Introduction. While other parts of the world were experiencing unprecedented prosperity during the postclassical era, Europe’s economy underwent a sharp constriction with the fall of the Roman Empire. Long-distance trade did not entirely disappear, significant developments took place in agricultural production, and there were brief periods of government consolidation; nevertheless, early medieval Europe was a world dominated by rural self-sufficiency and political decentralization. In spite of its seeming “backwardness” compared to other great empires of the postclassical world, Europe was laying the foundation for the development of the powerful society that would emerge during the high middle ages. The foundation rested on:

- Hard-won political order, restored out of disruption caused by the fall of the Roman Empire, centuries of destructive invasions, and dramatic depopulation. This order was based on a highly decentralized but flexible system that vested political, military, and judicial authority in local and regional rulers.
- A long, slow process of economic recovery based first on increased agricultural production within the rural manorial system to be followed by gradually increasing trade, industry, and commerce and eventual re-urbanisation of Europe.
- The cultural unity provided by the Christian church based in Rome. During this period Roman Christianity provided the impetus for cultural continuity and unity in western Europe. The office of the papacy and monastic movement were two powerful institutions that helped to preserve Roman traditions and develop and consolidate a uniquely European culture.
- Clovis Charles Martel Charlemagne, Pope Leo III Gregory of Tours
- Louis the Pious Otto I, Pope Gregory I St. Scholastica St. Benedict
- Franks Manorial system Missi dominici, Retainers Benefice Serf
- Heavy plow papacy Monasticism Vikings, Magyars, Benedict’s Rule

I. The quest for political order
A. Germanic successor states
   1. Germanic kingdoms: Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Lombards, Burgundians, Angles/Saxons
   2. The Franks: center of gravity shifted from Italy to northern lands
B. The Franks and the temporary revival of empire
   1. Clovis
      a. Led the Franks and wiped out the last vestiges of Roman authority in Gaul
      b. Military campaigns against other Germanic peoples
   2. Clovis’s conversion
      a. Many other Germanic peoples converted to Arian Christianity
      b. The Franks converted to Roman Christianity
      c. Alliance with the Roman church greatly strengthened the Franks
   3. The Carolingians
      a. Carolingians, an aristocratic clan, asserted authority in the early eighth century
      b. Charles Martel’s son claimed the throne for himself, 751
   4. Charlemagne (reigned 768-814 C.E.)
      a. Grandson of Charles Martel, founder of Carolingian empire
      b. Control extended to northeast Spain, Bavaria, north Italy
   5. Administration
      a. Capital city at Aachen (in modern Germany)
      b. Relyed on aristocratic deputies, known as counts
      c. Used missi dominici to oversee local authorities
   6. Charlemagne as emperor
a. Pope Leo III proclaimed Charlemagne emperor, 800
b. The coronation strained relations with Byzantine emperors

C. Decline and dissolution of the Carolingian empire
   1. Louis the Pious (reigned 814-840)
      a. Charlemagne's only surviving son; lost control of the counts
      b. His three sons divided the empire into three kingdoms, 843
   2. Invasions
      a. Muslims raided south, seized Sicily, parts of northern Italy and southern France
      b. Magyars invaded from the east
      c. Vikings invaded from the north
   3. Norse expansion; Scandinavian homelands were Norway, Denmark, and Sweden
      a. Motives: population pressure, resisting Christian missionaries
      b. Most were merchants and migrants
      c. Some mounted raids in many European regions from Russia to Spain
      d. Outstanding seafarers; even established a colony in Canada about 1000
      e. Fleets could go to interior regions via rivers, attacking towns and villages

D. The establishment of regional authorities
   1. In England small kingdoms merged into a larger realm against Scandinavian raids
      a. King Alfred (reigned 871-899) expanded to the north
      b. Alfred's successors controlled all England about the mid-tenth century
   2. Germany: after Carolingian empire, local lords took matters into their own hands
      a. King Otto I (reigned 936-973) defeated Magyars in 955
      b. Imposed authority in Germany; led armies to support the papacy in Italy
      c. Otto's coronation by the pope in 962 made him the Holy Roman Emperor
   3. In France counts and other local authorities became local lords

II. Early medieval society
A. Organizing a decentralized state
   1. After Carolingian empire dissolved, local nobles built decentralized states
   2. Lords and retainers
      a. Lord provided retainer with a grant known as a benefice (usually land, called fief)
      b. Enabled retainer to devote time and energy to serve the lord
      c. Provided resources to maintain horses and military equipment
      d. Retainers owed lord loyalty, obedience, respect, counsel, and military service
      e. Lord/retainer relationships become stronger; retainer status became hereditary
   3. Potential for instability
      a. Multitiered network of lord-retainer relationships
      b. Sometimes conflicting loyalties led to instability
      c. But powerful states were built on foundation of lord-retainer relationships

B. Serfs and manors
   1. Serfs
      a. Slaves and peasants took agricultural tasks and frequently intermarried
      b. Free peasants often turned themselves and their lands over to a lord for protection
      c. Serfs as an intermediate category emerged about the mid-seventh century
   2. Serfs' obligations
a. Labor service and rents in kind
b. Could not move to other lands without permission
c. Once their obligations were fulfilled, serfs had right to work on land and pass it to heirs

3. Manors were a principal form of agricultural organization
   a. A manor was a large estate, controlled by the lord and his deputies
   b. Manors were largely self-sufficient communities

C. The economy of early medieval Europe
   1. Agriculture production suffered from repeated invasions
   2. Heavy plows
      a. Heavy plows appeared in the sixth century; could turn heavy northern soils
      b. Became common from the eighth century; production increased
      c. Cultivation of new lands; watermills; and rotating crops
   3. Rural society--agricultural surplus not enough to support large cities
   4. Mediterranean trade--Italian and Spanish merchants trade with Muslims
   5. Norse merchant mariners in North and Baltic Seas
      a. Followed routes of Vikings
      b. Traded actively with Byzantine and Abbasid empires
      c. Imported Abbasid silver used in European coinage
   6. Population: 36 million in 200; down to 26 million in 600; back up to 36 million in 1000

III. The formation of Christian Europe
   A. The politics of conversion
      1. The Franks and the Church
         a. Frankish rulers viewed themselves as protectors of the papacy
         b. Charlemagne also worked to spread Christianity in northern lands
      2. The spread of Christianity
         a. Charlemagne's military campaigns forced the Saxons to accept Christianity
         b. Pagan ways did not disappear immediately
         c. By 1000 C.E., all western Europe had adopted Roman Christianity
   B. The papacy
      1. Pope Gregory I (590-604 C.E.)
         a. Organized defense of Rome against Lombards' menace
         b. Reasserted papal primacy over other bishops
         c. Strongly emphasized the sacrament of penance--confession and atonement
      2. The conversion of England--by 800, England in the Roman church
   C. Monasticism
      1. Origin
         a. Devout Christians practiced asceticism in deserts of Egypt, second and third century
         b. Monastic lifestyle became popular when Christianity became legal, fourth century
      2. Monastic rules
         a. St. Benedict (480-547 C.E.) provided a set of regulations
         b. Virtues of Benedictine monks: poverty, chastity, and obedience
      3. St. Scholastica (482-543 C.E.)
         a. St. Benedict's sister, a nun
         b. Adapted the Rule, and provided guidance for religious life of women
      4. The roles of monasteries
         a. Became dominant feature in social and cultural life of western Europe
         b. Accumulated large landholdings
         c. Organized much of the rural labor force for agricultural production
         d. Provided variety of social services: inns, shelters, orphanages, hospitals, schools
         e. Libraries and scriptoria became centers of learning