

## **MOHAMMED AND CHARLEMAGNE**

**BY HENRI PIRENNE.**

**Comments by Bob Corbett (edited May 2010)**

**February 2004**

Pirenne argues that, as the editor claims:

*“This last work of the great Belgian scholar Henri Pirenne offered a new and revolutionary interpretation of the evolution of Europe from the time of Constantine to that of Charlemagne. Pirenne’s major thesis is that it was the advance of Islam rather than the Germanic invasions that caused the break with antiquity and the consequent decline of Western civilization in the Middle Ages.”*

The first section investigates the question of western civilization after the Germanic invasions.

- While there were important military victories scored by the Germanic tribes, there was little lasting shift in the fundamental culture of Rome.
- Within a relatively short period of time Germanic peoples were co-opted into Roman culture intermarried and that the Latin language(s) remained dominant.
- He argues that fundamentally the Germanic peoples had little desire to destroy the empire, but much preferred to just have a share of the benefits.

He next details several features of life in the European sector of the empire after the invasions to further support the general thesis.

- Germanic tribes were fully absorbed, but that there was no essential change in the structure and culture of the empire, nor any significant decline of economy. (Although there were some changes including a degree of self-governance and economic independence.)
- In the Merovingian period (500-751) and the years from the success of the Germanic invasion until Charlemagne, the empire survived in an uneasy union of the original peoples and the invaders and only very gradually was there any noticeable decline in economy.
- While the Roman owners were often replaced by German owners, the system of agriculture and land management remained unchanged.

More importantly production continued at virtually the same rates not appreciably lessening the wealth of the empire.

- The eastern portion of the empire continued to dominate trade via shipping, mainly in the Mediterranean, but even inland served by the rivers.
- Wines, food stuffs, spices and olive oil (for both cooking and lighting) were in desperate need in the West. These things came from Asia and Africa.
- In exchange the Europeans traded slaves, primarily barbarians from north of the Rhine and textiles and wood for building.
- Trade was centered in the towns, but not in markets, just in the ports.
- Critical to this trade was gold since the dominant nature of trade continued to be with money, not barter. Pirenne claims that gold must also have been an important import since there just wasn’t enough gold in circulation to support the trade, and there were no gold mines in the West.

*The essential point for him is that life went on much the same as it had before the Germanic invasions, just a change in some of the key players.*

To bolster his thesis he turns our attention to intellectual life in the west. Pirenne uses several arguments in this section to conclude his argument that there was relatively little long-term CAUSAL impact on the fall of the empire from the Germanic invasions. The first sentence of this section did cause me a great sense of hilarity. He says:

- “It is needless to insist upon the increasing decadence of intellectual life and of the ancient culture after the 3rd century.”
- The church also continued a process of change by using Latin more and more in a colloquial manner (as opposed to classical Latin) which allowed the people to better understand Christianity.
- And art was dominated by a trend toward orientalization rooted in the commercial contacts with Persia, Syria and Egypt.
- Even the Germanic tribes contributed to this trend with art that they had long had contact with in Russia before the invasions of the south.
- Another intellectual force that contributed to the maintenance of Roman culture was the legal, governmental and commercial system which required a significant number of people capable of writing in the cursive informal Latin style to manage and maintain those institutions.

*In this first half of defense of his thesis Pirenne concludes:  
“What the Germans destroyed was not the Empire, but the imperial government.”*

Please Note: Britain was a key expectation to this claim, There, Pirenne argues, the changes were much more dramatic and it was Anglo-Saxon culture and life forms that were followed, not Roman ones.

As a parting shot to the more classical view of the role of the Germanic invasions as being the dominant cause of the collapse of the Empire is his view that such historical theses have confused the Merovingian with the later Carolingian period to which he then turns his attention.