

## Chapter 7 Podcast Transcript

In the British Isles, the year 793 began in troubling fashion. Medieval chronicles report that “immense whirlwinds, flashes of lightning and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air.” Famine followed shortly thereafter. These were all troubling signs. For the monks of Lindisfarne Island, though, they were a reminder that there was still work to do in Britain.

Lindisfarne is located off the coast of Northumbria in northeastern England. It is an unassuming sight—a low, windswept island gently rising above the shifting sands of the English coastline. There is a quaint village at Lindisfarne today, popular with tourists and filled with restaurants, coffee shops, and guesthouses. It is, by all accounts, a peaceful, reflective place.

Place yourself in the shoes of a Lindisfarne monk. In your travels to neighboring villages, you have heard rumors of whirlwinds and dragons, famine and suffering. But Lindisfarne had faced challenges before. Saint Aidan, an Irish monk, established the monastery 160 years earlier, in 634 AD, when Northumbria was largely pagan. Holy Island, as you call it, was now the beating heart of Christianity in northern Britain.

Not only were you and your brothers engaged in prayer and missionary work, you were also responsible for preserving, translating, and copying the Gospels. The monastery’s scriptorium was particularly proud of the copy of the Gospels it completed in the first decade of the 700s. The Lindisfarne Gospels, as these would be known, incorporated artistic elements from local Anglo-Saxon and Celtic culture, as well as more exotic elements from the distant Mediterranean.

On June 8, 793, you are walking the island, perhaps praying and reflecting on your studies. Walking up one of the low hills on the north side of the island, you see something . . . out of place. A long shadow on the silvery horizon. The shadow lengthens, then separates. Steadying yourself on the slippery hill, you make out the shape of a serpent! Or, is it a ship? A narrow ship, with a serpent’s head? Snapping to alertness, you turn back to the monastery on the far side of the island. You’ll never make it. Fortunately, someone else saw the ships, too, and rang a bell in alarm. Clutching your cloak tightly around you, you settle low in the grass, hoping to avoid detection. The wind carries the sound of destruction your way, then no sound at all, only the smell of fire.

After the ships depart, you return to the monastery. It is difficult to describe the horrible scene, the death and the destruction of all that you know, but you must warn others in Christendom. Picking up a broken quill, you write something, probably not unlike what is recorded in the chronicles: “heathen men came and miserably destroyed God’s church Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter.”

News of the destruction of Lindisfarne swept through Christendom. Alcuin of York, a great scholar in Charlemagne’s court and a native of Northumbria himself, was horrified. In a letter to

the Bishop of Lindisfarne, Alcuin wrote “The Church of St Cuthbert is spattered with the blood of the priests of God, stripped of all its furnishing, exposed to the plundering of pagans.”

Like many others, Alcuin struggled to understand how God could allow such a disaster to happen to his people. He wondered whether it was a result of past sins, or whether the violence would open the door to more suffering in the future. What Alcuin and his contemporaries could not know, of course, was that Europe was entering a period of dramatic change, conflict, and reorganization. The sudden assault on Lindisfarne, of course, was the work of the Vikings. But they were only one group on the move in Europe at that time, as we’ll discuss today.

One thing was certain; nothing would ever be the same.

The Early Middle Ages were a period of recovery and reorganization. After the collapse of Roman rule, the West divided into dozens of smaller states. They were in constant competition for security, resources, and for the kind of legitimacy—political and religious—that the Roman Empire had enjoyed. In the East, Roman rule survived in the city of Constantinople. For another 1000 years, this Byzantine Empire would remain the dominant Christian government—and economy—in the Eastern Mediterranean. Both parts of Europe, though, would face major challenges in the period between 500 and 1000 AD—including climate change, disease, religious unrest, and the mass movement of people across the Eurasian continent.

The textbook traces the details of these changes across eastern and western Europe. For today, then, let’s focus on a few critical questions about this region. What remained after the Fall of Rome? Who were the Byzantines? How did the migration of people affect Europe’s fragile stability?

In a previous chapter, we explored the “Fall of the (western) Roman Empire,” commonly dated at 476 AD. If you were a common person in western Europe, though, 477 AD probably didn’t feel much different than 475 AD. Most people lived profoundly local lives. And the kinds of cultural and economic changes that look obvious in retrospect—when we look backwards—often take a long time to develop in real time.

What does that mean? Well, it may be obvious to us that long-distance trade and urbanization declined after the Fall of Rome. But in the average town, you may have only noticed that there were fewer items in the marketplace each year. It may be obvious to us that a Christian church or cathedral fell into disuse and disrepair, but a parishioner may have only noticed that there were fewer members of the clergy present. When we look back on this period, we know that “ruralization” took place, as cities disappeared across the empire. A citizen of that time, though, may have merely wondered why the roads and bridges were in such poor shape. These kinds of changes take time to accumulate, and it is easy to see them as a kind of “new normal” when you are living through them.

By the time Roman rule ended in the West, Germanic invaders had already established a series of Kingdoms. These included the Vandals, in North Africa; the Visigoths, in Spain; the Ostrogoths, in Italy; and the Franks, in modern France and Germany. All of these Germanic tribes had decades—often centuries—of contact with Roman people and Roman culture, and they all hoped to continue Rome’s success in their own way. Theodoric, the Ostrogothic King of Italy, instructed his subjects to “obey Roman customs... [and] clothe [them] selves in the morals of the toga.” In other words, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.”

The Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths were also Christians, by the Fall of Rome, though they were Arians rather than Catholics. Arian, spelled with an “I” in this case, describes a form of Christian belief that rejects the Trinity and believes that Jesus was lesser than God. Most of their subjects, though, were still Catholics.

The Franks would emerge as the most successful of these “successor states” in the West. The Frankish King Clovis, who ruled from 481-509 AD, united the Franks into one kingdom and converted to Christianity in 496 AD, only twenty years after the Fall of Rome. Crucially, Clovis converted to Catholicism. This created a natural connection between the Franks and the Christian legacy of Rome and the Roman Empire.

In every case, though, many of the characteristics that made the Roman Empire what it was slowly disintegrated. Cities decayed and disappeared; long-distance trade—except for very select luxury goods—was lost; transportation and passage across regions was restricted; barter replaced currency; and taxation broke down. Professional armies that had been funded by taxation were replaced by military bands that supported themselves by pillaging or by a feudal exchange of service for land.

Only with the rise of Charlemagne as King of the Franks in the 700s do we start to see some reversal of these trends in the West. Charlemagne used his armed forces to conquer neighboring states in Central Europe, Northern Spain, and Italy. He established a form of government that was more centralized and orderly, built schools to improve education, supported scholarship, and ultimately controlled most of Western Europe. The Pope “crowned” these achievements in 800 AD when he placed a crown on Charlemagne’s head, declaring him to be the Emperor of Rome, 324 years after the Fall of Rome.

What about the Eastern half of the Empire, though? Well, to be blunt, the Roman Empire survived in the East. We just don’t call it that. This is unfortunate, because it leads to some confusion about the significance of the year 476, and the idea that there was a singular “Fall of Rome” event.

Roman rule survived in the east, centered on the city of Constantinople. Constantinople, as we’ve explored, was built on the site of an ancient Greek city called Byzantium. Thus, we call it the Byzantine Empire. They didn’t call themselves Byzantines, though; they called themselves Romans. The Byzantine Empire survived for almost 1000 years. When the Ottoman Turks finally conquered Constantinople in 1453 AD, Christopher Columbus had already been born. Although

we are talking about “ancient” history today, it really isn’t that far away from the history of our own society.

The history of the Byzantine Empire is long and complex. The most important Byzantine Emperor, for our purposes, was the emperor Justinian, who ruled from 527-565 AD. Justinian set in motion a number of remarkably long-lasting, influential projects. The most obvious of these, today, is the construction of the church of Divine Wisdom, the *Hagia Sophia*, in Constantinople. It would be the most important church in Eastern Christianity for 1000 years, and it remains in use as a museum and mosque in Turkish Istanbul today. Justinian also set in motion a project to organize and systematize 900 years of Roman Law. The resulting law code, known as the Body of Civil Law or the Justinian Code, was the foundation for the legal system of Europe and thus much of the world (including, in the United States particularly, Louisiana).

So, why did everything fall part (again)? As usual, there were several reasons. For one, Charlemagne may have built a massive and apparently stable empire—but he didn’t create a *lasting* empire. Charlemagne had one son, Louis the Pious, but Louis had three sons. His sons were already at war while Louis was still alive, and those divisions turned into open warfare after his death. After three years of Civil War, these grandsons of Charlemagne divided his empire into three parts. Charles the Bald took the western lands, West Francia, which would become France. Louis the German took the German-speaking lands in the East that would become Saxony and Bavaria. And Lothar, who received the title of Emperor, took only northern Italy and a strip of land between his brothers.

There were other changes, though, that transformed the map (and future) of medieval Europe. The most dramatic of these involved new waves of human migration across Eurasia and into Eastern and Western Europe. To some extent, such migration was a constant feature of the late Roman Empire and early medieval period. We have already seen the arrival of the Goths and Vandals, for example. There were others. In the North, a group of Germanic peoples known as the Anglo-Saxons moved into the island of Britain just as the Roman Empire was withdrawing its army (and protection). This new “English” population, as we call it, converted to Christianity within a century or so and played an important role in spreading Christianity, establishing monasteries, and participating in scholarship and education—even in Europe itself. Alcuin of York—the author of the letter about the attack on Lindisfarne—was originally a monk from England, from Northumbria.

During the seventh century, several new groups migrated to Europe, including the Avars, Bulgars, and Slavs. The Avars remained nomadic, but the other two settled in the Balkans near Constantinople. All three were a continuous challenge—and drain on resources—for the Byzantine government. The seventh century also saw the development of Islam and the rapid expansion of the Islamic Caliphate in the Mediterranean World. North Africa and Spain fell under Muslim rule, while the Islamic Caliphate slowly broke off pieces of the Byzantine Empire—a process that would continue for over 800 years.

Finally, the eighth and ninth centuries saw the migration of the Norse Vikings and the Magyars. The Norse were another Germanic people, but they were located far from Roman and Christian culture in northern Europe and Scandinavia—where Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are located today. Due to population increase and infighting, the Norse rapidly expanded into nearby lands like England and France. Initially, they arrived in raiding parties like the one that struck Lindisfarne in 793 AD, but later they settled permanently. Native populations had to figure how to resist the Vikings or coexist with them. The first unified English state, in fact, emerged as a response to the Viking invasions.

The Vikings were *everywhere*. They launched raids as far away as Spain in the West and Constantinople in the East. After settling among the Slavs in Eastern Europe, they became known as the Rus, and established new states in Novgorod and Kyiv in present-day Russia and Ukraine.

At around the same time, a nomadic people known as the Magyars moved into central Europe from the Eurasian steppe. Traveling by horseback, the Magyars also raided their neighbors. Like the Vikings, though, they eventually settled, converted to Christianity, and established a new kingdom, Hungary, that would serve an important role in guarding the frontier of Europe.

By the end of this period, then, Europe looked dramatically different than the Roman Empire. Despite Charlemagne's best efforts, there was no unified European state. As the textbook notes, "the story of Western Europe would be one of competing states rather than empire claiming universal authority." It is a story that is still being written today.