

The Electronic Passport to the Middle Ages

Between Ancient and Modern

In AD 476, warriors attacked the city of Rome and ended more than 800 years of glory for the "eternal city." Historians mark the fall of Rome as the end of ancient history. The next one thousand years were called the Middle Ages. The Latin term for Middle Ages is "medieval."

The beginning of the Middle Ages is often called the "Dark Ages" because the great civilizations of Greece and Rome had fallen. Life in Europe during the Middle Ages was very hard. Very few people could read or write and nobody expected conditions to improve. The only hope for most people during the Middle Ages was their strong belief in Christianity, and the hope that life in heaven would be better than life on earth.

The Dark Ages were anything but dark in other parts of the world. The Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa studied and improved on the works of the ancient Greeks while civilization flourished in sub-Saharan Africa, China, India, and the Americas.

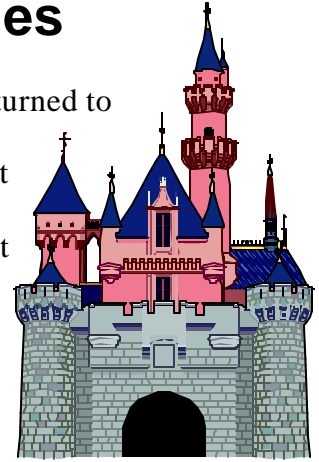
Europe began to experience great change by about 1450. Within one hundred years, Columbus had sailed to America, literacy spread, scientists made great discoveries, and artists created work that still inspires us today. Historians call the next period of European history the "Renaissance," or the "rebirth." The Renaissance is the beginning of modern history.

Feudalism

Feudalism was the system of loyalties and protections during the Middle Ages. As the Roman Empire crumbled, emperors granted land to nobles in exchange for their loyalty. These lands eventually developed into manors. A manor is the land owned by a noble and everything on it. A typical manor consisted of a castle, small village, and farmland.

During the Middle Ages, peasants could no longer count on the Roman army to protect them. German, Viking and Magyar tribes overran homes and farms throughout

Europe. The peasants turned to the landowners, often called lords, to protect them. Many peasants remained free, but most became serfs. A serf was bound to the land. He could not leave without buying his freedom, an unlikely occurrence in the Middle Ages. Life for a serf was not much better than the life of a slave. The only difference was that a serf could not be sold to another manor.



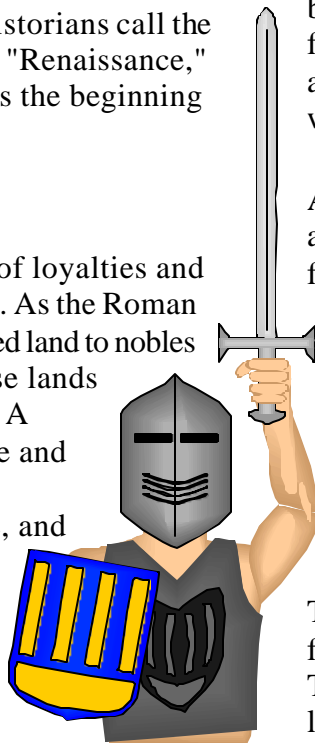
Serfs would often have to work three or four days a week for the lord as rent. They would spend the rest of their week growing crops to feed their families. Other serfs worked as sharecroppers. A sharecropper would be required to turn over most of what he grew in order to be able to live on the land.

Primogeniture

Primogeniture is a system of inheritance where all property is handed down to the first-born son. In the Middle Ages, the oldest son would become the Lord of the Manor upon the death of his father, much in the same way that the oldest son of a king would gain the crown. The younger sons would have to find other careers.

The military was an option for many sons. A knight began his training as a young boy and advanced to the rank of squire at about the age of fifteen. When the overlord considered the young squire worthy, he was proclaimed a knight, and was entitled to the honorific title "Sir." Knights were expected to be chivalrous. Chivalry was a set of rules for honorable behavior followed by the knights. The term chivalry now refers to aristocratic display and public ceremony rather than good manners.

A third option was to acquire a trade. There were no trade schools in the Middle Ages. A father would pay a master to teach his son a trade. The boy would become an apprentice, and often live with the family of the master tradesman. After a



period of about seven years, the boy became a journeyman. He could now work in his trade and be paid for his work. If he were an expert in his trade, he might create a masterpiece and become a master himself, able to employ apprentices of his own.

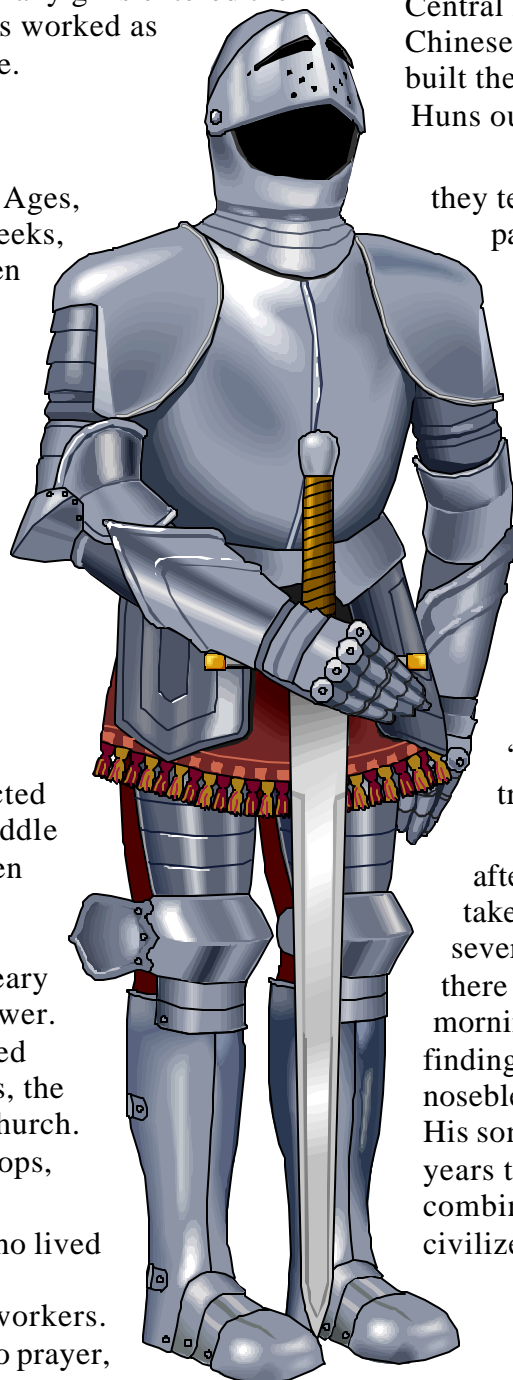
A girl might look toward marriage in her future. A dowry was a present of money, goods, or sometimes land given by a bride's father to her husband. The dowry, however, was for his use, not hers. A dowry was thought to make a young girl more attractive to a potential husband. A large dowry might make it possible for a young lady to attract a rich landholder. Many girls entered the clergy as nuns, while others worked as servants at the manor house.

Christendom

By the later Middle Ages, the gods of the Romans, Greeks, and Celts had long since been forgotten, and Christianity became the universal faith of almost all of the people of Europe. People did not think of Europe as a distinct place until the Middle Ages had passed. Instead they spoke of "Christendom," or the community of Christians. Christianity was the most important influence of the Middle Ages.

Religious life attracted many people during the Middle Ages. The Church was often the only way to get an education. It also allowed poor people to escape a dreary life and possibly rise to power. Religious workers are called clergy. In the Middle Ages, the Pope ruled the Christian Church. Other clergy included bishops, priests, nuns, and monks.

Monks were men who lived in monasteries, or small communities of religious workers. Monks devoted their lives to prayer,



and their behavior influenced the entire church. Monasteries produced many well-educated men prepared to serve as administrators for uneducated kings and lords. Monks were responsible for keeping the Greek and Latin "classical" cultures alive. Monks copied books by hand in an era before the printing press. Though few in number, monks played a significant role in the Middle Ages.

The Huns

The Huns were possibly the most destructive people in history. They originally came from Central Asia. About 200 BC, the Huns overran the Chinese Empire. Chinese emperor Shih Huang-ti built the massive Great Wall of China to keep the Huns out.

The Huns were pastoralists, which means they tended to animals. Throughout history, pastoralists have generally been more warlike than farmers, and the Huns were no exception. The Huns were skilled horsemen who used their skills to plunder more settled people. They moved into the land west of the Caspian Sea, forcing the Visigoths and other Germanic tribes to move into the Roman Empire. The Huns were illiterate and had no interest in the lands they raided. They simply attacked and plundered.

In 445, Attila became the sole leader of the Huns after murdering his brother. The Romans called Attila the "Scourge of God." He forced Rome to pay tribute, or payment for protection.

The threat of the Huns dwindled after Attila died suddenly in 453. Attila had taken a beautiful young wife, though he had several other wives. The day of the wedding there was a huge drunken celebration. The next morning, the new bride was found quivering after finding that Attila had choked to death from a nosebleed. The threat of the Huns died with Attila. His sons were weak and quarrelsome. Within two years the Ostrogoths and other Germanic tribes combined to remove the Huns as a threat to more civilized people.

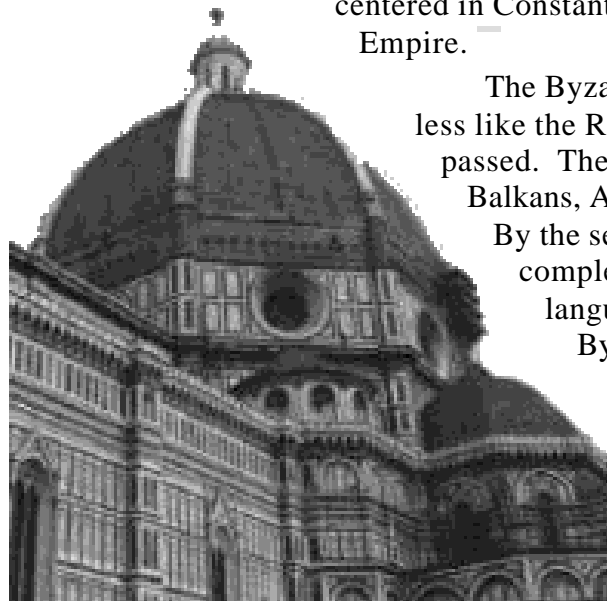
The Barbarians

The Romans saw themselves as having a highly advanced civilization, and they looked down on the cultures of the people who lived beyond the borders of their empire. In AD122, Emperor Hadrian built a wall separating the Roman part of Britain from the mountainous land now called Scotland. The Romans called the Scottish people “barbarians,” possibly because their native Celtic language sounded like the bleating of sheep. The term was eventually used to describe anyone who lived beyond the borders of the Roman Empire.

The people who lived northeast of the Roman Empire spoke languages similar to modern German. These “Germanic tribes” included the Vandals, Lombards, Alamanni, Goths, Franks, and Burgundians. Most of the tribesmen did not know how to read, but unlike the Huns, they tended to farms and were not nomadic. Most of the tribes gave up their pagan beliefs and became Christians.

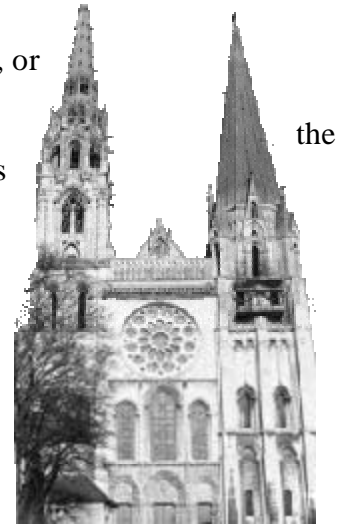
In 376, the Huns forced the Visigoths (western Goths) to leave their homeland near the Danube River in modern Austria. The Visigoths asked Emperor Valens permission to settle inside the Roman Empire. Valens agreed, but charged the Visigoths unfair prices for food and other supplies. When the Visigoths protested, Valens ordered them to leave. The Visigoths refused, and formed an army that defeated and killed the emperor in 378.

Alaric was a Visigoth who joined the Roman army and rose to a high rank. He left the army when his father died and became king of the Visigoths. In 410, the Romans refused to pay a bribe, so Alaric’s soldiers formed a siege around Rome. When the city was close to starvation, the Roman citizens opened the gates and allowed the conquering army to enter. The Visigoths rampaged through the streets for three days, pillaging and burning. Alaric ordered his army not to molest women or destroy churches. Rome was not completely destroyed, but for the first time in nearly 800 years, the “eternal city” had



been defeated.

Germanic tribes overran what was left of the Roman Empire. The Ostrogoths, or “eastern Goths,” came from land we now call Ukraine. The Ostrogoths conquered most of Italy, Greece, and the western Balkans. The Vandals took control of the Roman territory in North Africa. The Franks overran France, while the Saxons conquered the southern part of England.



The Goths lent their names to many genres. Gothic architecture features sharp lines and precise angles. Gothic churches and cathedrals have tall spires while Romanesque architecture is generally more rounded. Gothic literature refers to gloomy stories with supernatural themes. Some teenagers use the term Gothic to refer to music and fashion they describe as broody, dramatic, and dark.

The Byzantine Empire

In 330, Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the Greek city of Byzantium. He wanted the capital of his empire to be safe from barbarian invasion. Constantine renamed the city Constantinople, but we refer to the civilization centered in Constantinople as the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine Empire began to look less like the Roman Empire as the years passed. The empire covered Greece, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.

By the seventh century, Greek had completely replaced Latin as the language of the empire. The Byzantine emperors still thought of themselves as the successors of Caesar Augustus, but over the years Roman influence gradually disappeared.

Seljuk Turks began moving into the Byzantine

Empire from Central Asia in the eleventh century. The Turks had recently become Muslims, and the Byzantine emperor feared they would soon overpower his Christian empire. He asked the leader of the Christian church—the Pope—to assist in a holy war against the Turks. In 1095, Pope Urban II launched the first of many Crusades, or “wars of the cross.” Urban hoped that in addition to expelling the Turks from the Byzantine Empire, he would also be able to reclaim the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim control. Soldiers from western Europe left their homes to free the Byzantine Empire of the “unbelievers.” This was the first time many Europeans left their homes. Their exposure to new and different cultures was a factor that led to the Renaissance.

The Crusades were ultimately unsuccessful because the Turks conquered the Byzantine Empire. The city first called Byzantium and later Constantinople is now known as Istanbul, Turkey. Turkish has replaced Greek as the language of Asia Minor, and 99.8% of the people in modern Turkey are Muslims.

The Moors

In 622, an Arab named Mohammed preached that an angel had visited him. The angel told Mohammed that he was the last of a long line of prophets that included Moses and Jesus. Mohammed called on people to renounce all other faiths and to submit to the will of Allah. Allah is an Arabic word that means God. He called the new faith Islam, which means “submission to Allah”; the people who practice Islam are called Muslims (sometimes spelled Moslems). The faith spread quickly through the Middle East and across North Africa, eventually reaching people in northwest Africa that the Romans called Moors.

The Visigoths had ruled Spain until 711, when the Moors crossed into Spain from North Africa. For the next three centuries, the Moors controlled most of Spain by establishing a “caliphate,” or religious center, in Cordoba. Spain enjoyed a “golden age.” The Moors

were able administrators who built Spain into a thriving center of culture and scholarship. The Moors were Muslims, but they were generally tolerant of the Christians and Jews who lived in Spain. Spanish Jews benefited from the tolerant policies of the Moors. This enabled them to have one of the most prosperous periods in their history.

Christian kingdoms in northern Spain and France slowly began the *Reconquista* (or reconquest) of Spain, a struggle that lasted almost 500 years. Quarrels among the Moors led to the overthrow of the caliphate of Cordoba in 1031. The Moors remained in Spain until King Ferdinand of Aragon, and Queen Isabella of Castille merged their kingdoms and forced the Muslims and Jews to leave Spain.

The Franks and Charlemagne

The Franks were a Germanic tribe in western Europe that began to conquer other tribes. Clovis was a Frankish king who united most of present day France and western Germany. Clovis converted to Christianity about 496 and forced his subjects to accept the faith.

Muslims had conquered Spain, and in 732 they crossed the Pyrenees Mountains and attempted to conquer France.

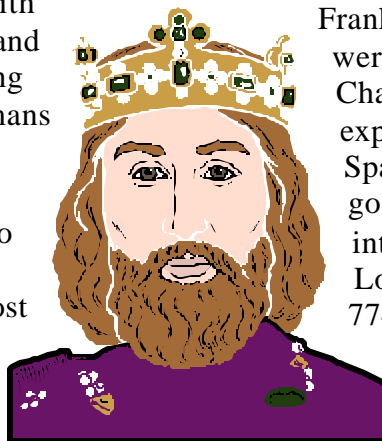
Frankish ruler Charles Martel kept the Muslims from invading France, but if Martel had been defeated, the history of Europe might have been very different.

Charlemagne or Charles the Great, was Charles Martel’s grandson and the greatest of the Frankish kings. In an era when most men were little more than five feet tall, Charlemagne stood six feet, four inches. He expanded the kingdom of the Franks into Spain and Central Europe. Charlemagne’s goal was to unite all of the Germanic tribes into a single Christian kingdom. When the Lombards attacked the papal territory in 774, Charlemagne marched into Italy and defeated the Lombards, and rescued the Pope.

On Christmas Day, 800, Pope



The approximate border of the Byzantine Empire



Leo III repaid Charlemagne for defeating the Lombards. As Charlemagne rose from prayer, Leo placed a crown on his head and proclaimed him “Augustus,” emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire.” The coronation united Christendom under Charlemagne’s rule, but it troubled him. If the Pope had the power to crown Charlemagne king, did the Pope also have the right to remove the crown? When Charlemagne named his son as his successor, he presided over the ceremony himself and did not invite the Pope. When Napoleon was about to be crowned Emperor of France in 1804, he took the crown from Pope Pius VII and set it on his head himself.

Charlemagne never learned how to read or write, but he wanted to recapture the glory of the Roman Empire. He set up schools throughout his empire and provided funds that allowed monks to copy the works of Greek and Roman authors. Charlemagne’s empire crumbled soon after his death, and the promise of returning the glory of Rome to Western Europe soon faded. The term Holy Roman Empire was used to describe different Frankish and German lands for another ten centuries, but it could be argued that after Charlemagne, it wasn’t holy, it wasn’t Roman, and it certainly was not an empire. In 1806, Napoleon prepared to oust Francis II from his title as Holy Roman Emperor, so Francis renounced his title and decreed himself emperor of Austria.

The Vikings

The Vikings were fierce warriors that threatened the security of Charlemagne's empire. The Vikings came from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, lands we now call Scandinavia. The Vikings were skilled sailors whose advanced methods of shipbuilding gave them an advantage over other Europeans. The largest Viking ships could hold as many as 100 sailors and travel at high speed. Viking ships required a depth of only three feet, so they could be used on rivers to travel inland. The Viking ships were strong enough to withstand the fury of the sea, but light enough to be carried around waterfalls.

The Vikings used their sailing skills to attack without warning and quickly escape. At first they attacked and left with as much as they could carry. Later, they settled down and colonized areas

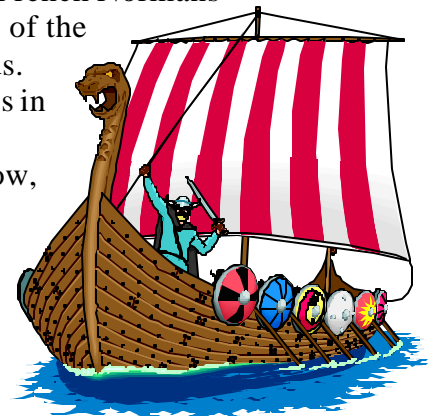
they conquered. By the tenth century, the Vikings controlled parts of Britain, France, and Russia, and raided lands as far away as Egypt.

Other Vikings sailed west and discovered Iceland. About 980, Erik the Red sailed further west and began a settlement on ice-covered land he called Greenland. Viking legends indicate that Erik’s son, Leif Eriksson, reached North America. The Vikings called their settlement Vinland, or “land of the grapes.” We don’t know the exact location of Vinland, but archaeologists found Viking weapons and tools in Newfoundland, Canada. The Vikings abandoned their settlements after about 35 years. Many historians suggest that Christopher Columbus heard the legends of the Vikings and knew of the possibility of a “New World” when he set sail to find Asia in 1492.



The Normans

One group of Vikings settled in Normandy, a section of northwest France. They adopted the French language and Christian faith, but they retained their ancestors’ taste for adventure. William the Conqueror was a powerful Norman ruler who invaded England in 1066. For the next three hundred years, England would be ruled by kings who did not speak English. The Normans imported French-speaking craftsmen, cooks, and scholars. The modern English language reflects the high status of the French Normans and the low status of the English field hands. We refer to animals in the field by their English names (cow, ox, sheep), while food that has been prepared and brought to the table generally has French names



(beef, veal, mutton).

The Norman Conquest destroyed English rule and created a French military state. The Normans seized English lands and destroyed any English opposition. The Normans built the Tower of London. The tower was designed to protect the capital, but it also served as a reminder to the English people of the power of the Normans. The Tower remains standing today.

William paid for his projects by imposing taxes. He completed a thorough census, or survey of the land, wealth, population, resources, and taxable capacity of England. The result was what the English people called the “Domesday Book” of taxation. The English hated the harsh Norman rule, but the taxation records survive to this day. If you go to the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, London, you can look at the original Domesday Book.

The Norman conquest was the beginning of centuries of hostilities between England and France. The nations fought the “Hundred Years’ War” between 1336 and 1453. They strongly competed for new colonies in America. England was a target of Napoleon, and the Duke of Wellington led the forces that defeated Napoleon in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. The two nations did not truly become allies until this century, when they combined forces to defeat Germany and other nations in two World Wars.

The Bubonic Plague

Almost half of the people of Western Europe died in a great sickness known as the Bubonic Plague. The plague was also referred to as “the Black Death” because the skin of diseased people turned a dark gray color. It apparently began in China’s Gobi Desert, and it killed about 35 million Asian people. When sailors traveled to Asia, rats returned with them to Europe. Fleas living on the blood of infected rats then transferred the disease to the European people.

Dr. E.L. Knox of Boise State University explained the Bubonic Plague by saying, “The flea...regurgitates the blood from the rat into the human, infecting the human. The rat dies. The human dies. The flea lives a long and happy life. Nature has a morbid sense of humor.”

In 1347, Italian merchant ships returned from the Black Sea, one of the links along the trade route between Europe and China. Many of the sailors were already dying of the plague, and within days the disease had spread from the port cities to the surrounding countryside. The disease spread as far as England within a year.

The Europeans were susceptible to disease because they lived in crowded surroundings with very poor sanitary conditions. The Europeans often ate stale or diseased meat because refrigeration had not yet been invented. Also, medicine was primitive and unable to remedy an illness that modern technology might have cured. Bad medical advice also advanced the plague. People were often advised to not bathe because open skin pores might let in the disease.

Death from the plague was horrible, but swift. The Italian writer Boccaccio said victims often “ate lunch with their friends, and ate dinner with their ancestors in paradise.” The first signs were generally aching limbs, and vomiting of blood. Then the lymph nodes would begin to swell. The lymph nodes are glands found in the neck, armpits, and groin. The swelling continued for three or four days until the lymph nodes burst. The swiftness of the disease, the enormous pain, the grotesque appearance of the victims, all served to make the plague especially horrifying.

Some Europeans believed the plague was a sign from God. Groups known as flagellants tried to atone for the sins of the world by inflicting punishments upon themselves. They also had a tendency to persecute Jews and even clergymen who spoke out against them. Pope Clement VI condemned the flagellants, but they continued to reappear in times of plague.

The Bubonic Plague continued to affect cities from time to time for hundreds of years. It still exists and is common among rodents. We have a cure for the disease, but occasionally people in isolated places still die from the Bubonic Plague.