

## INTRODUCTION

The Middle Age of European history, *i.e.* the period which extends between the years 395 and 1492 A.D. roughly speaking, has been so named because it lies between the history of the Ancient World of Greece and Rome and that of our own time. It takes its beginning in the dissolution of the Roman Empire of the West, and comes to its close with the discovery of the New World of America. These terminal dates are indeed conventional enough. It is hard to decide which was really the most critical year in the destruction of the Western Roman Empire; it is harder to say when a decisive breach occurred with the civilization which that Empire guarded. And the voyage of Columbus to the further shore of the Atlantic was but one among many events and phenomena which effected the transformation of the politics, the commerce and the thought of Europe from their older to their present-day form. But if the boundaries of the period are conventional, the Middle Age itself is no arbitrary chronological division of history. It has definite characteristics of its own which distinguish it both from Antiquity and Modern Times. Its ideals, its methods of action and government, its conditions of life, and still more its views of life and the world, are startlingly divergent from ours and divergent also from those of ancient Greece and Rome.

The most comprehensive terms, which can be used to describe the Middle Age of Europe, are those of youth

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62711-6 - Outlines of Medieval History: Second Edition

C. W. Previt -Orton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2

## INTRODUCTION

and barbarism. It lies not only between Greco-Roman civilization and our own day, but also between the primitive peoples, German and other, of North Europe and our modern nations. But it does not show the unending infancy of Australian blackfellows who repeat the life of prehistoric times with little change, not an unteachable or uninventive barbarism. The youthful peoples of Europe were busy in learning and making civilization. They started with small, if far from negligible, assets in civilization; but they turned their one talent into ten, and that under enormous difficulties. In one aspect we find the medievals with infinite pains and throes evolving order and law out of anarchy, and from law and order the state and citizenship. In another we see them progressing from the merest rudiments of economic life to material comfort and even luxury. In another we see the growth of intellectual life; they learn and train themselves how to think, how to reason, how to criticize; they leave us a great inheritance of thought, of art and of literature. In short, it is due to the medievals that our life can rise above the life of savages. It is on their foundations that we build.

The main factor of this youth and barbarism and this subsequent maturing and advance lay in the character of the population. Saving the Eastern Roman Empire, which remained as a fragment of the ancient world, Europe came into the hands of a race of fine, healthy barbarians. They were far from hostile to the civilization they overthrew, but they could not understand its essence. Their own tribal system broke down during their settlement. Their clumsy efforts at imitation of the Roman state broke down too, though not without inefaceable and profitable results. Nor could the Roman population they found in their new lands help them much. The mass of it was only half-civilized and but little superior to them in

## CONDITIONS OF THE MIDDLE AGES 3

culture. Such of the Roman upper classes, who remained, already decadent and barbarized, rapidly descended to the level of the conquerors, too often without learning their virtues. In spite of vigorous efforts to preserve the state and the law, disorder had the upper hand. It worked, indeed, its own cure, and was succeeded by a steady advance in all departments of civilization. But the Middle Age was long in putting off this barbaric character. It is an age of fierce untameable passions, of indiscipline and ignorance, wherein consisted the chief obstacle to the renewal of civilization which nevertheless the medievals brought about.

The material difficulties in the way were also great. The population was sparse and dwelt in isolated villages for the most part. The roads, of Roman origin, were few and badly kept. The natural arteries, the rivers, were long ill-tended, though far more serviceable. And everywhere there was woodland, where we now see cultivated fields. The woods, it is true, were a necessary element in the life of the self-sufficing village, which existed on its own produce almost solely, and they formed a refuge and defence for the villager in invasions; but they were also a screen to the outer world and to advancing culture. All through the Middle Age, they steadily decreased, and contemporaneously every step made in the direction of order and security increased wealth and intercommunication together. An ever-widening commerce imparted the culture of the more favoured lands to the more backward, while the authority of the state could more easily reach its subjects.

One striking fact of the Middle Ages, which is at once borne in upon the student of the period, is the vast difference between men's theory and their practice. Charters and legislation seem to give us an orderly state

and a settled jurisdiction of the laws; the facts show us a slowly-vanquished anarchy. The Church theory declares an orderly hierarchy and strict canons passed by sacred assemblies; in real fact we find often irregular action and a mutinous clergy. Nor is this all. Men delighted to spin further theory as to the world and mankind and their government with little regard to existing law, let alone existing practice. And the more ambitious the theory, the more absolute and extreme the doctrine, the more likely they were to gain acceptance. We can trace the habits of the semi-civilized mind, its ignorant, unexperienced and unscientific character, its love of the highly-coloured and grandiose, in this credulity and disregard of facts: but there was a further cause which gave rise to the exceptional development of the theorizing of the Middle Age, and its indifference to the contradiction between its theories and the facts of life.

The barbarian invaders, it has been said above, had no intention of destroying the civilization they found in the Roman Empire: the conquered Roman provincials had no wish to lose it. But for the most part it was lost, while remaining the ideal. For centuries, therefore, attempts at the amelioration of existing circumstances took the form of attempts to hark back to older idealized institutions. The Kings of the Germans, who now ruled the lands of the Western Empire, now took the place of the Emperor, and in theory exercised a centralized rule which was no longer possible. The culmination of this movement was the revival of the Western Empire by Charlemagne in 800 A.D. But the whole tendency of events was against it. The subjects of Charlemagne were not Roman provincials of the time of Constantine: neither were they German tribesmen of the time of Clovis. They were local nobles and barbaric peasants,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62711-6 - Outlines of Medieval History: Second Edition

C. W. Previt -Orton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## IDEALS OF GOVERNMENT

5

not citizens or chiefs of tribes. Thus, under the fierce pressure of the attacks of Northmen, Saracens and Magyars, the hollow structure went to dust, and was succeeded by a wilder anarchy than the West had yet known.

By the time the period of prostration was ended about the year 1000 A.D., much more of the older world had gone irrevocably; but its memories still remained. The Roman Empire still remained the ideal government for Christendom, but its conception had grown far more legendary. Western Europe believed in a theoretical lay ruler of Christendom, and practised a system of petty local states which grew up from the actual conditions of life. Internally, too, those local states had little of the statelike about them. They were loosely compounded of yet smaller units; chiefly, landowning nobles; that is, their government was feudal.

But ideals, universally believed in, and consciously striven for, do not remain without result, however impossible it may be to translate them into fact. On the one hand, the conceptions of the state and its authority, transmitted from the past, helped to shape the new kingdoms that were gathering strength during the feudal period; on the other, the special belief in the Holy Roman Empire governed the politics of Germany and Italy, and not only prescribed the conditions of the development of those two countries, but also gave birth to that strife and interaction of the Empire and the Papacy, which exercised a dominant influence over the later Middle Age.

In the Papacy we meet another inheritance from the Roman Empire. The medievals, looking back on the past, believed firmly in the unity of Christendom, and in its government by a single chief; looking on the present, they believed in the ascetic life as the only truly Christian.

The course of the history will make plain the dispute as to whether Pope or Emperor was the divinely-ordained supreme head, or whether they were co-ordinate authorities, one superintending the lay rulers, and one the ecclesiastical rulers of the Christian Commonwealth. Why the Papacy vanquished its rival is not hard to say. The Empire rested on dreams of the past, and met present needs unsatisfactorily: the forces it could command were inadequate to prolonged exertion. The Papacy, on the other hand, drew strength from the immense reservoir of its spiritual authority, the keys of Heaven and Hell. The typical medieval, living in a disastrous present, was all the more anxious concerning the life beyond the grave. The Papacy, like the Empire, might meet present needs inadequately; but then there was always the belief in its power over the after life. And it required much ill-doing and much decadence, and much prosperity as well, to exhaust that trust. Nor did the Papacy, stronger in its nature than the Empire, fail to accomplish more durable results. The Church first showed medieval Europe what organization meant; it was not a distant puzzle like the East Roman Empire, but was ramified through the West. Its influence, too, whether through Pope or local bishop or monastery, was for good in the main. They upheld, on the whole, a juster, a more civilized and self-restrained, a more humane and righteous way of acting. It was under the guidance of the clergy that orderly government was again created, that the wild medieval passions began to feel some restraint, some force working against them; that a higher ideal of common life began to replace the unbridled egoism, which in the anarchy after Charlemagne had thrust in the background all ideals, whether Christian or imperial Roman or healthily primitive and barbaric.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62711-6 - Outlines of Medieval History: Second Edition

C. W. Previt -Orton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## IDEALS OF LIFE

7

It will be seen how the natural feelings of regret for the good old times and of reverence for existing customs were raised by the circumstances of the Middle Age to the highest pitch. The better times did lie far behind them. Their theory implied that an ancient form for human society had been instituted divinely. It had been put out of joint, but not rescinded, by man's evil-doing. Hence the world, really advancing, seemed to them in proved decay. What was old was lawful; what was novel was unlawful. Thus lawful institutions existing must be old. Reformers were always restoring and defining the old, and therefore right, customs, or at least they had to try and seem to do so. It was a view fatal to scientific history, but not to advance in civilization. Precedents were developed, misunderstood and sometimes invented.

The belief which the medievals equally held, that this life was merely a time of trial and temptation on the way to a worse or better, might seem to paralyse all effort. But those vigorous generations were too alive, too full of passions and desires, to lapse into fatalistic inaction. And the Church came to the rescue: it taught asceticism, not apathy. For those who fled the wicked world, a hard path was prescribed. Hermits, monks and friars were energetic folk. True it is that the Orders, one after another, soon lost their first fervour and easily admitted corruption. The ascetic task was too hard often enough. Yet they retained their leaven. New Rules, at any rate, attracted the same devotion and industrious self-sacrifice. It was not till late in the thirteenth century that ascetic enthusiasm really declined, and at that time we may note that the world had become a far more tolerable place to a strongly religious nature. Riotous and furious as the age of Dante may seem to us now, the rule of the strong kings

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62711-6 - Outlines of Medieval History: Second Edition

C. W. Previt -Orton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8

## INTRODUCTION

and popes, the sturdy perseverance of the townsmen had not gone for nothing. It was far easier than before to play an ordinary part in the world, and yet not to prey or be preyed upon. Louis IX of France could reign as a strong king and be a saint as well.

If we seek for the weightiest secular factors in this slow regeneration we find them in feudalism—the rule of each district by the owner of its land—and in town-life. Feudalism was, it is true, a wretched makeshift for state-government. But it was the best that could be had in the earlier Middle Age. It meant the immediate presence of some one to keep order and ward off attack, of some one who had definite customary rights and duties. The greater the baron, the more likely was he to have some semblance of kingship about him; he would have some public state-authority and have subjects, not mere dependants; and he would, as we shall see, tame the petty feudalists, the worst of their order, around him. The feudal relation, too—fealty and homage—had a strong binding force, in spite of countless and glaring breaches of it. The medieval conscience was tender on the point of oaths, which called in the terrible powers of the other world, if it often took the risk of their displeasure on temptation. Society was almost held together by obligations and evidence taken on oath. This meant in feudalism the greater coherence of the feudal units, the greater authority of the feudal superior and the securer rights of the feudal inferior. At worst a baron would not willingly make himself hated by everybody; numbers told.

The second factor in early medieval progress was furnished by the towns. The country villages were isolated; their inhabitants gained little more than a subsistence, and were ruled by rigid feudal masters. But the townsman was a trader; as soon as the worst



## FACTORS OF PROGRESS 9

anarchy after Charlemagne had passed, it is wonderful how soon commerce and even manufacture revived. And trade meant travelling and a wider outlook: the good things of other countries could be introduced and imitated; a healthy rivalry between town and town, country and country could spring up. Like the Church trade formed an international civilizing agency. We shall see how in the creation of wealth and culture the towns everywhere played a foremost part. Politically they occasion the rise of a middle class between noble and peasant, the influence of which took the most varied forms.

On these foundations certain forces were at work, forces which were themselves also primitive factors in medieval society, but which are more conspicuous as agents shaping, manipulating and transforming feudalism and town-life. Christianity has been already touched upon. Next to be remarked is the Kingship. Apart from the theory of the universal Christian Commonwealth, but drawing like that its strength chiefly from the remnants of Roman civilization, the belief in the Kingship continued potent in the Middle Age. Dimly in the royal entourages and among the clerks, still more dimly in other classes of society, men realized that they were members of a state, of a civil community. It was a belief incompatible with the true genius of feudalism, which was based on private contract, the relation of landlord and tenant. But it never died out, it intermingled with feudalism, and finally conquered it. The great barons were royal representatives, as well as suzerains of vassals and masters of serfs; and, while they resisted the king, they enforced the royal powers which they had been granted or had usurped. By the efforts of Kings and barons, a state-authority and a state-administration were re-created.

Then another force, that of nationality, came to the aid of the state. Nationality, that is the sense of solidarity produced by a common speech, a common history and a common country, shows itself first, after the disappearance of the tribal bond, in the age of anarchy succeeding Charlemagne. It grew rapidly in strength and by the close of the Crusades was fully developed. In France, in England and in Spain, this feeling of nationality coalesced with the belief in the kingship and the state—*i.e.* it became political—and the kings of the national states carried all before them. The spiritual thunders of the Papacy, the revolts of the feudal barons, and the independence of the towns, were all in the end helpless to resist.

It was not an invariable process, however, that the sentiment of nationality should coalesce with loyalty to the king and obedience to the state. In Italy the towns rose to be states, and a common nationality was a bond of culture merely. In Germany, the actual government fell into the hands of many local authorities, of whom the chief were the great vassals of the crown; but these dominions in medieval times had hardly acquired the full dignity of states. They were overshadowed by the nearly nominal authority of the Holy Roman Empire to which they belonged. Still their day had come, and the later Middle Age, which saw Western Europe consolidated into powerful national states, saw Central Europe parted among a host of rulers. In both, however, feudalism was on the wane; privileges and much jurisdiction, much political power, remained to the local nobles, but in essentials they were subordinate parts of the administration even of a petty sovereignty.

The historian of the Middle Ages therefore takes the standpoint of the Germanic and Romance peoples of Western Europe. It was among them that the develop-