

The Dark Ages, Middle Ages or Medieval Times?

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Knights of the Holy Ghost embarking on the Crusades. The illustration is modeled after a miniature in a manuscript of the 14th century in the museum of the Louvre, Paris, France. Photo by: Library of Congress

In the year 476, the Roman Empire fell. The great civilization had once controlled all of Europe. What came next many people call the Middle Ages. This term describes a time in Europe. The time period is also called the Middle Period, the Dark Ages or Medieval Times.

Birth of an idea

Why do we call this time the "Middle Ages"? It was an in-between time.

Just after the these Middle Ages, Europe went through many changes. Thinkers, writers, artists and inventors became interested in ancient Greece and Rome. They thought the best ideas and art were from Greece and Rome. They started calling the time in-between a "Middle" or even "Dark" age.

Today, historians do not think this way. They consider the Middle Ages to be interesting, too.

The Catholic Church

After the fall of Rome, the Catholic Church took over control of Europe. The Church was very powerful. It was even more powerful than kings and queens.

The Church had a lot of money. This was partly due to something called "tithing." Every year, people had to give some of the money they made to the church.

The rise of Islam

At the same time, the Islamic world was growing. Muslim armies took over large parts of the Middle East. The Muslims practiced a religion called Islam. The religion is still practiced today. At one point, the Muslims controlled three times more land than the Christians.

There were great cities that formed. One was Cairo, in Egypt. Another city was Baghdad, in Iraq. Poets, scientists and philosophers in these cities wrote thousands of books. Inventors came up with new tools and machines. Mathematicians invented the number system that we still use today.

The Crusades

The Christian and Islamic worlds soon fought. The Catholic Church sent soldiers to force Muslims out of Europe. The fight was called the Crusades.

The Crusades began in the year 1095. They continued on and off until the end of the 1400s. Neither side "won." Many thousands of people from both sides were killed.

A side effect of the Crusades was that it led to more mixing of ideas between Europe and the Islamic world. Crusaders learned about Islamic literature, science and technology. They brought many new ideas home with them to Europe.

Art and architecture

Art changed in important ways during the Middle Ages. Hundreds of churches were built. Between the year 900 and the 1200s, the churches were built mostly in the Romanesque style. Romanesque churches share some common designs. They mostly have round stone arches. They also have very few windows.

Around the year 1200, a new style became popular. It was called Gothic. Gothic churches had big windows. They were full of colored glass. The churches also had pointed arches. Artists created paintings and decorations for the churches.

Economics and society

In the Middle Ages, a very small group of people held all the power. Most people were poor. They had no power. Many farmers, called serfs, had to work for no money.

Life started to change because of new farming tools. The tools made it easier and faster to grow food. Because of this, there was more to eat. Families had more children, and the population grew.

Soon, there were fewer jobs for farmers. People needed work and started moving into towns and cities.

Between 1347 and 1350, a terrible illness broke out in Europe. It was called the bubonic plague. At the time, many called it the "Black Death." It killed about 20 million people in Europe. That was nearly 1 out of 3 people on the continent. The sickness spread easily, especially in cities.

Europe survived the plague, though. Afterwards, the Renaissance began, bringing many new changes.

Quiz

- 1 What does the section "Birth of an idea" show the reader?
 - (A) why people began calling the time after the Roman Empire the Middle Ages
 - (B) why historians are interested in the Middle Ages
 - (C) how the Catholic Church was important in the Middle Ages
 - (D) how art, inventions and ideas changed in Europe during the Middle Ages

- 2 If you are looking for information about who was in charge of Europe in the Middle Ages, which section should you read?
 - (A) Introduction [paragraph 1]
 - (B) "The Catholic Church"
 - (C) "The rise of Islam"
 - (D) "Art and architecture"

- 3 Read the section "The Crusades."
 Select the paragraph in that section which shows HOW the Crusades caused changes in Europe.

- 4 Read the paragraph from the section "Economics and society."

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Which question is answered by this paragraph?

- (A) What new farming tools were invented in the Middle Ages?
- (B) What kinds of food did farmers grow in the Middle Ages?
- (C) How did new farming tools improve life in the Middle Ages?
- (D) How did farmers sell the food they grew in the Middle Ages?