

Background: The Invasions

No one knows why it started. Maybe there was a drought or cold spell that caused trouble in finding food. Maybe there was a mysterious disease that forced people to flee. Maybe some big, ugly, bad-tempered guy had a burr under his saddle.

For whatever reason, large groups of people from many lands started traveling about sometime in the early 300s. As these people migrated, some of them stumbled into the Roman Empire. The Romans weren't sure about all these "uncultured" and pushy people invading their lands, and called them barbarians. Push came to shove; shove came to kill; and Europe would never be the same. The invasions had begun.

Remember that the Roman Empire was divided into eastern and western parts. The eastern part flourished with an environment that was closer to what people considered civilization. The western part was wilder and less civilized, and the Romans who ruled it were few and far between (see map 1). Lots of barbarians lived along the borders, and life was more or less peaceful until the pushing and shoving began. Let's begin at about the year 375.

The Huns were a feared group of people from central Asia who began to move west. This pushed the Germanic tribes that lived along the border of the Roman Empire into Roman land. One of the tribes that was forced to move was the Visigoths. It moved into Roman land and was tolerated, but when asked to pay taxes, the Visigoths went to Constantinople, the capital of the eastern region, to negotiate. The emperor met them with a huge army, which was a big mistake. The Visigoths won that battle and practically obliterated the eastern side of the Empire. Then the eastern side got the idea that they could use these barbarians to their advantage. They led them to the western side with gold and permission to attack.

In the meantime, another group from the Germanic tribes had pushed into the western part of the Roman Empire. This group, the Vandals, had already taken over much of the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal) (map 2). By 410, Alaric, the leader of the Visigoths, had finished sacking the western capital of Rome and was headed for the Iberian Peninsula. He and his forces pushed the Vandals right off the continent and into Africa (map 3). The Visigoths held the peninsula for many years and established a culture of learning.

By 452 the Huns were moving farther and farther west under the leadership of a fierce warrior named Attila. The Romans and Visigoths had to work together to face these fearsome people, but the threat died when Attila died in 453. The Huns stopped their advance and began to move out of the territory that they had conquered.

When the Huns left, there were vacant areas and more Germanic tribes happily settled there. In about 489, the Franks moved into the main part of Europe known as Gaul, and the Ostrogoths moved into Italy (map 4).

The northern part of Europe wasn't exempt from these invasions. In the late 400s, Germanic tribes known as the Anglos, Saxons and Jutes were invading the British Isles and driving the Romans away. Even the Pict tribes from Scotland were helping to push the Romans along (map 5).

From 540 to 565, Roman Emperor Justinian managed to retake some of the lost lands in the eastern areas. He and his followers preferred a more Greek way of life and a more Greek view of Christianity, so he renamed the eastern area Byzantine. These Christians did not answer to the pope in the western area (map 6).

By 711, Islamic people known as Moors pushed upward from Africa into the Iberian Peninsula. They took over and established a large area of Muslim people in Europe. They tried to expand into the areas held by the Franks, but Charles Martel stopped them. Martel was known as "The Hammer" and was the grandfather of the future king of the Franks, Charlemagne. The Germanic bloodlines fathered many strong and determined people (map 7).

By the end of the 700s, a whole new terror was pushing its way into Europe. The Vikings started attacking the British Isles, but soon found much more to steal in the continent itself. The Vikings were ruthless and had boats that could navigate shallow rivers. That made their attacks fast, furious and almost impossible to stop. The Vikings and their close cousins, the Norsemen, tormented much of Europe for the next 200 years (map 8).

All this pushing, shoving and raiding had a slow but serious effect on daily life. Common people needed protection. They moved in droves onto lands owned by lords, where they could be protected by the lord's knights and castle or stronghold. In return, they worked the lord's land for him and tended his animals and needs. This was the beginning of feudalism.

The barbarians also brought with them advances in technology. Stirrups made fighting on horseback much more successful, so it gave armies who understood how to use them a great advantage. Before the invasions, Romans on horseback had nothing between them and the horse but a short blanket. Wielding weapons from horseback was too dangerous because the rider could easily fall. Using stirrups, cavalymen could wield a lance in battle.

Before the advent of the framed yoke, farmers plowed by simply putting a rope around an animal's neck. If the animal had to strain through hard or soggy land, the rope would choke off its air supply. Progress was impossibly slow and often women pulled the plows in place of the animals. But the barbarians introduced a framed yoke to the farmers. It went over the animal's neck and down its two front shoulders. The weight of the plow and earth was off the animal's neck, greatly improving efficiency. This allowed for more food to be produced, which changed how people survived and spent their time.

Other innovations brought by the barbarians included pants, barrels, wheeled plows, special boats and navigation knowledge, butter, rye bread, schools for the children of nobles, timed candles, transparent ox horns that could be used as lanterns, manual cranks, water mills and horseshoes. All these things made life, labor and fighting easier, increasing the production and power of greater Europe in the medieval times.