

War and Technology in Late Antiquity

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The crisis of late antiquity

Starting in 300s, Roman empire faces:

- The threat of invasion by migrating/nomadic peoples on horseback.
- Traditional military threats from established empires, such as Persia.
- Civil war.
- Decline of traditional Roman religion (and the political authority it helped reinforce).
- Decaying infrastructure and bureaucracy.
- Difficulty enforcing authority in distant locations.

Group work: Save the empire

It's 400 A.D. and you're the *Consortium imperii* (Roman imperial leadership). With your group, make a plan for saving the empire from:

- The threat of invasion by migrating/nomadic peoples on horseback.
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- Civil war.
- Decline of traditional Roman religion (and the political authority it helped reinforce).
- Decaying infrastructure and bureaucracy.
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Lecture goals

- Define “late antiquity”
- Explain how military technology changed during the transition from the ancient world to the Middle Ages
- Identify the political, social, economic and cultural effects of those changes

What is late antiquity?

The centuries marked by widespread upheaval in major ancient world empires, culminating in their collapse.

Approximately late 200s-800s A.D.

Debates about late antiquity

- Was it a period of overall “decline,” or just cultural and political change?
- How important was religion (especially Christianity)?
 - And what effect did Christianity have on war?
- How violent and brutal was the experience of “civilized” people?

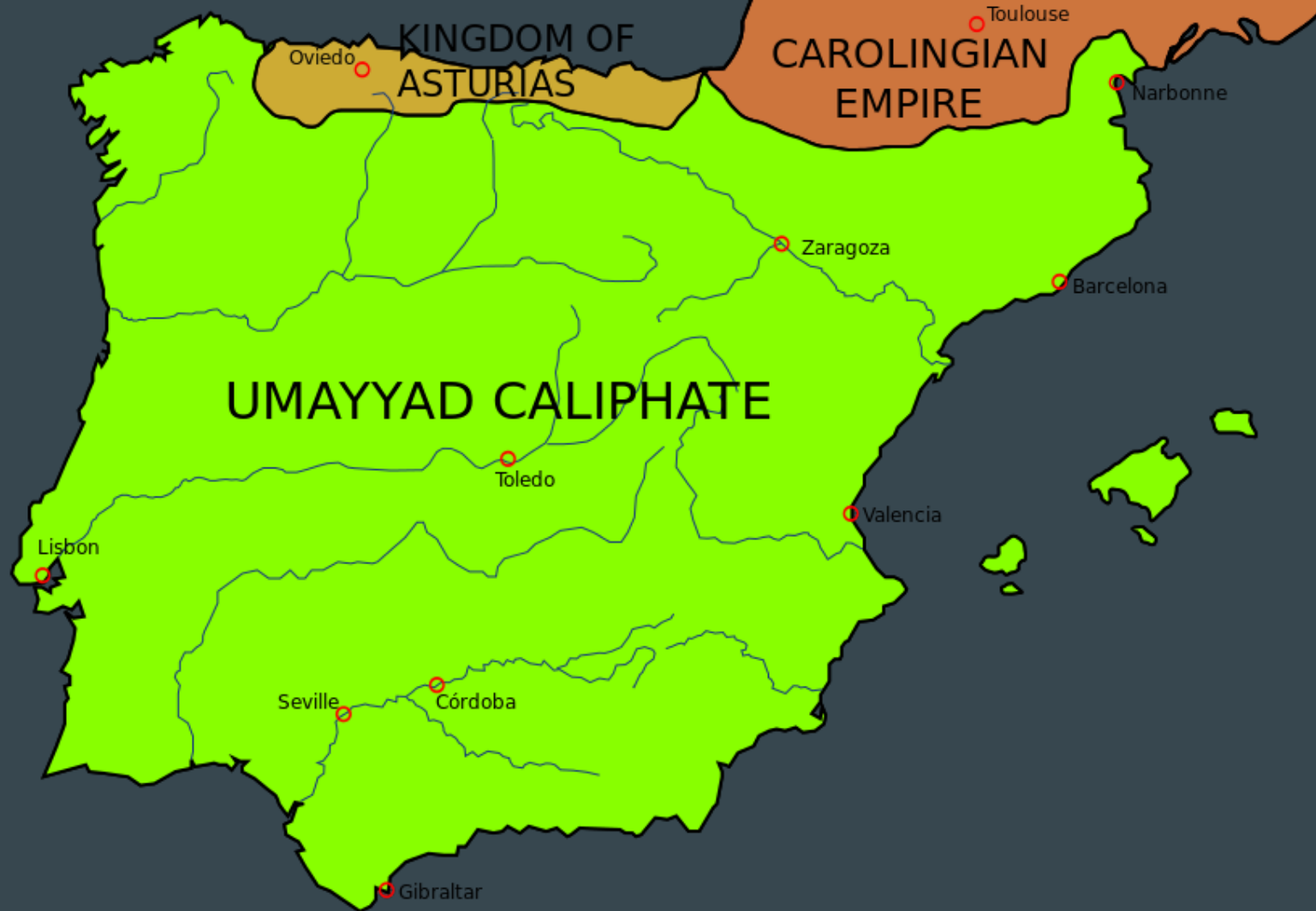
Key dates

- 235: Emperor Severus Alexander assassinated by Roman soldiers
- 268: Roman Empire splits into three states
 - Roman Empire, Gallic Empire, Palmyrene Empire
- 284: Reforms of Diocletian
- 285: Roman Empire divided into eastern and western halves
- 410, 455: City of Rome captured
- 476: Western Roman Empire dissolved
- 565: Death of Belisarius
- 610: Rise of Islam

Dominant themes

- Spread of Christianity
 - Made legal in Roman Empire in 313 by Constantine
- Rise of Islam
 - Circa 610 A.D. in modern Saudi Arabia
 - Leads to Muslim invasions of Africa, Europe
- Political fracturing, decline of large empires
 - And replacement by networks of cities or small states
 - Retreat of populations to defensible sites, away from roads (example: Venice, founded circa 421)
- Widespread violence, insecurity
 - “Barbarian Migrations”: Goths, Huns, Vandals
- Decline of infrastructure
 - Roads, canals, water systems, fortifications all decay





KINGDOM OF
ASTURIAS

CAROLINGIAN
EMPIRE

UMAYYAD CALIPHATE

Oviedo

Toulouse

Narbonne

Zaragoza

Barcelona

Lisbon

Toledo

Valencia

Seville

Córdoba

Gibraltar

Changes in military technology and practices

- Heavy reliance on “mercenary” forces and conscription
 - Sons of Roman soldiers forced to become soldiers
 - Local communities abuse conscription taxes
 - “Barbarian” populations conscripted by Romans, too
- Smaller states → Smaller armies
- Military leaders more likely to be political leaders as well
- Switch to long swords and lighter, circular shields
 - Because mobility and raiding are more important



Changes in military technology and practices

- Fortifications assume new importance
 - Pitched battles displaced by sieges
 - Fortifications can play offensive role
- Some stone fortifications replaced with wood and earthworks
 - E.g., parts of Hadrian's Wall
- Cavalry grow in importance, effectiveness
 - Due in part to breakdown of infrastructure
 - Development of stirrup
- Christianity assumes military significance
 - Constantine's conversion (312)
- Eventually, military recruitment becomes decentralized personal
 - Beginnings of feudalism

Did the ancient world really end?

- Latin
- Christianity
- Roman law
- Roman political institutions, traditions
- Holy Roman Empire

Destroying Rome vs. becoming Roman

