Levels 7 and 8: Cause and Effect – Student Handout 2

Effects of the fall of the Western Roman Empire

The fall of the Western Roman Empire had an enormous impact on Europe. Historians often characterise the 500 or so years following the end of the Western Roman Empire as the ‘Dark Ages’. However, this term can be misleading and is often debated by historians. It is argued by some that society merely underwent change during this time, but as it is a poorly documented time, it can be called ‘dark’ as our knowledge of it is far less than of other, better documented, periods of time.

Some of the other reasons this period is referred to as the ‘Dark Ages’ are outlined below:

* Towns and cities became less important as people fled to the countryside for safety from attacks by barbarian tribes and other warring groups.
* There was a disruption of trade and commerce as:
* roads fell into disrepair
* it became dangerous to travel
* the loss of a common currency meant societies began to revert to bartering.
* There was a decline in learning and education as many learned scholars and wealthy people fled to the capital of the Eastern empire, Constantinople. Fewer and fewer people could read and write.
* Roman infrastructure was neglected, so buildings, bridges and roads fell into disorder.
* Many people turned to the Christian Church for guidance, so it gained power and began to dictate how people in society should behave.
* There was a loss of a common language, making it more difficult for people to communicate. Latin became the language of the Church.

Warlords and petty kings gained power and people turned to them for protection, so feudalism – whereby common people worked for lords in exchange for their protection – became the basis of society.