St. Francis: geographical, historical, socio-political, economic introduction

Maps/geography

To track the geo-political progression from the Roman empire to the Holy Roman Empire see maps:

http://www.medievaleuropeonline.com/maps.html

Charlemagne (742-814) creates the Frankish empire and becomes the Roman emperor in 800

In 843 his empire is divided into three parts: West, Middle (Lotharingia), And East Francia. The ruler of Lotharingia is supposed to hold the title of the Roman emperor but with the collapse of this part the role goes to the ruler of East Francia, which gradually becomes the “Holy Roman Empire” and forms the foundation of “Germany,” among other geo-political bodies.

Important persons

Holy Roman Emperors (Hohenstaufens) at the time of Francis:

Frederick I Barbarossa, died 1190 during the third crusade
Henry VI (son of Frederick I), died 1197
Frederick II (1194-1250) crowned as Holy Roman Emperor in 1220; also King of Sicily/Naples

Popes at the time of Francis:

Innocent III, 1198-1216
Honorius III, 1216-1227
Gregory IX (former Cardinal Ugolino), 1227-1241

Important dates: Francis and Assisi during the time of Francis:

1181/2, Francis born
1198, Assisi middle class overthrows the nobility
1202, Battle of Collestrada, middle class defeated, nobles return; Francis imprisoned in Perugia
1203, charter of peace; coalition
1206, Francis encounters the lepers and experiences conversion
1208, Francis gathers followers
1209, verbal approval of Francis’s Rule by Innocent III; the Earlier Rule forms between 1209 and 1221

1210, new agreement between maiores and minores; charter of independence for the free commune of Assisi; freedom can be purchased; citizenship is defined by wealth; leaves out 75% of population: peasants, workers, the poor, etc.

1215, IVth Lateran Council; all religious movements need a Rule

1217, friars are sent around Europe and Mediterranean

1219, friars are sent to Islamic areas; Francis goes to Egypt during the 5th Crusade

1220, pressure to relax the Rule and organize the Order; Francis hands over the governance of the Order

1223, the Later Rule is promulgated by Honorius III

1226, Francis dies

**Socio-economic class structure at the time of Francis (feudalism starting to morph into capitalism):**

The upper class: landed aristocracy (dukes, counts, knights, etc.) bound by relations of vassalage; their power is based on hereditary ownership of land

The middle class: free citizens who do not own land, cannot vote in elections, etc.: merchants, bankers, guildsmen/craftsmen, etc.

The lower class: serfs (peasants bound to the land owned by aristocracy), various people on the margins of society (lepers, beggars, etc.)

Relations based on land ownership slowly start to transform into relations based on possession of wealth; wealth becomes the second determining factor in one’s social standing.

**Religious/spiritual movements at the time of Francis:**

Classic monastic movement perfected in the West by St. Benedict. Benedictine monks related to property differently than secular people; there was no individual property ownership; however they still owned property communally and this fit within the legal, political, and economic structure of the feudal society as group land owners. Within the community Benedictines were also structured: educated monks who came from the aristocratic class became contemplative or cloistered monks who prayed and did scholarship; uneducated monks who came from the lower peasant class worked the fields. Benedictine monasteries were extremely rich in lands and possessions, rivalling the power of kings and dukes.
The Cistercian reform of the 12th c. Some monks within the Benedictine community thought such way of life was incompatible with what is described in the Gospels. They reformed the Benedictine movement and advocated a simpler way of life, simpler buildings, avoiding lavishness in all areas of life, including elaborate art, architecture, elaborate singing, etc.

The penitents. Two type of penance: private and public. Role of penitents in society: helping he sick and the poor. 12th century saw the development of group penitential movements of people who felt that to follow the Gospel properly one must renounce all property (the humiliati, the Waldensians in the 1100’s, the beguines in the 1300’s)