

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 the “Middle Ages” describes western Europe between the fall of Roman civilization 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 way we think of the Middle Ages have a lot to do with what came next: the Renaissance. 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 the money they made 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. Muslim armies conquered large parts of the Middle East. These lands were controlled by 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. 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 clashed. The Catholic Church began a series of military campaigns, called the Crusades. It wanted to force Muslims out of Europe. Christian crusaders believed that their military service would guarantee that they could spend eternity in heaven.

The Crusades began in 1095 and continued on and off until the end of the 1400s. Neither side "won" in the struggle, though many thousands of people from both sides lost their lives.

A side effect of the Crusades was that they exposed European soldiers to Islamic literature, science and technology. Europe learned and borrowed many new ideas from the Islamic world as a result.

Art and architecture

Art and architecture in Europe changed in important ways during the Middle Ages. Hundreds of cathedrals (large churches) were built in the Romanesque style between the year 900 and the 1200s. Romanesque cathedrals have rounded stone arches, thick walls and few windows.

Around the year 1200, builders started to embrace a new style, called Gothic. Gothic cathedrals had huge stained-glass windows and pointed arches (a technology borrowed from the Islamic world).

Religious art changed as well. Artists were hired to create grand paintings and decorations for churches. Craftsmen made illuminated manuscripts, which were handmade books with colored illustrations, gold and silver lettering and other decorations.

Economics and society

In medieval Europe, life in the countryside was controlled by a system called “feudalism.” The king gave large pieces of land, called fiefs, to wealthy and powerful families. Landless peasants, known as serfs, worked the land. Their only payment was that they were allowed to live on the fiefs. They were also 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. 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 started to spread across Europe. It was called the bubonic plague, though many at the time called it the “Black Death.” The deadly illness killed about 20 million people in Europe, nearly 1 out of 3 people living on the continent. It was especially deadly in cities. People were so crowded together there that it was impossible to prevent the disease from spreading.

After the Black Death, however, a new era was born in these cities: the Renaissance.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "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.

HOW does this paragraph contribute to the article's MAIN ideas?

- (A) by describing the relationship between Catholic kings and queens in the Middle Ages
 - (B) by explaining the influence and power of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages
 - (C) by comparing the power of the Catholic Church before and after the Middle Ages
 - (D) by outlining similarities between Rome and the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages
- 2 Read the section "The Crusades."

What does this section show the reader that other sections do NOT?

- (A) how the Crusades affected the Catholic Church
- (B) how Christian ideas spread throughout Europe
- (C) how people of the Islamic world viewed Europeans
- (D) how ideas developed by the Islamic world spread to Europe

3 Read the conclusion below.

The Islamic world played an important role in preserving and sharing the ideas of others.

Which detail from the article BEST supports this conclusion?

- (A) Poets, scientists and philosophers wrote thousands of books.
- (B) Muslim thinkers translated Greek, Iranian and Indian texts into Arabic.
- (C) Europe learned and borrowed many new ideas from the Islamic world as a result.
- (D) Gothic cathedrals had huge stained-glass windows and pointed arches (a technology borrowed from the Islamic world).

4 Read the section "Economics and society."

Which paragraph suggests that serfs were MOST impacted by economic changes in the Middle Ages?