

The Middle Ages

Introduction to the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages is a period in European history from about the 400's to 1400 AD. During these years, also known as the Medieval period, Europe evolved from ancient to modern times. This gradual change began when the Roman Empire collapsed in Western Europe during the 400's. Many people believe that after this collapse culture and society **declined**.¹ The Middle Ages is sometimes called the Dark Ages because of this belief.

In fact, the Middle Ages was a time of great activity. The Roman Empire was divided into many smaller kingdoms. Most kings had little control over their kingdoms. As a result, hundreds of **vassals**² with titles like prince, duke, and count became independent rulers of their own land. Their territories were known as fiefs. They ruled like kings through a form of government known as feudalism.

Under feudalism, a king gave a fief in return for a vassal's loyalty and service. The vassal promised to protect the king and fight in his army as a knight. The vassal, in turn, would give part of his fief to people who promised to serve and protect him. The feudal system of government created two main classes of people. The ruling class governed the **peasants**³ and engaged in the fighting. The peasants or serfs worked the land to support themselves and their rulers. There was also a third group of people, the clergy, which served the church.

The church was the main force that kept Europe together during the Middle Ages. Church leaders took over many functions of government after the Roman Empire collapsed. Most Europeans were Christian. The church had great power over its people. It was very wealthy and owned a lot of land. It provided education and encouraged **literacy**.⁴ It also administered justice and created hospitals for the sick.

In the beginning of the Middle Ages, most people were very poor. However, between the 1000's and 1200's the economy began to get stronger.

¹ **declined** – got worse

² **vassals** – people given land and protection by a lord in return for loyalty and military service

³ **peasants** – people who own or work on a small farm; people without much money and social standing

⁴ **literacy** – the ability to read and write

Things improved. Medieval **civilization**⁵ was at its peak during this time, which is often referred to as the High Middle Ages. There was peace across most of Europe. Peasants developed new ways of farming that kept them out of poverty. Merchants were able to trade using improved roads and seaways to sell their products from town to town.

The Medieval period is often remembered for the Crusades, a series of holy wars in which Christian armies sought to take control of the holy lands of Palestine away from the Muslim forces. But the High Middle Ages was also a period of achievement. Great stone cathedrals were built to glorify God throughout Europe. Writers and painters created great works, some of which are among history's finest.

⁵ **civilization** – an advanced stage of human society