

Section 1: Geography of Europe

THE PHYSICAL FEATURES OF EUROPE

Europe is a small continent, but it is very diverse. Many different landforms, water features, and climates can be found there. Although we call Europe a continent, it is part of **Eurasia**, a large landmass that includes both Europe and Asia.

Europe's **topography**, the shape and elevation of the land, varies widely from place to place. Southern Europe is very mountainous, with some of the world's highest mountains in the Alps. As you travel north, the land gets flat. Northern Europe was once covered in thick forests.

Most of Europe's rivers are in the north. Farther north, the land gets rugged and hilly again, though not as high as the mountains in the south. Many peninsulas jut out from Europe, creating a long and jagged coastline. The climate is hotter and drier in the south, and gets progressively colder as you move north.

GEOGRAPHY SHAPES LIFE

Not surprisingly, with this variety of topography and climate, life in early Europe was different depending upon where you lived. In southern Europe, most people lived on coastal plains or in river valleys where the land was flat enough to farm. People grew crops like grapes and olives that could grow on mountainsides and also survive the region's dry summers. High in the mountains, where the land was too steep or rocky to farm, people raised sheep and goats.

Because southern Europe has a long coastline with numerous peninsulas, many people turned to the sea for food and transportation. Societies that lived in southern Europe often became great traders and seafarers.

Most people in northern Europe lived much farther from the sea than people in southern Europe did. They still had access to the sea, however, through northern Europe's many rivers. Because rivers were an easy means of transportation, many towns grew up along them. These rivers also sometimes provided protection for cities.

In the fields around cities, farmers took advantage of northern Europe's rich soils to grow all sorts of crops. These fields were excellent farmlands, but the flat land also created an easy route for invaders to follow. No mountains blocked people's access to northern Europe. As a result, the region was frequently invaded.

Section 2: Europe after the Fall of Rome

CHRISTIANITY SPREADS TO NORTHERN EUROPE

Europe was a dangerous place during Rome's long collapse. Without the Roman government, Europe had no central authority to keep order. Various groups from the north and east moved into former Roman lands, creating their own states and making their own kings. These kings often fought among themselves. As a result, by the early 500s Europe was divided into many small kingdoms. This marked the beginning of the **Middle Ages**, or **medieval** period.

At the beginning of the Middle Ages, most of the kingdoms of northern Europe were not Christian. Christianity was common only in places that had been part of the Roman Empire, such as Italy and Spain. As time passed, Christianity slowly spread farther north, largely through the efforts of two groups of Christians—monks and missionaries.

The pope sent missionaries to northern Europe, hoping that Christianity would make Europe a safer place. Missionaries converted much of Germany, France, and Britain. One of the earliest missionaries, **Saint Patrick**, was an English Christian who took it upon himself to convert Ireland. Unlike missionaries **monks** lived apart from society in isolated communities, praying, working, and meditating. Communities of monks, or **monasteries**, were built all over Europe in the Middle Ages. Most monks followed a strict set of rules created in the early 500s by **Saint Benedict**.

THE FRANKS BUILD AN EMPIRE

In the 500s a powerful group called the Franks conquered Gaul, the region we now call France. Under a ruler named Clovis, the Franks became Christian and created one of the strongest kingdoms in Europe. The Franks reached their greatest power during the 700s under **Charlemagne** (SHAHR-luh-mayn). At its height Charlemagne's empire reached from France into modern Germany, Austria, Italy, and northern Spain. Religious scholarship flourished in Charlemagne's time.

INVADERS THREATEN EUROPE

While Charlemagne was building his empire, Europe was being attacked on all sides by invaders. The most fearsome were the swift and vicious attacks of the Vikings from Scandinavia.

Section 3: Feudalism and Manor Life

FEUDALISM GOVERNS KNIGHTS AND NOBLES

After Charlemagne's time, raids on Europe from the north and east intensified. The Frankish kings were unable to defend their empire. Nobles had to defend their own lands. Many nobles began to rule their lands as independent territories. These nobles needed soldiers. They gave **knights**, warriors who fought on horseback, land in exchange for military service. A noble who gave land to a knight was called a lord, while the knight was called a **vassal**. The system that governed the promises between lords and vassals is called **feudalism**.

Lords and vassals had responsibilities to each other. A lord had to send help if an enemy attacked a vassal. A lord had to be fair or vassals could break all ties with him. Vassals had to fight at a lord's command. They also had to house and feed a lord if he visited and sometimes pay him money.

FEUDALISM SPREADS

Frankish knights introduced feudalism into northern Italy, Spain, and Germany. From Germany, knights carried feudalism into eastern Europe. Feudalism reached Britain when **William the Conqueror** invaded and made himself king of England.

THE MANOR SYSTEM

An estate owned by a knight or lord was called a **manor**. As fighters, knights had no time to work in the fields. Most peasants owned no land but needed to grow food to live. So knights allowed peasants to live and farm land on their estates. In return the peasants, or **serfs**, had to give the knights food or other payment. Skilled craftsman also lived and worked on the manor, which provided everything people needed.

Women in the Middle Ages had fewer rights than men, but they still played important roles in society. Some women, like **Eleanor of Aquitaine**, even became politically powerful.

TOWNS AND TRADE GROW

Most people lived in manors during the Middle Ages, but as Europe's population grew so did the size and number of towns and cities. The invention of the plough and increased trade eventually led to the decline of feudalism as people had more opportunities to make a living.

Section 4: Feudal Societies

FEUDAL SOCIETIES SHARE COMMON ELEMENTS

Feudalism was not unique to Europe. You may have noticed a connection between the lords and vassals of Europe and, half a world away, the samurai and the daimyo of Japan. But how similar were the two societies?

Both knights and samurai were paid in land, rather than in money, and had peasants work the land for them. Both collected part of the crop yield in return for allowing the peasants to farm on their property. Both kinds of warriors promised to serve and fight for their nobles. In exchange for the land, both lords and daimyo expected their warriors to behave with honor and loyalty. The Japanese code of behavior for a samurai was called Bushido. A similar code of honorable behavior for European knights was called **chivalry**.

EUROPE AND JAPAN DIFFER

Still, there were many differences between the two cultures. Perhaps the main difference was expressed through religion. Although religion was important to both groups, the religious concepts were different. The Europeans were mostly Christians, while the Japanese had blended the naturalistic Shinto religion, where everything has a spirit, with Buddhism and Confucianism. Religion strongly influences the way people look at life and ultimately how they act.

The differences in religion appear in the art of the two cultures. In Europe most art of the Middle Ages showed Christian religious themes. Painting and sculpture represented scenes from the Bible or male and female saints. Poems and stories often taught people how to live or tried to inspire them with the lives of great Christians.

The art of Japan, on the other hand, expressed mostly natural scenes. Paintings of nature were common, and people designed and built beautiful gardens. The simple wooden architecture of a house was designed to blend into nature, rather than stand out. Japanese literature also celebrated nature. For example, Japanese poets in the 1600s created **haiku**, short poems of three lines and 17 syllables that often describe scenes of nature.

Still, it is remarkable that similar systems of feudalism developed at the same time in two completely different cultures, located so far from each other. While feudalism has faded, it still impacts the life and culture of these two different regions today.