Middle Ages

The medieval period, or the Middle Ages, was a time in European history before the modern era. In the 4th century AD Germanic peoples began crossing the frontiers of the Roman Empire, in part because of the advance of ferocious warriors from the east—the Huns. The movement of the Germanic peoples contributed to the so-called fall of the Roman Empire. Although violent clashes occurred between Romans and various Germanic tribes, the process also involved the more peaceful migration and settlement of Germanic peoples in the empire and their incorporation in Roman armies. The Germanic peoples themselves underwent important social and cultural changes as a result of their contact with Rome. They were gradually “Romanized,” adopting various Roman traditions—including Christianity—and they became more settled. The union of Germanic traditions and Roman religion and culture led to the emergence of the civilization of the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages cover about 1,000 years—from about AD 500 to about AD 1500. The change from ancient ways to medieval customs came so gradually, however, that it is difficult to tell exactly when the Middle Ages began. The conventional date of the beginning of the Middle Ages is AD 476, when the Germanic general Odoacer defeated the Roman general Orestes and overthrew the emperor Romulus Augustulus, ending the Western Roman Empire. (The eastern part of the empire, called the Byzantine Empire, survived for about another thousand years.) Other historians give the year 410, when Alaric, king of the Visigoths, sacked Rome. Still others say that the ancient world lasted until 750 or even 1000, when the extensive practice of slavery as in the classical world finally came to an end in western Europe.

It is equally hard to determine exactly when the Middle Ages ended, for decisive events leading to the modern age took place at different times. Historians say variously that the Middle Ages ended with the fall of Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, in 1453; with the European “discovery” of America, in 1492; with the beginning of the Reformation, in 1517; or with the coming of the French Revolution, in 1789.

The Middle Ages was first defined as a distinct historical period in the 15th century, by scholars who saw their own time as one of great cultural progress and the revival of the Classical learning of ancient Greece and Rome (see Renaissance). These scholars thus thought of the time between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and their own time as one of decline and then stagnation. The Middle Ages came to be seen as a long period dominated by ignorance and superstition.

Historians today, however, mostly do not accept this position. They emphasize the many important changes that occurred in society during the Middle Ages. New forms of political, social, cultural, and economic organization emerged. The monarchies that developed laid the foundations for the nation-states of the modern period. People also first began to consider Europe as a distinct cultural unit. The Roman Catholic Church became a significant part of medieval life. Later in this period, the population began to grow greatly, agriculture and trade flourished, and cities expanded. Medieval Europe gave the world the first universities, and medieval architects produced magnificent Gothic cathedrals.

Fall of the Roman Empire

Even before the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476, life in Europe began to change. The Germanic peoples had long lived along the frontiers of the Roman Empire. In the 3rd century, during a period of near-anarchy within the empire, they attempted to seize Roman territory. The Roman recovery of the late 3rd and 4th centuries restored the traditional balance. At the same time, the Romans began to welcome some of these people into the empire. Some were settled inside the Roman lines as farmers and defenders of the frontier, and others were recruited for the Roman army. The Germanic peoples in this way became part of the empire and learned Roman ways. In the later 4th century, however, this balance was upset by the appearance of another people, the Huns.

The Huns began moving westward from their homeland north of China in the 4th century, conquering everyone in their way and inspiring great fear. They achieved their greatest success in the 5th century under their leader Attila. As a result of the savage advance of the Huns, the Germanic peoples along the frontier began moving into Roman territory. This movement of the Germanic tribes has traditionally been called the barbarian invasions, since the Romans called foreigners from outside the empire “barbarians.”

The Romans themselves settled some of these Germanic peoples within the empire, while others invaded and conquered Roman territory. The arrival of the Germanic peoples occurred at a time, especially in the Western Empire, when Rome suffered economic and population declines that made it less able to turn back the invaders. From the 4th to 6th centuries Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Franks, Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic tribes entered the empire and created new kingdoms on the ruins of the old Roman world.

The early medieval period has sometimes been called the late antique period or the Dark Ages because it was believed to have been a time of violence and ignorance. This view has generally been rejected, however, and many historians now regard it as a time of significant transformation from one form of civilization to another. In fact, many changes took place during this period that laid important foundations for later developments. The Germanic peoples who settled in the empire did not possess the highly developed systems of law and government of the Romans. However, they followed long-standing customs that served as legal traditions and were organized in war bands led by warrior chiefs. These chiefs, partially as a result of contacts with Rome, evolved into powerful kings. The Germanic peoples adopted, if in simpler form, Roman administrative traditions, especially in the area of taxation. The new Germanic rulers also inherited the language of government and the practice of writing and codifying the law from the Romans.

The creation of new kingdoms out of the old Roman state yielded some dynamic cultures, especially those of the Ostrogoths (eastern Goths) of Italy and the Visigoths (western Goths) of Spain. Although the Germanic peoples enveloped Europe and drove into North Africa, only one group, the Franks, created a lasting state. Their first great leader was Clovis, who in 481–511 established in Gaul the kingdom that was to become France.

Influence of Christianity
When Clovis became a Roman Catholic, his Franks began to receive the support of the bishops and other religious figures in his kingdom. This opened to the Franks the residue of Roman culture sustained by the church. Its monks, living in retreats called monasteries, had preserved a knowledge of Roman arts, crafts, and industries. The monasteries were also important centers of book production and education, and they now began to spread this learning.

Charlemagne’s empire faced many challenges after its founder’s death, when it was divided among all his sons. Later, Charlemagne’s grandsons and great-grandsons often fought in civil war with one another in an attempt to rule the entire empire. To preserve the loyalty of their soldiers, the later Carolingian kings granted land to their supporters. At the same time that civil wars took place, Europe was terrorized by new invasions. Seagoing Vikings swept down on England and the west coast of Europe and darted up rivers to raid inland. Hungarians drove from the east into Germany, France, and Italy. Muslims from North Africa and Spain (regions that Muslim armies had conquered in the 7th and 8th centuries) slashed into southern Europe.

The Carolingian military was ill-equipped to face these marauders, and local lords emerged to defend the region from attack. Many lords built fortified dwellings, or castles—strong points that could serve to defend the territory and to help the lord impose his will on the people living there. In the part of the empire that would emerge as the country of France, this process led to the almost complete collapse of royal authority. In its place, dukes, counts, and even lesser nobles assumed political and military authority before the king of France was able to establish his control of the kingdom during the 12th century. In the German territories of the Carolingian world, however, a new dynasty established itself in the 10th century and created a new empire that came to be called the Holy Roman Empire. It was the greatest power in medieval Europe for many generations, surviving in some form or other until 1806.

The Peasant’s Life

About nine-tenths of the people were peasants—farmers or village laborers. A peasant village housed perhaps 10 to 60 families. Each family lived in a simple hut made of wood or wicker daubed with mud and thatched with straw or rushes. Layers of straw or reeds covered the floor; often the peasants’ home included their pigs, chickens, and other animals. The bed was a pile of dried leaves or straw, and they used skins of animals for cover. A cooking fire of peat or wood burned day and night in a clearing on the dirt floor. The smoke seeped out through a hole in the roof or the open half of a two-piece door. The only furniture was a plank table on trestles, a few stools, perhaps a chest, and probably a loom for the women to make their own cloth. Every hut had a vegetable patch.

Only a very small number of the peasants were free, independent farmers who paid a fixed rent for their land. The vast majority were serfs, who lived in a condition of dependent servitude. A serf and his descendants were legally bound to work on a specific plot of land and were subject to the will of the lord who owned that land. (Unlike slaves, however, they could not be bought and sold.) Serfs typically farmed the land in order to feed themselves and their families. They also had to work to support their lord. They gave about half their time to work in his fields, to cut timber, haul water, and spin and weave cloth for him and his family, to repair his buildings, and to wait upon his household. In war, the men had to fight at his side. Besides providing labor, serfs had to pay taxes to their lord in money or produce. They also had to give a tithe to the church—every 10th egg, sheaf of wheat, lamb, chicken, and all other animals. (See also feudalism.)

Peasants suffered from famines. Plague outbreaks depleted the livestock. Frosts, floods, and droughts destroyed the crops. Bursts of warfare ravaged the countryside as the lords burned each other’s fields and harvests.

The peasants’ lot was hard, but most historians consider it little worse than that of peasants today. Because of the many holidays, or holy days, in the Middle Ages, peasants actually labored only about 260 days a year. They spent their holidays in church festivals, watching wandering troupes of jongleurs (jugglers, acrobats, storytellers, and musicians), journeying to mystery or miracle plays, or engaging in wrestling, bowling, cockfights, apple bobs, or dancing.

Castle Life

Supported by the labor and taxes of the peasants, the lord and his wife would seem to have had a comfortable life. In many ways they did, even though they lacked many of the comforts of modern society.

The lords owned large self-sufficient estates called manors, which included the land worked by the serfs. The manor houses, where the lords lived, were often protected with defensive works. About the 12th century these palisaded, fortified manorial dwellings began to give way to stone castles. Some of these, with their great outer walls and courtyard buildings, covered perhaps 15 acres and were built for defensive warfare.
The churl (half-serf) lived a rude life. He was born in the cradle and died in the coffin. After his father died, the son was bound to his lord until he was seven. He was given some land and a household, and was taught the practices of chivalry and, above all, of warfare. At the age of 21, if worthy, he received the accolade of knighthood.

Sometime between 9 am and noon, a trumpet summoned the lord’s household to the great hall for dinner. They ate soup, game, birds, mutton, pork, some beef, and often venison or boar slain in the hunt. Great, flat pieces of bread called trenchers served as plates and, after the meal, were flung to the dogs around the table or given to the poor. Huge pies, or pasties, filled with several kinds of fowl or fish, were relished. Metal or wood cups or leather “jacks” held cider, beer, or wine. Coffee and tea were not used in Europe until after the Middle Ages. Minstrels or jongleurs entertained at dinner.

The nobles enjoyed hunting, games, and tournaments. Even the ladies and their pages rode afield to loose falcons at game birds (see falconry). Indoors, in front of the great open fire, there were chess, checkers, and backgammon. A troubadour would often chant and sing of the storied deeds of Charlemagne, Roland, or Arthur and his Round Table.

One of the most popular types of entertainment for the medieval aristocracy was the tournament, an extravagant contest of arms. The tournament originated as a staged battle between two groups of knights, with few rules. These battles were fought with blunted weapons to minimize injury, but knights still died in the fighting. In its most elaborate form, the tournament was a highly ritualized and regulated affair. Visiting knights and nobles set up their pavilions near the lists, or field of contest. Over each tent a banner fluttered to show the rank of a contestant—here a count, there a marquis or a baron (see titles of nobility). The shield of each armor-clad warrior was emblazoned to identify the bearer (see heraldry). The first day of the tournament was usually devoted to single combats, in which pairs of knights rode full tilt at each other with 10-foot (3-meter) lances. The tournament’s climax was the mêlée, when companies of knights battled in perilous mimic warfare. A tournament cost a lord a fortune for hospitality and rich prizes given to the victors.

Tournaments had a grim value as practice for medieval warfare. They also served as a substitute for warfare when internal conflict declined in the 12th century. Dangerous affairs, tournaments faced prohibitions at times by European rulers. The introduction of plate armor made tournaments less dangerous. They remained a popular form of entertainment even after the introduction of gunpowder began to transform the nature of battle.

**Children’s Lives**

The understanding of childhood in the Middle Ages has undergone an important transformation since it was first studied seriously in the 1960s. The belief that children in the Middle Ages received little love from their parents, though still popularly held, has been shown to be false. The deep sense of bereavement at a child’s death, revealed in sources from the period, and the care involved in a child’s burial are only two examples to disprove this notion. Infant mortality was high in the Middle Ages, but that did not prevent parents from making an emotional investment in their children. The notion that childhood was not perceived as a distinct category of life has also been proved wrong. Drawing in part from the Roman legal tradition, people in medieval times believed that early childhood lasted to age 7, and adolescence lasted to age 12 for girls and age 14 for boys.

The experience of children varied somewhat according to social class and location, but in general infants and young children remained in the home. Infants were swaddled and breast-fed by their mothers or by a wet nurse and were given an adult’s diet by about age two. Young children were gradually given duties in the household, but children were also given the opportunity to play. Games included hopscotch, hide-and-seek, backgammon and chess, and ball games. A child’s toys included, among other things, miniature knights in armor, dolls, cups, plates, and boats. Children also had pets.

At age seven, most children began their education. Girls were usually taught in the home, learning spinning, weaving, and household management. Boys were sent to local parish schools or grammar schools, where they learned the alphabet and some reading, writing, and arithmetic. They learned to read in their native language, with only a small number also learning Latin language and grammar. The school year lasted from mid-autumn until late spring, and the school day began at dawn.

In adolescence, children were apprenticed in the family business or sent as apprentices to other people’s homes. Children served as servants or learned a skilled craft from a master; contracts survive that clearly regulate the relationship between apprentice and master and outline the hours of labor and related matters. Some noble boys were sent to monasteries or into the clergy. Others were sent to castles to serve as pages to learn courtly ritual and how to be a knight.

Children were also given basic religious instruction. Soon after birth, they were baptized and assigned godparents. Parents and godparents were expected to teach their children the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer and to take them to church on holy days.

**The Church**

One of the most important of all institutions in the Middle Ages was the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout the Middle Ages the church was a significant force in the arts and culture as well as in education and religion.
During the Middle Ages the church was organized into different groups, or orders: the clergy, including the monks and the priests, and the laity (ordinary believers). Each of these groups was assigned specific functions by the church. The exact responsibilities of each group evolved over time, and sometimes conflict between groups emerged in the process of defining their mutual responsibilities.

### The Clergy

The power of the church was rooted in its spiritual authority. The priests were responsible for saying mass and performing the sacraments, especially baptism and communion (Holy Eucharist). The sacraments were thought to be essential for gaining salvation. The mass was a form of communal worship and religious instruction and was the ritual during which the Eucharist was celebrated. All Christians were expected to attend the mass.

The priesthood was increasingly organized in an ever more hierarchical fashion, and all clergy and laity were ultimately subject to the pope. The parish structure was fully worked out in the 11th century. Each parish was headed by a priest, and the parishes were organized in dioceses headed by bishops. The bishops were the leading spiritual and administrative figures in the diocese and were charged with overseeing all religious affairs in their territory. The archbishops oversaw more than one diocese.

The bishops ran the church courts, which controlled all cases involving the clergy and church property and many other cases, such as those of marriage, wills, and orphans. Bishops also exercised the power of excommunication. This excluded those guilty of serious crimes against the church from participating in church services or receiving the sacraments, and other Christians were forbidden from associating with them. Excommunication was intended not as a punishment but as a tool to encourage proper Christian behavior.

At the very top of the organization of the church was the pope. Before the 11th century, the authority of the pope was limited. He was understood to be the most important of the bishops in the Roman Catholic Church, but he was not always seen as the ruler of the church. He could claim special status as the successor of the apostle St. Peter—Catholics believe that St. Peter was the first bishop of Rome and that all popes are his heirs. Some popes of the early Middle Ages, such as Gregory I, the Great (590–604), were effective rulers who imposed their will on all of the church. Others exercised more limited powers. In the 11th century a series of popes, including Gregory VII (1073–85), transformed the church into a highly structured organization headed by the pope. Popes after the 11th century ruled almost as kings. They exercised authority over questions of religious faith and practice, intervened in political affairs, and were the superiors of all bishops and other clergy.

The church kept alive the spark of public education. True, in the lords’ castles pages went to their lessons, but pages were extremely few compared with the number of peasant boys. For them, the church looked to each village parish to supply a school and religious training. Each diocese was expected to maintain a cathedral school to educate the clergy.

The work of the church was supported by the work of monks and nuns, who retired from worldly distractions to live in monasteries and convents. They gave up earthly pleasures to prepare for salvation. For that, they accepted a life of prayer and labor and upheld the Christian precept of “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Their example was bulwarked starting in the 13th century by the work of the friars, men of religious orders who went into the world to preach to the people of the growing towns and cities.

The most important and influential guideline for monastic life was the strict yet wholesome and practical Rule of Benedict of Nursia (480?–547?). The Benedictine Rule put upon the monks the double duty of prayer and work. Benedict sought to establish a balance in the daily life of his monks so that they did not indulge themselves in any one practice. The monks had to do some manual labor, such as clearing forests, draining swamps, nursing the sick, sheltering travelers, and serving the needy. In this way, the monks provided important services to society in addition to their spiritual duties. In the Middle Ages, though, it was their prayer that was most valued, and many people made donations to the monasteries so that the monks would pray for them.

Of the contributions made by the monks’ manual labor, two were especially notable. The first directly helped people of the Middle Ages: it was farming skill. Monasteries were traditionally established in the countryside, and the monks were successful farmers. One group of monks, the Cistercians, have been called the best farmers of medieval days. They founded new monasteries far away from the towns and other population centers and brought more land into cultivation.

The monks’ second special service was producing manuscripts. Even before the downfall of Rome the church had begun to preserve the books of Roman and Greek knowledge. Neither the siege nor the sack of Rome found the church surrendering its full treasury of classical learning. Later, when the church came to power, monks spent hours in the scriptorium, or writing room. There they meticulously copied the scrolls, letter by letter. One monk wrote at the end of a manuscript: “He who does not know how to write imagines that it is no labor; but, though only three fingers hold the pen, the whole body grows weary.” Their labors preserved not only classical knowledge but also the works of Christian thinkers. Monks copied the books of the Bible, the writings of the Church fathers, and other works of theology and doctrine. The monks also wrote works of history, theology, poetry, law, and other disciplines.

### The Laity

During the Middle Ages, the church played an ever-increasing role in the daily life of the laity, especially after the Gregorian Reform movement of the 11th century. The church assumed responsibility for guiding Christians from birth to death and presided over important rites of passage throughout their lives. All Christians were expected to receive baptism as infants. This rite not only introduced the child into the community of the faithful but also strengthened relations within the earthly community. An important element of the baptismal rite was the identification of godparents who were bound to the newly baptized child and responsible for ensuring the child’s growth as a Christian.

The church also required that all Christians offer confession of sins to a priest and receive the sacrament of the Eucharist at least once a year. Medieval Christians turned to the church to confirm the rite of marriage as well. Originally, the priestly blessing of marriages took place outside the church. During the 11th and 12th centuries, however, the church defined marriage as one of the seven sacraments, and marriages were then...
Scandinavian peoples. Church leaders during the Middle Ages, magic was strongly identified with “paganism”—the term Christian missionaries used for the religious beliefs of Celtic, Germanic, and Nordic peoples. Magic and witchcraft were widely condemned by authorities during the Middle Ages, for political, social, or religious reasons. They also celebrated saints’ days, which were cause for processions, masses, and feasting. 

The saints, or the holy dead, and their relics—that is, their mortal remains or objects the saints had touched—were central facets in the religious life of the Middle Ages. Saints’ relics were collected and were venerated as the locus of the saints’ holy power on earth. The relics were thought to effect cures of the sick, lame, and blind, and to cause other miracles, including the rescue of those unfairly imprisoned. The Holy Eucharist too was thought to effect miracles and was sometimes sown in peasants’ fields to secure a better harvest.

Angels were also important to both Christian popular belief and religious philosophy during the Middle Ages. Angels were believed to provide a vital link between God and humans. It was thought that angels transmitted prayers to God and thus helped people in gaining special graces or favors as well as salvation. Each person was believed to have a guardian angel watching over him or her throughout life. Images of angels were abundant in medieval art, especially in the decoration of cathedrals. Angels were also featured in the medieval dramas known as mystery plays and miracle plays.

The archangel (or chief angel) Michael, who leads the angels to victory against Satan in the Book of Revelation, was a favorite of many people in the Middle Ages. A warrior angel, he was thought to protect knights in battle. Many churches and shrines were dedicated to St. Michael, and his feast day, Michaelmas, was a great religious holiday.

In the Middle Ages great emphasis was placed on the afterlife and whether one’s fate would be eternal salvation or damnation. Those who died in a state of grace would enter the bliss of heaven. Sinners who were beyond redemption would be sent to hell, where they would remain exiled from God for all time and would be punished with perpetual pain. It was thought that most lay people, however, would go to purgatory, a place for those who had sinned but could still be saved. Purgatory was considered a place of temporary punishment. There one’s soul was purified through suffering so that one could ultimately enter heaven. It was believed that the prayers of the living could shorten the time the dead spent in purgatory. For this reason, people would commonly pray for their dead relatives or leave money to the church so that prayers for their soul would be offered after death.

Throughout the Middle Ages, tales abounded of individuals who had witnessed the terrors of hell and the joys of the blessed afterlife. These accounts included detailed descriptions of the gruesome tortures awaiting the damned. The most famous of such return-from-the-dead stories is Dante’s Divine Comedy. Many medieval paintings and sculptures also depicted the horrors of hell.

**Pilgrimages and Crusades**

As religion touched nearly every facet of medieval life, people of all classes journeyed to shrines, or places of religious interest, on pilgrimages. The hallowed place might be the grave of a martyr or a church that sheltered the relics of a saint. Travel was hard, but discomfort was even welcomed as a kind of penance. The pilgrim who could not afford a horse plodded on foot, aided by a staff. The typical pilgrim garb was a cloak, girdled by a cord, and a brimmed felt hat.

Every country had its favorite shrines, but the great shrine for all Christians was the Holy City, Jerusalem. The Holy Land had been held by Muslim Arabs for centuries, but Christian pilgrims had been allowed to travel there unmolested. When the Holy Land fell in the 11th century to the Seljuq Turks, who had recently converted to Islam, they persecuted pilgrims.

Christian Europe then vowed to win the Holy Land from the Turk “infidels.” Pope Urban II declared in 1095, “God wills it. Christ Himself will be your leader when you fight for Jerusalem.” On that command he sent forth Europe to fight a series of religious wars called the Crusades that were designed to restore control of the Holy Land to the Christians.

There were eight major and many smaller expeditions, but only the First Crusade truly succeeded in its purpose of conquering Jerusalem. The remaining Crusades were designed to protect or restore the gains of the First Crusade. The main Crusading movement lasted from 1096 until 1291, when the last Crusader outpost, Acre, fell to Muslim armies. The ideal of Crusading, however, and attempts to launch another Crusade continued into the 16th century.

The marches into other lands —Christian armies fought Muslims in Spain as well as in the Holy Land—and the contact with other peoples showed the Crusaders a much higher level of civilization. They brought back new ideas, new customs, and new products. These innovations helped to stimulate business and to revive wide commerce, and they also stimulated intellectual and cultural growth in Christian Europe.

**Magic and Witchcraft**

Belief in magic, witchcraft, and good and evil spirits was widespread throughout medieval society. Indeed, the great number of magic formulas and books from the period suggests that magic was widely practiced in various forms. Witches, sorcerers, and other magicians worked in private to accomplish their own goals, as contrasted with the public practice of religion. Through magic, individuals sought to gain or preserve health, to get or keep property, to protect against natural disasters or evil spirits, to help friends, or to seek revenge. They used a variety of means, including blessings and charms, astrology and divination (to predict the future), amulets and charms (to ward off hostile spirits and harmful events), and potions and medicinal herbs.

Magic and witchcraft were widely condemned by authorities during the Middle Ages, for political, social, or religious reasons. In the early part of the Middle Ages, magic was strongly identified with “paganism”—the term Christian missionaries used for the religious beliefs of Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian peoples. Church leaders generally denounced magic as superstition. However, they also sometimes adopted native practices and
In the 11th century, attitudes toward witchcraft and other forms of magic began to change. From about 1050 to 1350, the battle between the church and magic occurred as the struggle against heresy—the church’s label for Christian belief that had been corrupted, or twisted away from the good or the true. In this period magicians and witches, like heretics, were believed to distort or abuse Christian rites to do the Devil’s work. During the Middle Ages, the Devil was deeply and widely feared by both common people and church leaders. The Devil and demons were thought to be keenly intent on destroying people’s souls, lives, families, and communities as well as the church and state. Demons were believed to cause a range of misfortunes, from disease and mental disorders to accidental deaths, famine, war, and earthquakes. By the late Middle Ages, witches were thought to get supernatural powers by being possessed by demons or by making pacts with them. Witches were thus considered the sworn enemies of Christian society.

It is important to note, however, that the European witch hunts—in which tens of thousands of purported witches were killed—did not take place in the Middle Ages. The witch hunts occurred afterward, in the era of the Renaissance, Reformation, and Scientific Revolution. There were scattered persecutions of witches starting in the late 14th century, at the end of the medieval period. The witch hunts became severe later and lasted until the 18th century. (See also Salem witch trials.)

**Crime and Punishment**

The understanding of crime and its punishment evolved across the course of the Middle Ages and was shaped by both secular and church, or canon, law. In the early Middle Ages, from the 5th to 10th centuries, this understanding was molded by the customs and practices of the Germanic kingdoms that replaced the Roman Empire and its legal traditions in western Europe. Crimes were generally understood as offenses against families and not against the general community or state. Resolution of assault, murder, or property crimes sometimes involved the feud, a means of extracting vengeance through violence or negotiation. Early medieval legal codes also established the practice of the payment of compensation called the wergeld to resolve cases of murder. Individuals were assigned a specific monetary value depending on their gender, social status, and other conditions, and the murderer paid the victim’s family the determined amount.

As early medieval rulers established themselves, administration of justice was often assigned to local authorities. One method employed to determine guilt or innocence was trial by ordeal. This practice required the accused to hold a burning coal or red-hot poker in his hand; if the burn healed cleanly, then the accused was judged innocent. It was held that this was God’s judgment of the accused, but the procedure involved the consensus of the community as a whole.

Later in the Middle Ages, the understanding of crime and punishment was shaped in part by the rediscovery of Roman law. The increasing institutionalization of public power and the development of new national legal codes were also factors. Judicial procedures became more regularized and relied less and less on the trial by ordeal, which was formally forbidden by the papacy in the 13th century. The practice of inquisition, a process in which a magistrate collected and assessed evidence of criminal procedure, rather than private accusation, became more widespread during the late Middle Ages.

Roman law was less influential in England, where the legal system became centralized. In the early Middle Ages, each locality in England had its own laws based on custom and tradition. After the Norman Conquest of 1066, judges appointed by the king moved from one place to another to administer these local laws. As time passed, local laws gave way to judges’ interpretations of a broader system of laws accepted in more than one area. Eventually the decisions of the judges, constantly modified by later decisions, were accepted as the body of English common law (see law, “Common Law and Statute Law”).

Along with murder and theft, crimes against the community and against religion were prosecuted throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. Offenses in this latter category included blasphemy, heresy, witchcraft, gaming, treason, and counterfeiting. Capital crimes such as murder and theft were punished by hanging or decapitation, and heresy was punished by burning. Lesser punishments included whipping, exposure in the stocks or pillories, mutilation, banishment, fines, and the confiscation of property. Fears of a criminal underworld that public authority could not contain emerged by the 14th century and reinforced a trend toward criminalizing social deviance.

**The Rise of Towns**

By the beginning of the Middle Ages, urban life had begun to decline in Europe. The Roman Empire had encouraged the building of towns, but city life declined as the empire itself declined. The Germanic peoples found fewer and smaller towns and established themselves on rural villas, manors, and castles. The reduction in the size and number of towns led to a drop in long-distance trade. Towns lost their right to self-government and became the property of the lords.

In the 11th century, however, the population began to increase dramatically, along with increases in the production of food. It is estimated that the population of Europe nearly doubled between the years 1000 and 1340. The rise in population contributed to the renewed growth of towns and trade. So too did the output of the farms, which allowed more people to work at nonagricultural labor. New towns were founded, and old ones were expanded. Traveling merchants established headquarters in places of safety, such as by the walls of a castle or monastery. Places accessible to main roads or rivers grew rapidly.

Wherever merchants settled, laborers and artisans came. Carpenters and blacksmiths made chests and casks for the merchants’ goods and carts to transport them. Shipbuilders turned out trading vessels. Butchers, bakers, and brewers came to supply food for the workers, and tailors and shoemakers came to supply clothes. Others came to make the wares of trade.
An important part of urban life during this period was the guilds—associations of merchants and craftspeople that regulated their trades and protected their common interests. In each city, all the people who worked at a particular profession usually would belong to the city’s guild for that profession. The guilds kept the trade of the city in their own hands and made rules for each branch of the trade. Each guild helped its own needy members and cared for widows and orphans. At first there were only merchant guilds. Then master workmen set up separate craft guilds for each trade—for weavers, blacksmiths, bakers, brewers, butchers, furniture makers, builders, painters, teachers, and so forth—and for different branches of the trades. Leatherworkers, for example, were split into many guilds, such as leather dressers, glosers, pocket makers, and slipper makers. Paris had some 350 craft guilds at the end of the 13th century. All guilds regulated the number of apprentices and workmen, hours of labor, and wages.

As the cities grew rich and their guilds grew powerful, the cities sought the right to govern themselves. The first to free themselves from the power of the lords were in Italy—Venice, Pisa, Genoa, Florence, and others. Towns in France were next to gain power and then towns along the Rhine Valley and on the Baltic coast, where cities of the Hanseatic League grew to enormous wealth and strength. Some of the towns bought their freedom from the nobles and the church; others fought bitter battles to win it. A few were given it.

In the towns the houses were packed together because every town had to be a fortress, with stout, high walls and a moat or river to protect it from hostile nobles, pirates, and robber bands. The smaller the walled enclosure, the easier it was to defend. The only open places were the market square in the town center, the cathedral, and the few gardens of the rich. Main streets led like spokes of a wheel from the market to the few gates in the walls. Building room was so cramped that the houses were built in several narrow stories, with the upper floors jutting over the alleylike streets.

Houses were uncomfortable. Most of them had a mere framework of heavy timbers. The wall spaces were filled with woven reeds daubed with clay or plaster. Rushes or straw usually lined the floors. Fireplaces had chimneys, and the peril of sparks on the thatched roofs was one of the worst hazards of town living. The house of the average citizen served multiple functions as his dwelling, factory, and shop. Goods were made and sold on the ground floor. The owner and his family lived on the floor above. The upper stories of the house were storage rooms and sleeping lofts for the workmen.

At night the medieval city was dark and dangerous. The streets were not lighted. People who ventured out at night took along one or two workmen with lanterns and weapons as a protection against robbers. In some cities cables were strung across streets to hinder fleeing criminals.

Few working citizens, however, went out at night. The workday began at sunrise and ended at sunset. At 8 or 9 pm the cathedral bell tolled the curfew. This was the signal to cover all fires with ashes to lessen the peril of houses catching fire in the night.

The chief glories of the medieval towns were their churches and guildhalls. The Gothic cathedrals were especially splendid and represented the labor of every art and craft. They were the artistic monuments of the Middle Ages. Many still stand. The construction of Gothic churches began during the 12th century with such architectural masterpieces as the cathedrals at Chartres and Paris. They were typically built of stone. Advances in engineering made possible the greater use of wall space for stained-glass windows, thus enhancing the beauty of the churches. The skilled use of such architectural elements as the ribbed vault, the pointed arch, and the flying buttress also allowed architects to create much broader and taller buildings, with soaring interior spaces. (See also architecture, “Gothic”.)

Many European cities have also preserved their old, ornate guildhalls, where the guilds assembled. The Grand Place in Brussels, Belgium, is surrounded on three sides by guildhalls, most of which date from the 17th century. Zürich, Switzerland, which was ruled by guilds until 1789, has several beautifully decorated guildhalls.

Michael Frassetto Ed.

Cite

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