

Unit Three

Middle Ages

the period of European history extending from about 500 to 1400–1500 CE is traditionally known as the Middle Ages .

The roots of this term

The term was first used by 15th-century scholars to designate the period between their own time and the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The period is often considered to have its own internal divisions: either early and late or early, central or high, and late.

Although once regarded as a time of uninterrupted ignorance, superstition, and social oppression, the Middle Ages are now understood as a dynamic period during which the idea of Europe as a distinct cultural unit emerged.

During late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, political, social, economic, and cultural structures were profoundly reorganized, as Roman imperial traditions gave way to those of the Germanic peoples who established kingdoms in the former Western Empire. New forms of political leadership were introduced, the population of Europe was gradually Christianized, and monasticism was established as the ideal form of religious life. These developments reached their mature form in the 9th century during the reign of Charlemagne and other rulers of the Carolingian dynasty, who oversaw a broad cultural revival known as the Carolingian renaissance.

Historians' opinions about the middle ages

Many historians have questioned the conventional dating of the beginning and end of the Middle Ages, which were never precise in any case and cannot be located in any year or even century.

Some scholars have advocated extending the period defined as late antiquity (c. 250–c. 750 CE) into the 10th century or later .

and some have proposed a Middle Ages lasting from about 1000 to 1800. Still others argue for the inclusion of the old periods Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Reformation into a single period beginning in late antiquity and ending in the second half of the 16th century.

The Middle Ages in modern historiography

With the extraordinary growth of the academic discipline of history in the 19th century, the history of the Middle Ages was absorbed into academic curricula of history in Europe and the United States and established in university survey courses and research seminars. Journals of scholarly historical research began publication in Germany (1859), France (1876), England (1886), and the United States (1895), regularly including studies of one aspect or another of the Middle Ages. Historical documents were edited and substantial

scholarly literature was produced that brought the history of the Middle Ages into synchronization with other fields of history. The study of the Middle Ages developed chiefly as a part of the national histories of the individual European countries, but it was studied in the United States as a pan-European phenomenon, with a focus after World War I chiefly on English and French history. The growing influence and prestige of the new academic and professional field of medieval history were reflected in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (“Historical Monuments of the Germans”), a research and publication institute founded in 1819 and still in operation in Munich, and in the eight-volume collaborative *Cambridge Medieval History* (1911–36). (The latter’s replacement, *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, began to appear in 1998).

Most scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries accepted the view that history is largely a story of progress, in which occasional periods of decline—such as the Middle Ages—are succeeded by periods of renewal. The most articulate attack on this view was by the American medievalist Charles Homer Haskins in *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (1927), which applied Michelet’s and Burckhardt’s term *Renaissance* to the 12th century rather than to the 15th or 16th.

Chronology

Learn how religion and superstitious beliefs ruled the lives of people in the Middle Ages
Learn about religion in the Middle Ages.

See all videos for this article

Regardless of the loaded aesthetic, philological, moral, confessional, and philosophical origins of the term Middle Ages, the period it defines is important because it witnessed the emergence of a distinctive European civilization centred in a region that was on the periphery of ancient Mediterranean civilization. Although European civilization appropriated elements of both Greco-Roman antiquity and Judeo-Christian religion and ethics, it emerged just as the ancient Mediterranean ecumenical world was divided into the civilizations of East Rome, or Byzantium, and Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. Three sibling civilizations, two of them Christian, developed at about the same time. The influence of wider Eurasian and North African history on that of Europe has attracted the attention of increasing numbers of historians since the late 20th century. But such change does not occur in a single year and not even in a single century. To assign any but an approximate date to the beginning of the end of the Middle Ages, as was once the fashion, is pointless. Far more important is the assessment of the nature of change in different areas of life in different periods and different places between the 3rd and the 16th centuries.

The 8th-century English monk and computist Bede (673–735), adapting an invention of the 6th-century theologian Dionysius Exiguus, introduced the method of counting years from the birth of Jesus, *anno Domini* (“in the year of our Lord”), which formed the basis of the modern notion of the Common Era. The new method superseded older traditions, which included dating by four-year Olympiads, by the number of years since the founding of Rome in 753 BCE, by the years of Roman consuls, by the regnal years of emperors, and by the 15-year tax assessment cycle of *indictions*. Bede’s innovation was taken up by Frankish chroniclers and rulers from the late 8th century and became standard practice in Europe.

The year itself was divided according to a universal Christian calendar that gradually displaced the old Roman calendar, although it retained the Roman names for the months. The liturgical year alternated seasons of penitence and joy, beginning with Advent, the fifth Sunday before Christmas, and culminating in penitential Lent and joyful Easter and its

aftermath until Advent returned. Although the unit of the week and the Sabbath were taken over from Jewish usage—displacing the older Roman divisions of the month into Kalendae, Nonae, and Ides and the nine-day market cycle—Christians began to mark time by the seven-day week and moved its holiest day to Sunday during the 4th century.