

Chapter 6: The Middle Ages

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After the Fall of Western Rome, the **papacy** served as a source of authority and continuity. In the absence of a *magister militum* living in Rome, even the control of military matters fell to the pope. Gregory the Great (c 540–604) administered the church with strict reform. A trained Roman lawyer and administrator, and a monk, he represents the shift from the classical to the medieval outlook and was a father of many of the structures of the later Roman Catholic Church. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, he looked upon Church and State as co-operating to form a united whole, which acted in two distinct spheres, ecclesiastical and secular, but by the time of his death, the papacy was the great power in Italy.

According to tradition, it was a Romanized Briton, **Saint Patrick** who introduced Christianity to Ireland around the 5th century. Roman legions had never conquered Ireland, and as the Western Roman Empire collapsed, Christianity managed to survive there. Monks sought out refuge at the far fringes of the known world: like Cornwall, Ireland, or the Hebrides. Disciplined scholarship carried on in isolated outposts like Skellig Michael in Ireland, where literate monks became some of the last preservers in Western Europe of the poetic and philosophical works of Western antiquity.

By around 800 they were producing illuminated manuscripts such as the **Book of Kells**. The missions of Gaelic monasteries led by monks like St Columba spread Christianity back into Western Europe during the Middle Ages, establishing monasteries initially in northern Britain, then through Anglo-Saxon England and the Frankish Empire during the Middle Ages. Thomas Cahill, in his 1995 book *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, credited Irish Monks with having "saved" Western Civilization during this period. According to art historian Kenneth Clarke, for some five centuries after the fall of Rome, virtually all men of intellect joined the Church and practically nobody in western Europe outside of monastic settlements had the ability to read or write.

Around AD 500, Clovis I, the King of the Franks, became a Christian and united Gaul under his rule. Later in the 6th century, the Byzantine Empire restored its rule in much of Italy and Spain. Missionaries sent from Ireland by the Pope helped to convert England to Christianity in the 6th century as well, restoring that faith as the dominant in Western Europe.

Charlemagne ("Charles the Great" in English) became king of the Franks. He conquered the Low Countries (modern-day Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg), Saxony, and northern and central Italy. In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor. Under his rule, his subjects in non-Christian lands like Germany converted to Christianity. After his reign, the empire he created broke apart into the kingdom of France (from *Francia* meaning "land of the Franks") and the Holy Roman Empire.

Starting in the late 8th century, the **Vikings** began seaborne attacks on the towns and villages of Europe. Eventually, they turned from raiding to conquest, and conquered Ireland, most of England, and northern France (Normandy). These conquests were not long-lasting, however. In 954 Alfred the Great drove the Vikings out of England, which he united under his rule, and Viking rule in Ireland ended as well. In Normandy the Vikings adopted French culture and language, became Christians and were absorbed into the native population.

By the beginning of the 11th century Scandinavia was divided into three kingdoms, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, all of which were Christian and part of Western civilization. Norse explorers reached Iceland, Greenland, and even North America, however only Iceland was permanently settled by the Norse. A period of warm temperatures from around 1000-1200 enabled the establishment of a Norse outpost in Greenland in 985, which survived for some 400 years as the most westerly outpost of Christendom. From here, Norsemen attempted their short-lived European colony in North America, five centuries before Columbus.

In the 10th century another marauding group of warriors swept through Europe, the **Magyars**. They eventually settled in what is today Hungary, converted to Christianity and became the ancestors of the Hungarian people.

A West Slavic people, the Poles, formed a unified state by the 10th century and having adopted Christianity also in the 10th century but with pagan rising in the 11th century.

By the start of the second millennium AD, the West had become divided linguistically into three major groups. The **Romance languages**, based on Latin, the language of the Romans, the Germanic languages, and the Celtic languages. The most widely spoken Romance languages were French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. Four widely spoken Germanic languages were English, German, Dutch, and Danish. Irish and Scots Gaelic were two widely spoken Celtic languages in the British Isles.

High Middle Ages: 1000–1300

Art historian Kenneth Clark wrote that Western Europe's first "great age of civilisation" was ready to begin around the year 1000. From 1100, he wrote: "every branch of life — action, philosophy, organisation, technology [experienced an] extraordinary outpouring of energy, an intensification of existence". Upon this period rests the foundations of many of Europe's subsequent achievements. By Clarke's account, the **Catholic Church** was very powerful, essentially internationalist and democratic in its structures and run by monastic organisations generally following Benedictine rule. Men of intelligence usually joined religious orders and those of intellectual, administrative or diplomatic skill could advance beyond the usual restraints of society — leading churchmen from faraway lands were accepted in local bishoprics, linking European thought across wide distances. Complexes like the Abbey of Cluny became vibrant centres with dependencies spread throughout Europe. Ordinary people also trekked vast distances on pilgrimages to express

their piety and pray at the site of holy relics. Monumental abbeys and cathedrals were constructed and decorated with sculptures, hangings, mosaics and works belonging one of the greatest epochs of art and providing stark contrast to the monotonous and cramped conditions of ordinary living. Abbot Suger of the Abbey of St. Denis is considered an influential early patron of **Gothic architecture** and believed that love of beauty brought people closer to God: "The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material". Clarke calls this "the intellectual background of all the sublime works of art of the next century and in fact has remained the basis of our belief of the value of art until today".

By the year 1000 **feudalism** had become the dominant social, economic and political system. At the top of society was the monarch, who gave land to nobles in exchange for loyalty. The nobles gave land to vassals, who served as knights to defend their monarch or noble. Under the vassals were the peasants or serfs. The feudal system thrived as long as peasants needed protection by the nobility from invasions originating inside and outside of Europe. So as the 11th century progressed, the feudal system declined along with the threat of invasion.

In 1054, after centuries of strained relations, the **Great Schism** occurred over differences in doctrine, splitting the Christian world between the Catholic Church, centered in Rome and dominant in the West, and the Orthodox Church, centered in Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire. The last pagan land in Europe was converted to Christianity with the conversion of the Baltic peoples in the High Middle Ages, bringing them into Western civilization as well.

As the Medieval period progressed, the aristocratic military ideal of **Chivalry** and institution of knighthood based around courtesy and service to others became culturally important. Large Gothic cathedrals of extraordinary artistic and architectural intricacy were constructed throughout Europe, including Canterbury Cathedral in England, Cologne Cathedral in Germany and Chartres Cathedral in France (called the "epitome of the first great awakening in European civilisation" by Kenneth Clarke). The period produced ever more extravagant art and architecture, but also the virtuous simplicity of such as St Francis of Assisi (expressed in the Prayer of St Francis) and the epic poetry of Dante's Divine Comedy. As the Church grew more powerful and wealthy, many sought reform. The Dominican and Franciscan Orders were founded, which emphasized poverty and spirituality.

Women were in many respects excluded from political and mercantile life, however, leading churchwomen were an exception. Medieval abbesses and female superiors of monastic houses were powerful figures whose influence could rival that of male bishops and abbots: "They treated with kings, bishops, and the greatest lords on terms of perfect equality;. . . they were present at all great religious and national solemnities, at the dedication of churches, and even, like the queens, took part in the deliberation of the national assemblies...". The increasing popularity of devotion to the Virgin Mary (the mother of Jesus) secured maternal virtue as a central cultural theme of Catholic Europe. Kenneth Clarke wrote that the 'Cult of the Virgin' in the early 12th century "had taught a race of tough and ruthless barbarians the virtues of tenderness and compassion".

In 1095, **Pope Urban II** called for a **Crusade** to re-conquer the Holy Land from Muslim rule, when the Seljuk Turks prevented Christians from visiting the holy sites there. For centuries prior to the emergence of Islam, Asia Minor and much of the Mid East had been a part of the Roman and later Byzantine Empires. The Crusades were originally launched in response to a call from the Byzantine Emperor for help to fight the expansion of the Turks into Anatolia. The First Crusade succeeded in its task, but at a serious cost on the home front, and the crusaders established rule over the Holy Land. However, Muslim forces reconquered the land by the 13th century, and subsequent crusades were not very successful. The specific crusades to restore Christian control of the Holy Land were fought over a period of nearly 200 years, between 1095 and 1291. Other campaigns in Spain and Portugal (the Reconquista), and Northern Crusades continued into the 15th century. The Crusades had major far-reaching political, economic, and social impacts on Europe. They further served to alienate Eastern and Western Christendom from each other and ultimately failed to prevent the march of the Turks into Europe through the Balkans and the Caucasus.

Cathedral schools began in the Early Middle Ages as centers of advanced education, some of them ultimately evolving into medieval universities. During the High Middle Ages, **Chartres Cathedral** operated the famous and influential Chartres Cathedral School. The medieval universities of Western Christendom were well-integrated across all of Western Europe, encouraged freedom of enquiry and produced a great variety of fine scholars and natural philosophers, including Robert Grosseteste of the University of Oxford, an early expositor of a systematic method of scientific experimentation; and Saint Albert the Great, a pioneer of biological field research. The Italian University of Bologna is considered the oldest continually operating university.

Philosophy in the High Middle Ages focused on religious topics. Christian Platonism, which modified Plato's idea of the separation between the ideal world of the forms and the imperfect world of their physical manifestations to the Christian division between the imperfect body and the higher soul was at first the dominant school of thought. However, in the 12th century the works of Aristotle were reintroduced to the West, which resulted in a new school of inquiry known as scholasticism, which emphasized scientific observation. Two important philosophers of this period were Saint Anselm and Saint **Thomas Aquinas**, both of whom were concerned with proving God's existence through philosophical means. The *Summa Theologica* by Aquinas was one of the most influential documents in medieval philosophy and Thomism continues to be studied today in philosophy classes. Theologian Peter Abelard wrote in 1122 "I must understand in order that I may believe... by doubting we come to questioning, and by questioning we perceive the truth".

In Normandy, the Vikings adopted French culture and language, mixed with the native population of mostly Frankish and Gallo-Roman stock and became known as the Normans. They played a major political, military, and cultural role in medieval Europe and even the Near East. They were famed for their martial spirit and Christian piety. They quickly adopted the Romance language of the land they settled off, their dialect

becoming known as Norman, an important literary language. The Duchy of Normandy, which they formed by treaty with the French crown, was one of the great large fiefs of medieval France. The Normans are famed both for their culture, such as their unique Romanesque architecture, and their musical traditions, as well as for their military accomplishments and innovations. Norman adventurers established a kingdom in Sicily and southern Italy by conquest, and a Norman expedition on behalf of their duke led to the Norman Conquest of England. Norman influence spread from these new centres to the Crusader States in the Near East, to Scotland and Wales in Great Britain, and to Ireland.

Relations between the major powers in Western society: the nobility, monarchy and clergy, sometimes produced conflict. If a monarch attempted to challenge church power, condemnation from the church could mean a total loss of support among the nobles, peasants, and other monarchs. **Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV**, one of the most powerful men of the 11th century, stood three days bare-headed in the snow at Canossa in 1077, in order to reverse his excommunication by Pope Gregory VII. As monarchies centralized their power as the Middle Ages progressed, nobles tried to maintain their own authority. The sophisticated Court of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II was based in Sicily, where Norman, Byzantine, and Islamic civilization had intermingled. His realm stretched through Southern Italy, through Germany and in 1229, he crowned himself King of Jerusalem. His reign saw tension and rivalry with the Papacy over control of Northern Italy. A patron of education, Frederick founded the University of Naples.

Plantagenet kings first ruled the Kingdom of England in the 12th century. Henry V left his mark with a famous victory against larger numbers at the Battle of Agincourt, while Richard the Lionheart, who had earlier distinguished himself in the Third Crusade, was later romanticised as an iconic figure in English folklore. A distinctive English culture emerged under the Plantagenets, encouraged by some of the monarchs who were patrons of the "father of English poetry", Geoffrey Chaucer. The Gothic architecture style was popular during the time, with buildings such as Westminster Abbey remodelled in that style. King John's sealing of the **Magna Carta** was influential in the development of common law and constitutional law. The 1215 Charter required the King to proclaim certain liberties, and accept that his will was not arbitrary — for example by explicitly accepting that no "freeman" (non-serf) could be punished except through the law of the land, a right which is still in existence today. Political institutions such as the Parliament of England and the Model Parliament originate from the Plantagenet period, as do educational institutions including the universities of Cambridge and Oxford.

From the 12th century onward inventiveness had re-asserted itself outside of the Viking north and the Islamic south of Europe. Universities flourished, mining of coal commenced, and crucial technological advances such as the lock, which enabled sail ships to reach the thriving Belgian city of Brugges via canals, and the deep sea ship guided by magnetic compass and rudder were invented.

Late Middle Ages: 1300–1500

A cooling in temperatures after about 1150 saw leaner harvests across Europe and consequent shortages of food and flax material for clothing. Famines increased and in 1316 serious famine gripped Ypres. In 1410, the last of the Greenland Norseman abandoned their colony to the ice. From Central Asia, Mongol invasions progressed towards Europe throughout the 13th century, resulting in the vast Mongol Empire which covered much of Asia and Eastern Europe by 1300.

The Papacy had its court at **Avignon** from 1305-78. This arose from the conflict between the Papacy and the French crown. A total of seven popes reigned at Avignon; all were French, and all were increasingly under the influence of the French crown. Finally in 1377 Gregory XI, in part because of the entreaties of the mystic Saint Catherine of Sienna, restored the Holy See to Rome, officially ending the Avignon papacy. However, in 1378 the breakdown in relations between the cardinals and Gregory's successor, Urban VI, gave rise to the Western Schism — which saw another line of Avignon Popes set up as rivals to Rome (subsequent Catholic history does not grant them legitimacy). The period helped weaken the prestige of the Papacy in the buildup to the Protestant Reformation.

In the Later Middle Ages the **Black Plague** struck Europe, arriving in 1348. Europe was overwhelmed by the outbreak of bubonic plague, probably brought to Europe by the Mongols. The fleas hosted by rats carried the disease and it devastated Europe. Major cities like Paris, Hamburg, Venice and Florence lost half their population. Around 20 million people – up to a third of Europe's population – died from the plague before it receded. The plague periodically returned over coming centuries.

The last centuries of the Middle Ages saw the waging of the **Hundred Years' War** between England and France. The war began in 1337 when the king of France laid claim to English-ruled Gascony in southern France, and the king of England claimed to be the rightful king of France. At first, the English conquered half of France and seemed likely to win the war, until the French were rallied by a peasant girl, who would later become a saint, Joan of Arc. Although she was captured and executed by the English, the French fought on and won the war in 1453. After the war, France gained all of Normandy excluding the city of Calais, which it gained in 1558.

Following the Mongols from Central Asia came the **Ottoman Turks**. By 1400 they had captured most of modern-day Turkey and extended their rule into Europe through the Balkans and as far as the Danube, surrounding even the fabled city of Constantinople. Finally, in 1453, one of Europe's greatest city fell to the Turks. The Ottomans under the command of Sultan Mehmed II, fought a vastly outnumbered defending army commanded by Emperor Constantine XI — the last "Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire" — and blasted down the ancient walls with the terrifying new weaponry of the canon. The Ottoman conquests sent refugee Greek scholars westward, contributing to the revival of the West's knowledge of the learning of Classical Antiquity.

Probably the first clock in Europe was installed in a Milan church in 1335, hinting at the dawning mechanical age. By the 14th century, the middle class in Europe had grown in influence and number as the feudal system declined. This spurred the growth of towns and cities in the West and improved the economy of Europe. This, in turn helped begin a cultural movement in the West known as the Renaissance, which began in Italy. Italy was dominated by city-states, many of which were nominally part of the Holy Roman Empire, and were ruled by wealthy aristocrats like the Medicis, or in some cases, by the pope.