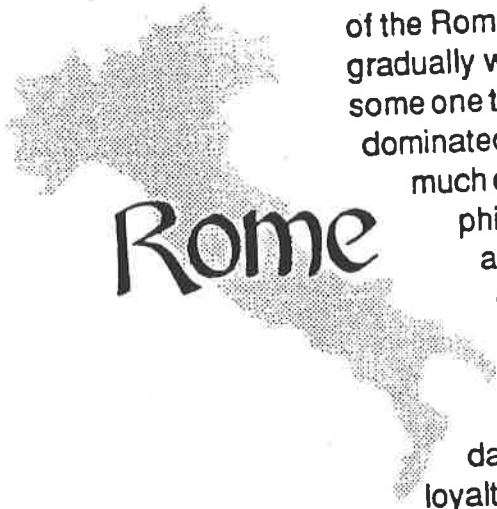




BACKGROUND ESSAY: The Medieval World - 1

Introduction Before you leave your comfortable modern lifestyles and enter the medieval world, you should know what awaits you. In some ways it will be an exciting journey; in a few ways it will be a jarring and uncomfortable one. You will have to adapt. For now, however, be content with the knowledge about how human beings in Europe lived between 600 and 1300. (Incidentally, historians usually divide the medieval era into the early Middle Ages, c. 600-1000, and the late Middle Ages, c. 1000-1300.)



The fall of Rome Any study of the Middle Ages begins with the decline of the Roman Empire. The classical world of the Greeks and Romans gradually waned in the first few centuries after the birth of Christ. For some one thousand years, the Mediterranean Sea world had been first dominated by the Greeks, then by the Romans. The Romans copied much of what the Greeks had given to Western civilization (drama, philosophy, architecture, science, history, etc.), but they also advanced many of its own cultural legacies and spread this classical civilization throughout their empire. But by A.D. 400, circumstances led to the fall of this vast empire centered in Rome: weak and corrupt emperors ruling an inefficient bureaucracy, foreign invasions (Visigoth, Vandals, and Huns), declining prosperity, epidemics, and a lack of loyalty among Rome's citizens. However, a second capital of the empire, at Byzantium on the Bosphorus, would flourish over the next several centuries at the same time Rome's power waned.

Charlemagne When Rome finally fell in the late fifth century and was no longer a power seat, the focus of political power moved north to what is now known as France. Leaders such as Clovis, Charles Martel, Pepin, and Charles the Great (Charlemagne) ruled over the Franks. They tried to keep the armies of the new Islamic faith at bay and promoted Christianity throughout the Frankish Empire. Charlemagne, the most influential of these kings, encouraged scholarship at his court when he appointed Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon monk, to set up a palace school. Furthermore, the king ordered his nobles to establish schools and libraries, where Latin, the language of the Catholic Church, was to be taught and used.

Feudalism From the death of Charlemagne to about 1000, chaos from more Germanic invasions and constant warfare resulted in the creation of a system which promised to bring order during the Middle Ages in Europe. This system is called feudalism, wherein nobles swear an oath of loyalty to a leader and fight for him in exchange for land and other needs. This social/economic system was to dominate Europe for



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the next few centuries. In a sense, feudalism was based on a mutually agreed upon contract of rights and obligations. It included the lord's giving his favored subjects, or vassals, plots of land called fiefs, or "manors." On these manors peasants, who had no legal rights as persons and who were thought of much as we think of domestic animals today, worked the land for the vassals. In turn, the vassals gave the lords about 10 days of military service a year and an annual fee. All these exchanges were formalized at a ceremony where lord and vassals confirmed the feudal contract. Of course, the peasants were exchanged with the land.

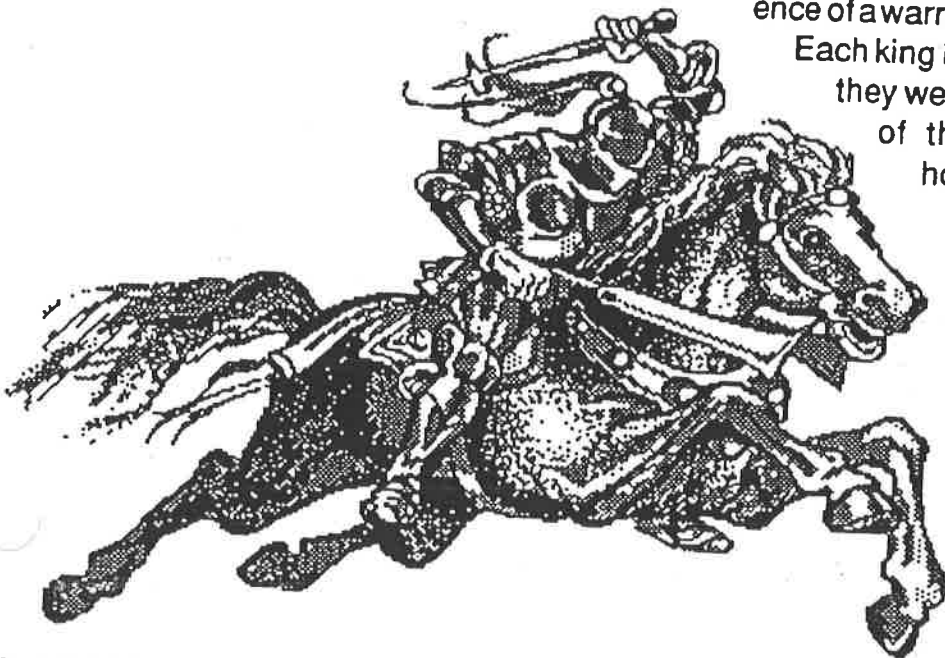
Life on a manor If feudalism defined the political and military system of Medieval Europe, manorialism was its economic heart. A manor, or estate, was ruled over by lords and vassals. The peasants, who worked the land and raised the animals, were called serfs. The relationship between vassal and serfs was similar to the one between lord and vassal: an exchange of obligations and rights. Peasants toiled on the manor under a steward's watchful eye for the vassal. In exchange, the vassal protected them in time of war and provided justice through a court on the manor. Specifically, serfs worked three days a week for the master, repairing his castle, digging his moat, and doing many other tasks. For them, life mostly offered filth, monotonous routine, and danger. During the Middle Ages, manors were mostly self-contained and self-sufficient economic units.



Knights and warfare One of the factors which insured that the manors functioned smoothly and without interruption was the presence of a warrior class of men called knights.

Each king had many knights (very often, they were his feudal vassals), as part of the feudal contract. These

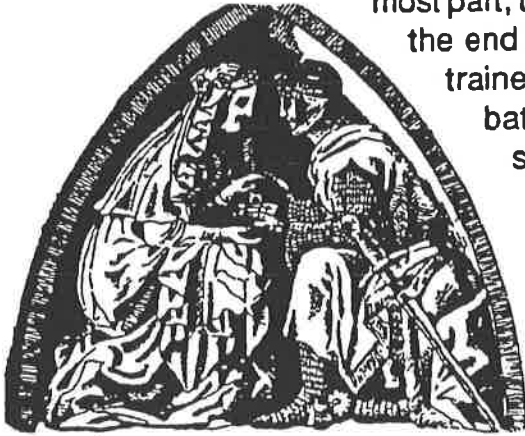
horsemen, fully armored with lances, swords, axes, and maces, rode off to defend one king or another, in mostly small insignificant battles. Often these engagements resulted from kidnappings, marriages, or confusion over feudal contracts and loyalties. In any event, these medieval skirmishes were fought man to man, hand to hand, in





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armor so heavy that a few blows could cause death. However, for the most part, the knight who was knocked off his horse lost and that was the end of the fight. For knights, warfare was a way of life. They trained for war much as soldiers in today's army train. Mock battles called tournaments were held periodically to make sure the skills of these warriors never rusted.



Chivalry Among medieval knights a formal code of behavior—called chivalry—developed. It combined Christian values and the virtues of knighthood which included generosity, loyalty, and bravery. Chivalry also defined rules of warfare. For example, one knight could not attack an enemy knight until his opponent was in his armor. However, many did not obey the chivalrous code and warfare remained brutal and deadly.

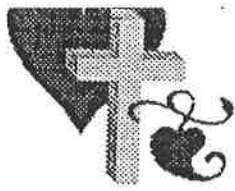
Medieval women Like most pre-modern eras of history, the Middle Ages was essentially a man's world. It limited most women to home chores and bearing and rearing children. The amount of drudgery for women depended on their status, or whom they married. Noblewomen

Life for medieval European women was not as romantic as it often appears in films.

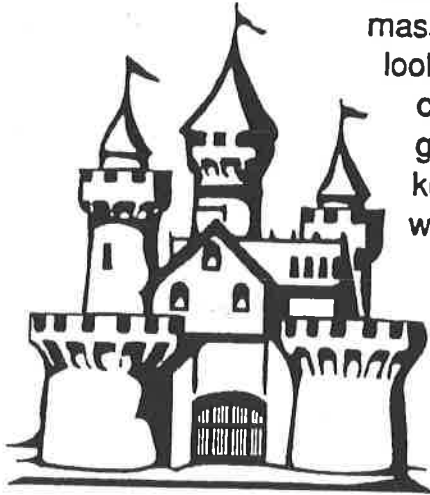
had no more rights than their sisters who fed pigs and planted potatoes on the manor. The quality of life for a noble's wife, however, was significantly better and less dangerous, and she was often given some instruction in skills involving weaving, medicine, and cooking. Less frequently, noblewomen were even taught to read and write.



About 1100 the code of chivalry placed noblewomen on pedestals as objects to be cherished and protected: a venerated position similar to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Minstrels and troubadours, as they wandered from castle to castle, glorified romantic love between knights and their ladies. In reality, the lives of most medieval women, including fine ladies of the castle, were difficult and hardly ideal or romantic.



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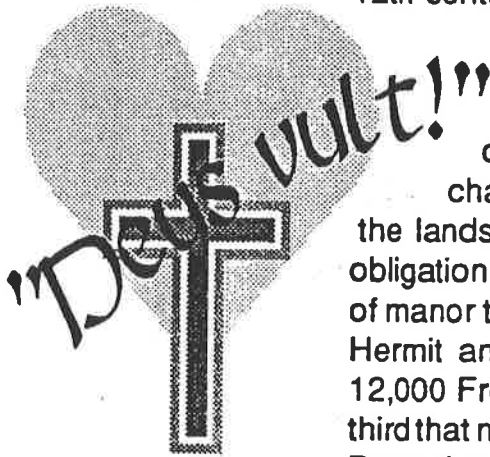
Castles Many lords and ladies lived in majestic buildings called castles, which dominated the landscapes of the medieval manors like massive fortresses. Castles were made up of thick stone walls, lookout towers, and drawbridges over wide watery moats. At the castle's center was a tall tower called a keep, which contained a great hall, several rooms and a prison, or dungeon. It was in this keep where the lords and ladies of the Middle Ages lived. Close by were shops, kitchens, stables, and rooms which housed the often huge retinue of knights, cooks, attendants, and slaves. To be sure, life in a castle was more exciting than a peasant's life out on the manor. Castle-dwellers could be entertained by jesters and wandering troubadours. They could play chess or cards and carry on with other activities without fear of being suddenly attacked by knights from nearby castles, or by distant enemies like the Vikings. However, a castle could have to endure long castle sieges. Then the lords and ladies might worry about a dwindling food supply, which would sometimes result in their having to eat their pets, or rats, or even dead human carcasses.

The church Permeating the lives of lords and ladies and the peasants on the manor was the Catholic Church. Spreading throughout Europe after the fall of Rome, the church was the center of daily life in every village, castle, and town. Many historians call the Middle Ages the "Age of Faith" because of the church's influence on people. While religion was important seven days a week to medieval people, the church dictated that one day—Fridays—should be set aside for sacrifice—avoiding meat, for example. On Sundays, the faithful went to Mass to be reminded of a better life in a kingdom after death. Most holidays on the Christian calendar honored the church's historical saints, heroes, and heroines. The church's unquestioned spiritual leader was the pope in Rome, who delegated authority to cardinals and bishops throughout Europe. Yet, it was simple and dedicated monks who made sure the Catholic beliefs reached the unwashed masses on a daily basis. These "soldiers of the church" met needs of the people in misery, in death, or in crisis and belonged to religious orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans.

Many European villages and towns were fortunate enough to have large churches called cathedrals. Built for their local parishioners, these "pillars of the earth" often took decades and centuries to be constructed, but, once built, glorified God and the church, and brought growth and prosperity to the nearby towns. From miles away travelers approaching a community with a cathedral could see its bold outline silhouetted against the horizon, reaching deep into God's heavens.



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Crusades Perhaps the church's greatest glory, outside magnificent cathedrals, was a series of crusades to the Holy Land in the 11th and 12th centuries. Although Christians had visited cities and shrines in Palestine in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea before, it took the Moslem capture of Jerusalem to inspire mass movements of Europeans to journey there. As Pope Urban II cried out, *deus vult*, "It is God's will," Christians took up the challenge, first in 1096, to recapture from the Saracen hordes the lands their Savior walked on. Motivated not only by Christian obligation but also by military glory and a desire to escape the drudgery of manor toil as well, the so-called First Crusade was led by Peter the Hermit and Walter the Penniless. They guided a rag-tag band of 12,000 French peasants possessed with fever-pitch zeal. Only one-third that number made it to Constantinople, the capital of the Christian Byzantium Empire, and few of those brought any military skills to fight the Saracens.

The Crusade of Kings There were other similar crusades over the next several decades. The most famous was the Crusade of Kings, so called because the Christian armies were led by King Richard the Lion Hearted of England, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, and King Philip Augustus of France. This star-studded effort failed, too. Constant bickering by the kings over strategy, and the military genius of the Moslem leader Saladin, forced the crusaders to give up their quest, sign a truce, and return home to Europe.

The Crusades impacted Western Europe in the Middle Ages in several ways. First, east and west were brought in closer contact; Europe was no longer isolated. Second, the crusades helped break down feudalism. Feudal lords had little control over their vassals and fiefs while they battled Saracen swords thousands of miles away. Last, the contact with the cultured and advanced Byzantine and Moslem empires led to a new interest in learning, inventions, and new products from the east (sugar, spices, rugs, and the fork). This demand for exotic products would lead to the growth of trade and cities.

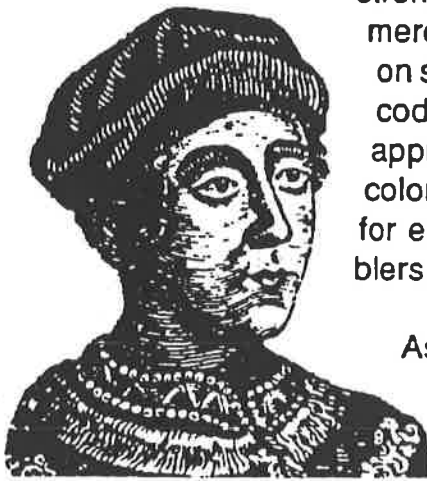
Trade and town life Part and parcel of the new pulsating life of the late Middle Ages (1000-1400) was the simultaneous growth of trade, towns, and craft unions known as guilds. For whatever reasons, their reappearance, or redevelopment, pushed Europeans down the path toward the modern commercial world we easily recognize today. What began as trade fairs along coastlines became bustling market places. People who participated in these fairs, as trade further increased, established permanent headquarters and these slowly grew into



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towns. Local artisans such as carpenters, tailors, and butchers began to move into these towns where they more readily secured customers for their goods and services. An important outcome of this trend was the growth of a merchant class; that is, townspeople, bent on making a profit, who identified neither with peasants or nobles. These towns gradually became cities, characterized by the crowded, dirty, dangerous, and impersonal conditions we see in our own urban areas today.

Guilds As time went on, this new merchant, or middle, class became stronger and wealthier. Many formed “guilds” or associations of merchants and artisans that governed towns and established codes on standards, prices, and wages within their local area. Part of these codes was the rigorous training of artisans through the stages of apprentice to journeyman to master craftsman. Each craft was colorfully advertised for the illiterate population of Europe. Hatmakers, for example, displayed a sign picturing a hat; shoemakers, or cobblers, exhibited a shoe; and so on.



As towns grew and the middle class gained in influence, they played a greater role in European history. For the most part, feudalism vanished, the manorial system declined, and the knight had fewer enemies to knock off their horses. Western Europe was changing. Beckoning over the horizon was a new era—the Renaissance.