Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire
Late Antiquity

• Period from AD 300- AD 700
• Used to be referred to as the Dark Ages
• Filled with poverty, famine, disease, warfare, and universal illiteracy in the West
• Will be a new age of enlightenment in the East when Christianity strengthened the old ideas of the ancient near east
Imperial Crisis

- Emperors didn’t have succession figured out
- Emperors over-reached territory
- Civil War
- Massive inflation
- Poverty
- German tribes invaded
- Conflict in Arabia with trade routes
The Imperial Crisis

- Commodus died in 192 AD setting off a civil war
- This became the pattern for most imperial succession throughout 3rd cen.
- Role of the army expanded
- Non-stop war disrupted the economy and damaged agriculture
Imperial Decline: Rome’s Overreach

• Influx of Germans across the Rhine-Danube
• Attacks by the Persian Empire in the east
• Emperor Valerian captured by the Persians in 260
• Brief break under the Emperor Diocletian
  – He returned the Roman economy to one of barter, because of the lack of silver currency—with taxes paid in kind
  – He recast the imperial army into civil and military divisions, with special border troops
  – He split the empire into two halves (Tetrarchy), east and west
Imperial Decline: Rome’s Overreach

Persian Ascendancy
This is the most famous of the Sassanid rock reliefs, not only because of its workmanship but because of the scene it portrays: the great victory of Shapur I (r. 241–272) over the Roman emperors Valerian and Philip the Arab. Valerian was captured, executed, then stuffed and mounted on the wall at Shapur’s palace.
Martyrdom and Empire

• He was interested in keeping unity of the empire
  – He promoted the cult of emperor-worship as a means of civil cohesion
  – Diocletian remembered for instituting longest attacks on Christians

• Martyrdom of Christians
  – Christian martyrs felt death was prize to be embraced
  – Christian writers reveled in the gory details of martyrdom

• Romans who witnessed martyrdoms often astonished at Christian attitudes

Medallion of Saint Mamai
Saint Mamai, an early martyr popular with the Georgian people in the Caucasus, was thrown to the lions by the Romans in 275 CE. This 11th-century medallion depicts Mamai fearlessly astride a lion while brandishing a cross.
Constantine (307-337 AD)

- Involved in many civil wars to consolidate power
- First Christian Emperor
  - Reversed persecutions through Edict of Milan
- Created the city of Constantinople
  - New capital of Rome
  - Becomes Byzantine Empire when Rome splits
  - Constantinople is capital for over 1000 years
- Fought many Barbarian groups to keep Rome safe
A Christian Emperor and a Christian Church

• 306 AD-Constantine the Great was the first Christian emperor
  – His conversion came on the eve of the final battle for the succession
• In 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan
• He also directed state funds to Christians and Christian institutions
• Paganism remained legal but the tide had turned in favor of Christianity
• By 391 Christianity became the official religion of the Empire

Dear Prudence

Mosaic of Christ in his heavenly throne, surrounded by his apostles and Saints Prudence and Praxedes. From the 4th century on, the Good Shepherd iconography of Christ gave way to images of Jesus as the mighty king of heaven or the stern judge of the Last Day. The kinder, gentler Jesus did not become the norm again until the 12th century.
A Christian Emperor and a Christian Church

• Constantine found that no two sets of Christians believed the same thing

• Council of Nicaea
  – Resulted in the Nicene Creed, the ultimate statement of Christian belief

• Constantine declared the emperor to be the leader of the Christian church

• This brought him into conflict with the Pope (Sylvester I)

• He refused to recognize the emperors authority over the church
The Rise of “New Rome”

• In 324 Constantine decided to abandon Italy and build a new capital in the East: Constantinople.
• By the 4th C. it was clear the western empire was in decline, while the west was on the rise.
• The new capital was viewed as more important
  – Cradle of western civilization.
• In the 4th and 5th C., the Byzantine empire included most of the Middle East and the Baltic states.
• Byzantium retained centralized control because of their ease of sea-lanes.
• In 476 a German general named Odoacer ended the western empire.
Justinian

- 527-565
- Attempted to reconquer land in the west
  - Attempts weren’t financially advantageous
- Known for the Hagia Sophia
- Corpus iuris civilis
  - Formed the basis for all justice in Byzantium until the 15th century
A Splendid, Beleaguered Capital

- Under Justinian, Byzantium lost territory to the Persians
- Because the emperor Heraclius lost so much territory, he lacked money
  - Couldn’t pay soldiers
  - More land invaded by barbarians
- He replaced the central bureaucracy with the army, apportioning land to commanders
- Byzantium economic hub
  - All trade and commerce passed through it
A Splendid, Beleaguered Capital

• Impoverishment of provincial cities and regions
• Descendants of Roman curiales gradually disappeared, along with the classical learning and urban education
• In 612 the Persians took the Holy Land
• Rebellion by the Christians in Jerusalem against the Persians caused a bloody crack-down
  – This led to an increasingly hostile attitude of Christians toward non-Christians
• Heraclius launched a counter offensive in 622
German Invasions

• Diocletian divided the empire
• Permanently split with Theodosius AD 395
• Immediate cause were the Germanic invasions
• Germans: different tribes
  – Franks, Vandals, Burgundians settled along the Rhine and Danube
  – Goths came from Sweden and split AD 257
• Huns moved into the Balkan area AD 370
  – Conquered the Ostrogoths and pushed the Visigoths into the Balkan area
German Invasions

• Roman emperor Valens defeated in 378 allowing the Visigoths to enter the empire
  – Settled into Spain by AD 418
  – Vandals: Spain and Africa 439
  – Burgundians along the Rhone River 430s
  – Franks in northern Gaul AD 481
• Huns attacked Gaul 451 and Rome 452
  – Died in 453 (end of Huns)
• Rome fell in 476 to Odoacer and 493 to the Ostrogoths
MIGRATIONS AND KINGDOMS OF THE GOTHS
5TH AND 6TH CENTURES AD

- Routes of the Ostrogoths
- Routes of the Visigoths

- Ostrogothic Kingdom
  - 476 CE
- Visigothic Kingdom
  - 476 CE
- Ostrogothic Kingdom
  - 526 CE
- Visigothic Kingdom
  - 526 CE
Barbarian Kings

- After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the west was taken over by warlord semi-states
- Most people were reduced to subsistence farming
  - The population was marked by little security and high mortality
- Aspects of Rome persisted
  - Roman law remained inconsistently intact
  - Latin was still the dominant language
- The period saw an amalgamation of Roman, Germanic and Christian cultures into what would become medieval society
Divided Estates and Kingdoms

- The nomadic custom of dividing a man’s estate (animals) between his sons caused problems because a western farm could not be so easily divided
  - This subdivision with each generation kept Europe mired in poverty
- The same problem held for states
- Until a means was found to pass on undivided realms, little advance in government was made
Culture of the Germans

• Women’s roles would be reduced after the 5th and 6th centuries
• Catholicism shaped the policy, social, and cultural structure
• Those supporting the government gained:
  – Monasteries
  – Positions in the church
• Elite donated land to monasteries thereby protecting family land
Franks

- Established 5th to 10th centuries
- Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties
- Clovis first Frankish king and united the Frankish tribes
- Converted to Catholicism in 496
  - Gave him support and aid from Rome and eased tensions between Franks and Catholic Celts
- Divided between his four sons and threatened by Slavs and Avars
- Capital Paris
- New Dynasty Carolingian in AD 754
Anglo-Saxons

- Celts invited Germans to join army
  - AD 449 saw a huge increase in Angles, Saxons, Jutes
- Pushed Celts into Cornwall, Whales, Ireland, and Scotland
  - King Arthur was a Celt
- War chieftain society/honor society
- Wergild
  - Paying a substitute price instead of eye-for-an-eye
- Eventually converted to Christianity
  - Pagan stories banned
- Alfred the Great
  - Battled against the Norse, patron of literature
Germanic Law

• Old tribal customs that had been passed down orally among German tribes began to be written down starting in the 5th C.
• Germanic law was constructed from the ground up
  – Therefore they were a collection of specifics, not ideological blueprints
• The most striking feature of German criminal law is *wergeld*, compensation for harm or loss of life
The Body as Money and Women as Property

- Germanic law considered women as legal minors.
- The exceptions to this Germanic rule were the Visigoths.
- Girls were considered marriageable upon menstruation.
- Within marriage there was a strict division of labor.
- There were frequent shortages of women because of infanticide and death in childbirth.
  - This shortage ironically raised women’s social value.
- By the 8th C, women had more legal protections.
Christian Paganism

• Germans gradually came to accept Christianity
• Missionaries brought Christianity to the Germans
• They converted the upper echelons first, who then directed underlings to convert
• For many generations, Dark Ages society was an amalgam of religions
• For the Franks, Jesus became one god among many
• Monasticism in the West abetted hybrid versions of Christianity

The Jelling Stone

This 10th-century Danish runestone is one of a series erected by King Harald Bluetooth (r. 958–986), who is traditionally regarded as the first of his people to convert to Christianity. The stones commemorate that conversion and offer atonement for his parents’ pagan hostility to the faith.
Pockets of Intellectual Life

- After the Edict of Toleration in 313, Christians intentionally sought out the most difficult ways to love God
- These ascetics eventually came together in isolated communities
- Monasticism was extraordinarily popular in the 5th - 9th C.
  - E.g. the rule of St. Benedict
- The isolation of monasteries often removed Christian knowledge from everyday life
Early Church Fathers

• Jerome: Latin Vulgate
• Augustine of Hippo: Confessions and City of God
• Gregory the Great: had papal “authority”
• Athanasius: attempted to protect the church from the state; wrote Life of Antony
The ruins of Lindisfarne Monastery and the opening-page of the Gospel of Matthew in the Lindisfarne Gospels, ca. 700.