

Slavs

The Slavs were nomadic peoples from the Eurasian steppes, the grasslands stretching from modern Hungary into central Asia. Between 400 and 600, Slavic communities settled in Eastern Europe between the Baltic Sea and the Balkans. These communities were multi-ethnic with each one linked by language and custom. From this initial migration, the Slavs would eventually break into three main groups in Eastern Europe: Polish Slavs in the north, Balkan Slavs in the south, and Russian Slavs in the east. Before this occurred, however, Slavic communities fell under attack by another people from the steppes: the Avars. Known for their horsemanship, the Avars conquered many of the Slavs residing in Eastern Europe. Those Slavs who escaped conquest, either through fleeing south or putting up successful resistance, collaborated with their would-be conquerors. Joint Slav and Avar forces marauded south of the Danube, settling in modern Croatia and Serbia, and pressed in on Byzantine holdings. By 600, these combined forces had taken many Byzantine lands from the Danube to Greece as the Byzantines fled to safety elsewhere in the Empire.

Scholars have relied on the mid-sixth century observations by the Byzantine writer Procopius (c. 500-c. 565) for much of what we know about the Slavs. In his description, Procopius characterizes the Slavs as a people with no single ruler, suggesting the lack of sovereignty as people living in the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century understood it. Evidence of chiefs and kings challenge Procopius's view of a purely communal society, and scholars continue to wrestle with an accurate characterization of early Slavic communities. What scholars do agree on, however, is the political fragmentation present in Slavic dominated areas of Eastern Europe. Political fragmentation made the Slavs vulnerable to invasion and capture by the stronger and centralized monarchies of Western Europe. The Frankish ruler Charlemagne captured many Slavs and brought them back to his empire as slaves, which is how the word originated in the French and English languages. Yet, Charlemagne also sought diplomacy, at least when it came to conversion to Christianity. In 797, he issued the *Capitulare Saxonicum*, detailing a diplomatic approach to the introduction of Roman Christianity to the Saxons and the Slavs on the eastern borders of his empire. Conversion to Christianity exacerbated existing political fragmentation. Missionaries from both the Roman and Orthodox churches appeared among the Slavs as early as the eighth century. Some regions converted to Roman Catholicism, such as the Polish Slavs in the tenth century. Slavs in other areas, such as those in the region of central Europe, known in the Middle Ages as Moravia, embraced Orthodox Christianity in the ninth century. Perhaps because of political fragmentation and certainly after conversion to Christianity, by the end of the medieval period, Slavs had thoroughly merged with their neighbors and were incorporated into regional territorial states.