



The Middle Ages are a period of European history that began with the **fall** of the Roman Empire in 476 **A.D.** and ended with the beginning of the **Renaissance** in the 15th century.

During the **medieval** period, Christianity and Islam became **popular** religions. It was also a time during which castles and **cathedrals** were built throughout Europe.

During the Middle Ages **migration**, wars and **plagues** killed millions of people. Feudalism **emerged** in which **peasants** worked on the land that noblemen owned.

Scholars often called this era the Dark Ages because they believed there was **little** progress during this thousand-year period.

History of the Middle Ages

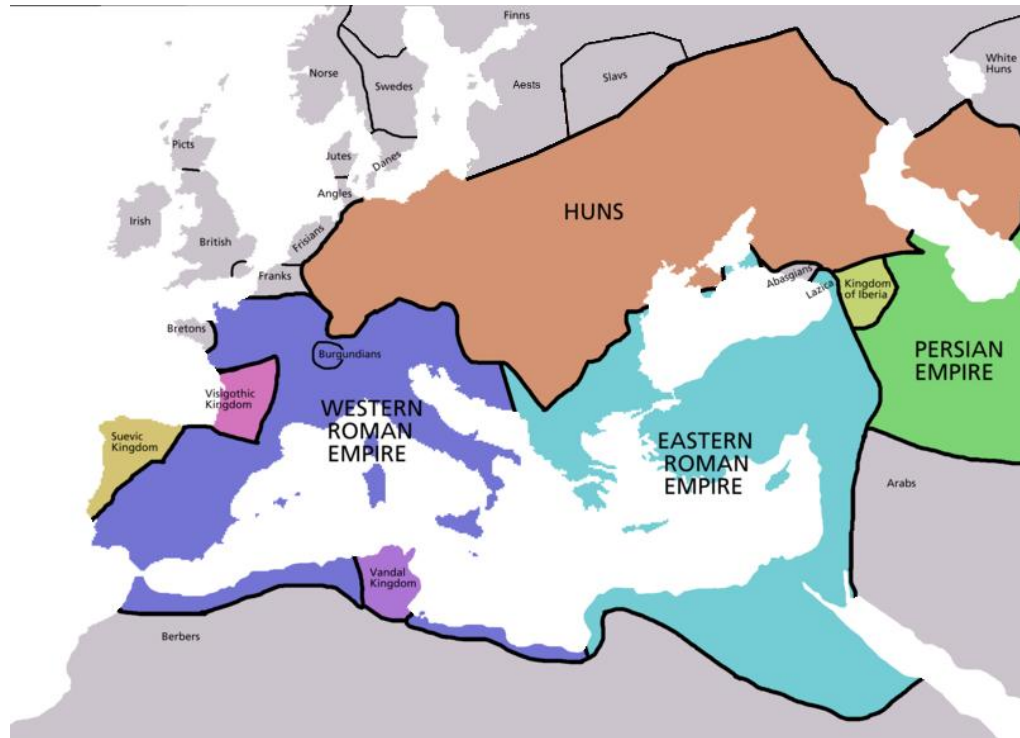
Migration Period - Tribes Invade Europe

To the north of the Roman Empire, there were people who spoke a language that is like today's German. They were called the Germanic **tribes**.

In the 5th **century** these Germanic tribes **overran** the Roman Empire. The Eastern Goths came from Russia and Ukraine. They **conquered** most of Italy, Greece and the western Balkans. The Franks took over today's France and the Saxons conquered the southern parts of England.

The Huns **originally** came from Central Asia. They overran the Chinese Empire at about 200 B.C. and the Chinese emperor had to build a great wall to keep them out. At about 400 A.D. Attila became the leader of the Huns. They came to Europe and **forced** other tribes to move westward.

The Huns **destroyed** everything that was in their way. They had no interest in the land they conquered - they only **plundered** and set fire to villages. When Attila died, the Huns didn't have a strong leader. In the following years, the Goths and other Germanic tribes **defeated** them.



Map of Europe at around 450 A.D.

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Rise of Islam

Islam started to become an important religion at the beginning of the 7th century. Mohammed was the **main prophet** of Islam. He **founded** and **ruled** the first Islamic state in the Middle East. Between 700 and 1000 A.D. Islam **spread** to many parts of Northern Africa and even got as far as Spain in the west and India and China in the east.

The Franks and Charlemagne

The Franks were a Germanic **tribe** in Western Europe that began to **conquer** other tribes. One of their greatest kings was Charlemagne, or Charles the Great. When he was king, the Franks invaded Spain and Central Europe. His **goal** was to bring together all the Germanic tribes into one Christian **kingdom**.

On Christmas Day 800, the **pope crowned** Charles the Great, **emperor** of the "Holy Roman Empire". Charlemagne wanted to **continue** the Roman Empire in central and Western Europe.



The Vikings

The Vikings were **fierce warriors** that wanted to **conquer** Charlemagne's empire. They came from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, countries that we now call Scandinavia.

The Vikings were **sailors** and they were good at building ships. A Viking ship could sail very fast, and it could hold about 100 men. These ships were very strong and powerful, and they were not very deep, so that they could also travel on rivers. The Vikings **attacked** lands near the sea without warning. They got out of their boats, **overran** villages and took as many things as they could carry with them. Then they quickly left and sailed to another place.



Reconstructed Viking ship

Image: [William Murphy, CC BY-SA 2.0](#), via
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By the tenth **century**, the Vikings controlled parts of Great Britain, France and Russia and even sailed to Egypt. Other Vikings sailed west and **discovered** Iceland and Greenland. One Viking sailor, Leif Ericson, even got to North America. There, he **founded** a village in today's Newfoundland and called it "Vinland" because it was so warm that you could grow **grapes** there.

The Normans

One group of Vikings **settled** in Normandy, a part of north-western France. They spoke French and became Christians, but they still liked adventures.

William the Conqueror was a powerful Norman king who **invaded** Britain in 1066. For the next 300 years England was ruled by kings who did not speak English.

The English hated the Normans, and the two countries became **enemies** for the next **centuries**. William built a lot of castles and buildings and paid for his projects by collecting **taxes** from the English people. The Normans brought a lot of French words to England. They also took over the lands of English **lords** and built the Tower of London.



The Crusades

The **Crusades** were wars that were fought by Christians against **Muslims**. The Turks and other Muslims took control of Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the 11th **century**. The Muslims **forbade** Christians to come to Jerusalem and **pray**.

In 1095 Pope Urban got together many **soldiers** and **knights** and sent them to Jerusalem to free the city from the Muslims. The French, Germans and Italians were the first European Christians to go on Crusades. The word "crusade" meant "war of the cross". **Pilgrims** also went to Jerusalem to pray there.



Richard the Lionheart on his way to Jerusalem

Image: By James William Glass - <http://www.1st-art-gallery.com/James-William-Glass/Richard,-Coeur-De-Lion,-On-His-Way-To-Jerusalem-%28richard,-The-Lion-Heart,-On-His-Way-To-Jerusalem%29.html>, Public Domain, [Link](#)

During the first Crusade many knights died of hunger, thirst and **disease**. When they got to Jerusalem, they killed anyone they could find.

Some knights took **foot soldiers** with them. They helped carry things for their masters. When they arrived in Jerusalem they tried to get into the city by using **huge weapons**, called ballistas. They were big **catapults** that shot large stones and other things over big walls. Other knights tried to **dig** tunnels and then set fire to the walls. When the knights got inside the city they killed everyone they could see.

The Crusades didn't really **achieve** much for the European Christians. Soldiers and knights **captured** the Holy Land back for a few years but then lost it to the Muslims again. But the Crusades were important for Europe. Many castles were built and new religious **orders** were **founded**.



Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc was one of France's most famous women. She became a **saint** and was also called the "**Maid** of Orleans".

She came from a very poor family. When Joan was 13, she believed she heard voices from God. Sometimes she also saw **visions** from heaven. When the British were about to **capture** Orleans in the Hundred-Year War, these voices told her to help Charles VII, who later became King of France. In the **Battle** of Orleans, Charles gave her **soldiers** and with them she was able to **beat** the English.

After Charles became king, Joan went on to fight against the English **on her own**. But Charles wanted to have **peace** with the English king. When the English captured her, they **turned her over** to the French king. She was burned at the **stake**, because Charles and his **supporters** thought that she was a **witch**.

Black Death

Almost half of the people in Western Europe died of a great **illness** that was called the "Black Death". It got its name because the skin of the sick people turned dark and grey.

The Black Death probably began in China, where it killed about 35 million people. When **sailors** travelled to Asia, rats returned with them. **Fleas sucked** their blood and **spread** the disease to most of Europe.

In the middle of the 14th **century**, **merchant ships** returned from Asia and many sailors were already dying of the plague. Within days, it spread to all big cities and the countryside.

Death came very quickly. The first signs were **aching** arms and legs, and many people **vomited** blood. Faces often became **swollen** and the skin colour turned dark. Most **victims** had terrible **pain**. Many people died within 24 hours after they got the disease.

The disease could **spread** quickly because there was not enough medicine in those days and people often ate **rotten** meat.

The people of the Middle Ages thought that the "Black Death" was a sign of **punishment** from God. Today we have a **cure** for this disease, but it still happens in very poor countries of the Third World.



Religion and Cathedrals

The Catholic Church was the only church in Europe in the Middle Ages. It had its own **laws** and a lot of money.

Bishops were often very **wealthy** and came from **noble** families. They sometimes sat on the king's **council** . **Priests** , on the other hand, came from the lower classes . They looked after the poor and sick people, and sometimes they taught Latin and the Bible to the children of the village .

Monks were called Benedictines because St. Benedict showed them how to live. They had to work but were not allowed to have any land or leave the **monastery** . They did everything **in silence** . Monks went to the monastery church about eight times a day to **pray** . Between these **masses** they often read or wrote books on **science** and religion and sometimes they sang religious songs. They were the most **well-educated** people of the Middle Ages. Women monks were called nuns . They lived in places called **convents** .

Pilgrimages were a very important part of life in the Middle Ages. Many people went on **journeys** to holy places like Canterbury Cathedral in England. Sometimes they had to travel for many months, and they often slept in monasteries , where they were safe. They told each other stories on their long trip.

Cathedrals

Cathedrals were important buildings of the Middle Ages. People went to mass and thought they could get a place in **heaven** when they **attended** . But cathedrals also had other functions . **Crownings** were held there. People got married in cathedrals, and **funerals** also took place there . Some kings and queens were even buried in cathedrals.

The body of a cathedral is the **nave** . It is the long, central part of the church. The cathedral sometimes had a curved end



Canterbury Cathedral

Image: [Rafa Esteve](#), CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



called the apse . Between the rows of seats there were big **passageways** to walk - called **aisles** . One part of a church was built in another direction - to make the form of a cross. This was called the **transept** .

Cathedrals were mostly made of stone. Building such a big church often took hundreds of years. The **bishop** , being the religious **head** of a country, gave the order to build a cathedral. **Medieval** churches were at first built in **Romanesque** style. They had many round **arches** and thick **pillars** . Sometimes the churches formed a half-circle. From the 12th century on, cathedrals were built in **Gothic** style. These churches were very pointed and tall. Some of them had 3 big doors.

Medieval Castles

Early castles were made of wood. During the 10th **century**, people started to make them out of stone. The walls could be up to 30 feet thick. Some castles had a **moat** around them and a **drawbridge** that would be let down if you wanted to get into or out of the castle. The **bailey** was the closed place around the inner part of a castle. If you wanted to **attack** a castle, you would have to get by the bailey first.



Beaumaris Castle in Wales

Image: [Cadw](#), OGL v1.0OGL v1.0, via Wikimedia Commons



Some castles were built on high mountains. This made it even harder for enemies to attack them. Castles were also built along rivers, on the **shores** of lakes and on hilltops. Some castles were built near the sea, so that **defenders** could see **enemies** who came by boat.

There were holes in the walls of a castle so that the **archers** could shoot **arrows** at an enemy. The doors were made out of heavy iron, so it was very difficult to open them. Later on, castles often had round walls, which made them harder for the enemy to hit.

Castles were dark and cold, but everybody wanted to live in them because they **offered protection** from enemies. But keeping castles was very expensive and only kings, lords and other **noblemen** could live in castles with their families.

They became very important, because Europe was **divided** into many small states and the lords often fought against each other. A castle helped a lord or a king **defend** the land around it. The people in the villages around the castle brought food to the people who lived there.

A castle had many rooms or **chambers**. There was a large **public** room for eating and drinking. Big **feasts** were held here. It was the centre of castle life. A castle also had a big kitchen and many private bedrooms, as well as bathrooms for the people who lived there.

At the end of the Middle Ages - about 1500 A.D. - castles lost their **importance**. They were no longer as safe as before because enemies started to use **cannons** to attack castles. Kings also started to use one big army, instead of many smaller ones, to protect their country.

Life in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, most people lived on a **manor**. It was a **village** with a castle, a church and some land around it. The king gave land to his most important **noblemen** and **bishops**, who promised to give the king **soldiers** for his armies.

The lowest people of **society** were the **peasants**. They didn't have their own land, but they got land from the lords. The lords also gave them **protection**. In return, peasants had to fight for them. This was called the feudal system.

Peasants worked on the land and produced the **goods** that the **lord** needed. But they did not lead a very nice life. They had to pay a lot of **taxes** and give the lord much of what they **harvested**. The peasants did not even "belong" to themselves. When they did something wrong, they were often **punished** by



their lord or by the church. Some were good **craftsmen** who built the things that everybody needed. They made **cloth** , **jewellery** and, very often, repaired things that were broken.

Women

Women led a very difficult life in the Middle Ages. They did housework like cooking, baking bread, **weaving** and **spinning** . They fought in **battles** and learned to use **weapons** to **defend** their homes and castles.

Some **medieval** women had other jobs . There were women who worked as **blacksmiths** and **merchants** , while others worked in the fields or played musical instruments and danced for the king.

Some women were known as **witches** , who could do magic and **heal** other people. Many of them were burned, while others became **nuns** and lived for God.

Food

Poor people didn't get very much to eat. They had to eat dark bread because white bread was only for the king and his family. Only rich people had **mutton** and **beef** , whereas peasants ate a lot of vegetables . People liked eating **onions** , **garlic** and **herbs** that they picked from the castle garden. The best way to **preserve** food was to put salt on it because in those days there were no fridges. There were no **plates** and **forks** , so the food was put on flat bread, called trenchers.



Peasants sharing a simple meal

Image: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peasants_breaking_bread.jpg , Public Domain

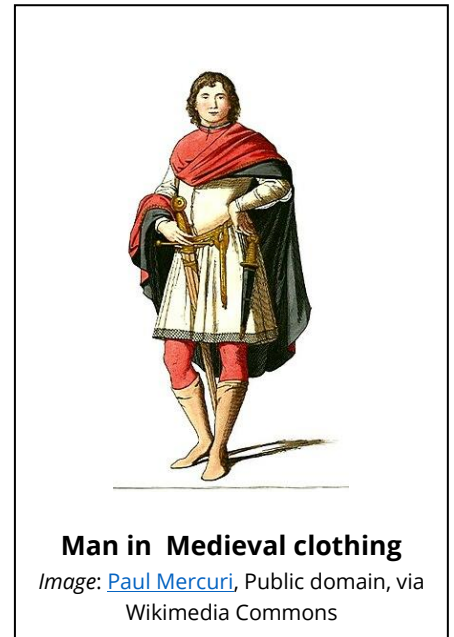
Clothing

In the Middle Ages, people usually made their own clothes by **spinning** or **weaving** cloth themselves. Sometimes they bought **linen** to make the clothes they needed. Wool was **sheared** from sheep. Rich people made more expensive clothes from linen or **silk**.



Poor women often wore long dresses made of wool, **stockings** and leather shoes. The colours were very dark - brown or grey. The medieval lady wore clothes made of fine silk, wool or **fur**. They were more colourful than the clothes of the poorer people. In the winter, she often wore a fur coat or a **cape**. Only a rich woman could **afford jewellery**. Shoes had wooden bottoms with leather on top of them.

Men wore **tunics** and trousers and later on **stockings** that went up their whole legs. Purple was a **popular** colour for men in the Middle Ages. Fur and **velvet** were also used a lot on the sides of coats.



Houses and Homes

Most **medieval** homes were cold, **damp** and dark. Sometimes it was brighter outside the house than in it. The windows were small, because homeowners didn't want people to look into it.

Many poor families ate, slept and spent their time together in only one or two rooms. The houses had **thatched** roofs that could easily be **destroyed**.

The homes of rich people were **fancier** than those of the **peasants**. They had **paved** floors and **tapestries** sometimes hung on walls. They made the house warmer. Only the rich people had glass in their windows.

In most houses there were no **chimneys**. The kitchen had a stone **hearth**, where women cooked and kept the rooms warm. The kitchen of **manor houses** and castles had big fireplaces where meat and even large **oxen** could be **roasted**. Sometimes these kitchens were in different buildings because people were afraid of a fire.

Health

Most poor people did not have money to buy medicine, so they got ill quickly and didn't live very long. They had to help themselves .

Only rich people got good medical **treatment** . Doctors **cured** people with the help of plants and **herbs** . Others laid stones on a person's body. The man who cut your hair was often the one who operated on you if you were ill .



Knights, Tournaments and Weapons

Knights

A knight was a **professional** soldier who rode out to fight in **battles**. He helped **defend** castles from **enemies**.

In order to become a knight, a young man had to go through three **stages** :
When he was 7, he became a **page** who helped a knight get dressed and put on his **armour** . He also trained with his **master**, and they played a lot of games.
The knight also showed the page how to use a **sword** . The ladies of the castle taught a page how to sit at the table and table **manners** .

At the age of 14 the page became a **squire** - a knight's personal **servant** . In a battle he would bring the knight his **lances** and swords if they were broken.
Squires also wore heavy armour and they trained for battles. They learned to ride horses and carried **shields** and swords.

A squire could become a knight when he **reached** 21. In a **ceremony** , he put on a white **tunic** and **knelt** before his lord. His lord would make him a knight with a slap of his hand or the **flat** part of his sword. Then the knight got his **weapons**.

Tournaments

Tournaments started in France in the 11th **century**. They were usually held to **entertain** the king , his family and the noblemen. They took place in fields that had walls around them and where many people could watch.

The **joust** was a typical **medieval** sport. Two knights on horseback rode towards each other. They wore **armour** and held a sharp **lance** . Each knight wanted to **knock** his enemy off his horse. Very often, knights and **spectators** were killed when horses went out of control. At times, even both knights were knocked off their horses. Then they continued fighting on the ground. When a knight won, the daughter or wife of the king would throw him a **scarf** or a **glove** to show that he was something special and that they liked him.

Tournaments were the **highlights** of life in a castle. People made wooden **stands** and sold things. They ended in the 17th century , when guns became popular .

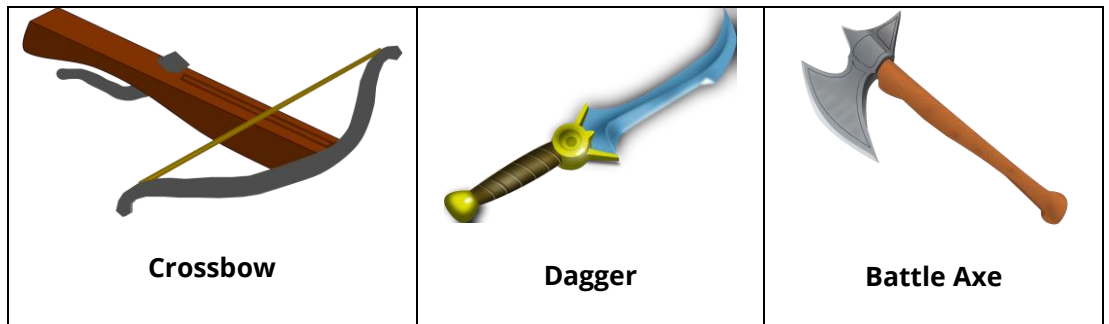


Weapons

Many kinds of **weapons** were used in the Middle Ages. Knights preferred swords, which were sometimes so big that they had to use both their hands. On horses they used long, pointed weapons called lances . Some of them were made of wood and others of metal.

Vikings made their own deadly weapons - like the **battle axe** , which they used against their enemies. **Archers** used **bows** and **arrows** . **Crossbows** were **introduced** in the 11th century. They were made mostly of wood and used to shoot arrows over long **distances** .

Daggers were among the smallest weapons of the Middle Ages. Knights didn't use them until the 14th century.



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