

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

The “Middle Ages” was a time in Europe that started after the fall of the Roman Empire in the year 476. It was followed by another period called the Renaissance in the 1300s. It is also sometimes known as the Middle Period, the Dark Ages or Medieval Times.

Birth of an idea

The way we think of the Middle Ages has a lot to do with how we think about the Renaissance. Starting in the 1300s, after the Middle Ages, European thinkers, writers and artists became interested in the art and culture of ancient Greece and Rome. These ancient civilizations came before the Middle Ages. Because the Renaissance grew from the culture of ancient Rome and Greece, the scholars thought of the time in between as the “Middle” or even “Dark” age.

This way of thinking has recently been challenged. Today's historians see the Middle Ages as complex and interesting a time period as any other.

The Catholic Church

After the fall of Rome, the most powerful organization in Europe was the Catholic Church. The Church was even more powerful than kings and queens.

Ordinary people across Europe had to donate one-tenth of the money they made each year to the Church. This was a custom called "tithing." As a result, the Church built up a great deal of money and power.

The rise of Islam

Meanwhile, the Islamic world was growing larger and more powerful. Muslim armies conquered large parts of the Middle East. The Muslims practiced a religion called Islam. The religion of Islam is still practiced today. During the Middle Ages, the lands conquered by Muslims armies were controlled by a single leader. The leader was called a caliph.

The Islamic world became very powerful. At its most powerful, the medieval Islamic world was more than three times bigger than the Christian world.

Under the caliphs, life and culture in great cities blossomed. Some of these cities included Cairo in what is now Egypt and Damascus in what is now Syria. Poets, scientists and philosophers wrote thousands of books. They also developed the number system that we all use today. Inventors came up with technologies like the pinhole camera, soap, windmills and surgical tools.

The Crusades

The Christian and Islamic worlds soon clashed. The Catholic Church began a series of military campaigns, called the Crusades. It wanted to force Muslims out of Europe. Crusaders believed that their military service would guarantee that they could spend all eternity in heaven.

The Crusades began in 1095 and continued on and off until the end of the 1400s. Neither side "won" in the struggle, though many thousands of people from both sides lost their lives.

A side effect of the Crusades was that they led to more exchange of ideas between Europe and Islam. Crusaders learned about Islamic literature, science and technology. They brought many new ideas from the Islamic world as a result.

Art and architecture

Art and architecture in Europe changed in important ways during the Middle Ages. Hundreds of cathedrals were built. These were very large churches. The cathedrals built after the year 900 up to the 1200s were mostly in the Romanesque style. Romanesque cathedrals have rounded stone arches, thick walls and few windows.

Around the year 1200, builders started to embrace a new style, called Gothic. Gothic cathedrals had huge stained-glass windows and pointed arches.

Religious art changed as well. Artists were hired to create grand paintings and decorations for churches. Craftsmen made illuminated manuscripts. These were handmade books with colored illustrations, gold and silver lettering and other decorations.

Economics and society

In medieval Europe, life in the countryside was controlled by a system called “feudalism.” The king gave large pieces of land, called fiefs, to powerful families. Peasants, known as serfs, worked the land. Their only payment was that they were allowed to live on the fiefs and were promised protection if enemies attacked.

Feudal life started to change when new farming tools like the heavy plow were introduced. With these tools, fewer farmers could grow more food. As a result, the population of serfs grew, but they could not all find work. When this happened, many of them moved into towns and cities.

Between 1347 and 1350, however, a mysterious disease started to spread across Europe. It was called the bubonic plague, though many at the time called it the “Black Death.” It killed about 20 million people in Europe, or about 1 out of every 3 people. It was especially deadly in cities. People were so crowded together there that it was impossible to prevent the disease from spreading.

After the Black Death, however, a new time period was beginning in these cities. It was called the Renaissance.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "The rise of Islam."

Under the caliphs, life and culture in great cities blossomed. Some of these cities included Cairo in what is now Egypt and Damascus in what is now Syria. Poets, scientists and philosophers wrote thousands of books. They also developed the number system that we all use today. Inventors came up with technologies like the pinhole camera, soap, windmills and surgical tools.

What conclusion is supported by this paragraph?

- (A) Poets and philosophers needed a number system in order to write their books.
 - (B) The ideas developed in Islamic cities are still important to the modern world.
 - (C) The most important Islamic poets and scientists came from Cairo and Damascus.
 - (D) The inventions we use today have not changed since the Middle Ages.
- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Economics and society."

Between 1347 and 1350, however, a mysterious disease started to spread across Europe. It was called the bubonic plague, though many at the time called it the "Black Death." It killed about 20 million people in Europe, or about 1 out of every 3 people. It was especially deadly in cities. People were so crowded together there that it was impossible to prevent the disease from spreading.

What conclusion can the reader make based on this paragraph?

- (A) The bubonic plague was caused by serfs who moved into cities.
- (B) People who lived in the countryside were safe from bubonic plague.
- (C) Fewer people may have died from bubonic plague if serfs had stayed in the country.
- (D) Rulers and wealthy people were less affected by bubonic plague than peasants were.

3 Read the section "Art and architecture."

Which option BEST describes the structure of this section?

- (A) cause and effect
- (B) problem and solution
- (C) question and answer
- (D) compare and contrast

4 The author organized this article by listing different causes and effects.

WHY did the author choose to use this structure?

- (A) to emphasize the changes in Europe and the Middle East during the Middle Ages
- (B) to show why different groups and ideas spread during the Middle Ages
- (C) to explain why the Middle Ages led to the beginning of the Renaissance
- (D) to describe how life during the Middle Ages was difficult for many people