

## The Middle Ages

### 1066-1485

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#### 1. William the Conqueror and the Norman Influence

- a. William was the illegitimate son of the previous duke of Normandy, a cousin of the English king (Edward the Confessor)
- b. William claimed that Edward promised the English throne to William & sailed across the English Channel with an enormous army
- c. William of Malmesbury (one of the greatest English history writers) describes William the Conqueror this way: "He was of just stature, extraordinary corpulence, fierce countenance: his forehead bare of hair; of such strength of arm that it was often a matter of surprise that no one was able to draw his bow which he himself could bend when his horse was on full gallop: he was majestic whether sitting or standing, although the protuberance of his belly deformed his royal person."
- d. William the Conqueror wanted to rule the Anglo-Saxons, not eliminate them
- e. Because of this, both English culture and language is a combination of Norman and Anglo-Saxon elements
- f. Domesday Book: an inventory of nearly every piece of property in England (land, cattle, buildings) – written in red and black ink
- g. Because of the Domesday Book, for the first time, taxes were based on what people owned

#### 2. The Normans Change England

- a. The Normans brought significant changes to England: land (taken from fallen English landowners) was redistributed among William's followers; a new language was introduced to the Anglo-Saxons (French); and a new social system **feudalism** was introduced

#### 3. Feudalism: From the top down

- a. Feudalism was a caste system, a property system and a military system
- b. based on a religious concept of rank (with God as the supreme overlord)
- c. Vassal: a dependent tenant
- d. Kings held land as a "divine right" (i.e.: given to them by God)
- e. The king appointed barons as his vassals (allotting them portions of his land in return for their economic or military allegiance or both!) who in turn appointed their own vassals – all the way down to the serfs!
- f. Vassal: aristocratic dependent tenant who received land (a fief) from a lord in exchange for military service & other expressions of loyalty

- g. Lord: noble who had the power to grant land to vassals (they could also be vassals to other higher lords)
- h. Knight: landless, armored warrior – provided as military service from their lord to a higher lord (the larger the fief, the more knights a vassal had to supply!)
- i. Serfs: landless peasants who worked on and were bound to vassals' land! They were not free to leave the land they worked
- j. Ceremony of homage: a ceremony where a vassal affirmed his loyalty to his lord
- k. The feudal system created a sense of form & manners – a formalism of life (especially in the knighthood and in the related practice, or code, or chivalry!)
- l. **Chivalry**: a code of conduct. The knight's first obligation was to defend his lord, the king, and the Christian faith; but the code also covered how to treat a lady, how to help others, and how to resist the urge to run away if captured.

#### **4. Knights in Shining Armor**

- a. Boys were trained from an early age to become warriors
- b. Not every boy could become a knight – his parents had to be rich enough to buy him a horse, armor, and weapons
- c. A knight's education began at about the age of seven, with instruction in good manners and social skills, such as singing, dancing, and playing chess. Also, how to use a sword and shield;
- d. At the age of 14, a boy became a squire, a kind of personal servant to a knight
- e. After his training, a boy was dubbed (ceremonially tapped on the shoulder) and given the title of "Sir" and full rights of the warrior caste
- f. Knighthood was grounded in the feudal idea of loyalty & the complex system of social codes!

#### **5. Women in Medieval Society: No Voice, No Choice**

- a. Since they were not soldiers, women had no political rights (b/c the society was primarily military)
- b. Women were always subservient to a man: her husband, father, or brother
- c. Her husband's social standing determined the degree of respect she commanded
- d. Peasant women, experienced a never-ending life of child-bearing, housework and hard field work
- e. Women of higher stations (class/rank) were occupied with childbearing and household supervision. Some women might even manage entire estates when their husbands were away on business or at war (but when the men returned, the wives went back to the same old...)
- f. The Church also regarded women as inferior to men – during the Middle Ages, the Church took further steps to diminish women's status by reclaiming convents and monasteries that had been founded or supported by noblewomen!

#### **6. Chivalry and Courtly Love: Ideal but Unreal**

- a. Chivalry was a system of ideals and social codes governing the behavior of knights and gentlewomen
- b. Rules: taking an oath of loyalty to the overlord, observing certain rules of warfare (never attacking an unarmed opponent), adoring a particular lady (not necessarily one's wife) – this last was seen as a means of self-improvement

- c. Adoring a lady was considered a way of making a knight braver and nobler
- d. Courtly love: in its ideal form - nonsexual! (a knight may wear his lady's colors in battle, he might glorify her in words & be inspired by her, but the lady always remained pure and out of reach) – she was always set above her admirer!
- e. Of course, this concept flew in the face of human nature!!!
- f. When the line between courtly love and physical love gets crossed – things go bad (remember in King Arthur tales when this happens, the Round Table collapses, Camelot crumbles)

## **7. The Rise of the Romance**

- a. Chivalry brought about an idealized attitude toward women, but it did little to improve their actual position!
- b. A woman's value was tied to the value of the lands she brought to the marriage!
- c. The Romance: not what you know as romance!...but, a story of a romantic hero who undertakes a quest to conquer an evil enemy (often with the help of magic!)
- d. In the Romance, love was relatively distant and idealized

## **8. The New City Classes: Out from Under the Overlords**

- a. As the population grew, an increasing number of people lived in towns and cities – making the feudal system obsolete!
- b. City classes develop during this period: lower, middle, and upper middle
- c. These people make their living outside the feudal system: an emerging merchant class had its own tastes in the arts & the ability to pay for what it wanted (so much medieval art is not aristocratic! It is middle class!)
- d. People in the cities were free, not tied to the land or to knighthood and chivalry
- e. Ballads often expressed the points of view of these people
- f. Also, their values were expressed in the mystery and miracle plays performed by the new guilds, or craft unions,
- g. City Life:
  - i. Most shops opened at 6:00 am and closed around 3:00 pm
  - ii. Merchants advertised by shouting out to – and sometimes grabbing! – passersby.
  - iii. News came primarily from the town crier, who would ring a bell as he walked about, calling out timely information.
  - iv. Pigs owned by citizens roamed freely, adding to the filth from open drains that often ran down the middle of streets.
- h. Medieval Drama: originated in the Church; plays provided religious instruction (since most of the population could not read); miracle plays were based on the legends of the saints; mystery plays were based on Biblical history; and morality plays were dramatizations of allegorical stories (they had 2 levels of meaning!)

## **9. The Great Happenings**

- a. The Crusades: Bloodbath over the Holy Land
  - i. The Crusades (1095 – 1270), were a series of holy wars waged by European Christians against Muslims

- ii. Pope Urban II upheld that it was their duty to wage war against Muslims occupying Jerusalem and other places in the Middle East that were considered holy to Christians.
- iii. They were disastrous expeditions in which even children were swept up into (the Children's Crusade 1212)
- iv. However (even though they were trounced militarily!) Europe benefited greatly from its contact with the sophisticated Middle Eastern civilization: mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and crafts
- v. Islamic Cities:
  - 1. Baghdad and Damascus had well-established public libraries
  - 2. Cairo was an important link in the spice trade
  - 3. Arab universities were established long before their European counterparts: al-Azhar (Cairo) University was founded in 970!

**b. The Martyrdom of Thomas a Becket: Murder in the Cathedral**

- i. At this time all Christians belonged to the Catholic Church
- ii. The Pope was the head of the Church and considered God's representative
- iii. King Henry hoped that Thomas (of Canterbury) would take his side in disputes with the church – but Thomas was independent and often sided with the Pope!
- iv. King Henry gets frustrated with Thomas & in an angry rage says: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" – unfortunately four of Henry's knights took him literally & murdered Beckett in his own cathedral!
- v. Much public outrage followed and further weakened King Henry in matters dealing with the church
- vi. Many clergy become corrupt since the state was in no position to correct them!
- vii. The medieval Church had one positive effect: it fostered cultural unity – a system of beliefs and symbols that transcended the national cultures of Europe.
- viii. The Church was a center of learning – Latin was the common language – allowing religious leaders from various countries to communicate.
- ix. However, since the common man did not speak Latin, many of them would be cut off from some aspects of their religion

**c. The Magna Carta: Power to (Some of ) the People**

- i. It served as a return to older, democratic tendencies (from the Anglo period)
- ii. "Great Charter" – signed by King John in 1215
- iii. The Magna Carta becomes the basis of English constitutional law: rights such as trial by jury and legislative taxation were established

**d. The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453): The Arrow is Mightier Than the Armor**

- i. Militarily unsuccessful
- ii. Based on weak claims to the throne of France by two English Kings (Edward III and Henry V)

- iii. The war did factor in the gradual development of a British national consciousness
- iv. English were no longer best represented by the knight in shining armor, but by the yeoman (small landowner) with his longbow!
- v. These small landowners now became a dominant force in the new society that grew up from the ruins of feudalism

**e. The Black Death**

- i. Bubonic plague – highly contagious – spread by fleas from infected rats
- ii. Reduced the nation's population by a third – causing a labor shortage and giving the lower classes more bargaining power against their overlords!
- iii. Serfs gained freedom – which knocked out feudalism's last support!
- iv. Ushers in the English Renaissance!