



The Middle Ages live on in popular culture today. The Black Knight, with most of his limbs still attached, fights it out with King Arthur in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (above left), a 1974 spoof of medieval romances, now a cult classic. (Courtesy of Python (Monty) Pictures, Ltd.) *Chant*, a recording of medieval church music, topped the charts in 1994. (Courtesy of Angel Records) Tourists visit the physical remains left by the Middle Ages not only in Europe but also in the United States. This late-12th-century cloister (right), from Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert in southern France, was transported and reerected intact at the Cloisters in Manhattan in the 20th century.

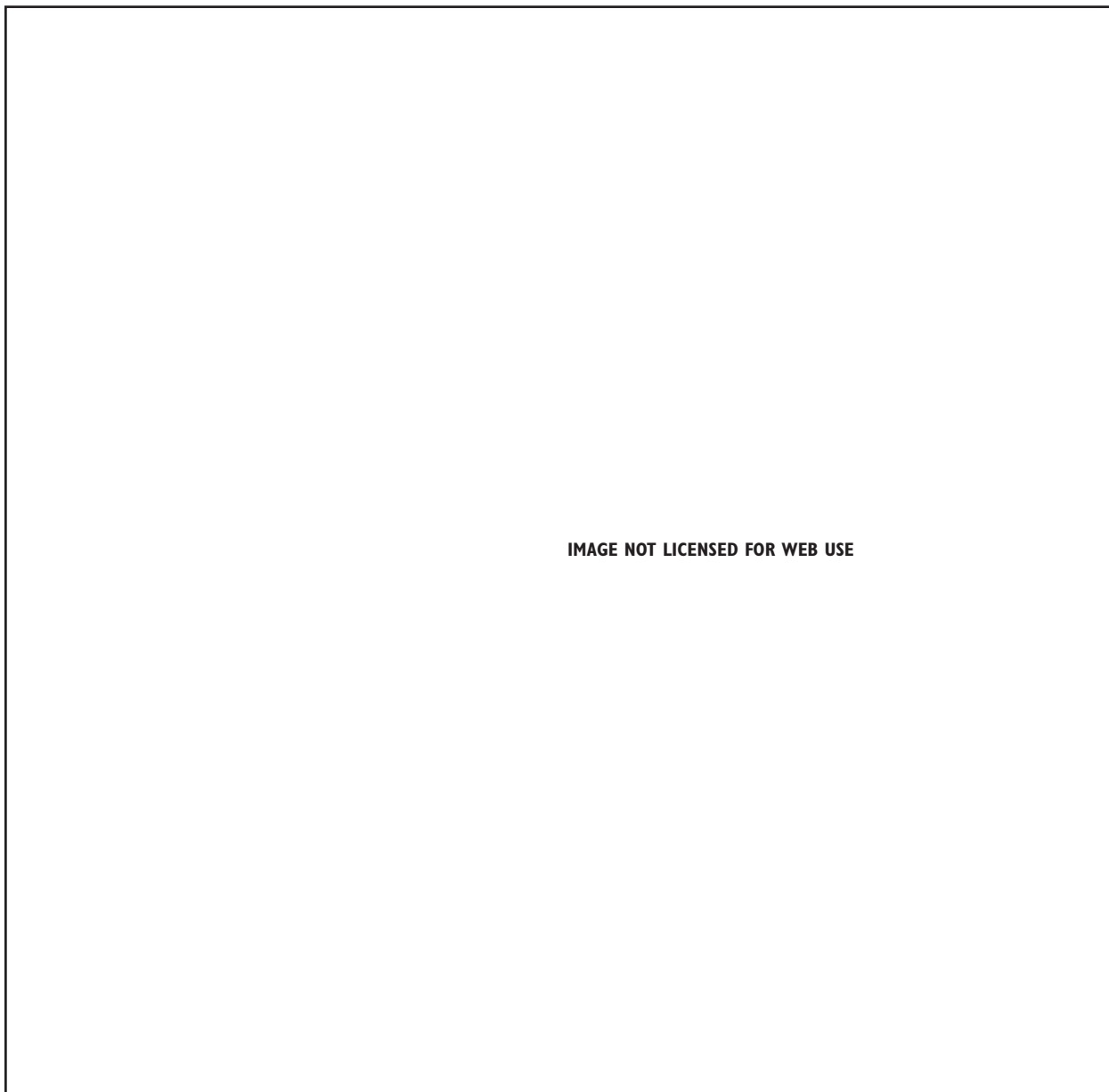


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(The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1925. (25.120.3-4) Photograph © 1979 The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

If we look at movies, newspapers, and magazines, or on the Internet, we find that the Middle Ages are for us first and foremost an almost mythical time in Europe's distant past. "Middle Ages" means kings and queens, knights and castles, and glorious, unfettered, joyous violence.

What's "Middle" About the Middle Ages?

by Warren C. Brown

In 1986, the physicists Paul Ginsparg and Sheldon Glashow used the Middle Ages as a metaphor to express their concern with the way that string theory seemed to be increasingly divorced from verifiable reality. They charged string theory with being a kind of "medieval theology" that would undermine science itself: "For the first time since the Dark Ages, we can see how our noble search may end up with faith replacing science once again."

Ginsparg and Glashow's comments reflect one of the more common popular images of the Middle Ages. From a modern perspective, the term "medieval" frequently connotes either religion carried to the point of superstition or religious and intellectual intolerance: the Inquisition, faith smothering reason, and Joan of Arc burning at the stake. In other words, the adjective "medieval" is often used to represent the antithesis of our post-Enlightenment/post-scientific-revolution way of viewing the world.

American popular culture contains other images of the Middle Ages as well. If we look at movies, newspapers, and magazines, or on the Internet, we find that the Middle Ages are for us first and foremost an almost mythical time in Europe's distant past. "Middle Ages" means kings and queens, knights and castles, and glorious, unfettered, joyous violence. It means dragons, damsels in distress. It means oppressed peasant serfs, exploited by their rapacious lords. The Middle Ages have inspired not only movie-makers, but also legions of historical reenactors and war gamers who have turned to medieval history and mythology in search of a simpler and more direct world with fewer rules than, or perhaps rules different from, our own.

As I indicated above, there is, of course, also a strong religious component to the popular idea of the Middle Ages. "Middle Ages" means Christian churches, Christian monks. Popular destinations for tourists interested in the period include not

only castles but also great cathedrals and monasteries—and not just in Europe, but sometimes moved to this continent, like the pieces of various monasteries incorporated into the Cloisters in Manhattan.

But what *were* the Middle Ages, really, and what was "middle" about them?

To answer this question, we need to get away from popular conceptions and preconceptions and look at what the term "Middle Ages" actually means. Literally, it means a set of times that lies between other times. The question then becomes: which times are they, and what times do they lie between? To find out, we need to look at where the term originated and what it was first used for.

The term first started appearing in Europe in the mid 15th century, a period when European intellectuals were beginning to feel that their world was somehow different from the world that had come before it. This sense of difference translated into a sense of revival or "renaissance"; that is, a sense that European civilization was recovering from something. These early-modern intellectuals measured that recovery by a set of even older standards: the intellectual, political, and artistic glories of classical Rome. They used the term "middle age" to describe the period between classical antiquity and their own present, which they sought to connect to classical antiquity—that is, to refer to the in-between "not antiquity." The term was, therefore, not flattering. "Middle" used in this way meant not only "between" but also "lesser."

By the 18th century, European historians were using "middle age" to label a discrete historical period from roughly the 4th through the mid 15th century. This "time in between" was like a dark valley between two shining hills, hence the corresponding term "Dark Ages." In the view of these historians, in the late 4th and the 5th centuries barbarian hordes (most visibly Goths and Vandals) swept across the Western Roman Empire.

Early-modern historians considered the ornate gothic architecture (right: Chartres Cathedral) and script of the Middle Ages “barbaric”—an unfortunate departure from the purity of classical Roman forms.



These barbarians destroyed ancient civilization; they wiped out ancient learning, art, and architecture. While Roman civilization survived for many more centuries in the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire centered in Constantinople, civilization in western Europe reverted to a rudimentary level. The only light flickering in the darkness was kept alive by monks working desperately in remote monasteries to salvage what they could of the wreckage.

The cultural handiwork of the Middle Ages was seen accordingly as “barbaric” in comparison to the things Rome had produced. For example, medieval buildings were much too ornate and complicated; medieval handwriting was equally incomprehensible. These things had to have come from the barbarians, hence the terms “gothic” architecture and “gothic” script.

Attitudes toward the Middle Ages among historians have improved since then, but the sense that the period was different, unique, even “middle,” has remained. Looked at from the eyes of modern medieval historians, then: what is “middle” about the Middle Ages?

First I must issue a disclaimer: what I’m presenting here is *my* Middle Ages. The picture I will lay out for you here is shaped by my training and by the questions that interest me. It is also shaped by my interaction with my professional colleagues and with my students—who have

helped me to understand just what it is that I study. Someone else might present a very different picture. Due to the limits of space, my picture will also be incomplete; I could write an entirely new essay from the things I have had to leave out. Nevertheless, I want to use the space I do have to suggest some particular points that might help us understand what makes this time worth studying.

The story undeniably starts with the end of the classical world. The Roman world was profoundly Mediterranean. Plato’s famous comment about the ancient Greeks that they lived on the shores of the Mediterranean like “frogs about a marsh” applied equally well to most of Roman civilization. The Roman Empire would remain to its dying breath a loose aggregate of independent city-states, most of which were grouped around the shores of the sea that the Romans proudly called *mare nostrum*—our sea.

Roman society was also polytheistic, marked by a bewildering array of religious cults of various shapes and sizes that Roman governments cheerfully tolerated as long as they didn’t interfere with the established state pantheon of gods.

Historians are now divided about when the Roman world came to an end. One of the hottest new areas of research in the last few decades has concerned how to define the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. The problem is that the lines are blurred. Change happened at different rates in different arenas. If we focus on any one point in time we see both signs of the future and signs of the past.

The Roman Empire in the 3rd century stretched northward as far as Britain, southward into North Africa, and eastward into Asia, but its center remained the Mediterranean Sea.



For example: is the dividing line Christianity? Not to the Roman emperor Constantine, who legalized and promoted Christianity at the beginning of the 4th century and who oversaw the Council of Nicaea in 325, which promulgated the statement of belief, or creed, that is still the central statement of faith for Christian churches.

During the 4th and 5th centuries, barbarian peoples gradually infiltrated the western Mediterranean lands and established their own kingdoms. The Byzantine Empire succeeded what was left of the Roman Empire in the east, while in the west, Roman and barbarian governments and cultures became inextricably fused.



Neither the Christian Constantine (top), who ruled as emperor in the 4th century and moved his capital eastward, nor Romulus Augustulus (bottom), who was deposed by barbarians in 476, was responsible for the “fall” of the Roman Empire.

Constantine was Roman. He acted in the best interests of the Empire as he saw them in promoting a youthful and vigorous religion that could help him unite a polity that had been battered by invasion and civil war for most of the previous century.

Or is the dividing line economic or social, perhaps marked by transition from gangs of slaves working huge plantations to quasi-free or unfree serfs working their own fields and paying dues of produce or labor to their lords? Again, it’s not easy to say. Clear antecedents of medieval serfdom were already visible in the Roman world by the end of the 3rd century.

Perhaps the greatest example of the difficulty is pinning down the “fall” of the Roman Empire itself. Recent research on late antiquity has contributed the recognition that the Roman Empire did not so much fall as become gradually transformed out of existence. Most textbooks give the date of the fall as 476. In this year, the last “legitimate” western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by a barbarian military commander. A leading scholar of the period, however, has characterized this as the greatest nonevent in western history. The deposition of Romulus Augustulus is now understood as entirely typical late-Roman power politics in a world where barbarian and Roman had become irreversibly blended. This was a world in which Germanic barbarians had served as Roman soldiers and even generals for centuries; a world in which Roman emperors freely used entire barbarian peoples as armies to make up for a shortage of army recruits. Many contemporaries hardly noticed the event that now looms so large in history books. To them it looked simply like a coup d’état by a Romanized barbarian general, similar to countless others carried out over the preceding centuries by Romanized barbarians or barbarized Romans.

Nevertheless, with hindsight we can see that a

critical transformation was taking place. By 500 political competition no longer focused on control of the imperial office itself, but rather on carving out local or regional spheres of domination within the western territory that had formerly been under direct imperial rule.

What followed was a long period of what historians now call “sub-Roman” society. Traditions of classical aristocratic culture and lay Latin education continued in the West. Descendants of Roman soldiers still occupied the bases and used the weapons of their great-grandfathers. Barbarian kings still nursed Roman titles that their forefathers had borne in Roman service; they issued law codes drawn up by Roman legal experts and still paid lip service to the eastern emperor in Constantinople.

These continuities, however, existed side by side with profound change. For example, in the classical empire, a local aristocratic bigwig would have shown his wealth and power by serving on his town council, by promoting the political careers of promising young men, and by building lots of great secular buildings with his name on them. In the sub-Roman world, a local aristocrat (probably of mixed Roman and barbarian heritage) exercised the same kind of power over local affairs, but as a Christian bishop building churches or monasteries. This sub-Roman local aristocrat could also be female. Christianity opened the doors wide for aristocratic women, through their patronage of churches and monasteries, to wield considerable influence on a local or regional scale, or even on the scale of a kingdom.

One of the most important changes that took place was the separation of western Roman society from its southern half. Starting in the 7th century, Islamic troops spread out from Arabia into the Mediterranean basin. By 711, they had overrun North Africa and jumped across the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain. These Islamic conquests helped shift the center of gravity of European

civilization to the north and west.

So when do we finally get to the Middle Ages? My personal favorite as a symbolic date for the end of sub-Roman late antiquity and the arrival of something really different is Christmas Day of the year 800. On that day, Charlemagne, a Frank—that is, a descendant of the barbarian group that had taken over the rule of Roman Gaul—was crowned emperor of a revived Western Roman Empire.

Yet this new western empire was not really Roman. It was clearly European; its center of gravity was *not* the Mediterranean. Moreover, Charlemagne's empire (which historians now call the Carolingian Empire, from Charlemagne's name in Latin—*Carolus*) had no bureaucracy or standing army as the old empire had. It was held together by ties of loyalty and self-interest binding emperor to aristocrats to local freemen. It was maintained by constant warfare carried out on a seasonal basis (almost like football season) by the emperor, the aristocrats and their armed followers, and levies of local freemen carrying out required military service.

Even more important was that fact that although Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome, the coronation was performed in a church, by a bishop of Rome, Pope Leo III. This act reflected Charlemagne's efforts to unify his empire by promoting a centralized western Christian church that looked to the papacy for spiritual authority—something very unlike the Christian churches of antiquity.

Charlemagne's empire was also held together by a common written culture based on a backward looking, revived classical Latin, which by this point was very different from spoken late-Latin vernaculars. Charlemagne and his successors promoted this written culture as a way to standardize and ensure the quality of religious training and to enable government and church officials to communicate over long

distances in an empire that was a hodgepodge of different peoples, cultures, and legal traditions.

So these are the things that make the Middle Ages “middle”: a coherent Latin Christian civilization, centered in western and central Europe and distinct from the Islamic world and the Greek Christian Byzantine Empire. The written language of this civilization was Latin. The bonds between its members depended more on kinship, loyalty, and self-interest than on bureaucratic or contractual relationships. This “Latin West” as a visible civilization maintained its coherence even after Charlemagne's empire broke up in the mid 9th century.

Looking closely at the centuries that followed, it's possible to identify other things that made medieval civilization different from what came before and what came after. In particular, we find things living comfortably together that people in modern western societies might consider mutually exclusive. For example, the natural world and the supernatural world were completely and organically intertwined. As far as medieval people were concerned, miracles happened. These two worlds intersected in saints—that is, holy men and women—and especially in their relics (bits and pieces of their physical remains or items that had once belonged to them). People prayed to saints as personified in relics, and expected in return protection or intercession with God, just as one expected one's earthly lord or patron to provide protection or intercede on one's behalf with a higher lord.

Saints' relics, accordingly, were given royal treatment; relic cases, or reliquaries, include some of the most ornate and beautiful works of art to survive the Middle Ages. Saints responded to this treatment with miracles. The most common ones were a direct reflection of much of Christ's activity in the New Testament: healing miracles. One example among innumerable others occurred in the early 13th century. Brother Paul of Venice, a member of the Dominican order of friars, wanted to testify in the canonization process of the order's founder, Dominic. Paul had such bad kidney pains, however, that he was afraid he could not. So he prayed at Dominic's tomb. Sure enough, his pains vanished and he was able to testify—and the miracle conveniently gave him something to testify about.

The supernatural world also communicated with the natural world through visions and voices. The following example demonstrates the huge gulf between the medieval world view and our own. A friend of mine served as a historical adviser on a recent TV movie about Joan of Arc, the 15th-century French peasant girl who claimed to hear voices telling her to go and rally the French to drive the English from France. My friend showed up at the first meeting with the heads of the project to find them still trying to sort out their script. The main question that they were strug-

After the Islamic conquest of North Africa and Spain in the 7th and 8th centuries, Charlemagne consolidated his Western Roman Empire in the north in the 9th century. The orange area represents the mainly Frankish lands he started with; bluish green, the territories added before Charlemagne's death in 814; and greenish yellow, the tributary Slavic states. Although “Roman” in name, it was not centered around the Mediterranean; historians now refer to it as the Carolingian Empire.



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The medieval mentality was dominated by the concept of right or truth; everyone had his own—and it frequently came into conflict with someone else's.



Voices, visions, and miracles were part of the “truth” in the Middle Ages. Joan of Arc (top, right; 15th century; Giraudon/Art Resource, NY) heard voices from God directing her to lead her countrymen against the English; and a grateful Saint Faith (her ornate jewelled reliquary is shown above) performed miracles after her relics were moved to a different church.

gling with was: how do we portray why Joan did what she did?

Among the possible explanations they had come up with were: 1) Joan wanted to prove that as a girl she could be powerful in a man's world; 2) she wanted to prove that a country girl could make it big on the national stage; and 3), my personal favorite, her father hadn't wanted a girl and had tried to abandon her to die when she was born, so Joan spent the rest of her life trying to prove to her father that she wasn't worthless. After the discussion had gone on for a while, my friend finally raised his hand and ventured: “Perhaps Joan heard voices, and, given the 15th-century perception that the divine world communicated through voices, she interpreted them as a sign from God that she should go help drive the English out of France.” Their response was dismissive: “We're not interested in the God angle.”

Similarly, the boundary between truth and fiction in the Middle Ages was not how we would understand it today. Medieval writers have bedeviled generations of medieval historians with documents and stories that to us often seem to be fantasies or outright lies. But they weren't lies. The medieval mentality was dominated by the concept of right or truth; everyone had his own—and it frequently came into conflict with someone else's. If the documentation to support what you knew to be true didn't exist, then you produced it, by altering old documents, by writing new ones, by writing down old orally transmitted legends, and so on, to document what you knew must have been because it was right that it was so.

This activity produced tales that from a modern perspective seem very strange. One staple of medieval literature, for example, is the so-called “translation story”—the story of how a particular saint's relics were moved, or “translated,” from one place to another. A bald reading of many of these

stories from a modern perspective would suggest that some monks wanted relics they didn't have, so they went out and stole them. But the storytellers told it differently: the saint sent out a vision that he or she (that is, his or her relics) was being mistreated. The monks went out and liberated the saint from prison and brought the relics back to where the saint really preferred to be—that is, to their monastery. The saint then showed his or her approval by performing a host of miracles.

One prominent example concerns St. Faith, a late-3rd-century Roman girl who was martyred for her Christian beliefs. Faith's relics spent most of the Middle Ages at the monastery church at Conques, in southern France. According to an 11th-century translation account, they came to Conques in the second half of the 9th century from the church at Agen, likewise in southern France. A monk from Conques went to Agen and signed up with the church community there as an ordinary priest. He spent the next 10 years gaining the trust of the community and finally a position as guardian of the church treasury (where the relics were kept). One night, finding himself alone in the church, he broke open St. Faith's tomb, took her body, and ran back to Conques. The monks of Conques rejoiced, and St. Faith showed her approval by performing a battery of miracles over the next few centuries that turned Conques into a major pilgrimage destination.

Despite stories like this, the Middle Ages were also a period when two other things that some might see as diametrically opposed, Roman Catholic Christianity and rationalist Greek philosophy, could live in harmony. It was the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas who took the logic and natural philosophy of Aristotle, reintroduced into the West from the Islamic world, and reconciled it to revealed religion. Aquinas's basic assumption was that, since both reason and faith are God-given, they cannot contradict each other. Natural philosophy is therefore valid

Battles among the warrior aristocracy of the Middle Ages were fought on horseback with lances and swords, as portrayed in the scene below of William killing Harold at the Battle of Hastings (1066), from a 14th-century manuscript, *Decrees of Kings of Anglo-Saxon and Norman England*. (Art Resource, NY)

within its own sphere and can even help correct errors in the interpretation of scripture.

Perhaps the most striking contrast between medieval society and our own is that large segments of medieval society saw no contradiction between Christianity and violence. The dominant social class during much of the Middle Ages was the warrior aristocracy, which by the 12th century was labeling itself as knighthood. The knights' military and social power derived from their practice of heavily armed and armored warfare on horseback and their control of local fortifications—that is, castles. Knights saw their brand of warfare in and of itself as a religious vocation. Properly carried out, according to the rules, violence was work pleasing to God.

In medieval chivalric literature, such as the romances about Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, the path to God is to be found through the use of violence to protect women and orphans, to uphold justice and right order (here's that passionately and partisanly held vision of "right" again), to uphold the Christian faith, and to display the military prowess on which social and political power ultimately depended.

What about dragons and damsels in distress?

It is hard to say that there were dragons (although we do have medieval accounts of people having seen them), but there were certainly damsels in distress. One of the most famous knights of the 12th century, the Englishman William Marshall, as a young man got his start up the ladder that would lead to fame and a position as regent of England by trying to protect the Queen of England, the famous beauty Eleanor of Aquitaine, from ambush as she led an expedition to put down a rebellion in her continental territories. William got himself badly wounded and captured; a grateful Eleanor ransomed him and made him part of her own household.

The church, of course, had some problems with a lot of knightly violence. Beginning in the 10th century in France, church councils tried to proclaim the "Peace of God"—a set of limitations on the use of violence whose basic upshot was: "You can bang each other on the head all you want, but leave peasants and merchants alone, as well as church property and churchmen" (as long as these were unarmed; according to extant Peace Council acts, armed clerics were apparently legitimate targets).

Yet the church and individual churchmen, who themselves generally came from the ranks of the warrior aristocracy, were not interested so much in shutting down violence as in using it to uphold their version of right order—especially as it concerned church interests and church property—and in channeling violence to achieve their aims. This especially held true if knights were attacking the enemies of Christendom. Hence the Crusades and the theme present in so much of chivalric literature that the knightly work most pleasing to God was killing Muslims or other heretics if you couldn't force them to convert or recant.

Despite all of these differences between the medieval world and our own, there are also things that look familiar to us. Above all, we see humanity just being humanity. For example, there was plenty of bigotry and persecution. During the First Crusade, which began in 1095–96, loosely organized gangs heading south down the Rhine River to join the Crusade massacred Jewish communities along the way, despite heroic efforts by some churchmen to save them. They murdered on the theory that if they were going off to kill the infidel, they might as well get the ones at home first.

Another example is the so-called "feudal anarchy," that is, lawless violence by unruly knights, that has long been seen as characteristic of early France, especially before the 12th century. Many medievalists now do not view knightly violence as anarchic at all, but rather as somewhat familiar. Knights seem often to have behaved like members of the modern Mafia, or like members of urban gangs. Although violence was a way of life, it was regulated and limited by ritual and custom, and by unstated rules of behavior about

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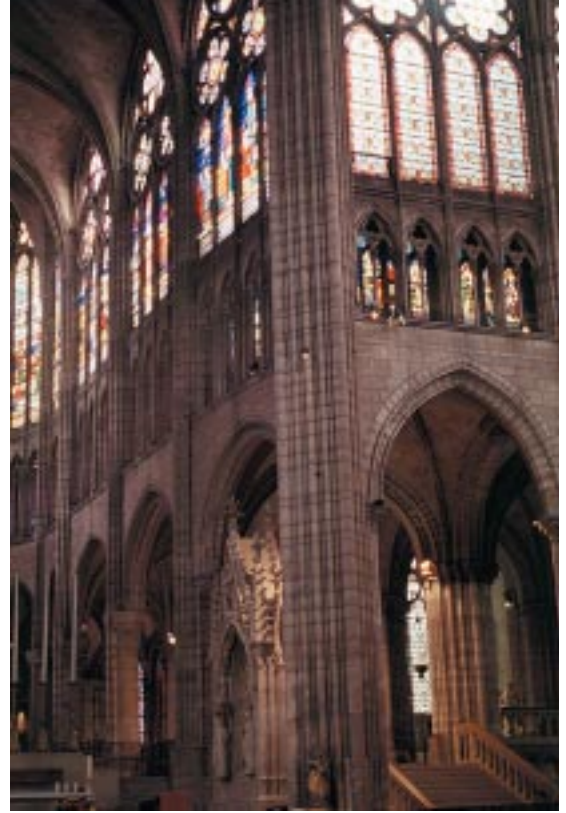
Romanesque churches such as the one in Maria Laach in southern Germany (right) were characterized by solid walls and “Roman” arches supporting a round vaulted ceiling. Maria Laach was begun in the late 11th century, and its construction continued through the 12th. Meanwhile, in France, the load-bearing walls were being replaced by outside buttressing, freeing up space for glass and light. The monastery church of St. Denis, outside Paris (far right), built in the middle of the 12th century, is considered the first gothic church.



whom you could injure or kill and how. It was carried out less for the purpose of simple destruction than to send messages about honor, prowess, or relative power relationships between individuals and groups.

In other words, although knights lived by and for violence (and although they frequently took out innocent bystanders, such as peasants, in their efforts to get at each other), their behavior—like the Mafia’s—nonetheless possessed an internal logic and order. This order enabled early French society to function and survive in a time of weak to nonexistent central authority. Scholars trying to understand knights have abandoned the assumption that the absence of a state-sponsored, law-based order means anarchy. Instead, they are looking for other kinds of social and political order and are finding insights by looking at urban gangs or at non-Western societies that operate on different principles than those we are conditioned to expect in modern Western states.

It’s also important to recognize that, while other European languages, such as French and German, call this period “the Middle Age” (*le moyen âge*, *das Mittelalter*), the English language got it right: there were many “middle ages.” We are talking about centuries in which changes took place every bit as profound as those that separate us from the United States of the late 19th century, or even the 1930s or 1960s. Students taking my early medieval history course (which covers the period from roughly 300 to 1000) go through the end of late antiquity, the development of the Frankish kingdoms, and the rise and disintegration of Charlemagne’s empire, and are surprised that only at the end do we end up with knights and castles. A warrior aristocracy whose self-identity rested solely on mounted combat and who operated from small, fortified bases was the product of a particular historical moment within the broader Middle Ages: in the 10th century, the combination of weakening royal power in what was becoming



France, and invasions by Vikings and others, placed a premium on local, heavily armed, and mobile military power.

We can also see changes over time in architecture. The architecture of the early Middle Ages (roughly through the 11th century) is called “Romanesque,” meaning “like the Romans.” In the 12th century, however, comes something really new. Between 1140 and 1150, Abbot Suger of the monastery of St. Denis outside Paris set out to restore his monastery’s traditional role as guardian and promoter of the sacred image of the French kings. As part of this program, he built a new monastery church in a revolutionary architectural style, which is now seen as the first Gothic church. By the use of outside buttresses, walls were liberated from the need to bear loads and could become frames for huge windows that let light through stained glass into a space conceived of as a meeting place between the human and divine worlds.

Economic and political structures also underwent changes. Before the year 1000, European rulers could rule in a profoundly rural and agricultural world only by engaging the loyalty and self-interest of coalitions of warrior aristocrats. By the 12th century, however, the rulers of France and England, increasingly flush with money taxed from thriving commercial economies, were able to start slowly territorializing their power with paid bureaucrats and mercenaries. As a result, by the 14th century, we can see glimmerings in France and England of what we might term national states.

So how did the Middle Ages end? How did all these things transform into something else? The

If the defining image of the Middle Ages for many is the knight on horseback, operating from his castle, defeating opponents by charging at them with his lance, and holding tournaments and wooing ladies in his spare time, perhaps the Middle Ages could be said to have ended when the knight was no longer militarily or culturally dominant.

boundary at this end is just as fluid and difficult to pin down as at the beginning. Nevertheless, we can find some markers.

An obvious one is the Protestant Reformation. In October 1517, the theology professor Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the castle church in the small German university town of Wittenberg. An attack on the sale of indulgences, this act set in motion a chain of events that brought a uniform Latin Christian church in Europe to an end. Yet Luther's challenge to the Roman church was the culmination of a long series of church reform movements visible from the 12th century on. Various heresies, as well as wandering preachers sworn to poverty such as the Franciscan Friars, tried to divorce the Roman church from its wealth and involvement in worldly affairs and reconnect it to the basic Christian message. The Roman church succeeded in either suppressing or absorbing such reform movements until the point when princes and kings ruling developing territorial states, or wealthy urban elites, found it to their advantage to support religious rebellion for their own purposes (for example, Luther owed his survival to the protection of Prince Frederick III of Saxony).

The gradual end of the Middle Ages is also visible in the slow decline of Latin as the dominant European written language. Written vernaculars had already appeared before the millennium; by the 12th century they were used in texts written for the entertainment of the aristocracy. The development of written vernaculars was driven above all, however, by businessmen, who needed to write the language they spoke in order to carry on commercial transactions and relationships. By the 14th century, a class of people had arisen literate in the vernacular, who wanted to read religious or historical texts that previously could have been written only in Latin (such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which the Florentine poet began around 1308).

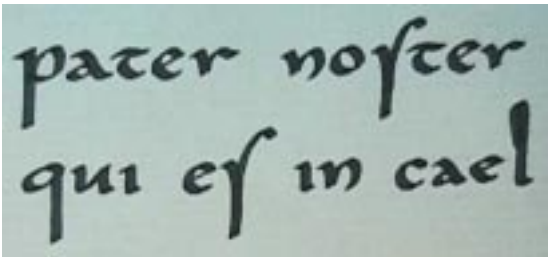
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The Hundred Years War in the 14th and 15th centuries changed knightly warfare forever. English archers defeated French mounted knights, and cannon besieged the castles. (From Froissart's *Chronicles*; Giraudon/Art Resource, NY)

Hand in hand with both of these changes went the development of printing. Craftsmen such as Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz developed printing in the mid 15th century in response to the growing demand for books at ever-lower levels of society. This demand reflected not only increasingly widespread literacy but also the intellectual ferment and desire for religious knowledge that would lead to Martin Luther. Once printed books became available, a flood of Bibles, both in Latin and in vernacular translations, as well as religious tracts and pamphlets, helped spread Protestant ideas and arguments and left the religious and cultural landscape of Europe changed forever.

Perhaps the most poignant change came in the nature of warfare. If the defining image of the Middle Ages for many is the knight on horseback, operating from his castle, defeating opponents by charging at them with his lance, and holding tournaments and wooing ladies in his spare time, perhaps the Middle Ages could be said to have ended when the knight was no longer militarily or culturally dominant. The end was already in sight during the Hundred Years War between France and England, which occupied most of the 14th century and part of the 15th. At the Battle of Crécy (1346) a charge by the cream of French chivalry was broken up by an army of highly

The clearly readable alphabet of Carolingian minuscule (bottom), which is the basis of our modern letter forms, was supplanted for several centuries by florid gothic writing (top), until the 9th-century script was rediscovered by Renaissance scholars—who thought it Roman.



PICTURE CREDITS:
10, 11, 12 — Bob Turring; 15 — Warren Brown

trained English archers and foot soldiers. By the 15th century, gunpowder weapons were knocking down the walls of the knight's refuge—his castle. The French turned these weapons on the English in their successful effort to finally drive the English off the continent.

So perhaps another symbolic marker for the end of the Middle Ages (to place alongside Martin Luther in 1517) would be the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when the walls of the ancient East Roman capitol were breached by Turkish cannon. This event proved a huge psychological blow to western Europeans, because it removed the bulwark that had stood for centuries between western Christendom and Islam.

So why do we care? What do the Middle Ages matter to us? Why study them?

Well, for one thing, they're intrinsically interesting. Medieval history provides great hooks to get students engaged so I can teach them other things. For example, Caltech students, particularly males, seem to enjoy military technology and lots of carnage. Medieval sources provide these in abundance, so I can teach students how to approach history and historical sources while they're not looking.

All my students get caught up in the differences between medieval society and our own, in the things that seem to be incompatible to us but coexisted naturally in the Middle Ages. This makes the Middle Ages an excellent vehicle for driving home the idea that the past really is a foreign country—that there are many different ways that societies can function, many different ways of understanding the world, and that Western civilization has tried out a lot of them.

Another extremely important reason for studying the Middle Ages: that part of our collective identity that is European, and therefore our collective sense of who we are, has been shaped by the

decisions of medieval people about what to preserve from their own past and how to preserve it. For example, much of classical literature and history—that is, works by Roman authors—was preserved by 9th-century copyists responding to an imperative from Charlemagne to preserve models of good Latin for education, as well as the most accurate texts of ancient Christian writings. To these copyists, and to their decisions about what to copy, we owe much of our picture of what classical antiquity looked like.

Finally, the Middle Ages are all around us. We can see this physically in Europe, of course, but we don't have to go there to appreciate the period's influence. Our language, for instance—modern English, both British and American—is a blend

of old Anglo-Saxon with Danish imported into the British Isles by Vikings in the 10th century and with a French dialect brought into England by the Normans (themselves descendants of other Vikings) in the late 11th century.

One further interesting example illustrates how the Renaissance humanists utterly failed to appreciate the Middle Ages even when they were looking straight at it. In the 15th century, Italian intellectuals combed Europe for the oldest surviving texts of classical authors. They found that the oldest manuscripts were written not in the dense and obscure Gothic handwriting but in a remarkably clear and elegant script. Assuming that, since these were the oldest manuscripts, they must be the Roman originals, they copied the handwriting and named it Roman script. But it was not Roman. The manuscripts were late 8th- and 9th-century copies produced during the reign of Charlemagne and his immediate successors in the burst of copying mentioned above. The easily readable script was developed in the context of Charlemagne's effort to standardize and rationalize church education and the royal bureaucracy. Church historians now call it "Carolingian minuscule." Because of how Carolingian script was understood and transmitted by the early modern period, it became the standard for modern letter forms. It is still called the "Roman" font, but most of our basic modern lowercase letter forms go back essentially to 9th-century Carolingian writing.

In short, we live, even here in the United States, amid all the other complex threads that combine to create the world we live in, surrounded by what medieval European society left behind. The lives of medieval people are all around us, like ghosts whose presence we are entirely unaware of. What they did, what they thought, what they wrote and built, are an important part of the streams of past experience that shape how we lead our own lives. They deserve not to be forgotten. □

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