

European Middle Ages

The gradual decline of the Roman Empire ushered in an era of European history called the **Middle Ages**, or the medieval period. It is also known as the Dark Ages. It spanned the years from about 500 to 1500. During these centuries, a new society slowly emerged. It had roots in: (1) the classical heritage of Rome, (2) the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church, and (3) the customs of various Germanic tribes.

European Middle Ages Questions:

1. When was the Middle Ages and what else is this time called?

2. Which people were involved with creating Medieval Europe's culture?

Invasions and Decline of Learning:

Germanic invaders overran the western half of the Roman Empire. The Germanic invaders who stormed Rome could not read or write. Literacy declined as Romans moved to the countryside to the point that a few priests and other church officials were literate. Knowledge of Greek, long important in Roman culture, was almost lost. To adapt to rural conditions, the Church built religious communities called **monasteries**. Monasteries became Europe's best-educated communities. Monks opened schools, maintained libraries, and copied books that preserved part of Rome's intellectual heritage.

Invasions and Decline of Learning Questions:

In what ways did Germanic invaders affect the fallen Western Roman Empire?

What is the importance of the monastery?

The Franks:

In Gaul, a Germanic people called the Franks held power. Their leader was **Clovis** (KLOH•vihs). In 496, Clovis converted to Christianity. The Church in Rome welcomed Clovis's conversion and supported his military campaigns against other Germanic peoples. By 511, Clovis had united the Franks into one kingdom. The strategic alliance between Clovis's Frankish kingdom and the Church marked the start of a partnership between two powerful forces.

The Franks ruled much of Europe. They defeated Muslim raiders from Spain at the Battle of Tours in 732. If the Muslims had won, Western Europe might have become part of the Muslim Empire. The descendants of these Franks became the Carolingian (KAR uh LIHN juhn) Dynasty, after being anointed by the Pope. They ruled the Franks from 751 to 987.

The Franks Question:

Who established a monarchy in Gaul?

How would Europe have been different if the Battle of Tours had a different outcome?

Papal Power Expands

Politics played a key role in spreading Christianity. In 590, **Gregory I**, also called Gregory the Great, became pope. As head of the Church in Rome, Gregory broadened the authority of the **papacy**, or pope's office, beyond its spiritual role. Under Gregory, the papacy also became a **secular**, or worldly, power involved in politics. The pope's palace was the center of Roman government. According to Gregory, the region from Italy to England and from Spain to Germany fell under his responsibility. Gregory strengthened the vision of Christendom.

Papal Power Questions:

What does papacy and secular mean?

How did Gregory I change the status quo or normal state of affairs or things?

Charlemagne

A member of the Carolingian Dynasty Charles, who was known as **Charlemagne** (SHAHR luh MAYN), or Charles the Great, ruled the kingdom from 768-814. Each summer he led his armies against enemies that surrounded his kingdom. Through these conquests, Charlemagne spread Christianity. He reunited Western Europe for the first time since the Roman Empire.

In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor. The coronation was historic. A pope had claimed the political right to confer the title “Roman Emperor” on a European king. This event signaled the joining of Germanic power, the Church, and the heritage of the Roman Empire.

One of Charlemagne greatest accomplishments was the encouragement of learning. He surrounded himself with English, German, Italian, and Spanish scholars. He also ordered monasteries to open schools to train future monks and priests. Charlemagne’s descendants fought one another for control of the Empire. In 843, the Treaty of Verdun was signed, dividing the empire into three kingdoms. As a result, Carolingian kings lost power and central authority broke down. The lack of strong rulers led to a new system of governing and landholding feudalism.

Charlemagne Questions:

What is the significance of Charlemagne?

What ended the Carolingian’s dynasty?

Feudalism

From about 800 to 1000, invasions destroyed the Carolingian Empire. Many turned to local rulers who had their own armies. Any leader who could fight the invaders gained followers and political strength. This led to European **feudalism**, a political and economic system based on land ownership and personal loyalty. In exchange for military protection and other services, a lord, or landowner, granted land called a **fief**. The person receiving a fief was called a **vassal**. Feudalism depended on the control of land. The feudal system was based on rights and obligations.

Feudalism Questions:

How did invaders affect the Carolingian Empire?

What is feudalism?

Social Structure of Feudalism

The structure of feudal society was much like a pyramid. At the peak reigned the king. Next were the most powerful wealthy landowners such as nobles and bishops. Serving beneath these vassals were knights. Knights were mounted horsemen who pledged to defend their lords' lands in exchange for fiefs. At the base of the pyramid were landless peasants who toiled in the fields. In the feudal system, status determined a person's prestige and power. Social class was usually inherited. The vast majority of people were peasants and most peasants were **serfs**. Serfs were people who could not lawfully leave the place where they were born. Though bound to the land, serfs were not slaves. Their lords could not sell or buy them. However, what their labor produced belonged to the lord.

Feudalism Structure Questions:

Draw Feudalism's social structure.

What is the distinction between serfs and slaves?

Economic Structure of Feudalism

The manor was the lord's estate. During the Middle Ages, the manor system was the basic economic arrangement. It rested on a set of rights and obligations between a lord and his serfs. The lord provided the serfs with housing, farmland, and protection from bandits. In return, serfs tended the lord's lands, cared for his animals, and performed other tasks to maintain the estate. Peasant women shared in the farm work with their husbands. All peasants whether free or serf owed the lord certain duties. These included at least a few days of labor each week and a certain portion of their grain. The serfs and peasants raised or produced nearly everything that they and their lord needed for daily life crops like wheat, oats, vegetables, milk and cheese, fuel, cloth, leather goods, and lumber. The only outside purchases were salt, iron, and a few unusual objects.

Economic Structure Questions:

How would you describe the manorial system?

How does feudalism work? What does each party receive and give?

Harshness of Manor Life

For the privilege of living on the lord's land, peasants paid a high price. They paid many taxes on things like food, marriage, and tithe, or church tax. A tithe represented one-tenth of their income. Serfs lived in crowded cottages and warmed their dirt-floor houses by bringing pigs inside. At night, the family huddled on a pile of straw that often crawled with insects. Life was work and more work and many died in childhood. Illness and malnutrition were constant afflictions for medieval peasants.

Most women in feudal society were powerless and thought to be inferior to men. A noblewoman could inherit an estate from her husband and send knights to war but their lives were limited. For the vast majority of women of the lower classes, life had remained unchanged for centuries. Peasant women performed endless labor around the home and often in the fields, bore children, and took care of their families.

Harsh Manor Life Questions:

What problems did peasants face?

How do peasant women and noblewomen compare?

Knights

During the 1700s, Frankish troops used armored horsemen, or knights. Leather saddles and stirrups changed the way warfare was conducted in Europe for they kept knights steady and able to carry more. In exchange for military service, feudal lords rewarded knights with fiefs or land from their sprawling estates. Wealth from the fiefs allowed knights to devote their lives to war. As the lord's vassal or subordinate a knight's main obligation was to serve in battle. Knights were expected to display courage in battle and loyalty to their lord.

By the 1000s, the code of **chivalry**, a complex set of ideals, demanded that a knight fight bravery in defense of three masters. He devoted himself to earthly feudal lord, heavenly Lord, and chosen lady. The chivalrous knight also protected the weak and the poor. Most knights, failed to meet these high standards. The code of chivalry promoted a false image of knights, making them seem more romantic than brutal.

Technology Questions:

How did the relationship between lords and knights work?

Whom was a knight loyal to?