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Generalizations can help us to understand and learn about certain people, places, time periods, etc., because it makes it easier for the masses to comprehend the topic. But they can also be restrictive and limiting. The phrase “Dark Ages” is such a generalization. There are outliers, beacons of light, and carriers of knowledge. Sometimes by accident, but more often by a yearning desire for more, civilizations evolve. Here we will look at three individuals, and their influence on the Middle Ages and beyond.

The title of emperor comes with a massive responsibility; leadership, forward thinking, and decisiveness, just to name a few. Perhaps none of these best described Justinian (483-565 CE), Byzantine Emperor, but the legacies he left were no less significant. Early in the rule of Justinian, he began the coding of Roman Laws. Many of the laws were out of date, and quite confusing. Justinian set out to simplify and organize the laws, as well as add his own laws into one system. These laws dealt with property, slaves, marriage, etc. This system of laws has served as the foundation for international law, including the United States today.

Justinian was not the most popular emperor. He angered both political parties of the time, to the point where they wanted to mutiny. Riots broke out throughout the city, and during these riots, Justinian was ready to run, ready to flee, but it was the strength of his wife, the Empress Theodora, who convinced him to stay and handle the problem. He handled it alright, killing 30,000 of them. The church of St. Sophia was burned to the ground during these riots, so Justinian set to rebuilding it a few months after things settled down. The result was *“a spectacle of marvelous beauty, overwhelming to those who see it, but to those who know it by hearsay altogether incredible. For it soars to a height to match the sky, and as if surging up from amongst the other buildings it stands on high and looks down upon the remainder of the city, adorning it, because it is a part of it, but glorying in its own beauty, because, though a part of the city and dominating it, it at the same time towers above it to such a height that the whole city is viewed from there as from a watch-tower. Both its breadth and its length have been so carefully proportioned, that it may not improperly be said to be exceedingly long and at the same time unusually broad. And it exults in an indescribable beauty”* (Procopius). It is said that when the Russian state was looking for an official state religion, those that visited Constantinople and saw the Hagia Sophia were in complete awe of the structure, so much so that its grandeur

influenced their decision in the adoption of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. The St. Sophia, or Hagia Sophia still stands today.

Justinian wanted to reunite the old Roman empire, and did so through a series of wars fought by his most successful commanders, Belisarius and Narses. Although he was successful, he did not have much support in this endeavor. Those in the Eastern empire had no interest in “*wasting money defending these Western conquests*” (Nelson), and those in the West had moved on from Roman taxes, Roman justice, and Roman ways in general. This reunification did not last, but it had lasting effects that were not intended by Justinian. He systematically removed most of the Germanic Kings who were, in a sense, keeping the idea of Rome alive in the West, leaving just the Franks, who took over power and changed the outlook of Europe.

I attended Catholic School from grades 1 through 12. Grades 2 through 8 were spent at St. Bede the Venerable Catholic School in Holland, Pennsylvania, named for perhaps the most educated man Europe during his era. Bede (673-735 CE) was truly a light among the darkness. He was a Benedictine monk, and monks were often those that kept education and learning alive during this time period. He was no different. He lived in what is now England, and during his lifetime, there were positive relations between England and the Papacy in Rome. The result of this was an ancient information highway of sorts. He had access to culture and learning, and was the guardian of both.

Bede is most famous for his History of the English People, focusing mostly on the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain. He provides a brief biography on several political and religious figures and events from this time. It was reproduced by hand nearly 200 times during the middle ages, indicating its significance. From a historical perspective, it is useful, but is slightly biased religiously, since Bede was a Christian monk.

Bede also wrote books that would be considered natural science today. One is a description of natural phenomena. “*He tried to explain why things were as they were and was the first scholar to show an interest in cause and effect*” (Gale Group). He also wrote about calendars and chronology, and astronomy, and created a set of rules to determine the date of Easter. During this time, the methods used in determining dates varied greatly. They were often days, and even weeks off. He developed tables and formulas to determine the calculations of dates, and even created mnemonic devices to remind his contemporaries how to calculate time. These tools would be the means for which men kept dates and times for 800 years. This sort of legacy came out of the “Dark Ages,” and although brilliance such as this was rare during this time, it was still there. We are just lucky it was not lost.

Charles Martel is a man often overlooked in history classes. Not only did he stop the Muslims from advancing into Western Europe, but he paved the way for the Carolingian dynasty to take control. He was the grandfather of perhaps the most influential man of the Middle Ages, Charlemagne (742-814). It is important to see Charlemagne through a "Middle Ages" lens. He did put thousands to death by sword, but this was not uncommon between warring tribes. He did have many wives, concubines, and children, but marriage was not a sacrament yet in the eyes of the church. So we will focus on the positives he left for Western Europe and beyond.

Once Charlemagne came to power, he began warring with the other Germanic tribes of the area, in an attempt to unite the people under the banner of Christianity. He created the largest unified empire in Europe during the Middle Ages. Today, Christianity is the largest religion in the world, standing around 33% of the world's population. This is probably in large part to Charlemagne.

In order to control such a vast dominion, he organized it by counties, run by counts. He then proceeded to travel his empire, stopping in on his counts to see how things were going. He was visible to his counts and his subjects. By doing this, he was not only reinforcing the political organization of his kingdom, but the social organization of his people as well. Society did not evolve without his knowledge, he had his finger on the pulse of his subjects.

The monetary system of the time was reorganized by Charlemagne. He developed the pounds, shillings, and pence. This system stayed in place throughout Europe for centuries.

Charlemagne rekindled creativity. He highly valued education, and as a result started schools throughout his kingdom. He hired scholars to teach classes, and often sat in on those classes himself. This was uncommon for a Frankish leader, who rarely had time for such things. Franks were warriors, but Charlemagne was paving a new path. A favorite teacher and scholar of his was Alcuin of York. He acted not only as a scholar teacher, but as an English ambassador on Charlemagne's royal court.

When compared the classical periods of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, many aspects of civilization as a whole were not operating on all cylinders. Technology, learning, and culture were often neglected, and replaced with survival. But in times like these, we are thankful for those that had the desire, foresight, or even just the means to keep human intellectual growth alive. With my students, I enjoy the "what if" game. What if Justinian did not conquer the Germanic tribes while trying to reunite the empire? What if Bede hadn't developed formulae for determining time and dates? What if Charlemagne did not unite under the pulpit of Christianity? These questions not only emphasize the importance of these men and their

legacies, but they challenge students to continue that desire and that foresight. We just have to hope they have the means.

References:

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