



CHAPTER 5: Germanic Kingdoms in the West

Chapter Overview

- Germanic peoples came from the region of the Baltic Sea and the plains and river valleys of Eastern Europe. During the late Roman period, they moved south and east into Western Europe and then began to cross the boundaries of the empire.
- The Roman emperors allowed some Germanic tribes to settle within the empire, using them as allies against other Germanic tribes. Eventually, Germanic tribes moved into the empire as conquerors and permanent rulers.
- Germanic nations had similar cultures, though they did not consider themselves one people. They spoke related languages; were divided by similar social classes; governed themselves by customary, not written, laws; and were warrior societies. Germanic nations held that courage was the highest virtue.
- Pagan Germans worshipped fierce gods who were thought to fight wars against giants and demons of the ice and cold. Brave warriors who died in battle were thought to be taken to the hall of these gods, called Valhalla. Many Germanic tribes were converted to Arianism.
- After sacking Rome in 410, the Visigoths withdrew from Italy and established a kingdom in southern Gaul and the Iberian Peninsula. Driven from southern Gaul by the Franks in 507, the Visigoths continued to rule Hispania for over two centuries. The Visigoths, who were Arian, ruled a much larger population of Romans, who were Catholic.
- A Visigothic king in Hispania, Leovigild, married Goswintha, a zealous Arian. Through her influence and to unify his kingdom, Leovigild tried to force Arianism on his Catholic subjects. But it did not work. Even his son, Hermenegild, who became Catholic through the influence of his wife, Ingunthis, refused to obey his father. After an unsuccessful rebellion, Hermenegild was martyred for refusing to receive communion from an Arian bishop.
- Leovigild's second son, Reccared, himself became Catholic; and with Bishop Leander of Seville, Reccared brought the Visigoths into the Catholic Church. He officially forbade Arianism in his realm.
- The Visigoths had driven another Germanic nation, the Vandals, out of the Iberian Peninsula. Led by their king, Genseric, the Vandals went to North Africa, where they set up a kingdom after plundering the Roman settlements and capturing Carthage. Genseric led his people in an invasion of Sicily and Italy, conquering Corsica and Sardinia, and in 455 looted and sacked Rome itself. The Arian Vandals persecuted the Christians in the conquered lands.

- Clovis, the Merovingian king of the Franks, conquered large sections of Gaul, seizing also the lands held by other Frankish kings. Though a pagan (along with the rest of his people), Clovis, through the influence of his Burgundian wife, Clotilde, became the first Germanic king to become Catholic.
- After Clovis' death, his kingdom was divided between his four sons. Over the next two centuries, the Merovingian kings became merely figureheads, their mayors of the palace carrying on the actual work of ruling. Finally, Pepin the Short, the Carolingian mayor of the palace, removed the last Merovingian rulers from power and was crowned king in 751.
- Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, overthrew Odoacer, the German king who had deposed the last Roman emperor in the West. Theodoric made himself king of Italy. He governed Italy and other lands he subsequently ruled wisely and well for most of his reign. Though an Arian, he treated Catholics with tolerance. But, at the end of his life, fearing a plot against him by the Eastern Roman emperor and the Catholic senators in Italy, he assassinated several senators. After Theodoric's death, his Ostrogothic kingdom fell into disunity.

Chapter Goals

An understanding of ancient German culture is important for a full understanding of medieval western Europe. Medieval western Europe inherited the classical culture of Greece and Rome, the imperial and legal traditions of the Roman Empire, and the Christian religion—but the Germanic peoples, their languages and culture, also formed a part of the medieval mix. Germanic peoples took on the ancient Mediterranean cultures and the Christian religion, but their culture modified the expression of these elements, forming a new Western European culture

that was rich, varied, and productive of a new and energetic civilization.

What Students Should Know

1. How the German nations entered the Roman Empire

The Germanic peoples came from the forests south of the Baltic Sea and the plains and river valleys of eastern Europe. During the later years of the Roman Empire, they moved with their families and herds into the Danube and Rhine valleys, and from there into western Europe—Gaul, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula. Another wave of Germanic tribes moved down from the Baltic Sea region, through Dacia and Hungary, and into Roman lands.

The imperial armies made use of some Germanic tribes as allies against other Germanic peoples. Eventually the Romans allowed several Germanic tribes to move their families as settlers and colonists into empty or underpopulated lands in Gaul or along the Danube River. Because of mistakes made by Roman commanders, the tribes finally moved into the empire of the West as conquerors, ruling over a much larger Romanized population.

2. The character of German culture

The Germans had a warrior-hunter society. All freemen were supposed to learn the use of arms, and women sometimes joined men on the battle line.

It was thought that German “kings” were descended from gods or demigods of an ancient heroic age. Tribal elders chose the kings from among those who fought and hunted best. If a king proved bad, cowardly, or unfit, the elders could replace him with another. A Germanic leader was surrounded by a band of comrades, who pledged loyalty to their leader while the leader, in turn, rewarded his followers with loyalty and a share of battle spoils.

3. The character of German law

For the Germans, law meant age-old custom. Laws were not written down but memorized and passed along by bards or council elders.

Under German law, those accused of a crime were considered guilty until proven innocent. To prove his innocence, one had to appeal to three kinds of “evidence”: the *oath*, the *ordeal*, and the *combat*.

In the *oath*, one called on a god or on Christ to support him for telling the truth or punish him for lying. In an *ordeal*, the oath taker underwent severe pain or torture to prove he was telling the truth. In the *combat*, one fought with a court-appointed opponent or one’s accuser. It was believed God would grant the victory to the one who swore truthfully.

4. The character of German religion

In the Germanic myths, the gods were ever at war with the giants of the ice and cold. The German gods demanded human sacrifice and rewarded recklessness in battle; men who were brave and fought well would be taken to Valhalla after death to feast with the gods.

The Germans thought the world and mankind would end in a colossal battle between the gods and giants. The end of all things would be defeat. So it was that the Germans glorified courage in the face of certain defeat.

5. The character of the Visigothic kingdom

After conquering southern Gaul, the Visigoths crossed into the Iberian Peninsula and conquered it. The Visigoths, under their Balting kings (the family of Alaric), ruled southern Gaul until the Franks drove them out. In Hispania, the Visigoths ruled from Toledo over a much larger Roman population. The Visigoths were Arian, with their own bishops and liturgy, while the Romans were Catholic. The Visigoths constantly fought among themselves and assassinated many of their elected kings. Despite their barbaric

ways, however, the Visigoths worked to preserve the classical culture of Greece and Rome.

6. The significance of the Third Council of Toledo and the character of Catholic Visigothic Spain

At the Third Council of Toledo (589), the Arian clergy and the Visigothic ruling class made the public announcement of their conversion to the Catholic Faith. King Reccared formally outlawed Arianism in his realm.

After Reccared’s death, the Visigothic kingdom was again torn by strife. It was the Catholic bishops who held the kingdom together by their wisdom and counsel. Monasteries helped civilize the society by preserving classical learning and offering free schooling. The Visigothic Church made Spain a beacon of learning and civilization in the early Middle Ages.

7. Who Genseric was and what he accomplished

Genseric was the king of the Vandals under whose leadership they conquered North Africa. Genseric led the Vandals in a raid on Italy, in which they sacked Rome in 455. Genseric used his Arianism as an excuse to loot Catholic churches and confiscate Church lands.

8. Who the Franks were, where they came from, and what they accomplished

The Franks were a pagan Germanic people who had lived for centuries in what is now Belgium and along the Rhine and Main Rivers in Germany.

The Franks had been allies of the Roman legions. When Roman power collapsed in Gaul, the Franks pushed into that land.

9. Who Clovis was and why he is important to history

Clovis was a Meroving king of the Franks who secured his power by eliminating all other members of his family and by conquest. He married Clotilde, the niece of the king of the Burgundians

and a Catholic. Through her influence, Clovis decided to accept baptism. On Christmas Day 496, he was baptized by Bishop Remigius at Reims, thus becoming the first Germanic king to become Catholic.

10. The character of the Merovingian Frankish kingdom

As was the way with Germanic kings, Clovis divided his kingdom between his sons. These sons, and their descendents, warred among themselves to gain sole power over the Frankish kingdom. Eventually, the kingdom of the Franks was divided between two realms—Austria, in the east, and Neustria, in the west.

Frankish kings were served by chancellors, called “mayors of the palace,” who increasingly took on themselves the task of ruling. Eventually, while the Merovingians kept the title of king, the mayors of the palace increasingly took on themselves the real tasks of ruling.

11. Who was the last Roman emperor in the West? Why is his name significant? How did he become emperor? What became of him?

Romulus Augustulus was the last Roman emperor in the West. His name recalls the legendary founder of Rome—Romulus—and Augustus, the first Roman emperor. He became emperor in 475 when his father bribed the

Roman Senate to name him emperor. Romulus and his father promised their German troops one-third of Italy if they agreed to Romulus’ appointment as emperor. But when this promise was not fulfilled, the Goth Odoacer removed the boy emperor and gave him a villa at Naples and a fortune in gold. Odoacer, who sent the imperial regalia to Constantinople, became king of Italy.

12. Who Theodoric was and what he accomplished

Theodoric was the king of the Ostrogoths, who, at the invitation of Emperor Zeno in Constantinople, overthrew Odoacer and his kingdom. Theodoric ruled Italy as king in the place of Odoacer. For most of his reign, Theodoric was a wise and provident ruler. He repaired city walls, aqueducts, and public buildings. He allowed the Roman Italians to rule themselves by their own laws and customs, while Theodoric’s Ostrogoths followed their own customs. Though an Arian, Theodoric tolerated Catholics and Jews. Toward the end of his life, however, Theodoric became afraid that the Emperor Justin in Constantinople was plotting against him. He accused his Roman subjects, especially members of the Senate, of plotting to assassinate him.

Some Key Terms at a Glance

Council of Toledo: held in 589; unified the Catholic and Arian churches of Spain

king: a Germanic title for the ruling chief of the people, either an hereditary office or elected by the principal nobles. A Germanic king ruled through custom and tribal connections.

Germanic law: age-old custom, traditional justice

Merovingians: the line of the Frankish kings claiming descent from the legendary hero, Merovech

Carolingian: the line of Frankish kings descended from Charles Martel (Carolus Martellus)

Questions for Review

1. Why were the German tribes able to sweep across the Roman Empire?

Several German tribes had become Roman allies, fighting with the Roman legions against other German tribes. The Roman government allowed these German allies to move into underpopulated regions of the empire in Gaul or along the Danube River. As the Roman power weakened or disappeared in some regions, the German tribes drove out what remained of imperial opposition and settled the imperial lands as conquerors and rulers.

2. In what way were the Germanic kings different from the Roman emperors?

Unlike the Roman emperors, who were the heads of a state and lawmakers, German kings were leaders of war who were appointed based on their skill and prowess in war and the hunt. German kings were not lawmakers, for German tribal life was governed by custom, not written laws or edicts. While the Roman emperor had absolute power over the empire, the German kings relied on the advice and good favor of the tribal elders. The German king, too, relied on the fidelity of his warriors and was bound to them by oaths of loyalty. A Roman emperor's power and authority was thought to come from the law of the empire.

3. What were the main differences in government between the Germanic nations and the Roman Empire?

The Roman Empire was a huge state that controlled vast and far-flung territories and ruled over peoples of various races and languages. The empire united these peoples by a common law. The Germanic nations, on the other hand, were many and disunited. Neither a common language nor law united them.

After Constantine, the Roman Empire was increasingly united by a common religion—the Christian Faith. The German nations, on the other hand, were either pagans, worshipping many gods, or Arian Christians.

The Roman Empire had a highly advanced civilization, with great cities, developed arts, splendid architecture, agriculture, and commerce. The Germanic nations, however, were warrior societies. Germanic culture centered on the hunt and war.

4. Did the German nations have a written law?

Germanic nations had no written law but were ruled by age-old custom. Their “laws” were memorized and passed along by the bards or council elders.

How did they decide questions of justice?

In Germanic law, someone accused of a crime was considered guilty until proven innocent. He had to prove his innocence by combat, oath, or ordeal.

What is trial by combat?

In a trial by combat, the accused fought with a court-appointed opponent or his accuser. If the accused was innocent, it was thought he would be victorious.

Trial by oath?

In a trial by oath, the accused called on a god or Christ to support him in his claim of innocence.

Trial by ordeal?

In a trial by ordeal, the accused underwent severe pain or torture to prove he was telling the truth.

5. After whom are the days of the week named?

The days of the week are named after the ancient German gods—the Sun, the Moon, Tiw, Wodin, Thor, and Freia.

6. Which Germanic peoples actually sacked the city of Rome?

Both the Visigoths and the Vandals sacked Rome.

7. What do the names “Visigoth” and “Ostrogoth” signify?

“Visigoth” signifies “western Goth.” “Ostrogoth” signifies “eastern Goth.”

8. Who married the Frankish king, Clovis?

Clotilde married Clovis.

How did she manage to convert him to the Catholic Faith?

She told him that only if he agreed to serve the one, true God would he defeat his enemy, the Alamanni, in an impending battle. Clovis swore to Christ that if he gave him victory over the Alamanni, he would accept baptism. Clovis was victorious over the Alamanni and was baptized.

9. What was a “mayor of the palace”?

A mayor of the palace was the chancellor or chief magistrate of the Meroving kings. The mayors increasingly took on themselves the task of ruling the kingdom.

Which mayor of the palace became king of the Franks?

Pepin the Short was the mayor of the palace who became king of the Franks.

10. Who were the Merovingians? The Carolingians?

The Merovingians were the family of Clovis, the kings of the Franks. The Carolingians were the family of Pepin the Short, mayor of the Meroving palace. Eventually the Carolingians themselves became the kings of the Franks.

11. How did Theodoric bring peace between the Arians and Catholics in his kingdom?

Theodoric brought peace between Arians and Catholics because, although he himself was Arian, he tolerated the Catholics over whom he ruled.

Ideas in Action

1. Write a report on the Germanic gods (a good source is Roger Lancelyn Green’s *The Saga of Asgard*). How are they similar to the Roman and Greek gods?

If students have not studied Greek and Roman mythology, the teacher may need to assign reading material on it or devote a class to discussing the major gods and myths of the Romans and Greeks. A good source for the teacher’s reference is *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton.

2. Discuss why Germanic peoples valued courage so much. Why should such an idea have sprung from a pagan people like the Germans? How is the Germanic ideal of courage acceptable to the Christian Faith? What is the value of suffering or defeat? Can one “lose” and still “win”?

In a society centered on war and the hunt, courage, of course, is of the utmost value. The Germans were certainly not alone in valuing courage, even to the extent they did. Respect for courage was characteristic of other peoples, such as the Celts. Germanic courage in the face of certain defeat is not far from Christian courage, since the Faith calls us to follow Christ and to practice virtue even when it goes against all worldly advantage. Jesus said, “he who loses his life for my sake will find it,” and he called us to take up our cross and to drink of the cup of death, as he did. Yet, even when defeated for following Christ, we are victorious, for we gain heaven, and we help, through our sufferings, to advance the Kingdom of God. As St. Paul said,

we “make up in our bodies that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.”

3. Make a map of the Germanic kingdoms that replaced the Western Roman Empire.

Since the boundaries of the German kingdoms differed from time to time, the teacher may wish to assign different time periods to various students or groups of students. For instance, a student or group of students would make a map of the Germanic kingdoms at the time of

Odoacer, another of the kingdoms at the time of Theodoric or Clovis. Students will have to carry on research outside the classroom. One source is the *Penguin Atlas of Medieval History*.

4. On a map of Europe, find the original homelands of the Germanic peoples. Where are the Scandinavian lands? Where are the steppes? Where is the Danube River?

This could work well as an in-class activity, utilizing a wall map.

Sample Quiz for Pages 115–124

Please answer the following in complete sentences.

- 1. What were the chief occupations of men and, sometimes, women in ancient Germanic society?**
- 2. What sort of man did the ancient Germans want as king?**
- 3. What was the chief way in which Germanic and Roman law differed?**
- 4. What was it about Germanic religion that made the ancient Germans glorify courage even in the face of certain defeat?**
- 5. What regions did the Visigoths conquer after they left Italy following the sack of Rome in 410?**
- 6. What was the name of the council where the Arian clergy and the rulers of the Visigoths formally became Catholic?**
- 7. Who was the Visigothic king who formally outlawed Arianism in his kingdom? In what year did he do this?**

Answer key to Sample Quiz I

Students' answers, of course, should only approximate the following.

- The chief occupations in ancient Germanic societies were *hunting* and *war*.
- The ancient Germans wanted a man who was a *good hunter* and *fighter* as king.
- Germanic law differed from Roman law in that *Roman law was a written law*, while *Germanic law was age-old custom*.
- The Germans believed that a great battle between the gods and the giants would end in the destruction of the world and all mankind.* Because of this, Germans glorified courage even in the face of certain defeat.
- The Visigoths conquered *southern Gaul* and *Hispania* (or *the Iberian Peninsula*.)
- The Arian clergy and the Visigothic rulers became Catholic at the *Third Council of Toledo*.
- Reccared* was the Visigothic king who formally outlawed Arianism in his kingdom in the year 589.

Sample Quiz for Pages 125–133

Please answer the following in complete sentences.

1. Under what king did the Vandals conquer Roman North Africa?
2. Who was the first Germanic king to become Catholic? On what day, in what year, did he convert? What Roman territory did his people, the Franks, conquer?
3. What were the mayors of the palace? Why were they so important to the Frankish kingdom?
4. What was the name of the last Roman emperor in the West? In what year was he removed from power?
5. Who was the king of the Ostrogoths who conquered Italy for the Emperor Zeno and ruled that land wisely and well for many years as its king?

Answer key to Sample Quiz II

Students' answers, of course, should only approximate the following.

1. The Vandals conquered Roman North Africa under their king, *Genseric*.
2. The first Germanic king to become Catholic was *Clovis*, who converted on *Christmas Day, 496*. His people, the Franks, conquered the *Roman territory of Gaul*.
3. The mayors of the palace were *the chancellors, chief magistrates, or head ministers of the Frankish kings*. They became important to the Frankish kingdom because *they eventually took on all the tasks of ruling*.
4. The last Roman emperor in the West was *Romulus Augustulus*, who was removed from power in *476*.
5. This king of the Ostrogoths who conquered Italy was *Theodoric*.

Sample Test

1. Why did the Roman government allow German tribes to settle within the boundaries of the empire?
2. Name the part of the Roman empire each of the following German tribes conquered:
 - a) Vandals
 - b) Visigoths
 - c) Franks
 - d) Ostrogoths
3. What were the chief occupations of the ancient Germans? What qualities did Germans look for in their kings?
4. How did Germanic law differ from Roman law? If one were accused of a crime under German law, by what three ways could he prove his innocence?
5. What was the Germanic ideal of courage? What in their religion made the ancient Germans hold to this ideal?
6. Neither the Vandals, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, nor the Franks were originally Catholic. What religion was each of these people? Which ones became Catholic, and when?
7. Please identify the following:
 - a) The king of the Ostrogoths who conquered Italy and set up a kingdom there.

For most of his reign he was a wise and just ruler.

- b) The last Roman Emperor in the West
- c) The king of Visigothic Spain who became Catholic and outlawed the Arian religion
- d) The Vandal king who conquered Roman North Africa and sacked Rome
- e) The ruling family of the Franks; the family of Clovis and his descendents

- 8. Who was the first Germanic king to become Catholic? Who influenced him to convert? When was he baptized?
- 9. What were the mayors of the palace? Why did they become so important to the Frankish kingdom?

Answer key to Sample Test

Students' answers, of course, should only approximate the following.

- 1. The Romans allowed Germans to settle within the boundaries of the empire *as a way of paying them for their services as military allies against other German tribes.*
- 2. *Answers:*
 - a) North Africa
 - b) Hispania (or Spain or the Iberian Peninsula)
 - c) Gaul
 - d) Italy
- 3. The chief occupations of the ancient Germans were *hunting and warfare*. Germans wanted their kings to be *brave and good fighters and hunters.*
- 4. *Roman law was written law while German law was age-old custom, not written down but memorized.*
If one were accused of a crime under German law, he could prove his innocence by taking an *oath*, undergoing an *ordeal*, or engaging in *combat* with his accuser or a court-appointed champion.
- 5. The ancient Germans believed that *courage exercised in the face of certain defeat is the high-*

est human virtue. This conviction arose from their religion, *where it was believed the struggle between the gods and the giants would end in the inevitable destruction of the universe and mankind.*

- 6. *The Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths were Arian. The Franks were pagan.* The Visigoths and the Franks became *Catholic*—the *Franks in 496* and the *Visigoths in 589.*
- 7. Identify the following:
 - a) Theodoric
 - b) Romulus Augustulus
 - c) Reccared
 - d) Genseric
 - e) the Merovings
- 8. The first Germanic king to become Catholic was *Clovis*, the king of the Franks. He embraced the Catholic Faith through the influence of his wife, *Clotilde*. He was baptized on *Christmas Day, 496.*
- 9. The mayors of the palace were *the chancellors, chief magistrates, or head ministers of the Frankish kings.* They became important to the Frankish kingdom *because they eventually took on all the tasks of the king.*