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THE BOOK OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Dorothy Mills

Edited by Memoria Press



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PART I

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

CHAPTER 1

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

IN A.D. 476 Rome fell, the Western Empire came to an end, and never again was there an emperor in Rome, never again was Rome the seat of the government of the Roman Empire. But what was it that had come to an end? Rome had given to the world justice, peace, and an ordered government that deeply impressed itself upon the imagination not only of those who dwelled within the Empire and who were subject to it, not only of those who lived upon its borders and who came from the uncivilized land that lay beyond it, but also upon those who were to live centuries later.

Since the beginning of recorded history, empires and civilizations have risen and fallen; sometimes they would seem to have completely disappeared. It would probably be truer to say that the races who have developed the varying civilizations have disappeared, but that their gifts to the world have survived, not always in the form in which they gave them, but in the form in which the world has needed them.

Rome herself owed to Greece all that was most worthwhile in the things of the higher intellectual life, and Greece had learned much from the earlier civilizations that had preceded her. And so, when the Western Roman Empire came to an end, it was the outward organization, the material things, that gave way. The principles of honor and loyalty, of justice and order that had made Rome great were to endure.

The immediate cause of the downfall of Rome was the invasion of the empire by the Germanic tribes from the

north. Though these invaders were not as uncivilized as they have sometimes been painted, and though at the time of their invasions they were already learning much from the Romans, they were, nevertheless, not civilized as the Greeks and Romans understood civilization. But they were to play an important part in the making of the new world that was to grow out of the break-up of the Roman Empire.

There was one other powerful influence at work in the Europe of the fifth century. Christianity had brought new ideals to the spirit of man. It had an influence and a power that transformed the lives of those who believed in it, and, as will be seen later, it was the Christian Church that kept alive much of the priceless legacy of the ancient world, and that in a time of disorder preserved the Roman ideals of law and discipline.

I. The Heritage from the Past

Rome had been profoundly influenced by Greece, but Greek civilization was first known in Western Europe in its Latin dress, and it was not until after a thousand years from the fall of Rome that the springs of Greek thought and poetry, philosophy and science were opened in any wide measure to the West. The immediate heritage of Europe came from Rome. She had ruled and civilized the lands that were to make part of the new Europe, and when the days of her might had passed, her imperishable gifts to the world were preserved.

One of the most important factors in preserving Roman civilization was the Latin language. Latin had been common to all parts of the Western empire, and throughout the period known as the Middle Ages, it was the language most widely used in Europe. It was the language of the Church, of the universities, of all who were educated; and when, out of what had once been the Roman Empire, new nations arose, the peoples of those nations developed languages directly

descended from Latin. Because Rome had once ruled in Italy, Gaul, and Spain, the Italian, French, and Spanish languages came into being.

Rome had civilized the lands she had conquered, and the whole Empire, north and south, east and west, was connected by great roads which served as channels along which her civilization passed. These roads are still some of the best in Europe, and in most cases modern railways follow the same route.

Rome also left the tradition of law and order and of a well-governed dominion. After the breakup of the Empire, the Church, in her organization, preserved this tradition, and Roman ideas of justice and order profoundly influenced the law of the growing states of Europe and have never been lost to the world. In whatever direction we turn today, we find ourselves on a path made possible to us by Rome.

II. The Germanic Invaders of the Roman Empire¹

For nearly five hundred years Rome had kept her frontiers safe and the barbarian tribes who lived beyond them had been unable to seriously threaten the Roman boundaries. But towards the end of the fourth century, these tribes began to push into the Empire. Many reasons brought them. Their own lands, lying outside the Empire, were poor, the forests were not cleared, the



German auxiliaries

¹ The greater part of this section is taken from Chapter XXIV of my *Book of the Ancient Romans*.