

The Middle Ages in Europe: Between Ancient and Modern

In AD476, warriors attacked the city of Rome and ended more than 800 years of glory for the “eternal city.” Historians mark the fall of Rome as the end of ancient history. The next one thousand years were called the Middle Ages. The Latin term for Middle Ages is "medieval."

The beginning of the Middle Ages is often called the "Dark Ages" because the great civilizations of Greece and Rome had fallen. Life in Europe during the Middle Ages was very hard. Very few people could read or write and nobody expected conditions to improve. The only hope for most people during the Middle Ages was their strong belief in Christianity, and the hope that life in heaven would be better than life on earth.

The Dark Ages were anything but dark in other parts of the world. The Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa studied and improved on the works of the ancient Greeks while civilization flourished in sub-Saharan Africa, China, India, and the Americas.

Europe began to experience great change by about 1450. Within one hundred years, Columbus had sailed to America, literacy spread, scientists made great discoveries, and artists created work that still inspires us today. Historians call the next period of European history the "Renaissance," or the "rebirth." The Renaissance is the beginning of modern history.



The Renaissance in Europe: The Dawn of a New Age

About 1450, European scholars became more interested in studying the world around them. Their art became more true to life. They began to explore new lands. The new age in Europe was eventually called “the Renaissance.” Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” Historians consider the Renaissance to be the beginning of modern history.



The Renaissance began in northern Italy and then spread through Europe. Italian cities such as Naples, Genoa, and Venice became centers of trade between Europe and the Middle East. Arab scholars preserved the writings of the ancient Greeks in their libraries and when the Italian cities traded with the Arabs, ideas were exchanged along with goods. When the Byzantine empire fell to Muslim Turks in 1453, many Christian scholars left Greece for Italy.

But there was much more to the Renaissance than simply studying the work of ancient scholars. Painting, sculpture, and architecture flourished. Artwork became more realistic and focused less often on religious topics. Crusaders returned to Europe with a newfound understanding of the world. The invention of the printing press encouraged literacy and helped to spread new ideas. The development of financial techniques such as bookkeeping and credit allowed merchants to prosper.

The Renaissance marked the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age. No longer would Europeans be isolated from the outside world.

Instead, Europeans would explore the world outside their borders and eventually created empires that spanned the entire globe.

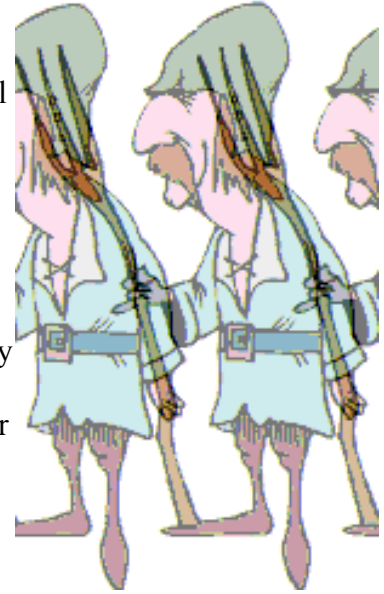
Feudalism

Feudalism was the system of loyalties and protections during the Middle Ages. As the Roman Empire crumbled, emperors granted land to nobles in exchange for their loyalty. These lands eventually developed into manors. A manor is the land owned by a noble and everything on it. A typical manor consisted of a castle, small village, and farmland.

During the Middle Ages, peasants could no longer count on the Roman army to protect them. German, Viking and Magyar tribes overran homes and farms throughout Europe. The peasants turned to the landowners, often called lords, to protect them.

Many peasants remained free, but most became serfs. A serf was bound to the land. He could not leave without buying his freedom, an unlikely occurrence in the Middle Ages. Life for a serf was not much better than the life of a slave. The only difference was that a serf could not be sold to another manor.

Serfs would often have to work three or four days a week for the lord as rent. They would spend the rest of their week growing crops to feed their families. Other serfs worked as sharecroppers. A sharecropper would be required to turn over most of what he grew in order to be able to live on the land.



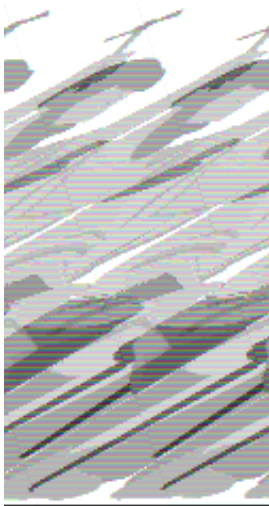
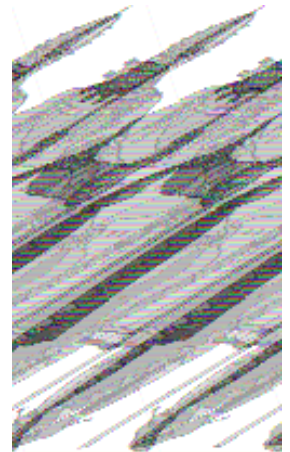
Primogeniture

Primogeniture is a system of inheritance where all property is handed down to the first-born son. In the Middle Ages, the oldest son would become the Lord of the Manor upon the death of his father, much in the same way that the oldest son of a king would gain the crown. The younger sons would have to find other careers.

The military was an option for many sons. A knight began his training as a young boy and advanced to the rank of squire at about the age of fifteen. When the overlord considered the young squire worthy, he was proclaimed a knight, and was entitled to the honorific title "Sir." Knights were expected to follow a set of rules for honorable behavior called chivalry.

Another option was to learn a trade. There were no trade schools in the Middle Ages. A father would pay a master to teach his son a trade. The boy would become an apprentice, and often live with the family of the master tradesman. After a period of about seven years, the boy became a journeyman. He could now work in his trade and be paid for his work. If he were an expert in his trade, he might create a masterpiece and become a master himself, able to employ apprentices of his own.

A girl might look toward marriage in her future. A dowry was a present of money, goods, or sometimes land given by a bride's father to her husband. However, the dowry was for the husband's use, not the wife's. A dowry was thought to make a young girl more attractive to a potential husband. A large dowry might make it possible for a young lady to attract a rich landholder. Many girls entered the clergy as nuns, while others worked as servants at the manor house.



Christendom

By the later Middle Ages, the gods of the Romans, Greeks, and Celts had long since been forgotten. Instead, Christianity became the faith of almost all of the people of Europe. Christianity was the most important influence of the Middle Ages.

Religious life attracted many people during the Middle Ages. The Church was often the only way to get an education. It also allowed poor people to escape a dreary life and possibly rise to power. Religious workers are called clergy. In the Middle Ages, the Pope ruled the Christian Church. Other clergy included bishops, priests, nuns, and monks.

Monks were men who lived in monasteries, or small communities of religious workers. Monks devoted their lives to prayer, and their behavior influenced the entire church. Monasteries produced many well-educated men prepared to serve as administrators for uneducated kings and lords. Monks were responsible for keeping the Greek and Latin “classical” cultures alive. Monks copied books by hand in an era before the printing press. Though few in number, monks played a significant role in the Middle Ages.



The Bubonic Plague

Almost half of the people of Western Europe died in a great sickness known as the Bubonic Plague. The plague was also referred to as “the Black Death” because the skin of diseased people turned a dark gray color. It apparently began in China’s Gobi Desert, and it killed about 35 million Asian people. When sailors traveled to Asia, rats returned with them to Europe. Fleas living on the blood of infected rats then transferred the disease to the European people.

In 1347, Italian merchant ships returned from the Black Sea, one of the links along the trade route between Europe and China. Many of the sailors were already dying of the plague, and within days the disease had spread from the port cities to the surrounding countryside.

The Europeans were susceptible to disease because they lived in crowded surroundings with very poor sanitary conditions. The Europeans often ate stale or diseased meat because refrigeration had not yet been invented. Also, medicine was primitive and unable to cure an illness that modern technology might have cured. Bad medical advice also advanced

the plague. People were often advised to not bathe because open skin pores might let in the disease.

Death from the plague was horrible, but swift. The Italian writer Boccaccio said victims often “ate lunch with their friends, and ate dinner with their ancestors in paradise.” The swiftness of the disease, the enormous pain, the grotesque appearance of the victims, all served to make the plague especially horrifying.

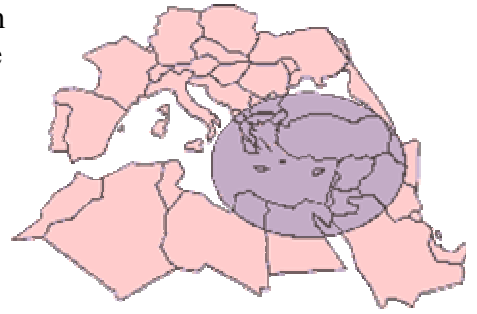
The Bubonic Plague continued to affect cities from time to time for hundreds of years. It still exists and is common among rodents. We have a cure for the disease, but occasionally people in isolated places still die from the Bubonic Plague.



The Byzantine Empire

In AD330, the Roman Emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium. He wanted the capital of his empire to be safe from barbarian invasion. Constantine renamed the city Constantinople, but we refer to the civilization centered in Constantinople as the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine Empire began to look less like the Roman Empire as the years passed. The empire covered Greece, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. By the seventh century, Greek had completely replaced Latin as the language of the empire.



Seljuk Turks began moving into the Byzantine Empire from Central Asia in the eleventh century. The Turks had recently become Muslims, and the Byzantine emperor feared they would soon overpower his Christian empire. He asked the leader of the Christian church (the Pope) to assist in a holy war against the Turks.

In 1095, Pope Urban II launched the first of many Crusades, or "wars of the cross." Urban hoped that in addition to expelling the Turks from the Byzantine Empire, he would also be able to reclaim the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim control. Soldiers from western Europe left their homes to free the Byzantine Empire of the "unbelievers." This was the first time many Europeans left their homes. Their exposure to new and different cultures was a factor that led to the Renaissance.

The Crusades were ultimately unsuccessful because the Turks conquered the Byzantine Empire. The city first called Byzantium and later Constantinople is now known as Istanbul, Turkey. Turkish has replaced Greek as the language of Asia Minor, and 99.8% of the people in modern Turkey are Muslims.



The Moors

In AD622, an Arab man named Muhammad preached that an angel had visited him. The angel told Muhammad that he was the last of a long line of prophets that included Moses and Jesus. Muhammad called on people to renounce all other faiths and to submit to the will of Allah. Allah is an Arabic word that means God. He called the new faith Islam, which means "submission to Allah" and the people who practice Islam are called Muslims. The faith spread quickly through the Middle East and across North Africa, eventually reaching people in northwest Africa that the Romans called Moors.



The Visigoth people had ruled Spain until 711, when the Moors crossed into Spain from North Africa. For the next three centuries, the Moors controlled most of Spain by establishing a "caliphate," or religious center, in Cordoba. The Moors were able administrators who built Spain into a thriving center of culture and scholarship. The Moors were Muslims, but they were generally tolerant of the Christians and Jews who lived in Spain. Spanish Jews especially benefited from the tolerant policies of the Moors since Europeans were very intolerant of religious differences at this time.

Christian kingdoms in northern Spain and France slowly began the *Reconquista* (or reconquest) of Spain, a struggle that lasted almost 500 years. Quarrels among the Moors led to the overthrow of the caliphate of Cordoba in 1031, but it took until 1492 for the Spanish to complete their *Reconquista*, after which time they forced the Muslims and Jews to leave Spain.