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Print section(s) of

**Middle Ages**

Table of Contents

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The medieval period, known as the Middle Ages, covers nearly 1,000 years of European history. According to some historians, the era began in A.D. 476 when a German chieftain overthrew the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire. It lasted until about 1500, when the Renaissance, a period of tremendous innovation, became firmly established throughout western Europe.

The Middle Ages were once viewed as a time of ignorance—a "dark age" between the glories of the ancient world and the flowering of learning and culture that occurred during the Renaissance. But a great many things happened in Europe during these years.

**The Early Middle Ages**

At its height, the Roman Empire controlled most of western Europe. Roman rule provided a sort of glue that unified the region. Roman armies kept the peace. Roman roads linked various parts of Europe, and Roman aqueducts brought water to towns and cities. But by A.D. 400, the Roman Empire had been split into eastern and western halves. Germanic tribes had begun to move into the Western Empire, and Roman armies could no longer control them. In 410, the Visigoths (or West Goths) invaded Italy and plundered the city of Rome itself. It was hard for people of those times to believe that Roman power had grown so weak. "Who would believe," Saint Jerome, a Christian writer, asked, "that Rome, which had spread over the whole earth by means of its victories, could now fall so low?" The Eastern Empire (or Byzantine Empire), with its capital at Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), continued to flourish. But the Western Empire fell apart.

Various Germanic tribes settled in what are today the countries of western Europe—the Visigoths in Spain, the Lombards in Italy, the Anglo-Saxons in England, and the Franks in France and western Germany. They lived alongside the inhabitants of the old empire. They did not wish to destroy all signs of Roman civilization. They adopted many of their neighbors' ways, including the Christian religion. But they lived under their own laws and under the rule of their own chiefs or kings.

Without a central government, life changed greatly. Roads and water-supply systems fell into disrepair. There was little trade, with the result that cities and towns became less important. The people in each region produced almost everything they used, which was often little more than the bare necessities. Learning also declined. Few Germanic people could read Latin, so they learned little about the civilization they had conquered.

During most of the early Middle Ages, Europe was carved up into small regions ruled by local lords. Each lord made his own laws, and this often led to conflict and disorder. Lords fought among themselves, and they tried to defend their lands from outside threats. One of the most serious threats came from Muslims from North Africa, who invaded Europe through Spain in 711.

Historians used to call the early Middle Ages the Dark Ages because this time was marked by confusion, disorder, and the breakdown of

civilization in western Europe. But scholars today see this period as a time of change, rather than darkness, in Europe. As Rome's power crumbled, religion became the one thing shared by people throughout the former Roman realm. Today Christianity has many branches, but in western Europe during the Middle Ages there was only one. The Catholic Church, headed by the pope, played a central role in medieval life.

## ■ Charlemagne's Empire

During the early Middle Ages, several rulers tried to establish larger kingdoms. The most successful was the great Frankish king Charlemagne (742?–814), whose empire included much of western and central Europe. Charlemagne wanted to rule as the emperors of Rome had in ancient times. He was even crowned emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III in 800. Charlemagne maintained order throughout his realm and kept close check on the great nobles and landlords, who were in the habit of doing as they wished. Into every district he sent special agents who saw that the nobles obeyed his commands.

Charlemagne also rewarded nobles for their military support. In exchange for providing knights, who were mounted warriors, he gave nobles grants of land called **fiefs**, or fiefdoms. This practice laid the foundation of **feudalism**, a system of government in which land was exchanged for military service by knights.

Charlemagne also encouraged interest in the Christian religion and ancient Latin learning. He established a palace school for the sons of nobles, gave support to scholars, and set scribes to work copying various ancient books to preserve their contents for future generations.

Charlemagne accomplished much, but his empire did not last long after his death. Later Frankish rulers could neither govern nor protect a large empire. Vikings from the Scandinavian lands found that there was no one to keep them from raiding the coast and sailing up the rivers to plunder the countryside. Muslim Arabs threatened in the south, as they had before Charlemagne became king.

With the breakup of Charlemagne's empire, local lords and their knights offered people the best protection. Europe became a patchwork of feudal realms. Feudal lords did give people some protection, but they also disturbed the peace with their private wars.

## ■ The High Middle Ages

After the year 1000, feudal realms began to grow into stable states. European kingdoms expanded their territory and their influence. Beginning in 1096, they united to fight in the **Crusades**, or "wars for the cross." This series of wars was aimed at gaining control of Christian holy places in Palestine, which was ruled by Muslims.

## ■ Kings and Nobles

Strong kings in several states succeeded in bringing their feudal lords under control and reducing the number of private wars.

## ■ France.

In 987, the feudal lords of what is today France elected a king, Hugh Capet, the count of Paris (938?–96). Hugh had little power, but he founded a dynasty that eventually controlled all of France. Among the Capetian kings was Louis VI (1081–1137), who personally led campaigns to bring feudal lords under his control. His grandson, Philip II (1165–1223), or Philip Augustus, appointed special officials, called bailiffs, who traveled within their districts to keep watch on the nobles, somewhat as Charlemagne's agents had done.

Louis IX (1214–70), famous for his piety and sense of justice, did his best to see that no man was treated unfairly in his realm. He would sit under a tree and invite anyone who had been unable to get justice from his lord or the regular courts to come and state his case. After his death, the Roman Catholic Church declared him a saint. His grandson Philip IV (1268–1314) did even more to enhance the power and prestige of the king. By the end of his reign, France was the leading state of Europe.

### **England.**

William the Conqueror (1028?–87), duke of Normandy, invaded England in 1066 and won its crown by conquest. As William I of England, he withheld power and independence from his nobles so none could rise against him. The kings of England thus had greater power over their feudal lords than did the French monarchs.

William's son Henry I (1068–1135) and his great-grandson Henry II (1133–89) further strengthened the king's powers. Henry II encouraged people to look to the royal courts for justice rather than to their local courts or those of the lords. He did so partly by having the royal courts offer better service and fairer judgments.

By limiting the powers of feudal lords, English kings built a well-governed state. But the English discovered that royal powers needed limits as well. King John (1167?–1216), a reckless and unjust ruler, was reviled by both nobles and common people. In 1215 he faced a revolt of the lords. To keep his throne, John agreed to issue a charter called **Magna Carta**. In it he stated certain limits on his power. Among other things John promised that he would have no freeman arrested or punished except "by the law of the land." This was the first known document to decree that the head of the government was not above the law. Constitutional governments today are based on this idea.

In time the power of English kings became increasingly limited by Parliament, an assembly made up of the chief nobles, bishops of the church, and representatives of knights and townspeople. A king would assemble his Parliament before attempting to collect special taxes. Parliament could often obtain privileges and concessions from the king in exchange for voting to give him the money he wanted. Thus Parliament gradually increased its power over the king. The Parliament of the Middle Ages was very different from the modern British Parliament, but the modern representative body grew out of the older one.

### **Germany, Italy, and Spain.**

The German kings, like those of France and England, tried to reduce the independence of their feudal lords. In the 900's, the Saxon king Otto I (the Great) (912–73) extended his control over much of Germany and even revived the name Holy Roman Empire. But Otto and his successors never matched Charlemagne's empire, which had extended south almost to Rome.

Through the mid-1200's, various German kings tried to rule northern Italy, but they all failed. Germany remained a collection of small principalities until the 1800's. So did much of Italy. Among the strongest Italian city-states was Venice, which built a trading empire. In 1130 southern Italy and Sicily united as the Kingdom of Sicily.

The history of Spain in the Middle Ages is largely a story of struggle between Muslims and Christians. Christians gradually gained the upper hand, and as they did, several strong feudal states appeared, including Aragon, Castile, Navarre, and Portugal. When they were not fighting the Muslims, these states fought each other. But in the late 1400's, Aragon and Castile united to form the kingdom of Spain.

### **Medieval Life**

Although Europe was politically divided in the Middle Ages, daily life did not vary greatly from one realm to the next. Medieval society was tightly structured. Many people lived their entire lives in one village or manor. They were born to a certain social position and stayed in that position.

Those who wanted something more had few choices. For all but the wealthiest, life was extremely hard.

## The Manorial System

Medieval land holdings ranged from small estates called manors to huge fiefs as big as small countries. The lord of a large fief, such as a baron, might give individual manors to his knights, in exchange for their service. Those knights thus became lords of their own small manors. But they still owed allegiance to the baron.

A lord's word was law on his manor. But knights and barons were often away, fighting battles. Much of the daily management of the manor fell to the lord's wife. She oversaw planting, spinning, weaving, and other activities. She made sure servants did their jobs and ran the household smoothly. Often she also handled the household financial accounts. But despite these responsibilities, women in medieval times had few rights. They were expected to obey their husbands and fathers in all things. Upper-class girls were married off early, as a way for powerful families to form alliances and build their wealth.

Most of the people on a feudal manor were peasants who spent their lives working in the fields. A great many of the peasants were **serfs**—that is, they were not free. Serfs could not leave their manor to try and find a better place. They belonged to the manor at which they were born and could move or change jobs only if their lord gave permission. The lords did not freely give away their serfs any more than they gave away their land or livestock. When a lord agreed to let one of his serfs marry a serf from another manor, he usually demanded a payment to make up for the loss.

Serfs led difficult lives. They had to till the land of the lord, as well as the strips in the manor fields in which they grew their own food. They knew little about the world and rarely met anyone from outside their village. They did not travel, nor could they read.

## Town Life

There were few towns, particularly in northwestern Europe, during the early Middle Ages. The rule of the feudal lords discouraged trade, and towns lived by trade. Each lord collected a toll, for "protection," from all merchants who came into his neighborhood. A merchant paid many such tolls in traveling from one land to another. For example, a merchant taking a boatload of goods down the Loire River from Orléans had to pay 74 different tolls. Needless to say, the many tolls made goods expensive and trade difficult even in times of peace. During the frequent private wars trade became still more risky.

As private wars became less frequent, trade became easier. Towns grew in both number and size. Townspeople were better off than the serfs, for they were free. But their position was beneath that of the lords. Thus the townspeople became known as the middle class.

Most townspeople were merchants and artisans. Some merchants were little more than peddlers carrying their packs from village to village. Others brought goods by ship, riverboat, or pack train from distant lands to sell in town markets and fairs.

As towns grew larger, some people opened shops stocked with goods bought from the traveling merchants. One shopkeeper might sell drugs and spices brought from distant lands. Another shop might have furs or fine cloth and carpets from the East. Towns also had butchers, bakers, and barbers. Artisans manufactured shoes, hats, cloth, ironware, and other goods in their workshops.

The right to do business in a town was a guarded privilege. The merchants and artisans banded together in special organizations for each trade or craft, called **guilds**. Only members of the guilds could sell goods or practice a trade within the town walls. Guild members all charged the same prices for the same quality work, and they limited the number of people permitted to follow a particular occupation. The shoemakers'

guild, for example, wanted to make sure that there were never more shoemakers in a particular town than could make a good living there.

Towns became increasingly important during the later Middle Ages. The middle class grew richer, and the kings began to choose middle-class lawyers to advise them on matters of government. Many merchants and craftsmen had their sons study law because it provided an opportunity for a young man to get ahead in the world.

## The Role of the Church

Every town and almost every village in the Middle Ages had a church, where a priest conducted worship services, baptized babies, married young people, and buried the dead in the churchyard. In addition, the priests taught the children at least the most important Christian prayers and beliefs.

The church grew great and powerful during the Middle Ages. It had its own laws and courts in which to try any person who broke church law. Church leaders also claimed that accused priests could only be tried by a church court. The church also collected tax payments for its support.

The church was governed by bishops and archbishops under the authority of the pope at Rome. Church leaders were involved in politics as well as spiritual matters. Some popes were very powerful. They rallied kings and lords to fight in the Crusades and to oppose heretics, those whose beliefs did not agree with the teachings of the church. But sometimes kings opposed the popes in bitter struggles.

The church was also served by monks and nuns. Monks were men who lived together in a house called a monastery. They were under the rule of an abbot, and they devoted their lives mainly to prayer and religious service. The nuns were women who followed a similar life in houses usually called convents. Monks and nuns gave all of their property to the monastery or convent. They vowed never to marry and agreed to live under strict rules.

Some monks worked in the monastery's fields, fed the poor who came to the monastery gate, or took care of travelers who asked for shelter. Others copied books in the monastery scriptorium, or writing room. Since there were no printing presses, all books had to be copied by hand. A few monks conducted schools where they taught boys to read and write Latin. It was necessary to learn Latin because both the Bible and the church services were in that language. Poetry and history were also written in Latin.

Bishops, too, established schools, called cathedral schools. Some cathedral schools became great centers of learning called universities. A number of the greatest thinkers of the Middle Ages, including Peter Abelard (1079–1142), Saint Albertus Magnus (1193?–80), and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225?–74), studied and taught at Paris. University students began their studies with the seven liberal arts. These were Latin grammar, rhetoric (how to write and speak), logic (how to reason), arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. Students could also go on to study law, medicine, arts (philosophy), or theology. The church also encouraged artists to erect magnificent cathedrals in stone and glass.

## The Late Middle Ages

The years between 1300 and 1500 brought many changes to Europe. France and England fought the costly Hundred Years' War (1337–1453). This was really a series of wars, in which English rulers tried to win back lands they had once held in France.

From about 1347 to 1350, a terrible plague called the Black Death killed as many as one-third of Europe's total population. Farmland stood idle, with few laborers to work it. Discontented peasants rebelled, and many serfs were able to gain their freedom. At the same time, the church's power began to decline. But in the cities, the influence of the middle class increased, and there was a growing spirit of freedom. This change came first in the cities of Italy, in the 1300's. Historians consider this to be the beginning of a new age called the Renaissance, meaning "rebirth."

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See *also*: Christianity, History of; Crusades; Feudalism; Guilds; Holy Roman Empire; Hundred Years' War; Knights, Knighthood, and Chivalry; Middle Ages, Music of the.

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