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Middle Ages

Middle Ages is a term that describes the period in European history from about the 400's through the 1400's. The Middle Ages are also known as the *medieval period*, from the Latin words *medium* (middle) and *aevum* (age).

In the late 1300's and the 1400's, Renaissance writers introduced the idea of a "middle age" between ancient and modern times. They believed that after the Roman Empire collapsed in western Europe during the 400's, culture and society declined until the revival of Greek and Roman ideas in their own time. As a result of this belief, the Middle Ages are sometimes incorrectly called the Dark Ages. But the Middle Ages were a dynamic time in human history. During this period, many Europeans converted to Christianity, and Islam became a dominant religion in the southern Mediterranean. In addition, the political, ethnic, and linguistic borders of modern Europe came into being during the Middle Ages.

This article discusses what happened in western Europe from the 400's through the 1400's. To learn how other peoples influenced medieval civilization, see [Byzantine Empire](#); [Muslims](#); and [Rome, Ancient](#). See also [World, History of the](#).

The fall of Rome

The late Roman Empire. At its height, the Roman Empire included much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The empire was so big, and its government was so complex, that it had difficulty defending its borders from attacks. To help resolve this dilemma, the empire was split into two administrative units starting in the late 200's. The empire became permanently divided in the late 300's. The West Roman Empire consisted of western Europe and the western half of North Africa. The East Roman Empire consisted mainly of the Balkans and present-day Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Egypt.

The Germanic invasions. Germanic peoples came from northern Europe and Scandinavia. They began to move into central Europe around 1000 B.C. By the A.D. 200's, they occupied regions in the Rhine and Danube river basins along the northern and northeastern boundaries of the Roman Empire. Some Germans adopted the civilization of their Roman neighbors. They traded with Roman merchants and enlisted in Roman armies.

The Romans called the Germans *barbarians*, a word they used to describe peoples who lived outside the Roman Empire. The Germans lived in tribes, each governed by a chief. People knew them as fierce warriors.



Picture

Life in the Middle Ages

In the late 300's, Germans began moving into the Roman Empire to escape the Huns, a central Asian people who were invading the region north of the Black Sea. The Huns later pushed into central Europe, and Germanic tribes began invading the West Roman Empire, which had lost much of its power to defend itself. Between 400 and 500, the Visigoths established themselves in Spain; the Vandals moved into North Africa; and the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes settled in Great Britain. The Franks established a kingdom in Gaul (now mainly France), and the Ostrogoths claimed Italy. See [Angles](#); [Franks](#); [Goths](#); [Jutes](#); [Saxons](#); [Vandals](#).

A German commander of the Roman army deposed the last ruler of the West Roman Empire in 476. However, the East Roman Empire survived as the Byzantine Empire until 1453. See [Byzantine Empire](#).

The Germanic kingdoms

Germanic Europe. The Germanic invasions divided the West Roman Empire into many kingdoms. Germans were a tiny minority of the population of their new kingdoms. In most cases, Germans worked with Roman leaders to create governments that reflected both peoples' traditions. Over time, the Roman and Germanic ways of life blended to create medieval culture.

The Roman legal system had been based on written case law. German law was based on oral tradition. In the new kingdoms, the Germanic rulers had their oral traditions written down so they would have the same status as Roman law. One of the Germans' methods of determining guilt was called *trial by ordeal*. The accused person had to undergo a test, such as picking up a red-hot iron bar with a bare hand. If the burns healed within three days, it was declared that God had shown the person was innocent. See also [Trial by combat](#).

Government in the Germanic kingdoms was on a much smaller scale than Roman government had been. Taxes were a major source of government income during the Roman Empire, but Germanic kings received money from the profits of their lands or from military conquest. Germanic governments did not have a large income and could not build roads or support schools. Kings ruled with the support of the nobility. Nobles were the king's warriors and the major landowners. In return for their loyalty, nobles expected the king to provide land, goods, or privileges.

The Germanic invasions destroyed most of the European trade that the Romans had established. Few people used the great system of stone roads that had encouraged trade and communication among cities of the Roman Empire. Money went out of use almost completely.



Picture
Food production

By the 800's, most of western Europe was divided into large estates of land called *manors*. A few wealthy landowners, called *landlords* or *lords*, ruled the manors. Most of the people were peasants who worked the land and often were forbidden from leaving it. Each village on a manor produced nearly everything needed by its people. This system of obtaining a living from the land was called *manorialism*. See [Manorialism](#).

in the Middle Ages

Towns lost their importance in manorial society. Some towns were completely abandoned. Most became centers of religious activity only. The middle class, which had engaged in trade and industry, disappeared. Education, cultural activities, and literacy declined. Almost all state and city schools vanished. Ancient Greek and Roman knowledge and culture were preserved on a reduced scale, primarily by the church.

The Christian church had become the official church of the Roman Empire by 400. Almost all Germanic peoples, except the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, were already Christians or became Christians soon after they entered the empire. Germanic kings supported the church, and the church supported them.

Church leaders took over many functions of government after the Roman Empire collapsed. In many cases, they were major landowners. The church encouraged literacy and administered justice. It also provided hospitals for the sick and rest stops for travelers.

Two church institutions, the *cathedral* and the *monastery*, became centers of learning in the early Middle Ages. Cathedrals were the churches of bishops. Monasteries were communities of men and women who gave up worldly life to serve God through prayer and work. The monks of some monasteries and the clergy of the cathedrals helped continue the reading and writing of Latin and preserved many ancient manuscripts. They also founded most schools in Europe. In about 600, the church began a vigorous, organized effort to send missionaries to non-Christian areas of northern and eastern Europe.

The rise of Islam. In about 610 in Mecca, a city in the Arabian Peninsula, the Prophet Muhammad declared that he had begun to receive revelations from God. Muhammad began to preach the religion of Islam and converted many Arabs. Followers of Islam, called Muslims, began expanding into neighboring areas. Between 630 and the early 700's, Muslim armies easily conquered the Persian Empire and took Syria, Palestine, and North Africa from the Byzantine Empire. They also seized Spain from the Visigoths.

Until the 1100's, the Muslims dominated shipping on the Mediterranean Sea, and so contact between western Europe and the Byzantine Empire was difficult. But the Muslims maintained extensive trade and communication networks in their territories. They introduced many new crops and such industries as papermaking and silk-weaving to western Europe. Muslim scholars translated many ancient Greek texts into Arabic.

The Carolingian Empire united much of western Europe under one ruler in the late 700's. The Carolingians were a family of Frankish kings who ruled from the mid-700's to 987. The most important Frankish rulers were Pepin the Short and his son Charlemagne.

Popes began to exercise influence over European politics in the mid-700's. In 751, with the pope's support, Pepin the Short, the Frankish kingdom's chief government official, became king of the Franks. Charlemagne inherited the throne in 768. He conquered much of what is now Germany and most of Italy, uniting more territory in western Europe



Picture
The Christian church



Picture
Charlemagne

than any ruler had since the Roman Empire ended. In 800, the pope crowned Charlemagne emperor of the Romans.

In creating and running their empire, the Carolingian rulers depended on loyal noblemen called *vassals*. These men pledged their loyalty to the king and promised to serve him. The king then became a *lord* to his vassal. The Carolingian kings rewarded their vassals by granting them estates called *fiefs*. A fief included the use of the manors on the land, the buildings and villages of each manor, and the peasants who farmed the manor. If a vassal was disloyal to his lord, the lord could demand the return of the fief. Most vassals served as knights in the king's army. Many vassals also had their own knights.

The early Middle Ages reached their highest point of achievement during Charlemagne's rule. He worked to protect and reform the church. Although he never learned to write, he supported education and scholarship. He established a school at his palace in Aachen. Teachers from across Europe gathered there. They organized schools and libraries and copied ancient manuscripts. These activities caused a new interest in learning called the *Carolingian Renaissance*. See [Charlemagne](#).

Charlemagne's empire did not last long after his death in 814. His three grandsons fought each other for the title of emperor. In 843, the Treaty of Verdun divided the empire into three parts, one for each grandson. But Magyars, Muslims, and Vikings attacked the divided empire soon after the treaty was made. By the late 800's, the Carolingian Empire no longer existed.

Feudal Europe

Feudalism. After the end of Charlemagne's empire, Europe was again divided into kingdoms. Most of the kings had little control over their kingdoms. As a result, hundreds of vassals—with such titles as *prince*, *baron*, *duke*, or *count*—became independent rulers of their own fiefs. These noblemen ruled their fiefs through a form of government now called feudalism.

Under feudalism, the noblemen who controlled the land also had political, economic, judicial, and military power. Each nobleman collected taxes and fines, acted as judge in legal disputes, and maintained an army of knights within his own territory. He also supervised the farming of the manors on his fief. The fief-holders were the ruling class in Europe for more than 400 years.

A typical member of the feudal ruling class was a nobleman, a knight, a vassal, and a lord—all at the same time. He was a nobleman because he had been born into the noble class. He became a knight when he decided to spend his life as a professional warrior. He became a vassal when he promised to serve a king or other important person in return for a fief. Finally, he became a lord when he gave part of his own land to persons who promised to serve him.

A lord and a vassal had rights and duties toward each other. A lord promised his vassal protection and justice, and the vassal gave the lord various services, most of which were military. Feudal warfare was common in Europe. If a lord and his vassal performed their duties, there was peace and good government. But if either disregarded his duties, war broke out between them. The lords fought among themselves as well, because they often tried to seize each other's land. The church, which had its own princes and fiefs, was part of the feudal system, so it also suffered in the warfare. See [Feudalism](#).

Feudal government. During the 900's and 1000's, much of western Europe was divided into feudal states. A powerful lord ruled each state as if he were king. The kings themselves ruled only their own royal lands.

In France, the king ruled only the area called the Ile-de-France, a narrow strip of land centered near Paris. The rest of France was divided into such feudal states as Aquitaine, Anjou, Brittany, Flanders, and Normandy. In some states, no lord was powerful enough to establish a strong government. But in Anjou, Flanders, and Normandy, capable lords provided strong governments.

Under William the Conqueror, England became the strongest feudal state in Europe. William, the duke of Normandy, invaded England in 1066. After defeating the Anglo-Saxon army, he became king of England. He then established the feudal system in England by making all landholders his vassals. See [Norman Conquest](#); [Normandy](#); [William I, the Conqueror](#).

Feudalism did not provide strong government in Germany or Italy. For hundreds of years, powerful dukes fought the kings. Otto I, one of the most powerful German kings, won control over the dukes in the mid-900's. He then tried to create an empire like Charlemagne's. After conquering lands east of Germany, Otto invaded Italy. In 962, the pope crowned Otto emperor of what later became known as the Holy Roman Empire. The empire consisted mainly of Germany and northern Italy. But the German dukes tried repeatedly to regain greater control of their territories. By the early 1200's, the empire was weak and continually divided by warfare.

The power of the church became the single great force that bound Europe together during the feudal period. The church touched almost everyone's life in many important ways. The church baptized a person at birth, performed the ceremony at the person's marriage, and conducted burial services when the person died.

The church also became the largest landholder in western Europe during the Middle Ages. Many feudal lords gave fiefs to the church as donations or in return for services performed by the clergy. At first, feudal lords controlled the church, but the church gradually won a large degree of freedom.

Although church leaders did not take a direct part in feudal warfare, they controlled the lords with their own types of weapons. One great power of the church was its threat of *excommunication*. To excommunicate a person meant to cut the person off completely from the church and take away the person's hope of going to heaven. If a lord continued to rebel after being excommunicated, the church disciplined him with an *interdict*. This action closed all the churches on the lord's land. No one on the land could be married or buried with the church's blessing, and the church bells never rang. The people usually became so discontented that they rebelled, and the lord finally yielded to the church.

Life of the people. Europe during the 900's was poor, underdeveloped, and thinly populated. At least half the land could not be farmed because it was covered with thick forests or swamps. War, disease, famine, and a low birth rate kept the population small. People lived an average of only 30 years. There was little travel or communication, and less than 20



Map
Europe about
1000

percent of the people went farther than 10 miles (16 kilometers) from their birthplace.

The people of western Europe consisted of three groups. The *lords* governed the large fiefs and did all the fighting. The *clergy* served the church. The *peasants* worked on the land to support themselves, the clergy, and the lords.

The lords. A lord's life centered around fighting. He believed that the only honorable way to live was as a professional warrior. The lords and their knights, wearing heavy armor and riding huge war horses, fought with lances or heavy swords.

The behavior of all fighting men gradually came to be governed by a system called *chivalry*. Chivalry required that a man earn knighthood through long and difficult training. A knight was supposed to be courageous in battle, fight according to certain rules, keep his promises, and defend the church. Chivalry also included rules for gentlemanly conduct toward women. In peacetime, a lord and his knights entertained themselves by practicing for war. They took part in *jousts* (combat between two armed knights) and *tournaments* (combat between two groups of knights). See [Knights and knighthood](#).



Picture

Stone castle of the Middle Ages

The lord lived in a manor house or a castle. Early castles were simple forts surrounded by fences of tree trunks. Later castles were mighty fortresses of stone. In the great hall of the castle, the lord and his knights ate, drank, played games, and gambled at the firesides.

Women were not allowed to be knights and could not participate directly in feudal government. The lord's wife, called a *lady*, was trained to sew, spin, and weave. When the lord was away, at war or performing his feudal responsibilities, the lady was in charge of managing and defending the estate.

She was also in charge of children in the household. But she had few rights. Decisions about whom a woman married, and what happened to her if she was widowed, were mainly in the hands of the men in her family or her feudal overlord.

The clergy. Most bishops and other high-ranking clergymen were noblemen who devoted their lives to the church. They ruled large fiefs and lived much like other noblemen. Some of these clergymen were as wealthy and powerful as the greatest military lords.

Monks who lived in a monastery were required to live according to its rules. They had to spend a certain number of hours each day studying, praying, and taking part in religious services. Some monks who were outstanding scholars left the monastery and became advisers to kings or other rulers.

Many peasants who became clergymen served as priests in the peasant villages. Each village priest lived in a small cottage near his church. He gave advice and help to the peasants, settled disputes, and performed church ceremonies. The priests collected fees for baptisms, marriages, and burials. But most priests were as poor as the peasants they served.

The peasants had few rights and were almost completely at the mercy of their lords. A peasant family worked together to farm both the lord's fields and their own. Peasants also performed whatever other tasks the lord demanded, such as cutting wood, storing grain, or repairing roads and bridges.

Peasants had to pay many kinds of rents and taxes. They had to bring grain to the lord's mill to be ground, bake bread in the lord's oven, and take grapes to the lord's wine press. Each of these services meant another payment to the lord. Money was scarce, so the peasants usually paid in wheat, oats, eggs, or poultry from their own land.

Peasants lived in crude huts and slept on bags filled with straw. They ate black bread, eggs, poultry, and such vegetables as cabbage and turnips. Rarely could they afford meat. They could not hunt or fish because game on the manor belonged to the lord.

The High Middle Ages

Medieval civilization reached its highest point of achievement between the 1000's and the late 1200's. This period is called the *High Middle Ages*.

In the 1000's, many capable lords provided strong governments and periods of peace and security under the feudal system. Also, some evidence indicates that a small variation in Earth's climate produced a *climatic optimum*, which gave western Europe warmer and drier weather conditions that were favorable for farming. This period lasted from about 1000 to about 1300. The population grew, farm yields expanded, and many people became more prosperous. As a result, more people were able to devote themselves to new ideas and activities.

Economic recovery. As government improved, so did economic conditions. Merchants again traveled the old land routes and waterways of Europe. Towns sprang up along the main trade routes. Most early towns developed near a fortified castle, church, or monastery where merchants could stop for protection. The merchants, and the craftworkers who made the goods sold by the merchants, gradually settled in the towns.

Europe's population began to increase during the 1000's, and many people moved to the towns in search of jobs. At the same time, peasants began to leave the manors to seek a new life. Some became merchants and craftworkers. Others farmed the land outside the towns and supplied the townspeople with food. Medieval towns, which arose mainly because of the growth of trade, encouraged trade. The townspeople bought goods and also produced goods for merchants to sell.

The peasants learned better ways of farming and produced more and more food for the growing population. Peasants began to use water power to run the grain mills and sawmills. They gained land for farming by clearing forests and draining swamps.

For the first time since the days of the Roman Empire, Europeans took notice of the world beyond their borders. Merchants traveled afar to trade with the peoples of the Byzantine Empire in southeastern Europe. The Crusades, a series of Christian military expeditions against the Muslims, encouraged European trade with the Middle East (see [Crusades](#)). Italians in Genoa, Pisa, Venice, and other towns built great fleets of ships to carry the merchants' goods across the Mediterranean Sea to trading centers in Spain and northern Africa. The Italians brought back goods from these seaports. Many of the goods were exports from cities in India and China. Leaders in the towns of northern Germany created the Hanseatic League to organize trade in northern Europe.

Merchants exchanged their goods at great international trade fairs held in towns along the main European trade routes. Each fair was held at a different time of the year, and merchants traveled from one fair to another. The county of Champagne in northeastern France became the site of the first great European fairs. Its towns lay on the trade routes that linked Italy with northern Europe. Flemish merchants brought woolen cloth to the fairs. Italian merchants brought silks, spices, and perfumes from the Middle East, India, and China. Merchants from northern and eastern Europe brought furs, lumber, and stone. The merchants not only traded their goods, but also exchanged ideas about new methods of farming, new industries, and events in Europe and the rest of the world.

Medieval towns. Early towns were only small settlements outside the walls of a castle or a church. As towns grew larger, walls were built around them. Soldiers on the walls kept a lookout for attacking armies. The towns became crowded because the walls limited the amount of land available. Houses stood crowded together. The people had to build upward because land was expensive. Many buildings were five or six stories high.

Streets were narrow, crooked, dark, and filthy. Until about 1200, they were not paved. The people threw all their garbage and rubbish into the streets, and disease spread quickly. During the 1200's, people in some towns began to pave their streets with rough cobblestones. They also took some steps toward increasing sanitation.

A citizen who went out at night took his servants along for protection against robbers. The servants carried lanterns and torches because no town had street lighting. The wide use of lamps, torches, and candles made fire one of the great dangers for a medieval town. Wealthy citizens had stone and brick houses, but most houses were made of wood. A large fire was likely to wipe out a whole town. The city of Rouen, in France, burned to the ground six times between 1200 and 1225.

After the merchants and craftworkers settled in the towns, they set up organizations called *guilds*. A guild protected its members against unfair business practices, established prices and wages, and settled disputes between workers and employers.

Guilds played an important part in town government. When the first guilds were organized, the towns had few laws to protect merchants or craftworkers. Most laws were made and enforced by the lord who owned the land on which a town stood. As the townspeople gained power, they demanded the right to govern themselves. Often, a guild forced a lord to grant the people a charter that gave them certain rights of self-government. Guilds led the townspeople's fight for self-government, and so members of guilds often ran the new town governments. See [Guild](#).

The decline of feudalism. Economic recovery brought many changes to the social and political organization of Europe. Money came back into use with the growth of trade and industry, the rise of towns, and the Crusades. The manorial system began to break down as people grew less dependent on the land. Many peasants ran away from the manors to the towns. Other peasants bought their freedom with money they earned by selling food to the townspeople. The lords of some towns encouraged new settlers to come. Many lords granted freedom to peasants who settled in their towns.

The feudal system, based on manorialism, began to break down, too. Ruling lords could pay for military and political service with money instead of fiefs. Their wealth provided better pay for soldiers and officials they hired. In return, the lords

received better service. They and their governments grew increasingly powerful.

Developments in the 1100's and 1200's laid the foundation for the eventual rise of great nation-states in England and France. Such powerful kings as Henry II of England and Louis IX of France forced feudal lords to accept their authority. These kings developed new and more centralized forms of government. They also organized national armies to protect the people, and established royal laws and courts to provide justice throughout the land (see [Henry II](#) [of England]; [Louis IX](#)). At the same time, small but well-organized governments took form in Flanders and Italian city-states, including Florence, Genoa, Siena, and Venice.

Learning and the arts during the High Middle Ages were devoted to glorifying God and strengthening the power of the church. From 1100 to 1300, almost all the great ideas and artistic achievements reflected the influence of the church.

Princes and laborers alike contributed money to build magnificent stone cathedrals that rose above medieval towns. Stained glass windows and sculptured figures that decorated the cathedrals portrayed events in the life of Christ and other stories from the Bible. The cathedrals still standing in the French cities of Chartres, Reims, Amiens, and Paris are reminders of the faith of medieval people. See [Notre Dame, Cathedral of](#).

Increasing contact with Arab and Byzantine civilizations brought back much learning that had been lost to Europe since the end of the Roman Empire. Scholars translated Greek and Arabic writings from these civilizations into Latin, and studied their meanings. More and more scholars became familiar with the writings of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The scholars argued whether Aristotle's teachings opposed those of the church. A field of thought called *scholasticism* grew out of their discussions and writings (see [Scholasticism](#)). Among the great teachers and writers of this period were Peter Abelard, Saint Albertus Magnus, and Saint Thomas Aquinas (see [Abelard, Peter](#); [Albertus Magnus, Saint](#); [Aquinas, Saint Thomas](#)).

Students gathered at the cathedrals where the scholars lectured. Students and scholars formed organizations called *universities*, which were similar to the craftworkers' guilds. From the universities came men to serve the church and the new states, to practice law and medicine, to write literature, and to educate others.

The late Middle Ages

Between 1300 and 1500, medieval Europe gradually gave way to modern Europe. During this period, the Middle Ages overlapped the period in European history called the *Renaissance*. For a discussion of the great developments in art and learning during this period, see the World Book article on [Renaissance](#).

A halt in progress. Although art and learning advanced, other areas of medieval civilization stood still or fell back. Europe had moved forward economically and socially almost without interruption during the High Middle Ages. The population had grown steadily, social conditions had improved, and industry and trade had expanded greatly. These developments came to an end in the 1300's. The population decreased, the people became discontented, and industry and trade shrank.

Around 1300, slight climate changes made weather in western Europe cooler and wetter. As a result, the agricultural practices that had developed in Europe could not sustain the increased population. Famines and floods caused widespread

hardship. An outbreak of plague, later called the Black Death, began in 1347 and eventually killed a fourth to a half of Europe's people. See [Plague](#).

The reduction in population due to famines, disease, and the plague had various social and economic consequences. Because of a labor shortage, lords tried to enact strict laws to keep peasants on their land and subject to high rents and other traditional obligations. Peasants rose in bloody revolts. In the towns, workers fought the rich merchants who kept them poor and powerless.



Picture
Bubonic plague

War also played a part in the slowdown of European progress. From 1337 to 1453, England and France fought the Hundred Years' War. This conflict interrupted trade and exhausted the economies of both nations (see [Hundred Years' War](#)). In addition, the breakdown of feudalism and manorialism caused civil war in most of Europe.

The growth of royal power. By the 1300's, the breakdown of feudalism had seriously weakened the feudal lords. At the same time, economic recovery had enriched the kings. With the help of hired armies, the kings enforced their authority over the lords. Royal infantry—newly armed with longbows, spears called *pikes*, and guns—defeated armies of feudal knights.

Meanwhile, the kings greatly increased their power by gaining the support of the middle classes in the towns. The townspeople agreed to support the kings by paying taxes in return for peace and good government. These developments gave birth to the nations of modern Europe.

Troubles in the church. The power of popes grew with that of kings, and bitter disputes arose between the rulers of church and state. Church leaders took an increasing part in political affairs, and kings interfered in church affairs more often. The popes sometimes surrendered their independence and gave in to the kings. This happened especially from 1309 to 1377, when the popes ruled the church from Avignon, France, instead of Rome. After the popes returned to Rome, disputes over the election of popes divided the church. Two, and sometimes three, men claimed the title of pope at the same time. Such disputes hurt the church's influence. They also caused criticism of church affairs and church teaching. Groups of people who challenged the church's authority also won many followers. The church tried to root out such opposition. The religious unity of western Europe weakened, leading to the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's. See [Christianity](#) (The Reformation); [Inquisition](#); [Pope](#) (The troubles of the papacy); [Reformation](#).

The growth of humanism. During the late Middle Ages, scholars and artists were less concerned with religious thinking and concentrated more on understanding people and the world. This new outlook was called *humanism*.

The scholars and artists of ancient Greece and Rome had emphasized the study of humanity. Scholars and artists of the late Middle Ages rediscovered the ancient works and gained inspiration from them. Architects began to design nonreligious buildings rather than cathedrals. Painters and sculptors began to glorify people and nature in their works. Scholars delighted in the study of pre-Christian authors of ancient times. During the late Middle Ages, more and more writers composed prose and poetry not in Latin but in the *vernacular* (native languages), including French and Italian. This increasing use of the vernacular opened a new literary age, and gradually brought learning and literature to the common people. Finally, the introduction of the printing press in Europe in the 1450's meant that books and documents could be

made more cheaply. Thus, books became available for many more people to read.

The political, economic, and cultural changes of the late Middle Ages gradually changed Europe, and by the early 1500's, Europe was no longer medieval. But the culture and institutions of the Middle Ages continued to influence modern European history.

Contributor:

- Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of History, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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