

First published in 2009 by Orpheus Books Ltd.,  
6 Church Green, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 4AW England  
www.orpheusbooks.com

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Created and produced by Orpheus Books Ltd

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ISBN 978 1 905473 49 6

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Singapore



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## MEDIEVAL EUROPE

**I**N EUROPE, the period from about AD 500 to 1500 is known as the Middle Ages, or the medieval period. The Middle Ages began after the collapse of the Roman Empire (see page 6) and ended with the start of the Renaissance. The early part of this period was a time of invasions, including Viking raids (see pages 12-13) and the conquest of England by Duke William of Normandy in 1066. The later part saw frequent wars between the kingdoms that covered Europe, including the so-called Hundred Years' War fought between England and France (1337-1453).

## THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

The feudal system, or feudalism, is the term used to describe a political and military system that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages. It had its roots with the Franks (see page 6) when Frankish warriors pledged loyalty to a ruler or lord in return for some sort of protection and reward. Feudalism spread across Europe between the 800s and 1200s. In return for military or other services, a lord would reward a loyal follower, known as a vassal. The reward was often in the form of land. The vassal was given the use of the land, although he did not own it. In return, he promised loyalty.

Noble vassals divided up the land given to them by their lord or king into manors (right). The land in each manor was worked by peasants. As well as labouring in their lord's fields, the peasants had small plots or strips of land on which to grow their own food. Some manors also had a windmill for grinding grain into flour.

Market day at a town in medieval Europe (below, left). Markets were very important in the Middle Ages. Farmers brought their produce to sell to the townspeople. Travelling merchants sold fine cloth to wealthy people. Jugglers entertained the crowds.



In the uncertain times experienced by people across Europe during the early Middle Ages, feudalism provided some kind of security and protection. But by the late 1200s, the system was beginning to fall apart. People began to make more use of money, preferring to pay rent for land than be bound by the feudal system. Lords, too, could pay for soldiers rather than reward them with land.

## THE BLACK DEATH

The Black Death was a terrible disease that killed millions of people in Europe in the 1340s. The name might have come from the black spots that appeared on victims. The disease came from Asia in 1347 and spread across Europe in the following years. It was carried by fleas that lived on black rats—although no-one knew that at the time.

## THE DOMESDAY BOOK

In early 1086 Duke William of Normandy ordered a survey of the whole of England. After his victory of 1066, he wanted information about his kingdom. The result was a place-by-place survey of the whole of England (except for London, Winchester, and parts of northern England), listing population, wealth and who owned what. It was later called the *Domesday Book*. Similar surveys were also made elsewhere in Europe from the 12th century onwards.

Such detailed work required people who could read and write, and it was during the Middle Ages that the earliest universities were founded in Europe—for example, in the Italian town of Bologna (1088).



No-one in the Middle Ages understood where the Black Death came from or how to treat it. Many people died within a day of catching the disease. The dead bodies were collected on carts. People fled from infected towns—spreading the disease as they went.

## TRADE AND FAITH

**B**EFORE THE YEARS of plague (see page 19) and famine in the 1300s, medieval Europe was an increasingly wealthy place. Across Europe, land was drained and forests were cut down to bring more land under cultivation. In some places this process happened as villages expanded. In other places, fortresses were built as defence against invaders, or monasteries were founded in remote places, providing the starting-points for new settlements.

As the amount of food production increased so did the population. In 1000 it is estimated that the population of Europe was about 40 million. It rose dramatically to about 80 million in 1300, falling again in the 1300s as a result of plague and famine.

Any increase in wealth usually went to the lord of the manor, but life changed little for the peasants in the fields. They continued to live in cramped and disease-ridden conditions, with a monotonous diet of coarse bread, porridge and vegetables. They very rarely ate fish or meat—these were delicacies reserved for the table of the lord of the manor.



This is the Hölstentor Gate in the German town of Lübeck, one of the members of the Hanseatic League.

## THE HANSEATIC LEAGUE

Towns were important centres of growth between 1000 and 1300 in Europe, particularly those on the great trading routes. In Germany, several towns joined together to form a trade alliance, known as the Hanseatic League. The towns of the League gained control of the trade in furs, fish and timber in northern Europe. Further south on the Mediterranean Sea, Italian cities such as Venice and Genoa became

centres for trade with Asia and North Africa. Many of these exotic wares—silks, spices and sugar—were then transported across the Alpine passes for sale in northern Europe. In the other direction, wool, iron and furs were taken southwards.

## THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

The Christian Church became very powerful during the Middle Ages in Europe. Christianity was an important part of everyday life for everyone—from peasant to lord. Many men and women chose to devote their lives to the Church by becoming monks or nuns. They lived in monasteries or nunneries and also worked in the fields or looked after the poor and the sick. They also spent much of their time in prayer and study, copying out texts and decorating them with beautiful pictures and letters, called illuminations. As a result, monasteries and nunneries became centres of scholarship across Europe.

Many magnificent cathedrals were built during the Middle Ages in Europe. The word “cathedral” comes from *cathedra*, meaning “bishop’s throne”. A cathedral was the building where the bishop’s throne was kept.

There were several orders (organizations) of monks and nuns. The earliest was started by St. Benedict of Nursia who founded the Benedictine order in the 500s. St. Benedict was the author of the *rule*—a set of guidelines for monastic life.

Thousands of monasteries, abbeys, churches and cathedrals were constructed across Europe during the Middle Ages. The largest took many years to complete. Some of the largest abbeys, for example Cluny in France, were like small, self-contained towns within their own walls.



People of the Middle Ages: (from left to right) a merchant, a lady of the royal court, a falconer, a friar and a peasant. Both the court lady and the merchant wear rich clothing while the peasant woman is much more simply dressed. The falconer would have worked at court, or for the lord of the manor. Falconry was very popular in Europe in the Middle Ages, and was known as the “sport of kings”. Falcons, hawks and

eagles were all trained to hunt. The falconer wore a heavy glove to protect his hand when the bird perched on it. The friar was a monk who did not live inside a monastery. Instead he travelled from place to place, preaching Christianity as he went. In medieval feudal society, the nobility held all the wealth and power. Below them came merchants and craftworkers. Peasants and servants were the poorest people.

