



The Dark Ages, 476 - 1000 CE

Week I: Introductions and Definitions

Dr. Samuel Cohen, PhD
Associate Professor of Ancient and Early
Medieval History
Sonoma State University

Today:

1. Welcome! Introductions
2. The Dark Ages: Definitions, problems, methods
3. The 'Big Three'
 - Rome
 - Barbarians
 - Christianity



Ideas worth thinking about

- Usefulness of value judgements in history (good, better, best)
- Decline and Fall – how do we judge what constitutes decline? When does 'decline' start? Do these ideas help or hinder our understanding of history?
- Continuity vs. change? Unity vs. Disunity
- Periodization?



2. The Dark Ages?

1. Ancient/Classical

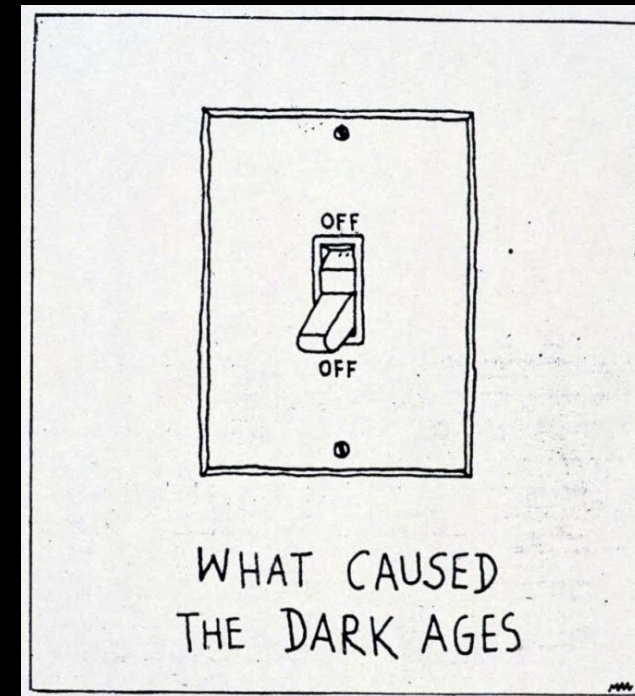
- From the Greeks to 476 CE

2. The Middle Ages (*medium aevum*)

- 476 CE until the mid-14th c. The period to ~1000 was thought to have been particularly bad. It was the *saeculum obscurum* - **the Dark Age**

3. The modern period (*modo* = now)

- The Renaissance!



2. The Dark Ages?

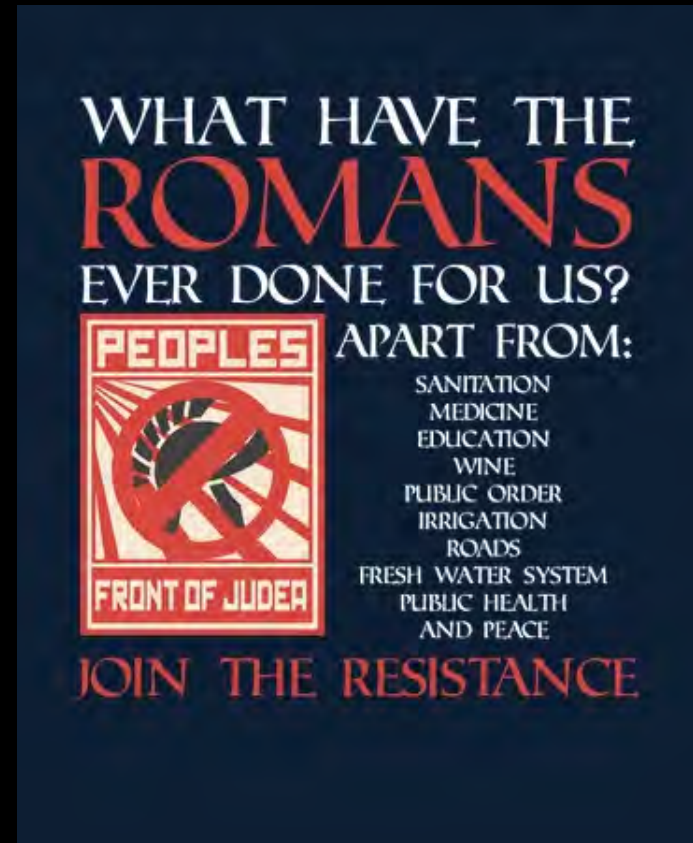
In popular imagination, the Dark Ages were:

- Barbarous, backward, uncivilized
 - No bathing!
- The 'classical inheritance' was almost lost (at least some monks copied stuff)
 - Science ended (believed in a flat earth, focused on obscure theological questions)
- Literature and learning was non-existent



2. The Dark Ages?

- But how **dark** was it really? And for whom?
 - Rise and fall (and rise) of political structures is not the same as the rise and fall of living standards
 - Bias in favour of large empires?
 - **MYTHS that grew out of Renaissance prejudice**
 - (But: the Romans did do some positive things...)



2. The Dark Ages?

- Recent approaches eschew tripartite history and de-emphasize decline and fall/catastrophic collapse
- Less stress on war, politics, institutions, more on culture and continuity
- *The end of the Roman political regime in the west does not = catastrophic civilizational collapse*



Coin of Theoderic, king of the Ostrogoths

2. The Dark Ages?

- Scholars use **'The Early Middle Ages'** to describe the period 476-1000 CE. THIS IS THE FOCUS OF OUR COURSE!
- A crucial period of transition and change
- Development of political, cultural, and religious institutions:
 - The Latin Church
 - Beginnings of European states and peoples



Major theme: Unity / disunity



The Empire in 475 CE



Europe in 800



Europe in 900...



3. The Big Three

Unity/disunity, continuity and change:

- Rome
- The 'barbarians'
- Christianity



The EMA = five centuries of the confluence of Rome, the barbarians, and Christianity!

- After Rome in the Latin West (the 'Barbarian Successor States')
- After Rome in the Greek East: The Byzantine Empire and the Rise of Islam
- The Church and Society in the Early Middle Ages
- Charlemagne: War, Politics, and Renaissance
- Invasion, Dissolution, and Civil War

