

*History*  
UNFOLDING

# CHRISTENDOM AFTER ROME'S FALL



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**MindSparks**  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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# Introduction

## Europe's “Dark Ages”

This MindSparks set is the first of two covering the history of Christian Europe and the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages.

This set focuses on the chaos and disorganization following the collapse of the Roman Empire, and on the further disruptions that kept Western Europe on the defensive in the ninth and tenth centuries. As a result of this turmoil, Western Europe stagnated, while daily life came to center almost entirely on a narrowly circumscribed local sphere. The main factor countering this process was the Roman Catholic Church and its growing power, wealth, and responsibility for the preservation of culture and learning. Meanwhile, in the eastern half of Christendom, a very different situation existed. There, something of the imperial order of Rome survived in the form of the Byzantine Empire. And there, Christianity was much more subordinate to political authority than in Western Europe.

A second set, *Christendom: The High Middle Ages* (HS845), carries this story forward to the early stages of the Renaissance.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in its story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **The West Under Attack**

The maps and illustrations here focus on the geographical factors that help explain how the Western Roman Empire fell apart under the assaults of nomadic or semi-nomadic Germanic tribes, beginning in the fourth century CE.

### **The Early Church**

Here the emphasis is on some key aspects of Christian teachings, in particular, those regarding the relationship of Christian spiritual authority to political or secular authority.

### **Two Christian Empires**

The illustrations here help to focus on the contrasting nature of the Carolingian and Byzantine empires.

### **Invasion and Retreat**

The focus here is on the new wave of invasions in the ninth and tenth centuries and their impact on Western Europe.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Christendom: After Rome's Fall***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand some of the factors that led to the fall of the Roman Empire.
2. Students will better appreciate some geographic factors affecting Europe's early history.

# The West Under Attack

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

The Roman Empire once stretched from the eastern Mediterranean all the way to the British Isles. Its many borderlands were very hard to police. Just beyond them lived rough, warlike bands of Germanic peoples. As the empire weakened, these peoples began to look on it with less fear. In the fourth century CE, tribes such as the Goths, the Vandals, and the Lombards began invading. As this map shows, these tribes were often themselves being pushed out of their lands by other tribes also on the move, such as the Huns of central Asia. A vast movement of nomadic peoples soon helped to seal the fate of the Roman Empire.

**Illustrations 2A & 2B**

The Germanic invasions were aided by geography. Northern Europe provided few natural defenses against invaders from the east. For example, Illustration 2A shows Hadrian's Wall, which the Romans built across England to protect themselves against attacks from northern invaders. The thick forests and open plains of northern Europe did little to stop the migration of Germanic tribes and their relentless pressure on Rome's northern frontier. Illustration 2B is a modern artist's idea of how the movable huts of these early migrating Germans might have looked. Natural barriers such as forests and mountains did help to divide up the invading peoples in ways that would keep the new, emerging Europe split into many kingdoms and principalities.

**Illustration 3**

By the end of the fifth century, the western half of the Roman Empire was under the control of various Germanic kings. For example, there were the Ostrogoths in Italy and the kingdom of the Visigoths in Spain. Only one Germanic state would prove long-lasting, the kingdom of the Franks. In 476 CE, Rome's Western emperor was deposed and not replaced. After that, another emperor remained at Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. This half is what historians today call the Byzantine Empire. At the time, its inhabitants still thought of their realm as the Roman Empire and of themselves as Romans. The Byzantine Empire would last for almost 1000 more years. By acting as a barrier against invaders from Western Asia, it would play a key role in enabling a new European civilization to emerge and grow.

## Lesson 1 – The West Under Attack

## Illustration 1



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**Discussing the Illustration**

1. The yellow and purple areas on this map mark the eastern and western parts of a great empire at around 400 CE. What empire was that?
2. At this time, the Roman Empire had already started to fall apart. The arrows on the map help to show why the empire started to collapse. Can you explain what these arrows show?
3. The Roman Empire was one of the mightiest empires the world had ever seen. From what you see here, and from your knowledge of history, can you explain some reasons why the Romans were unable to resist the Germanic invaders?
4. As the arrows on the map imply, the many peoples invading the Roman Empire were nomadic or semi-nomadic. What does this mean? Why might this help explain the sudden movements of people all across Central Asia and northern Europe at this time?

**Follow-up Activities**

1. **Small-group activity:** Divide up the invading tribes or peoples named on the above map equally among the members of your group. Find out more about them and what led them to migrate to Western Europe. Make a copy of the map and use it as the key element in a bulletin-board display on these migrations. Write a page on each group. Find illustrations to add to your display. Give a brief talk to the class explaining your bulletin-board display.
2. Read more about what life was like as a citizen of the late Roman Empire. Imagine you are a young Roman citizen living in one of the Western European lands shown here. It is the early 400s, and your region has been victimized by numerous Germanic attacks. Write a letter to a relative in the city of Rome, telling that relative what you've been experiencing. Share your letter with the class.