

Western European Government – Postclassical Period

Overview It is worth starting with the sense that the ‘idea’ of nationality’ came only recently into the western world: such an idea was hardly imaginable to a citizen of the Middle Ages in Europe--for that matter, perhaps, to any earlier citizen of West European society, in which tribalism, monarchy, and regionalism--cf. the city-state in Greece--had hitherto provided the available exemplars. Similarly, it was still to be a good three to four centuries, after the end of the Middle Ages, before Mediaeval culture could fall under the organizational spell of the notion of the nation.

The early mediaeval period, in Western Europe The early mediaeval period, let’s say from 400-1000 C.E., brings together many kinds of governmental process--much of it constructed around the institutions of Feudalism, and its regional agricultural underpinnings. During this period there were significant moments of coming-together, when a competent ruler and a cultural milieu coincided, as during the reign of Charles Martel (686-741 C.E.), in what was a proto-France, or of the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814 C.E.), around whom what we call the Carolingian Renaissance of literature and art took shape. There was the fictive Holy Roman Empire, often traced in origin to Charlemagne himself, sometimes to Otto I (dating from 962 C.E.), and nominally existent until the early 19th century, after dynastic episodes of many varieties. In the larger sense, however, the governments of early mediaeval Europe were fleeting operations, rarely far from the kinds of threat posed by Barbarians to the Late Roman Empire, and frequently harassed almost to death by the incursion of tribal forces like the Huns, Magyars, Vikings, and Anglo Saxons, who appeared out of nowhere and undermined the best efforts of settled life.

The Church It is no surprise that the Catholic Church entered the picture early, by the third and fourth centuries C.E., to provide structure and, increasingly, secular possessions and power. Following on such Church Councils as Nicaea (325 C.E.), in which the Church consolidated its fundamental beliefs, and asserted its primacy as an interpreter, for the civilized world, of the ‘mysteries of faith,’ the Church in Rome, and its satellite power centers throughout Europe and North Africa, became the firmest structure for communities cut loose, in the earlier centuries of the Middle Age, from any kind of secular governance.

The later Middle Ages The last centuries of the Middle Ages (1000 C.E.-1400 C.E.), while known for such world transforming achievements of mind as Scholastic Philosophy or the Gothic Cathedral, was unfortunately fraught with social-political instability and with such dreadful interventions as the Black Plague, a pandemic thought to have halved the population of Europe in the 14th century. The Frankish Empire pushed its boundaries significantly into northern Europe, as did the equally loosely constituted Germanic empire, which is estimated to have tripled its nominal size during the centuries in question. The expansion of the Franks into Spain, in the 12th and 13th centuries, was directed to (eventually) expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

Observation The history of the centuries that precede the Renaissance, and follow the Greco-Roman, are hard to beat into intellectual shape. Huge cultural achievements there were, the greatest of them powered by the strange risk of faith, and both science and innovation, as well as the explosion of universities, marking new growth points for humanity. However the thread of social-cultural maturing was snapped, and it would be here, if anywhere, that the word ‘dark’ could be invoked for these ages.

Reading

Jordan, William, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, Harmondsworth, 2004.

Power, David, ed., *The Central Middle Ages, Europe 950-1320*, Oxford, 2006.

Discussion questions

Many causes are given, for the political disorganization of Mediaeval Europe: barbarian invasions; plagues and famines; the unbalance between Church and State; the Islamic eruptions into European polity. What do you think? Have you other explanations to suggest?

Did human culture emerge enriched from the ‘mediaeval experience’? Did that experience stamp a new readiness and openness on the mankind that made its way over the sill into the Renaissance?

What role did international trade play, in building a sense of common values and common political will in mediaeval Europe? Did the international alliances, created by such trade, build new and larger political communities?