

Europe during the Middle Ages

The medieval period of European history, also known as the Middle Ages, is considered to have lasted from 500-1500. Traditionally, the medieval era is broken down into three phases: the Early Middle Ages (500-1000), the High Middle Ages (1000-1300), and the Late Middle Ages (1300-1500).

The decline and eventual fall of the Roman Empire led to the Dark Ages. Europe became known as an “undeveloped area.” Intellect, taste and imagination disappeared from art and literature. During the Early Middle Ages the year’s 500-1000 was a period of political decentralization and overall backwardness. From 1000-1300, Europe enjoyed a revival. Nations became stronger, the economy grew healthier, and the level of technological and cultural knowledge improved. The concept of Europe as a single civilization, joined together by a common cultural heritage and the Christian religion, took greater shape during these years. The years 1300-1500 were complex, marked by both crisis and advancement. On one hand, Europe was struck by social unrest, constant warfare, and struck by the Black Death. On the other hand, these years were the start of major advancement. The Renaissance began in Italy, ushering in a period of tremendous artistic and intellectual achievement.

1. Describe what the three periods of the Middle Ages were like in the following graphic organizer.

The Early Middle Ages	The High Middle Ages	The Late Middle Ages

The Rise of Regional States in Western Europe

After the chaos of the fall of the Roman Empire, some areas of Western Europe witnessed the rise of powerful nobles and monarchs who established unified regional governments that provided a glimpse of the future of Western Europe. In the decades following the fall of Rome, local governments in the form of small Germanic kingdoms replaced imperial rule. At the same time, the Catholic Church served as a unifying force in the territories of the former Roman Empire. Eventually many of the Germanic tribes surrounding the former Roman Empire converted to Christianity.

Germanic rule structured itself around loyalties to family and the individual, such as the Germanic chiefs. In the former Roman province of Gaul, power was in the hands of a Germanic people called the Franks. Clovis the leader of the Franks converted to Christianity along with his army. Their adoption of Roman Christianity gained the Franks the support of the pope, thereby strengthening the power of the Frankish leaders.

1. After the fall of Rome, how was the west ruled?
2. How was Christianity adopted, and how did it help the Franks?

Monastic Life

During the rule of the Frankish kings, the Roman Catholic Church established monasteries and convents where monks and nuns relinquished their private possessions in order to serve God. One order was the Benedictine Order, founded around 520 by and Italian monk named St. Benedict. The Rule of St. Benedict required its monks to observe the rules of poverty, charity and obedience. They also divided the monk’s day into hours of meditation and hours of manual labor. St. Benedict’s sister, the nun St. Scholastica, adapted the rule to guide the lives of women in convents as well.

Within the walls of the monasteries of Western Europe, monks preserved education by maintaining schools and libraries. An accomplishment of the monks was the hand copying of books and manuscripts. They enhanced the beauty of the manuscripts by illustrating them with elaborate letters and detailed pictures. These illuminated manuscripts preserved Greco-Roman culture until the invention of the printing press in the 1400's. In addition to preserving the Roman culture, the Church continued to solidify its authority over secular as well as spiritual matters. When Gregory the Great (Gregory I) became pope in 590, he used church finances to engage in traditionally secular roles of repairing public works, raising armies, and establishing public welfare programs. The concept of secular kingdoms under church authority would prove a source of increasing tension between popes and kings throughout the medieval period.

1. Who was St. Benedict and what was his order?
2. What were some effects of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages?

The Battle of Tours

October 10, 732 AD marks the conclusion of the Battle of Tours, arguably one of the most decisive battles in all of history. A Muslim army, in a crusading search for land and the end of Christianity, after the conquest of Syria, Egypt, and North Africa, began to invade Western Europe. The Muslims led an infantry of 60,000 and 400,000 soldiers toward Tours, but they were met just outside the city by Charles Martel, known as the Hammer, and the Frankish Army.

Martel gathered his forces directly in the path of the oncoming Muslim army and prepared to defend their land by using a phalanx style of combat. The invading Muslims rushed forward; however, the French Army was well trained. Despite the effectiveness of the Muslim army in previous battles, the terrain caused them a disadvantage. Their strength lay within their cavalry, armed with large swords and lances, the terrain limited their mobility. The French army held their ground. It was one of the rare times in the Middle Ages when infantry held its ground against a mounted attack. The battle ended when the French captured and killed the Muslim leader. The Muslim army withdrew peacefully overnight and even though Martel expected a surprise retaliation, there was none. For the Muslims, the death of their leader caused a sharp setback and they had no choice but to retreat, never to return again. Not only did this prove to be a decisive battle for the Christians, but the Battle of Tours is considered the height of the Muslim invasion of Western Europe. Many historians say that if Martel had fallen at Tours the long term implications for European Christianity would likely have been devastating.

1. What were the Muslims searching for before the Battle of Tours?
2. Why is this battle so significant?

Charlemagne and the Carolingian Dynasty

In 768, when Charlemagne was 26, he and his younger brother inherited the kingdom of the Franks. In 771 his brother died, and Charlemagne became sole ruler of the kingdom. At that time the Franks were falling back into barbarian ways, neglecting their education and religion. In the south, the Roman Catholic Church was asserting its power to recover land confiscated by the Lombard kingdom of Italy. Europe was in turmoil.

Charlemagne was determined to strengthen his realm and to bring order to Europe. In 772 he launched a 30-year military campaign to accomplish this objective. He defeated the Avars in 791, and the conquest of Saxony took thirty years. Any Saxon who would not convert to Christianity would be killed. By 800 Charlemagne was the undisputed ruler of Western Europe. His vast realm encompassed what are now France, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. It included half of present-day Italy and Germany; Charlemagne restored much of the unity of the old Roman Empire and paved the way for the development of modern Europe.

On Christmas Day in 800, while Charlemagne knelt in prayer in Saint Peter's in Rome, Pope Leo III placed a golden crown on the head of the king. Once crowned king, Charlemagne used Christianity to protect any Christian land against Muslim attacks. He was devout Christian who spread Christianity throughout his empire and he also built new churches facing Jerusalem. Charlemagne was constantly reforming his empire. He placed a large emphasis on education and built schools where clergy could study ancient texts and philosophers.

Religion was not his only motivator. Charlemagne also focused on government problems. He established a central government, he developed a new administrative system and sent officials throughout the empire known as *missi dominici* to listen to legal cases and spread laws. His empire was very large so he instituted feudalism, where the land is ruled by local lords who pay homage to the king. The lords rule the land but the king still has all the power. His empire also did not levy taxes, and arts and education rose during his reign.

Describe the political, military, and religious achievements of Charlemagne in the following graphic organizer.

Political	Military	Religious

Death of Charlemagne

At Charlemagne's death in 814 only one of his three sons, Louis, was living. Louis's weak rule brought on the rise of civil wars and revolts. After his death, Louis' three sons split the empire between them by the Treaty of Verdun in 843.

The Frankish practice of dividing the realm led to further splits, not only of land but of rights and powers. No king emerged from these families to unite the lands, and many of the kings were outright incompetent. To add to their woes, the hundred year stretch from 850 to 950 was filled with the worst of the Viking invasions from Scandinavia, Moslem raids and pirates in the south and Magyar raids from Hungary. Against these pressures the Carolingians could not stand. Charles' great empire collapsed steadily, fragmenting into dozens of pieces. The monasteries were plundered, the towns burned. Even the very title of emperor was lost again for a time. When it reappeared, it was taken by a German king.

These constant attacks in the empire gave birth to a new era. During this time the cultures of all these areas began to blend. These areas developed many common features, but none more important than Christianity. At this time the Catholic Church was becoming the most powerful institution in the world.

1. How did Charlemagne's empire get divided?
2. How did the role of Christianity improve during this time?

The Achievements of Charlemagne

Such are the wars, most skillfully planned and successfully fought, which this most powerful king waged during the forty-seven years of his reign. He so largely increased the Frankish kingdom, which was already great and strong when he received it at his father's hands, that more than double its former territory was added to it...He subdued all the wild and barbarous tribes dwelling in Germany between the Rhine and the Vistula, the Ocean and the Danube, all of which speak very much the same language, but differ widely from one another in customs and dress...

He added to the glory of his reign by gaining the good will of several kings and nations...The emperors of Constantinople sought friendship and alliance with Charles by several embassies, the old Greek proverb was used to describe these alliances, "Have the Frank for your friend, but not for your neighbor." Many surrounding countries wanted to be friendly with the great king of the Franks.

Charles was so great at extending his empire and subduing foreign nations, that he was constantly occupied with plans to that end. He also undertook many works calculated to adorn and benefit his kingdom, and brought several of them to completion. Among these are, the basilica of the Holy Mother of God at Aix-la-Chapelle, built in the most admirable manner, and a bridge over the Rhine River at Mainz, half a mile long...Above all sacred buildings were the object of his care throughout his whole kingdom; and whenever they were falling into disrepair, Charles would order them rebuilt or repaired... Thus did Charles defend and increase as well as beautify his kingdom...

He cherished with great fervor and devotion the principles of the Christian religion, which had been instilled into him since infancy. This is why the basilica of the Holy Mother of God at Aix-la-Chapelle was built. The basilica was adorned with gold and silver and lamps, and with rails and doors of solid brass. He had the columns and marbles for this structure brought from Rome and Ravenna. He was a constant worshipper at this church as long as health permitted...

He was very forward in caring for the poor, so much so that he not only made a point of giving in his own country and his own kingdom, but when he discovered that there were Christians living in poverty in Syria, Egypt and Africa, at Jerusalem, Alexandria and Carthage, he had compassion on their wants, and used to send money over the seas to them...He sent countless gifts to popes, and wanted to reestablish the ancient authority of the city of Rome under his care and by his influence, and to defend and protect the Church of St. Peter, and to beautify and enrich it...

Source: Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*

1. Based on this excerpt from *The Life of Charlemagne*, how does Einhard prove Charlemagne's Christian background?
2. How does Einhard see the rule of Charlemagne? (Use evidence to support your claim)
3. Is there evidence of bias in this article?