Medieval Europe Essay, Research Paper

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Many great Historians of European history identify the years 500-1500 the Middle Ages or the Medieval Period. The word medieval came about when early scholars combined the two Latin words medium (middle) and aevum (age), which means the transition between ancient and modern times. The first 500 years of this period are known as the Early Middle Ages or the Dark Ages. They were called the Dark Ages because the level of learning and culture were not as great as they had been earlier, during Greek and Roman Times. After the year 1000, Western Europeans saw many changes in their social, economic, and political lives. The many small kingdoms of Western Europe began to develop political strength and size. This time period was known as the Later Middle Ages. However, this time period played a great roll in history because it laid the foundation for Europe’s future development.

Early Middle Ages (AD 500 – 1000)

The Early Middle Ages firstly began with the fall of Roman empire which lead to a decline in commerce and cities in Western Europe. This time period is known more for its plunge than anything else. Bridges, roads, and sewage systems were not maintained. Many people left cities for the countryside because city life became almost unbearable.

Many kingdoms were now developing, but they all remained small and weak. However, there was one exception to this, the Frankish Kingdom, which included most of present-day France and the western half of present-day Germany. The Franks were a Germanic group of people who had adopted the Christian Religion. One of the Franks greatest leaders was Charles Martel who organized an army to fight the Moors (a Muslim Group who invaded Spain).

These two powers met at the Battle of Tours, but the Franks came out on top. This battle stopped the Moors from advancing anymore into the heart of Europe. The next dominant leader of the Franks was Martel’s grandson, Charlemagne, who was the son of Pepin the Short. He ruled what are now present-day France, Germany, Austria, Northern Italy and most of Spain, from AD 768 to 814. This new enlarged conquered area was now known as The Frankish Empire. The Pope (head of the Christian Church in Rome) gave Charlemagne the title of “Emperor of the Romans” because his empire helped the spread of the Christian Religion. Charlemagne also made many new reforms, which brought back the ideas of learning and scholarship. After this, many people began to learn how to read and write. Also, he introduced the idea of feudalism. This great empire came to a decline when the great emperor, Charlemagne, kicked the bucket in AD 814.

Charlemagne’s three grandsons, Charles the Bald, Louis the German, and Lothair all wanted to rule this great empire in which their Grandfather built. They began to quarrel over this empire but they came to a mutual agreement called the Treaty of Verdun. This treaty stated that each brother got part of the vast empire. Charles the Bald received most of present-day France, Louis the German received what is now present-day Germany, and Lothair became the Holy Roman Emperor and got a strip of land in the middle of the empire. The division of the empire into three parts greatly weakened it to foreign invasions. The empire came to a devastating crash after being raided by Muslims, Slavs, Magyars, and the Vikings.

With the weakening of the central government, Charlemgne’s feudalism came to use as the new political system in Western Europe. Feudalism was highly a decentralized form of government that stressed alliances of mutual protection between monarchs and nobles of varying degrees of power. Feudalism in Medieval Europe was an economic, political, social system based on the concept of protection. The system was based on giving land to nobles in exchange for loyalty and military aid. Here is an example of how feudalism works. A king would grant a large piece of land to an individual noble in return for political and military support. Those who received these large estates would, in turn, grant smaller pieces of land to lesser lords in return for loyalty and protection. Most of these people were vassals (knights).

Another system that played a large role in this economic scale was manorialism. Manorialism was a system linking nobles and peasants on their land. Basic to this system was the manor, a large piece of land on which the lord’s house or castle, church, and cottages for the peasants and artisans were located. These huge manors were self-sufficient and extremely large. The main part of a manor was the people who did all the labor, or the peasants. Some of the peasants were called serfs. Serfs were a group of people who lived on the manors there whole lives and weren’t permitted to leave it or work anywhere other then the manor.

Late Middle Ages (AD 1000 – 1500)

The beginning of the Late Middle Ages is marked by the increase in agriculture production. Now manors could easily supply their own needs, and they could now produce a surplus that could be sold to others. This was due to new farming techniques such as three-field farming, horse collars, and iron-tipped plows. Another mark of this time period is the increase of trade in Western Europe. Trade routes became safer for traders to travel on. Now more merchants and artisans settled in towns, which began to increase in size and population. With the growth of towns came the rise of a new social class in Western Europe, the middle class. This class was not made up of peasants or lords, but made up of merchants and artisans. An artisan is a person who is skilled in a craft. Some of the crafts that artisans mastered were making shoes, hats, jewelry, barrels, wine, baked good, etc. These large groups of artisans created guilds, or business associations of a certain craft. These guilds would train young workers, known as apprentices, in the skills of the craft. Guilds also set prices, wages, working conditions, and quality standards for the making of all the goods.

The Crusades were a series of wars by Western European Christians to recapture the Holy Land from the Muslims. They lasted from around AD 1096 to 1291. Armies of Christians marched and sailed from Europe to the Middle East in an effort to recover Jerusalem (the Holy Land) from the Seljuk Turks, a Muslim group. The Crusades began with the urging from Pope Urban II to take the Holy Land back from the Muslims. None of the Crusades were one hundred percent successful in freeing the Holy Land. One reason for this is was because the Crusaders lacked a strong military power. However, the Crusades were not a waste because they had some lasting effects, such as cultural diffusion, increased world trade, and persecution of Jews and Muslims.

Many of the cultural achievements of Western Europeans were associated with the Roman Catholic Church. One of the achievements was large cathedrals. Many people spent a lot of money and many devoted years of labor to building these cathedrals. Many churches that where constructed at this time, were decorated with stained-glass windows, sculptures, and paintings. The church played a large role in people lives.

Education started to become more and more essential. Most schools of this time period were associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Universities were founded that trained people for careers in medicine and law. At medieval universities, scholars studied Latin classics and Roman law in depth. Scholars of this time applied Aristotle’s philosophy to theological questions and developed a system of thought called scholasticism.

Many of today’s European nations, such as England and France, as well as many of the Western world’s legal procedures and forms of government can trace their origins to the political struggles in the medieval times. The medieval Catholic Church wove Christianity into the fabric of Western culture and laid the basis for modern scholarship by preserving and transmitting the learning of the ancient world. Many characteristics of modern Western civilization arose during the Middle Ages. The medieval history of Europe’s great cities can still be seen in great cathedrals. Modern labor unions and institutions of higher learning are related to medieval guilds and universities. The Middle Ages played a great role in making the world the way it is today.