

The Dawn of European Civilization

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The Dawn of European Civilization: The Dark Ages (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1965. 360 pp., \$28.50), edited by David Talbot Rice, is a large book—large in format, scope, and conception. It had to be large to fulfill its intention: to cover an unfamiliar era in breadth sufficient to relate the complicated movements and interactions of many people over a vast area, and yet to provide detail enough to describe with clarity the development and accomplishments of each individual culture. The era that is covered began with the destruction of the classical world at the close of antiquity and ended with the establishment of what can be recognized as the basis of modern Europe, at least with respect to the formation of most of the present western nationalities. From that time forth disruptive changes lessened and true national developments began.

The material is presented in a series of interlocking chapters, each written by one of 14 distinguished British authorities who not only trace the fortunes of the several ethnic groups, but present the gigantic conflicts of the era. These confrontations, although often violent, necessitated prolonged contacts and consequent cultural exchanges, resulting in various artistic blendings of the classical with the oriental and the primitive. The major interchanges were three: between the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Persian Empire to the east, succeeded by militant Islam; between the two great religions, Christian and Moslem; and, in the west, between two fundamentally opposed cultural traditions, the Classic-Byzantine and the Germanic barbarian. It was the tracing of the resolutions of these conflicts through the epoch of the "dark ages" (really not so dark after all), roughly from 500 to 1000 A.D., that occupied the authors who contributed to this book.

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Historically, the Sasanian and Islamic empires have played the role of a "middle kingdom" between the West and the Far East. In the context of Europe, however, the Far East was so remote as to be unknowable, and the Byzantine Empire was the actual middle realm, seemingly eternal and impervious to change, which acted as the avenue of exchange between East and West and as the intermittent source of renewal to other countries. The waxing and waning of Byzantine political fortune and the complexity of Constantinopolitan life, society, and learning are here carefully outlined.

Generally little known in the West is the importance of the historical roles of the Armenians and the Slavs. The history of the latter is here reported at greater length than usual. After prolonged contact with Scyths, Germans, and Byzantium, the Slavs took their place in history as protectors of Orthodox Christianity. The Armenians, a numerically weak people situated between Byzantium and the eastern empires, enjoyed the advantage of trade with, and suffered conquest by, each. Sustained by a nationalized Christian faith, the Armenians developed an art form that evinced elements of East and West and was startlingly anticipatory of European Gothic.

In Europe itself, the great changes were wrought by the migrating Germanic barbarians who occupied the previously Roman lands. Italian culture was transformed by Ostrogoths and Lombards, resulting in an art that blends Germanic forms with Byzantine, as illustrated by the royal jewels of Queen Theodelinde in one of the finest color plates in the book. As did the Ostrogoths, the Visigoths travelled through the East and developed a nervous, splendidly barbarous art in which they incorporated oriental and Byzantine elements. These they finally bequeathed to southern France and all of Spain while performing their ulti-

mate achievement, the initiation of the reconquest of Iberia from the Moors and the fusing of many ethnic elements into a Spanish nation.

The histories of Britain and France, although in general more familiar, are here enlarged through the presentation of the results of recent scholarship. Extensive archeological investigation has made possible the better interpretation of biased archival material. The civilizing role played by the Irish at the depth of the dark ages, and the destructive attacks and final settlements of the Vikings, the last of the great wanderers, completed the Celtic-Germanic amalgam of the two nations. Irish, English, and Merovingian French arts present a gorgeous display as they develop toward the Carolingian "Renaissance," a re-awakening of interest in the classical world that is especially evident in manuscript painting (see the cover on this issue of *Science*). The neo-classicism of the Frankish style continued into the Ottonian period through renewed contact with Constantinople.

By the year 1000, the concept of Christendom as a spiritual realm had finally matured, as had the notion of the "empire" as its physical equivalent. These two ideas, embodied in Pope and Emperor, symbols of unity although rivals in fact, became the basis of the Medieval and Renaissance worlds, and were not finally dissolved until the 19th century.

But what is the need of a book such as this, so far-ranging geographically and so far-removed in time? Talbot Rice, the editor, explains succinctly: "Now we are beginning to realize that a new, more comprehensive approach to our early history is necessary. . . . It is in the breadth of its scope that this book can hold out a claim to greatest originality. . . ." In dealing with so remote an era, works of art are essential to illustrate the course of history. Their actuality provides immediacy and credibility to the long-gone. Conversely, the art itself may well seem uncommunicative unless enlivened by clear, historical narrative. The present volume achieves an adroit balance between art and history: each serves as background to the other.

The contributors to the volume are David Oates, R. H. Pinder-Wilson, Sirarpie der Nersessian, Cyril Mango, J. M. Hussey, Tamara Talbot Rice, Donald Bullough, William Culican, Peter Lasko, David Wilson, Charles Thomas, Philip Grierson, and Denys Hay.