

Top Inventions of the Middle Ages

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Spectators watch a sword fight by knights at a two-day Medieval pageant in Salzburg, Austria, August 27, 2005. Photo from public domain

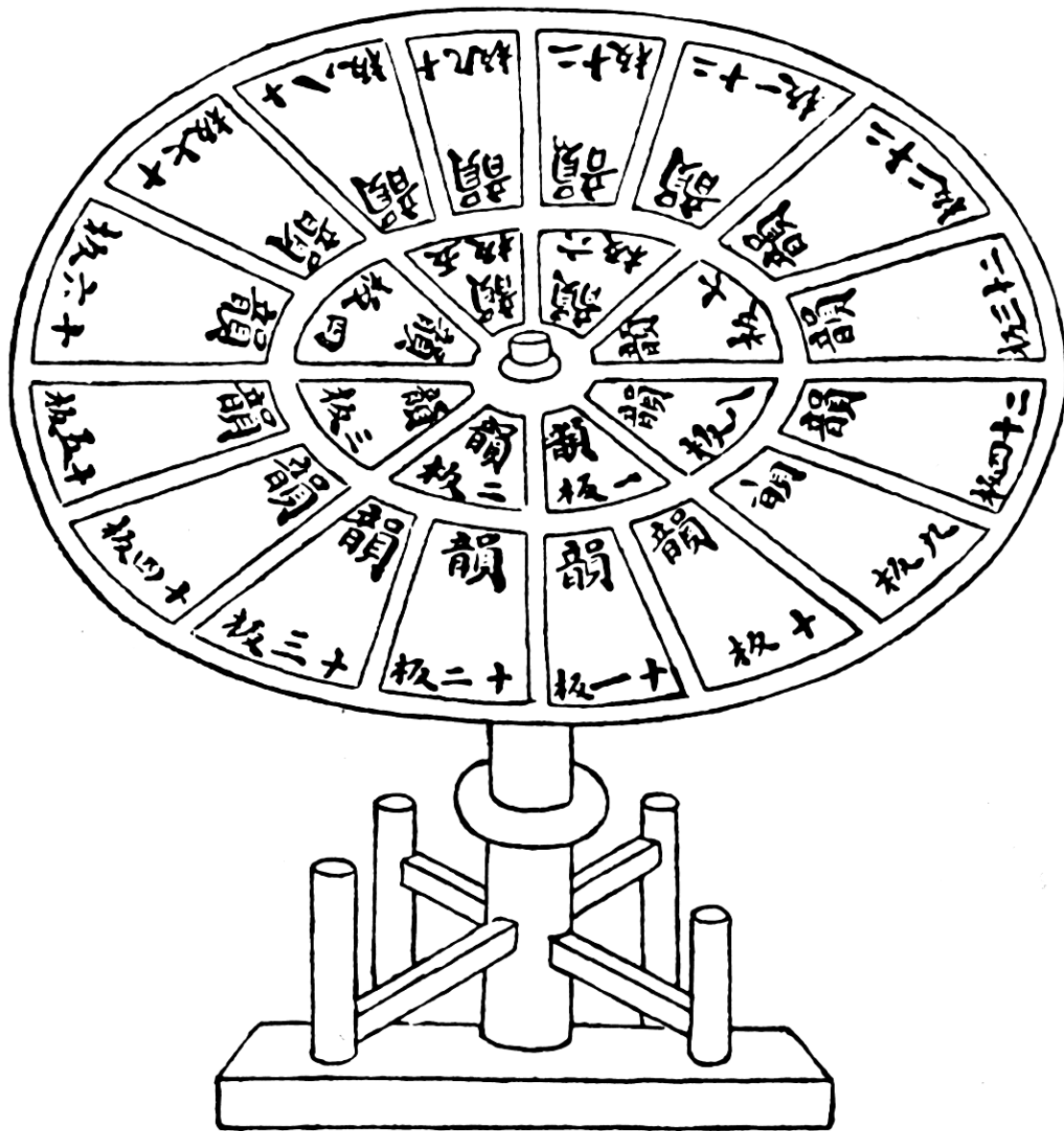
The Middle Ages took place between the years A.D. 500 and 1450. Some history books call this time the Dark Ages. Many people think of it as the medieval times, when knights battled across Europe.

The time period was known for hunger, diseases like the plague and war. The Catholic Church held much of the power in Europe. The most educated people were the priests. Most people had little education. Still, the Middle Ages was a period full of discovery and invention, especially in East Asia. Many inventions sprouted from Chinese culture. These are some of the great inventions from 1000 to 1400.

Paper money as currency

In 1023, the first government-printed paper money was printed in China. Before that, paper money had been printed just by companies. Marco Polo was an Italian explorer who went to China. When he returned to Europe, he wrote about paper money. Paper money did not take off in Europe until Sweden began printing it in 1601.

Movable type printing press



A printing press is used to make books. Many people say Johannes Gutenberg invented the first one in Germany in the 1400s. Actually, the world's first was invented about 400 years earlier. Bi Sheng invented it in China in the 1000s.

Magnetic compass

A compass can be used to tell you what direction you are going. The magnetic compass was first used by the Chinese around A.D. 200. They mainly used it for fortune-telling then. They began using it for sailing around the year 1000.

Buttons for clothing

Buttons with buttonholes to hold up clothes made their first appearance in Germany in the 1200s. Before that, buttons were just there for looks. Buttons became popular as people started wearing tight-fitting clothes in Europe.

Numbering system

Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci introduced the Hindu-Arabic numbering system to Europe in 1202. He had first learned about it when he traveled to Algeria in North Africa. This is the system we use today.

Gunpowder formula

English scientist Roger Bacon was the first European to write about how to make gunpowder. Bacon probably saw Chinese firecrackers in use. Europeans may have brought them back from Mongolia during this period.

Gun

The Chinese invented black powder during the 800s. A gun was invented by Chinese scientists around 1250 for signaling and celebrating. It stayed the same for hundreds of years. The oldest surviving firearm dates back to 1288.

Eyeglasses



The earliest version of eyeglasses was invented in Italy around 1268. They were held in front of the eyes or balanced on the nose.

Mechanical clocks

A verge escapement is a wheel inside a clock. It is what allows a clock to tick. It was invented in Europe around 1280. It made the first clocks possible.

Windmills

Windmills were first used in 1219 in China. Early windmills were used to power grain mills and water pumps. The earliest European windmills were made in 1270. These mills had four blades. The wind moved the blades. The blades then turned the wheel to pump water. Other windmills turned a grindstone to grind up grain. This helped make wheat into flour.

Modern glassmaking



In the 1000s, Germany developed new ways of making sheets of glass. First, they would blow hollow balls of glass. The balls were then formed into tubes and cut while still hot. Then the sheets were flattened. This way of making glass was perfected in Venice around 1295. Pebbles of quartz found near rivers were ground to powder. These quartz pebbles made the clearest and purest glass. This better form of glass gave Venice power over other glass-producing lands.

First sawmill for ship-making

In 1328, a sawmill was developed to cut lumber to build ships. A water wheel moved a blade back and forth to cut wood.

Quiz

1 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].

Which sentence from this section MOST CLEARLY shows a positive outcome of the Middle Ages?

- (A) Some history books call this time the Dark Ages.
- (B) The Catholic Church held much of the power in Europe.
- (C) The most educated people were the priests.
- (D) Many inventions sprouted from Chinese culture.

2 Read the section "Movable type printing press."

Based on the information in this section, which of the following statements is TRUE?

- (A) Johannes Gutenberg lied about being the first person to invent a printing press.
- (B) Most people have incorrect information about who invented the printing press.
- (C) More Chinese people than Europeans were able to read during the Middle Ages.
- (D) The Chinese printing press is much better than Johannes Gutenberg's printing press.

3 Read the section "Modern glassmaking."

Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of this section?

- (A) chronological order
- (B) description
- (C) question and answer
- (D) compare and contrast

4 Which answer choice BEST describes the structure of this article?

- (A) compare and contrast
- (B) chronological order
- (C) description
- (D) question and answer