Europe During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

- The medieval period (Middle Ages)
- Feudalism and serfdom
- Roman Catholicism and the ideal of Christendom
- Formation of European states
- The Crusades
- Trade, commerce, and urbanization
- The Black Death (bubonic plague)
- Aristotle and Greco-Latin learning
- Scholasticism
- The movable-type (Gutenberg) printing press
- The Renaissance (classicism and humanism)

The medieval period of European history, also known as the Middle Ages, lasted from approximately 500 to 1500. The question of periodization is complicated by the fact that from the 1200s onward, certain parts of Europe—particularly Italy—began to experience the famous cultural rebirth known as the Renaissance.

The years from 500 to 1000 were a time of political decentralization and overall backwardness. From 1000 to 1300, Europe enjoyed a general revival. Nations became better defined, the economy grew healthier, and the level of technological and cultural knowledge improved. The concept of Europe as a single civilization joined by a common cultural heritage and the Christian religion took greater shape during these years.

The period between 1300 and 1500 was a complex one, marked by crisis and advancement. On one hand, Europe was struck by social unrest, constant warfare, and, in the form of the so-called Black Death, one of the worst epidemics in world history. On the other hand, the Renaissance began, ushering in a period of artistic and intellectual achievement.

FEUDALISM AND THE MANOR SYSTEM

The Origins of Feudalism

In the aftermath of Rome's fall, Europe became politically decentralized. No single ruler was strong enough to provide Europe with central authority, and monarchs typically did not have the power, money, or military strength to govern their lands effectively. The solution was the system of feudalism, in which lords and monarchs awarded land to loyal followers. In exchange, these followers guaranteed that their
parcels of land (fiefs) would be governed, that law and justice would be dispensed, that crops would be grown, and that the land itself would be protected. Feudalism remained at the heart of medieval European politics for centuries.

**Feudal Nobility, the Manor System, and Serfdom**

The retainers to whom monarchs gave large land grants developed into Europe’s **noble** (or aristocratic) class. The feudal nobility were supposed to help provide political leadership.

The feudal nobility also served a military function. One of feudalism’s goals was to provide an army of foot soldiers (recruited by nobles) and an elite force of armored cavalry (knights) formed by the nobles themselves. According to the code of chivalry, the knight was to be a virtuous, Christian warrior. Songs and legends, such as those of King Arthur’s Round Table, provided examples of how real-life knights were supposed to conduct themselves. Chivalry did restrain the knight’s most violent behavior, but in actuality, the code was often broken.

Economically, the feudal system relied on the labor of peasants. Most peasants in Europe during the Middle Ages were **serfs**. Although serfs were not technically slaves, they were legally unfree. They were not allowed to change residence or profession without permission. A portion of their own crops and livestock had to be given to the lord. In addition, serfs had to spend a certain number of days per month fulfilling various labor obligations. Overall, living conditions were harsh.

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**THE IDEAL OF CHRISTENDOM**

**The Unifying Influence of Christianity**

One of the few things binding European nations together following the fall of Rome was the Christian faith, which acted as a unifying force throughout the continent, both culturally and politically.
Rome itself was one of the two major headquarters of Christian worship. The other was Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire. By 1054, doctrinal differences and geographical distance led to the Great Schism, which separated Christians into two churches: Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. The former was dominant in central and western Europe; the latter was prominent in the Middle East and the Greek and Slavic parts of eastern Europe.

The Catholic Church shaped medieval society in key ways. Its monasteries preserved Latin and Greek manuscripts, containing a wealth of information, left over from the Roman era. The church also provided the people of Europe with a sense that, despite national and linguistic differences, they were linked by a single faith. This gave a much-needed feeling of cultural cohesion at a time of extreme decentralization.

The Medieval Papacy and the Political Power of the Catholic Church

The leader of the Catholic Church was the pope. At the lowest level was the priest, who served the needs of an individual community. Only men could become priests. Above the priest were bishops, archbishops, and cardinals. Also part of the church hierarchy were monks and nuns.

After 1000, the Catholic Church became immensely powerful politically. The pope governed a sizable territory in central Italy, the Papal States. The popes had moral authority and the right to determine what was heresy, exclude worshippers from the Catholic Church (excommunication), and issue calls for holy wars (crusades). The ultimate goal of medieval popes was to join the nations of Europe into a single Christian community. Referred to as Christendom, this community was to be governed by the pope, with kings and emperors subject to his rule. The Catholic Church never realized this ideal, but for several hundred years, the popes heavily influenced how European monarchs ruled their countries.

The Catholic Church owned vast amounts of land. Combined with its right to collect tithes from the general population, this made the church very wealthy. Another way the church exercised worldly power was control over education, thought, and culture. In 1231, the Holy Inquisition, a set of special courts with wide-ranging powers, was established to hunt out and punish heresy and religious nonconformity.

THE WESTERN MONARCHIES AND THE EASTERN FRONTIER

Early Kingdoms and the Carolingian Empire

It took several centuries after the fall of Rome for stable nations to form. Short-lived kingdoms, founded by warlords and barbarian chiefs, rose and fell frequently during the 500s and 600s. Internally, decentralization kept states weak, as did external threats such as Viking raids and Muslim invasions.

One of the earliest European nations was the Frankish kingdom, which, by the 700s, grew into the Carolingian Empire. The Frankish military leader Charles
Martel successfully turned back Muslim invaders at the Battle of Tours (732), one of the most influential battles of the medieval era. Charles Martel established the Carolingian dynasty, and his son Pepin strengthened the kingdom's ties with the Catholic Church.

Even more successful as a nation-building monarch was Pepin's son Charlemagne (768–814), whose name means "Charles the Great." Charlemagne defended Frankish territory against Viking, barbarian, and Muslim attacks. He greatly expanded the kingdom, becoming the Holy Roman Emperor in 800. He actively supported education and culture, much of which he entrusted to the church.

Other early nations emerged in the late 800s and 900s. Saxon kings united large parts of England. The Capetian dynasty came to rule the area around Paris and gradually gained control over more of France. The eastern, Germanic portion of Charlemagne's realm reformed itself as the Holy Roman Empire, which ruled most of central Europe for centuries to come.

The Vikings

An important factor shaping the development of early medieval European nations was the appearance of the Vikings, expert sailors and fierce warriors from Scandinavia. Owing mainly to overcrowding in their homelands, large numbers of Vikings poured out of the north from the 800s through the 1100s. One of the few peoples of this era who could navigate on the open ocean, the Vikings, in their longboats, raided and conquered land throughout most of coastal Europe, as far south as the Mediterranean.

The Vikings colonized Iceland and Greenland. Around 1000 C.E., voyagers led by Leif Eriksson reached what is today Canada. The Vikings also settled in parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. They created long-lasting kingdoms in northwestern France and Sicily. A group of Vikings established a trade route from Scandinavia to Byzantium, through Russia. In the process, they created the first Russian state.

England and France

In the west, the most stable states were England and France. For four centuries, the political leadership of both countries was intertwined. In 1066, Normans (descendants of Vikings who had settled in France) led by William the Conqueror, invaded England, defeated the Saxon king, and established their rule there. Because William and his successors were connected to the French throne by blood ties and feudal obligations, there was much competition between England and France over land and political legitimacy until the middle of the 1400s.

The Norman Conquest brought French-style feudalism to England and helped create a rich cultural fusion, not only Celtic and Anglo-Saxon but also Latin-based, in the British Isles. By medieval standards, England became quite centralized, and it did so despite the fact that significant checks were put on the power of the king. (Normally, the less powerful the monarch, the less centralized the state.) In 1215, the Magna Carta, imposed on the king by his barons, guaranteed the nobility certain rights and privileges, limiting the monarch's might. Later in the 1200s, the English nobility won the right to form a Parliament, which eventually became a
representative lawmaking body that governed in conjunction with the king. In the 1200s and 1300s, English monarchs extended their rule to Wales and Scotland. Ireland would follow later.

In France, the Capetian kings centralized their nation by increasing their own power (the typical route to premodern nation building). Originally, the Capetians ruled only a tiny part of France. England controlled large territories, such as Aquitaine and Brittany, while large and economically important regions such as Flanders and Burgundy remained independent. Generations of Capetian monarchs expanded the size of the French kingdom, beat the English in a number of wars (including the Hundred Years’ War), and gained control over Burgundy and other stubborn regions. By the mid-to-late 1400s, France was large and centralized, and the French kings were among the most powerful in Europe. Unlike their English counterparts, French monarchs were not limited or obligated to share power in any legally meaningful way.

The political event that most affected England and France during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). The war’s first years coincided with the onset of other European crises, including social uprisings and the Black Death. Until the early 1400s, the English won a number of victories, gaining control over more than half of France. Only after the 1420s did the French king, helped by the warrior maid Joan of Arc, drive the English out. The war ended most of the awkward connections between the French and English royal families.

The Holy Roman Empire and Italian States: Decentralization

Important states formed in central and southern Europe, but they were less centralized. Dominating the middle of Europe was the Holy Roman Empire, a multicultural monarchy founded in the 900s by the heirs of Charlemagne. Its name was inspired by the theoretical ideal of a state that was large and powerful (“Roman”) and brought a variety of peoples into a single Catholic (“holy”) community. The emperor was supposed to work in partnership with the pope, but in real life, the two clashed more than they cooperated.

The Holy Roman Empire was large, but the emperor’s powers were comparatively weak. His position was not hereditary—he was chosen by the empire’s most powerful noble families. The empire’s population was ethnically diverse (German, Italian, Hungarian, Slavic, and more), and the empire itself consisted of dozens of duchies, kingdoms, and principalities (almost 200 in the mid-1300s). A key centralizing factor was the rise of the Habsburg family, which gained permanent control over the imperial throne from 1348 until 1918.

Even more decentralized than the Holy Roman Empire was Italy, not an actual country at this time. Most of northern Italy was under the Holy Roman Empire’s control, and many southern areas passed in and out of the hands of other foreigners, including the French, Spanish, Muslims, and Byzantines. The parts of Italy that remained free were governed by dozens of city-states; Italy was one of the most urbanized parts of Europe, with a high cultural level that made it the birthplace of the Renaissance. Italy’s position in the Mediterranean—which enabled trade with the
Middle East and Egypt (and, by extension, the Far East, China, and the Indian Ocean)—allowed its cities to develop strong commercial economies. The chief city-states of medieval and Renaissance Italy were Florence, Milan, and Venice in the north, and Naples in the south. Also important was Rome, the heart of the Papal States.

**Spain and Portugal**

The medieval development of Spain and Portugal was shaped above all by the fact that they had been taken over by Muslim invaders, known as the Moors, during the 700s. From 1031 onward, the people of Spain and Portugal fought the Moors in a long struggle known as the *Reconquista*. By the end of the 1200s, the Spanish had pushed the Moors into Granada, the southernmost part of the country. For the next 200 years, the Moors held out there, until they were expelled completely in 1492, by the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella.

The effects of the Moors and the war against them were many. Spanish territory was liberated gradually, and each newly freed region remained independent, delaying centralization. By the 1400s, there were about half a dozen Spanish kingdoms, not counting Portugal. Only late in the 1400s, when the rulers of the two largest kingdoms, Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabella of Castile, married and joined their lands together, did Spain take shape as a single country. Another result of the Reconquista was intense religious intolerance. The war caused Catholic authorities in Spain to be extremely rigid in terms of doctrine and hostile to nonbelievers. Muslims and Jews (whom the Moors had welcomed to Spain) were persecuted, and, by the end of the 1400s, forced to convert to Catholicism or leave the country.

The Moorish presence brought benefits as well. Islamic culture was more advanced than that of medieval Europe, so Spain was able to take advantage of the medical, scientific, and technological knowledge brought there by the Muslim conquerors (as well as the Jewish scholars and professionals who came with them). The Spanish city of Córdoba was one of Europe’s greatest centers of learning and science, thanks to the long-standing Muslim presence there.

Portugal, an independent principality, began its tradition of world exploration during the 1400s, starting a trend that would sweep the globe. (For more, see Chapter 15.)

**Byzantium and Eastern Europe**

The farther east, the less centralized European nations became, with the exception of the Byzantine Empire, the crossroads between Christian Europe and the Islamic Middle East. Constantinople was a tremendously important trading center, linking Mediterranean Europe with the Middle East and, by extension, the overland routes (such as the Silk Road) and sea lanes that joined the Middle East with China, India, and the East Indies.

Although Byzantium was superior to the rest of Europe in terms of economic and cultural advancement, it entered a long period of political and military decline. In the eleventh century, a new enemy, the Seljuk Turks, appeared on the eastern frontier. From the Battle of Manzikert (1071) onward, the Seljuks, then their more dangerous
successors, the Ottoman Turks, slowly but unceasingly stripped territory away from Byzantium. By the 1400s, Constantinople itself was under threat; in 1453, the Ottomans seized it. The Byzantine Empire was destroyed, the Turks made Constantinople their capital, and the Ottoman Empire went on to conquer large parts of southeastern Europe, clashing for centuries with the Holy Roman (Austrian) Empire.

Territories on Europe’s eastern and northern fringe tended to be more poorly defined, politically speaking. Much of this had to do with the stress of invasions from the east. Mongol attacks in the mid-1200s and constant pressure from the Ottomans during and after the 1400s took their toll and, in many ways, held back the political development of nations. Countries such as Hungary, Sweden, and Poland were exceptions: they were stable and sophisticated for the time being. More typical were the Russian lands, farther to the east. During most of the medieval era, Russia was a loose confederation of city-states, governed by constantly feuding princes. The Mongol invasions of the 1240s placed the Russians under the domination of the Golden Horde; not until the mid-1400s did Russia become free. Only after that did a Russian nation begin to take shape, under the leadership of the tsars of Moscow.

THE CRUSADES

The Concept and Origin of Crusading

Among the powers of the medieval popes was the ability to request monarchs to provide troops and money for holy wars known as crusades. Crusades were fought for a number of reasons: to convert nonbelievers to Catholicism, to crush Christian movements the papacy considered heretical (infamous crusades of this type were fought in southern France during the early 1200s), and to resist attacks by foreigners who were not Christian (especially Muslims).

Many underlying factors motivated the Crusades:

- Genuine religious fervor on the part of both Muslims and Christians
- Geopolitical conflict between Europe and the Middle East
- The Europeans’ desire to become more involved in the international trade network stretching from the Mediterranean to China
- Personal ambitions of Europeans hoping to gain wealth and land in the Middle East
- Racial and religious prejudice

The Crusading Experience

The spark of the First Crusade (1096–1099) came in 1095, when the Byzantine Empire asked fellow Christians in Europe for military assistance against the Seljuk Turks, who had recently captured Jerusalem. To increase their chances of receiving aid, the Byzantines exaggerated rumors of Turkish atrocities in the Holy Land. Pope Urban II responded by summoning the Council of Clermont and calling upon the knights of Catholic Europe to retake the Holy Land from the Turks. In 1096, a massive army of Crusaders traveled to Constantinople, then through the Middle East,
fighting Muslim forces along the way. In the summer of 1099, they reached Jerusalem and placed it under siege. After taking the city, the Crusaders, in one of the bloodiest episodes in military history, butchered almost every Muslim and Jew within its walls (as well as a number of native Christians whom they mistook for Muslims). A key reason for the First Crusade's success was lack of unity among Turks, Arabs, and other Muslim peoples.

After the First Crusade, the Europeans established four Christian states known as the Latin Kingdoms. While they lasted, these served as a military and political foothold in the Middle East. They also enabled Europeans to become involved in the lucrative commercial economy that made the region so wealthy.

The Christians maintained their presence in the Middle East for two centuries. However, the Muslims united their efforts in order to expel the Europeans. The many crusades that followed were generally responses to successful Muslim campaigns. Jerusalem, for example, fell under Muslim control again in 1187. Especially after 1200, European crusades lost their focus (the Fourth Crusade of 1202–1204 turned into a sack of Christian Constantinople) or failed miserably (like the ill-fated Children's Crusades). In 1291, the Europeans abandoned their last major outpost in the Middle East.

Effects of the Crusades

Long-term effects of the Crusades include the worsening of the relationship between the Muslim and Christian worlds. Also important was the greater awareness of the wider world, especially the lands of the east, that the Crusades stimulated among the Europeans. Along with this came an increased knowledge of—and desire for—the economic wealth to be gained by greater interaction with the Middle and Far East. Moreover, the crusading ideal—the notion that Christian warriors were fighting a holy war on behalf of a sacred cause—contributed to the powerful myth of knighthood and chivalry that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages. There was also technology transfer, as Europeans learned much about castle architecture from their experience in the Middle East.

URBANIZATION, TRADE, AND SOCIETY

While the early medieval era was a time of social and economic backwardness, significant gains were made between 1000 and 1500. However, the period after 1300 was a time of social crisis as well.

Population Growth, Trade, and Commerce

From 1000 to 1300, population growth in Europe was considerable. Advanced agricultural techniques—such as the three-field system of crop rotation and the invention of better plows—caused the food supply to increase.

Trade and commerce became a larger part of the European economy. Political stability made banking, the movement of goods, and the creation of markets safer and more convenient. Because the movement of goods was easier by water than by land, trade routes tended to follow rivers and coastlines. One major network, centered on
Italy sprang up throughout the Mediterranean, and did much to connect Europe with the commerce of the Middle and Far East. The Crusades did much to stimulate this. Other important networks formed along the Rhine River, in the North Sea and English Channel, and throughout the Baltic Sea. Trade in the Baltic was dominated by the Hanseatic League, a group whose influence stretched from England in the west to Russia in the east. The relatively new practice of banking made trade more feasible and dependable. Powerful banking houses were run by the Medicis in Italy and the Fuggers in central Europe.

European Trade Routes During the Late Medieval Period and the Renaissance.

European desire for more direct access to the goods of East and South Asia prompted the great wave of exploration that began during the 1400s and continued during the 1500s and 1600s.

Urbanization

Another social trend was urbanization. Although the majority of people in medieval Europe remained in the countryside, working as peasants and serfs, an increasingly large number were moving to cities. Existing cities grew larger, and new cities were founded at a great rate. Some parts of Europe, particularly Italy and Flanders, urbanized more quickly than others.

Cities were excellent sites for trade. They attracted artists, writers, and scholars. The growth of cities also encouraged specialization of labor. Most skilled trades in medieval cities were organized according to the guild system. Guilds were labor groups that maintained a monopoly on their respective trades. They restricted membership, established prices, set standards of quality and fair practice, and provided pensions.

Cities were often overcrowded and polluted, and many people lived in poverty. There were benefits to city life, however, including cultural opportunities and the chance to gain greater wealth. A key advantage was immunity from feudal obligations, especially serfdom: typically, if a person left the countryside and lived in a city for a year and a day, he or she was released from status as a serf, as reflected in the popular saying, "city air makes you free."
Social Stress and Black Death in the Late Medieval Period

Although trade and urbanization continued to expand, social stress increased after 1300. A wave of uprisings swept Europe from the early 1300s through the early 1500s, including the peasant Jacquerie of 1358 in France, the Wool Carders' Revolt in Florence, in 1378, and, in 1381, Wat Tyler's Rebellion in England. The causes of such disturbances were many. A general cooling of the climate, referred to by environmental historians as the Little Ice Age, affected harvests and made life in the countryside difficult. More wars were being fought, armies were growing larger, and the new gunpowder weaponry of the day was extremely expensive. More peasants were forced into military service (especially during the Hundred Years' War). The taxes of common people also increased. During the last half of the 1400s, religious disagreements and dissatisfaction with the Church sometimes led to rebellion.

Another manifestation of social stress was a sharp rise in the persecution of people thought to be witches. Catholic authorities sought to root out suspected witchcraft, issuing a manual in the late 1400s, *The Hammer of Witches*, to aid in spotting and trying witches. Ordinary people were caught up in the hysteria as well. Most of the victims of witch hunts were women.

Social trauma also came in the form of the Black Death, the popular name for the bubonic plague. The arrival of bubonic plague in the mid-fourteenth century ranks as one of the greatest medical disasters in Eurasian history. After killing millions of people in China, the disease traveled westward to the Middle East. It reached Europe in 1347 on a ship landing in Sicily.

In 1347 and 1348, the plague ravaged southern Europe. By 1349 and 1350, it spread to central Europe and the British Isles; it was felt in Russia and Scandinavia from 1351 to 1353. The disease's deadliness and rapid spread caused tremendous panic throughout Europe. This initial bout of the plague killed 25 to 30 million people, roughly one-third the population of Europe. For centuries afterward, the plague recurred periodically in Europe (although no attack was as bad as the first).

Women in Medieval Europe

As a rule, women were subservient to men in all parts of Europe during these years. How much freedom or how many rights a woman enjoyed depended mainly on her social status.

Women of lower classes cared for the household and assisted with farmwork. They bore children and raised them. Women of low birth also worked as servants for upper-class families. One of the few peasant women to leave an individual mark on medieval Europe was the French war leader Joan of Arc (ca. 1410–1431).

In most parts of medieval Europe, women had some property rights. They could own and inherit land and property. They often received dowries (although in some places and times, it was the woman's family that had to provide a dowry to the husband-to-be). Women could separate from their husbands, although obtaining divorces and annulments was difficult, especially for women of the upper classes. Women had protection, but not equality, before the law.

Women could enter religious life; they could not become priests in either the Catholic or Orthodox Church, but they could become nuns. The majority of nuns
were from the landed aristocracy. To marry off daughters, noble families had to provide potential husbands with land, money, or a title; an aristocratic family with many daughters was often unable to pay for all of them to get married, and a common solution was to place younger daughters in convents. Women who preferred intellectual pursuits sometimes found safe haven as nuns. For example, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), celebrated for her mystical writings and songs, became abbess of a German convent.

Aristocratic women, while not legally the equal of men, could exert informal political and cultural influence. If an aristocratic woman was heir to rich property or a kingdom, she was a desirable match. Noblewomen often managed their husbands' estates and financial accounts. Frequently, the mothers of young kings whose fathers died early served as regents and advisers until their sons came of age.

Some women ruled in their own right, as queens. This situation was not common, and countries whose legal systems were based on tribal Germanic (Salic) law, such as France and the Holy Roman Empire, did not allow women to inherit thrones. However, women would come to rule England, parts of Spain, Russia, and elsewhere. The most famous example of a politically important woman during the Middle Ages was Eleanor of Aquitaine (ca. 1122–1204). A dynamic, intelligent woman, Eleanor married Louis VII of France and then Henry II of England. She had much influence over politics in both countries. She was also a great patron of art and music.

MEDIEVAL CULTURE

For many years, it was traditional to view the medieval period as the Dark Ages, an era lacking in culture or sophistication. More recently, it has become standard to recognize the richness of medieval culture, especially during the High and Late Middle Ages. Even so, medieval Europe lagged behind Byzantium and the Islamic world in terms of cultural attainment.

Catholicism and Classicism as Influences on Medieval Culture

The most important factor shaping medieval culture was the Catholic Church, which administered institutions of learning (monasteries, then universities) and was the largest employer of artists, architects, and musicians. Art and ideas that were not in line with church doctrine could be banned—and could lead to severe punishment.

Another influence on medieval culture was the classical learning and literature preserved from ancient Greece and Rome. During the Middle Ages (and long afterward), Latin was Europe's language of learning and culture. (Europeans had much less knowledge of Greek until later, when Arab and Jewish translators made materials in that language more accessible.) Medieval scientific thought was dominated by the theories of the ancient Greeks, mainly through Latin translations. Of special importance was Aristotle, whose writings on science, philosophy, ethics, and politics were adapted by Christian scholars and placed at the center of the medieval worldview. Greek science taught the Europeans much, but it also encouraged some mistaken ideas, especially the geocentric theory, which argues that the sun revolves around the earth.

NOTE

Ironically, Aristotle had written about the scientific method (in which hypotheses have to be tested by observation and experiment), but medieval Europeans tended to ignore this part of his thinking and accepted most Greek science, errors included, as unquestioned fact.
Eventually, increased familiarity of European artists and scholars with Greek and Roman texts helped give birth to the Renaissance.

**Art, Architecture, and Literature**

Most medieval art was religious in nature. Icons, or religious paintings, were largely inspired by Byzantine styles, even in Catholic Europe. Early church music was mainly plainsong (also known as Gregorian chant): human voices unaccompanied by instruments. Over time, arrangements became more complex, and instruments were used by the end of the Middle Ages. The greatest achievement of medieval architecture was the cathedral, which required skill, money, and decades to build.

In the secular sphere, the medieval Europeans were great builders of castles, although many were modeled on Byzantine and Middle Eastern designs. Troubadours and minstrels appeared in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and popularized nonreligious music. Favorite songs were about love, as well as legends of King Arthur, Charlemagne's knight Roland, and El Cid of Spain.

One trend encouraged by troubadours and minstrels—then later authors like Dante Alighieri of Italy (1265–1321), the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (1340–1401), and Christine de Pisan (1364–1410), who wrote in French and Italian—was the increased use of native, or vernacular, languages. Although Latin remained the language of the educated elite, it became more acceptable to write serious poetic and literary works in the vernacular. This stimulated a growth in literacy and made literature available to a wider range of people.

![Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris, France.](image)

One of the best-known landmarks of Paris, the Cathedral of Notre Dame provides a quintessential example of the Gothic style of church architecture.
The Printing Press

In the late 1430s, a new invention revolutionized European culture and the intellectual life of the entire world. This was the printing press developed by German inventor Johannes Gutenberg. The concept of printing by carving images and words into blocks of wood had originated in China (perhaps Korea) centuries before, and was known to the Europeans. However, block printing was costly and unwieldy. Gutenberg created a movable-type printing press, in which individual, reusable metal characters could be placed in a frame to form text. The printing press raised literacy rates, spread information, increased the impact of new ideas and scientific theories, and encouraged the expansion of libraries and universities. It played an indispensable role in the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and a general explosion of knowledge that transformed Europe and the West for centuries.

THE RENAISSANCE

The Concept of the Renaissance

During the early 1300s, an important cultural and intellectual revival began in parts of southern Europe, especially the city-states of the Italian peninsula. This revival became known as the Renaissance, or “rebirth.” By the end of the 1400s, it was spreading from Italy to the rest of Europe. It is considered to have lasted until approximately 1600.

As noted previously, it was common until recently to think of the medieval era as a time of minimal cultural advancement. Consequently, the Renaissance was often viewed as a revolution, a sudden explosion of new ideas and learning. Because historians now have a better appreciation of medieval culture, it has become standard to see the Renaissance more as a gradual cultural and intellectual evolution. Nonetheless, it represented a significant change.

The Cultural Outlook of the Renaissance

One of the hallmarks of Renaissance culture was classicism: a greater understanding of and admiration for Greco-Roman literature and learning. Of course, medieval Europeans were familiar with this heritage. What changed during the Renaissance was that a greater number of people probed more deeply into Latin sources and, thanks largely to translations provided by Jews and Arabs, the learning of the Greeks.

Renaissance thought was more secular than that of the medieval era. The authors and artists of the Renaissance did not ignore religion; even if they had wanted to, doing so would have been dangerous, thanks to the church’s influence. Still, Renaissance writings and artworks placed a greater emphasis on worldly matters.

Similarly, another feature of Renaissance culture was humanism, a Greco-Roman concept that went hand-in-hand with the classical revival and Renaissance secularism. Humanism, the conviction that to be human is something to celebrate, ran counter to the church-dominated medieval view that to be human was to be tainted with sin and that worldly life was less important than heavenly afterlife.
Causes of the Renaissance

Why did the Renaissance occur first in Italy? One cause was the urban sophistication of the Italian city-states. Another was the commercial strength of the Italian cities, which generated excess wealth sufficient to support a sustained cultural revival. Italy’s success in trade and commerce also gave birth to a class of patrons who, though not always of noble blood, were rich, educated, and eager to improve their status by sponsoring artists and writers. Italy’s position as a naval and economic crossroads in the Mediterranean brought it into contact with new ideas and advanced knowledge from the outside world more quickly than the rest of Europe.

Major Figures and Trends of the Renaissance

Important figures in the early Italian Renaissance were the poet Petrarch (1304–1374), the author Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), and the painter Giotto (ca. 1267–1337). As the Renaissance matured, key individuals included the political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the artist and scientist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), and the painter and sculptor Michelangelo (1472–1564).

Renaissance architects attained a high degree of engineering skill, boosted by a better understanding of mathematics and a deeper knowledge of the techniques of the Greeks and Romans, who had been master builders. Renaissance painters achieved an astonishing level of realism in their work, compared with the art of the medieval era. In painting, as in architecture, increased familiarity with mathematics enabled painters to work out the laws of perspective. The result was a convincing depiction of a three-dimensional subject on a two-dimensional surface. Better paints and equipment, the technique of foreshortening, and the effective use of light and shadowing also increased the quality of Renaissance paintings.

The Spread of Renaissance Culture

By the 1400s, the Italian Renaissance was exerting its influence on the rest of Europe. Travelers, especially northern students attending Italian universities, carried with them techniques drawn from the art and literature of the south. The invention of the movable-type printing press in the 1430s dramatically increased the speed and scope by which information could be produced and transmitted throughout Europe, and the printing press deserves much of the credit for spreading the ideals of the Renaissance beyond Italy. The Renaissance took hold in southern France, and then all of France, as well as England, Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, Poland, Hungary, and elsewhere. By the late 1400s, it was possible to speak of a northern Renaissance. This northern Renaissance had a profound impact on the rest of Europe, especially with regard to the religious controversies of the 1500s that led to the Protestant Reformation.
Islam in the Middle East and Africa

Prior to 600 C.E., the dominant civilizations in the Middle East were the Byzantine Empire and Persia. Suddenly, the political and religious landscape of the Middle East was transformed by the appearance of Islam.

During the 600s and 700s, military conquest carried the new faith out of Arabia, where it was born, to Spain and Morocco in the west, and the borderlands of India in the east. The Islamic caliphate aspired to unite all worshippers into a single political community called dar al-Islam (much as popes strove to do in Christian Europe). The golden age of classical Islam lasted from the middle of the 900s to about 1000, and is associated with the Abbasid Caliphate.

Although the Abbasids retained theoretical control over the Islamic world until the Mongol conquest of 1258, their power started to wane before that. Islamic culture remained advanced, but, politically speaking, the years after 1000 were a period of decline.

Another characteristic of these years was political confusion. From 1000 to the 1400s, many Islamic states rose and fell. Other Middle Eastern peoples, such as the Persians and Turks, rivaled the Arabs as forces in the Islamic community. Outside enemies and invaders added to the chaos. Finally, by the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth, the Islamic world—at least the Middle East and North Africa—was reconsolidated under the Ottoman Turks. However, even under the Ottomans, Islam was never again united as it had been under the Abbasids.

MOHAMMED AND THE ORIGINS OF ISLAM

The youngest of the world's major religions, Islam transformed itself with amazing speed from a local faith into a cultural and political force of global dimensions. A monothestic form of worship that originated in the Middle East, Islam is linked with Judaism and Christianity in many ways, and their relationships have frequently been stormy, even tragic. Nonetheless, the three faiths contain many similarities and possess an eventful shared history.
Islam arose in the Arabian Peninsula during the 600s C.E., a time when Arabia was sparsely populated and its desert interior largely unexplored. Arabia's few major settlements were built up around oases and coastal towns serving as centers of the caravan trade that linked the region with the rest of the Middle East. From Arabia, the new religion spread rapidly throughout the eastern Mediterranean. By 1000 C.E., its influence stretched from Spain and Africa's Atlantic coast to the borderlands of India in the east.

The founder of Islam was Mohammed (also Muhammad), a merchant from the Arabian town of Mecca. Born in 570 C.E., Mohammed began to meditate in the mountains near Mecca when he turned forty. In 610 C.E., he experienced a profound vision, in which the archangel Jibril (Gabriel to Jews and Christians) is said to have delivered the word of Allah (Arabic for "God") to him. With the help of family members such as Ali (his cousin and son-in-law), Aisha (his favorite wife), and Abu Bakr (Aisha's father), Mohammed preached and gathered a religious community. In 622, he and his followers were forced out of Mecca by local religious authorities and fled to the city of Medina. This flight—the Hegira—marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. In 630, Mohammed and his followers returned to Mecca and converted the city. In 632, he died, but the religion he had founded grew.

Mohammed taught that there is one god, Allah, but Islam also pays respect to figures from Jewish and Christian faith and instructs Muslims to acknowledge Jews and Christians as "people of the book." Submission to Allah involves living by the Five Pillars of Faith, which are to declare that "there is no god but Allah"; to pray daily, facing in the direction of Mecca; to fast during the holiday of Ramadan; to give alms to the poor; and to make a pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime. Other traditions include abstinence from alcohol and pork, avoiding the portrayal of human or animal images in art, and polygamy (Muslim men were allowed to take up to four wives). There were also restrictions on women's conduct; a strictly observant Muslim woman was to guard her modesty and veil herself when in public—although many modern Muslims have secularized and allow a less-stringent observance of these practices. Patriarchalism was somewhat offset by the command that men treat women with respect. Women also enjoyed the right to inherit, have dowries, and own property. The teachings of Mohammed are contained in the Qur'an (Koran), and the holy language of Islam is Arabic. Sharia is the codification of traditional Islamic law.

The expansion of Islam during the 600s–800s C.E. went hand-in-hand with military conquest and political domination. Early Islam made no distinction between political allegiance and religious affiliation: to be a Muslim meant also to belong to a political and social community, or umma, linked by religious belief. After Mohammed's death, the umma was governed by a caliph, or "successor," who was both a religious and political leader. The first caliph was Mohammed's father-in-law, Abu Bakr.

Before Mohammed's death, most of Arabia had converted to Islam. The first three caliphs broke out of Arabia and brought Islam to the rest of the Middle East and beyond. By the end of the 700s C.E., Muslim forces had destroyed the Persian Empire, were threatening Byzantium, and were converting Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, most of
North Africa, present-day Pakistan, Spain, and parts of Italy. From the 600s to the 1200s C.E., this vast territory was ruled over by two caliphates: the Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1258). The zenith of Islamic civilization as a single political and religious entity came during the first 300 years of the Abbasid Caliphate.

Triumph and expansion did not prevent major splits. From 656 to 661 C.E., disputes among Mohammed’s family led to civil war. The final result was the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate. The majority of Muslims accept this line of successors as legitimate and refer to themselves as Sunni, the “people of tradition and community.” More than 80 percent of Muslims are Sunni. The followers of Mohammed’s son-in-law Ali (who was killed in the war) considered the Umayyads to be usurpers and formed a minority denomination known as the Shiites. Another Islamic movement is Sufism, a mystical tradition that appeared during the 700s and 800s C.E. as a reaction to the growing worldliness of the caliphs. It places a premium on fasting, prayer, and meditation. Islam is most famously associated with the Middle East, where the vast majority of the population is Muslim. But due to the wide expansion of the religion, countries with Islamic majorities include most of those in North Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia (the country with the largest Muslim population), and others.

**THE FIRST CALIPHATES**

After the Sunni-Shiite split (656–661), power passed to the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), which governed from Damascus, in Syria, and continued Islam’s military expansion. The Umayyad caliphs made Arabic the official language of the Muslim world and imposed a tax on those who did not convert to Islam. A series of rebellions led to the Umayyads’ decline.

![The Birth and Expansion of Islam, 632–750.](image)

Born in Arabia, the dynamic new faith of Islam triumphed throughout the Middle East, where it is still dominant. It then continued to expand, both eastward and westward.
The Abbasid Caliphate

Following the Umayyad dynasty was the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), which established a great capital at Baghdad and presided over the golden age of classical Islamic culture.

The caliphs were strong and provided peace and stability throughout the Islamic empire. Economic unity prevailed (as it had throughout the empires of Persia, Rome, and Han China), and Abbasid trade networks linked the Middle East with Europe, Africa, the Indian Ocean, and Asia. Just as European bankers facilitated trade there, the concepts of credit and a single currency made possible by Abbasid stability stimulated commerce in the Islamic Empire. Muslim manufacturers were among the most skilled in the world (especially at the production of steel), and, as described at the end of this chapter, the level of cultural advancement was high. The most famous and best loved of the Abbasid caliphs was Haroun al-Rashid (776–809).

Abbasid political unity began to disintegrate during and after the 900s. Geographic overextension, the difficulty of ruling millions of people of such diverse ethnicities, and the Sunni-Shiite split all contributed to the caliphate’s gradual breakup. Nomadic movements in North Africa, Syria, and Iraq destabilized it as well. As early as 875, Persia and Central Asia came under control of a non-Arabic dynasty (the Samanid). In 909, a Shiite caliphate (the Fatimids) rose up in Egypt and ruled there till 1171. Spain achieved independence briefly from 929 to 976.

At the same time, Baghdad itself was under military threat. It fell to several conquerors, including the Seljuk Turks, who kept the Abbasid caliph in place as a figurehead. Military stress continued, tearing the caliphate apart. (Abbasid weakness largely accounts for the European crusaders’ success in seizing Middle Eastern territory.)

The final blow came from the Mongols, who invaded the Middle East in the mid-1200s (for more, see Chapter 11). In 1258, the Mongols captured Baghdad and killed the last Abbasid caliph. Afterward, the Middle East splintered into many separate states. It was reunited, but only partly, by the Turks.

ISLAM IN SAHARAN AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The Spread of Islam to Africa

Islam reached the eastern parts of North Africa (especially Egypt) in the 600s and 700s. Over the next few hundred years, it spread through the Sahara and to sub-Saharan Africa. Some of northeastern Africa remained Christian: the Nubian kingdoms of Kush and Axum (until the 1300s and 1400s), Ethiopia, and the Coptic Christians of Egypt. However, most converted to Islam.

Islam was brought to Africa by Arab traders—either overland (along the trans-Saharan caravan routes) or by sea, along the continent’s Indian Ocean coastline. Conversion was mostly peaceful, although it was sometimes carried out by force. In addition, much of the commercial activity that brought Islam to southern Africa was connected with the extensive Arab slave trade. Trade northward consisted of slaves, salt, ivory, and animal skins. Trade southward included manufactured goods like glass, metalwork, and pottery.

As for the west, Islam took root not just in the Sahara, but also sub-Saharan Africa, during the eleventh century. Here, the most dedicated converts were the Berbers,
desert nomads and hardened warriors. From Marrakesh, in present-day Morocco, Berber clans extended Muslim authority far to the south.

**Mali**

By the 1300s and 1400s, Islamic states in western sub-Saharan Africa included Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, and many Hausa city-states. The biggest and most powerful was Mali (ca. 1250–1460), along the Niger River basin, an important north–south trade route for centuries. Founded in the mid-1200s by the conqueror Sundiata, and blessed with sizable deposits of gold and metal ore, Mali became a key center for trade in western and northern Africa.

Conversion to Islam proved beneficial. Politically, it enabled good trade relations with Arab states to the north. It also created a group of educated scholars who acted as public servants.

Mali’s products were highly valued. They included gold, salt, ivory, animal skins, and slaves. The chief commercial outpost (though not the capital) was Timbuktu, a stopping point for caravans and traders traveling in all directions. The main commodity here was salt. Timbuktu was also a renowned center of religious studies and Islamic scholarship.

Mali’s most powerful ruler was Mansa Musa (1312–1337), famous throughout Europe and Africa as one of the world’s wealthiest monarchs (a Spanish map of 1375 referred to Mali as home to the “richest and noblest king in all lands”). Mansa Musa more fully systematized the government. By the early 1400s, Mali was under foreign attack, and its territory was steadily shrinking. Its might collapsed by the end of the century.

Culturally speaking, Mali (like most parts of Africa) was home to a strong tradition of oral storytelling and song making. One of Africa’s most famous epic poems from this period comes from Mali, the Son-Jara (also known as the Sundiata). It dates from the 1200s, and it tells of the many exploits of the chieftain Son-Jara (Sundiata), founder of the Mali state.

**THE RISE OF THE TURKS**

Originating on the open steppes of Central Asia, the nomadic tribes known collectively as the Turks began to exert a significant influence on the Middle East, starting around 1000 C.E. By the 1400s, the Ottoman Turks would be the dominant political force there.

**Mamluks and Seljuks**

Most Turkish tribes were adept at horse combat, and many Turks were brought to the Middle East to serve in Arab armies. These cavalry warriors were called Mamluks. They became dedicated converts to Islam and were among the best soldiers in the Middle East. By the eleventh century, there were many Mamluks in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). In 1250, a large group of them migrated to Egypt and established a kingdom there.

In the eleventh century, the Seljuk Turks moved westward. They captured Baghdad in 1055 (but kept the Abbasid caliph in place as a figurehead). In 1071,
the Seljuks defeated the Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Manzikert. They then took most of Asia Minor, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (including Jerusalem). Seljuk successes crippled the Byzantine Empire and ushered in its long period of decline. However, Turkish victories prompted European Christians to begin the Crusades in 1095.

**Crusaders and Mongol Assaults**

The early Crusades and the establishment of the Latin Kingdoms (see Chapter 7) threw the Middle East into political confusion. Until the mid-1100s, neither the weakened Abbasids nor their many political rivals proved capable of organizing effective resistance. One of the Middle East’s great leaders during this time was the Kurdish general Saladin, who recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 and drove back the Third Crusade (1189–1192).

By the 1200s, the Mamluks, Arabs, and Seljuks had gotten better at fighting the crusaders. The Latin Kingdoms shrank steadily, and the Europeans were expelled by the end of the century.

However, an even greater crisis emerged in the form of the Mongols (see Chapter 11), who moved into the Middle East in the mid-1200s, seizing Baghdad in 1258 and destroying the Abbasid Caliphate. Only in 1260 was the Mongol advance halted, as a Mamluk army defeated the Mongols at the Battle of Ain Jalut (Goliath Springs) in Syria. The Mongols took no more territory but established a state (the Il-Khan Empire) that lasted until 1349. For a long time, no single state—Mamluk, Seljuk, or Mongol—was strong enough to centralize the Middle East.

**The Ottomans**

The group that eventually dominated the Middle East, the Ottoman Turks, rose to prominence in the 1300s and 1400s. As early as the 1200s, the Ottomans, who served the Seljuks as vassals, settled northwestern Asia Minor. By the century’s end, they had their own independent state, founded by the sultan Osman I (1280–1326).

The Ottomans conquered southeastern Europe and what remained of the Byzantine Empire. Attacks on the Balkans began in the late 1300s, and the Ottoman fleet of galleys (oared warships, often rowed by prisoners or slaves) captured many ports and islands in the eastern Mediterranean. Finally, in 1453, Ottoman armies under Sultan Mehmet II, using the world’s largest and most advanced gunpowder artillery, captured Constantinople. The fall of Constantinople ended the 1,100-year history of the Byzantine Empire and set the stage for a long, intense struggle against Christian Europe during the late 1400s and 1500s.

**ISLAMIC CULTURE**

For all its political failures, the Abbasid Caliphate presided over the golden era of Islamic culture. Compared with its neighbors—Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, the steppes of Central Asia—the Islamic world was far more culturally advanced during the 700s through the 1200s. Its only cultural and intellectual rivals during these years were India and China.
Mathematics and Science

The mathematical and scientific aptitude of the Muslims was great. Under the Abbasids, the use of so-called Arabic numerals (which actually originated in India) became widespread. Islamic scholars were also adept at medicine. In the 900s, the physician Razi compiled the **Hawi**, the most thorough medical encyclopedia of its time. Even more famous was the Persian scientist Ibn Sina, known to the West as **Avicenna** (980–1037), whose **Canon of Medicine** remained in wide use until the 1600s, both in Europe and the Middle East. The fact that many stars in the night sky bear Arabic names attests to the skill of Muslim astronomers. One reason for the Ottomans’ great military successes was a high degree of expertise with gunpowder weaponry, which required a good working knowledge of metallurgy and chemistry. Cultural and technological interchange between the Abbasids and Tang China was extensive.

Philosophy

The Islamic world produced many philosophers: some Muslim, some Jewish (but accepted as citizens and recognized for their accomplishments). Like the Scholastics of medieval Europe, Islamic philosophers investigated the relationship between human reason and religious faith.

The two most famous thinkers came from Muslim Spain. Ibn Rushd, better known as **Averroës** (1126–1198), played an indispensable role in Islamic and European cultural life. A celebrated doctor, Averroës translated and analyzed the works of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, reintroducing his ideas to Europe. A second philosopher was **Maimonides** (1135–1204), a Spanish rabbi. Maimonides wrote commentaries on Jewish scripture and, like Averroës, encouraged the dissemination of Aristotle’s ideas throughout Europe. His most famous work, *Guide to the Perplexed*, attempted to reconcile the rationality of Greco-Roman thought with Jewish theology (as Thomas Aquinas would do with Christian thought).

Islam’s Influence Over Culture

As in Christian Europe, religion played a large cultural role. Muslim authorities controlled what was acceptable art or literature. Because the **Qur’an** forbids the worship of graven images, Islamic art during these years tended to feature geometric patterns and shapes rather than human or animal figures (although this was not a hard-and-fast rule). Religious colleges (madrasas) provided centers of learning. Much intellectual activity in the Islamic world involved debates and commentaries on the Qur’an, the sayings of Mohammed, and Islamic law (**Sharia**).

Islamic Literature

Among the classics of Islamic literature from the Abbasid years is **The Thousand Nights and a Night**, known in the West as **The Arabian Nights**. The work includes the tales of Sindbad the Sailor, Ali Baba, and Aladdin. Also important is the **Rubaiyat** of Omar Khayyám (ca. 1038–1131). Famous as a mathematician and
astronomer, Khayyám composed this collection of bittersweet, meditative poems in the early 1100s.

Another masterpiece was Travels, the journal of Ibn Battuta (1304–1368), the Islamic world’s greatest explorer. Born in Morocco, Ibn Battuta spent 30 years visiting Mecca, Persia, Mesopotamia, Turkey, Central Asia, Spain, Timbuktu, India, China, and Sumatra, a journey covering more than 75,000 miles.

From Persia came Sufism, a mystical strain of Islam that places an emphasis on attaining union with Allah by means of ritual disciplines and spiritual exercises (especially chanting and dancing). The best example of Sufi thought and belief can be found in the poetry of Rumi (1207–1273).