THE MIDDLE AGES
A New History, 1000–1400

Jarbel Rodriguez
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I would also like to thank my family. My parents, siblings, and other relatives remain a font of affection and encouragement that make even difficult times easier to navigate. My wife Claudia continues to offer her support and love, much as she did twenty years ago, when I was writing my first book. Finally, I would like to thank two very special young men. My son Tristan has grown into an admirable person—kind, smart, funny, and self-confident. Learning from him has been one of life’s great experiences. My nephew Rocco was born while I was in the process of writing. He has been like a small whirlwind of hair and smiles who brings joy everywhere he goes. It is to Tristan and Rocco that I dedicate this book in hopes of brighter tomorrows.
Chapter 1

Europe in the Early Middle Ages

Before We Begin

This book, as a work of history, must start at some point in time. The date that we choose is likely to be both somewhat arbitrary while also carrying some importance; otherwise why choose it? So we shall begin, at least for the time being, in the year 476. Not a particularly eventful year as these things go, except for one quite notable exception: In 476, the last man to claim the title of emperor in the Western Roman Empire was deposed by one of his Germanic war captains. The ex-emperor was likely retired, and the imperial regalia sent to the other imperial capital of Constantinople, where the Eastern emperor resided. Due to this event history books have often marked 476 as the year the Western Empire fell. An empire falling is a complicated thing, and that was no less true for the Roman Empire, but going into much more detail on these complexities and what “falling” really means would take us far from our proposed purpose, so we shall accept that date and use it as a point of departure so our story can begin.

Events so Far

In 476, the last Western Roman emperor was deposed, bringing an end to a thousand years of Roman rule for much of what is now Western Europe. This Roman world had at one point stretched in a rough arc from Greece to Scotland and everything to the south down to the Mediterranean and beyond into North Africa, Egypt, and the Levant. In the absence of Roman rule, Germanic chieftains and their tribes moved in to fill this void, apportioning the remnants of most of the Western Empire among themselves.¹ This did not happen quickly and had in fact been going on for some time before the last emperor was deposed. This has led historians to think of the fall of the Roman Empire not so much as a specific event but as a process that took centuries, whereby Roman and Germanic elites began to intermingle and intermarry and the former slowly ceded power to the latter. Imperial power, however, largely collapsed. Indeed, a recent book has noted that by the 470s “it barely mattered whether there was anyone wearing the purple [imperial colors] in Rome. … Aristocracies

¹ For a good overview of this period see, Roger Collins, Early Medieval Europe 300–1000 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991).
all along the Latin West had given up on imperial politics.” But, the waning of imperial authority did not mean that everything Roman ceased to exist. The successor states that followed the Roman Empire imitated or borrowed Roman ideology, practice of governance, social structure, and religious beliefs to varying degrees. Change would have been slow in coming and largely imperceptible from year to year, especially at the local level. Elements of Roman life that depended on the larger empire, such as long-distance trade, were impacted the most, while other elements began to develop local idiosyncrasies that would, in time, lead to pronounced differences between the different regions of Europe. Chris Wickham has noted as much and suggested that Europe after Rome provides historians with a “rough-and-ready laboratory of alternatives: what happens to the way social change takes place,” when the different regions are all starting from roughly the same situation.

How much of an impact do a handful of variables make in the future development of these regions? Part of the goal of this book is to explore how the different regions of Europe—many of which had this common Roman element—evolved differently.

The dismemberment of the Roman Empire into successor polities was already under way by the early fifth century, but accelerated in the late 400s. By about the year 500, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes had settled the Roman province of Britannia and established multiple kingdoms. Roman Gaul was partitioned among Burgundians, Visigoths, and Franks, the latter of which eventually gave the region its modern name, France. Hispania (modern Spain) fell also, to the Visigoths and other smaller tribes. Among the latter were the Vandals, who after a brief sojourn in Hispania continued on to North Africa and conquered most of the African coast from the Atlantic Ocean to the city of Carthage, in modern-day Tunisia, which they made their capital. Another Germanic tribe, the Ostrogoths, took the Roman heartland of Italia, but their tenure was short-lived. They spent most of the sixth and seventh century fighting over control of the Italian Peninsula with the Eastern Roman Empire, also known as the Byzantine Empire, and later the Lombards, yet another Germanic peoples. Decades and even centuries of instability accompanied these Germanic migrations as the new arrivals settled in among the surviving Roman populations and fought with each other and anyone else who got in their way. This ongoing instability caused terrible disruptions to trade networks, cultural developments, educational pursuits, governance, and daily life. The one institution that seems to have weathered the crisis fairly well was the Church, which quickly made alliances with Germanic chieftains and gave them legitimacy as they took on crowns and Roman titles. In return, the Germans gave the Church protection and, more often than not, their conversion to Christianity.

These Germanic incursions and settlements were looked at with anger, suspicion, and disgust from the surviving Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The Eastern or Byzantine emperors considered that their claim to the West was legally the strongest, certainly much stronger than any posed by the barbarians who now occupied Western Roman soil. The Byzantine emperors were, after all, Roman emperors. If not for an imperial split that had divided the Roman Empire in 395 into a Western and Eastern half and later Western inability to defend its borders, they might still rule over much the same territorial expanse as their great ancestors Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius. But here they were, in control of a diminished, yet still vibrant Eastern Empire and with aspirations to recover all that had been lost in the West. Their reach, however, exceeded their grasp. The great military campaigns of reconquest of the Emperor Justinian (d. 565; see figure 1.2) and his talented general Belisarius (d. 565) convulsed the Mediterranean—Italy, Spain, and North Africa in particular—over much of the sixth century but had limited long-term success, aside from draining the imperial treasury and causing tremendous upheaval. Volcanic eruptions in 535 that blackened the sun over much of the planet and led to a decade of crop failures and an outbreak of pestilence that began in 541 and may have killed over half the population of Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, certainly did not improve the prospects of Byzantine triumph. In describing these events, the historian Procopius wrote, “For the sun gave forth its light without brightness. ... And from the time when this thing happened men were neither free from

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war nor pestilence nor any other thing leading to death.’\textsuperscript{5} The Roman senator Cassiodorus (d. 585) would write that in Venice, ‘‘[T]here have been … no crops of wine, wheat or millet and [the inhabitants would] be ruined unless royal pity succors them.’\textsuperscript{6} Subsequent wars to the east against the Sasanian Persian Empire in the later sixth and early seventh century as well as civil wars for control of the imperial throne did little to ameliorate the growing debt, economic turmoil, and military uncertainty that was engulfing the Byzantine world.

This constant crisis that was consuming the Byzantine Empire began to turn into catastrophe in 632. That year, Arab raiders, who had hitherto been little more than a nuisance, emerged from Arabia in armies of formidable numbers and skill and guided by a new monotheistic faith, Islam. This Islamic expansion had been decades in the making. In the year 610, the Prophet Muhammad began to receive revelations from the angel Gabriel of verses that would eventually come to form the Quran, the holy book of Islam. After finding strident opposition to his new faith in his home city of Mecca, Muhammad had to leave. In 622, he made his famous journey (\textit{hegira}) to Medina and there successfully created an Islamic state that included the Arab dwellers of the city as well as some of the Bedouin tribes that roamed through the deserts of Arabia. By 630, he had captured Mecca as well. When Muhammad died in 632, his successor Abu Bakr (d. 634) quickly conquered and unified what was left of Arabia. From there his armies pushed north against the Persians and Byzantines, both disastrously weakened by their years of fighting one


\textsuperscript{6} Thomas Hidgkin, ed., \textit{The Letters of Cassiodorus} (London: Henry Frowde, 1886), 520.
another. Abu Bakr’s death in 634 did little to quench the expansion. His successor Umar (d. 644) took Syria from the Byzantines, while threatening Asia Minor, after destroying their army at the Battle of Yarmuk (636). An even worse calamity befell the Persians as Umar conquered most of their empire by the time of his death. By 639 Muslim armies had also turned their attention westward toward Byzantine Egypt and North Africa; the former had fully capitulated by 642. The expansion slowed somewhat in the middle of the seventh century as a civil war sundered the Islamic world (leading to the still standing divisions of Sunni and Shi`ah Islam), but picked up speed again in the last decades of the century. This time most of North Africa fell to the invaders, and the heart of the Byzantine Empire was seriously threatened as Constantinople itself suffered and survived two protracted sieges between 674 and 718. The collapse of North Africa opened the way for the overthrow of the Visigoths and the conquest of Spain (beginning in 711) and later Sicily (in 827).

By the early ninth century, the impetus that had propelled the early Islamic conquests had subsided. What emerged was a European and Mediterranean world that had three major loci of power. The Byzantines, weakened as they were, survived and eventually returned to some of their former glory by conquering lost lands in Asia Minor and the Balkans. The Muslims controlled Arabia, Egypt, North Africa, the Levant (the modern Middle East), what had once been the Persian Empire (modern Iran and parts of Central Asia), western India, and most of Iberia and Sicily. During these last centuries of the first millennium, they also cultivated a rich and scientifically advanced culture that would have tremendous implications for Europe later. Finally, in much of Europe the Germanic tribes that had settled in what had been the Western Roman Empire had also begun a process of consolidating their gains and solidifying their frontiers.

The Situation in Frankish Europe

After the chaotic transition from Roman to Germanic Europe, we start to see signs of a returning normalcy. By the eighth century, a fair amount of stability had returned to the Latin Christian parts of the continent as well as England. Much of this was the work of a tribe known as the Franks, which had expanded from its original power center in the Low Countries and Northern France. Under the Merovingian Dynasty—the first French royal dynasty—and led by kings such as Clovis, Chilperic, Dagobert I, and other long-haired kings (the Merovingian kings grew their hair long, unlike their subjects who were only allowed to keep it short), the Franks expanded their territory north and east of the Rhine River. Eventually, they added much of modern Germany (west to Bavaria), Austria, and Switzerland as well as France. But by the eighth century, the power of the Merovingians was waning and that of a rival family, the Arnulfings, was ascending through its control of the office of the Mayors of the Palace. While the Arnulfings ruled and took on additional duties and powers, the last Merovingians were characterized by their contemporaries as the “do nothing kings,” due to their inactivity and weakness. The Arnulfings also engaged in numerous wars of expansion against other Germanic tribes, notably the Saxons, Frisians, and Alemani. And thus it was that by the 730s, the de facto ruler of the Frankish realm was Charles

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Martel (the Hammer, d. 741), the head of the Arnulfing family; he wasn’t a king, but he ruled like one. As such, it fell to him to lead a Frankish army against an invading Muslim raiding force coming from Southern France and Spain. The two hosts met at Poitiers, where Charles emerged victorious and was able to push the Muslims out of most of France. “Then was he [Charles] first called ‘Martel,’ for as a hammer of iron and steel, and of every other metal, even so he dashed and smote in the battle all his enemies.” The renowned historian of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon (d. 1794), concluded that Charles’s victory had saved Western civilization and Europe from Islamic domination. This view prevailed for centuries, but more recent historiography has diminished the importance of the battle somewhat, with some modern historians arguing that the Muslim army was only intent on looting the rich Christian monasteries of southern and central France and not on conquest. At the time, however, the victory was seen as miraculous evidence of God’s support for the Franks and for Charles in particular. The spiritual and political capital that Charles earned as a result of his victory and growing power allowed his son, Pepin the Short (d. 768), to claim outright the crown of the Franks in 751 (with papal help) and establish a new royal dynasty, the Carolingians (named after Charles Martel).

The Carolingian achievement was dramatic and in many respects long lasting as the family expanded the frontiers of their kingdom to Islamic Spain and Northern Italy in the south, up to the Baltic Sea in the North and eastward to the lands of the Balts and the Slavs. The highpoint of their power came during the reign of Pepin’s son, another Charles (d. 814). His accomplishments were such that in time he would be known as Charles the Great or Charlemagne (see figure 1.3). Under Charlemagne, the Carolingians were able to unify Europe in a way not seen since the heyday of the Roman Caesars. Indeed, in imitation of Roman Emperors, Charlemagne had himself crowned as emperor on Christmas Day in the year 800, much to the chagrin of the emperors in Byzantium.

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10 Collins, Early Medieval Europe, 262–271.
11 Jarbel Rodrigez, ed., Muslim and Christian Contact in the Middle Ages: A Reader (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 33.
For this, he needed the support of the Pope, the head of Latin Christendom, who operated out of Rome and who was not above a little fraud. Starting in the late seventh century, the Roman papacy had slowly begun to seek independence from the Byzantine emperors, who considered Italy to be part of their domain and the pope one of their subjects. Over time the popes drifted into the Frankish sphere of influence as they sought Frankish protection from the Byzantines, the Lombards who ruled over much of northern Italy, and other enemies. It was this relationship that had allowed Pipin to ask the papacy for a royal crown in exchange for the protection his Frankish soldiers offered Rome. Frankish support for the papacy proved decisive in sundering any remaining claims that the Byzantines may have had on the papacy. Moreover, in order to strengthen its position the papacy resorted to forgery. Sometime in the mid-eighth century, papal clerks forged a document that later came to be known as the *Donation of Constantine*. This document claimed that Constantine, the Roman emperor who legalized Christianity in 313, had ceded the western provinces of the empire to the papacy. The false document strengthened the papacy’s position as it negotiated with the Franks, gave a justification as to how the popes could bestow an imperial crown on a Western king (which they could offer to the Franks), and undercut any Byzantine claims to the western lands. It “crystallized the idea of a dual regime, of papal power backed by (and thus heavily influenced by) imperial power.” And thus, the Latin West came to have an emperor, and the papacy fortified its relationship with the Frankish rulers as well as its own position. In the long run, this relationship would create all kinds of problems as both the pope and emperor claimed primacy over the other and ultimately precipitated the reform movement and Investiture Conflict of the late eleventh century.

Returning to Charlemagne, he also expanded the governance of his empire, its ability to collect revenue, and the administration of law by subdividing his realm into counties (a practice first put in motion by Pepin). Counts and bishops administered the counties and bishoprics with very small staffs and were supposed to report directly to the crown once a year. Royal auditors, known as *missi dominici*, roamed the realm ensuring that the king’s commands were being followed. At least this was the theory of Carolingian government. In practice, it appears to have been much more chaotic as counts often accrued power for themselves and the distances involved as well as the limited education of the royal officials made any effort at effective governance an uphill battle. The monarch also had to be constantly on the move to ensure that his officials did what they were supposed to. Nevertheless, these efforts, stunted as they sometimes were, did improve the practice of government and with it seem to have brought a measure of stability that had been sorely lacking in many regions of Europe since the fall of the Western Empire.

Not surprisingly, in the wake of these increasingly stable conditions, the Carolingians began to have numerous economic, cultural, and intellectual successes. Commercially, trade increased with England to the west, with the Slavs to the east, and even with Islamic Spain. This period also saw Jewish merchants settling in some of the northern regions of the Carolingian Empire. Moreover, as Rosamund McKitterick has argued, Charlemagne created a

17 Ibid., 392.
sense of unity that bound his people together, regardless of where they came from, as they shared “military service, general liturgical rites, use of coinage, and the judicial process.” Charlemagne also required his counts to improve and maintain roads and bridges, thereby easing and securing lines of communication throughout his empire.\(^\text{20}\)

Culturally and intellectually, the Carolingians authored a revival of learning, sometimes called the Carolingian Renaissance, which had long lasting effects for the future of Europe. Scholars from all over Latin Europe flocked to the Carolingian court at Aachen to work and to consult with one another. Their results were truly remarkable. Working as agents of the Church—which had a near monopoly on learning—these men and some women copied, translated, and wrote thousands of pieces of literature.\(^\text{21}\) Indeed, Pierre Riché has claimed that “thanks to the Carolingians, the West acquired a shared means of communication: a Latin lingua franca.”\(^\text{22}\) These books were being written or transcribed in a new style of handwriting known as Carolingian (or Caroline) Miniscule, which significantly cut down on errors and made writing easier. Today, it still forms the basis of many lower-case fonts.\(^\text{23}\) Most ambitiously, starting in 787, Charlemagne directed the many bishoprics, parishes, and monasteries of his realm to open schools “in which boys may learn how to read.”\(^\text{24}\) Significantly, this was open to any who wanted its benefits and was not limited to only members of the clergy or other elites. These efforts, in spite of the upcoming disruptions, seem to have had a profound impact on the future of European culture and intellectual traditions.

### Italy and Spain

Modern Spain and Italy both have regions that were part of Charlemagne’s empire. In Italy, the Carolingians ruled most of the north of the Peninsula with power further south being divided between the Lombards, the Byzantines, and, at times, the Papacy from its seat in Rome. For most of the seventh century, the popes had to rely on erratic Byzantine assistance for their survival against Lombard aggression. As the Arab expansion intensified, forcing the Byzantines to fight for their very lives, the papacy began to look for more reliable protectors, and in this effort they found a willing partner in the Carolingians. In exchange for the crown that raised him from mayor of the Palace to king of the Franks in 751, Pepin the Short became the protector of the papacy and the Church. The chance to exercise this new responsibility came quickly. As early as 755, Pepin had to march into Italy to protect the pope from the Lombards. He had to return the following year, this time with more definitive consequences. After defeating the Lombards and forcing them to hand over numerous towns to the pope, Pepin laid the foundation for a papal state that occupied much of central Italy.\(^\text{25}\)

Italy was not the only Mediterranean region where the Carolingians had considerable interest and influence. Starting in 778, the Franks made several forays south beyond the Pyrenees in efforts

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20 McKitterick, Charlemagne, 270; 270–276.
21 For a good introduction see McKitterick, The Carolingians and the Written Word (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
to wrest territory away from Muslim garrisons in Spain. These efforts, which lasted almost half a century, were not always successful. But Frankish persistence paid off, as they were able to establish numerous counties in Northern Spain to act as buffers against Islamic raiding against their holdings in France. Some of these counties remained close to the Frankish crown while others quickly became independent. Among them were embryonic polities that would in time evolve into the kingdoms of Aragon and Navarre and the County of Barcelona, among others.

These small and impoverished realms formed the eastern half of a series of Christian principalities that stretched across the mountainous north of Spain all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. To their west lay the Kingdom of Asturias and a series of border counties that were largely subservient to the Asturian kings. The origins of this Asturian kingdom are difficult to decipher due to a paucity of sources that leaves much of its early history as pure conjecture. The most commonly told origin story centers on a certain Pelagius or Pelayo. After the Visigothic collapse in 711, many of the surviving Visigothic nobles appear to have found refuge in Asturias, where they elected the aforementioned Pelagius (r. c. 718–737) as their leader—it is unclear whether he was a king. Pelagius became the focus of Christian resistance after he won what the Christians considered a critical battle (for the Muslims it was little more than a skirmish) at Covadonga in 722. His raiding into Muslim territory and expansion into Galicia gave him a solid base that would later become the foundation for the Kingdom of Asturias-Leon. It was in Asturias-Leon that we see the first echoes of an ideology that by the eleventh century would become a crusade of reconquering all the territory that had once been the Kingdom of the Visigoths. This reconquest, as some modern scholars have dubbed it, began in earnest in the eleventh century, and we will return to it. Between the eighth and tenth centuries, however, there was little beyond being a nuisance (sometimes a major nuisance, to be sure) that the Christian polities of Spain could do against Al-Andalus, the Islamic dominion in the south.

It took the Muslim forces that destroyed the Visigothic armies decades to establish their control over the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed the first four or five decades were marked by upheaval and infighting between the Syrians and Berbers, who made up the bulk of the Muslim forces. Then, in 750, events in the eastern Mediterranean reverberated all the way to Spain. The Abbasids, a rival clan, overthrew the Umayyad Dynasty, which had ruled the Islamic world from their capital in Damascus since shortly after Muhammad’s death. As part of the palace purge, the Abbasids tried to exterminate the entire Umayyad family, but a junior member, Abd Al-Rahman, escaped, and after a perilous journey through North Africa he found his way to Spain. In 756 he established a new Umayyad lordship in Cordoba, independent from the Caliphate the Abbasids had established in Baghdad. Under Abd Al-Rahman (r. 756–788) and his successors, Al-Andalus endured some difficult times in the ninth century. The Umayyad emirs faced numerous internal revolts, particularly

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27 Collins, Caliphs and Kings, chapter 2; O’Callaghan, A History of Medieval Spain, 98–100, 121–123.
29 For a good introduction to the early centuries of Islamic Spain, see Brian Carolos, Kingdoms of Faith (New York: Basic Books, 2018), chapters 1–4; Collins, Caliphs and Kings; Hugh Kennedy, Muslim Spain and Portugal (London: Longman, 1996), chapters 1–2; Richard Fletcher, Moorish Spain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), chapters 1–4; O’Callaghan.
from native-born Iberian converts to Islam (the *muwalladun*), who resented the foreign Arabian Muslims that made up the ruling class. But by the beginning of the tenth century, during the celebrated reign of Abd Al-Rahman III (r. 912–961) this Caliphate of Cordoba, as it came to be known at the time, was entering a golden age. The cities of the Caliphate became dominant economic and cultural centers as merchants from Al-Andalus ranged far and wide over the Mediterranean and Cordoba assumed its place as an epicenter of scholarship and research. Its library with over four hundred thousand volumes beggared those found in Christian Europe—its catalogue, which ran over forty volumes, was likely larger than most contemporary libraries in Latin Christendom. The Caliphate also engendered a multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious society. While Islam was the dominant faith and gave its adherents certain social and economic advantages, there were large thriving communities of Jews and Arabized Christians known as Mozarabs, who as People of the Book or *dhimmi* were protected under Islamic law. But it wasn't just the cities that enjoyed an era of prosperity; the countryside also flourished with new crops (e.g., sugar, rice, and melons) and new irrigation techniques brought over from Syria that rendered fertile the arid regions on Spain.

**Anglo-Saxon England**

Like Iberia and other regions of Europe, the island of Britain also experienced a traumatic post-Roman era. Conquered and settled by groups of Angles, Jutes, and Saxons in the aftermath of Roman collapse, England suffered through centuries of highly disruptive warfare, migrations, and instability. Sadly, much of this history has been lost as sources are very thin for the period between the withdrawal of Roman troops in the early 400s and the reestablishment of Christianity beginning in the mid-sixth century, and more firmly in 597. The return of Christianity, first brought by Irish monks coming from their homeland and later by a mission sent by Pope Gregory I (d. 604) from Rome in 597, opens up the historical record as written sources become more abundant.

The account that emerges from contemporary monastic writers is one of a difficult process of conversion as Anglo-Saxon kings were slowly Christianized—often by arranging marriages with Frankish or other Christian noble women—to be followed by their subjects. Accommodation also had to be reached with the Irish monks who were proselytizing from their bases in Scotland and Ireland a rather different form of Christianity that had grown quite distinct from the version championed by Rome.

A process of political consolidation accompanied these religious changes, as the many small kingdoms

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that the early Anglo-Saxons had carved out from the remains of Roman Britain were swallowed up or made subservient by the most powerful among them, Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. Northumbria was the first to enjoy a measure of hegemony over its weaker neighbors. During the seventh century, Northumbria, led by energetic monarchs and a dynamic monastic movement, controlled most of Northern England directly, while its influence extended far beyond its borders. In its monasteries, Northumbrian monks were engineering the first of many post-Roman revivals of learning and culture. The so-called Northumbrian Renaissance produced some exceptional cultural artifacts, including the famed *Lindisfarne Gospels* (see figure 1.4) and the historical writings of the Venerable Bede (d. 735). Mercia eclipsed Northumbria starting in the early eighth century. Under the leadership of two prodigiously long-lived and effective monarchs, Ethelbald (r. 716–757) and Offa (r. 757–796), Mercia experienced a revival of its own. The onus of Mercian growth was on economic and political power as new towns (burhs) were established to act as both defensive bulwarks and to enhance trade and administration. The minting of millions of new silver pennies also points to an era of enhanced economic activity. Such was the power of Mercia that Offa could correspond with Charlemagne as an equal, and his authority extended over much of the island. Yet, the instability inherent in dynastic monarchies did not spare the Mercians. With the passing of Offa, less able successors took the throne and power slowly passed to Wessex, its neighbor to the south. The era of Wessex dominance, indeed, even the last few years of Offa’s rule, also pointed to another troubling portent as England increasingly became the target of ferocious warriors coming from Scandinavia to loot and pillage.

**Invaders, Again!**

In the year 793, the British Isles were invaded by dragons—or so says the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one

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of the best sources that we have for the period, in describing the omens that preceded a Viking raid against the monasteries of Northern England. A few decades later in 846, “God sent the avenging Pagans” to sack Rome, according to the Liber Pontificalis, as it tried to explain an Arab raid on the capital city of western Christendom. Not long after, the Magyars or Hungarians, a tribe from the steppes of Central Asia, arrived in Europe and began raiding through most of what is now Germany and Central Europe, ultimately reaching France and the shores of the Atlantic. And thus, when Europe seemed to be on the verge of emerging from the instability that followed the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, a new wave of invasions sent it into turmoil once again.

Historians have generally divided these incursions into three groups. The least damaging in the long term as they were mostly raids intent on collecting booty were attacks made by Muslims from North Africa and Spain into Italy and Southern France. The sack of Rome, previously noted, and the conquest of Sicily were among the most successful features of these assaults. With the exception of Sicily, where Islamic government and cultural institutions took a firm hold, most of the areas raided remained under Christian control.

The same could not be said for the much more damaging and consequential migrations of the Magyars into Eastern and Central Europe. The Magyars likely originated from the region of the Ural Mountains in Central Asia. Between the fourth and ninth centuries they slowly migrated westward, which brought them into the orbit of the Byzantine Empire. A series of shifting alliances and wars in modern-day Ukraine and Romania with the Byzantines, Bulgars, Slavs and Pechenegs drove the Magyars even farther west. By 899, they had begun raiding into Italy and Germany and other regions of the Carolingian world from their bases in the Carpathian basin.

Their arrival couldn’t have come at a worse time for the Carolingians. When Charlemagne died in 814, he was succeeded by his son Louis the Pious (r. 814–840), upon whose death the empire was divided among his three surviving sons. One of these sons, Charles the Bald (r. 843–877) assumed control over the western part of the Frankish empire, which roughly correlates with the modern borders of France. A second son, Lothair (r. 840–855) received the middle part of the Empire and Northern Italy. The third son, Louis the German (r. 843–876) reigned over the eastern half of the Empire, forming the origins of what would later be Germany. These divisions did not come peacefully as Louis’s sons spent years attacking one another and fighting for the spoils of the Frankish Empire. Even after they agreed to a mutually acceptable division in the Treaty of Verdun (843; see figure 1.5), the regions they ruled slowly went their separate ways, in turn developing local idiosyncrasies while also becoming weaker and more isolated.

43 There are some divergent views as to the importance of the Treaty of Verdun. See Riché, The Carolingians, 165–169, and Costambeys et al., The Carolingian World, 379–388.