**The Middle Ages**

**Historical Background**

**From the Fall of Rome to the Renaissance**

Scholars usually refer to the historical period between approximately a.d.  450 and 1300 as the Middle Ages—but why is this considered a “middle” period? The Middle Ages may be seen as a historical filling, sandwiched between the Latin civilization of the Roman Empire and the later rediscovery of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome in the Renaissance.

The dates of the Middle Ages are somewhat arbitrary. The fifth century, a period marked by the rapid decay of those institutions that held the Roman Empire together, is the beginning of this period: Rome was sacked by the Visigoths, a Germanic tribe, in 410 and the western part of the empire ceased to exist in 476. The end of the Middle Ages, however, is more complex an issue. The Renaissance began in the south of Europe. In Italy, the early fourteenth century brought the rediscovery of classical forms in art and architecture, together with the production of new editions of classical literature. In northern Europe, however, such innovations did not occur until the end of the fifteenth century.

**A New European Structure**

In the third century a.d. , Rome was master of most of Europe. The empire extended from England in the north to Africa in the south and from Portugal in the west to Syria in the east. Ultimately, this territory was far too large to administer, both politically and militarily. The Roman Empire was then divided into two distinct empires, with the emperor of the West ruling from Rome and the emperor of the East ruling from Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey).

For some time, the northern frontiers of the empire had been experi-encing pressure from several Germanic tribes. The northern border, however, had generally remained secure. Then, a population explosion among these tribes triggered a need for expansion. This need for more territory, coupled with the tribes’ warlike disposition, provoked what is sometimes called the “barbarian invasions.” In reality, the incursion of the Germanic tribes into Roman territory more accurately resembled a mass migration sometimes marked by hostilities. Germanic historians, sensitive about using the word “invasion,” called this period in history the *Volkerwanderung* —the wandering of the peoples.

**The Germanic Contribution**

Hardly a portion of the old Western Roman Empire was left untouched by the various Germanic tribes: Lombards, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths settled in Italy; Visigoths, in southern France and Spain; Franks, in northern France; Angles and Saxons, in England. The presence of these peoples radically changed the political structure of what had been, until then, a unified empire. As these tribes began to dominate the land in which they settled, they established individual kingdoms, ending Roman rule once and for all.



**The Birth of Feudalism**

These tribes also helped shape the feudal system that spread through medieval Europe. The act of vassalage, in which one lord swears allegiance to another in exchange for privileges or “feuds,” originated in tribal organization. The concepts of kingship, knighthood, and chivalry all emerged from these Germanic peoples. After settling in the empire, Germanic tribes were quickly converted to Christianity, which had become the empire’s official religion during the fourth century a.d. Because of this religious conversion, their political institutions were also Christianized. With their adoption of Roman religion, they also adopted Latin, the official language of the Western Church, as their language. Many linguists believe that the Romance languages descended from Latin—such as French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian—owe their modern differences to the various Germanic tribes that learned Latin in an imperfect manner. Many words of Germanic origin, especially those relating to warfare and feudalism, still exist in these languages.

**Feudalism and Peasants**

The feudal system did not involve only lords and knights. It also spelled out the duties of poor farmers known as peasants. They lived on a lord’s manor—a village and its surrounding fields—and owed service to the lord in exchange for protection. Usually, they were not free to leave the land. They contributed to the manor by raising sheep and cattle and growing grain and vegetables. Their self-sufficient community often included a mill, a blacksmith shop, and a church.

**The Moors Threaten Europe**

In a.d.  711, the Muslims, or Moors, inspired by their successful subjugation of the Middle East and North Africa, swept into Spain and quickly conquered all but a few mountain strongholds. The Muslim advance into Europe’s heartland was not stopped until a.d.  732, when Charles Martel , “the Hammer,” defeated the Moors at the Battle of Tours, in central France. The struggle between Christianity and Islam became one of the most important conflicts in medieval Europe.

**A New Stability: The Reemergence of Learning**

On December 25, a.d.  800, Charles I, King of the Franks, also known as Charles the Great or Charlemagne , was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. This event represents the complete integration of the Germanic peoples into the mainstream of European society. In addition, the use of a title and an office linked to the traditions of the ancient Roman Empire was an attempt at creating a new unified political order. This action revealed a need and willingness to revive some kind of historical continuity, and there is little doubt that at this time Europe needed all the unity it could muster.

**A Crusade**

Having contained the Islamic threat in Europe, the Christian rulers of Europe turned their eyes to the Holy Land. This Middle Eastern region, located in what is now Jordan and Israel, was at that time a Muslim stronghold. Its sacred associations, however, made it “holy” for Jews and Christians as well. In 1095, Pope Urban II preached a sermon in Clermont, France, urging European knights to participate in a crusade that would win back the Holy Land.

**A Powerful Sermon**

Urban’s sermon was perhaps one of the most effective orations in history. The pope even claimed that he was not ready for the intense fervor generated by his discourse. Nevertheless, one year later, the first crusade was launched. This army, under the leadership of several powerful lords, initially met with great success. They regained Jerusalem in 1099, but the Arabs reorganized and began to exploit the internal discord of the crusaders. Several crusades were subsequently undertaken. Their success was minimal because the European lords were more interested in protecting and expanding their own domains than in pursuing any international cooperative venture. By 1187, Jerusalem was once again under Islamic control.

**Stirrings of Nationalism**

With nationalism beginning to take hold in Europe, there arose a natural antagonism between the single most important international office, the Catholic Church, and the various kingdoms. This conflict of interest between the papacy and the secular order reshaped the political landscape of Europe. One of the most famous victims of this controversy was the great Italian poet Dante . Exiled from his native Florence in 1302 for opposing papal meddling in Florentine politics, he expressed his aversion to the worldly pursuits of the papacy as a recurring theme in the *Inferno,* the first part of his epic poem, the *Divine Comedy.*

**The Impact of the Crusades**

Despite their limited military success, the crusades had a tremendous impact on medieval civilization. As crusaders returned from the Middle East, they brought back with them new spices, textiles, and other products. A demand for these new and exotic items inspired commerce. This trading created a new merchant class in the Italian city-states of Genoa, Florence, and Venice, and new markets sprang up elsewhere as well. Small towns in Europe were quickly transformed into large trading centers. By the effective end of the crusades in the late thirteenth century, the merchant class was becoming increasingly important in many parts of Europe.



As the medieval city grew, so did the new centers of learning. By 1300, universities existed in a number of important European cities. The University of Paris was the most eminent center of theology and phil-osophy in the Western world, and the University of Bologna in Italy was the most important center for the study of law.

**Transformation of Medieval Life**

Despite disease and poverty during this time, new capital generated by commerce stimulated the quest for learning and the rediscovery of classical literature. In addition, explorers searching for better trade routes would soon expand European knowledge of the world. Europe was entering the period of rebirth that we now call the Renaissance.

## Literature

## Literature in Native Languages

As previously mentioned, Latin became the language of religion, scholarship, and government. It was no longer understood by common people, who spoke German or one of the Romance languages that were evolving from Latin, such as Italian, French, and Spanish. These languages were known as the vernacular, or “the native language of a place.”

This new linguistic situation affected the way culture was passed on. Two cultures existed side by side: a high culture based on Latin and a popular culture based on vernacular languages. The history of medieval literature is the story of how the various national literatures emerged in native languages while Latin became increasingly specialized.

## Reforms in Latin

As vernacular literatures were emerging, however, Latin underwent important reforms that ensured the more accurate transmission of texts. Under Charlemagne’s patronage, monks created a new writing style called the Carolingian minuscule. This style, featuring a neater script penmanship and distinct breaks between words, made documents much easier to read. In addition, new Latin grammars helped to standardize the language by eliminating elements introduced from the vernacular.

## A New Kind of Vernacular Epic

While monks in monasteries were refining Latin and copying out libraries of books, the oral tradition was thriving in the rough-and-tumble world. Germanic storytellers, for example, developed a new kind of epic, or long narrative heroic poem. Epic poetry existed in classical Latin, but these Latin poems, such as Virgil’s *Aeneid,* were extremely refined and literary. The Germanic epics existed in oral form centuries before they were written down. Their verse form is irregular, and they were meant to be performed to stimulate a warrior’s courage before battle. The most famous Germanic epic is the *Nibelungenlied*(“Song of the Nibelungs”), which an unknown author composed from earlier tales sometime around 1200.

## Epic Heroes for Different Nationalities

The Spanish *Song of My Cid* and the French *Song of Roland,* although written in medieval Spanish and medieval French, respectively, are also descendants of this ancient Germanic tradition. These two epics describe conflicts between Christians and Moors.

The Moors had invaded Spain and Portugal in the early 700s. Charlemagne took part in early efforts to expel the Moors. In 778, he crossed the Pyrenees into Spain to accomplish this goal. The *Song of Roland,* dating from around 1100, relates the tragedy that befell Charlemagne’s nephew, Roland, during this campaign.

In the eleventh century, Christians in Spain launched a new campaign against the Moors. Eventually, several independent Christian kingdoms emerged. *Song of My Cid,* written in the mid-1100s, tells the story of Spain’s national hero, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (1043–1099), who helped spearhead the expansion of these Christian kingdoms.

## Icelandic Sagas

Meanwhile, from the ninth through the eleventh centuries, conflicts also occurred between Europeans and Viking raiders from Scandinavia. These Vikings, or Norsemen, settled in England and in northern France, where they became known as Normans. Under William the Conqueror, a Norman army conquered England in 1066.

Vikings also settled in Iceland. There, in the late 1100s, they carried their restless, adventurous spirit into literature, producing works like *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga.* These tales draw upon oral traditions and fictionalize historical events.

## Troubadour Poetry

In the second half of the eleventh century, a group of poets began writing verse in Provençal , a Romance language spoken in the south of France. These troubadours—from *trobar,* meaning “to find or invent”—were associated with the courts of certain powerful lords and invented new ways to sing about love. As a result, the theme of their poetry became known as courtly love. The rules of courtly love required a troubadour to praise in poetry a distant, unattainable lady, usually someone else’s wife.

## Courtly Love and the Status of Women

This type of poetry, which helped foster enlightened attitudes toward women, took Europe by storm. Poets followed courtly love traditions, writing in their own native lan-guages rather than in Latin. Among those who helped popularize the new poetry was Eleanor of Aquitane (c. 1122–1204). As queen of France and England, successively, she was the most influential woman of her time.

Chrétien de Troyes, writing at the court of France’s Marie de Champagne in the twelfth century, created a new poetic form, the courtly romance. This form combined the elements of courtly love with the longer narrative form of the romance. Many of his works, like *Perceval,* recount adventures associated with the legendary King Arthur of Britain.

## Dante Makes a Fateful Choice

As medieval society evolved and education became more available with the growth of the universities, popular and Latin culture at times intersected. These traditions combined in the greatest poem of medieval times, Dante’s *Divine Comedy,* written in the early 1300s. This epic, which expresses a Christian vision of the world, is based in part on Latin culture. Dante’s guide for his imaginary trip through Hell, for example, is the great Roman poet Virgil. At the same time, Dante chose to write his poem in Italian rather than in Latin. His choice gave added prestige to the vernacular and caused other writers to use it as well.



## The Dark Side

Starting in the 1100s, European towns began to increase rapidly in size. Although this urbanization was part of a social rebirth, it had its dark side as well. Impoverished city-dwellers, menaced by crime and disease, had a hard time surviving. Especially threatening was the plague, a highly contagious disease carried from rats to humans by fleas. The dark side of medieval life found expression in the work of Parisian poet François Villon.

***Focus On Literary Forms***

**Medieval Romance Saga**

### Defining Romance

A **romance** is a narrative that tells of strange, sometimes supernatural, events in exotic settings. In the Middle Ages, the term referred to tales that depicted the heroic deeds and courtly loves of noble knights and ladies. The genre has expanded to include any work that features idealized characters in an exotic setting, particularly one that focuses on a struggle between good and evil. The term **saga,** derived from an Old Norse word meaning “say,” refers to a long story of adventure or heroic deeds.

## Origin and Development of the Term

The word *romance* comes from the French word *roman,* which is similar in meaning to the English word *novel.* Originally, romances did not have any connection to love, except in an indirect way. However, courtly love is an important element of chivalry, and chivalry is the real core of the medieval romance. For this reason, romance sagas are sometimes known as **chivalric romances** or **courtly romances.**

Over the centuries, the link between the romance as a literary form and romantic love became stronger. Since the eighteenth century, the term *romance* has been used to describe sentimental popular novels about love.

Romance means nothing if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy. —W.P.Ker

## Romance and Legend

Medieval romance sagas are often closely related to **legends,** traditional stories about the past that are usually based on historical fact. Legends often tell about a hero who is human yet larger than life—a king, a saint, or a person who performed extraordinary deeds. Medieval romances were often based on legends. For example, legends about the adventures of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table were adapted to form the plots of numerous romance sagas, such as Chrétien de Troyes’s twelfth-century French narrative poem *Perceval* .

## Features of the Medieval Romance Saga

The medieval romance saga is characterized by these key features:

* **Romance Hero** A romance focuses on the exciting adventures and courageous deeds of a heroic main character. This **romance hero** is usually a king, a knight, or a brave warrior who follows the chivalric code of be-havior, which values courage, virtue, piety, loyalty to a ruler, and the idealized love of a noble lady. The romance hero is often raised in humble surroundings and does not discover his true identity until he approaches manhood. For example, King Arthur is does not learn that he is the rightful king of England until he pulls a magical sword from a stone.
* **A Heroic Quest** The plot of a romance usually focuses on a **quest,** a hero’s dangerous journey in search of something of value. For example, in *Perceval,* the hero’s quest is to find the Holy Grail, which will enable King Arthur to save his kingdom.
* **Supernatural Elements** A romance blends realistic and fantastic elements, including supernatural characters, fantastic plot elements, and exotic or even magical settings. For example, Marie de France’s *Lay of the Werewolf* includes a character who is a werewolf.
* **Symbols and Archetypes** A romance features characters, plot elements, settings, images, and themes that take on greater importance. A symbol is a person, a place, an animal, or an object that suggests a meaning larger than itself. For example, in *Perceval,* the Holy Grail is a symbol that represents more than simply a golden cup. An **archetype** is a symbolic narrative element that appears in the literature, mythology, or folklore of many different cultures. For example, *The Lay of the Werewolf*includes the archetype of disguised identity, which is found in folk tales, myths, and legends throughout the world.

**Strategies**

**Strategies for Reading Medieval Romance Sagas**

Use these strategies as you read medieval romance sagas.

* **Identify Cultural Values**Pay close attention to plot elements, characterizations, and settings that reflect cultural values, particularly those relating to medieval chivalry and religious ideals.
* **Analyze the Hero’s Quest**Make sure you understand what the hero seeks on his quest and how that object will help him or his people. If the hero’s quest is not successful, think about what may have prevented its success.
* **Interpret Symbols and Archetypes**Decide whether there are characters, images, objects, or settings that suggest a symbolic meaning. Also look for archetypal elements that appear in the literature of many different cultures. Then, work to interpret the larger meaning that these symbols and archetypes suggest.