angel Gabriel had appeared and announced that Muhammad was God's prophet to bring a message of repentance. Receiving a series of revelations that were eventually compiled in the Qur'an, Muhammad taught that there was only one God, the God of Abraham. To Muhammad and the Muslim community, these revelations were more authoritative than the Jewish and Christian scriptures.

Merchants in Mecca perceived his religious claims as a threat. The city's economy was based in part on its reputation as a pilgrimage site for the pagan gods. Muhammad and his followers were forced out of the city in 622, whereupon they departed to Medina.<sup>1</sup> Muhammad soon became its political and religious leader. After a series of conflicts with Mecca, he and his supporters took control of that city in 630. By his death in 632, Muhammad had alliances with most of the tribes in the Arabian Peninsula.

The next century witnessed unprecedented conquest by the Arabs. By 651, they had conquered the Sassanid Persian Empire, as well as Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. This was due in part to the weaknesses of the two great superpowers in the Middle East. For the Byzantines, disputes over the nature of Christ caused significant animosity toward Constantinople. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 had ruled that Christ was fully God and fully man. However, a significant group of Christians had refused to accept this definition, instead arguing that Christ's divine nature dominated his human one. Supporters of Monophysitism (one nature-ism) were the majority in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria and were persecuted by the imperial government. As Muslims tolerated

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<sup>1</sup> The Islamic calendar is dated from this event.

all Christians as “People of the Book” whether Monophysite or Chalcedonian, some Monophysites saw advantages to being under Arab Muslim rule.

Civil war from 655 to 661 interrupted Arab expansion. After Muhammad’s death, there were controversies over who should lead the community. Some argued that only a direct descendant of the Prophet should rule the community. These people became the Shi’at Ali (Party of Ali) or the Shi’ites named after Ali (656–61), Muhammad’s son-in-law. Additional disputes in later generations further divided the Shi’ites into multiple groups. On the other hand, those who believed that any prominent Muslim could lead are the Sunnis, the majority of Muslims then and now.

Under the Umayyad dynasty that came to power in 661, expansion continued. In the West, their troops took control of the rest of North Africa, crossed to the Iberian Peninsula in 711, and were finally stopped by Charles Martel in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers in modern-day France. By 750, the Umayyad caliph ruled a territory that stretched from western India through the Middle East, across North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula.

In 750, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads. In 751, the Abbasid armies fought Chinese troops under the Tang Dynasty at the Battle of Talas River for control of Central Asia. One member of the Umayyad family, Abd al-Rahman (756–88), fled to the Iberian Peninsula where he established a separate caliphate. This was the first division of the Arab empire, but nowhere near the last. It was under the Abbasids, with their new capital at Baghdad, that scholars at the House of Wisdom created a cultural legacy that would profoundly shape Western Europe in later centuries. They preserved and translated ancient Greek and Roman manuscripts, popularized the use of paper, and introduced Arabic numerals. Scholars developed and explored algebra and geometry, made



# The Islamic World to 1500



Islamic world c. 1000  
Islamic world c. 1250  
Islamic world c. 1500

discoveries in optics, pharmacology, human anatomy, astronomy, and engineering. Many of the textbooks written by these scholars became standard texts in the West. This is why so many scientific and mathematical terms are Arabic in origin.

By 1000, the Islamic territories were increasingly fragmented. Never again would a single power control the territory from Spain to Central Asia. However, for much of the Middle Ages, this area was united by an Arabic-speaking Muslim elite, urban centers, an integrated trade network, and a technologically advanced culture. Significant numbers of Jews and Christians continued to be able to practice their faith and prosper in these territories.

### BYZANTINE EMPIRE TO 1000

With the initial Arab gains in the seventh and eighth centuries, it is not surprising that many Byzantines questioned why God granted victories to the Muslims. The use of icons was seen as a possible problem. Both iconoclasts (those against icons) and iconophiles (those who supported icons) used scripture, tradition, church authorities, and church councils to support their positions. Icons were outlawed from c. 730 to 787 and again from 814 to 842.

In 867, Basil I (867–86) took the throne. The first of the so-called Macedonian emperors, he and his successors oversaw a period of growth and stability for the empire. A series of victories in the Middle East allowed for the reincorporation of the rest of modern-day Turkey, parts of Georgia, Armenia, Syria, and Lebanon. To the west, Crete and Cyprus were retaken in the 960s. After a number of devastating wars, Basil II (976–1025) finally defeated the Bulgarians in 1018. With this, the Byzantine Empire controlled not only Greece, but also all of the Balkans to the Danube River. The Empire was the largest, most influential, and prosperous it had been since the early-seventh century.



With the collapse of Roman administration in the West, the old provinces of the Roman Empire divided into multiple kingdoms. The fifth through the mid-eighth centuries saw the rise of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in modern-day England, the Visigoths in Spain and Portugal, and the Merovingian Franks in France. The Byzantine Empire ruled North Africa and southern Italy. The Ostrogoths and then Lombards controlled northern Italy.

One of the most important issues to keep in mind is that there was no such thing as the “Dark Ages.” It is true that the West witnessed a significant drop in technology and urbanization, but historians know that learning and education did not disappear. Scholars were hampered by the lack of Greek and by the expense of books written on vellum (animal skins) rather than paper. However, throughout Western Europe, the church required literate and educated leaders. Monasteries copied books and preserved Roman learning. Important scholars such as the Anglo-Saxon theologian Bede (c. 672–735) wrote original and important works.

### CAROLINGIANS

The Merovingians ruled a series of kingdoms in what is modern France from the late-fifth century until 768. While there had been many powerful Merovingian kings, by the early-eighth century, this was usually not the case. Within this power vacuum, the Major of the Palace, who was the most powerful noble in a Merovingian court, became increasingly influential.

The Carolingian family began their rise to power through this position in the Merovingian kingdoms of Neustria and then Austrasia. By the 750s, Pippin the Short (751–68) decided he was

not satisfied with being the power behind the throne. Therefore, he needed to identify a legitimate authority to recognize his kingship. According to the sources, he turned to Pope Zachary (741–52), who agreed to support his claim to rule. In return, Pippin promised to protect Rome from Lombard attack. Due to this, the papacy shifted from relying on the Byzantine emperor in the East for the physical protection of Rome and instead looked to Western kings. This also established a difficult precedent for the relationship between church and state in the West. If the pope could make someone a king, could he also not remove one from power? In other words, did the church have more authority than the state?

Pippin was succeeded by his famous son, Charlemagne (768–814). He defeated the Lombards once and for all and conquered the “Spanish March,” a territory in northern Spain that included modern-day Barcelona. He also expanded east, defeating the Avars and gaining significant treasure for the kingdom. Finally, for over thirty years, he fought to control the Saxon territories in modern-day Germany. As with his father, Charlemagne acted as papal protector. On December 25, 800, Pope Leo III (795–816) crowned Charlemagne emperor. Though this was deeply opposed by the Byzantines, it is clear that Charlemagne had a vision of restoring a united empire in the West.

Charlemagne is also remembered for overseeing the beginning of the Carolingian Renaissance. He believed he had a duty to promote Christianity and education. Therefore, he gathered some of the foremost scholars of his day, including Alcuin of York (c. 735–804), to his court. These men composed textbooks, preserved ancient documents, and created new scholarship. Charlemagne also called church councils and oversaw church reform.

While very successful at first, Charlemagne's kingdom began to show cracks by the end of his reign that only widened under his son and successor, Louis the Pious (814–840). As the Carolingian empire expanded, the lords who supported Charlemagne grew to expect land and other rewards for service. However, by Louis's reign, the empire transitioned from expansion to defense. This meant that the opportunities for ambitious lords began to disappear. Also, the people in regions such as Brittany, Saxony, and Lombardy did not want to remain under Carolingian control. Finally, the Carolingians themselves undermined the unity of the empire. Louis the Pious had three male heirs. While the tradition was to divide the lands between all sons, Louis tried to introduce the idea that Lothar, his oldest, would inherit the imperial title and most of the land, while his younger sons would have smaller sub-kingdoms.

His sons did not appreciate this idea and rose in rebellion. Eventually after Louis's death, his sons divided the empire into pieces through the Treaty of Verdun (843). Charles the Bald (843–77) took West Francia, which was the precursor to France. Louis the German (843–76) took the East Frankish territories centered on what would eventually be the Holy Roman Empire. Lothar (843–55) received the imperial title and a strip of land running from Aachen in the north through Italy. This agreement did not last long. Upon Lothar's death in 855, his three sons divided his kingdom. Fighting between these kings and their uncles, Charles the Bald and Louis the German, eventually led to the Treaty of Meerssen in 870. Lothar's old kingdom was dissolved and its territory divided between West and East Francia. In turn, male heirs subdivided these kingdoms, leading to increasing decentralization.



## NINTH- AND TENTH-CENTURY INVASIONS: VIKINGS, ARABS, AND MAGYARS

The last major invasions and migrations of the early Middle Ages occurred from three major groups in the ninth through the tenth centuries. A Scandinavian raid on the Northumbrian monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 is usually regarded as beginning the Viking Age.<sup>1</sup> Raiders and settlers from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden significantly influenced and reshaped Europe. To the west, Vikings eventually settled in large areas of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Iceland. They temporarily established settlements in Greenland and sent trading expeditions as far as Newfoundland, Canada. By the middle of the ninth century, Vikings had attacked the coastline of France and Spain and were raiding into the Mediterranean.

To the east, Swedish Vikings traveled the inland waterways of modern-day Russia and Ukraine, reaching Constantinople and Baghdad. Some Vikings eventually became bodyguards for the Byzantine emperor. According to legend, a Viking leader by the name of Rurik (862–79) established the Rus state with its capital at Kiev. His descendants ruled this area until 1076.

Vikings founded new towns in places such as Dublin and controlled trade networks stretching from Constantinople to North America. As settlement increased, they slowly became integrated into the wider European culture. By 1000, the Scandinavian kingdoms had been united under central monarchies and their rulers converted to Christianity. Intermarriage and contact with surrounding societies meant that, within a few generations, these invaders became somewhat indistinguishable from the surrounding Irish, English, or French societies.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Vikings did not wear horned helmets.

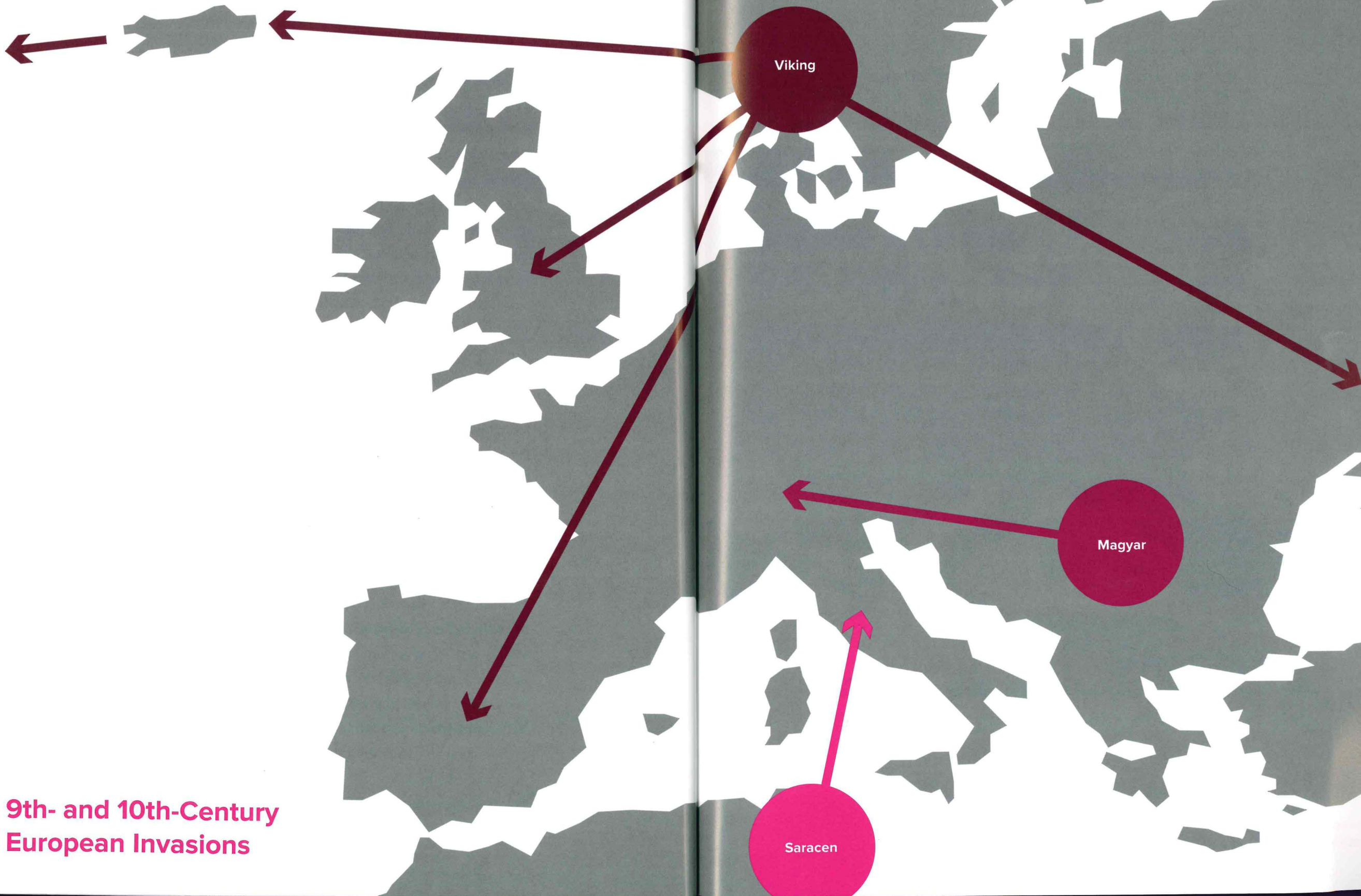
The Magyars or Hungarians began moving west in the late-ninth century. They raided portions of northern Italy, East Francia, and parts of West Francia. They were eventually defeated in the mid-tenth century and established the Kingdom of Hungary, converting to Latin Christianity c. 1000. Meanwhile, in the ninth century, Arab pirates conducted raids in the Mediterranean, capturing Sicily and establishing bases in southern France. They even sacked Rome in 846. They occupied portions of southern Italy, Sardinia, Corsica, and Sicily until the High Middle Ages.

### RESPONSE OF THE EUROPEAN KINGDOMS

Viking, Magyar, and Arab raids led to both political fragmentation and consolidation in different European territories. In Anglo-Saxon England, Vikings began settling in the ninth century. One of the few Anglo-Saxon kingdoms not conquered was Wessex. However, by the reign of Alfred the Great (871–99), it appeared that Wessex would also fall to Danish armies. Through a process of military reform and strategy, Alfred defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Eddington in 878. He and his successors were able to slowly conquer Viking-held territories to the north, ruling most of what is modern-day England by the 950s.

In West Francia (France), fighting and divisions among the Carolingians continued even in the face of Viking attacks. Viking raids only helped further destroy central authority as peasants were forced to look to local lords for protection. Charles the Simple (893–929) agreed in 911 to allow settlers under the Viking leader Rollo to control land in what would become known as Normandy. By 987, when the last Carolingian ruler of West Francia died, the kings controlled little more than the Ile de France or the territory surrounding Paris. Effective power was in the hands of the aristocracy.





9th- and 10th-Century  
European Invasions





Europe  
Approx. 1025 CE

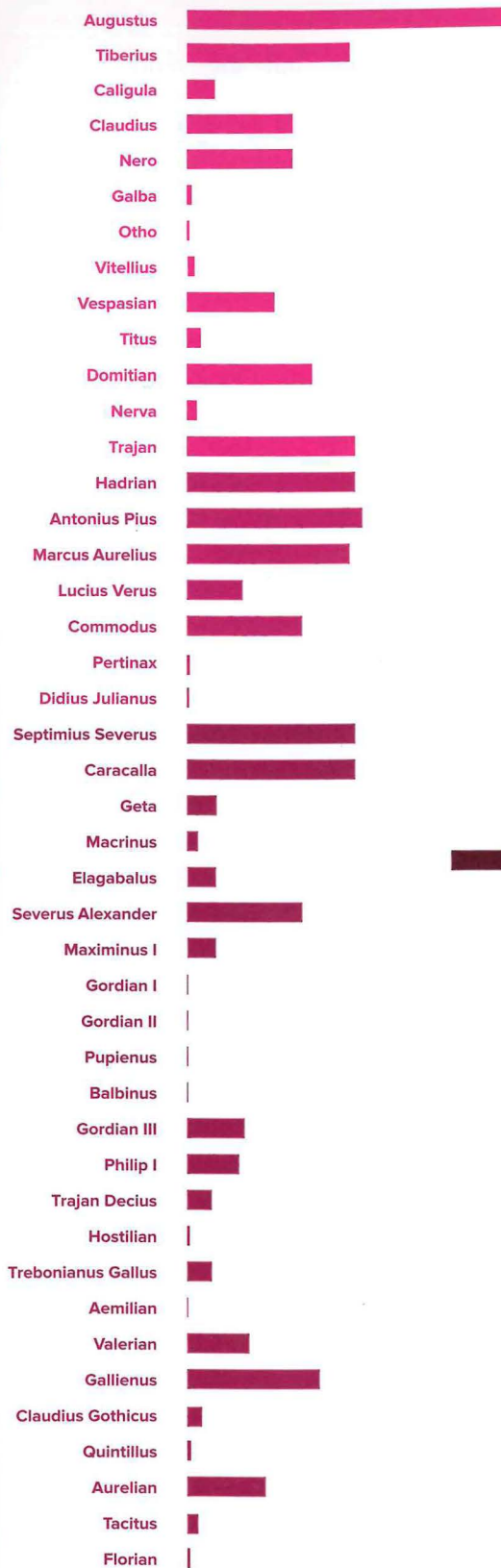
East Francia suffered Viking raids, but the more devastating attacks were by the Magyars. Here, as in England, the invasions helped a royal family gain power. In 919, the major dukes recognized Henry the Fowler (919–36), Duke of Saxony, as their king when he was able to counter the Magyars. His son, Otto I (936–73), finally defeated the Magyars in 951. Much like Charlemagne before him, the papacy looked to Otto for protection. To support the papacy, in 962, Otto defeated the Lombard king and, in turn, was crowned emperor by Pope John XII (955–64).

After the end of the early Middle Ages, most of Europe was finished with large-scale invasions and migrations. Some of the countries that exist today had been created and a number of them had strong central governments. The economy was growing and the emphasis on education by monarchs such as Charlemagne, Alfred the Great, and Otto I ensured that the heritage of Rome and the early church was not lost. A firm foundation had been laid as Europe entered the High Middle Ages.

1ST CENTURY

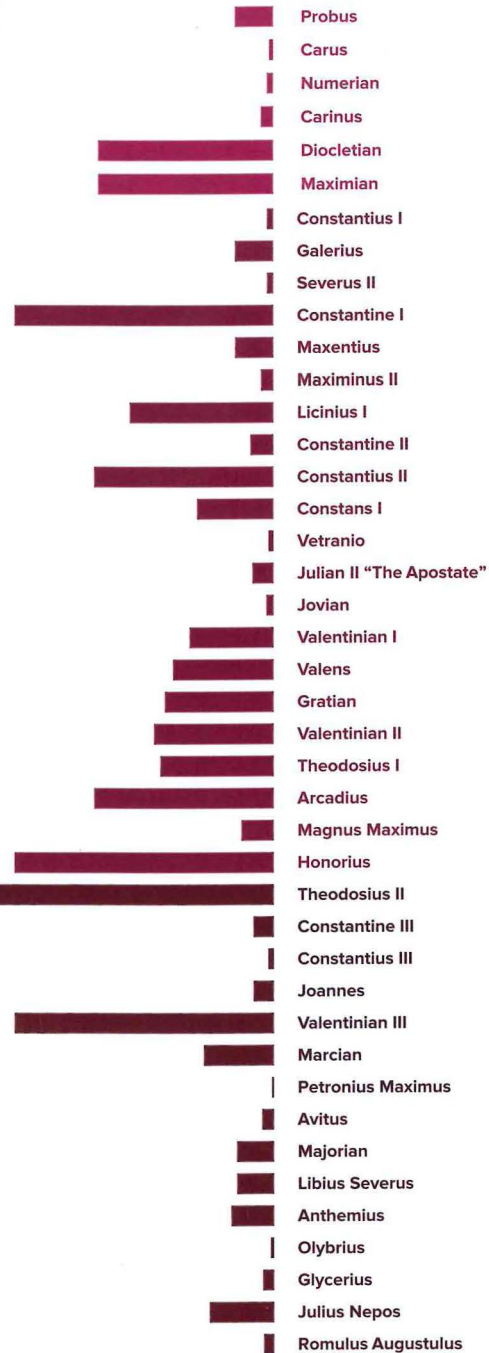
2ND CENTURY

3RD CENTURY



4TH CENTURY

5TH CENTURY



Chronological List of Western Roman Emperors  
and Length of Rule