

# A New Civilization Emerges in Western Europe

## Stages of Postclassical Development

- The postclassical West suffered from **several key problems**, including the political fragmentation of Italy, the Muslim conquest of Spain, Viking raids, and a decline in intellectual life.
- Effective political organization was usually local, and **manorialism** created an oppressive system of political and economic organization between landlords and peasants, many of whom were **serfs**. The **moldboard** and **three-field system** gradually improved agriculture.
- The Christian church was the most organized institution in western Europe. It had a relatively clear hierarchy and established a chain of **monasteries**. **Clovis's** conversion to Christianity helped him gain power over the **Franks**.
- **Charlemagne** established a substantial empire in France and Germany around the year 800, but his empire did not survive his death as Europe split increasingly into **regional monarchies**.
- Agricultural advances, population increases, and growing towns helped breathe economic and cultural vitality into Europe after 900.
- The key military and political system in the Middle Ages was **feudalism**, a system in which greater lords provided protection and aid to lesser lords, called **vassals**; vassals, in turn, owed their lords military service, some goods or payments, and advice. The introduction of feudal monarchy generally took time, though **William the Conqueror** introduced feudal monarchy to England following his invasion in 1066.
- Feudal lords cut into aristocratic power. In 1215 noblemen forced King John to sign the **Magna Carta**, and **parliaments** served as further checks on royal authority.
- Western Europe's **expansionist impulse** led to the conquest of Spain, the first European steps in the Americas, and (spurred on by pope **Urban II**) the **Crusades**. Though the Crusades ultimately ended in defeat, they opened western Europe's eyes to new possibilities, particularly for trade.
- Several important reforms impacted the church, including those advocated by the **Franciscans**, the **Order of Saint Clare**, and pope **Gregory VII**. The **investiture controversy** helped give the church power over monarchies.
- Several key creative tensions characterized the High Middle Ages.

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## Western Culture in the Post-Classical Era

- Theologians like **Peter Abelard** and **Thomas Aquinas** helped to assimilate Greek philosophical ideas into the Catholic religious tradition. **Bernard of Clairvaux** opposed this process, but ultimately **scholasticism** prevailed.
- Though some pagan traditions continued, **Christian devotion among lay people increased.**
- Medieval architecture, literature, and art reflected religious themes. **Gothic** cathedrals rose up around western Europe.

## Changing Economic and Social Forms in the Post-Classical Centuries

- Economic activity and social structure developed **innovative common features** around western Europe, and the region became a growing commercial zone.
- **Peasants gained more freedom** with agricultural advances.
- Urban growth allowed more **specialized manufacturing and commercial activities**, which, in turn, promoted still greater trade. The **Hanseatic League** is perhaps the best example of cities working together for mutual economic benefit. **Guilds** grouped people in the same business or trade in a single city, stressing security and mutual control.
- Men placed new limits on the condition of women, and patriarchal structures seemed to be taking deeper root.

## The Decline of the Medieval Synthesis

- The devastation and antifeudal innovations of the 14th century's **Hundred Years War** suggested that change was at hand. Agricultural resources could no longer sustain increasing population, and devastating plagues like the **Black Death** swept Europe. The growth of **professional armies** shook the authority of feudal lords, who turned to a ceremonial style of life. A series of **controversies over papal authority** distanced the church from everyday devotion. Intellectual and artistic life gradually moved out from under Church influence.
- The **legacy of the Medieval period** includes academic institutions, political ideas, and a marked change in the relationship between the West and the regions around it.