

The Barbarian West

While the eastern half of the Roman Empire continued and prospered as the Byzantine Empire, in the western half, life grew difficult. When the centralized Roman government collapsed around A.D. 500, Western Europeans experienced 500 years of disorder, chaos, and darkness. Traditionally, this period in Western Europe is known as the Early Middle Ages.

With the fall of Rome, the Germanic tribes became the dominant force in the West. However, they were relatively primitive people with little culture and civilization. They destroyed more than they brought or even borrowed from the Romans. Over the centuries following A.D. 500, civilization in the West nearly reached the point of extinction.

With the demise of the Roman political system, destruction became commonplace. The barbarian Germans were brutal conquerors, murdering, raping, and turning their victims into slaves. The population in the West declined as a result. Former Roman towns and cities either lost large numbers of their populations or ceased to exist at all.

The population of Rome, for example, had reached 10 million during its heyday. However, by A.D. 800, Rome was home to only 50,000 inhabitants. Throughout these years, many of the municipal (or city) systems ceased to operate. There were simply not enough people to keep the roads repaired. Great aqueducts which had delivered water to the city fell into disrepair. Buildings and bridges were not maintained and fell apart. The city's streets became littered with waste and trash. Grass grew in along Rome's streets and roads. Cattle grazed in the Roman Forum, formerly the city's busy commercial and political center.

Other Roman cities ceased to exist altogether. In England, the Roman city of London was completely abandoned and was not revived until hundreds of years later. A city in southern Gaul (France), Marseilles, fell from existence for 200 years.

Shortages existed everywhere in the West. With little trade and little production, food shortages were constant. By the 700s, gold coins almost disappeared with only a few silver coins left in circulation. The chief export of the West became human beings who were sold into slavery.



Each little village or rural group had to produce all its own food, clothing, and housing. Farming became less productive. There was a constant shortage of hay, so livestock could not be fed and consequently dwindled in numbers. Fewer farm animals meant less manure, which was in shortage to fertilize the hay fields, completing the tragic circle. There were reported incidents of cannibalism in the West. Children died at early ages; perhaps four out of five died in infancy.

Learning nearly disappeared in the barbarian West. Schools ceased to exist and most people grew up illiterate. Only the church existed to provide some element of security in people's lives. Within the church, literacy remained alive.

For hundreds of years, life in Western Europe became desperate and frightening. People forgot how to be civilized. They forgot how to live in cities. They forgot how to read. It is no wonder that some historians still refer to these centuries in Western Europe as the Dark Ages.

Review and Write

1. In what ways did life in the western half of the old Roman Empire become barbaric after A.D. 500?
2. Describe the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman Empire.
3. What happened to life in the city of Rome after the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire?