

After Rome's Fall: The Dark Ages

In the later Middle Ages, people began to refer to the period following the Roman collapse as the Dark Ages. The early Middle Ages were "dark" compared to Rome's "light." Following the fall, most Europeans lived life as before without realizing the empire ceased to exist. However, the transition to the Middle Ages had long been underway. Major migrations collapsed the Roman frontier, economy, and defenses. As the empire disintegrated, people placed themselves under the protection of powerful strongmen creating the feudal system. At the same time, urban areas depopulated, skilled workers became peasant farmers, and learning centers forgot how to learn. As a result, feudalism formed, the cities collapsed, and classical learning lost resulting in a dark age.

In the 5th century, waves of Germanic tribes swept into the Roman Empire. The overstretched and undermanned military failed to halt the invasions. When the empire was at its height, the government could hold back the tide or would negotiate a settlement. The government's collapse led to a breakdown in trade and the economy.

Since the government and military broke down, people began searching for protection and access to resources. Rich landholders provided a respite for the desperate. The rich allowed the poor onto their lands and provided protection. In return, the poor worked the lands for the landowner and provided a portion of the crop to pay rent. This was the beginning of the feudal system.



Over time, the estate, or manor, became a self-sufficient economic entity. The manor provided all the resources for people to live. On top of this, the manor developed a social system designed to regulate the relations between people. The lords ruled the manor, provided protection, and were the law. The vassals enjoyed few rights. This arrangement became customary and hereditary. Centuries later, the same families remained on the same estates.

Rural citizens were joined by their urban counterparts on the manor. The collapsing economy forced many urban dwellers into the countryside. As a result of several factors, the European economy degraded to barter. Additionally, several outbreaks decimated the cities further depopulating these areas. As a whole, the population of Europe dropped by about 20%.

In addition to feudalism and depopulation, Europeans forgot their intellectual and cultural heritage. Classical western thought dates to the Greeks. The Romans kept this tradition alive and expanded upon it. Once the empire fell, Europeans forgot this tradition until the Renaissance. Without a central government, the church emerged as the continent's sole unifying force. As a religious institution, the church ignored science and concentrated on the supernatural to explain events.

The Dark Ages represent a period between the Roman light and the European rebirth in the High Middle Ages. The Roman Empire disintegrated due to economic mismanagement, depopulation, and barbarian attacks. The empire's collapse led to feudalism, a barter economy, depopulation, and the loss of classic learning. Europe remained in the dark for several centuries before beginning to emerge following the Crusades.