

CURIOSITY CHRONICLES



Snapshots of Medieval History

by Rachel Meyers M. A.

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Globally Minded History for the Elementary Child

by Rachel Meyers, M.A.

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Introduction to Medieval History

Ted: Dragons, knights, ladies, castles, moats. I'm so excited for medieval history!

Mona: You know dragons aren't real right? But the rest of that is part of Medieval History, plus so much more! Silk and spice-laden caravans, elaborate mosques, religious wars, Mongol invaders, African empires, the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu, Viking raids, scientific innovation, and so much more! A LOT happens in the Middle Ages. This is an important part of history because the world is transitioning from a few major civilizations surrounded by simple farming communities and hunter-gatherer peoples into a world full of complex and diverse human cultures all over the globe.



Ted: In our tour of ancient history, we focused on six major civilizations. Are we going to have a different approach to medieval history?

Mona: Yep. As the world's population grows and more and more complex societies emerge, it's harder to organize history just by civilization. Plus, different civilizations are having more and more contact with each other, so there's a whole lot out there to study!

Ted: What even is medieval history? What does medieval mean?

Mona: Medieval is another word for Middle Ages. The Middle Ages is the period of history between the ancient period and the modern period.

Ted: So it's called the Middle Ages because it's in the middle!

Mona: Exactly! The fall of Rome caused lots of problems for Europe, so the Middle Ages is sometimes called the Dark Ages.

Ted: The Middle Ages sure does have some dark and gruesome military history!

Mona: But this period of history isn't exactly 'dark' in other parts of the world. It's actually a really bright part of history in places like China, the Middle East, and parts of the Americas and Africa. So to keep things simple, let's define the medieval period based dates. For our adventure, I'm going to say the medieval period goes from 500 CE to 1550 CE.

Ted: Perfect. Dates make sure everything is clear! Let me pull up my timeline here. So for our entire adventure, we're only covering 1,050 years? Wow, that's going to let me really zoom in on things with my timeline. Awesome! You know what else? Everything we're going to be talking about takes place in the CE era of history. That means we can simplify things and not include CE after every single date.

Mona: That's right. If a date doesn't have a BCE or CE after it now, you can assume that it's a CE date.

Ted: I can't wait to get started!

Mona: Let's get a quick lay of the land first! At the end of ancient history, the Western Roman Empire had fallen, and most of Europe was in disarray. Meanwhile, the Eastern Roman Empire was still carrying on like normal. India had just experienced a golden age under the Gupta Empire, but now they've entered a period of decline because of invasions from the Huns. China also experienced a golden age during the Han Dynasty, but the fall of the Han brought a period of disunity called the Six Dynasties. China had a lot of political fighting during this period, but art, culture, science, and technology flourished. Then over in America, the end of ancient history comes right in the middle of the Mayan civilization, so they're just carrying on like normal.

Ted: So some parts of the world are struggling, but others are flourishing when we start in 500 CE.

Mona: That's right! Our first stop in medieval history will be in the Eastern Roman Empire to see how Rome is getting on without Rome.



Chapter 1

Justinian Builds a Golden Age and Gets the Plague

Mona: We're going to start our first snapshot of medieval history with a young boy named Flavius Petrus Sabbatius. Flavius was a poor peasant boy. His native language was Latin, and he was born in the Eastern Roman Empire just six years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

Ted: Why are we starting with an ordinary kid?

Mona: Because Flavius doesn't stay ordinary for long! He moved from the countryside to Constantinople itself, the capital of the empire. Flavius lived with his Uncle Justin. Justin worked his way through the ranks of the army until he became the captain of the royal guard.

Ted: That means he was in charge of protecting the palace and the emperor himself? That's a really important job!



*The size of the
Roman Empire
after the fall of
Western Rome.*

Mona: Justin didn't have any children of his own, so he treated Flavius like his own son. He used his new money and power to pay for Flavius to receive an excellent education. To thank his uncle for this, Flavius changed his name to Justinian.

Ted: Wait, do you mean THE Justinian? One of the greatest emperors of Rome? How did a farm boy end up the emperor of Rome?!

Mona: When Emperor Anastasius died, he didn't leave an heir, so confusion broke out as the Romans began fighting over who the next emperor would be. Justin was in a pivotal position. As the head of the Royal Guard, he was in charge of the only soldiers inside Constantinople. That meant no one was going to become the next emperor without his approval. One group tried to bribe Justin to support their choice for emperor.

Ted: Kind of reminds me of Caesar. Bribery is a very Roman way to get power.

Mona: Romans were also pretty good at back-stabbing, which is exactly what Justin did. He took the bribe, but then he used it to bribe other leaders to support HIM for emperor. With a bribe and an army on his side, Justin was crowned the next emperor of Rome.

Ted: So our little Flavius went from farm boy to nephew of the emperor! Nice!

Mona: The son of the emperor, actually. Justin officially adopted him. Justin gave Justinian quite a bit of power. Justin was a good soldier, but he wasn't educated. In fact, he couldn't even read! So he relied on Justinian's education to help him with the more difficult parts of running an empire.

Ted: What comes next for Justinian?

Mona: Next, Justinian meets a woman named Theodora and falls in love.

Ted: So not only does Justinian become one of the most powerful men in Rome, but he also marries the love of his life. This guy is so lucky!

Mona: I didn't say he got married! I mean, Justinian wanted to marry Theodora, but there was a problem. Theodora was not the most respectable of women. In fact, she was in the lowest social group in all of Constantinople. She was an actress.



*Tile mosaic of
Emperor Justinian
and Empress
Theodora located in
Ravenna, Italy.*



Ted: So he's not allowed to marry an actress?

Mona: Nope! There was even a law against public officials marrying actresses.

Ted: Yeah, but surely he had enough power to change the law!

Mona: Yes he could, but he aint stopped him every time he tried. So Justinian had to wait until his aunt died before he could change the law and marry Theodora. Not too long after that, his uncle died too, and Justinian was crowned Emperor of Rome with Empress Theodora at his side.

Ted: I know Justinian is one of the most famous emperors of Rome, but why? What does he do?

Mona: Rome had a couple of big problems when Justinian became emperor. For starters, Rome was half the size it used to be, and the city of Rome wasn't even part of the Roman Empire anymore. Secondly, Rome was corrupt. Now, this wasn't exactly new, Rome had struggled with corruption for a long time. But by the time Justinian became emperor, the corruption was at a breaking point. Something had to be done! Finally, Rome's laws were a convoluted mess! Rome had been around for over a thousand years by this point. During that time they'd made all sorts of laws, overturned other laws, and had judges decide what exactly a whole bunch of those laws meant—and all those judges didn't always agree with each other! There were rooms full of books listing all the laws of Rome. Some of those laws contradicted each other, and just knowing what all those books said was an almost impossible feat.

Ted: It sounds like Justinian needed to get Rome back, get rid of corruption, and fix all of Rome's laws. That's the hardest to-do list I've ever seen.

Mona: One of the things Justinian started with was fixing the corruption of the tax system. Taxes were where the Empire got its money from. No money means no new bridges or aqueducts, and no money to pay soldiers. But corrupt tax collectors keeping some of the money for themselves and rich noble families avoiding taxes meant the Empire wasn't getting nearly enough money. Justinian fixed all that. He changed how taxes were collected and made sure the nobles paid up.

Ted: That probably didn't make him very popular with the nobles.

Mona: Not really, but with the extra money Justinian was able to invest in new building projects and building up the army.

Ted: He's sure going to need an army if he wants to recapture Rome!

Mona: Before he turned his attention to Rome, Justinian needed to fix the laws. He hired a man named Tribonian to fix the massive mess of Roman law. In just 14 months, Tribonian had simplified all of Rome's laws and created a new law code. He took the 1,500 books Rome's laws used to fill and simplified it down to just 50 books.

Ted: Someone could actually read 50 books.

Mona: With a simplified law code, Justinian was able to get rid of a lot of corruption. Before, it was easier just to bribe a judge rather than understand Roman law, but now the law was the same for all Romans and justice didn't depend on bribery.

Ted: So Justinian gave all people equal access to justice—that's something our laws still try to do today.

Mona: That's right! This new law code was called the Corpus Juris Civilis, and it didn't just become the basis of all Roman law. It's still the basis of laws all throughout the Western world.



Bas-reliefs of Tribonian and Justinian located in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington D.C., honoring them for their contributions to law and justice.

Ted: Wait, Justinian helped write laws we're still using today?

Mona: That's right! We owe Justinian and Tribonian quite a lot for giving us the framework for modern laws.

Ted: Sounds like Justinian is ticking items off his to-do list at an impressive rate!

Mona: His last goal, recapture the Western Roman Empire, ended up being a lot more complicated than his first two goals. But before Justinian could turn his attention west, he had some bigger problems right at his doorstep. Chariot racing was incredibly popular in Constantinople. Imagine 'soccer in South America' kind of popular. There were groups, called demes, that were like fan clubs for certain chariot teams, but they were more than fan clubs, they were also political parties.

Ted: So sports and politics were kind of the same thing?



Painting of Roman chariot racing by Alexander von Wagner in 1882.

Mona: Yep. The two largest demes in the city were really powerful and could get away with a good bit of trouble. Then one day after a chariot race, a riot broke out. Some people were murdered during the riot. Justinian was not going to tolerate that kind of violence, so the leaders of the two demes were sentenced to death.

Ted: That's harsh, but understandable.

Mona: Seven men were sentenced to be hanged, but at the execution, something went wrong. Two of the ropes broke, and two of those men were able to escape to the safety of a church and claim sanctuary.

Ted: What does it mean to claim sanctuary?

Mona: A church is considered sacred ground. During the Middle Ages, if a criminal entered a church and claimed sanctuary, soldiers were not allowed to enter the church to arrest him.

Ted: So the escaped men were safe?

Mona: As long as they stayed in the church. One man from each deme escaped. The citizens of Constantinople started demanding Justinian pardon these men and let them go free.

Ted: Justinian doesn't strike me as the kind of guy to give in to demands.

Mona: He wasn't. Justinian was holding a large chariot race when people started chanting at him to have mercy on the two escapees. When Justinian ignored them, their chant changed. Instead, they started chanting "Nika."

Ted: What does nika mean?

Mona: Nika means victory. It also means to conquer someone.

Ted: So the crowds were threatening to conquer Justinian?

Mona: Yep! Justinian fled back to his palace, while the crowd formed into a mob and started rioting across the city. The rioters caused chaos and began looting buildings. They even started a fire. Many of the largest buildings in Constantinople burned down. The riot lasted five days.

Ted: Five days of that chaos??

Mona: Justinian went to talk to the crowds, ready to pardon the men to get the city back under control, but that wasn't enough for the mob anymore. They demanded a new emperor.

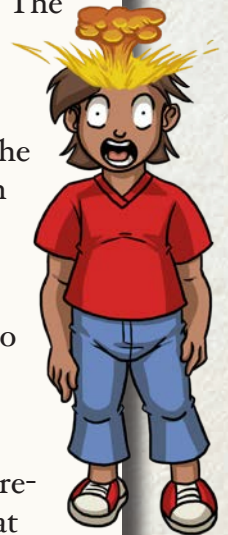
Ted: Oooo, that's a tough break.

Mona: Justinian retreated to his palace again to decide what to do. His advisors told him to flee. The situation was hopeless.

Ted: Well it sure doesn't look good!

Mona: This was when Theodora stepped up to the plate. She refused to flee the city. She told her husband and his advisors that

"For a man who once was an emperor to flee—that we cannot bear. I hope I never have the royal purple stripped from me nor live to see the day where the people I meet do not address me as empress. . . . As for me, I like the ancient saying that the royal purple is the noblest burial clothing."



Theodora would rather die than flee. In that terrifying moment, Theodora showed more courage than anyone else in the room. Her courage inspired Justinian. Justinian was not going to give into the mob. He was going to make a plan.

Ted: Wow, it would take some serious guts to stand up to rioting mobs like that!

Mona: Justinian's solution was swift and ruthless. He bribed the leaders of the demes to stop encouraging the riot. Then he sent soldiers to end the uprising. By the end of the day, 30,000 people had been killed, and Justinian was firmly in control of Constantinople.

Ted: Wow, that is harsh!

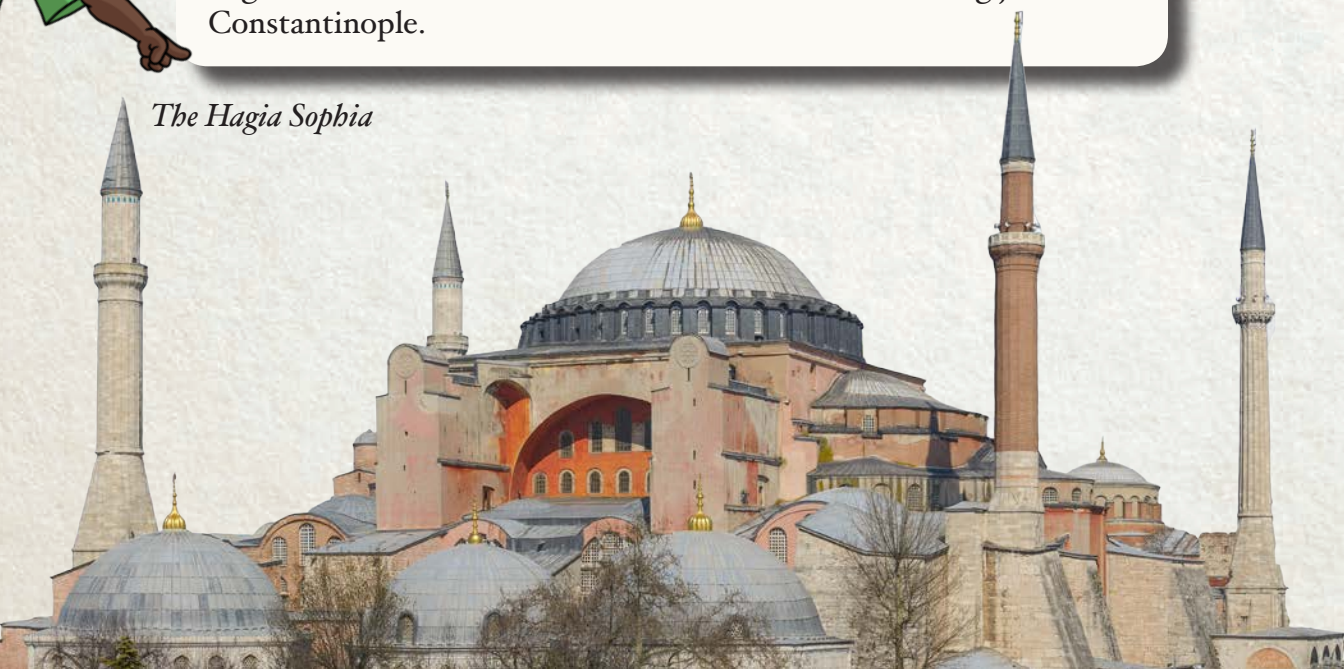
Mona: No one said being emperor meant being nice. By the time Justinian had control of the city again, a quarter of Constantinople had burned down. Much of the destruction happened in the richest parts of the city too, destroying many public buildings. Constantinople was the largest city in the world at this point in time. The level of destruction was unthinkable.

Ted: I'm guessing Justinian quickly came up with a plan to rebuild though.

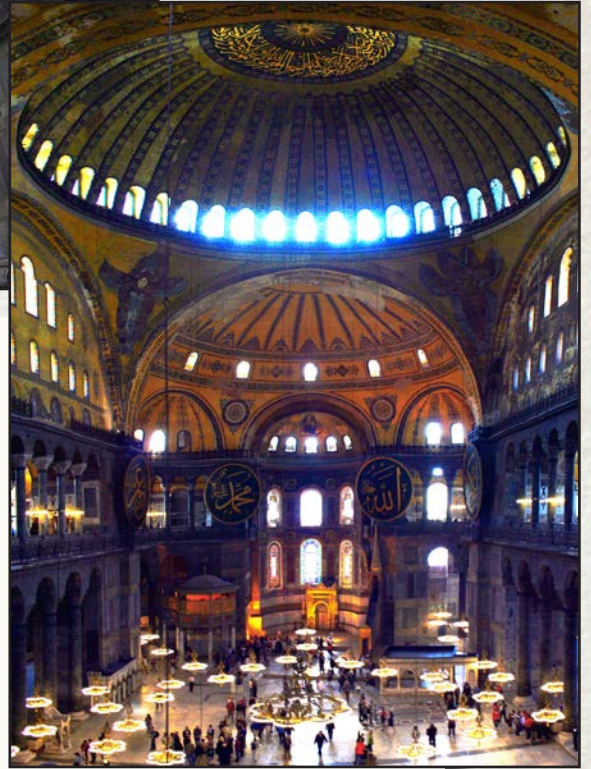
Mona: You're right. He saw this as an opportunity to make Constantinople bigger and better than it was before. One of the things that burned down was the main church in the city. Justinian decided to construct a new church that truly displayed the glory of his empire. Less than six years after the Nika Riots, Justinian dedicated the brand new Hagia Sophia. The Hagia Sophia had one of the largest domes in the world and is considered the crowning jewel of Constantinople.



The Hagia Sophia



Interior of the Hagia Sophia. Below and bottom right show the central dome. Right shows a side alcove. The Hagia Sophia was later converted into a mosque and is now a museum.



Ted: It is a stunning church! So where's Justinian on his to-do list? He's cleaned up corruption, gotten the demes under control, and rewritten the law code. It's time to take Rome back.

Mona: Justinian didn't just want Rome back, he wanted the entire Western Roman Empire back. He decided to start with North Africa. He sent an army and ordered them that they were to act like liberators, not conquerors, which meant they weren't allowed to steal or attack the common people.

Ted: That's definitely going to make them more popular with the common people.

Mona: Exactly. The liberating force was successful, and North Africa was added back to the Roman Empire.

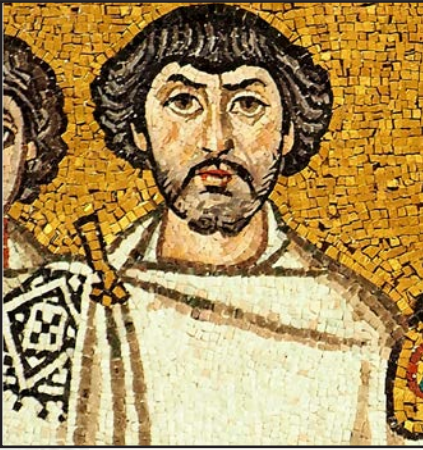
Ted: Wow! Aside from the Nika Riots, everything seems to just go the way Justinian wants!

Mona: Don't get too ahead of yourself! After his success in North Africa, Justinian decided it was time to start reclaiming the Italian Peninsula. He sent his chief general, Belisarius, to Italy. Belisarius was Justinian's chief general for a reason. He'd already helped Justinian make peace with the Persians, put down the Nika riots, and reclaim North Africa.

Ted: Sounds like my kind of guy.

Mona: So Belisarius and 7,500 soldiers set off to reclaim Italy.

Ted: Hold up. 7,500? In military terms that's...not much...at all.



Mosaic of Belisarius

Mona: Justinian did rush into that one with a pretty small army. Belisarius landed in Sicily, the island at the tip of Italy. Many of the cities willingly surrendered to the Roman liberators, but the city of Panormus decided to fight back. The city had high walls and was well guarded. There was no way Belisarius could win on land, at least not without several months of fighting.

Ted: If he got stuck fighting in one place for several months, it would be easy for the Ostrogoths in the rest of Italy to gather an army to fight him off.

Mona: But if he just left Sicily and moved on, he'd be leaving enemies behind him, as well as in front of him.

Ted: Which makes an ambush easy. It's a tough spot to be in as a general.

Mona: Justinian had chosen well when he appointed Belisarius to lead this campaign. Instead of getting bogged down in the usual military options, Belisarius got creative. All of his men were still on boats in the harbor, so Belisarius ordered his men to climb the masts and start shooting arrows over the walls. This approach took the soldiers of Panormus by surprise and worked!

Ted: I bet an easy victory like that over such a well-guarded city spooked the Ostrogothic king.

Mona: Yeah it did. In fact, as Belisarius and his army established their control over Sicily, the Ostrogothic king and Justinian started negotiating. The king was afraid of the strength of Belisarius' army. He even offered to return the whole of Italy to Justinian!

Ted: Dude! That's like the easiest victory ever!!

Mona: But then, Belisarius got word that his troops in North Africa were rebelling. If he didn't leave for North Africa immediately, everything he'd conquered there would be lost, so Belisarius packed his bags and set off for Africa.

Ted: Oooo! He showed weakness in the middle of negotiations. That can't bode well for Justinian!

Mona: Nope! The Ostrogothic king heard about Belisarius leaving Sicily and changed his mind. The treaty with Justinian had already been written up and delivered to him, but he refused to sign. If Justinian still wanted Rome, he was going to have to go about it the long, hard way.

Ted: Oh man, that is such bad luck!! He was sooo close!!! But he's not going to give up, is he?

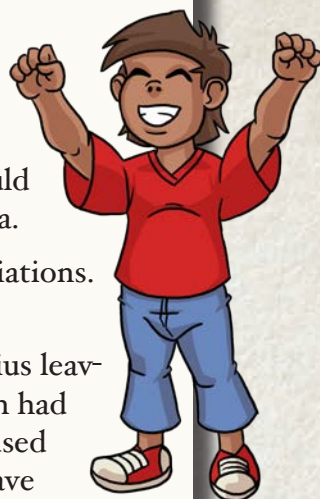
Mona: Nope! After Belisarius got North Africa under control, he returned to Italy and began conquering. The war wasn't easy with so few men, but Belisarius' impressive military skills and remarkable good luck won the day. On December 9, 536 Belisarius took control of the city of Rome.

Ted: Mission accomplished!

Mona: Sort of. There were still some details to tie up, but just as Justinian was securing peace in the west, his eastern border brought him a whole new batch of trouble.

Ted: Oh no! Things were going so well!

Mona: The reason Justinian was able to send so many soldiers to fight in Africa and Italy was because he had signed the Treaty of Eternal Peace with Persia. The Eastern Roman Empire shared an extensive border with Persia, and Persia and Rome had long been enemies. The peace treaty meant Justinian could leave his borders less heavily guarded, which is why he managed to retake so much of



the Western Roman Empire. When Persia saw this, they decided, 'to heck with that peace treaty!' and started moving on the Eastern Empire. Before peace in Italy was finalized, Persia was on Justinian's doorstep. Not only that, but raiders from Europe were threatening his northern border. The Roman Empire was stretched thin trying to defend so many borders!

Ted: That's exactly why the Empire broke apart in the first place! It was too big to manage. There were too many enemies surrounding it. Its borders were too long. Paying for so many soldiers to defend the Empire was incredibly expensive. Maybe giant empires are a bad idea. . .

Mona: Those are all problems Justinian should have been able to predict. Maybe if everything had gone normally, Justinian would have been able to manage those problems. But things did not go normally. At all. A new problem hit the Eastern Empire. A problem no one saw coming. The plague.

Ted: Wow, Justinian went from having the best of luck to the worst of luck. It doesn't get worse than the plague!

Mona: The plague was a deadly disease. It caused fevers, then people would start vomiting blood, then their skin would begin decaying like they were dead, and they would get black puss-filled pods on their legs.

Ted: That is so disgusting!!

Mona: The plague started in Egypt, but then it spread. In 542, the plague hit Constantinople itself—the heart of Justinian's empire.

Ted: That must have been devastating!

Mona: It was! The plague killed one out of every four people in Constantinople. At its worst, the plague was killing 5,000 people a day.

Roman Empire

410
Sack of Rome



**End of
Ancient
History**

Justinian is born
482
476
Fall of Western Rome

Ted: I can't even imagine so many people dying!

Mona: It was totally overwhelming for the city. People were dying so quickly that they couldn't even bury everyone. Ordinary life had ground to a halt. The city was in total panic. Then the only thing that could have made Justinian's situation worse happened.

Ted: Don't tell me he got the plague too!

Mona: Yep, Justinian was struck down by the plague. As he lay in bed in a coma, just days or weeks away from death, Theodora stepped up to the plate once again. Theodora took over ruling the empire. Theodora had always been helping Justinian in the background. She acted as his legal advisor and spymaster, and she also improved the rights of women and worked to improve relations between different types of Christianity. Now that Justinian was out of action, she took over everything. Theodora ruthlessly squashed any murmurs of rebellion and protected Justinian's crown. Justinian and Theodora had never had children, so there was no heir to inherit the throne. Generally, in a situation like that, power hungry people would be quick to pounce, but Theodora kept them all at bay.

Ted: That's amazing that in the middle of that colossal crisis she stepped up and ran the empire and no one challenged her for control.

Mona: Even more amazing is what happened next. Justinian got better.

Ted: Wait, what?? The guy gets the plague and doesn't die?! I'm going back to my 'he has crazy good luck' theory.

Mona: The plague utterly ravaged the Mediterranean world. By the time it was over, around 25 million people had died. The plague even came back several times after that, making that number rise even higher.

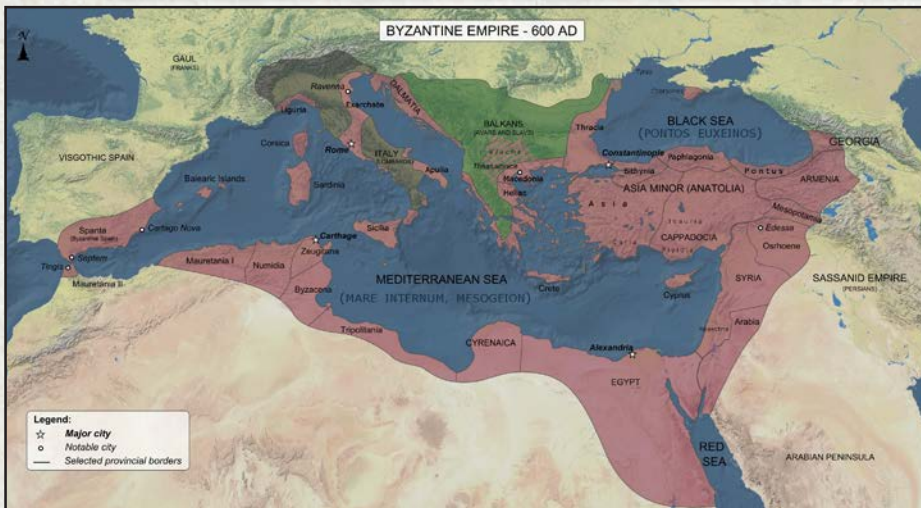


Ted: Living in the Middles Ages doesn't sound pleasant.

Mona: As hard as Justinian worked, and as impressive as his accomplishments were, it wasn't enough. Justinian's dreams of a restored empire were short-lived. He managed to create a new peace treaty with the Persians after many years of fighting, but along the way, new problems arose in Italy. Within ten years of Justinian's death, half of Italy would be lost to the Ostrogoths again. Not only that, but all the money Justinian had spent trying to rebuild the Empire, left the Empire short on cash in the coming years.

Ted: Solve one problem and create two more.

Mona: Justinian may be one of the greatest emperors of the Roman Empire, but the Empire was not very strong by the time he died. After Justinian, the size and power of the Eastern Roman Empire continued to shrink. We'll come back to the Eastern Roman Empire later, but for now, it's time to see what happened to the remains of the Western Roman Empire.



Map of the Eastern Roman Empire just a few decades after Justinian's death. Green areas are lands that were lost to outside kingdoms.

Want to know more?

Try researching the following topics:

- Byzantine Empire
- Empress Theodora
- Chariot racing and the Hippodrome
- Hagia Sophia
- Eruption of Krakatoa

Chapter 2

Clavis Becomes Catholic

Ted: Last time we talked about some of what happened after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, with Justinian trying to reclaim it and all, but I want to know what was going on in other parts of Europe after the fall of Rome. I mean, Rome used to control most of Western Europe, so now that it's gone, what does Europe look like?

Mona: To understand how life changed when Rome fell you first need to know how life changed when Rome first arrived. Rome brought roads, bridges, aqueducts, trade routes, government, laws, customs, new types of weapons, and many inventions.

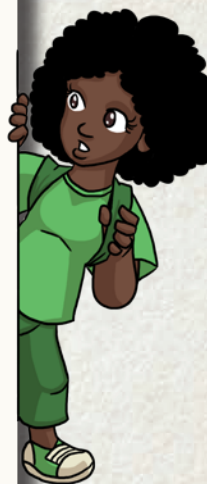
Ted: So all that disappeared with the fall of Rome?

Mona: Some of it did. There was no longer a centralized government to maintain roads, bridges, and aqueducts. Rome is famous for its quality building, so there were roads, bridges, and aqueducts that were in use for hundreds of years after the fall of Rome, but if something did break, there wasn't anyone to fix it.

Ted: No more construction crews. That's bad.

Mona: The fall of Rome also led to a collapse of trading. Roads were no longer safe from bandits, and there was a lot more war—both of which discouraged merchants. Before, trade had brought food and new materials to the area. With less trade, people had to work harder to supply these things for themselves. Before, a metalworker could spend all his time crafting high-quality metal tools and then sell them to a merchant to buy food. Now that same metalworker wouldn't have a merchant to sell his goods to, so he wouldn't have money to buy food. Instead, he'd have to start farming to get food.

Ted: But that means he'd have less time to make metal tools, so then even if a merchant did come through the area, he wouldn't have as much to sell to him.



Mona: Exactly, and then merchants wouldn't have goods to take another place to sell. So, a decrease in trading just led to an even bigger drop in trading, until soon, most people were farmers barely making enough to live on.

Ted: So decreasing trade is kind of like when I don't clean my room. It starts out kind of messy, but as I don't clean it, it just gets messier. The messier it is, the easier it is to make a mess, until one day you can't see the floor anymore!

Mona: That's one way to look at how a problem keeps getting worse with time. When Rome fell, its government disappeared. Many different cultural groups lived in Europe, so they formed their own governments to replace Rome. They were ruled by kings. They had different laws than Rome. One of the biggest changes was a return to revenge-based justice.

Ted: That means if someone steals from me, I'm allowed to go and do something about it myself, like challenge them to a fight to get revenge.

Mona: Correct.

Ted: What about the last few things you said Rome brought with it? Customs, weapons, and inventions. Did those disappear too?

Mona: Some did, some didn't. Some tribes rejected everything Roman and returned to their ancient traditions. Some tribes blended Roman life with their traditions.

Ted: You said there was a lot of war that decreased trade. I'm assuming all these different tribes are fighting each other for control of what used to be Rome?

Mona: Yes. The Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Burgundians, Franks, Alamanni, and Saxons were all battling for control of different parts of Europe.

Map of Europe at the beginning of Clovis' reign in 481.

Let the power struggle begin!



Ted: Sounds like the set up for a pretty big showdown for control of Europe.

Mona: That's basically what medieval European history is.

Ted: I knew the Middle Ages would be cool! So where do we start?

Mona: We're going to start with Clovis I, King of the Salian Franks.

Ted: Is it just me, or does Frank sound kind of like French?

Mona: It's not just you. The Franks do become the French.

Ted: So this is like the beginning of French history?

Mona: It's going to be a while before France looks like the France we know today, but it all started here. According to legend, Clovis' grandfather, Merovech, had established his kingship in the final days of the Roman Empire. Merovech had been a mighty warrior, and he even joined forces with Rome to help fight off Atilla the Hun.

Ted: Clovis has some impressive military lineage!

Mona: The Salian Franks preserved many Roman customs with their traditions, forming a distinctly new culture. Yet, at the beginning of Clovis' reign he and his people were not Christians like Rome. They were pagans.

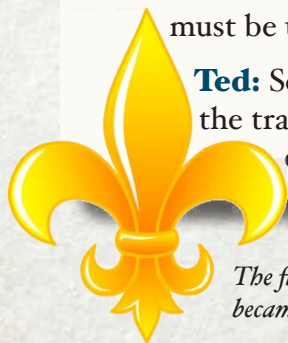
Ted: What's a pagan?

Mona: The word comes from the Latin word "paganus" which means "country peasant." The early Roman Christians used that word to describe all the people who lived in the country that hadn't converted to Christianity. Over time, the word changed to mean anyone who wasn't Christian. Sometimes it would be used as an insult, meaning anyone who wasn't Christian must be uncivilized.

Ted: So you're saying Clovis was polytheistic and worshiped the traditional gods of his tribe? Were most of these different tribes in Europe pagans too?



Bronze hanging of Merovech's victory over Atilla the Hun in 451 by Emmanuel Fremiet, 1867.



The fleur-de-lis was a symbol of Merovech's family and became a common symbol in French art and design.

Mona: A lot of the tribes around modern-day Germany had converted to Christianity, but a different type of Christianity than Rome. They were Arian Christians.

Ted: Wait, there are different types of Christians?

Mona: Pretty much from the get-go, Christians started debating with each other about what different scriptures mean. When they couldn't agree with each other, they began forming different branches of Christianity. In this case, the debate started over the fact that Christians believe in three beings: God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

Ted: Wait, I thought Christians were monotheists. How can they only believe in one god if they actually believe in three?

Mona: That's exactly what started the debate. Some Christians argued that all three beings were actually one being, with three different aspects.

Ted: Huh?

Mona: They believed God is one huge, incomprehensible being. Because God is so complex, he has three different forms that humans can try to understand.

Ted: Hey, the Hindus had an idea like that too. Ok, so God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all one being—that's why Christians are monotheists.

Mona: Precisely. The idea that all three beings are one being is known as the doctrine of the Trinity. That was the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. But there was another interpretation called Arianism. Arians believed that God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit were all separate beings.

Ted: It sounds like such a small thing, but I guess if you can't agree on who God is, it's a big deal.

Mona: The takeaway is there are two main types of Christianity in Europe at this point: Catholicism and Arianism. They disagreed with each other about the nature of God. The Catholics said the Arians were heretics who had perverted Christianity, and it's not like the Arians liked the Catholics much either.



Ted: So the Roman Empire was Catholic, the northern Germanic tribes were Arian, and there were some pagans thrown in the mix too. Pretty much, there were a lot of politics and religion to fight about.

Mona: I think you're getting the hang of medieval history! Shall we return to Clovis?

Ted: Oh right, I'd almost forgotten about him. Does he go on a campaign to unite all these different tribes?

Mona: First stop, uniting the Franks. Clovis becomes king in 481 when he's only 15 years old. Despite being young, Clovis quickly set to work building up his kingdom. Clovis began conquering the different Frankish tribes and killing their kings.

Ted: Killing their kings was a way to make sure no one could challenge him for control, right?

Mona: Exactly. Some of the kings he killed were even his own relatives, so he got a bit of a reputation for being ruthless. Despite that, Clovis' campaign was very successful. By 491, he had united most of the Frankish tribes, and he established a new capital city in Paris.

Ted: Wow, Paris is still the capital of France today. It's cool getting to the parts of history that are still around!



Sculpture of Queen Clotilde in Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris.

Mona: Clovis worked to establish political alliances too, which means he made friends with the people he hadn't conquered. In 492 his sister, Audofleda, was married to Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths. The following year, Clovis married Clotilde, a Burgundian princess. Clotilde is going to be really important to what happens next because she was a Christian. A Catholic Christian to be precise.

Ted: So we've got a pagan king, surrounded by Arian kingdoms, married to a Catholic? That sounds a bit messy.

Mona: Clotilde tried relentlessly to get her husband to convert to Christianity,

but Clovis wouldn't budge. Clovis continued conquering the tribes around him and pushing back the borders of the more powerful kingdoms. It all came to a head in 507 at the Battle of Vouillé. Clovis was attempting to push the Visigoths across the Pyrenees Mountains into modern-day Spain. During the battle, things weren't going that well. Then, Clovis cried out to the heavens during the battle: "If you will grant me victory over these enemies, I will believe in you and be baptized in your name."

Ted: Hey, that sounds a lot like Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge! Did it work?

Mona: Well, Clovis won the battle, and the Frankish border was secured. True to his word, Clovis and 3,000 of his soldiers were baptized on Christmas Day, 508. Clotilde was even made a saint for her important role in converting the king.

Ted: Winning a battle and helping your wife become a saint all in one go, impressive!

Mona: That's at least how the story goes according to Gregory of Tours who wrote the history of Clovis over 50 years later. Gregory wasn't even alive during the Battle of Vouillé, and the story does seem pretty remarkable. Modern historians think there's good evidence that Clovis actually converted to Christianity much earlier

before he even married Clotilde, and Gregory's story is just a cool story, not actual history.

Ted: Why is it always the cool stories that end up not being true?

Mona: Because why would you make up a story that wasn't cool? Regardless of when and how exactly Clovis converted to Christianity, his conversion is incredibly important. He converted to Catholicism, not Arianism. Clovis saw it as his duty to help spread Catholicism across Europe, and he was very successful. Because of Clovis' conversion, Catholicism will go on to be the type of Christianity



Sculpture of the baptism of Clovis in Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris.



practiced by all of Western Europe for hundreds of years. Even today, Catholicism is the largest branch of Christianity in the world, and that's thanks to Clovis. If Clovis had converted to Arianism or hadn't converted at all, history would have been very different.

Ted: So Clovis kind of single-handedly changed the world?

Mona: Clovis also passed a law code while he was king that would be the foundation for most laws in medieval Europe. His law code helped establish a better justice system in the post-Roman world. However, one of the more famous parts of his law code is that it prevented women from inheriting the throne or any property.

Ted: So that's why there aren't many medieval queens?

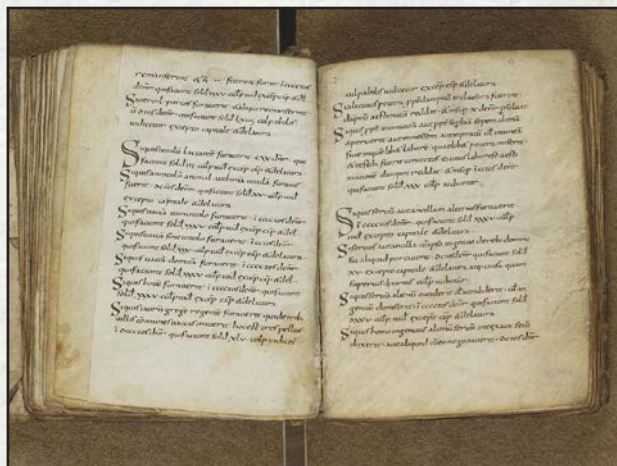
Mona: Yeah, this law code stopped women from gaining power, but plenty of medieval women were quite good at running things behind the scenes. Clovis died in 511. According to Frankish tradition, his kingdom was divided among his four sons. So each son got his own kingdom.

Ted: Wait, they split the Frankish Kingdom apart as soon as they got it united?

Mona: Yes and no. Technically they were separate kingdoms, but Clovis has united his people with more than just borders. He had joined them with a common culture and religion too. So kind of like the city-states of Ancient Greece, the Frankish kingdoms were separate but united enough to fight off outsiders.



Painting of Clotilde dividing the kingdom among her sons.



A book of Salic Law, based on the law Clovis passed, written in the 800s.



Map of Frankish Territory at the end of Clovis' life.



Ted: Hey, that map of Frankish territory is starting to look a lot like modern France!

Mona: A lot more things you'll recognize started happening around this time too. Medieval Europe is famous for its nobility: Lords and Ladies, Dukes and Duchesses, Kings and Queens.

Ted: I love studying nobility. They're awesome because they have all sorts of gold and treasure, plus they're always getting into ridiculous, yet highly entertaining, fights with each other!

Mona: Yeah, the nobility are a pretty colorful bunch. Medieval Europe developed a new way of life called feudalism. In feudalism, the nobility own all the land. There's a king at the top who's in control, and beneath him, there's a bunch of different lords and dukes who are loyal to him. Even though the lower nobility is loyal to the king, when they're on their own land, it's like they're running their own mini-kingdom.

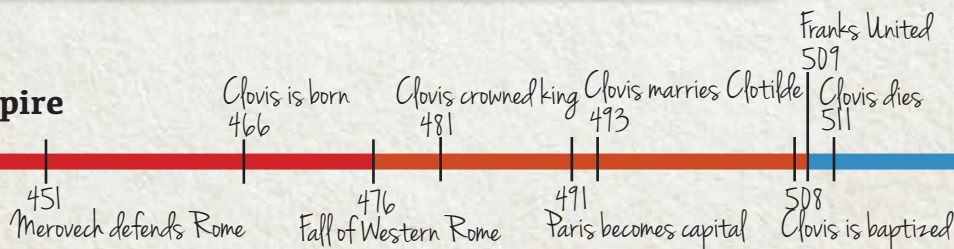
Ted: So on his own land, a Lord would be in charge of the laws and protecting his people. The people who lived on his lands would be loyal to the Lord and pay taxes to him. Each Lord would run a mini-kingdom, then all these mini-kingdoms made up the king's larger kingdom.

Mona: Exactly.

Ted: What about people who weren't nobility?

Mona: Most of the people were poor peasants. They would live on a Lord's land and farm. Some of what they grew would be given to the Lord to pay him for using his land. They would get to keep the rest of what they grew, which probably wasn't much. These people were called serfs. It was a step up from being a slave because serfs

Roman Empire



could choose to go serve a new Lord if they wanted and they had a few more freedoms than a slave, but in a lot of ways being a serf was similar to being a slave.

Ted: So the world was divided into serfs and nobility?

Mona: There were some other jobs available, like being a servant in a noble house or being a blacksmith or baker. The third large group in the Middle Ages was the clergy.

Ted: What's the clergy?

Mona: People who worked for the Church. Catholicism was a massive force in medieval Europe. There were many important positions like Bishops and Cardinals who'd help run the Church, as well as many people who served the church at a lower level by being monks and nuns.

Ted: So if I lived in medieval Europe, I could choose between being a noble, a serf, or a clergyman? Yeah, I'm definitely going with noble!

Mona: The nobles definitely had it good. Even though their job was technically to run the kingdom, the Frankish kings arranged so they wouldn't even have to do that!

Ted: What? How!?

Mona: There was a servant in the king's household called the Mayor of the Palace. He was like a butler. He ran the royal household. Then the Frankish King asked him if he could also do all the boring bits of being king too. You know, things like passing laws, administering justice, and dealing with squabbles within the kingdom. Sometimes the King would even ask the Mayor of the Palace to lead his troops into battle if he didn't feel like it.

Ted: That's like everything a king is supposed to do! What did the nobles do if they weren't running the kingdom?

Mona: Well, it left lots of time for fighting and plotting against each other, which was kind of the specialty of medieval royalty. In my opinion, the best plotter and schemer of them all was Brunhilda, Queen of the Frankish kingdom Austrasia.

Frankish Kingdom



Ted: What makes Brunhilda a grade-A schemer?

Mona: Brunhilda started life as a Visigothic princess, then she married King Sigebert I of Austrasia. Sigebert's brother King Chilperic of Neustria was jealous Sigebert had married a princess from such a wealthy family, so Chilperic went off to Spain and married Brunhilda's sister Galswintha.

Ted: So two king brothers marry two princess sisters?

Mona: Yeah, except Chilperic then decides he doesn't like Galswintha very much. He'd fallen in love with Fredegund, a servant in his palace. So then Fredegund and Chilperic murder Galswintha and get married, which obviously makes Brunhilda furious. That set off a several decades-long feud all with Brunhilda at the center of it.

Ted: So Brunhilda was not the sort of woman you wanted to cross.

Mona: Brunhilda orchestrated the deaths of many rivals and outlived many generations of men who died in the ensuing battles. She ruled as regent for her son, her grandson, and her great-grandson. In the end, when she was about 70 years old, she was captured on the battlefield alongside her great-grandson. Her captors charged her with the death of TEN Frankish kings and sentenced her to death.

Ted: Wow, being responsible for the death of ten kings is quite the feat! I can see why you said she was such a good plotter. Not that killing kings is a good thing, but you know, it's not easy.

Mona: So that's what nobles did all day. Fighting, plotting, wars, assassination—it's all going to be a pretty common theme in medieval Europe! We'll come back and talk about medieval Europe some more later, but a lot is going on in the rest of the world we need to talk about first. Next up: China.

Want to know more?

Try researching the following topics:

- Merovich
- Fredegund
- Salian Law
- Other European tribes such as the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Burgundians, Franks, Alamanni, and Saxons

Chapter 3

The Sui Rise and Fall

Ted: Last time we were in China was during the Han Dynasty in ancient history.

Mona: The Han Dynasty was considered the golden age of China. Chinese art, culture, science, medicine, and military power all flourished. Though just like Rome, the Han Dynasty fell.

Ted: What caused the fall of the Han Dynasty?

Mona: Fighting nobles—something we’re going to see a lot of in history.

Ted: Typical! By the way, do you like my Chinese nobel outfit? I’m so ready for China today!

Mona: Since the fall of the Han, China has had several dynasties, but was never united. There was quite a lot of warfare between the different Chinese kingdoms over the years. When we pick up Chinese history today, we’re in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. There were actually a lot more than just two dynasties though. There were a whole bunch.

Ted: The star of today’s story, one of my personal favorites, is the guy who managed to reunite China: Emperor Wen!

Mona: Before he was called Emperor Wen, his name was Yang Jian.

Ted: In China, who your family is matters a lot. Yang was the descendant of an important Han Dynasty general and had a long lineage of military service.



Painting of Emperor Wen

Mona: Yang's family history helped him start his military career. Yang attended a military school and then became a military commander for the Emperor of Northern Zhou.

Ted: Northern Zhou is one of the many dynasties trying to control China right now, correct?

Mona: Yep. Yang excelled in military service and also became the Duke of Sui.

Ted: I'm a bit jealous. I want to be a duke.

Mona: Yang found so much favor with the Emperor that Yang's daughter was married to the crown prince.

Ted: You'd think that be a good thing, right? Being the father-in-law to the future emperor ought to be a pretty comfy job.

Mona: Except when that crown prince became emperor, Yang wasn't in such a great position. The new Emperor was very unstable, always afraid of a conspiracy against him. The Emperor threatened both Yang and his daughter with execution.

Ted: Being close to the Emperor can have its drawbacks.

Mona: But Yang and his daughter played their cards right. They kept their heads down and didn't push the Emperor too far. Soon the Emperor became very ill, and Northern Zhou was in need of a new ruler.

Ted: As father-in-law to the Emperor, with an impressive military history, Yang was the ideal candidate.

Mona: At first, Yang was just the regent of Northern Zhou.

Ted: But then he went on a campaign to take control of the whole of China and won!

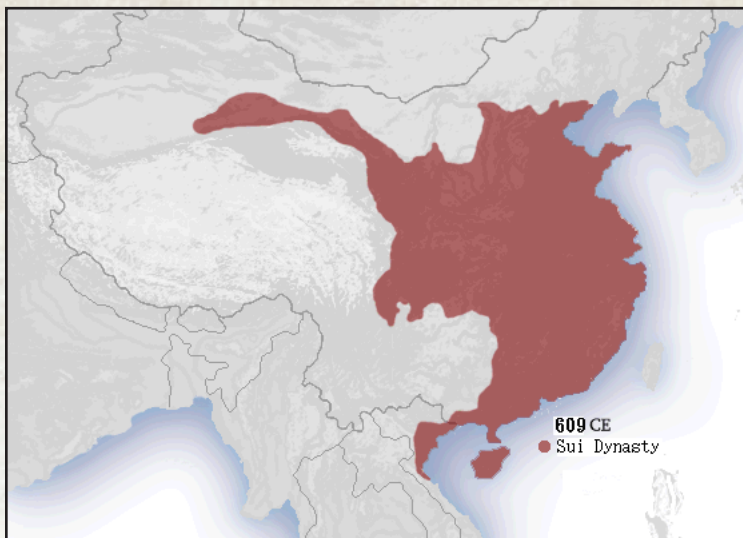
Mona: In 581, Yang was crowned Emperor Wen and founded the Sui Dynasty.

Ted: This was the first time China was fully united since the Han Dynasty.

Mona: The Sui Dynasty is one of the shortest in Chinese history, but in many ways, it's also one of the most important.

Ted: Why is that?





Map of the Sui Dynasty. The long section poking out to the west was land China conquered to protect the Silk Road.

Mona: Emperor Wen set the course for much of Chinese history. He was very popular and well respected among the Chinese people. Some of what Emperor Wen did was bring back practices from the Han

Dynasty, like the Imperial Examination System.

Ted: I've never heard of the Imperial Examination System, but I'm guessing it has something to do with taking tests.

Mona: China is a pretty big place. It takes a lot of government workers to run a government for such a vast country. But where are you supposed to get all those government workers?

Ted: You...ask your family if they want to work for the government?

Mona: That's how plenty of government jobs have been filled throughout history, but appointing your family and friends for all the jobs makes it seem like you're playing favorites.

Ted: Well, you are.

Mona: And that makes people cranky and more likely to rebel.

Ted: It would make me cranky if I couldn't get a job just because I wasn't related to the right person.

Mona: Besides, being related to someone important doesn't mean you're smart or talented or educated or would be any good at the job.

Ted: So what's a better way to do it?

Mona: With the Imperial Examination System! Local government workers could nominate people that they thought would be a good fit for a government job. Those people then took a big test—the world's first standardized test. People would then be offered jobs based on their test results.



Ming Dynasty painting showing the Imperial Examination.

Ted: So basically you had to prove you knew something before getting a job?

Mona: Exactly. By offering jobs based off of a person's merit (like what they knew and how hard they studied) instead of based off who a person was related to, the government looked fairer, which made people like it more, which made them less likely to rebel.

Ted: So what was on this big test? Math and law and government policies?

Mona: Nope. It was not a practical exam. Instead, the exam tested people's knowledge of art, poetry, and Confucianism.

Ted: I feel like testing practical skills would have been better.

Mona: Testing practical skills probably would have been helpful, but testing someone's cultural knowledge had benefits too. The exam made it so people studied the same things. This helped keep China united by creating a standard knowledge base.

Ted: So if everyone studied the same books, then everyone could talk about the same books, so everyone would have something to talk about, so everyone could get along?

Mona: That's right. But not everyone in China was educated. Only the nobility and rich merchant families had the time and money to be educated. Plus, education and the exam were only available to men, so only a small portion of the people in China was even able to take the exam.

Ted: That's too bad. What else did Emperor Wen introduce?

Mona: Wen changed how land was owned in China. During the Sui Dynasty, the emperor owned all the land in China. Farmland was then distributed to families to live and work on based on the family's ability to use the land. Pretty much, the bigger your family, the more land you were given to farm.

Ted: Because larger families mean more workers, more workers mean more farming, so big families can farm more land.

Mona: Distributing land based on family size made things more equal, which made Emperor Wen super popular with the common people. Wen also decreased taxes which made life easier for the common people.

Ted: A tax cut will always make people like you.

Mona: Wen focused on doing things that would keep China safe and united. The northern border of China had been having problems for a long time with raider and bandits.

Ted: I thought China had already built the Great Wall because of that exact problem.

Mona: They had, but the wall didn't cover all of China's border and many parts of the wall needed to be repaired. One of the first things Wen did as emperor was to order the rebuilding and extension of the Great Wall. But it turned out the wall he built wasn't long enough since the bandits just rode around the Great Wall to attack a different part of China. So Wen ordered the building of more new sections of the Great Wall to try to stop these attacks.



Chinese farmer standing next to a rice paddy. Rice was the most important crop in medieval China. Rice farming takes a lot of work, which is why larger families were able to farm more land.



Ted: As you can see by looking at this map of the Great Wall, the Great Wall isn't just one big wall. It's a whole bunch of different walls. Sometimes these walls connect, sometimes they don't. By adding more sections of wall, Wen was protecting more of his kingdom.

Mona: As part of Wen's goal to keep China safe and united, he disbanded all private armies. He also outlawed citizens owning weapons, unless they lived along the border.

Ted: Tightening his control over the military and weapons would make a revolt harder.

Mona: China had been disunified for so long, the odds of a revolt were quite high. Wen did many good things for China, but he was also aware of how dangerous it was to unite such a large country. Wen ordered many harsh punishments for people who threatened his kingdom.

Ted: Were there any other problems Wen had to deal with as he united China?

Mona: Yes. One of the problems Wen ran into during his reign was famine in northern China. Drought hit the area around the Yellow River, which grew most of the food for northern China. The drought

caused a food shortage, but that was only a problem in half of Wen's kingdom. The farmland in the south, around the Yangtze River, was still growing plenty of food.

Ted: So Wen had to figure out how to get food from the south to the people in the north.

Mona: Transporting the food by land took too long and was too expensive. Transporting the food by water didn't work, since the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers don't connect.

Ted: Sounds like he was stuck between a rock and a hard place. How was he supposed to make it easier to transport food?

Mona: Wen thought it'd be really nice if the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers did connect.

Ted: But they don't—and they're not even close. They're hundreds of miles apart!

Mona: You know what else is hundreds of miles? The northern border of China. But that didn't stop China from building a wall along it.

Ted: So Wen actually tried to connect the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers??

Mona: No project is too big for China! It took 5 million men and women to dig the canal. The canal Wen built connected the rivers and lakes of China so that you could sail from the south of China all the way to the capital city of Chang'an in the north. When Wen's son became emperor, he continued building the canal, so it reached all the way into the northern provinces near modern-day Beijing. This massive canal system is called the Grand Canal. It almost goes without saying, but the Grand Canal is the longest canal in the world, even today. Today it's 1,115 miles long.

Ted: That is insane! That's almost as long as Europe is wide! The Grand Canal, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army—China just does things on a bigger scale than anyone else! So what else happened during the Sui Dynasty?

Mona: Emperor Wen wasn't content with just reuniting the areas that had previously been part of China. He wanted to expand China's borders too. The first place he looked to do that was Vietnam, just south of China. The Han Dynasty had conquered northern Vietnam over 600 years before. Wen wanted to reclaim that land and add even more to his empire.



Left: Map of the Grand Canal. Sections labeled *Wendi* were built by Emperor Wen. Sections labeled *Yangdi* were built by his son, Emperor Yang.

Below: Section of the Grand Canal in modern-day Beijing



Ted: Unfortunately for him, that turned out to be a bit harder than he'd anticipated. The Han had been unsuccessful at conquering all of Vietnam after the Trung sisters led a rebellion against them. Conquering Vietnam this time was just as problematic.

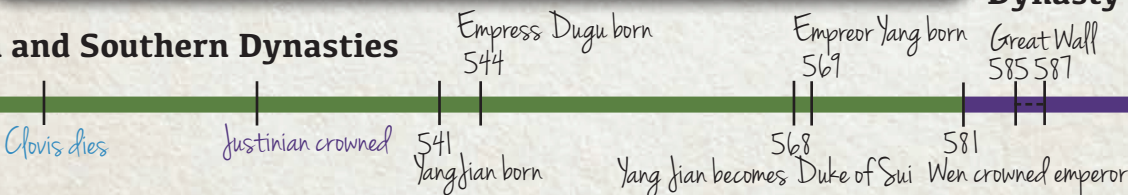
Mona: It wasn't just Vietnamese resistance that caused major problems for China. Vietnam is tropical, which means it has lots of tropical diseases, like malaria, which soldiers from northern China had never been exposed to before. Large numbers of soldiers died because of the tropical conditions.

Ted: Even though China sent plenty of troops to Vietnam, it wasn't easily conquered. Northern Vietnam was reclaimed, and China ended up signing a peace treaty with central Vietnam.

Mona: While that was going on, Emperor Wen also tried to conquer Korea. At this point in time, Korea was divided into three kingdoms. The northernmost kingdom that bordered China was called Goguryeo.

Ted: Just like Vietnam, the Koreans put up quite the fight. I think China's logic was that Korea was a pretty small peninsula, so it should be easy to conquer. Or at least be conquerable. Boy, were they wrong!

Northern and Southern Dynasties



Sui Dynasty

Mona: Emperor Wen died before either war was complete.

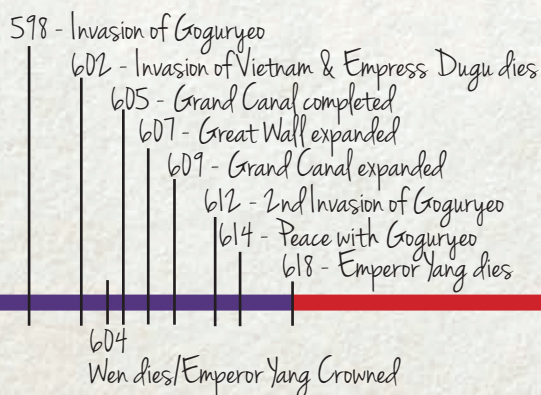
Ted: Which means we need to talk about his son who took over for him. His son would be known as Emperor Yang, but Yang wasn't always the crown prince destined to take over when his father died. Yang was Emperor Wen's second son.

Mona: To understand how Yang took the throne, we need to talk about Emperor Wen's wife, Empress Dugu. Wen and Dugu were married before Wen became emperor, and they genuinely loved each other. It was normal for Chinese emperors to have many wives and concubines, but Dugu was Wen's only wife because he loved and respected her so much. Empress Dugu strongly believed that it was proper for a man to only marry and love one woman. Empress Dugu took a pretty active role in running China. She and Wen would discuss important decisions, and she would tell Wen when she believed he had made a mistake. Women weren't allowed in official meetings in China, but Dugu would walk right up to the door with Wen and then wait outside for him. Even though Chinese women were expected to stay at home and take care of family affairs, Empress Dugu pushed boundaries and showed how capable she was.

Ted: How does she lead to Emperor Yang inheriting the throne?

Mona: Empress Dugu became quite upset with her oldest son when his wife died. The rumor was he'd poisoned his wife. Her son already had multiple concubines and didn't respect women. Her second son, Yang, played into his mother's fears. He'd point out all the bad things his brother did, while also pointing out all the good things he did. Yang only had one wife and was loyal and respectful to her. Yang claimed he feared that when his brother became emperor, his brother would try to kill him. Fed up with the behavior of her oldest son, Empress Dugu convinced Wen to change the succession so Yang would become the next emperor.

Ted: Manipulating your mother to get power. Classy.



Tang Dynasty



Mona: I'd just like to point out that Emperor Wen died under suspicious circumstances, and many people believed Yang poisoned him.

Ted: Not a great guy. We don't know what would have happened if his older brother took the throne, but it would have been pretty hard for things to have turned out worse than they did.

Mona: Yeah, Emperor Yang is remembered as one of China's worst emperors. For every good thing his father did, Yang did something bad. Like with building the Grand Canal and Great Wall. Yang significantly expanded both of those building projects. He forced millions of Chinese peasants to work for him for little or no pay. The working conditions were terrible. Hundreds of thousands of workers died. The Chinese people began to really resent Emperor Yang.



Painting of Emperor Yang

Ted: What made Emperor Yang building the Grand Canal and Great Wall worse than Emperor Wen doing the same thing?

Mona: For starters, Yang ordered bigger projects and needed even more workers. Plus the pay and working conditions were far worse. And, the things Yang wanted to be built weren't necessary.

Ted: What do you mean?

Mona: Wen needed to build the Grand Canal so there was a way to transport food from southern China to northern China. Wen needed to build more sections of the Great Wall to protect China from invaders. Yang decided he wanted a brand new capital city further north in China. There wasn't a need for a new capital. He just wanted a fancy new city. So Yang extended both the Great Wall and Grand Canal to reach this new city that didn't even need to exist.

Ted: So Yang's building projects were selfish. They were showing off how powerful he was.

Mona: And nothing makes people complain like rulers showing off how powerful they are at the expense of the common people. Yang introduced quite a few changes that people didn't like which lost him a lot of popularity. Yang lived a life of lavish luxury, even though his father had tried to live a simple and modest life.

Ted: Yeah, I can see why people disliked him.

Mona: But his biggest problem was his military failures.

Ted: Yang sent so many troops to Vietnam that to only come away with a peace treaty was embarrassing. He wanted to make sure that didn't happen in Korea, so Yang sent an unbelievable number of soldiers to Korea. Like, over a million.

Mona: The army he sent to Korea was so big, it was over 150 miles long.

Ted: It's mind-boggling how big his army was!

Mona: He even extended the Grand Canal, just to make it easier to ship supplies up to the army.

Ted: And yet, even with such a big army, Yang lost. I mean, he sort of, kind of got Korea to submit, and he set up some military bases there, but he had nowhere near the type of success you'd expect after sending an army that big.

Mona: Remember the Mandate of Heaven?

Ted: That's the Chinese belief that there is only one true emperor of China at a time, and if lots of bad stuff happens it means the Emperor's lost Heaven's blessing.

Mona: Yeah, the number of terrible things that happened while Yang was emperor just kept piling up. The people didn't have confidence in their emperor anymore.

Ted: Then Yang kind of sealed his own fate when he turned against some of his top generals.

Mona: One of those generals ends up overthrowing the Sui Dynasty and starting his own dynasty. We'll learn about him next time we visit China, but now, it's time to visit a kingdom in Africa.



Want to know more?

Try researching the following topics:

- The Three Kingdoms Period
- Kingdom of Champa/History of Vietnam
- The Grand Canal