

Chapter 1: The Crusades and The High Middle Ages

The Crusades

The Crusades were a series of invasions of the Middle East by Europeans in the name of Christianity. They went on, periodically, for centuries. They resulted in a shift in the identity of Latin Christianity, great financial benefits to certain parts of Europe, and many instances of horrific carnage. The Crusades serve as one of the iconic points of transition from the early Middle Ages to the “high” or mature Middle Ages, in which the the localized, barter-based economy of Europe transitioned toward a more dynamic commercial economic system.

The background to the Crusades was the power of a new Islamic empire in the Middle East, that of the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuks were fierce fighters, trained by their background as steppe nomads and raiders, who had converted to Islam prior to the eleventh century. They proved even more deadly foes to the Byzantine Empire than had the Arab caliphates, and by late in the eleventh century the Byzantine emperor Alexius called for aid from the Christians of western Europe, despite the ongoing divide between the Latin and Orthodox churches.

In 1095, Pope Urban II responded by giving a sermon in France summoning the knights of Europe to holy war to protect Christians in and near the Holy Land. Urban spoke of the supposed atrocities committed by the Turks, the richness of the lands that European knights might expect to seize, and the righteousness of the cause of aiding fellow Christians. The idea caught on much faster and much more thoroughly than Urban could have possibly expected; knights from all over Europe responded when the news reached them. The idea was so appealing that not only knights, but thousands of commoners responded, forming a “people’s crusade” that marched off for Jerusalem, for the most part without weapons, armor, or supplies.

Much of the impulse of the Crusades came from the fact that Urban II offered unlimited penance to the crusaders, meaning that anyone who took part in the crusade would have all of their sins absolved; furthermore, pilgrims were now allowed to be armed. Thus, the Crusades were the first armed Christian pilgrimage, and in fact, the first “official” Christian holy war in the history of the religion. In addition to the promise of salvation, and equally important to many of the knights who flocked to the crusading banner, was the promise of loot (and, again, Urban’s speech explicitly promised the crusaders wealth and land). Many of the crusaders were minor

lords or landless knights, men who had few prospects back home but now had the chance to make something of themselves in the name of liberating the Holy Land. Thus, most crusaders combined ambition and greed with genuine Christian piety.

The backbone of the Crusades were the knightly orders: organizations of knights authorized by the church to carry out wars in the name of Christianity. The orders came into being after the First Crusade, originally organized to provide protection to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. They were made up of “monk-knights” who took monastic vows (of obedience, poverty, and chastity) but spent their time fighting as well as praying. The concept already existed at the start of the crusading period, but the orders grew quickly thanks to their involvement in the invasions. Two orders in particular, the Hospitallers and the Templars, would go on to achieve great wealth and power despite their professed vows of poverty.

The First Four Crusades

The First Crusade (1095 - 1099), which lasted only four years following the initial declaration by Pope Urban, was amazingly successful. The Abbasid Caliphate had long since splintered apart, with rival kingdoms holding power in North Africa and the Middle Ages. The doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims further divided the Muslim Ummah. In addition, the Arab kingdoms battled the Seljuk Turks, who were intent on conquering everything, not just Christian lands. Thus, the Crusaders arrived precisely when the Muslim forces were profoundly divided. By 1099, the Crusaders had captured Jerusalem and much of the Levant, forming a series of Christian territories in the heart of the Holy Land. These were called The Latin Principalities, kingdoms ruled by European knights.



The Latin Principalities at their height. Note how the Seljuq (here spelled “Seljuq”) territories almost completely surrounded the principalities.

After their success in taking Jerusalem, the knightly orders became very powerful and very rich. They not only seized loot, but became caravan guards and, ultimately, money-lenders (the Templars became bankers after abandoning the Holy Land when Jerusalem was lost in 1187). Essentially, the major orders came to resemble armed merchant houses as much as monasteries, and there is no question that many of their members did a very poor job of living up to their vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. Likewise, the rulers of the Latin Principalities made little effort to win over their Muslim and Jewish subjects, treating them instead as sources of wealth, infidels unworthy of humane treatment.

Subsequent Crusades were much less successful. The problem was that, once they had formed their territories, the westerners had to hold on to them with little but a series of strong

forts up and down the coast. The European population centers were obviously hundreds or thousands of miles away and the local people were mostly Jews and Muslims who detested the cruel invaders.

Attacks on the Latin Principalities resulted in the Second Crusade, which lasted from 1147 - 1149. The Second Crusade consisted of two Crusades that happened simultaneously: some European knights sailed off to the Holy Land, while others fought against the Cordoban Caliphate in the Iberian Peninsula. The Europeans ultimately lost ground in the Middle East but managed to retake Lisbon in Portugal from the Muslim Caliphate there. In fact, the Second Crusade's significance is that crusaders began to wage an almost ceaseless war against the Cordoban Caliphate in Spain - in a sense, Christian Europeans, particularly the inhabitants of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, concluded that there were plenty of infidels much closer to home than Jerusalem and its environs. These wars of Christians against Spanish Muslims were called the Spanish "Reconquest" (*Reconquista*), and they lasted until the last Muslim kingdom fell in 1492 CE.

In 1187 an Egyptian Muslim general named Salah-ad-Din (his name is normally anglicized as Saladin) retook Jerusalem after crushing the crusaders at the Battle of Hattin. This prompted the Third Crusade (1189 - 1192), a massive invasion led by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (Frederick Barbarossa), the king of France (Philip II), and the king of England (Richard I - known as "The Lion Heart"). It completely failed, with the English king negotiating a peace deal with Saladin after Frederick died (he drowned trying to cross a river) and Philip returned to France. After this, only a few small territories remained in Christian hands.

Arguably the most disastrous (in terms of failing to achieve its stated goal of controlling the Holy Land) crusade was the Fourth Crusade, lasting from 1199 – 1204. This latest attempt to seize Jerusalem began with a large group of crusaders chartering passage with Venetian sailors, long since accustomed to profiting from crusader traffic. En route, the crusaders and sailors learned of a succession dispute in Constantinople and decided to intervene. The intervention turned into an outright invasion, with the crusaders carrying out a horrendously bloody sack of the ancient city. In the end, the crusaders set up a Latin Christian government that lasted for about fifty years while completely ignoring their original goal of sailing to the Holy Land. The only lasting effect of the Fourth Crusade was the further weakening of Byzantium in the face of Turkish invaders in the future. To emphasize the point: Christian knights from Western Europe set out to attack the Muslim kingdoms of the Middle East but ended up conquering a Christian kingdom, and the last political remnant of the Roman Empire at that, instead.

Many further crusades followed; popes would continue to authorize official large-scale invasions of the Middle East until the end of the thirteenth century, and the efforts of Christian knights in Spain during the Reconquest very much carried on the crusading tradition for centuries. Later crusades were often nothing more than politically-motivated power grabs on the part of popes, launched against a given pope's political opponents (i.e. fellow European Christians who happened to be at odds with a pope). Technically, the last crusade was the Holy League, an army drawn from various kingdoms in Central and Eastern Europe dispatched to fight the Ottoman Empire in 1684. None of the latter crusades succeeded in seizing land in the Middle East, but they did inspire a relentless drive to overthrow and destroy the now centuries-old Muslim kingdom of Spain, as noted above, and they also inspired the idea of the potential "holiness" of warfare itself among Christians.

Consequences of the Crusades

The Crusades had numerous consequences and effects. Three were particularly important. First, the city-states of northern Italy, especially Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, grew rich transporting goods and crusaders back and forth between Europe and the Middle East. As the transporters, the merchants, and the bankers of crusading expeditions, it was northern Italians that derived the greatest financial benefit from the invasions. The Crusades provided so much capital that the northern Italian cities evolved to become the banking center of Europe and the site of the Renaissance starting in the fifteenth century.

Second, the ideology surrounding the Crusades was to inspire European explorers and conquerors for centuries. The most obvious instance of this phenomenon was the Reconquest of Spain, which was explicitly seen through the lens of the crusading ideology at the time. In turn, the Reconquest was completed in 1492, precisely the same year that Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. With the subsequent invasions of South and Central America by the Spanish, the crusading spirit, of spreading Catholicism and seizing territory at the point of a sword, lived on.

Third, there was a new concern with a particularly intolerant form of religious purity among many Christian Europeans during and after the Crusades. One effect of this new focus was numerous outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence in Europe; many crusaders attacked Jewish communities in Europe while the crusaders were on their way to the Holy Land, and anti-Jewish laws were enacted by many kings and lords inspired by the fervent, intolerant new brand of Christian identity arising from the Crusades. Thus, going forward, European Christianity itself became harsher, more intolerant, and more warlike because of the Crusades.

The Northern Crusades and the Teutonic Knights

Often overlooked in considerations of the Crusades were the “Northern Crusades” – invasions of the various Baltic regions of northeastern Europe (i.e. parts of Denmark, northern Germany, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland) between 1171, when the Pope Alexander III authorized a crusade against the heathens of the east Baltic, and the early fifteenth century, when the converted kingdoms and territories of the Baltic began to seize independence from their crusading overlords: the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights were a knightly order founded during the Third Crusade at a hospital in the Latin city of Acre. They were closely modeled after the Templars, adopting their “rule” (their code of conduct) and spending most of the twelfth century crusading in the Holy Land. Their focus shifted, however, in the middle of the century when they began leading Crusades against the pagan peoples of the eastern Baltic, including the Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, and various other groups.

The Baltic lands were the last major region of Europe to remain pagan. Neither Latin nor Orthodox missionaries had made significant headway in converting the people of the region, outside of the border region between the lands of the Rus and the Baltic Sea. Thus, the Teutonic Knights could make a very plausible case for their Crusades as analogous to the Spanish Reconquest, and the Teutonic Knights proved very savvy at placing agents in the papal court that worked to maintain papal support for their efforts.

The Teutonic Order ultimately outlasted the other crusading orders by centuries. The Order was very successful at drumming up support from European princes and knights, relying on annual expeditions of visiting warriors to do most of the fighting while the Teutonic Knights themselves literally held down the fort in newly-built castles. They were authorized by various popes not only to conquer and convert, but to rule over the peoples of the east Baltic, and thus by the thirteenth century the Teutonic Knights were in the process of conquering and ruling Prussia, parts of Estonia, and a region of southeastern Finland and present-day Lithuania called Livonia. These kingdoms lasted a remarkably long time; the Teutonic Order ruled Livonia all the way until 1561, when it was finally ousted. Thus, for several centuries, the map of Europe included the strange spectacle of a theocratic state: one ruled directly by monk-knights, with no king, prince, or lord above them.



The theocracy of the Teutonic Knights as of 1466 (marked in orange and purple along the shores of the Baltic). Note that 1466 falls squarely into the Renaissance period - the Northern Crusades began during the Middle Ages but their influence lasted far longer.

The Northern Crusades were, in some ways, as important as the Crusades to the Holy Land in that they were responsible for extinguishing the last remnants of paganism in Europe – it was truly gone by the late fourteenth century in Lithuania, Estonia, and Livonia – and in conquering a large territory that would one day be a core part of Germany itself: Prussia.

The Emergence of the High Middle Ages

The early Middle Ages, from about 500 CE – 800 CE, operated largely on the basis of subsistence agriculture and a barter economy. Economies were almost entirely local; local lords and kings extracted wealth from peasants, but because there was nowhere to sell a surplus of food, peasants tended to grow only as much as they needed to survive, using methods that went unchanged for centuries. There was a limited market for luxury goods even among those

wealthy enough to afford them, and the only sources of reliable minted coins were over a thousand miles away, in Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab kingdoms.

This descent into subsistence had happened for various reasons over the course of the earlier centuries. The fall of the western empire of Rome had strangled the manufacture and trade in high-quality consumer goods (a trade that had been very extensive in Rome). Centuries of banditry, raids, and wars made long-distance travel perilous. In turn, the simple lack of markets meant that there was no incentive to grow more than was needed, and the nobility sought to become more wealthy and powerful not by concerning themselves with agricultural productivity (let alone commerce), but by raiding one another's lands.

Europe had enjoyed brief periods of relative stability earlier, culminating around 800 CE during Charlemagne's rise to power. During the rest of the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the invasions of the Magyars, Saracens, and Vikings had undermined the stability of the fragile political order created by the Carolingians. Many accounts written at the time, almost exclusively by priests and monks, decried the constant warfare of the period, both that caused by invaders from beyond the European heartland and that between European rulers themselves. Historians now believe that market exchange was growing as a component of the European economy by about 800 CE, but the period between 800 - 1000 was still one of political instability and widespread violence.

Things started to change around the year 1000 CE. The major causes for these changes were twofold: the end of full-scale invasions from outside of the core lands of Europe, and changes in agriculture that seem very simple from a contemporary perspective, but were revolutionary at the time.

The Medieval Agricultural Revolution

In 600 CE, Europe had a population of approximately 14 million. By 1300 it was 74 million. That 500% increase was due to two simple changes: the methods by which agriculture operated and the ebb in large-scale violence brought about by the end of foreign invasions.

The first factor in the dramatic increase in population was the simple cessation of major invasions. With relative social stability, peasants were able to consistently plant and harvest crops and not see them devoured by hungry troops or see their fields trampled. Those invasions stopped because the Vikings went from being raiders to becoming members of settled European kingdoms, the Magyars likewise took over and settled in present-day Hungary, and the Saracens were beaten back by increasingly savvy southern-European kingdoms. Warfare between states in Europe remained nearly constant, and banditry still commonplace in the

countryside, but it appears that the overall levels of violence, at least, did drop off over the course of the eleventh century.

Simultaneously, important changes were underway in agricultural technology. Early medieval farmers had literally scratched away at the soil with light plows, usually drawn by oxen or donkeys. Plows were like those used in ancient Rome: the weight of the plow was carried in a pole that went across the animal's neck. Thus, if the load was too heavy the animal would simply suffocate. In turn, that meant that only relatively soft soils could be farmed, limiting the amount of land that could be made arable.

A series of inventions led to dramatic changes. Someone (we have no way of knowing who) developed a new kind of collar for horses and oxen that rested on the shoulders of the animal and thus allowed it to draw much heavier loads, enabling the use of heavier plows. Those plows were called *carruca*: a plow capable of digging deeply into the soil and turning it over, bringing air into the topsoil and refreshing its mineral and nutrient content. Simultaneously, iron horseshoes became increasingly common, which dramatically increased the ability of horses to produce usable muscle power, and iron plowshares proved capable of digging through the soil with greater efficiency.

In addition to the increase in available animal power thanks to those innovations, farmers started to take advantage of new techniques that greatly increased the output of the fields themselves. Up to that point, European farmers tended to employ two-field crop rotation, planting a field while leaving another "fallow" to recover its fertility for the next year. This system was sustainable but limited the amount of crops that could be grown. Starting around 1000 CE, farmers became more systematic about employing three-field crop rotation: working with three linked fields, they would plant one with wheat, one either with legumes (peas, beans, lentils) or barley, and leave one fallow, allowing animals to graze on its weeds and leftover stalks from the last season, with their manure helping to fertilize the soil. After harvest, farmers would rotate: the fallow field would be planted with grain, the grain with legumes, and the legume field left fallow. This process dramatically enriched the soil by returning nutrients to it directly with the legumes or at least allowing it to naturally recover while it lay fallow. Thus, the overall yields of edible crops dramatically increased. Likewise, with the greater variety, the actual nutritional content of food became better.

Finally, starting in earnest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, windmills and watermills became increasingly common for grinding grains into usable flour. The difference in speed between hand-grinding grain and using a mill was dramatic - it could take most of a day to grind enough flour to bake bread for a family, but a mill could grind fifty pounds of grain in less than a

half hour. While peasants resented having to pay for access to mills (which were generally controlled by landowners, often nobles or the Church), the enormous increase in productivity meant that much more food was available overall. Thus, mills were still cost effective for peasants, and milled flour became the norm across most of Europe by the end of the twelfth century.

The medieval agricultural revolution had tremendous long-term consequences for peasants and, ultimately, for all of European society. Thanks to the increase in animal power and the effects of crop rotation, existing fields became far more productive. Whole new areas were opened to cultivation, thanks to the ability of the *carruca* to cut through rocky soil. As a result, there was a major expansion between 1000 – 1300 from the middle latitudes of Europe farther north and east, as the farming population took advantage of the new technology (and growing population) to clear and cultivate what had been forest, scrub, or swamp. In turn, the existence of a surplus encouraged lords to convert payment in kind (i.e. taxes and rents paid in actual foodstuffs and livestock) to cash rent. Likewise, the relative stability allowed smaller kingdoms to mint their own coins, and over the course of a century or so (c. 1000 – 1100) much of Europe became a cash economy rather than a barter economy. This gave peasants an added incentive to cultivate as much as possible.

Peasants actually did very well for themselves in these centuries; they were often able to bargain with their lords for stabilized rents, and a fairly prosperous class of landowning peasants emerged that enjoyed traditional rights vis-à-vis the nobility. Thus, the centuries between 1000 CE - 1300 CE were relatively *good* for many European peasants. Later centuries would be much harder for them. As an aside, it is important to bear in mind that the progressive view of history, namely the idea that "things always get better over time" is actually factually *wrong* for much of history, as reflected in the lives of peasants in Middle Ages and early modern period.

Cities and Economic Change

The increase in population tied to the agricultural revolution had another consequence: beyond simply improving life for peasants and increasing family size, it led to the growth of towns and cities. Even though most peasants never left the area they were born in, many did migrate to the nearest towns and cities and try to make a life there; serfs (unfree peasants) who made it to a town and stayed a year and day were even legally liberated from having to return to the farm. Likewise, whole families and even villages migrated in search of new lands to farm, generally speaking to the east and north as noted above.

This period saw the rebirth of urban life. Not since the fall of Rome had most towns and cities consisted of more than just central hubs of local trade with a few thousand inhabitants. By the twelfth century, however, many cities were expanding rapidly, sometimes by as much as six times in the course of a few centuries. Likewise, the leaders of these cities were often merchants who grew rich on trade, rather than traditional landowning lords.

Even as the agricultural revolution laid the foundation for growth and the cities took advantage of it, other factors led to the economic boom of this period. Lords created new roads and repaired Roman ones from 1,000 years earlier, which allowed bulk trade to travel more cheaply and effectively. More important than bulk goods, however, were luxury goods, a trade almost entirely controlled by the Italian cities during this period. Caravans arrived in the Middle East from China and Central Asia and sold goods to Italian merchants waiting for them. From the Black Sea Region and what was left of Byzantium, the Italians then transported these goods back to the west. Silk and spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and their trade created the foundation for early financial markets and banks.

Trade networks emerged not only linking Italy to the Middle East but southern to northern Europe. In the Champagne region of France annual fairs brought merchants together to trade their goods. German rivers saw the growth of towns and cities on their banks where goods were exchanged. Starting in the twelfth century, the German city of Lubeck became the capital of the Hanseatic League, a group of cities engaged in trade that came together to regulate exchange and maintain monopolies on goods.

The social consequences were dramatic and widespread, yet the status of merchants in European society was troubled. They were resented by the poor (still the vast majority of the population), often despised by traditional land-owning nobles, and frequently condemned by the church. *Usury*, the practice of lending money and charging interest, was classified as a sin by the Church even though the Church itself had to borrow money and pay interest constantly. Likewise, anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews as greedy and ruthless arose from the simple fact that dealing in money and money-lending was one of the only professions Jews were allowed to pursue in most medieval kingdoms and cities. Christian Europeans needed loans (as it happens, loans and banking are essential to a functioning cash economy), but despised the Jews they got those loans from - hence the origins of some of the longest-lasting anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Even though cities did not "fit" in the medieval worldview very well, even the most conservative kings had to recognize the economic strength of the new cities. Just as peasants had been able to negotiate for better treatment, large towns and cities received official town

charters from kings in return for stable taxation. In many cases, cities were practically politically independent, although they generally had to acknowledge the overall authority of the king or local lord.

The growth in trade did not, however, create a real “market economy” in the modern sense. For one thing, skilled trades were closely regulated by craft guilds, which maintained legal monopolies. Monopolies were granted to guilds by kings, lords, or city governments, and anyone practicing a given trade who was not a member of the corresponding guild could be fined, imprisoned, or expelled. Guilds jealously guarded the skills and tools of their trades - everything from goldsmithing to barrel making was controlled by guilds. Guilds existed to ensure that their members produced quality goods, but they also existed to keep out outsiders and to make the "masters" who controlled the guilds wealthy.

Medieval Politics

The feudal system flourished in the High Middle Ages. While it had its origins in the centuries after the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the formal system of vassals pledging loyalty to kings in return for military service (or, increasingly, in return for cash payments in lieu of military service) really came of age in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The lords themselves presided over a rigidly hierarchical social and political system in which one’s vocation was largely determined by birth, and the vocation of the nobility was clearly defined by landowning and making war.

Lords - meaning land-owning nobles - lived in “manors,” a term that denoted not only their actual houses but the lands they owned. All of the peasants on their lands owed them rent, originally in the form of crops but eventually in cash, as well as a certain amount of labor each year. Peasants were subdivided into different categories, including the relatively-well off independent yeomen and freeholders, who owned their own plots of land, down to the serfs, semi-free peasants tied to the land, and then the cottagers, who were the landless peasants worse-off even than serfs. The system of land-ownership and the traditional rights enjoyed by not just lords, but serfs and freeholders who lived under the lords, is referred to as “manorialism,” the rural political and economic system of the High Middle Ages as a whole.

One of the traditional rights, and a vital factor in the lives of peasants, were the commons: lands not officially controlled by anyone that all people had a right to use. The commons provided firewood, grazing land, and some limited trapping of small animals, collectively serving as a vital “safety net” for peasants living on the edge of subsistence. Access

to the commons was not about written laws, but instead the traditional, centuries-old agreements that governed the interactions between different social classes. Eventually, peasants would find their access to the commons curtailed by landowning nobles intent on converting them to cash-producing farms, but for the medieval period itself, the peasants continued to enjoy the right to their use.

The kingdoms of Europe up to this point were barely unified. In many cases, kings were simply the most powerful nobles, men who extracted pledges of loyalty from their subjects but whose actual authority was limited to their personal lands. Likewise, kings in the early Middle Ages were largely itinerant, moving from place to place all year long. They had to make an annual circuit of their kingdoms to ensure that their powerful vassals would stay loyal to them; a vassal ignored for too long could, and generally did, simply stop acknowledging the lordship of his king. Those patterns started to change during the High Middle Ages, and the first two kingdoms to show real signs of centralization were France and England.

In France, a series of kings named Philip (I through IV) ruled from 1060 to 1314, building a strong administrative apparatus complete with royal judges who were directly beholden to the crown. The kings ruled the region around Paris (called the *Île-de-France*, meaning the "island of France"), but their influence went well beyond it as they extended their holdings. Philip IV even managed to seize almost complete control of the French Church, defying papal authority. He also proved incredibly shrewd at creating new taxes and in attacking and seizing the lands and holdings of groups like the French Jewish community and the Knights Templar, both of whom he ransacked (the assault on the Knights Templar started in 1307).

In England, the line descending from William the Conqueror (following his invasion in 1066) was also effective in creating a relatively stable political system. All land was legally the king's, and his nobles received their lands as "fiefs," essentially loans from the crown that had to be renewed for payments on the death of a landholder before it could be inherited. Henry II (r. 1154 – 1189) created a system of royal sheriffs to enforce his will, created circuit courts that traveled around the land hearing cases, and created a grand jury system that allowed people to be tried by their peers.

In 1215, a much less competent king named John signed the Magna Carta ("great charter") with the English nobility that formally acknowledged the feudal privileges of the nobility, towns and clergy. The important effect of the Magna Carta was its principle: even the king had to respect the law. Thereafter English kings began to call the Parliament, a meeting of the Church, nobles, and well-off commoners, in order to get authorization and money for their wars.

Monasticism

One special social category within medieval society deserves added attention: the monks and nuns. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when they left their normal lives and joined (respectively) monasteries and convents. They did not, however, have to spend their time attending to the spiritual needs of laypeople (i.e. people outside of the Church), which was the primary function of priests. Instead, they were to devote themselves to prayer and to useful works, activities that were thought to encourage piety and devotion among the monks and nuns, and which often proved to be extremely profitable to the monasteries and convents themselves.

Monasteries and convents grew to become some of the most important economic institutions in medieval Europe, despite their stated intention of housing people whose full-time job was to pray for the souls of Christians everywhere. Monasteries and convents had to be economically self-sustaining, overseeing both agriculture and crafts on their lands. Over time, activities like overseeing agriculture on monastery lands, brewing beer or making wine, or painstakingly copying the manuscripts of books often became a major focus of life in monasteries and convents. In essence, many monasteries and convents became the most dynamic and commercially successful institutions in their home regions. Monks and nuns encouraged innovative new forms of agriculture on their lands, sold products (including textiles and the above-mentioned beer and wine) at a healthy profit, and despite their vows of poverty, successful monasteries and convents became lavishly decorated and luxurious for their inhabitants.

Simultaneously, one way that medieval elites tried to shore up their chances of avoiding eternal damnation was leaving land and wealth in their wills to monasteries and convents. Generations of European elites granted land, in particular, to monasteries and convents during life or as part of their posthumous legacy. The result was the astonishing statistic that monasteries owned a full 20% of the arable land of Western Europe by the late Middle Ages.

Corruption

Monasteries and convents were not alone in their wealth. The upper ranks of the Church - bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the popes themselves - were almost exclusively drawn from the European nobility. Lower-ranking churchmen were, in turn, commoners, often drawn from the ranks of the same peasants that they ministered to from one of the small parish churches that dotted the landscape. All of the wealth that went into the Church, from an

obligatory tax called the tithe, was siphoned up to the upper reaches of the institutional Church, and many of the high-level priests lived like princes as a result.

Morality in this setting was, predictably, lax. Despite the nominal requirement not to marry, many high-level priests lived openly with concubines and equally openly supported their children, seeing their sons set up as landowners or members of the Church in their own right and marrying off daughters to noble families. Despite the injunction to live simply and avoid luxury, many priests (and monks, and nuns) were greedy and ostentatious; one notorious practice was of bishops or archbishops who controlled and received incomes from many different territories (called "bishoprics") at once but never actually visited them. Another practice was of noblemen literally buying positions in the Church for their sons - teenage boys might find themselves appointed bishops thanks to the financial intervention of their fathers, with Church officials pocketing the bribe. Medieval depictions of hell were full of the image of priests, monks, and nuns all plummeting into the fire to face eternal torment for what a profoundly poor job they had done while alive in living up to the moral demands of their respective vocations. In other words, medieval laypeople were well aware of how corrupt many in the Church actually were.

In addition, while medieval education and literacy was almost entirely confined to the church as an institution, many rural priests were at best semi-literate. All Church services were conducted in Latin, and yet some priests understood Latin only poorly, if at all (it had long since vanished as a vernacular language in Europe). Thus, some of the very caretakers of Christian belief in medieval society often had a very shallow understanding of what that belief was supposed to consist of theologically.

For all of the Middle Ages, however, the fact that the lay public knew that the Church was corrupt and that many of its members were incompetent was of limited practical importance. There was no alternative. Without the Church, without the sacraments only it could offer, without the prayers issued by monks and nuns for the souls of believers, and without its reassurance of a life to come after death, medieval Christians were certain that their eternal souls were damned to hell.

Medieval Learning

Despite the biases of later Renaissance thinkers that the medieval period was nothing but the “dark ages,” bereft of learning and culture, there were very important intellectual achievements in the period of 1000 – 1400 CE. Most of these had to do with foreign influences that were taken and reshaped by European thinkers, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to innovations originating in the Islamic empires to the south and east of Europe.

Likewise, despite the problems of corruption and ignorance among members of the clergy, scholarship *did* continue and even prosper within the church during the late Middle Ages. Numerous priests were not only literate in Latin and deeply knowledgeable about Christian theology, but made major strides in considering, debating, and explaining the nuances of Christian thought. Thus, it is a mistake to consider the medieval church as nothing more than a kind of “scam” - it did provide meaningful guidance and comfort to medieval Christians, and some of its members were exemplary thinkers and major intellectuals.

Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages

A symptom of the growth of intellectual life in the High Middle Ages was the fact that literacy (which, at the time, meant the ability to read, not necessarily to write) finally revived, at least a bit, following the real nadir of literacy that had lasted from the collapse of the western Roman Empire until about 1050. As of 1050, perhaps 1% of the population could read, most of whom were priests, some of the latter only being able to stumble through the Latin liturgy without fully comprehending it. While it is impossible to calculate anything close to the exact literacy rates at any point before the modern era, it is still clear that literacy started to climb following that eleventh-century low point, with many regular merchants and even a few peasants acquiring at least basic reading knowledge by the fourteenth century. The explanation for this growth in literacy is an expansion of educational institutions that had only existed in a few pockets earlier in the Middle Ages.

The two forms of educational institutions available were tutoring offered within monasteries and schools associated with cathedrals. Both were, obviously, part of the Church, and cathedral schools in particular focused on training future priests. Monasteries offered basic education in literacy (in Latin) to laypeople as well as the monks themselves, and even some prosperous farmers achieved a basic degree of literacy as a result. Cathedral schools in cities

offered the same, and they increasingly trained not only local elites, but even the children of artisans and merchants.

While they did offer basic education to laypeople, the official focus of cathedral schools was in training priests. They began to expand after 1000 CE, offering a more focused and rigorous grounding in sacred texts and, to an extent, ancient texts from Rome, to help educate Church leaders and laypeople. The cathedral schools were supposed to be turning out not just spiritual leaders, but skilled bureaucrats, and that required a rigorous form of education that encouraged the study not just of the Bible, but of classics of Latin literature like the speeches of the great Roman politician Cicero and ancient Rome's great epic poem, Virgil's *Aeneid*. Thus, those priests-in-training who were lucky enough to attend one of the better cathedral school acquired a strong command of classical Latin and were made aware of the high intellectual standards that had prospered in the glory days of Rome.

Scholasticism

If there was a single event that changed education and scholarship in the late Middle Ages, it was the arrival of the lost works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle was one of the greatest geniuses of the ancient world, producing learned works on philosophy, astronomy, physics, biology, literary criticism and, most importantly for medieval Europe, logic. Some of Aristotle's works had survived in Europe after the fall of Rome, but most of it had vanished. Over the course of the eleventh century, translations of Aristotle's work on formal philosophical logic re-emerged in Europe. Most had been preserved in the Arab world, where Aristotle was considered the single most important pre-Islamic philosopher and was studied with great rigor by Arab scholars. Enterprising scholars - many of them Jewish philosophers who lived in North Africa and Spain - translated Aristotle's work on logic from Arabic into Latin. Later, Greeks from Byzantium came to Europe with the originals in Greek and they, too, translated it into Latin.

The importance of this rediscovery of Aristotle is that his work on logic offered a formal system for evaluating complicated bodies of work like the Christian Bible itself. The inherent problem facing believers of any religion based on a single major text is figuring out what that text fundamentally *means*. To wit: the Christian Bible is full of parables, stories, and accounts of events that are often terrifically difficult to interpret. Even in the four gospels that describe the life of Christ, not all of Christ's actions or sayings are easy to understand, and the gospels sometimes offer conflicting accounts. What did Christ mean when he said "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the

kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24)? What did he mean with "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)? Not to mention, how was a Christian to make sense of the stern, vengeful God described in the Old Testament and the deity of peace and forgiveness represented by Christ? Most medieval Christians were content to simply accept the sacraments and offer prayers to the saints without worrying about the theological details, but increasingly, educated priests themselves wanted to understand the nuances of their own religion.

Thus, Aristotle's formal approach to logic proved invaluable to the interpreters of the Bible. Armed with his newly-rediscovered system of logical interpretation, key figures within the Church began to analyze the Bible and the works of early Christian thinkers with new energy and focus. The result was scholasticism, which was the major intellectual movement of the High Middle Ages. Scholasticism was the rigorous application of methods of logic, originally developed by Aristotle, to Christian scriptures. And, because the cathedral schools of the late Middle Ages increasingly relied on scholasticism to train and teach new priests, it spread rapidly across all of Europe.

By roughly 1100 CE, a new form of formal education based on scholasticism was the method of instruction in cathedral schools. The instructor would read a short passage from the Bible or an early Christian intellectual leader, then cite various authorities on the meaning of the passage. This was called the lecture, which simply means the "reading." Students would then consider the possible meanings of the passage in a period of meditation. Finally, students might be called on to debate their respective interpretations. In debates, students were expected to cite not only the passage itself but any supporting evidence they could come up with from the vast body of sacred and ancient writings. The result was that, at least at the better cathedral schools, large numbers of newly-minted priests emerged with a strong understanding of Christian thought and an equally strong grasp of rhetoric, debate, and logic.

Some teachers in the scholastic tradition became minor intellectual celebrities, the most celebrated being Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142), a brilliant teacher and debater in Paris who gave extensive lectures exploring both the pros and cons of various important questions that had been considered by the Church fathers. Abelard's major focus was the use and application of reason to faith – he was of the belief that ultimate truth could and should sustain reasoned investigation of its precepts, a stance that got him into considerable trouble with some Church leaders. Abelard's point was that educated Christians *should* challenge their own beliefs and try to understand them; to him, since Christians were safe in the assumption that the Bible would

always be the ultimate source of truth, their own attempts to understand its apparent contradictions and ambiguities only strengthened the Christian religion as a whole.

The new rigor of education and the expansion of cathedral schools, helped in part by the popularity of figures like Abelard, led in turn to the emergence of the first true universities. Initially, they were comparable to craft guilds, with organizations of students and teachers negotiating over the cost of classes and preventing unauthorized lecturers from stealing students. A princely charter was granted to the law students of Bologna in northern Italy in 1158, which marks it as the first recognized university. The most significant medieval university was, however, the Sorbonne of Paris in 1257. It grew out of the cathedral school of Notre Dame, at which Abelard had taught, and it is usually considered the oldest large university in the western world (it is still very much in operation today).

Medieval universities created a number of practices that live on to the present in higher education. They drew up a curriculum, established graduation requirements and exams, and conferred degrees. The robes and distinctive hats of graduation ceremonies are directly descended from the medieval models. Teachers were all members of the clergy, "professing" religion, hence the term "professor." The core disciplines, which date back to Roman times, were divided between the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (called the trivium) and what might now be described as a more "technical" set of disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the quadrivium) - this division was the earliest version of a curriculum of "arts and sciences." Finally, the four kinds of doctorates, the PhD (doctor of philosophy), the JD (doctor of jurisprudence, that is to say of law), the ThD (doctor of theology, a priest), and the MD (doctor of medicine), are all derived from medieval degrees.

All students and professors were male, since the assumption was that the whole purpose of studies was to create better church officials; while some women did become outstanding medieval thinkers, they were either exceptional individuals who had been tutored by men or were nuns who had access to the (often excellent) education of the convents.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to characterize European intellectual life before about 1000 CE as part of a "dark age," that was obviously no longer the case by the eleventh century. Educational institutions multiplied, diversified, and expanded, and the quality of education and scholarship increased along with that expansion. While most people - by definition, peasants - remained illiterate and largely ignorant of the world beyond their own villages, there was at least a current

of real intellectual curiosity and rigorous scholarship expanding among the upper classes by the High Middle Ages.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Latin Principalities](#) - MapMaster

[Teutonic Theocracy](#) - S. Bollmann