

## The Middle Ages

### 1. Geography and Time Frame

The European Middle Ages, despite its foreignness (alterity) and chronological distance to us today, exert tremendous fascination on people in the modern and postmodern world. In fact, the medieval world seems to be more alive and important for us today than ever before. There are movies with medieval themes (Crusades, Excalibur, Courtly Love, and the Nibelungen), movies focusing especially on the characters King Arthur, Robin Hood, Tristan, Saladin, Gawain, Merlin, and Joan of Arc; movie parodies such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* [1975]; furthermore, novels inspired by (John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1954) or situated in the Middle Ages (Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, 1980 [also as a movie, 1986]); popular medieval festivals; and the recreation of medieval knighthood through groups such as the international Society for Creative Anachronism which organizes tournaments worldwide, but especially in the United States (<http://www.sca.org>). All this excitement, however, has also blinded us to the actual history and culture of the Middle Ages. The following essay will attempt to outline and discuss some of the basic features, forces, figures, intellectual movements, poets, and philosophers from that long time period (roughly 1000 years from ca. 500 through ca. 1500), though this survey can only provide a sketch of a past world that continues to have a huge impact on our own with respect to our fantasies, imaginations, but also our self-awareness, religious orientation, and, most important, our self-identity. Many areas that also would deserve to be discussed in greater detail are art history, the history of technology, the history of architecture, the history of agriculture and commerce, the history of gender relations, the history of foodstuff, clothing, and medicine, and the history of warfare.

Despite radical differences between, say, medieval Iceland and Sicily, there were many elements that were common to all peoples and cultures in the Middle Ages. Although the notion of the 'epoch' as a separate historical entity or unit has been highly problematized in recent years, we can clearly distinguish the Middle Ages from antiquity on the one hand, and from the modern era, on the other. People in the Middle Ages had, of course, no idea of this peculiar time frame, and historiographers did not resort to this term for chronological purposes until the seventeenth century when Christoph Cellarius—one of the first to employ such categories—published his three books on universal history, *Historia antiqua* (1685), *Historia medii aevi* (1688), and *Historia nova* (1696). Before him, the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century humanists (Petrarch to Poliziano) looked down upon the previous era and characterized their forerunners with pejorative terms such as "Gothics," or "barbarians" who allegedly had little understanding of classical antiquity (hence the term 'Gothic').

### GEOGRAPHY AND TIME FRAME

Although many peoples and nations throughout the world experienced something like their own 'Middle Ages,' such as Japan, China, and probably also certain African cultures, here we will focus on the European Middle Ages, covering the territory from as far west as modern Ireland; as

far north as modern Finland, Sweden, and Norway; as far east as modern Russia; and as far south as modern Spain, Italy, and Greece. The close contacts, however, that medieval travelers, rulers, writers, musicians, and explorers enjoyed with Northern Africa, Palestine, and Asia Minor indicate that even the geographical limits are not as clearly drawn as one might wish. Venice and Genua, for instance, pursued close trade contacts with the area of the Black Sea and beyond. Individual European and Arabic travelers explored the respective other territory (Usâmah ibn-Munqudh, Ibn Battuta, Marco Polo), and in the thirteenth century a number of Franciscan and Dominican missionaries traveled to the Far East to preach Christianity (William of Rubruck, Lawrence of Portugal, John de Plano Carpini, Ascelin of Cremona, and Andrew of Longjumeau).

Medieval Byzantium comprised not only parts of modern Greece, Turkey, and Lebanon, but also bordered directly on the Caliphate of the **Abbasids** (today Iraq and Jordan). Yet, depending on the availability of sources, the majority of medieval research has focused on western Europe comprising modern England, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium, to some extent also the Scandinavian countries, including Iceland, and occasionally Greece and Poland. This is not to say that people in the areas of Prussia, the Baltic, the Balkan, Lapland, Belarus, etc. did not have a history of their own, but we mostly know too little about them, or they experienced considerably different cultural, economic, religious, and political developments. Hungary, however, is a significant case in point; we would fail to recognize the importance of this mighty medieval kingdom (Christianized since ca. 1000 C.E.), especially since the **Magyars**, who had originated from the Eurasian steppe, had seriously challenged the German Empire until Emperor Otto I defeated them at the Lechfeld near Augsburg in 955. They settled in the Carpathian Basin and established a powerful kingdom which later played an important role in the family politics of the Luxemburg and Hapsburg royal families ruling the German Empire during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But when the **Mongols** attacked Poland, Moravia, Hungary, and the Balkan in 1241, this terrible onslaught was almost ignored by people in the west. If news of **Genghis Khan's** death on December 11, 1241, had not reached the Mongolian army in Hungary, they would have certainly conquered the rest of Europe. Instead, the generals quickly returned home to participate in the process of determining a successor, leaving behind vast stretches of scorched earth. These particular conditions would certainly not justify to disregard the history of Central and Eastern Europe in a general study of the Middle Ages, but it illustrates the problem of all historiography and literary and cultural studies which are forced to make a selection. Since our focus mostly rests on the courtly world, which experienced its highest flowering in England, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, we will have to accept certain generalizations and the exclusion of the Central- and East-European cultures.

The time frame for the European Middle Ages proves to be a highly thorny issue as well. Commonly we place the Middle Ages between the end of the Roman Empire (5th century) and the emergence of the Italian Renaissance (14th century). But the problems with both time demarcations are enormous. The Roman Empire did not simply disappear when the Byzantine general Odoacer, a Germanic warrior, deposed the last Roman Emperor **Romulus Augustulus** in 476 C.E. and had himself crowned as the new king of Italy. On the one hand, the Eastern Roman Empire continued to exist until 1453, and the Germanic tribes who had replaced the Roman authorities all over Western Europe mostly copied the Roman administrative system, or at least maintained its basic elements. Moreover, Roman law, infrastructure, and urban cultures continued to hold sway everywhere, even though the following centuries saw the rise of

Germanic kingdoms in Spain, France, Germany, and Italy. The end of the Roman Empire only implied that individual Germanic tribes took over public power, but their leaders mostly relied on the traditional bureaucratic, judicial, and political structures already in place.

Odoacer was subsequently murdered by the Ostrogoth **Theodoric the Great** in 493 who then established his own kingdom in Italy, followed by the Langobards in the sixth and seventh centuries. On the Iberian Peninsula, the Visigoths established their kingdom in the sixth century, and the Franks occupied Roman Gaul already in the late fifth century. When the Frankish king **Charlemagne** gained the title of Roman Emperor in 800, he proudly claimed to stand in immediate succession of the Roman emperors, yet his people and his country demonstrated very different features and can be identified with the foundation of the Middle Ages. Already in ninth century the people in the western part spoke a type of Old French, and people in the eastern part spoke a form of Old High German (*Strasbourg Oaths*, 842). Nevertheless, the continuity of certain cultural elements borrowed from the Roman Empire throughout the Middle Ages and far into the modern age can also be observed in several other areas. First, the Romans passed on their Latin language, which subsequently became the official language of the administration, the Church, the intellectuals, many poets, and the lawyers throughout the centuries and plays an important role even today in fields such as law, philosophy, biology, and history. The impact of the Roman Law, the *ius civile*, codified at the order of Emperor Justinian between 529 and 533 C.E. in the great *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, can be felt until today. Third, the Christian Catholic Church, officially acknowledged by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 C.E., maintained its role and steadily expanded to gain absolute dominance over all of Europe until the sixteenth century when it was finally challenged by the Protestant reformers. Significantly, despite many modifications and adaptations, the Catholic Church has basically remained the same from the late antiquity until today, both in its fundamental ideology and in its structure, liturgy, and public appearance.

Irrespective of the tenacity of Roman traditions, by the seventh and eighth centuries a new world emerged in northern and western Europe, dominated first by the **Merovingians**, later by the **Carolingians**, which led to the development of the French kingdom and the German empire. Whereas in antiquity the Mediterranean dominated world politics, now the focus shifted to western and northern Europe. Most medieval countries assumed the system of feudalism based on vassalage that made possible the establishment of knighthood, which in turn led to the rise of chivalry as the most fundamental value system of medieval society beside the religious one. On the basis of chivalry, then, or in conjunction with its military institution, the central ideals of courtly love developed, which characterized most of the high Middle Ages.

While the Iberian Peninsula had been conquered by Arabic forces in 711-715 and subsequently was ruled by a Emir in Cordoba, already several years and decades later the Spanish **Reconquista** began, a steady attempt by Christian rulers in the north to fight back and to reconquer the lands. This was to last centuries, but finally, in 1492, the same year the Columbus discovered America, without quite knowing what he had found, and in the same year when the Jewish population in Spain was radically expelled by the Spanish crown, the last Arabic fortress in Granada, the Alhambra, fell to Christian forces, signaling the successful end of this **Reconquista**. The Arabs had tried still in the early eight century to expand their control far into the Frankish kingdom, they were defeated in a big battle near Poitiers and Tours in 751. From that time on, the Arabs were increasingly pushed back, until, as mentioned, they were completely defeated in 1492. To do justice to this topic, however, we also would have to consider the larger history of internal political and military conflicts among the various religious groups within the Islamic religion, especially the Almorads and the Almoravids (the latter having been a Berber dynasty that ruled over lands we call today Morocco and Spain, and who were defeated by the Almorads in 1147).

Considering the **end of the Middle Ages**, we face similarly difficult issues with identifying a clear historical limit since the transition from one period to another cannot be easily determined. Whereas older research tended to conceive of a sharp divide between the Middle Ages and the (Italian) Renaissance, most modern scholars assume that we are dealing with a long transitional period which ultimately led to the establishment of the early modern world. There are many ways to identify the Renaissance, whether with the discovery of the individual (Jules Michelet, *Renaissance*, 1855; Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860), or with the emergence of a new style of painting, based on the principle of the central perspective and realism, or with the rediscovery of the classical world of antiquity, or with the development of Neoplatonism. Our critical examination of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century arts, literature, philosophy, music, religion, and architecture has, however, shattered this conviction of an absolutely innovative paradigm shift. Certainly, the Gothic style was replaced by the Renaissance style, and scholars and poets such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Poggio Bracciolini rediscovered the language and literature of ancient Rome once again, but they were not the first ones to do so, and they were also not necessarily embracing an entirely different intellectual approach. In fact, both in the eighth and in the twelfth century a renewed interest in the philosophers and poets from antiquity had already triggered strong revivalism in the schools, the administrations, at the courts, and within the Church. In other words, Petrarch and Boccaccio had

significant forerunners such as Alcuin at the court of Charlemagne (8th century), and, about three hundred fifty years later, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and Bernard of Clairvaux (12th century). It makes perfect sense to talk about the “Eighth-Century Renaissance” and the “Twelfth-Century Renaissance” as equally powerful periods of innovation and invigoration compared with the “Italian Renaissance.” This does not mean that the eleventh or thirteenth century produced less intellectuals, art, and literature, but we often do not know enough about them or are still in the process of reevaluating them (see C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, 1994; Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 1996).

Scholars have often referred to the emergence of the early-modern **city life** with its money-based economy as a significant indication of the end of the Middle Age, but the ancient Roman cities had never fully ceased to exist throughout the centuries, and many of the major urban centers that dominated the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been founded between the tenth and the twelfth century by the Vikings in the West, by French, Dutch, German, and Italian lords in the Western and Southern Europe, and by the Slavic lords in Central and Eastern Europe. The rise of the class of burghers throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did not necessarily imply a decline of the aristocracy, rather required them to adapt to a new way of life for their own survival. By the same token, we know of many wealthy bankers who quickly tried to imitate aristocracy, purchasing castles and adopting courtly manners. Many late-medieval cities organized knightly tournaments for their own entertainment, and the early-modern book market saw a strong interest in chapbooks with chivalric themes and heroes. Inversely, the development of a strongly capitalistic society can be traced back at least to the twelfth and thirteenth century when the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France and the German poets Walther von der Vogelweide and Boppe clearly addressed the relevance of money as the foundation of a comfortable lifestyle irrespective of the personal standing within one specific class. We ought not to forget that even in military, or technological, terms, knighthood increasingly faced severe challenges, first by the establishment of English and Swiss armies of foot soldiers equipped with the longbow, the Swiss pike, the crossbow, and eventually, by the end of the fourteenth century, with early types of firearms. Gunpowder, allegedly invented around 1300 by the German monk Berthold Schwarz of Freiberg, or by the English scholar and scientist Francis Bacon (1214-1292)—if it was not imported by traders from China or Persia—ultimately doomed medieval knighthood, though the ideals of chivalry and the strict separation of estates—clergy, aristocracy and common people—did not disappear until the nineteenth century.

Several other monumental events lend themselves for the identification of the end of the Middle Ages. In 1453 the ancient city **Constantinople** was conquered by the Ottoman Turks, and with the fall of this city the end of the Eastern Roman Empire had arrived. Large numbers of Greek scholars, poets, and other intellectuals sought refuge in the West, primarily in Italy, where they introduced the knowledge of Greek. At first, the fall of Constantinople did not effect a tremendous change, but militarily the Turks had breached the final defense barrier against Europe and soon after began their constant onslaught against the Balkans, Hungary, and eventually Austria. This was to put the European powers, including Venice and Genoa, under tremendous pressure until they finally gained the upper hand in the early seventeenth century. On a different level, the introduction of Greek in Europe made it possible for many intellectuals to gain personal knowledge of the ancient sources of philosophy and religion in their original language. The refugees from Constantinople, however, were not the first Greek teachers in Europe. The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 in the course of the Fourth Crusade had destroyed the old power structures there and opened, despite the cruel destruction of the city, the contacts between the Latin West and the Greek East. Many Greek manuscripts arrived in the West since that date, along with such magnificent teachers as Manuel Chrysoloras, who assumed his assignment in Florence in 1397, and George of Trebizond, who began teaching Greek in Mantua in 1420. The development of humanism, supported by intellectuals such as Erasmus of Rotterdam (1465-1536), made available the world of ancient Greek antiquity and slowly transformed the entire medieval world view. Martin Luther, for example, learned Greek and was thus able to translate the New Testament from the sources (*ad fontes*) in 1522, laying the textual foundation for the Protestant Reformation. Nevertheless, we should not forget that during the early twelfth century many texts by ancient Greek philosophers, medical experts, and scientists, which had been only preserved in Arabic translations, became known in Europe first through Hebrew, then through Latin translations, most of them produced at the universities of Salerno (near Naples) and Toledo (Spain).

When Johann **Gutenberg** discovered the printing press (movable type) in Mainz, Germany, ca. 1450, this did not immediately lead to a profound paradigm shift. In fact, for decades the traditional manuscript culture continued to dominate the book markets, whereas the early prints—incunabula (until ca. 1500)—remained very expensive and were used to reproduce the biblical texts. Beginning with the early sixteenth century, however, the print media gained the upper hand and ushered in a revolution in public communication, information transfer, data storage, and intellectual discourse. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to identify this

transformation as a quick and absolute victory. On the contrary, the manuscript remained a strong element far into the sixteenth century, whereas the print culture did not replace the medieval tradition until the 1520s and 1530s.

Even the **Protestant Reformation** was not the absolute death knell to the Middle Ages. Martin Luther (1483-1546) did not intend at all to destroy the Catholic Church when he allegedly nailed his ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. On the contrary, the Church had been severely criticized by clerics such as the British John Wyclif (1328-1384) and the Czech John Hus (1369-1415), not to mention scores of other theologians throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Before that, the Albigensians, or Cathars, in Southern France and elsewhere, who were crushed in two crusades in 1209 and 1213, and the Waldensians in Eastern France, Southern Germany, and Western Switzerland, who were excommunicated in 1184 but later readmitted into the Church under strict regulations, had radically criticized the Catholic theology and church practice. We also need to mention the Bogomils (also known as Massaliani and Pavlikeni [Paulicians] in Slavic sources) who emerged in ninth- and tenth-century Bulgaria and the Balkans and who exerted considerable influence on the Strigolniki, Molokani, and Dukhobortsi in Russia, and on the Cathars in France. They disappeared only by the late Middle Ages due to persecutions and the rise of Turkish power which imposed Islam on their lands.

**Martin Luther** attempted to introduce reforms of a church that suffered from serious moral and ethical decline. Anti-clericalism had been rampant throughout the late Middle Ages, especially since the French Pope Clement V (1305-1314) had established himself in Avignon in 1309, the beginning of the so-called "Babylonian Captivity." The subsequent six popes also stayed there because of political unrest in Italy and because they yielded to the pressure of the French kings. The time of Avignon came to an end in 1377 when Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) finally returned the Holy See to Rome. Simony, a common practice in the late-medieval church to sell offices to the highest bidder, was furiously criticized, but mostly without any effect. Moreover, by the end of the Middle Ages the strict rule of celibacy for clerics, enforced since the early Middle Ages, was often broken and disregarded. Not surprisingly, late-medieval and early Renaissance literature is filled with satires and bitter attacks against lecherous priests and other clerics. Between 1387 and 1415, several popes competed against each other, each of them claiming to be the only representative of Saint Peter here on earth, until finally the German Emperor Sigismund dethroned all three and nominated Pope Martin V (1417-1431) as the true successor, thus ending the highly destructive schism within

the Catholic Church. Finally, throughout the fifteenth century the common practice of selling indulgence letters all over Europe for the redemption of one's sins and even those of deceased family members led to excessive abuse and strongly contributed to the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation. The latter seems to have been revolutionary because of its sudden and forceful development, but the general decline of the Catholic Church throughout the entire late Middle Ages led to this final point which then rang in a new era in which at first two, but soon many other Christian churches emerged, all competing against each other for recognition, power, and influence. This eventually led to disastrous religious wars throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

### THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In a simplified manner, medieval European society was divided into three social classes (estates or orders), nobility, clergy, and peasantry. Ideally, each individual class depended on the other two, and each class provided the others with what they needed, and received something in return. Nobility, the knightly class (*bellatores* or *pugnatores*), provided military protection to everyone, and received food and money from the peasants. Peasants (*laboratores*) produced food for the two other classes, and received military protection from the nobility. The clergy (*oratores*) prayed to God on behalf of all Christians and helped them to reach out to Him by taking confessions and giving absolution. They received, in return, food from the peasants and protection from the nobility. The king was elected from among the nobility, and he also had to fulfill the expectations set in him, leading his country, providing protection, fostering the well-being of his subjects, and securing the internal peace in his country. Of course, according to Christian thinking, God was the ultimate source of all life, and all estates were subject under Him.

This schematic image of medieval society as a contractual society—every estate obligated to the two others by a system of give and receive—has many flaws, especially as it disregards the continuation of slavery in the Mediterranean world and the growing number of artisans, urban dwellers, artists, poets, then also the considerable size of the Jewish population, and the significant role of women in all three estates. Moreover, the conflict between the Pope and the German Emperor from 1075 until 1122 (Concordat of Worms) over the investiture of the bishops either by the Emperor or the Pope created enormous tensions and threatened to tear apart the traditionally close cooperation between Church and State.

In the late Middle Ages, the so-called **Black Death** (1347-1351), or **Plague**, had a tremendous impact on practically all countries, societies, and cultures. The catastrophic consequences for the population and economy of all of Western, Central, and Northern Europe, except for Czech Bohemia and Iceland, were tremendous. As a result of the devastating plague, which killed at least a third of the entire European population, profound changes in agriculture occurred, leading to growing prices for foodstuff, the partial liberation of serfs, a changing taxation systems, and a new social mobility. Most important, the peasantry and urban class gained more wealth and freedom. This in turn ultimately led to the decline of the lower-ranking aristocracy and occasionally to the development of **peasant revolts** (Peasant's Revolt in England, 1381, German Peasant War, 1524-1525) that aimed for better living conditions and lower taxation, but never intended to undermine the traditional feudal class structure. At the same time strong city alliances in Europe-wide trade organizations developed, such as the **Hanseatic League** in Northern Europe, the South-German City Association, the collaboration of the cities in England and Flanders, the **Lombard League** (Northern Italy), and the **Swiss Confederation** (established in 1291; political independence from the German Empire in 1499, formal independence in 1648). But social unrest and riots also happened within late-medieval city life where the craftsmen's corporations often struggled against the "aristocratic" guilds, or patricians (*Ciompi* rebellion in Northern Italy, 1378; the Weavers' battle in Cologne, 1369-1371; Wismar city rebellion, 1427-1430, etc.). Concurrently, the most powerful territorial dukes in Germany successfully fought for a growing independence from the Empire, strategically undermining the central power base. The opposite was the case in England, France, Spain, and in the Nordic countries where the centrally organized monarchy established the nucleus of the modern state. Symbolically, capital cities such as London, Paris, and Madrid emerged as the location of the royal power with its fundamental bureaucracy, whereas in Germany the House of Hapsburg settled in Vienna, far away from the rest of the country and soon the last bastion against Ottoman attacks during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (1529 and 1683). Not surprisingly, the system of the itinerant monarchy in Germany practiced throughout the entire Middle Ages prevented the development of an absolutist system as in Western Europe. Instead, the territorialization process led to a splitting up of the entire country into more than thousand mostly independent political units with the conclusion of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which was practically, though not nominally, the end of the Holy Roman Empire (e.g., Switzerland and the Netherlands became independent states).

## THE LITERARY HISTORY

The literary history of medieval Europe can be generally divided into three major periods, the early Middle Ages, the high Middle Ages, and the late Middle Ages (the same applies to the history of arts and philosophy). Before courtly culture emerged in western and central Europe, Old English, Old High German, Old French, and Old Spanish poets produced predominantly heroic epics such as *Beowulf* (OE), the “Hildebrandslied” (OHG), the “Waltharilied” (medieval Latin), *El poema di mio Cid* (OS), the *Chanson de Roland* (OF), and, as a very late representative, the *Nibelungenlied* (Middle High German), which was followed by many Old Norse and Icelandic sagas and epics collected in the *Edda*. The common elements to them all are the heroic ideal, the fatalistic approach to life, the existential experience of the protagonists, and almost always the absence of religious concerns. *Beowulf*, for instance, confronts the monster Grendel and kills it. Subsequently, Grendel’s mother attacks *Beowulf*, but he manages to overcome her as well and kills her. At the end, probably in his old age, *Beowulf* fights against a dragon and slays it, but he as well succumbs in this struggle. In the “Hildebrandslied,” the old but war-experienced father Hildebrand is challenged by his son Hadubrand who does not want to believe that he is his father and assumes that he is a Hun because of his appearance. The ensuing battle dooms them to their heroic destiny, though we are missing the conclusion because of text loss. Tragedy strikes them at any case, whether the father kills his son, or the son his father, or whether both die. Both in the *Poema di mio Cid* and in the *Chanson de Roland*—the German poet, Pfaffe Konrad (Cleric Konrad) translated this as *Rolandslied*—the protagonists struggle primarily against Muslims (medieval sources: Saracens) and also traitors within the Christian camp. In the *Njal’s Saga*, the hero faces many opponents within his own community and eventually succumbs to their evil mind-set, though he dies a heroic death and is glorified by the survivors. Heroic poetry, however, does not simply glorify the gory details and the existential struggle. In fact, most of the poems offer powerful messages about the consequences of failed human communication, the breakdown of a community, the loss of justice, ethical principles, and individual honor.

The literature of the early Middle Ages also consists of many (magical) charms, religious poems, liturgical texts, prayers, gospel texts (*Book of Kells*, ca. 800), translations of Bible excerpts in the vernaculars, law texts, ballads, panegyrics, school textbooks (by Alcuin and Hrabanus Maurus), chronicles, and biographies of rulers (Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne*). On the one hand, poets reflected the ongoing struggle against outside forces threatening medieval Europe, such as the various Arab cultures (Saracens, seventh through eighth centuries), Vikings (eighth through tenth centuries), and Magyars (ninth through tenth centuries); on the other

hand, they indicated the rise of a new culture within the framework of the Catholic Church and the Benedictine Order. Moreover, early-medieval society also suffered from limited agricultural productivity and reduced economic activities, that is, from an instability of human existence that required the help of heroic figures who were glorified in the contemporary epics.

Beginning in late eleventh, but primarily in the twelfth century, Europe experienced a profound transformation, originating in the South of France, but quickly spreading to many other countries. The population grew at an unforeseen rate, the economy flourished, new technological discoveries, such as the water mill, drastically improved the agricultural and industrial output. The proclamation of the First Crusade by Pope Urban II in 1095 signaled Europe's turn toward the external world in military terms, which quickly assumed an imperialist attitude with the intention of conquering not only the Holy Land, but also the neighboring countries on the East Mediterranean coast (Latin Kingdoms). In the wake of the crusades, and also as a consequence of the cultural contacts with the Arabic world—highly refined and sophisticated in its living conditions, scholarship, architecture, and philosophy at that time—European knighthood was familiarized with a much more advanced culture and quickly copied many of its features. At the same time, originating in the Provence, the ideas of courtly love emerged, expressed in courtly love poetry by the *troubadours*, who soon inspired the *trouvères* in northern France, and the *minnesingers* in Germany, finally followed by the Italian (and Sicilian) poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*. From ca. 1165 onward the French poet Chrétien de Troyes, drawing from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1137) and Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut* (ca. 1155), introduced the idea of King Arthur through his various courtly romances (*Erec et Enide*, *Cligès*, *Lancelot, Yvain*, and *Les Contes de Graal ou Perceval li Galois*). The Swabian poet Hartmann von Aue translated the first two romances into Middle High German, along with love poetry, a religious tale, *Gregorius*, and a love tale, *Poor Henry*, and the Bavarian poet Wolfram von Eschenbach adapted Chrétien's *Perceval* as *Parzival*. The latter also composed the crusade epic *Willehalm*, beautiful dawn songs, and the fragmentary piece *Titivel*.

Gottfried von Strassburg composed one of the most famous versions of the rich, European-wide tradition of the *Tristan* romance in ca. 1210, and this was followed by many other courtly romances and verse narratives written by other German, French, Italian, Spanish, and English poets. In England, Marie de France, apart from her *fables* and a visionary text (*Saint Patrick's Purgatory*) produced her famous amatory narratives, her *lais* (ca. 1170-1200). The French court chaplain Andreas Capellanus, on the basis of the classical source by Ovid, *Ars amatoria*,

composed his highly influential treatise on love, *De amore* (ca. 1190). In France, at about the same time when Chrétien composed his earliest texts (ca. 1170), an anonymous poet wrote the highly influential romance *Partonopeus de Blois*, which was subsequently translated into many European languages, such as by Konrad von Würzburg (*Partonopier und Meliur*, ca. 1280). The famous Majorcan philosopher and scholar Ramon Llull (ca. 1232-1316) not only composed many religious and philosophical treatises, he also wrote the first spiritual romance in Catalan, his *Book of Blanquerna* (1282-1287). Together, Latin and vernacular authors contributed to courtly literature all over Europe, perhaps best represented by the famous collection of religious and erotic love poems in the collections *Cambridge Songs* (eleventh century) and *Carmina Burana* (early thirteenth century). Concurrently, many poets explored the literary myth of King Alexander, and wrote monumental epics about the ancient conflict between the Saracens and Emperor Charlemagne and his Paladins, especially Roland (*Chansons de gestes*). Whole cycles of epic poetry were dedicated to Count William of Orange in his desperate struggles against the Saracens. Both an anonymous French author and the German poet Heinrich von Veldeke introduced the ancient topic of the Trojan Aeneas's foundation of Rome to their audiences (*Roman d'Eneas*, *Eneit*).

## THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY

It would be tantamount to hubris even to attempt to summarize the history of medieval philosophy in a short paragraph. During the roughly thousand years between late antiquity and the Italian Renaissance (fourteenth and fifteenth century) many profound thinkers made their voices heard, and only a few of them can be mentioned here. Most philosophers discussed a variety of aspects, including music, astronomy, mathematics, ethics, morality, and, above all, theology, so we can only touch on some key points advocated by these leading intellectuals. The Church Father Augustine of Hippo (354-430), the most prolific thinker and writer of the entire late antiquity, provided the foundation for practically every field of medieval philosophy and theology through his manifold texts, including his famous *De Doctrina Christiana* (396-426; On the Christian Teaching), *De utilitate credendi* (391; On the Usefulness of Faith), *De genesi ad litteram* (401-415; On the Literal Meaning of Genesis), *De libero arbitrio* (ca. 395; On the Free Will), *De trinitate* (399-419; On the Trinity), and his most influential *Confessiones* (397-398; Confessions), or autobiography. Augustine demonstrated how to proceed in biblical exegesis; he taught how to submit oneself under God's will, and how to place pure belief ahead of all human quests for knowledge. Augustine also

advocated tolerance toward non-believers, and preached on the meaning of many biblical passages. His influence on the entire Middle Ages cannot be underestimated. In his most significant historical-philosophical treatise, *De civitate Dei* (413-426; City of Good), Augustine reflected on the conquest and looting of Rome through the Visigoths under their King Alarich in 410 and projected a twofold world, one determined by “amor sui” (love of oneself), and one by “amor Dei” (love of God). Augustine provided, with his diverse and profound ruminations the most comprehensive defense of the Christian Church against all charges by non-Christians.

Following Augustine, the Roman statesman and philosopher Boethius (ca. 480-524), who was executed for alleged state treason, though he always claimed his innocence, offered the most powerful insights into the meaning of unstable and fluctuating Fortune, individual happiness, the human soul, man’s innate drive toward the supreme good, and free will in his enormously popular *De consolazione philosophiae*, written shortly before his death. Boethius demonstrated that there is no true evil, although people commit evil deeds. Evilness only leads to the dissolution of the individual who works against his own better self. Misfortune only reveals the truth in life and is to be welcomed as a liberating force, allowing man to turn toward the Supreme Good. Almost every medieval and early-modern philosopher and most secular writers demonstrated a strong Boethian influence on their work.

Similarly significant for the entire Middle Ages proved to be the Spanish bishop Isidore of Seville (ca. 560-636), even if less as a philosopher than as an encyclopedist with his *Etymologiae* in which he summarized the universal knowledge of his time, especially the classical learning. The foundation of true school learning was established by Alcuin of Northumbria (740-804) whom Charlemagne had called to his court at Aachen as the architect of a completely new school system. Alcuin became subsequently the teacher of a whole generation of abbots and bishops throughout the Carolingian Empire. These in turn created convent schools and established an extensive network of scholarly activities, such as the famous Hrabanus Maurus, Abbot of Fulda (824-842). Alcuin and his students developed the principles of the *artes liberales*, the cornerstone of all medieval university studies.

The true flowering of medieval philosophy, however, did not occur until the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), through his treatises *Monologion* and *Proslogion*, introduced the concept of rationality in

theological discourse, focusing especially on the effort to produce a logical proof of God's existence. He was most famous for his statement, "credo ut intelligam" (I believe so as to understand). Peter Abelard (1079-1142) further explored the principles of rationality—such as in his *Sic et Non* (ca. 1122) with its emphasis on dialectics—and created a secular school in 1132, an important forerunner of the University of Paris, the Sorbonne, founded between 1253 and 1257 by Robert of Sorbon. Abelard also wrote the most original treatise *Scito te ipsum*, an instructional treatise on how to understand oneself. Nevertheless, Abelard was quickly overtaken by other contemporary philosophers in the discussion of individuality, the quest of the Godhead, and ethics.

Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096-1141), heavily drawing from Augustine and Isidore, composed an extensive treatise of profound didactic significance, his *Didascalicon* in which he outlined for his students how to approach the study of the *artes liberales* (the liberal arts). He was also famous for his theological studies, summarized in his *De sacramentis ecclesiae*, divided between a discussion of the work of creation and the work of restoration, providing reasons for the incarnation and death of Christ. In other texts, such as *De arcae Noe morali et mystica* and *Scala caeli*, Hugh turned toward mystical interpretations of the Godhead, influencing many late-medieval mystical writers.

The Persian philosopher Ibn Sinna, known as Avicenna (ca. 980-1037), exerted not only a deep influence on many Islamic, but also on Western medieval philosopher, especially on Jewish-Spanish philosophers such as Ibn Roshd, known as Averroes (1126-1198), best known for his commentaries of Aristotle, and Maimonides (1138-1204). These two in turn exerted a profound impact on subsequent philosophers through their reintroduction of Aristotelian logic to the European philosophical discourse, with which reality and nature could be better understood, categorized, and rationalized. Maimonides is famous for his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1190) in which he outlined a harmonious cooperation between faith and reason. Averroes, on the other hand, strongly argued that the Prime Mover, God, would not have a place in this world and would not command any providential power. This radical position provoked thirteenth-century philosophers such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas to argue against Averroes's Aristotelianism. In 1277, the Bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, publicly condemned Averroes and many statements allegedly formulated by the various professors at the university, bringing to a close the Aristotelian school of thinking in central Europe. Peter Lombard (ca. 1100-1160) produced the most important summaries and interpretations of the Church Fathers in his monumental *Sententiae*, or *Sentences*,

through which the entire body of theological discourse from late antiquity to the present was translated into a logical system, structured by rational categories and a most detailed concept of abstract questions. One of the most significant historiographer proved to be Otto of Freising (ca. 1114-1158), uncle of the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Otto was appointed Abbot of the Cistercian convent of Morimond, Champagne, in 1136, and Bishop of Freising, Bavaria, in 1138. His *Chronicle of the Two Cities* (1143-1146 in its first, now lost version, reworked in 1156 or 1157) clearly reflects the influence of Augustine's *City of Good*. Otto not only provides an extensive historical overview, but also develops far-reaching philosophical observations regarding the meaning of history, though deeply entrenched in a pessimistic evaluation of the transitory world. In his *Gesta Friderici*, begun in 1157 and completed only by his student Rahewin in 1160, Otto made clear efforts to lighten up his perspectives toward the political and cultural development in his time. Walter Map (ca. 1140-ca. 1208/1210), the famous medieval English humanist, indirectly followed Otto's model, but he relied on a satirical presentation of the world of the courts in his treatise *De nugis curialium* (1193; Courtiers Trifling). His contemporary, John of Salisbury (ca. 1120-1180), focused on his own personal experiences at the court of the King of England (*Policraticus*, 1159) and at the court of the Pope (*Historia Pontificale*, after 1159). *De nugis curialium* proves to be an extraordinary representative of twelfth-century court criticism, characterized by its idealization of liberty, tolerance, ethical principles of politics, and its thorough criticism of irresponsible and immoral lords and princes. *Policraticus* emerged as one of the best political and philosophical treatises representative of the Twelfth-Century Renaissance during which the feudal system continued to maintain its predominance, but when individual critical voices came forward questioning the traditional structure of feudal society (see also Peter of Blois [ca. 1130-ca. 1203], Gerald of Wales [ca. 1146-1223], Nigel Wirecker [fl. around 1190], Herbert of Bosham [fl. around 1180], and, considerably earlier, Adalbert of Bremen [fl. around 1070]).

These powerful high-medieval scholars were followed by the famous Dominican theologian Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-1280), who was called "doctor universalis" for his stupendous scholastic learning and supreme efforts to combine theology with philosophy on the basis of a new understanding of Aristotle. He wrote detailed commentaries on the texts by the Greek philosopher, examining causation theory and the principles of physics. He also studied the nature of man and offered careful observations of the animal world (*De animalibus*, c. 1258-1262). Albertus was one of the first to discover and defend the value of the human individual which he discussed in his *Summa de creaturis*. Moreover, he studied individual animals, and other creatures in great detail as God's creations. Albertus's student, Thomas

Aquinas (ca. 1224-1274), the greatest philosopher in the entire Middle Ages and the father of medieval theology, authored the masterpiece of scholasticism, the *Summa theologiae* (1266-1273; left incomplete because of a religious experience which made him consider everything that he had written as meaningless). In his encyclopedic work, this extraordinary Dominican thinker strove to identify the origin of all things and living creatures descending from God, and their final return to God, discussing the role of providence and contingency.

Other contemporary philosophers were Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1170-1253), Roger Bacon (ca. 1214/120-1290), Bonaventure (ca. 1217-1274), Siger of Brabant (ca. 1240-ca. 1284), Johannes Duns Scotus (ca. 1265-1308), Ramon Llull (ca. 1233-1316), and William of Ockham (ca. 1285-1347).

Only when late-medieval philosophers began to look at their primary sources more as *fontes* (sources) than as *auctoritates* (authorities), that is, when they began to distance themselves from their origins and explored their meaning for their own time, medieval philosophy gave way to early-modern thinking, and did Renaissance philosophy assume center position, best represented by Nicholas Cusa (1401-1464), Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), and Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535).

## MYSTICAL LITERATURE

The high and late Middle Ages also witnessed the emergence of highly unusual but most powerful mystical literature in which religious visionaries related their spiritual experiences with the Godhead both in Latin and in the vernacular. Among the women mystics we find regular members of convents and abbesses, many beguines, and also religious individuals living in the world outside of the Church. The most important mystics were Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1165), Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213), Hadewijch of Brabant (early thirteenth century), Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207-1282), St. Gertrude the Great (1241-1298), St. Clare of Assisi (1196-1253), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), St. Bridget of Sweden (1302/03-1373), St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), Julian of Norwich (1343-1413), and Margery Kempe (1373-1439). St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Hugh (1096/1100-1141) and Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), Heinrich Seuse (Henry Suso) (1295-1366), and Johannes Tauler (1300-1361) enjoyed the highest respect and influence among the male mystics, but they also deeply influenced some of the women mystics. In a way, we also would

have to count St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), the founder of the Franciscans, who only wrote few texts (mostly rules for his order, *Opuscula*), but spurred a huge flood of Franciscan spiritual literature, and the Italian poet Jacopone da Todi (ca. 1236-1306) among the most significant mystical authors, though this stretches the definition of mysticism. There were also many Muslim and Jewish mystics in the wider sense of the word.

Religious literature also enjoyed tremendous popularity, both in Latin and in the various vernaculars, such as Iacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend* (1258-1270), consisting of 180 short lives of the saints. Many Latin authors wrote beast epics and bestiaries, hymns, biographies, hagiographies, pastoralia, debate poems, travel literature, dramas, exempla, proverbs and epigrams, and satires. In fact, medieval literature was undoubtedly dominated by Latin, but some of the most popular texts, such as the *Historia Apollonii regis Tyri* (fifth or sixth century), were quickly translated into many vernaculars far into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of the best lyric poets writing in Latin were Philip the Chancellor (ca. 1160-1217), the anonymous Archpoet (late twelfth century), and Peter of Blois (1130-1203).

#### JEWISH HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Whereas in the early Middle Ages Jews experienced a remarkable degree of tolerance in most parts of Europe, beginning with the crusades in 1096 they increasingly faced anti-Jewish hostility, eventually leading to horrible pogroms, which finally resulted in their expulsion from England in 1291, from France in 1306, from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal in 1497. A majority of the Jews who did not accept forced conversion moved to Poland, Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, but numerous Jewish communities remained in Germany, Italy, and neighboring territories. Anti-Semitism grew significantly throughout the late Middle Ages because the Christians depended on Jewish financial loans and often accused their bankers of heavy usury. Religious-ideological aggression, strongly influenced by the fabricated accusations of ritual murder, provided additional ammunition against the Jews and inspired the mob. Despite this tremendous hostility and excessive pressure exerted against the Jews, many of their Rabbis, such as Rashi in Tours (1040-1105) and Nahmanides (1194-ca. 1270), philosophers such as Ibn Gabirol (1021-1058) and Maimonides (1135-1204), exegetes, grammarians, translators, and teachers such as Joseph Kimhi (ca. 1105-ca. 1170), scholars and scientists such as Abraham bar Hija (1065-1135), travelers such as Benjamin of Tudela—who explored southern Europe, the Middle East, and China between 1153 and 1173—and lyric poets such as Jehuda Halevi (1086-1141) demonstrated that Jewish culture was a considerable force in medieval Europe.

Joseph Ibn Zabara (ca. 1140-ca. 1200), for instance, composed a most remarkable collection of tales, fables, and proverbs in his *Sefer Shashuim* (*The Book of Delight*) which shares many elements with ancient Roman and Greek and also with medieval Latin and vernacular exempla, anecdotes, and moral tales. Although the heyday of medieval Jewish literature seems to have been the twelfth century, many other names of famous didactic, lyric, religious, and philosophical poets, and Kabbalists would have to be mentioned here, such as Shem Tob ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-1290), Yehiel of Eisenach (fl. 1235), Abraham Abulafia (1241-ca. 1292), Asher ben Yehiel (1250-1327), Immanuel ha-Romi (1265-1330), Solomon ben Meshul-Iam da Piera (1340-1417), and Solomon ben Reuben Bonfed (1380-1450). Surprisingly, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many Jewish authors, particularly in the German-speaking lands, recreated medieval courtly themes and retold or recreated Arthurian romances, such as *Gabain, Paris and Vienna, Tristan und Isolde*, and *Sigemunt und Magdalena*.

#### THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Two of the greatest late-medieval poets, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), who composed the *Divine Comedy* and the *Vita nuova*, and Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), who wrote such famous poems as *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, and *The Canterbury Tales*, also represent the closing of the Middle Ages, both looking backwards and forwards. The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), though still deeply influenced by medieval thinking (see his *Decameron*, ca. 1350), already belongs, like Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), to the early Renaissance. Some of the most popular late-medieval poems, such as the allegorical and satirical *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris (first part, completed ca. 1237) and Jean de Meun (second part, completed ca. 1275-1280), and the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century, anonymous) represent powerful literary achievements and reflect both the attempt to maintain traditional courtly values and ideals, and the realization that the fundamental principles of that very world were quickly falling apart in a highly transitory world. The Spanish poet Juan Ruiz (middle of the fourteenth century), with his famous *Libro de buen amor*, continued the tradition of erotic discourse established by Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) and continued by Andreas Capellanus (ca. 1190), both idealizing and satirizing the concept of courtly love. In the late Middle Ages courtly literature was increasingly replaced by didactic, moralizing, but also satirical, often highly eroticized (*fabliaux, maeren, nouvelle*) texts. By the late fourteenth and fifteenth century, many courtly poets such as Antonio Pucci (1310-1388), Oswald of Wolkenstein (1376/77-1445), Charles d'Orléans (1349-1465), and François Villon (ca. 1431-ca. 1461) struggled to maintain the

medieval world view, but they could no longer close their eyes to the changes that occurred around them. The Constance lawyer Heinrich Wittenwiler reflected this pessimistic worldview most powerfully in his peasant satire *Der Ring* (ca. 1400), where Johannes von Tepl, who lived near Prague, created a deeply insightful dialogue poem (*Der Ackermann*, ca. 1401) in which a Ploughman (Everyman) and Death debate the value of marriage and love, the relevance of death, and the dignity of human existence. Most famous as a defender of women's causes proved to be Christine de Pizan (1365-ca. 1430), but she still belonged to the Middle Ages. Sebastian Brant (ca. 1457-1521), though already living in the time of German humanism, demonstrated through his famous *Narrenschiff* (1494; Ship of Fools) that conservative ideals and criticism of everything connected with modernity continued to hold sway in many different circles.

## CONCLUSION

Medieval literature was enormously rich and complex, and comprised lyric poetry, courtly romances, heroic epics, religious drama, then also courtly prose novels, fables, verse narratives, sermons, didactic texts, travelogues, scientific and scholastic texts, saints' lives, visionary accounts, and other genres. Modern research has made great strides in gaining a better understanding of that past world, but many treasure troves still need to be explored, and many archives deserve to be revisited for the recovery of medieval texts. Medieval philosophy, theology, science, architecture, technology, and medicine also would need to be discussed here, though space limitations prevent us from doing so.

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