

# The Dark Ages, Middle Ages or Medieval Times?

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Knights of the Holy Ghost embarking on the Crusades. The illustration is modeled after a miniature in a manuscript of the 14th century in the museum of the Louvre, Paris, France. Photo by: Library of Congress

The phrase “Middle Ages” describes western Europe between the fall of Rome in the year 476 and the beginning of the historical period called the Renaissance, which began in the 1300s. It is also sometimes known as the Middle Period, the Dark Ages or Medieval Times.

## Birth of an idea

The phrase “Middle Ages” tells us more about the Renaissance that followed it than it does about the era itself. Starting in the 1300s, European thinkers, writers and artists began to look back and celebrate the art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. So, they dismissed the period after the fall of Rome as a “Middle” or even “Dark” age, a time when art, science and philosophy stopped making progress.

This way of thinking has recently been challenged. Today's historians see the Middle Ages as complex and interesting a time period as any other.

## **The Catholic Church**

After the fall of Rome, no single state or government united the people of Europe. The most powerful organization on the continent was the Catholic Church. Kings, queens and other leaders had to rely on the protection of the Church in order to hold onto their power.

Ordinary people across Europe had to donate 10 percent of their earnings each year to the Church, a custom called "tithing." At the same time, the Church rarely had to pay any taxes to European governments. As a result, the Church built up a great deal of money and power.

## **The rise of Islam**

Meanwhile, the Islamic world was growing larger and more powerful. The prophet Muhammad, who founded the religion of Islam, had died in the year 632. In the years that followed, Muslim armies conquered large parts of the Middle East, uniting them under the rule of a single leader, called a caliph. At its height, the medieval Islamic world was more than three times bigger than the Christian world.

Under the caliphs, life and culture in great cities such as Cairo, Baghdad and Damascus blossomed. Poets, scientists and philosophers wrote thousands of books. Religious leaders taught and interpreted the Quran, the holy book of Islam, and spread it across the Middle East.

Muslim thinkers translated Greek, Iranian and Indian texts into Arabic. They also developed the number system that we all use today. Inventors came up with technologies like the pinhole camera, soap, windmills, surgical instruments and the early flying machine.

## **The Crusades**

The Christian and Islamic worlds soon came into conflict. The Catholic Church began a series of military campaigns, called the Crusades, to force Muslims out of Europe. Crusaders believed that their military service would guarantee that they could spend all eternity in heaven.

The Crusades began in 1095, when Pope Urban summoned a Christian army to fight its way to Jerusalem, a city that is considered holy in both Christianity and Islam. They continued on and off until the end of the 1400s.

No one "won" the Crusades, despite the many thousands of people from both sides who lost their lives. The conflict did make ordinary Catholics across Europe feel like they had a common purpose, however, and they inspired waves of religious enthusiasm.

The Crusades had another effect: they exposed European Crusaders to Islamic literature, science and technology, and this went on to have a lasting effect on European intellectual life.

## Art and architecture

While the Crusaders were shipping off to battle, the Catholic Church was also busy building grand cathedrals and monasteries.

Hundreds of cathedrals (large churches) were built after the year 900 up to the 1200s, mostly in the Romanesque style. Romanesque cathedrals have rounded stone arches, thick walls and few windows. Around the year 1200, builders started to embrace Gothic architecture, a new style with huge stained-glass windows and pointed arches (a technology borrowed from the Islamic world). Compared to Romanesque buildings, Gothic architecture seems almost weightless.

Religious art started changing as well, as artists were hired to create paintings and decorations of the Virgin Mary, Jesus and the saints for churches. Another important art form was bookmaking. Craftsmen created illuminated manuscripts and handmade books with colored illustrations, gold and silver lettering and other decorations. In the 1300s, city booksellers began to selling small illuminated manuscripts to wealthy individuals.

## Economics and society

In medieval Europe, life in the countryside was governed by a system called “feudalism.” In a feudal society, the king gave large pieces of land, called fiefs, to noblemen and bishops. Landless peasants, known as serfs, worked the land, but their only payment was that they were allowed to live on the fiefs and were promised protection in the case of an enemy invasion.

Feudal life was transformed when new farming tools like the heavy plow were introduced. With these tools, fewer farm workers were needed, but more food was produced. As a result, the population of serfs grew, but they could not all find work on fiefs, so many of them moved into towns and cities.

Meanwhile, European merchants started selling goods, like wine, olive oil and fabrics, that were brought in from other civilizations in the east. Port cities, where goods were brought in by boat, grew quickly. By 1300, there were about 15 cities in Europe with a population of more than 50,000.

Between 1347 and 1350, however, a mysterious disease called the bubonic plague, or the “Black Death,” killed about 20 million people in Europe — 30 percent of the people on the continent. It was especially deadly in cities, where people were so crowded together that it was impossible to prevent the disease from spreading from person to person.

In these cities, after the Black Death, a new era was born — the Renaissance, a time of great intellectual and economic change. Many historians see it as a golden age that put Europe back on track after the “Dark Ages,” but it actually had its roots in the Middle Ages, a period of time when Europe underwent important historical changes.

**Quiz**

1 Read these sentences from the article.

1. *Kings, queens and other leaders had to rely on the protection of the Church in order to hold onto their power.*
2. *The Crusades began in 1095, when Pope Urban summoned a Christian army to fight its way to Jerusalem, a city that is considered holy in both Christianity and Islam.*
3. *The conflict did make ordinary Catholics across Europe feel like they had a common purpose, however, and they inspired waves of religious enthusiasm.*
4. *While the Crusaders were shipping off to battle, the Catholic Church was also busy building grand cathedrals and monasteries.*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that the Catholic Church was the dominant power in Europe in the Middle Ages?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 1 and 4

2 According to the article, important new and influential ideas emerged during the Middle Ages.

Which selection from the article provides the BEST support for this idea?

- (A) This way of thinking has recently been challenged. Today's historians see the Middle Ages as complex and interesting a time period as any other.
- (B) They also developed the number system that we all use today. Inventors came up with technologies like the pinhole camera, soap, windmills, surgical instruments and the early flying machine.
- (C) The Crusades had another effect: they exposed European Crusaders to Islamic literature, science and technology, and this went on to have a lasting effect on European intellectual life.
- (D) Meanwhile, European merchants started selling goods, like wine, olive oil and fabrics, that were brought in from other civilizations in the east.

- 3 Read the two sentences from the section "Economics and society."

*As a result, the population of serfs grew, but they could not all find work on fiefs, so many of them moved into towns and cities.*

*It was especially deadly in cities, where people were so crowded together that it was impossible to prevent the disease from spreading from person to person.*

The two sentences develop one impact of the Middle Ages by \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) outlining the positive and negative effects of new technology on daily life
  - (B) explaining the connection between less fief work and the spread of the plague
  - (C) providing a comparison between life in cities and on farms
  - (D) illustrating how a problem for serfs caused a deadly disease
- 4 Read the final paragraph of the article.

*In these cities, after the Black Death, a new era was born — the Renaissance, a time of great intellectual and economic change. Many historians see it as a golden age that put Europe back on track after the "Dark Ages," but it actually had its roots in the Middle Ages, a period of time when Europe underwent important historical changes.*

WHY does the author conclude the article with this paragraph?

- (A) to elaborate on the idea that many historians have become more interested in the Middle Ages
- (B) to indicate that the Black Death created the conditions that launched the Renaissance
- (C) to emphasize the role of the Middle Ages in shaping the periods to follow
- (D) to illustrate why most historians view the Renaissance as the most important period in Europe