

Humanities middle ages



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The Middle Ages: A quick Historical Background
The Middle Ages is a vast period in Human History that lasted for roughly a millennium, particularly geo-centered around the territories of the former Western Roman Empire. It starts from the Fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century to the beginning of the early Modern Period in the 16th century, a period history refers to as that of the High Renaissance marked by wide development and revolutionary thinking in the arts, humanities and burgeoning scientific practices. Some historians refer to the Middle ages as the Dark Ages because it is in this period where the feudal system and increased warfare between territories and pseudo warlords were frequent.

This was expected however because of the power vacuum left by the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The feudal system allowed for a semblance of order: the peasants worked the land and in return they are provided protection by their feudal Lord who maintains strength of arms. This is how Monarchies came to strength in Europe with nobles as vassal lords controlling vast tracks of land for agricultural and administrative purposes. One are of power however remained – that of the seat of the Christian Church and its leadership.

Much of the former Western Roman Empire, if not all was Christian and the church exerted great power in influencing people and the nobility. The Church and the feudal lords and nobles became great patrons of the arts and humanities and it is through their donations and patronage that great art happened. The early Middle or Medieval Ages occurred from about 500 AD to 1000 AD.

It is referred to as a period to be the Dark Ages as it the period that occurred right after the Fall of the Western Roman Empire. While monarchies and alliances started to be rebuilt around the ruins of the empire and new leaders and kings emerged, the conquest of Europe by the Huns, the Mongols, the Germanic peoples, the Arabs (Islam reached its peak at this point and via the Iberian Peninsula worked to penetrate Europe) and the Vikings came one after the other. It was a period of political and military struggle between factions and loyalties that made life hard for the most ordinary people as frequent warfare all but stopped the flourishing of trading centers and urban areas. It was the feudal system that eventually allowed for a sense of organized semblance in the social disorder of the Dark Ages which fostered the next period, that of the High Middle Ages. Development in this period further led to the Late Middle Ages also known as the Renaissance. During the High Middle Ages (500AD to 1600 AD), the population of Europe was increasing, feudal Lords and nobles due to increase in labour source began to consolidate their influence and power, bringing about key social and political change that would ultimately lead to the Renaissance. This consolidation and increased trade among the territories saw the last of the barbaric invasions in 1000AD and even the Vikings have chosen to settle in Scandinavia in the same feudal system. Increased agriculture output saw the economic order change as specialist professions began to order themselves into guilds to further answer the demand - blacksmiths, glass makers, basket weavers, potters, dressmakers, and shoemakers were among the many and their cooperation as a union resulted in production levels never seen before.

The idea of Laissez Fraire (free trade) began here. Markets were set up in major population centres that turned to become cities and key trading ports. Financial systems like banks also began to sprout. And as expected in the social network created by economics, burgeoning wealth and the exchange of ideas produced new ways of thinking that presented itself in philosophies, humanities & the arts (music, paintings, literature, architecture, etc.

). Also, it is during this period that a series of invasion and attempts to retake the Holy Land happened. This period in History is known as The Crusades and a key source of political and social movement that influenced thinking and way of life during said period. Via the Crusades and via trade, influence Middle eastern (Sassanid, Quranic & Egyptian/Berber arts & ideas reached Europe and these were subsequently adapted into their way of life.

For example, the ideas of Knighthood and courtly traditions can be traced to the Sassanid Asawaran Knightly caste who via trade and the Crusades reached Europe.)The Late Middle Ages is the early usherment of the period of renewal and revival of what Europeans saw as the period of Classical Antiquity - the time of the Golden Age of Greece and Rome. This renewal period is what we now term as the Renaissance which started as early as the 1400 AD until the 1700 AD which was immediately followed by the Baroque.” He is a Renaissance man,” is a phrase that refers to one who is well rounded and expert in various fields of science & the humanities - one who strives for knowledge & enlightenment by not just reviving the Classics; a renaissance man they say is one who is determined to break the barrier, push for development a lot like the polymaths of the renaissance as we refer to that flourishing & feverish period in Europes History in the 14th to the 17th

Centuries – Leonardo da Vinci, Donatello, Raphael & classical sculptor Michelangelo. Renaissance literally means re-birth.

After the cultural stagnation of to the Middle Ages (this is the popular opinion about the Medieval Period anyway) an attempt at reviving the Classics of Antiquity started in the 12th century in centres of the Hanseatic League of what today is Germany, early Gothic Art in architecture found its way to Cathedrals in France & Italy. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Virgil & the arts, sciences & architecture of the Greek civilization became of interest to Philosophers, artists, musicians & alchemists. Many however refer to this period as High Medieval Ages, that movement that brought about the full bloom of the Renaissance. The Humanities in the Middle Ages Humanism is essentially a collection of ethical philosophies that have sprung as early as the Renaissance in Europe, the 7th Century in the Islamic Middle East and in Asia, around 563 BC in India through the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the first Buddha), and around 551 BC in China during the time of Confucius. Humanism as a whole is aimed at using rationality in determining right & wrong; it also looks to ensure the dignity of man by seeking truth & morality through a human framework while avoiding transcendental explanations even if the arguments presented have a metaphysical connotation. A humanist endorses universally accepted sense of morality, the right & the good; belief without reason is always questioned although claims sometimes are accepted via a well supported debate (i. e.

Confucian philosophy). We refer to the collection of disciplines that seek to study the human condition via analytical & speculative means (not empirical)

as the Humanities. These include literature, art, languages, religious studies and music.

Early & High Middle Ages In the early Middle Ages, literacy declined greatly due to the wars and periods of uncertainty. Education or the preserve of Humanities was largely due to the efforts of Monasteries, Cathedrals and religious orders who looked after libraries and written works for religious and scholarly pursuits. While the sciences stagnated however, the arts and literature became central to the Church as music, cantatas and literature were practiced and transcribed. The all-male choirs sang beautiful hymns that eventually became the Gregorian chants we now celebrate while books (especially the bible) were copied and rewritten page for page with accompanying beautiful illustrations. Latin was the academic language and in Highly Romanized territories in parts of Spain, France, Germany and Britain, monasteries and supported by monarchies continued the learning process following the Latin tuition - grammar, language, numbers and rhetoric.

Saint Isidore of Seville produced a Latin encyclopaedia in 630 while Charles the Great of the Carolingian Empire tried to institute educational standards within his territories. In the neighbouring Byzantine Empire the Corpus Civilis or the civil law was written and put in practice, an adaptation of the laws during the period of Roman Emperor Justinian. Politics and military affairs and literature dealing with it in Roman and Greek including studies on the history and philosophies of War by Thucydides became the preserve of warrior-monarchs and kings like the great Charlemagne who lived from 768 to 814 AD and Otto I who crowned himself Holy Roman Emperor. The high

Middle Ages was the Golden age of Monasticism – monks of the Benedictine and the Cistercian Order contributed greatly to humanities as their abbes become centres of pursuit of knowledge.

Monks studied nature and its healing powers. They become doctors of the period creating brews and ointments and producing varieties of beer and wine in the process. Ale & Beer at said period despite the alcoholic content was more beneficial to people due to their cleaner nature compared to drinking water especially in cities. The monks also copied by hand books and literary works from the Antiquities and in the process preserved much of the knowledge of the ancients. Anselm of Canterbury for instance rediscovered, copied & preserved the works of Aristotle. The Knights Templar on the other hand as Monastic order took on a military nature to protect Christian Pilgrims during the crusades.

It is also in this capacity that they invented the first geo-financial management system. The Hanseatic League, a group of key cities who organized an economic cooperation (Amsterdam, Cologne, Bremen, Hannover, Berlin) also sponsored an exchange of scholastic pursuits and artistic exhibitions – music, painting, theatre. This spirit of intensive trade via travel and exploration is what drove venetian Marco Polo to travel the Silk Road and eventually visit China, bringing awareness of the Far East to Europe by publishing a documentary of his travel entitled Il Milione. Marco Polo is credited for bringing the idea of gunpowder, spectacles & mass paper manufacture from the far East. Intense trade saw the invention of printing, water & windmills, spinning wheels & magnetic Compasses. Travellers & traders like Leonardo of Pisa via his book Liber Abaci in 1202 introduced

Arabic numerals that greatly improved expressing and signifying mathematical equivalent. In painting, it is during this period that the likes of Jan Van Eyck under the patronage of Hanseatic nobles produced an outstanding body of work.

Together with his contemporary Robert Campin, they produced minutely detailed presentations, correct in perspective oozing realism combined with richly complex symbolism & realistic detail. Late Middle Ages & the Renaissance For the late Middle Ages & Early Renaissance, when we talk about the arts we refer to how it is expressed in terms of the visual: sculptures, paintings, design - all works expressing realism & human emotion, moving & stirring those who gaze in its beauty & almost ethereal appeal. The final product however was rooted in methods & philosophies.

For example, Leonardo da Vincis paintings on human form take on his view of the perfect man via his knowledge of antiquity. His Vitruvian Man is a perspective of methods & proportion using science & mathematics infused with the skill of rendering the human body. The artist Masaccio of Tomasso Cassai developed techniques to render light & plasticism in paintings, a humanist foundation that were later followed by the likes of Raphael and his friends Donatello, Brunelleschi & Alberti all of them students of Renaissance master Giotto. His work, "The Madonna & the Child" now on display at the National art Gallery in London was once the altarpiece of the Carmelite Church in Pisa - influences of Roman & Greek emotions can be felt in his work while from afar his painting seem like a sculpture, as shadow & light play to create dimensions in his work. Donato di Niccol? di Betto Bardi or Donatello his colleague on the other hand concentrated in creating

perspectival illusionism especially in Bas relief or shallow sculptures although he is equally as gifted in paintings much as Alberti or Masaccio.

His style & rendition in sculpting came to the attention of the Medicis who commissioned him for various works in Florence. The Bronze David in the courtyard of the Medici Palazzo was among his first works in Florence & this buoyed the Medicis even more, his David was the first free standing nude since the ancient times. Soon Donatello became a prized Medici artist. Of course, Raphaels " St. George & the Dragon" and Leonardo da Vincis " Mona Lisa" & the " Last Supper" shared more than center stage with Masaccios & Donatellos work. Michelangelos paintings of the dome of the Sistine Chapel fused religion & high renaissance art, classics that live to this day.

Much of Baroque paintings & art coincide with that of Late renaissance as covered above. Bear in mind however that late renaissance & early Baroque encouraged the advent of the Rococo style, the use of forms in unusual presentation. A typical master is Italian artists Bernini. The guiding influence on Renaissance philosophy is Humanism; Humanists try to push the boundaries & discover the extraordinary ability of the human mind by learning poetry, grammar, ethics & rhetoric. They are focused on the classics & reviving the greatness of the Greek & Roman golden age. Reasoning & Empiricism were employed in their study of texts from Antiquity. As such Plato, Aristotle & Socrates came to known of renaissance influences in intellectual thought.

They influenced the likes of Niccolo Machiavelli who in his work, " The Prince" introduces Aristotlean concept of a Philosopher-leader. While his

work discoursed power, mainly the retainment of it & how through it society devolves or evolves, he also brings to light issues of leadership not as a right (for those who inherit the throne) but as a responsibility to the willing.

English Philosopher & lawyer Sir Thomas More wrote his novel Utopia, that imaginary, idealistic world that contrasts the corruptive, contentious social life in then Europe.

Here he combined the ideal states of Plato & Aristotle & adopted the idea of religious toleration. Sir Thomas Moores work is still popular today.

Theologians like Erasmus & Martin Luther started a movement & schism that questioned the corruptive practices of the Holy Catholic Church giving rise to the great religious schism. Word Count: 2, 430References:(Web)<http://www.sparknotes.com/history/european/middle2/timeline.html>

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