

The Middle Ages



Medieval society initially was divided into three orders: those "who fought," those "who prayed," and those "who worked." In this fragment from the *Meeting of the Golden Gate*, members of two of those orders, a monk and a peasant, appear to be following Saint Joachim as he travels to the Golden Gate outside Jerusalem. Artist Maso di Banco created the work, located at the Museo di S. Marco monastery in Florence, Italy. [Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library]

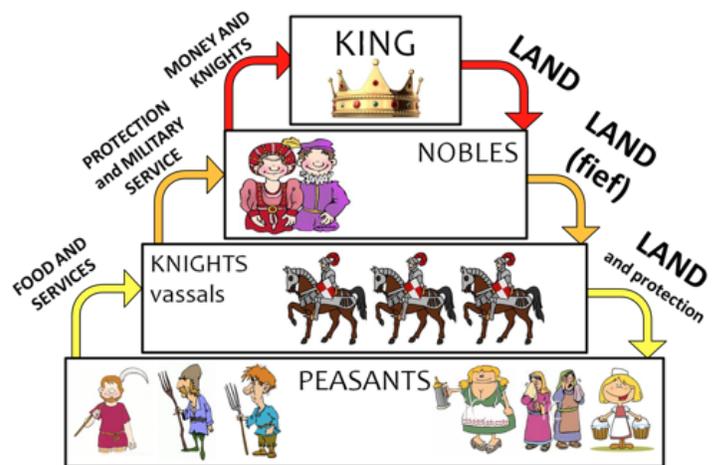
What is the Middle Ages/Medieval Times?

The "Middle Ages" is a term used to describe the period between the end of the late classical age and the time of the Renaissance. The most common starting point for the Middle Ages begins around the year 500 CE, with the most common end point being around 1500. That time frame is divided into the early Middle Ages (500 to 1050); the High Middle Ages (1050 to 1300); and the late Middle Ages (and early Renaissance: 1300 to 1500).

The Beginnings of the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, a number of interconnected Germanic kingdoms arose as the power of the Romans receded. During that early post-Roman period (Early Middle Ages), life in Western Europe was difficult, often violent, and for almost everyone, set within a very small world. Eventually, the centralized power that had once held together the domains of the powerful local lords disappeared, and it was left to armed and aggressive mounted nobles, known as knights, to fight amongst themselves for control of the choicest lands. Meanwhile, raids by Vikings and Muslim pirates often went unopposed, which made the absence of effective centralized government all the more painfully apparent.

The answer came with the rise of feudal manors. Under a system that has come to be called feudal manorialism, peasants (a class that included just about everyone) lived under the protection of a local strongman known as a lord. There was no centralized government to speak of and no centralized state. For that reason, the things Roman citizens had once looked to the Roman government for—protection and justice, for example—were the responsibility of the local lord. In return, the peasants who resided on a lord's lands owed him either rent, labor, or some combination of the two, which was dependent on the specifics of the relationship between them. More crucially, for the peasants, the lord of the manor had what amounted at times to absolute power over them. The lord, in turn, owed his allegiance to the king in whose realm he resided.



Feudal Pyramid of Power

Medieval Society: The Structure of the Church

During the Middle Ages the Catholic Church was the organization that kept social order when a strong central government was absent. The officials that ran the Church were called clergy. The structure of the Clergy was as follows:

1. *Pope* – Head of the Catholic Church; is stationed in the Vatican in Rome, Italy
2. *Bishops* – Leaders of all the churches within a specific area who supervise priests
3. *Priests* – conducts religious services at the local church & runs that church
4. *Monks* – a community of men who have taken a religious vow
5. *Nuns* – a community of women who have taken a religious vow

Monks lived in monasteries and nuns lived in convents apart from society. They took a vow to live a life of chastity, obedience, and poverty. They were not interested in attaining wealth or social status. Instead, they dedicated they were dedicated to God and their Catholic faith. Parishioners, or church members, were not part of the clergy. They included the peasants and the nobles.

The Social & Educational Role of the Church

Although most people in medieval society led very difficult lives, they were able to relax and attend church on Sundays and holy days. They enjoyed dancing, singing, and sports. Although they knew they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they believed that in the “eyes of God” everyone was equal. Therefore they looked forward to eternal life after death. Since most peasants at the time were illiterate, the Church played a pivotal role in preserving knowledge from the past. Many monks worked as scribes and copied over the ancient religious works and classical writing of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Many nuns also worked on religious manuscripts. Finally, both monks and nuns provided schools for young people, hospitals for the sick, food for the needy and guesthouses for weary travelers. They also taught the peasants carpentry, weaving, and improved farming methods

Peasants, Salvation, & Church Teachings

Poverty and hardship characterized peasant life, and few lived beyond the age of 40. Famine and disease were constant dangers. In times of war, the peasants were the first and hardest hit. Invading knights trampled crops and burned villages, causing famine and loss of life. The life of a peasant was very hard. They worked from dusk to dawn. Women sheared the sheep, spun wool, sewed garments, prepared breads and puddings, and cared for young children. The men tended to the sheep and farm animals, vines, and fields. They mowed hay and cut trees. Children had no childhood as you know it. They worked with their parents as soon as they were able. Peasants lived without luxuries and labored constantly to provide themselves and their families with food, clothing, and shelter. Therefore, they looked forward to salvation, or eternal life after death. Peasants made prayer a part of their daily life and committed themselves to following the teachings of the Church and their priests in order to achieve salvation.

The pope was the head of the Catholic Church. He and the bishops decided what would be taught in the churches and the priests would teach it. One of the things they taught their parishioners (church members) was that the route to salvation was through receiving the sacraments. The sacraments were seven sacred rituals, which were given by the priests. They include baptism, penance, communion, confirmation, matrimony, anointing of the sick, and holy orders. The most important sacrament was communion, which was a wheat wafer blessed by a priest to commemorate Christ’s death. To receive this sacrament, members had to attend church or mass.

Medieval Society: What is Feudalism?

In its most general form, the term "feudalism" has been used to refer to the oppressive hierarchy in European society as a whole during the Middle Ages; however, it more accurately describes the specific economic, political, and social relationships (contracts) between lords and vassals during that era. The context for feudal contracts was the series of Viking invasions in the ninth and 10th centuries, when kings were unable to meet every threat and local men with the

power to repulse the invaders took a more prominent role in defense. The Feudalism as described here began around the 10th and 11th centuries in France.

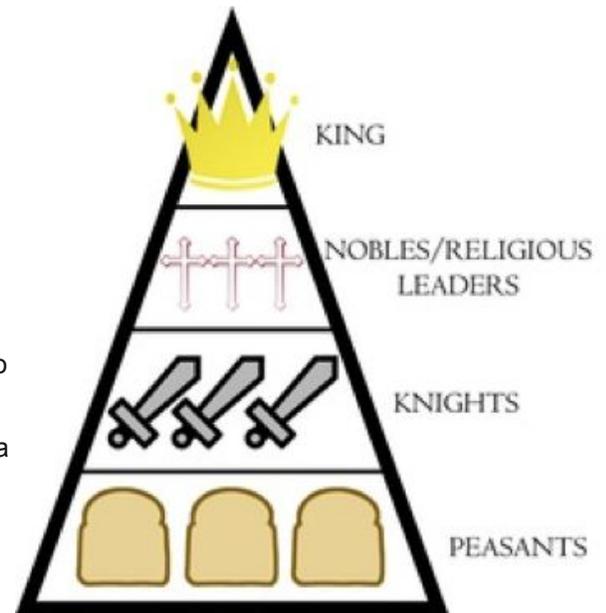
The word "feudalism" derives from the Latin feudum, or fief, the land given by a lord to a vassal in return for military service. Nobles received their land from the Kings, making them lords. The terms of the lord's contract varied considerably, but generally in granting his vassals land and thus a means to earn money, the lord was then able to equip and maintain a body of armed knights. Typically, a vassal also provided other such services as housing the lord and his men when they visited, acting as a juror in the lord's court, giving gifts of money or goods for important occasions within the lord's household, and even helping to pay the ransom should the lord be captured. Such an arrangement added not only to his military might but also to his prestige, as a large entourage was a tangible sign of a lord's wealth and power.

The contract between lord and vassal was cemented through the ceremony of homage. In that ceremony, the lord presented his vassal with a banner or a handful of soil (which symbolized the fief), and the vassal swore fealty to his lord. Fealty involved a formal oath, taken publicly, in which a vassal promised to serve his lord and uphold their contract. Eventually, Kings, and even nobles, began setting their feudal relationships down in ink. It was a mutual agreement, one that either party could break in case of a breach of contract. A vassal could break his oath if his lord failed in his obligations. Likewise, if the vassal failed to serve his lord, his fief was surrendered.

Feudal relationships were complex. In a decentralized state, which most feudal monarchies in the Middle Ages were at some point in their histories, one might have multiple loyalties. In theory, everyone owed their primary allegiance to the king, but in actual practice most people never met the king or served him personally. A king's major lords, like dukes and counts, had vassals; their vassals had vassals; and so on down the line. Not infrequently, a man might owe allegiance to more than one lord.

The Three Orders of Feudalism

From the 11th century forward, medieval society has often been simplified, even by medieval sources, into three orders, or estates: "who fought"- The knights (miles) were fighters (bellatores), charged with protecting the other classes; "who prayed" -the clergy (clerus) were prayers (oratores), who prayed for the other classes; and "who worked"- the peasants and serfs (cultori) were the workers (laborers), whose industry sustained the other two classes by providing them food and labor. Medieval writers regarded of those who prayed as first in rank of the three orders; medieval society was a religious society, and clergy and monks held a special place because they served God. The first two estates were effectively the owners of the third, who comprised the great majority of the medieval population. In England in the 14th century peasants and serfs numbered at least 60% of the population; in France during the same period, 80%; in Germany and Eastern Europe, 90%. The living, working and protection relationship among the classes, which worked in conjunction with feudalism, was called manorialism.



Class distinctions between peasants and the other estates were reinforced by a number of customs and pronouncements from the clergy and nobles. Even the daily bread of the Middle Ages was distributed along class lines. White wheat bread was reserved for the upper classes, while the peasants ate brown rye bread; in times of famine, when aristocrats might have to eat rye bread, peasants and their livestock were to eat oats.

Regulations further divided peasants from the other estates. The 12th-century Frankish Imperial Chronicle regulated peasant clothing, stating, "Peasants are not allowed to wear any colors other than black or gray." Although their ancestors

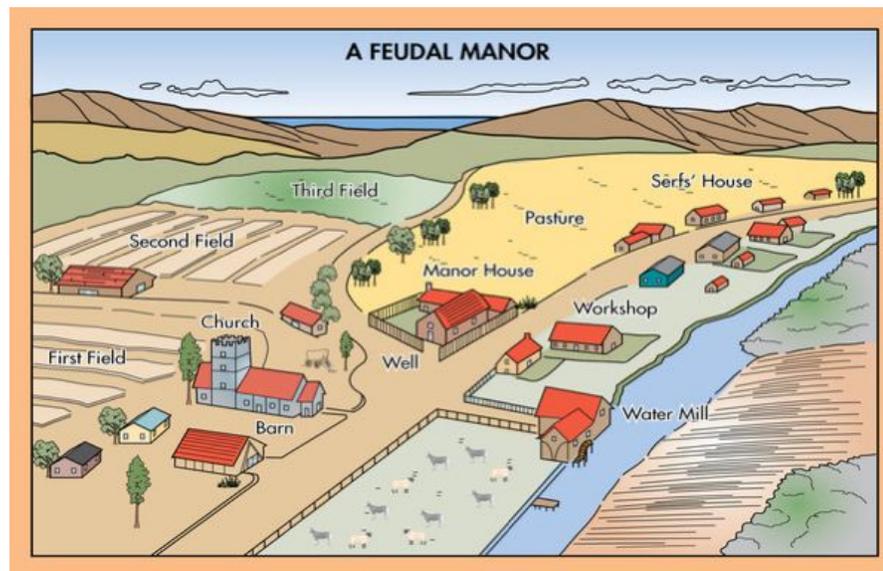
had been warriors and they customarily carried weapons, peasants were now required to finance wars with taxes rather than to fight; some laws forbade them to bear any arms within the village and allowed them no more than a sword when traveling on the dangerous roads.

As Europe recovered from the ninth- and 10th-century invasions, and as commerce increased over the next several centuries, towns and cities grew. Traditional crafts continued to be an important part of medieval life, particularly on the manor, but those emerging urban centers became hubs of production and trade and home to a group of people who did not fit squarely within the "three orders." Those shop owners, master craftsmen, and traders made up the urban middle class, a section of society that, in time, would do much to transform medieval kingdoms into the giant commercial states of the Renaissance.

Feudal Manorialism : The Medieval Manor

Manorialism was an economic system that was common in medieval Europe. Sometimes equated with feudalism, manorialism describes peasants' and serfs' relations to the manor that controlled the land on which they lived and worked. (In general, feudalism describes the law, politics, and society of the whole of medieval Europe and specifically, vassals' relations to their lords.)

Under manorialism, life was centered around a manor, a local jurisdiction or geographical area, owned by a nobleman. The manor was located near a town or village inhabited by peasants. The lord of the manor was the de facto ruler of all the peasants in his village; he held legal authority over them and was in charge of administering the law and holding court. The peasants provided him tribute in return for his protection. In addition, the lord might control a number of serfs, workers who were legally tied to the land. For most serfs and peasants, the manor constituted their entire universe. They were born there, lived there, and died there without ever leaving its boundaries.



In addition, a number of agricultural advances appeared during the early Middle Ages that made the manorial system a logical economic arrangement. For much of early-medieval Europe, most of the land was cultivated by free families who not only performed agricultural work but also frequently contributed military service to their lords. The peasantry emerged as a distinctive class only in the 11th century after a long process of social and technological change that worked against the small family farms and catalyzed the formation of large peasant communities evolving into manors. For example, the invention of the heavy plow helped to change the shape of fields from square to long and rectangular, and villagers reorganized their land into long, open fields without fences, leaving room for more inhabitants. The heavier plow required more oxen to pull it; because few peasants owned more than one ox, they pooled their animals to plow the fields together. Farmers also began using the three-field system for their crops, which meant rotating their fields through grains, beans, and fallow periods. Each individual farmer worked a number of different strips of land, often scattered all over the village's farmland. For all those reasons, it made sense for villagers to work together and to plant the land collectively. Collective farming was a key component of manorialism. The number of free farmworkers declined sharply after the eighth century as the manorial system gained greater and greater prominence.

Peasants of a Manor: Peasants, who stood between landowners and serfs on the social ladder, worked the lands of the nobles and clergy. The agricultural workers made up the vast majority of people during the Middle Ages and whose work fed virtually everyone in Western Europe. A peasant did not own a plot of land but, rather, belonged to it, legally bound to obey the will of the landowner. A significant proportion of the medieval peasantry discharged their obligations to their lords through both rents and labor. These obligations were sometimes nominal, but at least as often they were staggering. A given agricultural household might owe its lord as much as 100% of its income and as much as 250 days of manual labor per year by all able-bodied workers. In 14th-century France, as in most of Europe before that date, a lord possessed massive legal control over his villeins, pronouncing judgments on any crimes committed by the workers. Even the most intimate choices of peasant life fell under the sway of the lord, who often prohibited peasants from marrying anyone outside his demesne. Although the condition of serfs and peasants varied by region, both peasants and serfs had legal rights and could usually bring their grievances before the manor court.

Serfs of a Manor : Serfs, who were peasants bound to the land, were common to the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and ancient China beginning in the Han dynasty. Serfs were not slaves, but instead were tenants on manors or large estates who owed the lord certain economic and customary duties. The status and relationship to the land were hereditary; when a serf died, another member of his family would take over the payments to the lord and continue occupying the land. Serfs also owed the lord other such duties as a gift of his best livestock when he died. On some manors, lords might demand up to five days of labor per week from a serf. They could not legally own land, but they farmed plots given to them by the lord. Serfs were not allowed to leave the manor, marry, or go to school without the lord's permission. Arbitrary behavior by the lord was likely to generate protests, if not violence. Serfs had to work for the lord before they could work for themselves; as a result, their personal farming was sometimes neglected and their families poorly fed. By the 16th century, serfdom was ending in England and France, with the growth of a money economy as opposed to goods.

Changes in Manorialism: Around the 11th century, the trade revival in Europe began to diminish the importance of manorialism. With lords able to sell surplus crops to towns and able to pay their workers with money, and with some serfs even able to buy their freedom with earned wages, the localized economy of the manor gave way to the larger, decentralized regional economies of Europe. Moreover, lords found that peasants who earned wages and paid rent for their land tended to work more efficiently than serfs. As manorialism died out in Western Europe, however, it became increasingly common in Eastern Europe, where many people labored as serfs well into the 19th century. With such an increasingly productive and broad-based system of agriculture, northern and central Europe were able to support large urban populations, and cities such as Paris grew dramatically. In this complex society work grew more specialized. Peasants, once both farmers and warriors, were now full-time farmers, and the aristocracy developed its own exclusive warrior class, the knights. Knights and peasants progressively defined themselves as distinct classes in contrast with each other.

Centralizing Education and Religion in Feudal Europe

It was also during the Middle Ages that the first European universities appeared in such cities as Paris, Bologna, and Oxford. In the universities of Europe, an influx of Greek and Islamic texts through the Muslim State in Spain helped to usher in a new age of learning. Intellectuals used those new materials—principally the restored works of Aristotle—to explore questions of Christian faith through logic and philosophical reason. Meanwhile, such proponents of natural philosophy as Roger Bacon adapted the thought of Plato and Aristotle to develop a doctrine of observation, hypothesis, and experimentation that would set the stage for later developments in modern science.

Beginning in the 11th century, the Catholic Church began its own centralization, which involved a series of reforms aimed at taking control of such local religious foundations as churches, abbeys, and monasteries and the ability to invest clerics with ecclesiastical office away from kings and nobles. This movement caused great power struggles through the middle ages between Kings and religious leaders, such as the Pope, and even within the church structure itself. In fact, in 1054 there was a split between the Eastern and Western Christian Churches prompted by arguments over the theological and practical decisions during this reform period. This split was called the Great Schism. The Great Western Schism occurred in Western Christendom from 1378 - 1417. This was caused by an Italian pope called Pope Urban IV being elected and establishing the papal court in Rome. The French disagreed with this and elected a French Pope who was based in Avignon. The schism in western Christendom was finally healed at the Council of Constance and the Catholic religion was referred to as the Roman Catholic Religion.

As the movement to reorganize the church progressed, Pope Urban II expanded its aims to include the formation of a great army in service of the Church. In 1095, he called on the warriors of Europe to cease fighting with one another (and with members of the clergy) and to instead take the Holy Land from the Muslims, who had occupied Jerusalem since the seventh century. That initiated the Crusades, a series of horrific battles and one of the darkest chapters in the history of Christendom.



Urban II Proposing the First Crusade Urban II proposes the First Crusade at the Council of Clermont, 1095, from a 15th-century miniature. The Crusade movement began in November 1095 when Pope Urban II preached at the Council of Clermont for Christian knights to take up the cross to aid the Byzantine Empire against the Seljuk Turks. [Jupiterimages]

What are the Crusades?

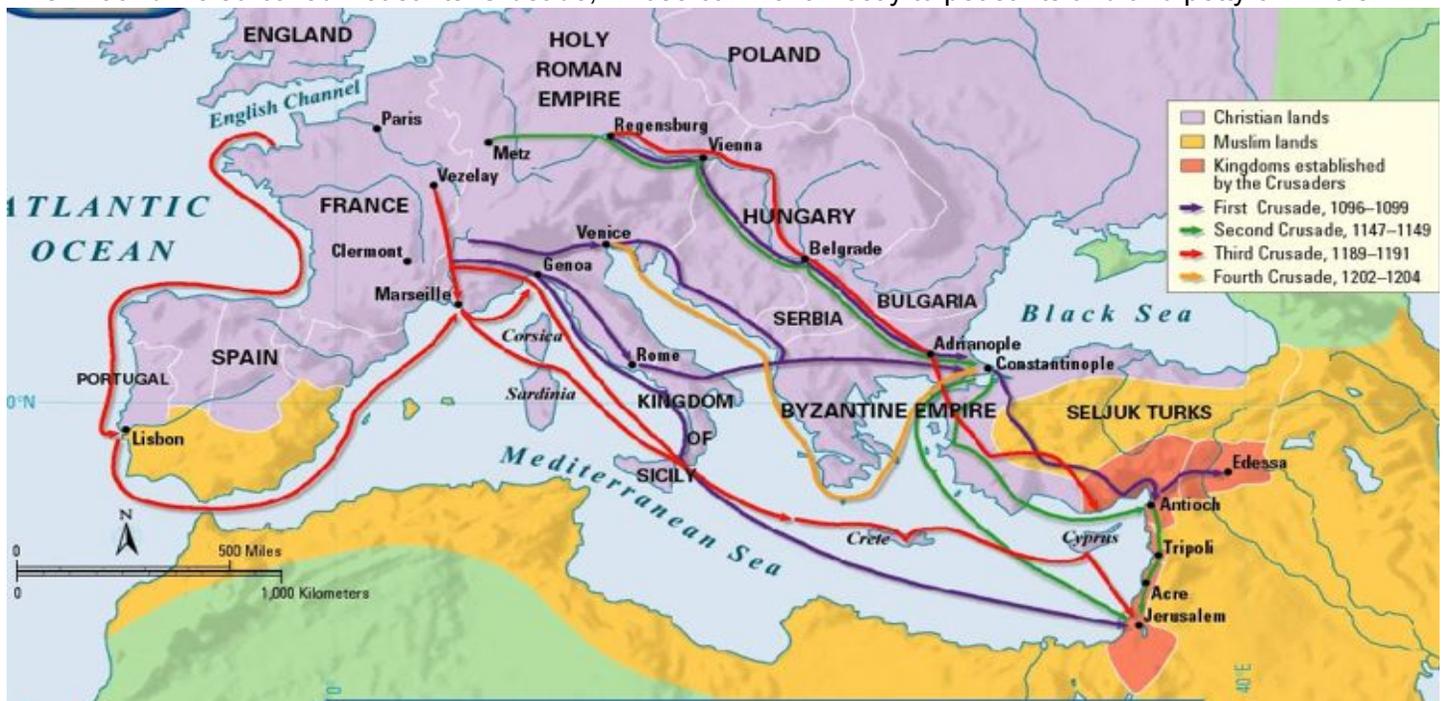
A series of armed conflicts in the Near East, the Crusades started in 1096 CE and continued on and off for several hundred years (approximately 300). They began when Christians from Western Europe set off to recapture the Holy Land (the city of Jerusalem and surrounding areas) from Muslims who had conquered it in the seventh century CE.

Why were the Crusades called?

During the Middle Ages, European Christians who had the means often made religious journeys, or pilgrimages, to the city of Jerusalem. For several hundred years, the Arabs who controlled Jerusalem were fairly tolerant of Christian pilgrims. However, by 1071, the Seljuk Turks, also Muslims, gained control of the city and began to make life difficult for Christians arriving there. Also, by 1095, the power and influence of the

papacy, as well as the purity of the majority of the clergy, were on the decline, while the power and influence of the German empire and Kings were on the rise. Pope Urban II, fearing the Church would lose what little influence it had, and abhorring the results of continued infighting among the Christian nobility, sought a way to unite Christendom in a common cause. At the Council of Clermont, he preached the First Crusade. It was a mixture of propaganda concerning the alleged cruelty of Muslims to Christian pilgrims; a request for aid by Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus in his conquest against the Muslims; a call for display of righteous action in the recovery of Jerusalem; and an offer of remission of sins for those who participated.

The effect was overwhelming. Not only did the nobility—his prime audience—heed Urban's call, but so did many peasants and riffraff of the cities. Others also took to preaching the crusade, most notably Peter the Hermit and his so-called Peasants' Crusade, whose call went mostly to peasants and petty criminals.



In response to that appeal, in 1095, Pope Urban II called on Christian knights to go to the aid of the Christians in the Byzantine Empire and to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims. To make the idea more attractive, the pope offered indulgences (forgiveness of sins) to those who would fight and promised that the Church would protect a knight's family and property during his absence.

The protection of Christians and the recovery of territory from the Muslims were not the only motives for the First Crusade. From the Catholic Church's standpoint, such a glorious venture—if successful—would bring power and prestige to the Church for issuing the initial call.

Pope Urban also hoped that sending the knights off to war might help reduce the many minor conflicts taking place in Europe. In feudal Europe, increased food production and population growth meant that more nobles competed for ownership of the same land. Private wars among the nobility were widespread and devastating to the common people. The Church had tried to control the situation by declaring a so-called Truce of God, which forbade nobles from battling each other on certain days, but the truce was not very effective.

All those factors—the desire for glory, excess manpower and wealth, the need to reduce conflicts among the nobility, as well as religious fervor—contributed to the Crusades.

What was the Result and Impact of the Crusades?

Initially, the Muslim world was totally unprepared for the Christian invasion. Yet, the crusaders and their camp followers were not prepared for the long and arduous march through the unknown land. This journey meant the death of many through hunger, thirst, and heat. Through time, the Muslim forces learned the weaknesses of the Crusaders and pushed back the progress made by the Christians.

The major military goals of the Crusades—driving Muslims from the Holy Land and imposing Western culture on the captured territory—were never accomplished. On the contrary, the Crusades strengthened and united the Islamic world and weakened the Byzantine Empire through Christian in-fighting during the Crusades until it was overcome by the Turks in the 15th century. They succeeded, however, in accomplishing Pope Urban II's original goals of returning the papacy to its previous position of power and influence and eventually ending feudal warfare.

The long-term consequences of the Crusades for the West were generally negative, as the high cost of foreign warfare impoverished the aristocracy. The population of Europe was depleted, and the Catholic Church lost much of its stature after successive defeats. In spite of its decreasing influence over the crusaders, however, the Church enjoyed a power rarely exercised before or since. Unfortunately, the power became corrupted such as the sale of indulgences (forgiveness from a sin). There were some positive aspects for Europe, however. A sense of unity prevailed for a time under the banner of the Church.

In the Near East, the influence of Europe remained for some time to come. Italian merchants were able to establish trading privileges in the major ports of the far eastern ends of the Mediterranean. By controlling the sea lanes of the Mediterranean Sea, they provided Muslim merchants with access to European goods while remaining the sole distributors of Asian goods to the West. Italian traders were able to move and work freely in dedicated districts of these cities and gained some legal control over citizens and visitors within those districts. Their basic problem was that though they provided a conduit to the West, they could deal only with Muslim traders who handled Asian goods, mainly spices. The Crusades had a profound effect on commerce and trade, both inside and outside Europe. Feudalism and serfdom disintegrated. A money economy began to predominate, which stimulated a need for banks. Trading relations were set up in port cities of Palestine by the trading powers of Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, providing easier acquisition of goods from both the Near and Far East. Navigation and shipbuilding improved with the increased need for transportation of people and goods. But many of the developments attributed to the Crusades were merely the end result of changes that had begun before Pope Urban's call to retake the Holy Land. The Crusades served only to facilitate and accelerate them.



The middle of the 14th century saw one of the most dramatic catastrophes in European history. Historians estimate that during a span of only a few years, between one-fourth and one-third of the population of Europe—perhaps 25 million people—died of the disease known as the plague. That history-changing event became known to later generations as the Black Death.

What is the Plague known as the Black Death?

With the Crusades opening up the world a bit wider than before, Europe saw a greater integration with the Middle Eastern and Asian empires, bringing both great opportunity and horrendous misfortune. Beginning in 1346 and ending at the last major outbreak in 1351 the Black Death had a profound impact on World History killing perhaps 50 to 60% of Europe's population, as many as 45,000,000 to 50,000,000 people. Historians continue to debate the extent to which the Black Death actually changed the history of Europe and how much it hastened trends that were already in motion. Whatever its interpretation, the Black Death was undoubtedly one of the largest, most widespread calamities in human history.

Technically, there are three forms of plague, each with its own separate symptoms. Analysis of historical accounts suggests that all three were likely present during the Black Death.

Bubonic plague, the most common form, is an infection of the lymphatic system. Symptoms include painful swelling of the lymph nodes to the size of eggs; black areas on the skin; fever, chills, and headache; muscle aches and exhaustion; and a horrible smell. Typically, it would have taken two to seven days for victims to die, and the mortality rate could have been 50%-90%.



Pneumonic plague is an infection of the respiratory system. Symptoms include coughing, coughing up blood, chest pains, shortness of breath, and high fever. It generally would have taken fewer than two days for victims to die, and the mortality rate was almost 100%.

Septicemic plague, the least common form, is an infection of the circulatory system. It often involves many of the symptoms of the bubonic plague, with the addition of seizures and a tendency to bleed. It could have taken less than a day for victims to die, and the mortality rate was nearly 100%.

All three forms are caused by the same bacillus, *Yersinia pestis*. That bacterium typically lives in the bloodstream of rodents, like rats, and in the stomachs of the fleas that feed on them. Under certain conditions, fleas can transmit the plague to other mammals, including humans.

Both the bubonic and the septicemic forms are spread through fleabites from infected fleas. The pneumonic variety is directly and highly contagious between humans, via airborne particles expelled during coughing. People in the 14th century were unaware of the causes of the disease and how it spread.

The Spread of the Black Death

It is generally believed that the first outbreak of the Black Death was in Central Asia, in areas controlled by the Mongols. From there, traveling along the caravan trade routes, it appears to have spread east into China, where it had a devastating impact, and west toward Europe.

The plague reached the Black Sea by 1346. There, it played an important role in the siege of Kaffa, a town on the north shore of the Black Sea maintained by traders from the Italian city of Genoa. The Mongol attackers, ravaged by the plague, attempted to infect the defenders by using catapults to throw dead bodies into the city. The defenders dropped the bodies into the sea but became infected nonetheless. They fled toward the Mediterranean Sea, spreading the infection as they went. The Black Death followed the trade routes and soon appeared in mainland Italy, the most urbanized country in Europe. The disease spread from large ports like Genoa to smaller cities and the smallest villages. Within six months, all of Italy was affected. One of the most vivid descriptions of the plague came from the writer Giovanni Boccaccio, who described it in his preface to the Decameron. He described the black boils that appeared on the victims and also the way in which authorities and individuals responded to the plague. Quarantine and efforts to clean up possible sources of infection were accompanied by prayers for divine assistance. Nothing helped, and Italy probably lost somewhere between 30% and 60% of its population.

During the next three years, the plague ravaged Europe, North Africa, and the Near East. The plague hit Constantinople and Sicily in 1347. In 1348, the plague spread inland into North Africa, Italy, Greece, France, Spain, and England, and it reached the Islamic holy city of Mecca in 1349. By 1351, all parts of Europe had experienced the plague, with the exception of much of Poland.

Immediate Impact of the Plagues

The impact of the Black Death varied widely from community to community, with some areas relatively lightly hit and others completely devastated. Some villages were so greatly affected that they had to be completely abandoned. Overall, the impact in cities seems to have been greater than in the country. In most smaller communities, the plague hit once for several months. In many of the larger cities, the plague might hit heavily in the summer or fall, die down somewhat in the winter, and then reappear the following spring.

Generally speaking, the poor suffered from the plague more than the rich. However, no group was unaffected. Those who often came into contact with the sick—particularly doctors and priests—were more likely to become infected and die, and people commonly complained that such caregivers had abandoned their duties. The lack of priests was particularly worrisome, as confession and absolution (a religious rite) were considered to be necessary for salvation.

Reactions and Responses to the Plague

People responded to the Black Death in various ways. A common complaint among contemporary writers was that people lost their natural affection for friends and family members. Some people reacted by attempting to live for the moment and experience what pleasure they could, as there was no guarantee that they would live much longer.

Many people saw the plague as God's punishment for human wickedness. In Germany, a religious group known as the flagellants arose in response to the plague. Traveling from town to town, they whipped themselves as an attempt to do penance. Christians also persecuted Jews in many places, based on the theory that Jews were somehow responsible for the Black Death. Originating in Germany because of the Black Death, anti-Semitism (hatred and discrimination of Jews) was seen on a large scale. Attacks on Jews had been common in Europe since the First Crusade in the 11th century, but they reached new heights of violence during the Black Death. Jews were accused of causing the disease by poisoning the wells. Many authorities, including the pope, condemned violence against Jews, but incidents increased in fury. In February 1349, the city council for Strasbourg ordered all 2,000 Jews in the city burned. Other places massacred the local Jews. By 1351, at least 350 massacres had taken place, with 60 major and 150 smaller communities exterminated. Surviving Jews were mostly forced out of Western Europe, into Poland and Russia, where they remained until World War II.



Dance of Death, also called *Danse Macabre*. medieval symbolic concept of the all-conquering and equalizing power of death, expressed in the drama, poetry, music, and visual arts of western Europe mainly in the late Middle Ages

Europeans sought explanations for the Black Death in astrology as well. The University of Paris issued the opinion that the plague was the result of a conjunction of the planets Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars. That opinion was widely accepted, but it did not suggest any useful measures for treating or preventing the plague. Instead, people tried to spare themselves by moving away from areas of infection, taking medicines, or burning substances that supposedly purified the air.

Aftermath and Impact

The effects of the Black Death fall into several different areas. The first is demographic. By 1348, European population had reached a historical high. The effects of overpopulation were beginning to be felt. The deaths of so many people prevented a real crisis, however. The population did not regain its pre-plague levels for 150 years, with the fertility rate dropping to a historical low. Many villages were abandoned, and land that was of only limited fertility was left empty. By the time most Black Death losses had been replaced, colonization of the wider world (Such as the Americas) offered an outlet for excess population that was not available pre-Plague.

Economically, the immediate effect of the plague was a drop in prices, as there was not nearly as much demand for goods and services. Later, however, prices rose, as a result of a lack of workers for the post-plague rise in population. With fewer workers, less land could be cultivated, fewer goods could be produced, and services were more valuable. Although Prices rose, the overall effect was a real increase in the standard of living that persisted for at least a century.

Some historians understand that plague had broad economic effects across Europe, at least down to 1500. Some believe that the redistribution of wealth in Europe drove up the demand for eastern luxuries and thus sparked the drive for Asian suppliers via the Atlantic. On the other hand, it may be that plague delayed European exploration of Africa's coast—and thus Atlantic expansion—at least half a century. Manorialism as an economic system collapsed in part because of the increased opportunities for peasants and the pressures on landlords. Some labor-saving devices may have been invented or spread because of the high cost of labor, but most agricultural advances came before or after the plague's heyday. The printing press, often pointed to, steadily grew in output after the crisis in labor had subsided.

Overall, medieval society after the Black Death was likely more mobile than before, breaking the Feudal patterns. Surviving laborers could ask for more money for their services or relocate to areas where opportunities were better. The ruling classes saw those developments as socially disruptive, however. Some governments attempted to prevent those changes by enacting such laws as the Statute of Laborers in England, which fixed prices or made it illegal for laborers to relocate. Those laws led to further social unrest, as the lower classes could not take full advantage of the new opportunities they saw around them. Long-term social stresses of that sort may have contributed to later movements, like the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in England. Now, the feudal system of peasants tied to specific manors and owing labor to the landlords was challenged. Eventually, peasants unhappy in one area were welcomed by landlords looking for workers. To keep workers, landlords had to offer better conditions. Social changes such as lower rent, reduction of traditional service requirements, and a change from growing grain to pasturing animals helped to undermine the feudal system.

Yet another social result of the plague was a transfer of wealth to families and individuals who would not otherwise have possessed it, both through inheritance and through social advancement. Writers complained about the decline of manners among those "new rich."

Finally, the European religious outlook underwent a change as a result of the Black Death. Because Europeans had no idea what caused the Black Death, many sought relief through prayer. When God did not answer their petitions, they began to question the efficacy of the Catholic Church. Many Church leaders also died or left their flocks from fear. Many of the survivors either became cynical about religion or turned to a more personal piety. Like all European institutions, the Church was shaken by the Black Death, although it benefited financially. Many of those who died left a part of their wealth to the Church, establishing new benefices that could be bestowed on church officials.

The Black Death had an effect comparable to the world wars of the 20th century. Many of the institutions that people accepted and believed in proved to be helpless before the plague. Social, financial, and cultural upheavals followed the Black Death, and it helped bring about change in Europe. In many ways, the Black Death helped end the medieval world and bring about the modern one.



Painting of children playing by artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. [Bruegel, Pieter, Children's Games, 1560, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Vienna]

Closing the Middle Ages

In spite of the hardships throughout the Middle Ages, however, Europe continued through the 14th and 15th centuries to develop politically, intellectually, and economically. Although the plague tore through towns and cities with a frightening ferocity, by the beginning of the 15th century, their populations were on the rise again. Out of the Crusades, the Catholic Church grew stronger and more centralized, and the once small world was now beginning to open up to communication and exploration beyond former limits. Culturally, such European literary giants as Giovanni Boccaccio wrote and more people were able to read their works, thanks to advances in printing technology. As the Middle Ages came to an end around 1500, Europe had transformed itself over the space of a millennium from a collection of isolated and frightened post-Roman peoples into a strong, prosperous, and culturally rich world entity. Its medieval past was one of structure, reason, religious devotion, and progress, but also one of intolerance, war, and conquest. In the centuries to come, each of those elements would have a role to play in Europe's journey into modernity.

Middle Ages Reading Vocabulary

Feudalism Vocabulary

demesne

The word "demesne," French for "domain," refers specifically to land held and occupied by its owner, rather than by tenants.

fealty

In feudal Europe, fealty was the formal oath of loyalty sworn by a vassal to his lord.

feudalism

Feudalism was a system of economic, political, and social relationships between lords and vassals during the Middle Ages in Europe.

fief

A fief was an estate given by a lord to his vassal in return for military service and certain social obligations.

heavy wheeled plow

Heavy wheeled plow favored large-scale farming. Earlier plows simply broke the earth, but the wheeled plow turned and enriched the soil and plowed under the weeds. The new machines required four or more oxen to pull the.

homage

The practice of homage derived from a vassal's ceremonial acknowledgment of his king or lord under feudal law.

manor

The term "manor" refers to a nobleman's estate during the Middle Ages.

medieval aristocrats

The Middle Ages inherited a cultural association between the free man and the warrior, as well as the tradition of a landowning aristocracy whose role was leadership in war and government.

medieval guilds

The increasing importance of trade in the High Middle Ages fostered new manifestations of a corporate identity. One such organization was the guild, a corporation of either merchants or artisans who gathered together to advance and protect their shared interests.

serf

Serfs, who were peasants bound to the land, were common to the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and ancient China beginning in the Han dynasty.

three-field system

The three-field system of crop rotation greatly enhanced crop yields: each year one field was planted in winter grain, a second lay crop-free to be fertilized by animals, and a third was planted in summer grain. During a three-year period each field would go through all three stages of cultivation. It would be planted first with wheat, rye, or barley, the winter grains sown in the fall and harvested early the next summer, then it would be left fallow until the next spring, when it would be sown with such summer grains as oats or barley (again) or with legumes, such as peas, that would replenish the soil. When these were harvested in late summer the field would lie crop-free again. Such planting required concerted planning efforts and cooperative work.

vassal

During the era of feudalism in the Middle Ages, a vassal was a person who pledged loyalty, homage, or fealty to a lord.

Crusades Vocabulary

indulgence and penance

The term "indulgence" is typically defined as the remission of temporal punishment due to God for sin.

Jerusalem

A holy city for the three expansive monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Jerusalem has a rich and troubled history dating back to ancient times.

Urban II

Pope Urban II, who reigned from 1088 to 1099, significantly contributed to the rise of the papal monarchy.

Plague Vocabulary

Black Death

The Black Death was almost certainly the most significant natural event in European history. It killed up to a third of the population and changed economic and demographic conditions.

bubonic plague

Bubonic plague, the most common form of plague, is believed to have been present during the Black Death. It is naturally a disease of animals, but like many diseases it jumps to humans. It is produced in the human body by the pathogen known as *Yersinia pestis*.

Catholicism

For 1,000 years, Catholicism was *the* church. Generally speaking, the history of Catholicism is the history of Christianity; specifically, it is the history of the Christian church in Western Europe.

Decameron

The *Decameron* is one of the most important frame tale collections of the Middle Ages.

Genoa

One of the most powerful of the Italian city-states during the Middle Ages, Genoa was also a thriving maritime center in the Roman Empire.

Peasants' Revolt of 1381

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381, or Wat Tyler's Rebellion, was a revolt of the lower classes in England against the gentry's and nobility's attempt to impose increased taxes and fees.

physicians during the Black Death

When the Black Death struck between 1347 and 1352, physicians died in large numbers due to their contact with the sick and their fleas.

pneumonic plague

Pneumonic plague is caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium, which is the same bacterium that causes bubonic plague. The two diseases are essentially the same, except that while in bubonic plague the destructive action of the pathogen does not directly interfere with the lungs, pneumonic plague is characterized by the bacteria's presence in the lungs. This makes pneumonic plague more lethal than bubonic plague and allows it to be spread directly from person to person, unlike bubonic plague.

septicemic plague

Septicemic plague, caused by the introduction of the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium into the human body, is the least common of the three types of plague responsible for the Black Death.