**Europe During Medieval Times**

The title of this unit includes two key words—*Europe and medieval*. You probably recognize Europe as the continent east of North America across the Atlantic Ocean. But what does *medieval* mean, and why is it important?

The period of time call medieval began with the fall of Roman Empire and lasted until about 1450. This long period of time, also known as the Middle Ages, is the period between ancient and modern times.

Historians divide the Middle Ages into three parts—early, high, and late. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about the year 476 to 1000 C.E., the High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300, and the Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

You will begin your study of the medieval world with Europe. Although the physical geography of Europe has remained largely unchanged since medieval times, the political geography of this region—such as place names and boundaries—has changed a great deal.

Europe is a giant peninsula attached to the huge landmass called Eurasia. Look at the map *Physical Features of Europe*. Water borders this continent to the north, south, and west. Much of Europe's land lies on the Northern European Plain, one of the largest expanses of flat land on Earth. Additionally, several mountain ranges extend across Europe, separating different regions. The Alps, for example, form a barrier between central and southern Europe.

Now look at the map *Medieval Europe*, About 1300. Some place names, such as England and France, will be familiar to you. Other names refer to political features that no longer exist but live on as present-day names. For example, Castile, Leon, and Navarre were kingdoms in medieval Spain. Now they designate regions in present-day Spain.

It is beneficial to study the medieval period because events in the past have helped to shape the present. Studying the past helps us understand our government, economy, and culture we have today. For example, in the year 1295 an English king created a governing body that centuries later influenced the creation of modern democratic institutions—including our own Congress.

The Legacy of the Roman Empire

*To what extent have the contributions of ancient Rome influenced modern society?*

## Introduction

“All roads lead to Rome,” boasted the ancient Romans. For 500 years, from about 27 B.C.E. to 476 C.E., the city of Rome was the capital of the greatest empire the world had ever seen. Road markers that stretched thousands of miles showed the distance to Rome, but the empire's 50 million people were connected by more than roads. They were also connected by Roman law, Roman customs, and Roman military might.

At its height, around 200 C.E., the Roman Empire spanned the whole of the Mediterranean world, from northern Africa to the Scottish border, from Spain to Syria. During this time, the Roman world was generally peaceful and prosperous. There was one official language and one code of law. Roman soldiers guarded the frontiers and kept order within the empire's boundaries. Proud Romans believed that the empire would last forever, an idea that would eventually be challenged.

But the empire did not last. By the year 500, the western half of this great empire had **collapsed** [collapsed: to fail suddenly and completely] . For historians, the fall of Rome marks the end of the ancient world and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

As one historian wrote, “Rome perished, yet it lived on.” The medieval world would pass on many aspects of Roman culture that still affect us today.

What contributed to the decline of this powerful empire? In this lesson, you will discover how and why the Roman Empire fell. Then you will learn how Rome's influence continues to live on in so many ways today—in art, architecture and engineering, language and writing, and philosophy, law, and citizenship.

## 1. The End of the Roman Empire in the West

Rome's first emperor, Caesar Augustus, ended 100 years of civil war and expanded the boundaries of the **Roman Empire** [Roman Empire: an empire that, at its height, around 200 C.E., spanned the Mediterranean world and most of Europe] . When he died in 14 C.E., few Romans could imagine that their **empire** [empire: a large territory in which several groups of people are ruled by a single leader or government] would ever end. Yet by the year 500, the western half of the empire had collapsed. What caused the fall of the mighty Roman Empire?

**Problems in the Late Empire** There was no single reason for the end of the Roman Empire. Instead, historians point to a number of problems that combined to bring about its fall.

**Political Instability** Rome never solved the problem of how to peacefully transfer political power to a new leader. When an emperor died, ambitious rivals with independent armies often fought each other for control of the empire.

Even when the transfer of power happened without **conflict** [conflict: a disagreement or fight caused by opposing points of view] , there was no good system for selecting the next emperor. Many times, the Praetorian Guard, the emperor's private army, chose the new ruler. But they frequently chose leaders who would reward them rather than those who were best prepared to be emperor.

**Economic and Social Problems** Besides political instability, the empire suffered from economic and social problems. To finance Rome's huge armies, its citizens had to pay heavy taxes. These taxes weakened the economy and drove many people into poverty. Trade also suffered.

Unemployment was a serious problem for the economy. Additionally, wealthy families used slaves and cheap labor to work their large estates. Small farmers could not compete with the large landowners. Even though they fled to the cities looking for work, there were not enough jobs for everyone.

Other social problems plagued the empire, including growing **corruption** [corruption: a pattern of illegal or immoral activities by government officials] and a **decline** [decline: a slow breakdown or failure] in the spirit of citizenship. Notorious emperors like Nero and Caligula wasted large amounts of money. A rise in crime made the empire's cities and roads unsafe.

**Weakening Frontiers** A final problem was the weakening of the empire's frontiers. The huge size of the empire made it hard to defend, and it sometimes took weeks for leaders in Rome to communicate with generals. By the 300s C.E., Germanic tribes were pressing hard on the western borders of the empire. Many of these peoples went on to settle inside the empire and were recruited into the army. But often these soldiers had little loyalty to Rome.

## 2. The Legacy of Roman Art

The Romans adopted many features of other cultures and blended them into their own, **unique** [unique: one of a kind] culture. This was true of Roman art. The Romans were especially influenced by the art of the Greeks. In fact, historians often speak of “Greco-Roman” art. Rome played a vital role in passing on this tradition, which has had a major influence on western art.

The Romans added their own talents and tastes to what they learned from other cultures. For example, they imitated Greek sculpture and were particularly good at making lifelike busts and statues.

Romans were also great patrons, or sponsors, of art. Wealthy families decorated their homes with statues and colorful murals and **mosaics** [mosaic: a picture made up of small pieces of tile, glass, or colored stone] . Roman artists were especially skilled in painting frescoes, scenes painted on the moist plaster of walls or ceilings with water-based paints. Roman frescoes often showed three-dimensional landscapes, so looking at one of these frescoes was almost like looking through the wall at a view outside. You've probably seen similar murals in restaurants, banks, and other modern public buildings.

The Romans also brought a sense of style and luxury to everyday objects. For example, they made highly decorative bottles of blown glass. A wine bottle might be shaped as a cluster of grapes. The Romans also developed the arts of gem cutting and metalworking.

One popular art form was the cameo, which is a carved decoration showing a portrait or a scene. The Romans wore cameos as jewelry and used them to decorate vases and other objects. You can find examples of all these art forms today.

About a thousand years after the fall of the empire, during the period called the Renaissance, Roman art was rediscovered. During the Renaissance, great artists, such as Michelangelo, revived the Greco-Roman style in their paintings and sculptures.

A good example is the famous ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Painted by Michelangelo in the 1500s, the ceiling shows scenes from the Bible. A Roman would feel right at home looking up at this amazing creation. Tourists still flock to Rome to see it.

Roman art has continued to influence painters and sculptors. Roman styles were especially popular during the early days of the United States. Americans frequently imitated these styles to give their art dignity and nobility. Today, you can see a number of statues in Washington, D.C., that reflect a strong Roman influence.

## 3. The Legacy of Roman Architecture and Engineering

The Romans were skilled and clever builders. In their architecture and engineering, they borrowed ideas from the Greeks and other peoples. But the Romans improved on these ideas in ways that future engineers and architects would imitate.

**Architecture** The Romans learned how to use the arch, the vault, and the dome to build huge structures. A vault is an arch used for a ceiling or to support a ceiling or roof. A dome is a vault in the shape of a half-circle that rests on a circular wall.

Roman baths and other public buildings often had great arched vaults. The Pantheon, a magnificent temple that still stands in Rome, is famous for its huge dome. The Romans used concrete to help them build much bigger arches than anyone had attempted before. Concrete is made by mixing broken stone with sand, cement, and water and allowing the mixture to harden. The Romans did not invent the material, but they were the first to make widespread use of it.

The Romans also invented a new kind of stadium, large, open-air structures that could seat thousands of spectators. The Romans used concrete to build tunnels into the famous stadium in Rome, the Colosseum. The tunnels made it easy for spectators to reach their seats. Modern football stadiums still use this feature.

The grand style of Roman buildings has inspired many architects through the centuries. Early medieval architects, for example, frequently imitated Roman designs, especially in building great churches and cathedrals. You can also see a Roman influence in the design of many modern churches, banks, and government buildings. A fine example is the Capitol building, the home of the U.S. Congress in Washington, D.C.

Another Roman innovation that has been widely copied is the triumphal arch. This is a huge monument built to celebrate great victories or achievements. A famous example is the Arc de Triomphe (Arch of Triumph) in Paris, France, which celebrates the victories of the French emperor Napoleon in the early 1800s. Today, it is the national war memorial of France.

**Engineering** In addition to architecture, the Romans also improved engineering. They were the greatest builders of roads, bridges, and **aqueducts** [aqueduct: a pipe or raised channel built to carry water over a long distance] in the ancient world.

More than 50,000 miles of road connected Rome with the frontiers of the empire. The Romans built their roads with layers of stone, sand, and gravel. Their **techniques** [technique: a specialized method used to achieve a desired result] set the standard of road building for 2,000 years. People in some parts of Europe still drive on highways built over old Roman roads.

The Romans also set a new standard for building aqueducts. They created a system of aqueducts for Rome that brought water from about 60 miles away to the homes of the city's wealthiest citizens, as well as to its public baths and fountains. The Romans built aqueducts in other parts of the empire as well. The water system in Segovia, Spain, still uses part of an ancient Roman aqueduct. Roman arches from aqueducts can still be found in Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia.

## 4. The Legacy of Roman Language and Writing

An especially important legacy of Rome for people in medieval times was the Romans' language, Latin. After the fall of the empire, Latin continued to be used by scholars and the Roman Catholic Church. Church **scribes** [scribe: a person trained to write or copy documents by hand] used Latin to create important **documents** [document: a written work containing information] . Educated European nobles learned Latin so they could communicate with their peers in other countries.

Latin remains extremely influential. Several modern European languages developed from Latin, including Italian, Spanish, and French. English is a Germanic language, but it was strongly influenced by the French-speaking Normans, who conquered England in 1066 C.E. English has borrowed heavily from Latin, both directly and by way of French. In fact, we still use the Latin alphabet, although Latin has 23 letters and English has 26.

You can see the influence of Latin in many of the words we use today. For example, our calendar comes from the one adopted by the Roman ruler Julius Caesar. The names of several months come from Latin. August honors Caesar Augustus, and September comes from Latin words meaning “the seventh month.” (The Roman year started in March, so September was the seventh month.) October means “the eighth month.” Can you guess the meanings of the words *November* and *December*? Latin also remains very important in the subjects of the law, medicine, and religion, as well.

## . The Legacy of Roman Philosophy, Law, and Citizenship

Roman **philosophy** [philosophy: the study of wisdom, knowledge, and the nature of reality] , law, and ideas about citizenship were greatly influenced by the Greeks. But the Romans made contributions of their own that they passed on to future generations.

**A Philosophy Called Stoicism** A Greek school of thought that was especially popular in Rome was Stoicism (STOH-ihk-ism). Many upper-class Romans adopted this philosophy and made it their own. Stoics believed that a divine (godly) intelligence ruled all of nature and that a person's soul was a spark of that divine intelligence. “Living rightly” meant living in a way that agreed with nature.

To the Stoics, the one truly good thing in life was to have a good character, which meant having virtues such as self-control and courage. Stoics prized duty and the welfare of their community over personal comfort. Roman Stoics were famous for bearing pain and suffering bravely and quietly. To this day, we call someone who behaves in this way “stoic.”

**Law and Justice** Roman law covered marriages, inheritances, and contracts (agreements) between people, as well as countless other areas of daily life. Modern legal codes in European countries like France and Italy are based in part on ancient Roman laws.

Another legacy of the Romans was the Roman idea of justice. The Romans believed that there was a universal law of justice that came from nature and that, by this natural law, every person had rights. Judges in Roman courts tried to make just, or fair, decisions that respected people's rights.

Like people everywhere, the Romans did not always live up to their ideals. Their courts did not treat the poor or slaves equally with the rich, and emperors often made laws simply because they had the power to do so. But the ideals of Roman law and justice live on. For example, the ideas of natural law and natural rights are echoed in the Declaration of Independence. Modern-day judges, like judges in Roman courts, often make decisions based on ideals of justice as well as on written law. Similarly, many people around the world believe that all humans have basic rights that no written law can take away.

**Citizenship** When Rome first began expanding its power in Italy, to be a “Roman” was to be a citizen of the city-state of Rome. Over time, however, Rome's leaders gradually extended citizenship to all free people in the empire. Even someone born in Syria, in Southwest Asia, or in Gaul (modern-day France) could claim to be Roman. All citizens were subject to and protected by Roman law, enjoyed the same rights, and owed allegiance (loyalty) to the emperor.

The idea of citizenship as both a privilege and a responsibility has descended from Roman times to our own. While most people in the United States are citizens by birth, many immigrants become citizens by solemnly promising loyalty to the United States. Regardless of where they were born, all citizens have the same responsibilities. For example, they must obey the law. And all enjoy the same basic rights spelled out in the Constitution and its amendments, including the Bill of Rights.

SECTION 2

The Development of Feudalism in Western Europe

*How well did feudalism establish order in Europe in the Middle Ages?*

## Introduction

The collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 C.E. marks the beginning of the period in Europe known as the Middle Ages. During this time period, a complex political and economic system developed that largely shaped people's lives.

Historians divide the Middle Ages into three periods. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about 476 to 1000 C.E. The High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300. The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

The Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire, which had unified much of Europe for about 500 years. After its collapse, life became dangerous and difficult in Western Europe. People worked hard simply to survive and to have enough to eat. They also needed to protect themselves from conquest by invading barbarians and neighboring kingdoms.

These challenges gave rise to the economic and political system historians call feudalism (FEWD-ahl-ism) in which people had clearly defined roles and relationships with each other. In the feudal system, people pledged loyalty to a lord—a ruler or powerful landholder. In return, they received protection from that lord. Warriors fought on behalf of their lords, and peasants worked the land. At the bottom of the system were serfs, or peasants who were not free to leave the lord's land without permission.

In this lesson, you will discover more about the difficulties people faced during the Early Middle Ages. Then you will learn about the rise of feudalism and how it helped to establish order and security after the fall of Rome. Finally, you will explore what daily life was like for people living under feudalism.

## 1. Western Europe During the Early Middle Ages

For 500 years, much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. The rest of the continent was controlled by groups of people the Romans called “barbarians” because they did not follow Roman ways. When Rome fell to invading barbarians in 476 C.E., Europe was left with no central government or system of defense. Throughout Western Europe, many invading groups set up kingdoms that were often at war with one another. The most powerful rulers were those who controlled the most land and had the greatest warriors.

**Charlemagne's Empire** One powerful group during this time was the Franks (from whom modern-day France takes its name). The Franks were successful because they had developed a new style of warfare that depended on troops of knights, heavily armed warriors who fought on horseback. To achieve and hold power, a ruler needed the services and loyalty of many knights. In return for their loyalty and service, the ruler rewarded knights with land and privileges.

One of the early leaders of the Franks was an ambitious young warrior named Clovis. In 481 C.E., at the age of 15, Clovis became leader of the Franks. Five years later, he defeated the last great Roman army in Gaul at Soissons. During his 30-year **reign** [reign: the period of time during which a king or other monarch rules] , he led the Franks in wars that largely extended the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.

Clovis also helped convert the Franks to **Christianity** [Christianity: the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus] . Clovis married a Christian woman, Clotilda, and eventually was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Many of his followers became Christians, as well.

The most important leader of the Franks was **Charlemagne** [Charlemagne: the leader of the Franks from 768 to 814 C.E., who unified most of the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire] (SHAR-luh-main), which means “Charles the Great.” This impressive king ruled for over 40 years, from 768 to 814. Writings from that period say that he was six feet four inches tall—extremely tall for his time—and “always stately and dignified.” Legend has it that he read very little and couldn't write, yet he loved to have scholarly works read to him. He encouraged education and scholarship, making his court a center of culture. Most important, he unified nearly all the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire. One of the poets at his court called him the “King Father of Europe.”

Charlemagne built his empire with the help of a pope—Leo III, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was a central part of society during this time, and for Charlemagne, the blessings of the Church sent the message, “God is on my side.” The Church also valued support from the empire, and Leo needed the backing of someone with an army. In return for Charlemagne's help, the pope crowned him Holy Roman emperor in 800 C.E.

Charlemagne's empire survived many attacks. After his death in 814, however, it quickly fell apart. The weak rulers who followed him could not defend the empire against new waves of invasions. Still, these kings helped prepare the way for the system of **feudalism** [feudalism: the economic and political system of medieval Europe in which people exchanged loyalty and labor for a lord's protection] by following Charlemagne's example of rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for military service.

**A Need for Order and Protection** In the 9th and 10th centuries, Western Europe was threatened by three main groups. Muslims, or the followers of the religion of Islam, advanced from the Middle East and northern Africa into what is now Spain. The Magyars, a central Asian people, pressed in from the east. Vikings swept down from present-day Norway and Denmark.

The Vikings were fierce warriors who instilled fear in the people of Europe. At times, the Vikings' intent was to set up colonies, but they were best known for their terrifying raids on towns and religious centers.

## 2. Feudalism: Establishing Order

By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. Feudalism provided people with protection and safety by establishing a stable social order.

Under this system, people were bound to one another by promises of loyalty. In theory, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the monarch (usually a king, but sometimes a queen). A large amount of land was also owned by the Church. The king kept some land for himself and gave **fiefs** [fief: land granted by a lord to a vassal in exchange for loyalty and service] (FEEFS), or land grants, to his most important lords, who became his vassals. In return, each lord promised to supply the king with knights in times of war. A lord then enlisted lesser lords and knights as his vassals. At times, these arrangements were written down, and some of these contracts even **survive** [survive: to continue to exist] to this day in museums.

At the bottom of the social system were peasants. Lords rented some of their land to the peasants who worked for them. However, some peasants, called **serfs** [serf: a peasant who could not leave the lord’s land on which he or she was born and worked] , were “tied” to the land they worked, which meant that they could not leave the lord's land without permission and had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of their own.

Most lords and wealthier knights lived on manors, or large estates. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were in the country, far from towns, which required peasants to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat and iron for making tools.

During the Middle Ages, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents. Let's take a closer look at the social classes in feudal society.

## 3. Monarchs During Feudal Times

At the very top of feudal society were the monarchs, or kings and queens. As you have learned, medieval monarchs were also feudal lords. They were expected to keep order and to provide protection for their vassals.

Most medieval monarchs believed in the divine right of kings, the idea that God had given them the right to rule. In reality, the power of monarchs varied greatly. Some had to work hard to **maintain** [maintain: to continue in the same way] control of their kingdoms, and few had enough wealth to keep their own armies. They had to rely on their vassals, especially nobles, to provide enough knights and soldiers. In some places, especially during the Early Middle Ages, great lords grew very powerful and governed their fiefs as independent states. In these cases, the monarch was little more than a figurehead, a symbolic ruler who had little real power.

In England, monarchs became quite strong during the Middle Ages. Since the Roman period, a number of groups from the continent, including Vikings, had invaded and settled England. By the mid-11th century, it was ruled by a Germanic tribe called the Saxons. The king at that time was descended from both Saxon and Norman (French) families. When he died without an adult heir, there was confusion over who should become king.

William, the powerful Duke of Normandy (a part of present-day France), believed he had the right to the English throne. However, the English crowned his cousin, Harold. In 1066, William and his army invaded England. William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and established a line of Norman kings in England. His triumph earned him the nickname “William the Conqueror.”

When William of Normandy conquered England, he brought feudal institutions from Europe with him. Supported by feudalism, strong rulers brought order to England. In fact, by the start of the High Middle Ages, around 1000 C.E., the feudal system had brought stability to much of Europe.

## 4. Lords and Ladies During Feudal Times

Like monarchs, lords and ladies were members of the nobility, the highest-ranking class in medieval society. Most of them lived on manors. Some lords had one manor, while others had several. Those who had more than one manor usually lived in one for a few months and then traveled with their families to another.

**Manor Houses and Castles** Many of the people on a manor lived with the lord's family in the manor house. Built of wood or stone, manor houses were surrounded by gardens and outbuildings, such as kitchens and stables. They were protected by high walls.

The manor house was the center of the community, and in times of trouble, villagers entered its walls for protection. Its great hall served as the lord's court, but it also offered a place for special celebrations and feasts, such as those given at Christmas or after a harvest.

Kings and queens, high-ranking nobles, and wealthy lords lived in even grander structures: castles. Castles were built for many purposes, but one of their main **functions** [function: the use or purpose of something] was to serve as a home. Castles were also one of the most important forms of military technology. With their moats, strong walls, and gates, they were built for defense. Finally, their large size and central locations made castles visual reminders of the social hierarchy and the power of the ruling classes.

The earliest medieval castles were built of wood and surrounded by high wooden fences. The strongest part, the motte, was built on a hilltop. A walled path linked the *motte* to a lower enclosed court, the *bailey*, where most people lived. After about 1100 C.E., most castles were built of stone to resist attacks by more powerful siege weapons.

Castles gradually became more elaborate. Many had tall towers for looking out across the land. The main castle building had a variety of rooms, including storerooms, kitchens, a dining hall, sleeping quarters for distinguished guests, and the lord and lady's quarters.

**The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Lords and Ladies** It was the lord's responsibility to manage and defend his land and its laborers. The lord appointed officials to make sure villagers fulfilled their duties, which included farming the lord's land and paying rent in the form of crops, meat, and other foods. Lords also acted as judges in manor courts and had the power to fine and punish those who broke the law. Some lords held posts in the king's government. In times of war, lords fought for their own higher-ranking lords, or at least supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

In theory, only men were part of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. However, it was quite common in the Middle Ages for noblewomen to hold fiefs and inherit land. Except for fighting, these women had all the duties that lords had. They ran their estates, sat as judges in manor courts, and sent their knights to serve in times of war.

Noblewomen who were not landowners were still extremely busy. They were responsible for raising and training their own children and, often, the children of other noble families. Ladies were also responsible for overseeing their household or households. Some households had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunters, and knights-in-training called *pages* and *squires*, who assisted the knights. There were also cooks, servants, artists, craftspeople, and grooms. Entertainment was provided by musicians and jesters who performed amusing jokes and stunts.

When they weren't hard at work, lords and ladies enjoyed hunting and hawking (hunting with birds), feasting and dancing, board games such as chess, and reading. Ladies also did fine stitching and embroidery, or decorative sewing.

Although nobles and monarchs had the most privileged lives in medieval times, they were not always easy or comfortable by modern standards. Lit only by candles and warmed only by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings, and people generally bathed only once a week, if that. Clothes were not washed daily either. Diseases affected the rich as well as the poor. And, of course, warfare was a great and ever-present danger.

## . Knights During Feudal Times

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights needed to have a good deal of wealth, since a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords.

**Becoming a Knight** The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castles and manors. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, a page spent much of his time with the ladies of the castle and was expected to help them in every way possible. During this period, the ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp—skills that were valued in knights.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the knight who was his lord. The squire helped care for his horse and polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He even waited on his lord at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-axe and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). Squires practiced by fighting in make-believe battles, but they also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, care for his weapons and horses, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if deserving of the honor, a squire became a knight, a **process** [process: a series of actions that produce a certain result] that at times was a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting ceremony in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

## 6. Peasants During Feudal Times

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. They were not included in the feudal relationship of vassal and lord, but they supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Their labor freed lords and knights to spend their time preparing for war or fighting.

During medieval times, peasants were legally classified as free or unfree. These categories had to do with the amount of service owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord. Unfree peasants, or serfs, farmed the lord's fields and could not leave the lord's manor. In return for their labor, they received their own small plot of land to farm.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock (farm animals), but every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths (metalworkers), and other skilled workers. Peasant women worked in the fields when needed, while also caring for their children, their homes, and livestock.

Along with the work they performed, peasants and serfs might owe the lord numerous taxes. There was a yearly payment called “head money,” at a fixed amount per person. In addition, the lord could demand a tax, known as *tallage*, whenever he needed money. When a woman married, she, her father, or her husband had to pay a fee called a *merchet*.

Peasants were also required to grind their grain at the lord's mill (the only mill on the manor). As payment, the miller kept portions of the grain for the lord and for himself, with lords keeping any amount they wanted. Peasants found this practice so hateful that some of them hid small handmills in their houses.

Most peasants lived in small, simple houses composed of one or two rooms. A typical house was made of woven strips of wood covered with straw or mud, usually with little furniture or other possessions inside. There was a hearth fire in the middle of the main room, but often there was no chimney, making the room dark and smoky. An entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals.

Peasants ate vegetables, meat such as pork, and dark, coarse bread made of wheat mixed with rye or oatmeal. Almost no one ate beef or chicken. During the winter, they ate pork, mutton, or fish that had been preserved in salt. Herbs were used widely, to improve flavor and reduce saltiness, or to disguise the taste of meat that was no longer fresh.

## Lesson Summary

**In this lesson, you learned about life during feudal times. The fall of the Roman Empire led to a period of uncertainty and danger. Europeans developed the system of feudalism to help provide economic and social stability and safety.**

**Feudalism** Feudalism The feudal system arose as a way of protecting property and creating stability. The feudal system arose as a way of protecting property and creating stability. It was based on loyalty and personal relationships. Monarchs gave fiefs to lords, their most important vassals. In exchange, vassals promised to supply monarchs with soldiers in war.the people who worked them. They lived in manor houses or castles.

**Monarchs and Lords** At the top of the feudal social structure was the monarch. Below the monarch were his vassals, the lords, or nobles. Monarchs and nobles oversaw their lands and the people who worked them. They lived in manor houses or castles.

**Knights and Peasants** Below the lords were the knights, heavily armored warriors on horseback who provided service in war in return for land and protection. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were free peasants, followed by serfs. Peasants farmed the land and made most of the necessary articles of life. Serfs were peasants bound to the land.

Section 3

The Roman Catholic Church in Medieval Europe

*How influential was the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe?*

## Introduction

The Catholic Church in Europe had a heavy influence during the High Middle Ages, the period from about 1000 to 1300 C.E. The Church was the center of life in medieval western Europe. Almost every community had a church building, and larger towns and cities had a cathedral. Church bells rang out the hours, called people to worship, and warned of danger.

The church building was the center of community activity and many parts of daily life. Religious services were held several times a day. Town meetings, plays, and concerts were also held in churches. Merchants had shops around the square in front of the church. Farmers sold their produce in the square, and markets, festivals, and fairs were held there, as well.

During the Middle Ages, the Church was a daily presence from birth to death. It provided education and helped the poor and sick. In fact, religion was so much a part of daily life, that people even said prayers to decide how long to cook an egg!

Christian belief was so **widespread** [widespread: spread out over a large area or among many people] during this time that historians sometimes call the Middle Ages the “Age of Faith.” People looked to the Church to explain world events. Storms, disease, and famine were believed to be punishments sent by God. People hoped prayer and religious devotion would prevent such disasters. They were even more concerned about the fate of their souls after death. The Church claimed that salvation, or the saving of a one's soul, would come to those who followed its teachings.

In this lesson, you will learn how the Church began and how it expanded. You will also discover how much the Church influenced people's daily lives during the High Middle Ages.

## 1. The Christian Church Takes Shape

The Christian **religion** [religion: a set of spiritual beliefs, values, and practices] is one ancient Rome's most important legacies. Christians are followers of Jesus, who, according to Christian scripture, was put to death on a Roman cross in the 1st century C.E. Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God, that God sent him to Earth to save people from their sins, and that he rose from the dead after his death by crucifixion.

Initially, the Romans **persecuted** [persecuted: to cause a person to suffer because of his or her beliefs] Christians for their beliefs. Yet the new religion continued to spread. In 313 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine issued a decree allowing Christians to practice their religion freely. In 395 C.E., Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

At the start of the Middle Ages, all Christians in western Europe belonged to a single church, which became known as the **Roman Catholic Church** [Roman Catholic Church: the Christian church headed by the pope in Rome] . After the collapse of Rome, the Church played a vital role in society. In part, it was one of the few ties that people had to a more stable time. The Church provided leadership and, at times, even organized the distribution of food. Monasteries, or communities of monks, provided hospitality to refugees and travelers. Monks also copied and preserved old texts, and in this way helped keep both new and ancient learning alive. The spread of monasteries and the preaching of missionaries helped bring new converts to the Christian faith.

**The Organization of the Roman Catholic Church** Over time, Church leaders developed an organization that was modeled on the structure of the old Roman government. By the High Middle Ages, they had created a system in which all **clergy** [clergy: the body of people, such as priests, who perform the sacred functions of a church] members had a rank.

The pope, who was the bishop of Rome, was the supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church. He appointed high-ranking clergy men, called cardinals, to assist and counsel him. These cardinals ranked just below the pope in the Church **hierarchy** [hierarchy: a system of organization with lower and higher positions] .

Archbishops came next. They oversaw large or important areas called archdioceses. Below them were bishops, who governed areas called dioceses from great cathedrals. Within each diocese, priests served local communities, called parishes, each of which had their own church building.

**The Increasing Power of the Church** During the Middle Ages, the Church acquired great economic power. By the year 1050, it was the largest landholder in Europe. Some land was gifted to the church by monarchs and wealthy lords, while other land was taken by force. The medieval Church added to its wealth by collecting a tithe, or tax. Each member was expected to give one-tenth of his money, produce, or labor to help support the Church.

The Church also came to wield great political power. Latin, the language of the Church, was the only common language throughout Europe. Church officials were often the only people who could read. As a result, they kept records for monarchs and became trusted scribes and advisers.

At times, the Church's power lead to conflict with European monarchs. One key struggle involved Pope Gregory VII and Henry IV, the Holy Roman emperor.

Gregory was elected pope in 1073. An ambitious leader, he undertook several reforms, such as forbidding priests to marry and outlawing the selling of Church offices (official positions). He also banned the practice whereby kings could appoint priests, bishops, and the heads of monasteries. Only the pope, announced Gregory, had this right.

Gregory's ruling angered Henry IV. Like rulers before him, Henry considered it his duty (and privilege) to appoint Church officials. He called a council of bishops and declared that Gregory was no longer pope. Gregory responded by excommunicating Henry. This action meant that Henry was thrown out of the Church and, therefore, could not gain salvation. Gregory also said that Henry's subjects were no longer obliged to obey him.

The pope's influence was so great that Henry begged forgiveness and was readmitted to the Church. For the moment, his action revealed the pope's **authority** [authority: the power to influence or command] , even over an emperor. But future rulers and popes would resume the fight over the rights of the Church versus those of the state.

## 2. Sacraments and Salvation in the Middle Ages

Most people in medieval Europe believed in God and an afterlife, the idea that the soul lives on after the body's death. The Church taught that people gained salvation, or entry into heaven and eternal life, by following the Church's teachings and living a moral life. Failing to do so condemned the soul to eternal suffering in hell.

To believers, hell was a real and terrifying place. Its torments, such as fire and demons, were pictured in vivid detail in many paintings. The Church asserted that receiving the **sacraments** [sacrament: a sacred rite of the Christian religion] was an essential part of gaining salvation. Sacraments were sacred rites that Christians believed brought them grace, or a special blessing from God. The sacraments marked the most important occasions in a person's life, such as baptism and marriage.

## 3. Pilgrimages and Crusades

During the Middle Ages, religious faith led many people to perform extraordinary acts of devotion. For instance, most Christians hoped to go on a **pilgrimage** [pilgrimage: a journey to a holy site] at some point in their lives. Pilgrims traveled long distances to visit holy sites, such as Jerusalem (the place where Jesus was killed) and Rome. They also visited churches that housed relics, or the body parts or belongings of saints. Canterbury Cathedral in England was another major destination for pilgrims.

Pilgrims went on these journeys to demonstrate their devotion to God, to perform penance for their sins, or to attempt to cure an illness. A pilgrimage **required** [required: to have to do something based on a rule or command] true dedication since travel at the time was difficult and often dangerous. Most pilgrims traveled on foot. Because robbers were a constant threat, pilgrims often banded together for safety, and sometimes even hired an armed escort. Along the routes of popular pilgrimages, local rulers built roads and bridges. Monks and nuns set up hostels, or special guest houses, spaced a day's journey apart.

Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived in England from about 1342 to 1400, wrote a popular narrative poem about pilgrims called the *Canterbury Tales*. His amusing “tales” are stories that a group of pilgrims tell to entertain each other as they travel to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury. Among Chaucer's pilgrims are a knight, a miller (someone who helps grind crops into flour), a cook, and a prioress (the head of a convent, or community of nuns).

A second type of extraordinary service that dedicated people carried out involved fighting in the Crusades. The Crusades were a series of military expeditions to the land where Jesus had lived, which Christians called the Holy Land. During the 7th century, this part of the Middle East had come under the control of Muslims. Jerusalem, which was a holy city to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, became a Muslim city. Between 1095 and 1270, Christians in western Europe organized several Crusades to recover Jerusalem and other sites of pilgrimage in that region.

Some people went on Crusade to seek wealth, and others to seek adventure. Others went with the belief that doing so would guarantee their salvation. Many Crusaders acted from deep religious belief.

## 4. Art and Architecture

During the Middle Ages, most art was created for a religious purpose. Paintings and sculptures portrayed Jesus and Christian saints and were placed in churches to support worship. Since most people could not read, art helped tell the story of Jesus's life in a way that everyone could understand.

Medieval art and architecture found their most glorious expression in cathedrals, the large churches headed by bishops. (The word *cathedral* comes from the Latin word *cathedra*, meaning “the throne upon which a bishop sits”.) Cathedrals were built to inspire awe, or wonder. For centuries, they were the tallest buildings in any community, often taller than a 30-story building of today. Most were built in the shape of a cross, with a long central section called the nave and shorter side sections called *transepts*.

The cathedrals constructed between 1150 and 1400 were designed in the Gothic style and built to appear as if they are rising to heaven. On the outside are stone arches called *flying buttresses*. The arches spread the massive weight of the soaring roof and walls more evenly, a building **technique** [technique: a specialized method used to achieve a desired result] that allowed for taller, thinner walls and more windows.

Gargoyles are a unique feature of Gothic cathedrals. Gargoyles are decorative stone sculptures projecting from the rain gutters or edges of a cathedral roof. They were usually carved in the form of mythical beasts. In medieval times, some people believed gargoyles were placed as a reminder that devils and evil spirits would catch them if they did not obey the Church's teachings.

The immense space inside a Gothic cathedral was lined with pillars and decorated with religious images. Beautiful stained-glass windows (windows made from pieces of colored glass arranged in a design) let in colorful light. The pictures on medieval stained-glass windows often depicted stories from the Bible.

Cathedrals were visible expressions of Christian devotion. Hundreds of workers and craftsmen constructed cathedrals by hand over many years. On average, it took from 50 to 100 years to complete a cathedral, but the work took more than 200 years in some cases.

## 5. Education

During the Middle Ages, most schooling took place in monasteries, convents, and cathedrals. This pattern was established under Charlemagne, who encouraged the Church to teach people to read and write. During his reign, scholars developed a new form of writing that helped make reading easier. Instead of writing in all capital letters, as the Romans did, scholars began to use lowercase letters, too. We still use this system today.

In medieval times, the clergy were the people most likely to be educated. Most of the students in Church schools were sons of nobles who were studying for careers in the clergy. They spent much of their time memorizing prayers and passages from the Bible in Latin.

Beginning in the 1200s, cathedral schools gave rise to universities. Students in universities studied Latin grammar and rhetoric (the art of argument), logic, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music. Books at that time were hand copied and very rare, so teachers often read to students.

Ancient texts were greatly respected in the universities, but the Church was sometimes uneasy about them. The Church taught people to be guided by faith. In contrast, ancient writers like the Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that reason, or logical thinking, was the path to knowledge. The clergy feared that studying such writers might lead people to question the Church's teachings.

Thomas Aquinas (uh-KWINE-iss), an Italian scholar of philosophy and theology, tried to bridge the gap between reason and faith. Aquinas greatly admired Aristotle. He saw no conflict between faith and reason, arguing that both were gifts from God. Reason, he believed, helped people discover important truths about God's creation, while faith revealed its own truths about God.

Aquinas wrote logical arguments in support of his faith to show how reason and religious belief worked together. For example, his concept of **natural law** [natural law: the concept that there is a universal order built into nature that can guide moral thinking] stated that there was an order built into nature that could guide people's thinking about right and wrong. Natural law, he said, could be discovered through reason alone. Since God had created nature, natural law agreed with the moral teachings of the Bible.

Aquinas's teachings unified ancient philosophy and Christian theology. His teachings were later accepted and promoted by the Church.

## 6. Holidays

Medieval Europeans enjoyed many festivals and fairs that marked important days of the year. Most of these celebrations were connected in some way to the Church. Almost every day of the year was dedicated to a Christian saint, an event in the life of Jesus, or an important religious idea. In fact, our word *holiday* comes from “holy day.”

Two of the main medieval holidays were Christmas and Easter. Christmas is the day when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. During the Middle Ages, Christmas celebrations lasted for 12 days. On Christmas day, Christians attended church before enjoying a great feast, which was often held for everyone on the manor by its lord.

Easter is the day when Christians celebrate the Resurrection. In Christian belief, the Resurrection is Christ's rising from the dead. For medieval Christians, Easter was a day of church services, feasting, and games. Often the games involved eggs, a symbol of new life.

Music, dancing, and food were all part of major medieval holidays and festivals. People sang folk songs and danced. They drank their favorite beverages and ate baked and fried foods.

Other favorite holiday entertainments included bonfires, acrobats and jugglers, and dancing bears. Plays were also popular. During religious services on special days, priests sometimes acted out Bible stories. By the 13th century, plays were often held outdoors in front of the church so more people could watch. In some English villages, mummers (traveling groups of actors) performed with masks, drums and bells, dances, and make-believe sword fights.

Saved! 

**7. Monks, Nuns, and Friars**

Religion was important to all Christians in the Middle Ages. Some men and women, however, solemnly promised to devote their lives to God and the Church.

**The Monastic Way of Life** Monks were men who joined monasteries, or communities devoted to prayer and service to fellow Christians. This way of life is called monasticism.

Men became monks for many reasons. Some were seeking refuge from war, sickness, or sinfulness. Some came to study, and others were attracted to the quiet life of prayer and service it offered.

The man who developed the monastic lifestyle in western Europe was Saint Benedict. In the 6th century, he founded a monastery in Italy. His followers, known as the Benedictines, followed Benedict's “Rule,” or instructions. Benedictines made three solemn vows, or promises: poverty (to own no property), chastity (never to marry), and obedience (to obey their leaders).

Monks spent their lives in prayer, study, and work, and even attended eight church services every day. Other duties included caring for the poor and sick, teaching, and copying religious texts. Since most monasteries were self-sufficient, monks spent much of their time working. They farmed their land, tended their gardens, raised livestock, and sewed clothing.

Most monasteries were laid out around a *cloister*, a covered walkway surrounding an open square. On the north side was the church, and the kitchen and dining hall were on the south side. On the third side was the *dormitory*, or sleeping quarters, where monks slept in small cells, often on beds of wood.

The library writing room, called the *scriptorium*, on fourth side of the cloister, provided monks a place to copy books by hand and create beautiful illuminated manuscripts. By copying rare documents, monks kept knowledge of the past alive. Much of what we know today, about both the Middle Ages and ancient times, comes from their important work.

Both monks and nuns joined **religious orders** [religious order: a brotherhood or sisterhood of monks, nuns, or friars] . Each order had its own distinctive rules and forms of service. The Benedictines were only one such group.

Monastic life was one of the few opportunities open to medieval women who did not wish to marry. Women who became nuns lived in convents, which were communities run in the same way as monasteries. Nuns did most of the same types of work that monks performed.

Many nuns became important reformers and thinkers. For example, in Germany, Hildegard of Bingen founded a convent and was an adviser to popes and other Church officials. She also wrote books in which she criticized some of the practices of the Church.

**Friars** Some people wanted to live a religious life without the seclusion of the monastery. A famous example is Saint Francis of Assisi who was born to a wealthy Italian family but gave up his money to serve the poor. He founded the Franciscans, an order that is also called the Little Brothers of the Poor.

Instead of living in monasteries, Franciscan friars traveled among ordinary people to preach and to care for the poor and sick. They lived in complete poverty and had to work or beg for food for themselves and the poor. For this reason, they were also called *mendicants*, a word that means “beggars.” With his friend Clare, Francis founded a similar order for women called the Poor Clares.

Francis, who loved nature, believed that all living things deserved respect. For this reason, he is often pictured with animals. To many, his example of faith, charity, and love of God represents an ideal of Christian living.

## Lesson Summary

**The Roman Catholic Church emerged from the fall of Rome to play a central role in daily life in medieval western Europe.**

**The Church Takes Shape** More than just a religious institution, the Catholic Church was the center of community life and acquired great political and economic power. All clergy had a rank in the hierarchy, from priests to bishops, archbishops, to the pope.

**Sacraments, Pilgrimages, and Crusades** The Church's sacraments marked all the most important occasions of life, from birth to death. Many people expressed their faith by going on pilgrimages or fighting in the Crusades.

**Art, Architecture, Education, and Holidays** The importance of the Church to medieval people was seen in the art and architecture of churches, in education, and in holidays.

**Monks, Nuns, and Friars** During the Middle Ages, Saint Benedict developed his “Rule” for religious communities of monks and nuns. Other religious orders were founded, too, including groups of friars, such as the Franciscans, and the nuns called the Poor Clares.

Life in Medieval Towns

*What was life like in medieval European towns?*

## Section 4: Introduction

The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1450 C.E., a time in which people experienced a shift in daily life. At the start of the Middle Ages, most lived in the countryside, either on feudal manors or in religious communities. Many owned or worked on farms where they produced their own food. But by the 12th century, towns were emerging around castles and monasteries and along trade routes. These bustling towns became centers of trade and industry.

Almost all medieval towns were protected by thick stone walls and required visitors to enter through gates. Inside, homes and businesses lined unpaved streets. Since few people could read, signs with colorful pictures hung over the doorways of shops and businesses. Open squares in front of public buildings, such as churches, served as gathering places. People in the town might shop at the local market place or watch religious plays.

Most streets were very narrow. The second stories of houses jutted out, blocking the sunlight from reaching the street. With few sources of indoor light, houses were often dark, too. Squares and streets were crowded with people, horses, and carts—as well as cats, dogs, geese, and chickens. There was no garbage collection, so residents threw their garbage into nearby canals and ditches or simply out the window. As you can imagine, most medieval towns were filled with unpleasant smells.

In this lesson, you will first learn about the growth of medieval towns. Then you will look at several aspects of daily life. You will explore trade and commerce, homes and households, disease and medical treatment, crime and punishment, and leisure and entertainment.

## 1. The Growth of Medieval Towns

In the ancient world, town life was well established, particularly in Greece and Rome. Ancient towns were busy trading centers. But after the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west, trade with the east suffered, and town life declined. In the Early Middle Ages, most people in western Europe lived in scattered communities in the countryside.

By the High Middle Ages, towns were growing again. One reason for their growth was improvements in agriculture. Farmers were clearing forests and adopting better farming method, which resulted in a **surplus** [surplus: more than is needed or used] of crops for them to sell in town markets. And because of these surpluses, not everyone had to farm to feed themselves. Another reason for the growth of towns was the revival of trade. Seaport towns, such as Venice and Genoa in Italy, served as trading centers for goods from the Middle East and Asia. Within Europe, merchants often transported goods by river, and many towns grew up near these waterways.

Many merchants who sold their wares in towns became permanent **residents** [resident: someone who lives in a place] . So did people practicing various trades. Some towns grew wealthier because local people specialized in making specific types of goods. For example, towns in Flanders (present-day Belgium and the Netherlands) were known for their fine woolen cloth. Meanwhile, workers in the Italian city of Venice produced glass. Other towns built their wealth on the banking industry that grew up to help people trade more easily.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, towns were generally part of the domain of a feudal lord—whether a monarch, a noble, or a highranking Church official. As towns grew wealthier, town dwellers began to resent the lord's feudal rights and his demands for taxes. They felt they no longer needed the lord's protection—or his interference.

## 2. Guilds

Medieval towns began as centers for trade, but they soon developed into places where many goods were produced, as well. Both trade and production were overseen by organizations called **guilds** [guild: an organization of people in the same craft or trade] .

There were two main kinds of guilds: merchant guilds and craft guilds. All types of craftspeople had their own guilds, from cloth makers to cobblers (who made shoes, belts, and other leather goods), to the stonemasons who built the great cathedrals.

Guilds provided help and protection for the people doing a certain kind of work, and they maintained high standards. Guilds controlled the hours of work and set prices. They also handled complaints from the public. If, for example, a coal merchant cheated a customer, it might reflect poorly on all coal merchants. The guilds, therefore, punished members who had bad practices.

Guild members paid dues to their organization, which paid for the construction of guildhalls and for guild fairs and festivals. Guilds also used the money to take care of members and their families who were sick and unable to work.

It was not easy to become a member of a guild. Starting around age 12, a boy, and sometimes a girl, became an **apprentice** [apprentice: a person who works for a master in a trade or craft in return for training] . An apprentice's parents signed an agreement with a master of the trade. The master agreed to shelter, feed, and train the apprentice. In some cases, the parents paid the master a sum of money, but apprentices rarely got paid for their work.

At the end of seven years, apprentices had to prove to the guild that they had mastered their trade. To do this, an apprentice produced a piece of work called a “master piece.” If the guild approved of the work, the apprentice was given the right to become a master and set up his or her own business. Setting up a business was expensive, however, and few people could afford to do it right away. Often they became journeymen instead. The word *journeyman* does not refer to a journey, but comes from the French word journée, for “day.” A journeyman was a craftsperson who found work “by the day,” instead of becoming a master who employed other workers.

## 3. Trade and Commerce

What brought most people to towns was business—meaning trade and commerce. As trade and commerce grew, so did towns.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, most trade was in luxury goods, which only the wealthy could afford. People made everyday necessities for themselves. By the High Middle Ages, more local people were buying and selling more kinds of products, including everyday goods like food, clothing, and household items. Different towns also began specializing in producing certain goods, such as woolen cloth, glass, and silk.

Most towns had a market, where food and local goods were bought and sold. Much larger were the great merchant fairs, which a town might hold a couple times a year. These fairs could attract merchants from many countries who sold goods from all over Europe, the Middle East, and beyond.

With the growth of trade and commerce, merchants grew increasingly powerful and wealthy. They ran sizable businesses and looked for trading opportunities far from home. Merchant guilds came to **dominate** [dominate: to have control or power over something] the business life of towns and cities. In towns that had become independent, members of merchant guilds often sat on town councils or were elected mayor.

Not everyone prospered, however. Medieval towns commonly had sizable Jewish communities, but in Christian Europe, they often faced deep prejudice. The hostility of Christians, sometimes backed up by laws, made it difficult for Jews to earn their living. They were not allowed to own land, and their lords sometimes took their property and belongings at will. Jews could also be the targets of violence.

One opportunity that was open to Jews was to become bankers and moneylenders. This work was generally forbidden to Christians because the Church taught that charging money for loans was sinful. Jewish bankers and moneylenders performed an essential service for the economy. Still, they were often looked down upon and abused for practicing this “wicked” trade.

## 4. Homes and Households

Medieval towns were typically small and crowded. They were narrow and could be up to four stories high. Most of the houses were made of wood, and they tended to lean over time. Sometimes two facing houses would lean so much, they touched across the street!

Rich and poor lived in quite different households. In poorer neighborhoods, several families might occupy a single house with only one room in which they cooked, ate, and slept. In general, people worked where they lived. If a father or mother was a weaver, for example, the loom would be in their home.

Wealthy merchants often had splendid homes. The first level might be given over to a business, including offices and storerooms. The family's living quarters might be on the second level, complete with a solar, a space where the family gathered to eat and talk. An upper level might house servants and apprentices.

Even for wealthy families, life was not always comfortable compared to life today. With fireplaces the main source of heat and light, rooms were cold, smoky, and dim. Most windows were small and covered with oiled parchment instead of glass, so little sunlight came through.

Growing up in a medieval town wasn't easy, either. About half of all children died before they became adults, and those who did survive began preparing for their adult roles around the age of seven. Some boys and a few girls attended school, where they learned to read and write. Children from wealthier families might learn to paint and to play music on a lute (a stringed instrument). Other children soon began work as apprentices.

In general, people of the Middle Ages believed in an orderly society in which everyone knew their place. Most boys grew up to do the same work as their fathers. Some girls trained for a craft, but most married young, usually around the age of 15, and were soon raising children of their own. For many girls, their education was at home, where they learned cooking, cloth making, and other skills necessary to care for a home and family.

## 5. Disease and Medical Treatment

Unhealthy living conditions in medieval towns led to the spread of disease. Towns were very dirty places. There was no running water in homes, and instead of bathrooms, people used outdoor privies (shelters used as toilets) or chamber pots that they emptied into nearby streams and canals. Garbage, too, was tossed into streams and canals or onto the streets. People lived crowded together in small spaces and usually bathed only once a week, if that. Rats and fleas were common and often carried diseases. It's no wonder people were frequently ill.

Many illnesses that can be prevented or cured today had no cures in medieval times. One example is leprosy, a disease of the skin and nerves that causes open sores. Because leprosy can spread from one person to another and can cause death, lepers were ordered to live by themselves in **isolated** [isolated: set apart from other people or things] houses, usually far from towns. Some towns even passed laws to keep out lepers.

Common diseases for which there was no cure at this time included measles, cholera, small pox, and scarlet fever. The most feared disease was bubonic plague, known as the Black Death.

No one knew exactly how diseases were spread. Unfortunately, this made many people look for someone to blame. For example, after an outbreak of illness, Jews—often a target of unjust anger and suspicion—were sometimes accused of poisoning wells.

Although hospitals were invented during the Middle Ages, there were few of them. When sickness struck, most people were treated in their homes by family members or, sometimes, a doctor. Medieval doctors believed in a combination of prayer and medical treatment, many involving herbs. Using herbs as medicine had a long history based on traditional folk wisdom and knowledge handed down from ancient Greece and Rome. Other treatments were based on less scientific methods. For example, medieval doctors sometimes consulted the positions of the planets and relied on magic charms to heal people.

Another common technique was to “bleed” patients by opening a vein or applying leeches (a type of worm) to the skin to suck out blood. Medieval doctors believed that this “bloodletting” helped restore balance to the body and spirit. Unfortunately, such treatments often weakened a patient further.

## 6. Crime and Punishment

Besides being unhealthy, medieval towns were noisy, smelly, crowded, and often unsafe. Pickpockets and thieves were always on the lookout for vulnerable travelers with money in their pouches. Towns were especially dangerous at night because there were no streetlights. In some cities, night watchmen patrolled the streets with candle lanterns to deter, or discourage, criminals.

People accused of crimes were held in dirty, crowded jails. Prisoners relied on friends and family to bring them food or money, or else they risked starving or being ill-treated. Wealthy people sometimes left money in their wills to help prisoners buy food.

In the Early Middle Ages, trial by ordeal or combat was often used to establish an accused person's guilt or innocence. In a trial by ordeal, the accused had to pass a dangerous test, such as being thrown into a deep well. Unfortunately, a person who floated instead of drowning was declared guilty because he or she had been “rejected” by the water.

In a trial by combat, the accused person had to fight to prove his or her innocence. People believed that God would ensure the right party won. Clergy, women, children, and disabled people could name a champion to fight on their behalf.

Punishments for crimes were very harsh. For lesser crimes, people were fined or put in the stocks (a wooden frame with holes for the person's arms and sometimes legs). Being left in the stocks publically for hours or days was both painful and humiliating.

People found guilty of crimes, such as highway robbery, stealing livestock, treason, or murder, could be hanged or burned at the stake. Executions were carried out in public, often in front of large crowds.

In most parts of Europe, important nobles shared with monarchs the power to prosecute major crimes. In England, kings in the early 1100s began creating a nationwide system of royal courts. The decisions of royal judges contributed to a growing body of **common law** [common law: a body of rulings made by judges or very old traditional laws that become part of a nation’s legal system] . Along with an independent judiciary, or court system, English common law would become an important safeguard of individual rights. Throughout Europe, court trials based on written and oral evidence eventually replaced trials by ordeal or combat.

## Leisure and Entertainment

Many aspects of town life were challenging and people worked hard, but they also participated in leisure activities. They enjoyed quite a few days off from work, too. In medieval times, people engaged in many of the same activities we enjoy today. Children played with dolls and toys, such as wooden swords, balls, and hobbyhorses. They rolled hoops and played games like badminton, lawn bowling, and blind man's bluff. Adults also liked games, such as chess, checkers, and backgammon. They might gather to play card games, go dancing, or enjoy other social activities.

Townspeople also took time off from work to celebrate special days, such as religious feasts. On Sundays and holidays, animal baiting was a popular, though cruel, amusement. First, a bull or bear was fastened to a stake by a chain around its neck or a back leg, and sometimes by a nose ring. Then, specially trained dogs were set loose to torment the captive animal.

Fair days were especially festive, as jugglers, dancers, and clowns entertained the fairgoers. Minstrels performed songs, recited poetry, and played instruments such as harps, while guild members paraded through the streets dressed in special costumes and carrying banners.

Guilds also staged mystery plays in which they acted out Bible stories. Often they performed stories that were appropriate to their guild. In some towns, for instance, the boat builders acted out the story of Noah, which describes how Noah had to build an ark (a large boat) to survive a flood that God sent to “cleanse” the world of sinful people. In other towns, the coopers (barrel makers) acted out this story, too. The coopers put hundreds of water-filled barrels on the rooftops. Then they released the water to represent the 40 days of rain described in the story.

Mystery plays gave rise to another type of religious drama, the miracle play. These plays dramatized the lives of saints, often showing the saints performing miracles, or wonders. For example, in England it was popular to portray the story of St. George, who slew a dragon that was about to eat the king's daughter.

## Lesson Summary

**At the beginning of the Middle Ages, most Europeans lived in the countryside. By about 1200, however, towns were growing.**

**Guilds, Trade, and Commerce** Many towns were wealthy enough to purchase a charter that made them independent from feudal lords. An economy based on trade and commerce significantly changed daily life. Guilds became leading forces in their communities. Farmers brought crops, and merchants brought many goods to sell in town marketplaces.

**Homes and Households** Homes varied, depending on how wealthy or poor a family was. Most families had small, crowded homes with only a fireplace for heat. Few children were educated. Girls married relatively early and boys began work as early as age seven.

**Disease and Treatment** Medieval towns were crowded, noisy, and dirty. Diseases spread rapidly, and many people could not be cured with the medical knowledge of the time.

**Crime and Punishment** Crime was a problem in medieval towns, and it was punished harshly. Prisons were filthy, dark places, and many prisoners had to buy their own food.

**Leisure and Entertainment** Despite the hardships in a medieval town, many types of leisure activities made life more enjoyable for town dwellers, including games, fairs, festivals, and religious plays put on by guilds.

The Decline of Feudalism

*How did events in Europe contribute to the decline of feudalism and the rise of democratic thought?*

## Lesson 5: Introduction

Several key events contributed to the decline of feudalism in Europe from the 12th through the 15th centuries. There were many causes for the breakdown of the feudal system. You will explore three of these causes: political changes in England, a terrible disease, and a long series of wars.

In England, several political changes in the 12th and 13th centuries helped to weaken feudalism. A famous document known as *Magna Carta*, or Great Charter, dates from this time. Magna Carta was a written legal agreement that limited the king's power and strengthened the rights of nobles. As feudalism declined, Magna Carta took on a much broader meaning and contributed to ideas about individual rights and liberties in England.

In the 1300s, a terrible disease called the bubonic plague, or Black Death, swept across Asia and reached Europe in the late 1340s. Over the next two centuries, this terrifying disease killed millions in Europe. It struck all kinds of people—rich and poor, young and old, town dwellers and country folk. Almost everyone who caught the plague died within days. In some places, whole communities were wiped out. The deaths of so many people led to sweeping economic and social changes.

Lastly, between 1337 and 1453, France and England fought a series of battles known as the Hundred Years' War. This conflict changed the way wars were fought and shifted power away from feudal lords to monarchs and the common people.

How did such different events contribute to the decline of feudalism? What social and political changes occurred as feudalism weakened? In this lesson, you will find out.

## 1. Political Developments in England

Political development was rampant during the Middle Ages, and in one country, England, developments during the 12th and 13th centuries helped to weaken feudalism. The story begins with King Henry II, who reigned from 1154 to 1189.

**Henry II's Legal Reforms** Henry made legal reform a central concern of his reign. For example, he insisted that a jury formally accuse a person of a serious crime. Cases were then tried before a royal judge. In theory, people could no longer simply be jailed or executed for no legal reason, but had to go through a court trial as well. These reforms strengthened the power of royal courts at the expense of feudal lords.

Henry's effort to strengthen royal authority led to a serious conflict with the Catholic Church. In the year 1164, Henry issued the Constitutions of Clarendon, a document that he claimed spelled out the king's **traditional** [traditional: a belief, custom, or way of doing something that has existed for a long time] rights. Among them was the right to try clergy accused of serious crimes in royal courts, rather than in Church courts.

Henry's action led to a long, bitter quarrel with his friend, Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury. In 1170, four knights, perhaps seeking the king's favor, killed Becket in front of the main altar of Canterbury Cathedral. The cathedral and Becket's tomb soon became a popular destination for pilgrimages. In 1173, the Catholic Church proclaimed him a saint. Still, most of the Constitutions of Clarendon remained in force.

**King John and Magna Carta** In 1199, Henry's youngest son, John, became king of England. John soon made powerful enemies by losing most of the lands the English had controlled in France. He also taxed his barons heavily and ignored their traditional rights, arresting opponents at will. In addition, John quarreled with the Catholic Church and collected large amounts of money from its properties.

In June 1215, angry nobles forced a meeting with King John in a meadow called Runnymede, beside the River Thames, outside of London. There, they insisted that John put his seal on a document called **Magna Carta** [Magna Carta: a written legal agreement signed in 1215 that limited the English monarch’s power] , which means “Great Charter” in Latin.

Magna Carta was an agreement between the nobles and the monarch. The nobles concurred that the monarch could continue to rule. For his part, King John agreed to observe common law and the traditional rights of the nobles and the Church. For example, he promised to consult the nobles and the Church archbishops and bishops before imposing special taxes. He also agreed that “no free man” could be jailed except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land. This idea eventually developed into a key part of English common law known as **habeas corpus** [habeas corpus: the legal concept that an accused person cannot be jailed indefinitely without being charged with a crime] (HAY-be-us KOR-pus).

In many ways, Magna Carta only protected the rights and privileges of nobles. However, as time passed, the English people came to regard it as one of the **foundations** [foundation: the basis from which an idea or situation develops] of their rights and liberties.

**King Edward I and the Model Parliament** In 1295, Edward I, King John's grandson, took a major step toward including more people in government. Edward called together a governing body called the **Model Parliament** [Model Parliament: a governing body created by King Edward I that included some commoners, Church officials, and nobles] that included commoners and lower-ranking clergy, as well as high-level Church officials and nobles.

**The Impact of Political Developments in England** These political changes contributed to the decline of feudalism in two ways. Some of the changes strengthened royal authority at the expense of the nobles. Others eventually shifted some power to the common people.

Magna Carta established the idea of rights and liberties that even a monarch cannot violate. This document also affirmed that monarchs should rule with the advice of the governed. Henry II's legal reforms strengthened English common law and the role of judges and juries. Finally, Edward I's Model Parliament gave a voice in government to common people, as well as to nobles. All these ideas formed the basis for the development of modern **democratic** [democratic: ruled by the people. In a democracy, citizens elect representatives to make and carry out laws.] institutions.

## 2. The Bubonic Plague

In addition to political developments in England, another reason for the decline of feudalism was the **bubonic plague** [bubonic plague: a deadly contagious disease caused by bacteria and spread by fleas; also called the Black Death] , which affected all of Europe. The bubonic plague first struck Europe from 1346 to 1351. It returned in waves that occurred about every decade into the 15th century, leaving major changes in its wake.

Historians suspect that the plague began in Central Asia, possibly in China, and spread throughout China, India, the Middle East, and eventually to Europe. The disease traveled from Central Asia to the Black Sea along the Silk Road (the main trade route between Asia and the Mediterranean Sea). It probably was carried to Italy on a ship, causing it to spread north and west, throughout the continent of Europe and to England.

**The Black Death** Symptoms, or signs, of the plague included fever, vomiting, fierce coughing and sneezing fits, and egg-sized swellings or bumps, called *buboes*. The term “Black Death” probably came from these black-and-blue swellings that appeared on the skin of victims.

The dirty conditions in which people lived contributed significantly to the spread of the bubonic plague. The bacteria that cause the disease are carried by fleas that feed on the blood of infected rodents. When the animal dies, the fleas jump to other animals and people. During the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for people to go for many months without a change of clothing or a bath. Rodents, covered with fleas, often roamed the floors of homes looking for food. City streets were filled with human waste, dead animals, and trash.

At the time, though, no one knew where the disease came from or how it spread. Terrified people falsely blamed the plague on everything from the positions of the planets to lepers and to Jews.

Persecution of the Jews did not begin with the plague. Prejudice against Jews provoked the English government to order all Jews to leave the country in 1290. In France, the same thing happened in 1306 and again in 1394. But fear of the plague made matters worse, and during the Black Death, many German cities ordered Jews to leave.

**The Impact of the Plague** The plague took a terrible toll on Asian and European populations. China's population was reduced by nearly half between 1200 and 1393, probably because of the plague and famine. Travelers reported that dead bodies covered the ground in Central Asia and India.

Some historians **estimate** [estimate: a guess as to the value or size of something] that 24 million Europeans died of the plague—about a third of the entire population. The deaths of so many people accelerated, or sped up, changes in Europe's economic and social structure, which contributed to the decline of feudalism.

Trade and commerce slowed almost to a halt during the plague years. As Europe began to recover, the economy needed to be rebuilt. But it wouldn't be rebuilt in the same way, as feudal lords no longer held most of the power.

After the plague, there was a shift in power from nobles to the common people. One reason for this change was a desperate need for workers because so many people had died. The workers who did survive could, therefore, demand more money and more rights. In addition, many peasants and some serfs abandoned feudal manors and moved to towns and cities, seeking better opportunities. This led to a weakening of the manor system and a loss of power for feudal lords.

After the plague, a number of peasant rebellions broke out. When nobles tried to return to the system from before the plague, resentment exploded across Europe. There were peasant revolts throughout Europe in France, Flanders, England, Germany, Spain, and Italy.

The most famous of these revolts was the English Peasants' War in 1381. The English rebels succeeded in entering London and presenting their demands to the king, Richard II. The leader of the rebellion was killed, however, and after his death, the revolt lost **momentum** [momentum: a force gathered over time] . Still, in most of Europe, the time was coming when serfdom would end.

## 3. The Hundred Years' War

Between 1337 and 1453, England and France fought a series of battles for control over lands in France. Known as the **Hundred Years' War** [Hundred Years’ War: a series of battles fought between France and England from 1337 to 1453] , this long conflict contributed to the erosion of feudalism in England and in France.

English monarchs had long claimed lands in France. This was because earlier English kings had actually been feudal lords over these French fiefs. French kings now disputed these claims. When Philip VI of France declared that the French fiefs of Edward III, King of England, were part of Philip's own realm, war broke out in France.

**Early English Successes** Despite often being outnumbered, the English won most of the early battles of the war. What happened at the Battle of Crécy (KRAY-see) demonstrates why.

Two quite different armies faced each other at the French village of Crécy in 1346. The French had a feudal army that relied on horsemounted knights. French knights wore heavy armor that made it difficult to move when not on horseback. Their weapons were swords and lances. Some of the infantry, or foot soldiers, used crossbows, which were effective only at short ranges.

In contrast, the English army was composed of lightly armored knights, foot soldiers, and archers armed with longbows. Some soldiers were recruited from the common people and paid to fight.

The longbow had many advantages over the crossbow. Larger arrows could be fired more quickly. The arrows flew farther, faster, and more accurately, and could pierce the armor of the time. At Crécy, the longbow helped the English defeat the much larger French force.

**The French Fight Back** The French slowly chipped away at the territory that the English had won in the early years of the war. In 1415, after a long truce, English King Henry V again invaded France. This time, the English met with stronger resistance, partly because the French were now using more modern tactics. The French king was recruiting his army from commoners and paying them with money collected by taxes, just as the English did.

Another reason for increased French resistance was a new sense of national identity and unity. In part, the French were inspired by a 17-year-old peasant girl, known today as Joan of Arc. Joan claimed that she heard the voices of saints urging her to save France. Disguising as a boy, she put on a suit of armor and set out to fight.

In 1429, Joan led a French army to victory in the Battle of Orléans (OR-lay-uhn). The following year, the “Maid of Orléans” was captured by English allies. The English pushed certain Church leaders to accuse Joan of being a witch and a **heretic** [heretic: a person who holds beliefs that are contrary to a set of religious teachings] and to burn her at the stake.

Joan of Arc's heroism changed the way many French men and women felt about their king and nation. Twenty-two years after Joan's death, the French finally drove the English out of France. Almost 500 years later, the Roman Catholic Church made Joan a saint.

**The Impact of the Hundred Years' War** The Hundred Years' War contributed to the decline of feudalism by helping to shift power from feudal lords to monarchs and to common people. During the struggle, monarchs on both sides had collected taxes and raised large professional armies. As a result, kings no longer relied extensively on nobles to supply knights for the army.

In addition, changes in military technology reduced the need for nobles' knights and castles. The longbow proved to be an effective weapon against mounted knights. Castles also became less effective as armies began using gunpowder to shoot iron balls from cannons and blast holes in castle walls.

The new feeling of nationalism also shifted power away from lords. Previously, many English and French peasants felt more loyalty to their local lords than to their monarch. The war created a new sense of national unity and patriotism on both sides.

In both France and England, commoners and peasants bore the heaviest burden of the war. They were forced to fight and to pay higher and more frequent taxes. Those who survived the war, however, were needed as soldiers and workers. For this reason, the common people emerged from the conflict with greater influence and power.

## Lesson Summary

**In this lesson, you have explored three key events that contributed to the decline of feudalism in Europe in the Late Middle Ages.**

**Political Developments in England** Henry II's legal reforms strengthened English common law and the role of judges and juries. Magna Carta established the idea of rights and liberties that even a monarch cannot violate. It also affirmed that monarchs should rule with the advice of the governed. Edward I's Model Parliament gave a voice in government to common people, as well as to nobles.

**The Bubonic Plague** The bubonic plague killed about one-third of the people of Europe. After the plague, the need for workers to rebuild Europe led to a slight shift in power from feudal lords to the common people.

**The Hundred Years' War** This series of battles between England and France caused a rise in national pride and identity in both countries. It strengthened the monarchs and began to reduce the importance of nobles and knights on the battlefield.