

World History/The Middle Ages in Europe

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The masters of the Renaissance regarded their era as a golden age, and looked back on the previous age as "dark" by comparison. Thus it is considered to be the "middle" transitional period between late antiquity and the modern world. It had feudal and manorial systems as socio-economic forms. Feudalism generally describes the relation held between a lord and his vassal. Manorialism placed significant emphasis upon self-sufficiency of manors, the underlying structure of economic establishment.

In addition to new socio-economic forms and models, new agricultural methods also came into existence, including the moldboard plow, which allowed a greater arriation of crops, and the three-field system, a manner in which one-third of available farmland was left fallow (unplated) to reduce the risk of soil erosion or over-usage.

Early Middle Ages

Rise of the Germanic Kingdoms

Following the fall of the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes became the dominate force in Europe. The greatest of these was the Frankish Empire. The earliest Frankish king was King Clovis (481 - 511). Clovis was known for the Salic Law, which listed out crimes and their various punishments.

The Frankish Empire relied on dukes to defend the borders of the empire and the Mayor of the Palace to run much of the daily business of the Empire. By 640, the Mayor of the Palace was the de facto ruler of the empire. In 751, Mayor of the Palace Pipin was appointed king of the Franks by the Pope.

Age of Charlemagne

Pepin's son, Charlemagne, was the greatest of the Frankish kings. He expanded the Frankish empire to northern Italy and Spain as well as to parts of Germany. In 800, the Pope appointed Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor in return for some help putting down a riot in Rome. Charlemagne also took an interest in art and education, opening a palace school at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Another important advancement made by Charlemagne was in the area of justice. At the time, conpurgation was the common practice. In conpurgation, a group of witnesses would gather to swear a defendant's innocence. If that wasn't sufficient, trial by fire, water, or combat was employed. Charlemagne set up a board of judges to listen to testimony and decide the verdict.

Charlemagne's empire didn't last long after he died. His son, Louis the Pious, lost land to Muslims in the south, Vikings in the north, and Slavs to the east. When Louis died in 840, his three sons battled for the throne. The Treaty of Verdun in 843 divided the empire between them. Lothar received the Rhine river valley and the Frankish holdings in the Alps and Italy. The other brothers received the land to the east and west. By 870, the holdings were simply East and West Frankland.

Viking Raiders

The Vikings (also known as Norse or Northmen) were Germanic Scandinavian seafarers who raided and settled many regions of Northern Europe during the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. Norse settlers founded communities and maintained important trade routes all the way from Greenland east to the heart of Russia, and developed a fearsome reputation as warriors and plunderers. Their descendants played crucial roles in the later history of France, England, Ireland and the Russian principalities, and they were the first Europeans to visit and settle in North America.

Denmark and Scandinavia had lain well outside the borders of the Roman Empire. By the end of the eighth century, the region contained many small tribal kingdoms. Farming and fishing comprised most of the economy. Growing populations and limited fertile land were probably the cause of a Norse movement to find new homes across the sea. The first major Viking raid was recorded in 793 when raiders sacked the wealthy monastery at Lindisfarne on the Yorkshire coast. As the 9th century wore on, Francia and Anglo-Saxon England came under yearly attack by Vikings whose swift ships appeared without warning off the coast, landing warriors whose skill and ruthlessness prompted the prayer, "from the fury of the Northmen, protect us, o lord."

By the 860s Danish Vikings had implanted themselves to stay in northeast England. After a series of wars against the Anglo-Saxon kings, the two sides agreed to a truce where the country was divided and the "Danelaw" area of Viking control recognized, if not formally ceded. The 10th century saw similar developments in Francia; there the Norse settlement -- *Normandie* -- was on the Channel coast between Le Havre and the Cotentin Peninsula.

Feudalism in Europe

Each lord had, more or less, complete control over his lands. However, weaker lords would become vassals of the stronger lords. A lord would protect his vassal. In return vassals were expected to supply soldiers in time of war and serve his lord in times of peace.

Medieval Society

When people think of the Middle Ages, the knight is one of the first things that come to mind. Most noblemen became knights. The path to knighthood began by serving a knight as a page. Pages had to learn to battle, ride a horse, be polite to ladies, sing, dance, and play chess. Once he learned to do this, he became knighted by another knight and blessed by a priest. Knights did not do common work. When they weren't fighting, they often hunted.

Medieval ladies were expected to run their house and tend to the ill. In their leisure time, they enjoyed falconry, chess, checkers, and dice. They were also very interested in fashion.

Besides what has been mentioned above, entertainment mostly consisted of banquets. The feasts were elaborate and lasted hours at a time. After everyone had eaten, jesters or minstrels would entertain the guests.

The Manor System

The manor or estate system refers to life on a manor, it could be said that it was the logical evolution of the continuing fractioning of land rights and government, something that was already common, even if under a somewhat distinct system, for instance the Roman villa.

Each manor had a lord who ruled over it, by hereditary rights, concession or payment. The people who worked on the manor were serfs. Serfs were responsible for tending the lord's fields as well as doing maintenance on the manor's buildings, they were bound to the land, forced to work there for their entire lives. Unlike slaves, serfs could not be bought or sold individually, they had freedom of movement but due to having no land of their own (and at time no right to acquire it) or any other means of surviving independently, they were forced into servitude.

The manor system quickly became common during the Middle Ages, but the system adapted to changes in legal rule and society, through the European expansion to the Colonial age, the United States of America plantations and to the large landowner in Brazil, the system has survived in some form or other until today.

The Church in Medieval Life

Monasteries and Convents

Monasticism became quite popular in the Middle Ages, with religion being the most important force in Europe. Monks and nuns were to live isolated from the world to become closer to God. Monks provided service to the church by copying manuscripts, creating art, educating people, and working as missionaries. Convents were especially appealing to women. It was the only place they would receive any sort of education or power. It also let them escape an unwanted marriage.

During the rule of Pope Innocent III (1198 - 1216), the two most famous monastic orders were founded. They were called the mendicant, or begging, orders because they begged for the food and clothes. They would usually travel in pairs; preaching, healing the sick, and helping the poor. Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscans, who were known for their charitable work. The Dominicans, founded by St. Dominic, focused on teaching, preaching, and suppressing heresy.

Papal Supremacy

The Pope, through the church, was as powerful as any nation and more powerful than most. The church taught that the only way to get to Heaven was through the sacraments that the Catholic church provided. The sacraments had to be paid for, which accounted for part of the church's vast wealth. Other reasons were that everyone paid the church ten percent of their income and no one taxed church property.

One dramatic example of the Pope's power was the Investiture Controversy. In 1076, Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV attempted to take the power to give a bishop the symbols of his office. Pope Gregory VII excommunicated Henry. Henry begged for forgiveness for three days and was forced to accept Gregory's terms.

The ultimate display of power by the medieval papacy was the crusades. From 1096 to 1272, no less than twelve crusades took place. Any man who participated was promised forgiveness for any sins committed before or during the crusade. As a mission to put Jerusalem under Christian control, the crusades were a failure. Jerusalem was in Christian control for less than 50 years. However, the crusades put the people of Europe in contact with the Muslim world. They were exposed to new ideas and developed a taste for new products. In this capacity, something good came from the crusades.

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