

History is His Story

How Europe fell into the Dark Ages is perplexing and complex. England in the 400s still had houses with glass windows and cities had aqueducts and baths, even though Celts (now Romanized) were running things. Yet by 546, a Welsh monk, St. Gildas, first wrote about how a certain "Arthur" was engaged in a desperate war to "break the heathen and uphold the Christ." (Such was Camelot?) In Gaul (France), Visigoths and Franks overran the country but assimilated to Roman ways. In Spain, first Vandals, then Visigoths did the same. Theodoric the Ostrogoth (who was educated in Constantinople), was encouraged by the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno to invade and take over Italy from the former Hunic tribes led by Odoacer that had taken over with the fall of the Roman emperor in 476. All these barbarians had lived on the edges of the empire and admired the Roman system. What happened to make civilization crumble?

An answer may lie in the turmoil of the church and the climate. Emperor Justinian in the East was a very able politician, not a warrior, who spent most days administrating. He started in behalf of his father Justin, a senator who usurped the throne in 518. Justin was frugal, lowered taxes, and limited government leaving a full treasury for Justinian. Justinian was a spender with an eye towards restoring the empire, winning the West back from the barbarians, and building up Eastern governance. His capable general Belasarius was dispatched to fight back Persia, then take back N. Africa from the Vandals, then Italy and Illyria (we'd call it Yugoslavia) from the Ostrogoths. But due to Justinian's big spending on Constantinople, Belasarius was forever shy of troops and pay. How could he have conquered so much? He let his army loot.

In 535, Krakatoa erupted. This volcanic 'hot spot' lies between Sumatra and Java. A hot spot is a weak spot in the crust where magma can repeatedly break through. It exploded with a monstrous eruption in 1883 but chronicles left in Indonesia tell of a much greater eruption in 535. It completely obliterated 50 miles around it separating the two large islands with a crater that blew away enough land to make 30 miles of ocean. It created 120' tidal waves, and, it has now been verified, put so much ash into the upper atmosphere that for 15 years the mean temperature worldwide got colder by about 10 degrees (compare this with a mere 2.5 degree rise predicted by climate scientists by 2200). Low temps meant meager crops, famines and pitiful economies. Thus weakened, the defending kingdoms couldn't hold off Belasarius' army which foraged and robbed peasants for food. It was an ironic reverse of the old story of barbarians invading Rome. Add to this, the genius of Belasarius as a general. Much of the West was reconquered while Justinian spent severely over budget. The conquered peasants were then plunged into famine and ruin and the Dark Ages began when cities, skills and education died.

Justinian also fashioned himself a musician, architect, poet, lawyer, and theologian. He rewrote Roman Law into the Code of Justinian that lasted almost 1000 years. In theology, he decided to favor the Trinitarianism of the Western Pope of Rome (perhaps as a way to unify the Arian Goths and Egyptian Monophysites). Arians denied the complete divinity of Jesus; Monophysites, his humanity (was a ghost spirit). But Empress Theodora (who had a sort of Hillary Clinton co-President role) sympathized with the Monophysites and softened Justinian into tolerance for that heresy. And thus the later part of their reign was filled with riots over famine, religious clashes, and the 542 plague. The plague is also a derivative of a sudden cold climate change. [Another sudden cold occurred in 1309 according to Chinese records and this caused an 8 degree drop in European temperatures followed by the Black Death.] When it gets cold, scavengers like rats thrive, and they carry fleas--vectors for bubonic plague. It is thought bubonic plague occurred in 542 AD as well.

So while civilization collapsed, orthodox Christianity not only overruled the heresies of east and west, but became the one sure hope of Europeans. What survived in the West were not pagan verses of Virgil and Homer but Augustine and Patrick of Ireland. Yet it was a faith confused with superstition and un-Christian practices of the barbarians, and a lifestyle of poverty, malnutrition, pitiful technology and illiteracy. So what would one predict from such an outcome? God, through the Dark Ages, preserved the land from conquest and faith played out through other Christians still to come.