The Formation of Christian Europe

Western Europe - the least prosperous and most primitive of the lands around the Mediterranean in Roman times - grows up during the so-called "Middle Ages" to develop a highly original and distinctive civilization. Typical postclassical themes prevailed:

- Civilization spread gradually beyond the Mediterranean zone.
- Christian missionaries converted Europeans from polytheistic faiths.
- Medieval Europe participated in the emerging international community.
- New tools and crops expanded agricultural output; advanced technologies improved manufacturing.
- Mathematics, science, and philosophy were stimulated by new concepts.

STAGES OF POSTCLASSICAL DEVELOPMENT.
- From the mid 6th century C.E. until about 900 disorder prevailed in western Europe. Rome's fall left Italy in economic, political, and intellectual decline.
- The Catholic church remained strong.
- Muslim controlled Spain maintained a vibrant intellectual and economic life, but only later influenced European development.
- The center of the postclassical west was in France, the Low Countries, and southern and western Germany. England later joined the core.
- Continual raids by Scandinavian Vikings hindered political and economic development.
- Intellectual activity sharply diminished; most literate individuals were Catholic monks and priests.

The Manorial System: Obligations and Allegiances.
- Until the 10th century most political organization was local. Manorialism was a system of reciprocal economic and political obligations between landlords and peasants.
- Most individuals were serfs living on self-sufficient agricultural estates (manors). In return for protection they gave lords part of their crops and provided labor services. Serfs bore many burdens, but they were not slaves. They had heritable ownership of houses and land as long as they met obligations.
- Inferior technology limited agricultural output until the 9th century introduction of the moldboard plow and the three-field cultivation system increased yields.
- Peasant villages provided community life and limited self-government.

The Church: Political and Spiritual Power.
- The Catholic church in the period after 500 was the single example of firm organization.
- The popes headed a hierarchy based upon the Roman imperial model; they appointed some bishops, regulated doctrine, and sponsored missionary activity. The conversion of Germanic kings demonstrated the spiritual and political power of the church.
- It also developed the monastic movement. Monasteries had both spiritual and secular functions. They promoted Christian unity, served as examples of holy life, improved cultivation techniques, stressed productive work, and preserved the heritage of Greco-Roman culture.
Charlemagne and His Successors.
- The Carolingian dynasty of the Franks ruling in France, Belgium, and Germany grew stronger during the 8th century. Charlemagne built a substantial empire by 800. He helped to restore church-based education and revived traditions of Roman imperial government.
- The empire did not survive Charlemagne's death in 814. His sons divided the territory and later rulers lacked talent.
- French, German, English, and other separate languages emerged, providing a beginning for national identity.
- The rulers reigning in Germany and northern Italy initially were the strongest; they called themselves holy Roman emperors, but they failed to create a solid monarchy. Local lords and city-states went their own way.

New Economic and Urban Vigor.
- During the 9th and 10th centuries new agricultural techniques - the moldboard plow, the three-field system - significantly increased production. Horse collars - also useful for agriculture - and stirrups confirmed lordly dominance. Viking incursions diminished as the raiders seized territorial control or regional governments became stronger. Both factors allowed population growth and encouraged economic innovation.
- Expanding towns emerged as regional trade centers with a merchant class and craft production. The need for more food led to colonization developing new agricultural land.
- The demand for labor resulted in less harsh conditions for serfs.
- The growing urban centers increased the spread of literacy, revitalized popular culture, and stimulated religious life.
- By the 11th century cathedral schools evolved into universities. Students studied medicine and law; later theology and philosophy became important disciplines.
- Art and architecture reached new peaks.

Feudal Monarchies and Political Advances.
- From the 6th century feudalism, a system of political and military relationships, evolved in western Europe. Military elites of the landlord class could afford horses and iron weapons. The greater lords provided protection to lesser lords (vassals) who in return supplied military and other service.
- Feudal relationships first served local needs, but they later were extended to cover larger regions. Charlemagne acted in that fashion. Later rulers, notably the Capetian kings of France from the 10th century, used feudalism to evolve from regional lords to rulers controlling a larger territory. In their feudal monarchy they began bureaucratic administration and specialization of official functions.
- William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066 and merged feudal techniques with a more centralized government. Royal officials, sheriffs, supervised local justice. The growth of feudal monarchies independently duplicated measures followed in other centralizing societies.