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# **Making England: The Shadow of Rome, 410-1130**

## **Transcript**

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# Making England: The Shadow of Rome 410-1130

Professor Simon Thurley

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Building in England in the middle ages is often misunderstood. The term middle ages itself speaks of prejudice. It was invented by the sixteenth century historian, Giorgio Vasari, to describe the bit between the glories of Rome and the triumphs of the renaissance. Part barbaric, part heroic and for many wholly confusing, these 1100 years are a jumble of castles and cathedrals, hovels and pig stys inhabited by brutish hairy peasants and knights in shining armour. For academics what was built in England is often considered a pale imitation of what was being built elsewhere in Europe. Somehow everything that was new and good architecturally about the middle ages seems to have come from abroad until eventually it is all swept away by the Renaissance.

In my four lectures I want to present a different and a personal view of building in England during the Middle Ages. I'm not going to concentrate on the many and deep arguments between scholars about England's early architectural history, I'm going to tell a narrative as I see it. And tonight I start with the end of the Roman Empire. Those of you who stay the course will reach the Reformation and the end of the middle ages on 1 December.

I have called this series God, Caesar and Robin Hood and tonight I want to talk about Caesar.

The Romans were in Britain for a very long time: to put it in perspective if they had left in the year 2000 they would have arrived in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I. During those centuries the Romans built a great deal: there were over 60 towns, parts of the countryside were littered with villas; sections of the coast with a series of massive fortresses and Hadrian's Wall, with its forts and towns, protected the Empire's northern border. Internal fortifications too were mighty, many towns were walled and the largest of these, like York, almost impregnable in stone.

The simple and crucial fact was that for a thousand years after the Roman legions left Britannia in 410 England was littered with **Roman buildings**. They had built in stone and brick and bonded their buildings with hydraulic lime mortar which sets like the hardest rock. **What this meant** is that well into the fourteenth century there were Roman buildings standing, many which were still roofed with vaults. The Roman road network survived too as did many river crossings spanned by Roman bridges.

So as the first waves of Saxons arrived in East Anglia from northern Germany they came to a country where the **physical legacy of Rome** was ever present. These peoples were farmers attracted by the agricultural potential of England and had had little direct experience of the Roman way of life and even less interest in it. They were not especially numerous, but were highly successful at establishing themselves, by force, as the landlords of the native British population. So much so that by 600, although the genetic make-up of what is now England was still heavily Romano-British, people spoke Anglo-Saxon, worshipped Germanic Gods and shared Germanic fashions.

But by 600 something was happening that was to put Rome centre stage again. In 596 Pope Gregory had sent St. Augustine and his missionaries to the Kentish kingdom, and after several faltering starts England had become Christian again by the 680s. After the Synod of Whitby had resolved that the Roman rather than Celtic form of Christianity would be followed the influence of Rome was assured. So what did this mean architecturally?

Britain, between 410 and around 950, was essentially an island of timber buildings. The Saxons were masters of timber construction, building their own houses, churches and palaces of wood. Even the verb 'to build' in Saxon is 'timbrian' and buildings were 'getimbro'. But we should not imagine that these structures were either provincial or primitive. We know from excavations at Roman villa sites like Brading on the Isle of Wight that many villas were furnished with great timber halls for transacting estate business and for feasting. Many of these Roman halls survived well into the Saxon period and the halls built by Saxon Kings such as those constructed at **Yeavering** in Northumberland in the 620s for King Edwin were monumental buildings built in a Romano-British tradition .

Stone building implied infrastructure and organisation. This disappeared after 410 and by 600 there can have been few stone masons left in England. Masonry building was re-introduced by Christian missionaries and relied entirely on robbing Roman buildings for a supply of cut stone.

Remarkably St. Martin's, the very first church of St. Augustine and his fellows, survives in Canterbury incorporating the brick remains of a Roman Tomb. This ancient church though mauled and altered by time is a powerful and evocative place to visit and is typical of the first places of Christian worship in Saxon England, built in close proximity to prominent Roman sites and constructed out of re-used Roman materials.

An early monastery built in the 650s at Bradwell-on-Sea makes the point again. The church, now much altered, is actually built on the gate of the great Roman shoreline fort of Othona. But the church you must visit to understand this first post-Roman phase of stone building in England is St. John at Escomb in County Durham probably built in 700. This is the best preserved building of the early Saxon period in England, but its walls of naked chiselled Roman stone cannot do justice to what we know of the original interiors. Its walls must have been plastered and painted white, carving was picked out in bright primary colours, the walls were hung with icons and its narrow windows filled with stained glass.

But a church like Escomb was not the norm. Before around 950 the vast majority of churches were built of timber, and of course can only be recovered archaeologically. However at Greensted in Essex there is a remarkable timber-built church that has been scientifically dated to between 1063 and 1100. This small church gives an impression, perhaps, of what hundreds of other much earlier examples might have looked like. The walls are built of split oak logs with their rounded face on the outside fixed together with concealed timber tongues. These are jointed into timber roof and base plates making a rigid wall. Archaeological excavation has shown that many Saxon buildings would have been constructed exactly like this.

The new stone churches were literally imported from Rome in fabric, design and even craftsmanship. But it was not only the physicality of Rome that was important in Early Saxon Christian England so was its intellectual and cultural legacy. With the fall of the political and military Empire Rome entered a new phase as the headquarters of world Christianity. As such, for educated Anglo-Saxons such as England's first historian, the venerable Bede, it became the headquarters of the world. For the Anglo-Saxon period there was a real sense that the cultural and intellectual capital of England was Rome. The East Anglian king, Raedwald, who was buried in a great ship at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk in around 624 was surrounded by **objects identifying** him as much as a Roman ruler as an Anglo-Saxon feast giver.

**Before the tenth** century England was divided into numbers of small kingdoms which fluctuated in their size and influence. Crudely speaking, in the years around 600, the Kingdom of Kent was the most powerful of these; I have already mentioned St. Martin's Church - built in the Kentish Christian Kingdom. In the following century Northumbria was in the lead (Escomb and Yeaveering were both built in this Kingdom) and, from about 700, Mercia was in the ascendant.

In the eighth century the kingdom of Mercia was ruled by two very powerful and successful kings who controlled most of England south of the river Humber: Ethelbald (716-57) and Offa (757-96). Offa is of particular importance as an international figure who corresponded with Charlemagne and was a friend of Pope Hadrian. He is also significant as the builder of Britain's largest monument the 150 mile long, Offa's Dyke. Much to the chagrin of Canterbury, Offa used his influence with the Pope to found a new archiepiscopal see at Lichfield. Nothing of the Offa's cathedral remains but a fragment of a contemporary Shrine chest associated with the cult of St. Chad has recently been excavated. This carving, one of the most beautiful and moving to survive from Saxon England, reveals Mercian carvers following continental fashions, reviving the sculptural style of the early Christian church.

This revival was political, religious and, ultimately, architectural. Most important politically was the emergence, under Charlemagne (768-814), of a new empire that rivalled, in wealth, organisation and stability, the fallen empire of Rome. Its territories stretched from central Germany to northern Spain and into northern Italy. On Christmas day 800, at the hands of Pope Leo III, Charlemagne took the title of Roman Emperor. This political revival was accompanied by a renewal of the authority and traditions of the Roman Church: a self-conscious attempt to recreate the Emperor Constantine's golden age of Christianity.

Under Charlemagne's influence his territories enjoyed one of the most important and creative periods of architectural development in European history. In his reign alone 16 **cathedrals** and 232 monasteries were either founded or rebuilt establishing most of the key components of medieval ecclesiastical design. The style in which these features developed was that of early **Christian Rome**, epitomised by the Basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul; a way of building known as the Romanesque. Romanesque is, in fact, not so much a style as an aesthetic programme, the name given to a variety of effects

used by architects to recreate more closely and effectively the architecture of ancient Rome. It became possible to do this through advances in building technology, materials and engineering all stimulated in their turn by the peace and prosperity of Carolingian rule. All these developments were important for England.

Offa's achievements in church building were heavily influenced by the remains of Rome around him and crucially by Carolingian Christianity. The best example of this is the church of All Saints **Brixworth** in Northamptonshire, England's most exciting and impressive standing Anglo-Saxon building. The church is big, about 160ft in length but is now shorn of its porticus, five lesser rooms on each side which originally flanked the open hall **of the nave**. The nave arcades are truly massive, their **vousoirs** made of reused Roman brick brought down the Roam road from the ruins of Leicester; whoever commissioned and designed this church was deliberately and successfully recreating a sense Roman monumentality and may have known contemporary Carolingian buildings.

Now, the Mercian dominance came to an end, and from 865 until 954 everything was dominated by the Vikings who at first pillaged and then settled in the east. The problems caused by Viking aggression were only resolved by the royal Dynasty of Wessex, most famously by King Alfred the Great (871-99). In the 880s Alfred populated his kingdom with a network of strategically located fortified places containing craftsmen, tradesmen, markets, minster churches and sometimes royal palaces. These are known as the Burghs meaning 'defended place' they were essentially the first English towns.

Alfred chose Oxford to be one of these and surrounded the existing minster and settlement with earth ramparts. Initially these were supported by great timber posts and planks, but after 1000 they were faced with stone. **At the west gate** was a massive stone tower which, amazingly still stands today. Oxford was, thus, in the tenth century, **astone walled citadel** like its Roman predecessors. Inside the ring of defences a grid of metalled streets was laid out round a cross of main roads. The land was probably granted out to noblemen and part was reserved for a royal palace.

The formation of towns, in the sense that we would understand the word, followed hard on the heels of the formation of villages in the countryside. Before the tenth century almost everyone lived in scattered settlements of no more than a score of people. But between the tenth and twelfth centuries, in the central arable areas of England, peasant farmers abandoned their farmsteads and hamlets and moved to create villages. These places normally had a church, a main street and between twelve and **sixty houses**. This is the deserted medieval village of Wharram Percy in Yorkshire, you can still visit it today and make out the pattern of medieval tofts and crofts.

Outside this central village belt, in the east and south east, in the north west and far south west people lived in a variety of types of hamlets or single farmsteads.

Peasant houses in these villages tended to be robust but simple timber structures. The reconstructed early Saxon Village of **West Stow** in Suffolk shows what houses in an earlier dispersed settlement were like. Village houses in the tenth century were little different.

There is much argument as to why villages like **Wharram** formed in this period. In truth there is no single national factor, for many villages the causes were different, even unique. Yet there were certainly some strong common centrifugal forces: as the density of rural settlement increased landholdings were shared by more family members the countryside became crowded and complicated to work. But crucially at the same time landlords, building themselves large houses and founding churches created a kernel around which to group.

This is a very important development. The first Christian churches were minsters which were essentially small monasteries. They were dispersed and people might have to travel quite a distance to worship. But from the 940s landlords began to found their own private churches near to their houses. This was the origin of the parish system and by 1130 there were 6-7,000 local churches. This meant that almost everyone now had a church within a short walk of where they lived. St. **Peter Barton upon Humber** built in around 970 is an example of a church built by a local landlord next to his manor house.

None of these late Saxon manor houses survive. But some, particularly those in the east, exposed to Scandinavian raiders, were fortified. Here is **Goltho in** Lincolnshire surrounded by ramparts with a fortified gate. They were large, comfortable, and of course built of timber.

So during the tenth century the English countryside acquired the components familiar today, the manor house and church and churchyard close together with the village houses clustered round.

Oxford was not Alfred's capital, as much as he had one, Winchester was. It was here that the greatest of his buildings was constructed 'the cathedral. Thanks to painstaking excavation more is known about Winchester than any other Saxon cathedral. By 1066 Winchester had already had a cathedral for 418 years; **this was the** Old Minster with a cruciform plan and a square end. Over the ensuing centuries this was enlarged and adapted so that, by 1000, as well as the nave and high altar, it comprised four towers, three crypts, three apses, at least 24 smaller chapels and a baptistery. Despite strong English characteristics, the Old Minster was, by the time of the Normans, a church with a recognisably Carolingian plan. **Most prominent** was the westwork - the enormous tower-like structure erected at the west end of the cathedral in the 970s. Westworks developed in Carolingian churches in the ninth century and went on to form a component of **many great churches** in France and Germany built during the tenth to the twelfth centuries. This is Corvey Cathedral in Westphalia, built in the 870s; it is the only Carolingian westwork to survive. **At Winchester** the huge west towers performed a dual purpose, providing a focus for liturgy and an occasional grandstand for the Kings of Wessex to view events in the main church below.

But Winchester was soon to be eclipsed by London as the commercial and eventually the political capital of England. Edward the Confessor, who came to the throne in 1042, built a new great royal church at Westminster Abbey. This commission ranks amongst the most important in the history of English architecture. The design of Edward's new Abbey had no direct precedent in England or Normandy, although, across the channel, the Norman abbey of **Jumièges** was being constructed in a similar style almost simultaneously.

Both the English and the Normans were in fact imitating a way of building invented and developed in Burgundy and the Loire valley in the 1030s and 40s. The essential change was from interiors that relied for their effect on large areas of painted wall surface to spaces that were modelled in three dimensions with arches, horizontal mouldings (string courses), semicircular shafts, stone vaults and ornamental mouldings. These ideas essentially came from Roman buildings especially the large and prominent remains of **amphitheatres** with their tiers of arches and columns.

So the interior of Saxon **Westminster Abbey** was revolutionary, conceived as a spatial whole rather than an agglomeration of small compartments as in Saxon churches. Its walls, **which in an earlier** Saxon church would have been a solid mass of masonry acting as a vast canvass for painting, now became an organised system of superimposed arches raised in tiers one above the other. The basic principle of the design was that each arch should be visibly supported by a column (or half column) and a capital. This produced a clustering of vertical shafts round the piers that visually broke up the hard forms of the structure. The arches themselves no longer had simple square sections but displayed a range of shapes created by the addition of extra rolls and mouldings.

In the 1050s local churches began to display similar architectural forms to Westminster and a much stronger spatial unity. At **St Mary Stow-in-Lindsey**, Lincolnshire, the transepts and crossing of a large minster church of c.1055 still stand dominating its small village. It is one of the first **generation of** buildings where the Anglo-Saxon porticus had transformed itself into a fully fledged transept. The crossing tower at Stow would have probably been of timber, but at **St. Mary-in-Castro**, Dover, the masonry crossing tower survives, albeit much restored.

These new-style churches were used in a different way. Most of the earlier timber churches were single spaces, new stone churches had separate chancels and so the priest was separated from the **congregation**. This was a different experience creating a new relationship with the priest whose status was elevated. Meanwhile the nave became a community space where people congregated to celebrate and to mourn: from the late tenth century local churches had their own burial grounds and from around 1050 permanent fonts.

So before William the Conqueror sailed from Normandy in 1066 England was richly populated with walled towns with towers, villages with defended manor houses and their own stone parish churches, with cathedrals of great size and beauty. This was no architectural backwater. Indeed Edward the Confessor and his courtiers were commissioning churches in a style that was in the forefront of European fashion.

The Norman Conquest looms over English History casting a shadow that obscures much of what came before and colouring what came after. It sounds obvious to say it but in the year 1000 no one had heard of the Norman Conquest. In fact no one had heard of the Normans as such: to the English the people of Normandy were French.

I have already suggested that the term Romanesque is not very helpful in trying to describe Anglo Saxon architecture; the same applies to what was built after 1066 which is normally categorised as Romanesque and commonly called Norman architecture. Sadly this too is simplistic and confusing, suggesting, as it does, that the buildings erected in England after 1066 were somehow in a style that was brought by the Normans. They were not. What is normally called Norman architecture was developed in England after 1066 drawing on native traditions and absorbing influences and ideas from across Europe, so it can more properly be called Anglo-Norman or Anglo-French. It was an inventive, eclectic, exotic and cosmopolitan style born of a unique coincidence of political, religious, social, cultural and economic events.

William the Conqueror and his immediate successors built on an imperial scale and expressed their power in the architectural language of ancient Rome. The arcades on the **White Tower**, at the Tower of London were a deliberate quotation from antiquity and the tower at **Colchester** was constructed on the podium of the Roman temple of Claudius. These buildings were not the busy, accretive structures of the early Saxons; they set out to imitate the monumentality and spatial clarity of ancient Rome. The Normans had not built in this style or to this scale in Normandy; it was the conquest that created a giddy mixture of excess, power and imperial triumphalism that was expressed in an outburst of architectural megalomania.

Anglo Saxon England was no stranger to invasion or fortification. Saxon Landlords had built fortified residences with earth ramparts, walls, towers and gatehouses. The situation in Normandy was broadly similar, few nobles lived in strongly defended residences, but in the years after 1000 the Duke and his greatest lords were developing types of fortified palaces - or castles, for themselves.

The military requirements of conquest caused a rapid development in military engineering and a proliferation of castles across the English countryside. The first ones were simple structures: either ringworks, that is to say an area enclosed by earth ramparts topped with a palisade, or mottes, which are mounds upon which a fortified structure was built. Ringworks were the most common form of castle in Normandy and similar to Anglo-Saxon fortified sites like Goltho,. Mottes were more novel in England. **The Bayeux Tapestry** shows the motte of the Conqueror's castle at Hastings being built, under instruction, by Saxon slaves. Soon these mottes had a lower outer enclosure known as the bailey used for stabling and accommodating any garrison.

The most important of this first generation of castles were royal, a product of the systematic imposition of Norman sovereignty on England. They were erected in strategic locations to support field tactics and, crucially, in county towns. This is one of the most spectacular and **famous at Durham**. But William's barons built castles for themselves, as did their followers - on a smaller scale. Ultimately this meant that in the period to 1130 there may have been as many as 500 castles in use, half of which were in private hands. This was a big change from what had been the situation before the Conquest either in England or Normandy where very few had had a fortified house.

King William died knowing that the military conquest of England was complete and that a matrix of royal castles secured his power in its county towns. There were remarkably few new castles built during the following century. But those that were built were dominated by the idea of the great tower as expressed by King William in London, Colchester and by his son Rufus in **Norwich**. Two of Henry I courtiers demonstrate the allure of the great tower. In the 1120s Geoffrey de Clinton, Chamberlain and Treasurer to Henry I was granted lands in Warwickshire where he founded a castle **and priory**. The castle at Kenilworth was hugely ambitious even for a man with Clinton's connections. A great tower was erected and an inner courtyard enclosed around it by a wall. **At Porchester**, Hampshire, another Norman magnate Hugh Pont de l'Arche replaced the Saxon residential buildings inside the **Roman walls** in the 1130s with a square plan great tower with a hall at first floor level.

Eleventh century society in England and Normandy saw no hard distinction between church and state. Both William and Edward the Confessor were interested in church reform and welcomed a series of reforming decrees which transformed canon law and liturgy in Western Europe in the 1050s. In Normandy William had promoted reform through his chief religious advisor the Italian Abbot, Lanfranc, one of the greatest intellectuals of his day.

Once in England William appointed Lanfranc as Archbishop of Canterbury and he set about reforming the English church. This was as much a political as a moral crusade: with William's support Lanfranc **reorganised the boundaries** of Saxon dioceses moving cathedrals from the countryside to towns, ensuring that the diocese became, like the county, a unit of government control. By the reign of Henry I there were seventeen dioceses - a map which remained until the reformation.

Within a period of less than fifty years each of these dioceses was to have an entirely new cathedral, perhaps the largest and most ambitious architectural programme in English architectural history. It is easy to imagine that this meant the invention of a

new type and shape of church, but there was no simple change from 'saxon' cathedrals to 'Norman' ones: the new cathedrals were not identical structures, each mixed stylistic and liturgical influences in its own way according to the preferences of its bishop, the resources available and local traditions. This had probably not been Lanfranc's intention. He had hoped to abolish Anglo-Saxon forms and traditions and bring the liturgical and architectural life of English cathedrals into line with the most advanced thinking on the continent.

In this Canterbury was to be the model. Lanfranc had been the abbot of St. Etienne at Caen and had overseen the reconstruction of the abbey church there; his Canterbury Cathedral was closely modelled on his old church, right down to the precise dimensions of the transepts and nave. But this was not just an architectural importation, the archbishop set down the liturgical practices he wanted performed in his new country, these were to move away from the showy, flowery customs of the Saxons and more towards a more austere, simpler and more disciplined liturgy.

**At Winchester** one can still gain a good impression of what the interior of the first generation of post conquest cathedrals looked like. Today only the transepts survive but here the essentials of the style of the new cathedral can be appreciated. Like the Confessor's Westminster Abbey the elevations are three storeys high: a main ground floor arcade, a gallery above and crowning that a clerestory. These levels are tied together by mast-like shafts that rise to the roof. Within this the individual parts of the elevation are subordinated to the whole. The arches at gallery level, for instance, are contained within a larger arch.

Parish churches of the eleventh century are hard to date. Late Saxon and early Norman churches are more or less identical. Most of these are two roomed (or more correctly two-celled) with rectangular naves separated from the chancel by an arch. **Most post-conquest** chancels originally had an apse, but almost all were later rebuilt square-ended. In east Norfolk a couple of remote churches still retain their original apse, perhaps the best amongst these is **St. Margaret, Hales**. The round tower is later, but the apsidal chancel dates from before 1130 and retains some of its blank arcading.

Archbishop Lanfranc died two years after William I and he was succeeded in 1093 by Anselm, a figure more tolerant of Anglo-Saxon church customs. The second generation of Anglo-Norman churchmen, perhaps, also lacked the sense of urgency and single-mindedness of Lanfranc and his contemporaries. They adopted a more florid architecture closer to the ornamental taste of the Saxons. In achieving this they built on a generation of improving craftsmanship and construction standards which in the first Anglo-Norman cathedrals were variable.

These changes can be seen as they take place at **Durham Cathedral**. While the bones of the cathedral's design are familiar: the alternating compound and cylindrical piers are as in the Confessor's Abbey, the tall first floor gallery, almost of equal height to the main arcade, has been reduced. The arcades at Durham are huge and squeeze the gallery and clerestory up to the roof. The **naves of early** cathedrals had been roofed in timber with flat, painted timber ceilings, the effect can now be seen at **Peterborough or Ely**. At Durham a way was found of **vaulting over a much** wider space with masonry highlighting the intersections of the vault with stone ribs. The vault was a crucial step forward in style. A flat timber roof broke up the unity of the space while a vault drew together all the elements into a coherent whole.

Durham's novelty is not only in its structure, it also lies in its decoration. The eastern parts of the cathedral, which were built first, have little surface decoration, **but the nave, built after 1104**, gets progressively more showy towards the west. The piers are cut with lozenges and zigzags; the arches with chevrons, the **aisle walls are** decorated with blank intersecting arcading that looks as if it has fallen straight out of an **Anglo-Saxon** manuscript.

Despite our ability to visit many of these buildings none gives the modern spectator anything other than a ghost of what was intended. Like Saxon churches Anglo-Norman cathedrals were filled with colour and texture. Most important were wall paintings. At **Canterbury Cathedral** the apse of St. Gabriel's chapel was walled up in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century preserving, untouched, a complete set of wall paintings only re-discovered in the nineteenth century. **Here it is** possible to gain a sense of the brilliance of the painters working in c.1130. Vast areas of cathedrals familiar to us as stone halls would have glowed with colour, walls would have been whitewashed and imitation masonry blocks painted in red. Windows would have thrown a coloured glow onto all this splendour as most were glazed in coloured glass.

What I have set out to demonstrate this evening is that by looking at buildings alone it would be impossible for an historian to guess that the Norman Conquest had ever taken place. This may be a surprising thing to be saying as the Norman Conquest is often seen as one of the great turning points in our history. But in the year 1000 England's architecture had already reached a turning point and the changes that came rapidly after 1066 had been in embryo since the 1050s at the latest. Yet without doubt Conquest hugely accelerated architectural change. The building and craft industries quickly developed and diversified and by

1130 almost everyone could experience stone architecture in their own locality.

That architecture was Roman architecture. For everyone who saw remains close at hand, who had travelled across Europe or who associated Rome with Christianity this was the style in which to build.

But the severe unsullied Roman monumentality of early Norman buildings as seen in the **transepts of Winchester**, or the elevations of the White Tower lasted merely a generation; they soon gave way to something more florid and cosmopolitan. Likewise the reforming aspirations of the Norman churchmen were diluted and what remained was an English compromise. As the first generation of Normans died out, England's architecture was already looking very different from anything in the rest of Europe. The Saxon love of ornament and complexity had contaminated the severity of Rome. In fact the Normans and their families were feeling different too. They might not have been able to express it in 1130, but the Normans and their architecture were becoming English.

In my next lecture I will explain how a vision of Rome dissolved into a vision of heaven. Between 1130 to 1300 God trumped Caesar.

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