

Middle Ages, the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilization in the 5th century CE to the period of the Renaissance. The term and its conventional meaning were introduced by Italian humanists with unpleasant intent; the humanists were engaged in a revival of Classical learning and culture, and the notion of a thousand-year period of darkness and ignorance separating them from the ancient Greek and Roman world served to highlight the humanists' own work and ideals. In a sense, the humanists invented the Middle Ages in order to distinguish themselves from it. The Middle Ages nonetheless provided the foundation for the transformations of the humanists' own Renaissance.



The sack of Rome by Alaric the Visigoth in 410 CE had enormous impact on the political structure and social climate of the Western world, for the Roman Empire had provided the basis of social cohesion for most of Europe. Although the Germanic tribes that forcibly migrated into southern and western Europe in the 5th century were ultimately converted to Christianity, they retained many of their customs and ways of life; the changes in forms of social organization they introduced rendered centralized government and cultural unity impossible. Many of the improvements in the quality of life introduced during the Roman Empire, such as a relatively efficient agriculture, extensive road networks, water-supply systems, and shipping routes, decayed substantially, as did artistic and scholarly endeavors. This decline persisted throughout the period of time sometimes called the Dark Ages (also called Late Antiquity or the Early Middle Ages), from the fall of Rome to about the year 1000, with a brief hiatus during the flowering of the Carolingian court established by Charlemagne. Apart from that interlude, no large kingdom or other political structure arose in Europe to provide stability. The only force capable of providing a basis for social unity was the Roman Catholic Church. The Middle Ages therefore present the confusing and often contradictory picture of a society attempting to structure itself politically on a spiritual basis. This attempt came to a definitive end with the rise of artistic, commercial, and other activities anchored firmly in the secular world in the period just preceding the Renaissance.

After the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the idea arose of Europe as one large church-state, called Christendom. Christendom was thought to consist of two distinct groups of functionaries: church hierarchy and secular imperial leaders. In theory, these two groups complemented each other, attending to people's spiritual and worldly needs, respectively. Supreme authority was wielded by the pope in the first of these areas and by the emperor in the second. In practice, the two institutions were constantly sparring, disagreeing, or openly

warring with each other. The emperors often tried to regulate church activities by claiming the right to appoint church officials and to intervene in doctrinal matters. The church, in turn, not only owned cities and armies but often attempted to regulate affairs of state.

During the 12th century a cultural and economic revival took place; many historians trace the origins of the Renaissance to this time. The balance of economic power slowly began to shift from the region of the eastern Mediterranean to western Europe. The Gothic style developed in art and architecture. Towns began to flourish, travel and communication became faster, safer, and easier, and merchant classes began to develop. Agricultural developments were one reason for these developments; during the 12th century the cultivation of beans made a balanced diet available to all social classes for the first time in history. The population therefore rapidly expanded, a factor that eventually led to the breakup of the old feudal structures.



The 13th century was the apex of medieval civilization. This can be seen in the formation of Gothic architecture and sculpture, different kinds of social units, the legal concept of representation spread, and intellectual life was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church.

The breakup of feudal structures, the strengthening of city-states in Italy, and the emergence of national monarchies in Spain, France, and England, as well as such cultural developments as the rise of secular education, culminated in the birth of a self-consciously new age with a new spirit, one that looked all the way back to Classical learning for its inspiration and that came to be known as the Renaissance.

Middle Ages Documents

Document 1

Source: In the Middle Ages, historian Frantz Funck-Brentano made use of previously published texts to describe Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries (Heinemann, 1922, pp.1-3.

The barbarians have broken through the ramparts*. The Saracen [Moors*] invasions have spread in successive waves over the South. The Hungarians swarm over the Eastern provinces... they sacked town and village, and laid waste the fields. They burned down the churches and then departed with a crowd of captives... There is no longer any trade, only unceasing terror... The peasant has abandoned his ravaged fields to avoid the violence of anarchy. The people have gone to cower in the depths of the forests or in inaccessible regions, or have taken refuge in the high mountains... Society has no longer any government.

*Note: Moors refers to Muslim inhabitants of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

*Note: Ramparts is a word meaning a defensive wall of a castle or walled city.

Document 2

This excerpt is from BBC's biography on Charlemagne. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/charlemagne.shtml

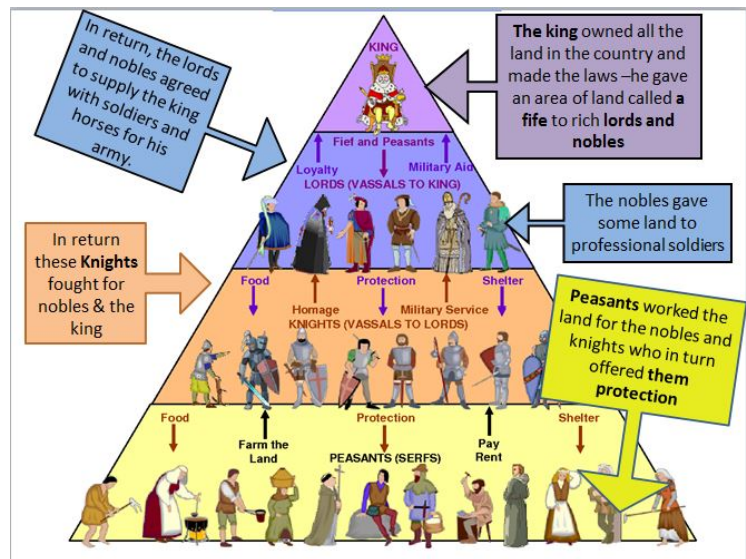
Charlemagne (Charles the Great) was king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the West. He did much to define the shape and character of medieval Europe and presided over the Carolingian Renaissance. The immense territories which Charlemagne controlled became known as the Carolingian empire. Charlemagne introduced administrative reforms throughout the lands he controlled, establishing key representatives in each region and holding a general assembly each year at his court at Aachen. He standardized weights, measures and customs dues, which helped improve commerce and initiated important legal reforms. He also attempted to consolidate Christianity throughout his vast empire. He persuaded many eminent scholars to come to his court and established a new library of Christian and classical works.

Document 3

Secondary source.

Feudalism was a political, economic, and social system in which nobles were granted the use of land that legally belonged to the king. In return, the nobles agreed to give their loyalty and military services to the king.

The peasants, or serfs, worked the land for the knights and the higher nobles and in return they received protection and a portion of the harvest to feed their families. The image shows the structure of feudal society – a social, political, and economic hierarchy.



Document 4

This excerpt is from the Homage Oath taken by John of Toul.

I, John of Toul, make known that I am the liege man of the [count and countess of Champagne]...I will aid the count of Champagne in my own person, and will send to the count and countess of Champagne the knights whose service I owe to them for the fief which I hold of them..."

Document 5

Source: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells of invasions of England

842. In this year there was a great slaughter in London and Quentovic* and in Rochester

846. According to their custom the Northmen plundered... and burned the town of Dordrecht* ... the Northmen, with their boats filled with immense booty [treasure], including both men and goods, returned to their own country...



*Note: Quentovic is a Frankish city during the Early Middle Ages located on the English Channel.

Note: Dordrecht is a town in the Netherlands during the Early Middle Ages.

Document 6

Source: Gray C. Boyce, "The Medieval Period" in The 34th Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies, 1964, pp. 69-70.

... we learn that an age once traditionally described as "dark" had remarkable vitality and exuberance. Even at its worst it performed the function of guarding, frequently by accident and chance, the knowledge and treasures of what had come before, but even more it was creative and inventive, and transmitted to later ages great riches of its own.

Document 7

Source: Minnesota State University E-Museum

The role of the Church was very large in Medieval Europe. More than any other institution, it unified Europeans and gave every person a sense of how the world worked. Since political leaders only had local power, the Church was the most powerful institution.

In a time of great political chaos, the Roman Catholic Church was the single, largest unifying structure in medieval Europe. It touched everyone's life, no matter what their rank or class or where they lived. With the exception of a small number of Jews, everyone in Europe was a Christian during the Middle Ages from the richest king down to the lowest serf.

From the moment of its baptism a few days after birth, a child entered into a life of service to God and God's Church. As a child grew, it would be taught basic prayers, would go to church every week barring illness, and would learn of its responsibilities to the Church. Every person was required to live by the Church's laws and to pay heavy taxes to support the Church. In return for this, they were shown the way to everlasting life and happiness after lives that were often short and hard.

In addition to collecting taxes, the Church also accepted gifts of all kinds from individuals who wanted special favors or wanted to be certain of a place in heaven. These gifts included land, flocks, crops, and even serfs. This allowed the Church to become very powerful, and it often used this power to influence kings to do as it wanted.

Document 8

Source: Visual Arts Encyclopedia

Gothic art evolved out of Romanesque art and lasted from the mid-12th century up to the late 16th century in some areas of Germany. Architecture was the main art form of Gothic Art, and the main structural characteristics of Gothic architectural design stemmed from the efforts of medieval masons to solve the problems associated with supporting heavy masonry ceiling vaults (arched roofs) over wide spans. The problem arose because the stonework of the traditional arched roof exerted a tremendous downward and outward pressure against the walls upon which it rested, which often caused a collapse. Up to and including the preceding period of Romanesque architecture (c.800-1150), building designers believed that vertical supporting walls had to be made extremely thick and heavy in order to counteract and absorb the vault's downward and outward pressure. But Gothic designers solved this problem around 1120 with several brilliant innovations.

First and most important, they developed a ribbed vault, made up of intersecting barrel vaults, whose stone ribs supported a vaulted ceiling of thin stone panels. Not only did this new arrangement significantly reduce the weight (and thus the outward thrust) of the ceiling vault, but also the vault's weight was now transmitted along a distinct stone rib, rather than along a continuous wall edge, and could be channeled from the rib to other supports, such as vertical piers or flying buttresses, which eliminated the need for solid, thick walls. Furthermore, Gothic architects replaced the round arches of the barrel vault with pointed arches which distributed the vault's weight in a more vertical direction.

Document 9

Examples of Gothic Architecture



Canterbury Cathedral, England



The **ribbed vault** in the Sainte Chapelle (Upper Chapel) (1239-48) Paris, France.



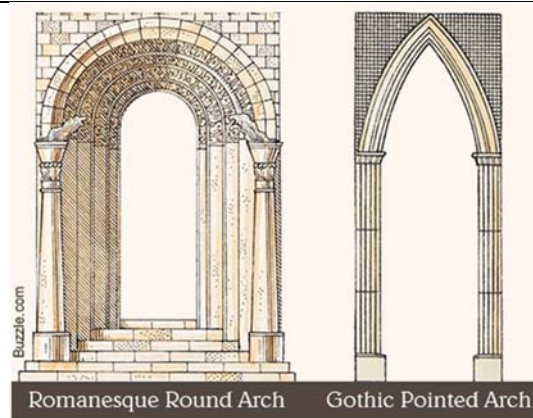
Flying Buttresses at Notre Dame Cathedral, giving masonry support to the walls of the nave.



Flying Buttresses on the Bourges Cathedral (built 1195-1230)



Gothic Arches on the Reims Cathedral (built between 1211-1275)



Document 10

Source: Dahmus, Joseph. *A History of the Middle Ages*. N.p.: Barnes and Noble Books, 1995. Print.

The medieval university did not limit itself to the study of metaphysics, theology, law, and medicine. It also contributed significantly to the advance of science. That the curriculum in medicine concentrated on what passed as scientific studies is understandable. Yet even in the arts curriculum the student gained some acquaintance with astronomy, physics, meteorology, geometry, optics, mathematics, and what the Middle Ages called natural philosophy but the modern world knows as natural science in general. Roger Bacon even recommended the study of techniques employed by artisans and alchemists. And when he declared that the study of theoretical sciences was justified principally by the use of manmade of them, he sounded thoroughly modern.

Document 11

Source: An anonymous English source written around AD 930.

Ordeal by Hot Iron.

If anyone should have given pledge to undergo the ordeal of iron . . . let him go three days beforehand to the priest whose duty it is to bless him with the sign of the cross; and let him live upon bread, water, salt and herbs, and hear mass each one of the three days; and let him make his offering and go to the holy communion on the day when he is to be examined by the ordeal; and before he is examined, let him swear that by the law of the realm he is innocent of the charge . . . Concerning the ordeal, we join in the name of God and by the command of the archbishop and of all our bishops that no one enter the church after the fire has been brought in with which the ordeal is to be heated except the priest and him who is to undergo judgment. And when the ordeal is ready, let two men from each side go in and certify that it is as hot as we have directed it to be. Then let an equal number from both sides enter and stand on either side of the judgment place along the church, and let them all be fasting on the preceding night. And let the priest sprinkle them all with water, and let them bow themselves everyone to the holy water and let the holy Gospel and the cross be given them all to kiss. And no one shall mend the fire any longer than the beginning of the hallowing, but let the iron lie on the coals until the last collect. Afterwards, let it be placed on a frame, and let no one speak except to pray diligently to God, the Father all-powerful, to agree to manifest His truth in the matter. And let the accused drink of the holy water and then let the hand with which he is about to carry the iron be sprinkled, and so let him go [to the ordeal]. Let the nine feet, in front of the iron, that was measured off be divided into three sections. In the first division, let him hold his right foot close to the stake. Then let him move his right foot across the second into the third division, where he shall cast the iron in front of him and hasten to the holy altar. Then let his hand be sealed up, and on the third day let examination be made whether it is clean or foul within the wrapper. [3]

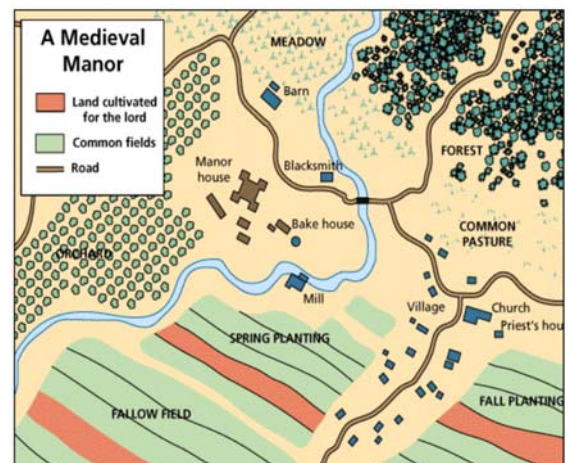


[3] That is, if the wound healed, the person was innocent.

Document 12

The Manor was the economic side of feudalism.

The manor was a mostly self-sufficient system in which the lord's land (granted by the king) was farmed by his serfs (bound to the land). The manor included not just farmers, but also artisans who provided for the needs of the manor, a chapel, forest for hunting, and pastureland for farm animals. For the majority of Europeans, life was hard. Serfs, or peasants obligated to work the lord's land, had very few freedoms. In return for laboring 6 days of the week, they were granted only one day a week to farm to feed their own family. They often also had to pay high rents to use the lord's land. There was no alternative, since peasants needed the lord's protection from raiding invaders.



Document 13

Source: *Einhart: The Life of Charlemagne*, translated by Samuel Epes Turner, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880) [in 1960 the University of Michigan Press reprinted this translation, with a copyrighted forward by Sidney Painter] and BBC http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/charlemagne.shtml
Source: AMSCO, Virginia World History A.D. 1000 to Present

Charlemagne Crowned Emperor

When he made his last journey, he also had other ends in view. The Romans had inflicted many injuries upon [Pope] Leo III, tearing out his eyes and cutting out his tongue, so that he had been compelled to call upon the King for help [Nov 24, 800].

Charles accordingly went to Rome, to set in order the affairs of the Church, which were in great confusion, and passed the whole winter there.

It was then that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus [Dec 25, 800], to which he at first had such an aversion that he declared that he would not have set foot in the Church the day that they were [awarded], although it was a great feast-day, if he could have foreseen the [plan] of the Pope. He [very patiently accepted] the jealousy which the Roman emperors showed upon his assuming these titles.



Europe in A.D. 1000: England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire.

*Note: When Charlemagne defeated those rebelling against Pope Leo III, Leo thanked Charlemagne by crowning him “Holy Roman Emperor” on December 25, 800. This title did not give Charlemagne new power, but it legitimized his rule over Italian territories and attempted to revive the imperial tradition of the “Western Roman Emperor.”

Document 14

Source: Medieval History Sourcebook, “Accounts of the Routes of Jewish Merchants to the East, 847”

Source: Elisabeth G. Ellis et al., *World History: Connections to Today*, Prentice-Hall (adapted).

The map below represents Europe in the later Middle Ages. Europe, although isolated at first, became more connected to the established global trade along the Silk Roads. The increase in trade connecting Europe to places along the Silk Roads was initiated by non-Christian merchants (Jews and Muslims many from the Middle East). Jewish merchants were known throughout Europe for bringing luxury goods to the major towns and trade centers of Europe. Due to their wealth, Jews were often persecuted in hard times, especially during the Plague.

