

# **The Legacy of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages in the West**

## **The World in Transition, AD 395-1500**

### **Introduction**

The Three Heirs to the Roman Empire: 6th-7th centuries: a new period in the history of world civilization; clear that no one empire would rule the Mediterranean world; by the 7th century, three successor civilizations, the Byzantine, the Islamic, and the western European, had developed, each with its own culture, its own religion, and its own language; these three civilizations quickly became rivals.

**Byzantine civilization:** (5th century-1453) descended from the eastern half of the Roman Empire; capital was Constantinople; language was Greek; it combined Roman imperial traditions of government with intense pursuit of the [Orthodox] Christian faith; aspects of this culture (including the Orthodox religion) spread into Eastern Europe and Russia during the Kievan Rus period (AD 882-1240) and the Appanage Period (1054-1480).

**Islamic civilization:** (7th century-ca. 1500) founded by the prophet Muhammad; language was Arabic; government and culture permeated with this dynamic new religion; it created an Empire in the old Near East, along the African coasts of the Mediterranean, & it spread into the Indian subcontinent.

**Western Christendom** (6th century-1500); its language was Latin for the educated, most often the clergy; the laity spoke one of many vernacular languages descended from Latin or Germanic tongues; economy & governmental structures were weak; it slowly moved toward political and religious cohesiveness based on the Christian religion; became dynamic, expansionistic, and creative during the High Middle Ages (1050-1300).



The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial  
The ship at Sutton Hoo under excavation

In 1939, a seventh-century ship burial was excavated at Sutton Hoo near Woodbridge in Suffolk. Its significance to the study of Beowulf is the interesting mix of Christian and pagan practices involved in the burial that mirrors a similar mix in beliefs in the poem. Effectively, some of the artifacts breathe life into the events of Beowulf while the poem helps explain the contents of Sutton Hoo. Together, archaeology and literature paint a detailed picture of Anglo-Saxon culture.

Warfare, or the threat of warfare, was a regular part of Anglo-Saxon life. From the number of feuds and stories of clan fealty throughout Beowulf, this is clear. Other Anglo-Saxon texts, such as The Battle of Maldon, Cynewulf and Cyneheard, and The Battle at Finnsburh are essentially of the Germanic 'heroic lay' tradition commemorating the heroic efforts of individual warriors, their strategies and fates.