

World History: European Middle Ages, 500–1200

Section 1: Germanic Kingdoms Unite Under Charlemagne

By the end of the fourth century, invaders from many different German groups overran the Roman Empire in the west. Their arrival and the collapse of Roman rule had several effects. The Germans' attacks put a halt to all trade, as it was not safe to move goods from one place to another. The end of Roman government and the decline in trade made cities less important. As cities faded, nobles moved to the countryside. Poorer people followed, hoping to be able to grow their own food. The general level of education in society became lower. As Germans settled in different areas, they began to Latin with phrases of their own. Their language developed different dialects. Europe no longer had a single language understood by all.

From about A.D. 400 to 600, Europe was the scene of turmoil and chaos as small German kingdoms fought each other for power. Long held Roman ideas about law were replaced by German ideas of society based on close personal ties. The Catholic Church provided the only sense of order. In 496, Clovis, the king of the Franks, became a Christian with all his warriors. From then on, the pope in Rome supported the military efforts of Clovis.

Clovis was one of many leaders to become Christian. The Church made an effort to bring these people to the religion. It also set up new communities called monasteries, where men—monks—and women—nuns—lived lives devoted to God. These monasteries became important because their libraries preserved some of the writings of the ancient world.

The Church also grew in importance when Gregory I became pope in 590. He made the pope the guardian of the spiritual lives of all Christians. He also made the pope an important power in governing part of Italy.

The kingdom of the Franks covered much of modern France. By the 700s, the most important official was the mayor of the palace. He made laws and controlled the army. In 719 Charles Martel became mayor and expanded the lands controlled by the Franks. He also won a battle in 732 against a Muslim force moving north from Spain. That ended the Muslim threat to Europe and made Martel a Christian hero. His son, Pepin, was crowned king.

One of Pepin's sons, Charlemagne, became king of all the land of the Franks in 771. At six feet, four inches tall, Charlemagne towered over most people of his time. With military skill, he expanded his kingdom to make it larger than any known since ancient Rome. By 800, he held most of modern Italy, all of modern France, and parts of modern Spain and Germany. Pope Leo III crowned him emperor. With that, the power of the Church and the German kings joined the heritage of the old Roman Empire.

Charlemagne cut the power of the nobles in his empire and increased his own. He traveled throughout his lands, visiting the people and judging cases. He brought well-read men to his court and sponsored a revival of learning. However, Charlemagne's empire broke into pieces soon after his death.

Section 2: Feudalism in Europe

Between 800 and 1000, Europe was threatened by new invasions. Muslims captured Sicily in southern Italy. Magyars attacked lands to the east. From the north came the most feared fighters of all, the Vikings, or Norsemen.

The Vikings left Sweden and Norway for small, quick raiding parties, taking anything of value from villages and monasteries. They struck terror in the hearts of Europeans. By around the year 1000, though, the Vikings had settled down in many parts of Europe. They adopted Christianity and stopped raiding to become traders and farmers.

The Magyars, Turkish nomads, attacked from the east and reached as far as Italy and western France. They sold local people as slaves. These attacks and those of Muslims and Vikings made life in Western Europe difficult. People suffered and feared for their futures. With no strong central government, they went to local leaders for protection.

Beginning about 850, rulers and the invaders made peace. Viking leaders were given pieces of land in return for a promise of loyalty to the ruler. In this way, Europe's feudal system began. It was based on the idea that a lord gave land to another person of lower status, called a vassal. The vassal promised to supply soldiers when the lord needed them. Under feudalism, society in Western Europe was divided into three groups: those who fought—the nobles and knights; those who prayed—the officials of the Church; and those who worked—the peasants. Peasants were by far the largest group. Many of them were not free to move about as they wished. They were tied to the land of their lord. The lord's land was called the manor, and manors became the centers of economic life. Lords gave peasants land, a home, and protection from raiders. The peasants worked the land to grow food, giving part of each year's crop to the lord. They also paid taxes every year and had much of their lives controlled by the lord. Peasants lived in small villages of 15 to 30 families. They found everything they needed in that small community and rarely traveled far from their homes. Their cottages had only one or two rooms with only straw mats for sleeping. They had poor diets. They endured these lives, believing that God had set their place in society.

Section 3: The Age of Chivalry

Nobles were constantly at war with one another. They employed knights, who were soldiers who fought on horseback. Using the saddle and stirrup to stay firmly in place on the horse, these knights became the most important military weapon of the time in Europe. By about the year 1000, nobles used their armies of mounted knights to fight one another for control of land. When they won battles, they gave some of the new land to their knights. The knights could use the income from this land to support their need for costly weapons, armor, and horses. They devoted much of their time to improving their skill at fighting.

By the 1100s, a new code of conduct for knights had developed. This code of chivalry said that knights had to fight fiercely for three masters: God, their lord, and his chosen lady. They were also required to protect the weak and poor. While the code set high standards, few knights met them. Most were harsh and cruel to peasants.

The sons of nobles and knights began training to become knights at an early age. They gained experience by fighting in staged combats called tournaments. These fights were fierce, but real battles were very bloody and harsh. To protect their lands and homes, nobles built stone castles. When a castle was attacked, defenders poured hot oil or boiling water on people trying to attack. The literature about knights did not reflect this bloody reality. Poems and stories stressed the code of chivalry, life in the castle, and the knight's loyalty to the woman he loved. Some long poems, called epics, told the story of legendary kings such as King Arthur and Charlemagne. Song told the joys and sorrows of romantic love. Many of the writers of these songs traveled to the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the rich and powerful ruler of a land in southern France.

The knights' ideals of love and devotion to a noble lady seemed to give women a high position in the society of the Middle Ages. In fact, the position of women actually worsened in this period. They were limited to working in the home or living in convents. Noble women could sometimes rule the land when their husbands were away from home, but they could not inherit land. It usually passed from father to son.

Among the poor, there was no change, however. Poor women had to work in the fields with their husbands and children simply to grow enough food to survive—just as they had always done.

Section 4: The Church Wields Power

With the central governments of Europe weak, the Church became the most important force unifying European society. An early pope had said that God had made two areas of influence in the world—religious and political. The pope was in charge of spiritual matters, he said. The emperor and other rulers were in charge of political affairs. Over the years, though, the difference was not so clear. Popes often tried to influence the actions of rulers, who clashed with them in a struggle for power. The Church was organized into a structure that mirrored society. At the bottom were the priests who led services at local churches. Above them were bishops, who oversaw all the priests in a large area. At the top was the pope, the head of the Church.

The Middle Ages was an Age of Faith, when people were bound together by their belief in God and the teachings of the Church. Though life was hard, the peasants hoped that by obeying God and doing their work they would earn the reward of being saved and being taken to heaven after death. The local church served not only for religious services but also as a center of the community. Holidays such as Easter and Christmas were joyful times of the year.

The Church also developed a body of law called canon law. It set standards for the conduct of people and officials of the Church. These laws ruled over such issues as marriage and religious practices. They applied to all Christians, from kings to peasants. The Church also set up courts that took charge when people broke these laws.

Two punishments were especially harsh. If the Church excommunicated a person, he or she was banished from the Church. The person was denied the chance for eternal life in heaven. Popes often used this power as a threat to try to force rulers to do what they wanted. The other punishment was interdiction. When a ruler refused to obey the pope, the Church leader could place the land under interdiction. That meant that no sacred actions of the Church could officially take place in those lands. The people of the area deeply feared this, for then they were doomed to eternal suffering in hell, not life in heaven.

The kingdom of Germany became the strongest after the death of Charlemagne. It came to be called the Holy Roman Empire and enjoyed close ties with the pope. Soon, though, pope and emperor became caught in a conflict. Rulers had, for a long time, enjoyed the power to name the bishops who led the Church in their lands. In 1075, Pope Gregory VII banned this practice. The German emperor, Henry IV, was angry and got his bishops to say that this pope had no real authority. Gregory then excommunicated Henry. When his nobles rebelled against him, Henry went to the pope and received forgiveness. However, the larger issue of excommunication was left open until 1122. Then an agreement stated that only the pope could name bishops. However, the emperor had the right to turn down any appointment that he did not like.

In the late 1100s, a new German ruler—Frederick I—tried to rebuild the power of the emperor. He tried to increase his control of the cities of Italy but lost an important battle. When he died in 1190, the many nobles of Germany took control of that area. The emperor continued to rule the land, but the smaller nobles held the real power. This situation continued in Germany for many hundreds of years.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW German peoples moved into the Roman Empire, causing it to fall. Small kingdoms arose. The kingdom of Charlemagne finally reunited western Europe but split apart after his death. As different groups invaded Europe, people sought protection and gave up some rights to powerful lords, producing a system called feudalism. The Church proved an important spiritual and political force throughout the Middle Ages.