

Rediscovering the  
dark ages and  
beyond: the christian  
oppression of ancient  
writi...



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Medieval literature covered the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and until the beginning of the Renaissance period. During this time, written literary works and “ every single book had to be copied by hand since printing press had not been invented yet” (Kathy Wilmore, 2007) Since the period covering the medieval literature is very long, and the subjects are as very wide and the place it covered was also very wide, medieval literature is best identified by its genre, place of origin or its language.

Dominant types of writings during this period were religious, secular, allegory and women’s literature. It was the writings by the church and by the clergies that dominated the world of literature and those were the kinds of literary items typically found in libraries. The center and leader when it comes to intellect were the clerics (or so it seemed) and it was their literature that was produced in the greatest quantity. Or, it was their literature that was never prohibited nor burned. Illness and fear led people to lock themselves indoors or abandon their farms.

Some fled from half-empty towns to live deep in the wilderness... Half of all children died of disease and starvation before reaching age 12. Kids worked as hard and suffered as much as adults. Education was almost completely forgotten. Yet even in those terrible times, a few people were keeping the light of knowledge safe for the future... Monasteries were the only institutions of learning left. Some monks spent their entire lives copying and preserving books—considered rare and precious things. (Cathy Wilmore, 2007) It is important to note why the period is considered dark.

Aside from the plague that hit humanity at that time and the weather turning cold causing sickness, there are other considerations that need to be viewed. Dark ages, in literary sense, is taken to derive its meaning from the fact that little was then known about the period, the term's more usual and pejorative sense is of a period of intellectual darkness and barbarity. The absence of Roman Emperor in the western (Holy) Roman Empire and the frequent warfare and a virtual disappearance of Urban life covering from 476-1000 AD marked this period of Antiquity or Early Middle Ages, substitute terms for the dark ages.

Nearly all the ancient critical texts were lost during the middle ages.

Emperor Flavius Juvianus ordered the burning of Antioch Library... tons of books were burnt... pagan temples and libraries were looted or burnt down.. (Vlasis G. Rassia, 2000) The church tried and it did succeed in preserving its power over the humanity and the world. It is claimed that there are actually around 200 gospels, epistles and other books concerning the life of Jesus Christ. Writing such material was a popular literary form in the ancient times, particularly in the 2nd century.

However, these writings were claimed by critics as pious fantasies competed with Greek romantic fiction. Political considerations in the ancient times led to the selection of just four approved gospels and the rejection of the rest. However, after three centuries of urging the authorities twenty-three other books were accepted by the Church as it classifies them as appropriately inspired by the divine intervention. The rest were declared fraudulent works.

Some classic writings like that of Homer, where Christians saw allegories, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, and some poetic and rhetorical works of Juvenal, Ovid and Horace were classified by the powerful Christendom as utilizable teaching aids. However, it should be noted that Christian hostility to general learning and practical knowledge was so pervasive during the early Dark ages that access to scriptures itself was forbidden to any lay-person who might happen to be knowledgeable. It should be noted that even the western Roman empire has fallen, the Roman Catholic Church survived.

In fact , it was the only centralized institution to have continuously survive after the fall of the empire and it did remain intact. The Roman Catholic church was considered as the only unifying cultural influence in the West, selectively and meticulously preserving their choice of Latin learning, maintaining the art of writing. Further, the Roman Church was able to preserve its centralized administration with its own network of bishops ordained in succession, who, during the Early Middle Ages had urban control.

Some specific examples how Christians oppressed those who do not belong to and obey its dogma include the total persecution of non-Christian people; the burning of the philosopher Simonides; the decapitation of another philosopher Maximus; the prohibition and sentencing of death penalty for anyone found studying pagan or non Christian books and this prohibition includes even the Christian bishops. Moreover, emperor Theodosius II ordered that all the non-Christian books be burned while later in 529 CE, the Platonic Academy in Athens was closed while its properties got confiscated as ordered by Emperor Justinian.

The Roman Church had been so tyrannical that all literatures contradicting the Bible were forced to be suppressed. Emperor Valens orders a tremendous persecution of Gentiles throughout the eastern Empire. In Antioch, among other Pagans, the ex-governor Fidustus and the priests Hilarius and Patricius were executed. Thousands of books were burnt in the squares of cities of the Eastern Empire. All friends of Julianus were persecuted (Orebastius, Sallustius, Pigasius), the philosopher Simonides was burned alive and the philosopher Maximus was decapitated. (Vlasis G. Rassia, 2000)

The church condemned all ancient culture decrypted as misleading, injurious and dangerous. Nevertheless, at the same time, in the scriptoria ecclesiastic it happened the conservation, the copying, the reading, the analysis and the study of these ancient work. Where the recovery and discovery happened to enlighten the wisdom and culture as well as to give poetic refinements to imitate the continuity of the classic rhetorical.

However, these suppressing attitudes by the church remarkably changed during the time of Saint Jerome, “ the Latin Church Father who was the patron saint and role model for many humanists, including Erasmus” (David Hotchkiss Price, 2003) and Saint Columban. It was the time when these two admitted the possibility to read other sources of wisdom, at least for the highest members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose theological knowledge could have compete with the ancient fables.

It was in fact the great personality of the Irish Saint Columban ( 543-615 A. D ) to “ renew the interest for the ancient culture”, as a study and discovery,

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and not anymore as an imaginative-like work (H. Daniel-Rops, 1959) It was Saint Columban who opined that rigorism was not the correct attitude to confront the ancient culture. In fact, Saint Columban was considered as an abbot and writer, one of the greatest missionaries of the Celtic church, who initiated a revival of spirituality on the European continent.

For instance, the *poetarum enarratio* (the narrations of the poets, that is above all the mythological stories), can be viewed as a good source of knowledge where “superior” Christian morals may be compared with. It was Saint Columbanus’ idea that served as a basis of the cultural *renovatio* of Charlemagne and Otto II, the two emperors who reigned during the periods approaching the year 1000. During the cultural *renovatio* a Latin word for “renewal” or “restoration”, and later called the Carolingian Renaissance, sensibility, taste, society, feeling have changed and evolved.

For some like Schutz, the interpretation of the Carolingian Renaissance as a revival of classical Rome is not the appropriate term. Instead, he sees the “*renovatio* (a preferable term to *renaissance* since it was used by contemporaries) as a synthesis of Christian, classical, and Germanic elements promoted by the Carolingians, particularly Charlemagne” (Herbert Schutz, 2004). Important works, during the *renovatio*, especially the European masterpieces, started to flourish.

It mattered not whether they were written by ecclesiasts or not. As most are aware, these works include epics like *The Song of Roland*, *Chanson de Geste*, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, and *El Cid Campeador*. Other works like the chivalric poems of Chretien de Troyes, which, eventhough it started from

secular values it still directed its meaning in the essence of the allegorical-Christian Search of the Holy Graal. Finally, it is the Commedia of Dante, that highlighted the medieval literature.