
The Worlds of Medieval Europe

Clifford R. Backman

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS



This page intentionally left blank



Clifford R. Backman
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2003

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York
Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires Cape Town Chennai
Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi Kolkata
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi
São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and an associated company in Berlin

Copyright © 2003 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016
<http://www.oup-usa.org>

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Backman, Clifford R.

The worlds of medieval Europe / by Clifford Backman.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-512168-6 — ISBN 0-19-512169-4 (pbk.)

1. Civilization, Medieval. 2. Feudalism—Europe. 3. Kings and rulers, Medieval. 4.
Monarchy—Europe. 5. Mediterranean Region—Civilization. 6. Byzantine
Empire—Civilization—1081–1453. I. Title.

D131 .B33 2003

2002066795

Printing number: 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

**This book is for Scott Austin Backman,
who knows all the things that matter most.**



“Counseille me, Kynde,” quod I, “What craft be best to lerne?”

“Lerne to love,” quod Kynde, “and leef alle othere.”

[William Langland, *Piers Plowman* 20.206–207]

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xiii
INTRODUCTION: WHY THE MIDDLE AGES MATTER	1

PART ONE THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES: THE THIRD THROUGH NINTH CENTURIES

1 THE ROMAN WORLD AT ITS HEIGHT	7
The Geography of Empire	7
The Role of the Military	10
Roman Society	12
Roman Government	14
The Challenges of the Third Century	17
Reform, Recovery, Persecution, and Favor	19
Suggested Reading	21
2 THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY	23
Before Christ	24
The Growth of the New Religion	27
The Problem of Persecution	32
The Problem of Heresy	34
Constantine and Theodosius: An Imperial Church	36
Responses to Imperialization	40
Suggested Reading	46
3 EARLY GERMANIC SOCIETY	48
Germanic Life	49
Migrations and Invasions	54
Europe's First Kingdoms	57
Germanic Christianity and the Fourth "Doctor of the Church"	64
Suggested Reading	67
4 CLOISTER AND CULTURE	69
The Rise of Monasticism in the East	69
The Rise of Monasticism in the West	73

	Cultural Life in the West: Cassiodorus, Boethius, and St. Benedict	78
	Suggested Reading	84
5	THE EMERGENCE OF THE MEDIEVAL WORLDS	86
	Continuity and Change in Northern Europe	86
	Continuity and Change in the Mediterranean	92
	The Rise of Islam	99
	A Tripartite World	106
	Suggested Reading	107
6	THE CAROLINGIAN ERA	109
	The “Do-Nothing” Kings and the Rise of the Carolingians	110
	The Carolingian Monarchy	114
	Carolingian Administration	120
	Carolingian Society	125
	The Carolingian Cultural Renewal	129
	Suggested Reading	133
PART TWO THE CENTRAL MIDDLE AGES: THE TENTH THROUGH TWELFTH CENTURIES		
<hr/>		
7	THE TIME OF TROUBLES	137
	Internal Disintegration	137
	Trouble from the North	141
	Trouble from the East	144
	Trouble from the South	145
	The End of the World?	149
	Suggested Reading	153
8	REVOLUTIONS ON LAND AND SEA	155
	Changes on the Land	156
	A Peasant Society Emerges	160
	Changes on the Sea	167
	A Maritime Society Emerges	170
	Suggested Reading	173
9	A NEW EUROPE EMERGES: NORTH AND SOUTH	175
	The Rise of Feudal Society	176
	The First German Empire	181
	The Rise of Capetian France	187
	The Anglo-Norman Realm	189
	The Spanish Kingdoms	196
	The Italian Scene	201
	Suggested Reading	206

10 THE REFORM OF THE CHURCH	208
The Origins of the Reform	210
The Papal Revolution	216
Christendom and the East	219
Monastic Reforms	227
Suggested Reading	229
11 THE RENAISSANCES OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY	231
Aristotle, Anselm, Abelard, and Ibn Rushd	232
Law and Canon Law	237
The Recovery of Science	241
The Rise of the Universities	247
Courtly Life, Love, and Literature	252
Suggested Reading	260
12 THE PAPAL MONARCHY	262
Church against State Once More	263
The Consolidation of Papal Authority	267
The Revival of Heresy	273
The Albigensian Crusade and the Origins of the Inquisition	277
Suggested Reading	279

PART THREE THE LATE MIDDLE AGES: THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

13 POLITICS IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY	283
The Rise of Representative Institutions	284
England and France	286
Germany, Italy, and the Papacy	293
The New Mediterranean Superpowers	296
Byzantium and Islam in the Thirteenth Century	299
Suggested Reading	302
14 ART AND INTELLECT IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY	304
Scholasticism	305
The Gothic Vision	309
Science and Technology	316
Aspects of Popular Culture	321
Suggested Reading	325
15 DAILY LIFE AT THE MEDIEVAL ZENITH	327
Economic Changes	329
Peasants' Lives	333
Townsfolds' Lives	337
The Question of Literacy	345
Sex Lives of the Not-So-Rich and the Not-So-Famous	346
Suggested Reading	350

16 CHANGES IN RELIGIOUS LIFE	352
The Importance of Being Penitent	353
The Importance of Being Poor	356
The Humanization of Christ and the Cult of the Virgin	361
Mysticism	364
Suggested Reading	367
17 THE CRISES OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY	369
Economic Difficulties	370
The Great Famine	373
The Black Death	374
War Everywhere	381
Challenges to Church Unity	387
Suggested Reading	394
18 SIGNS OF A NEW ERA	395
William of Ockham	395
Marsilius of Padua	398
Dante Alighieri and Geoffrey Chaucer	400
Christine de Pizan	407
Suggested Reading	408

PART FOUR TWO EPILOGUES

19 CLOSINGS IN, CLOSINGS OUT	413
The Last Years of Byzantium	415
The Search for a New Route to the East	417
Closing In on Muslim Spain	420
The Expulsions of the Jews	422
Closing In Forever: The Forced Cloistering of Women	
Religious	424
Suggested Reading	425
20 THE RENAISSANCE IN MEDIEVAL CONTEXT	427
Economies New and Old circa 1400	428
The Meaning of Humanism	430
The Canonization of Classical Culture	431
The Rejection of the Middle Ages	435
Suggested Reading	436
APPENDIX A THE MEDIEVAL POPES	438
APPENDIX B THE CAROLINGIANS	443
APPENDIX C THE CAPETIANS	444

APPENDIX D	FRANCE: THE VALOIS	445
APPENDIX E	ENGLAND: THE NORMAN AND PLANTAGENET DYNASTIES	446
APPENDIX F	ENGLAND: THE LANCASTRIAN AND YORKIST DYNASTIES	447
APPENDIX G	GERMANY: THE OTTONIAN, SALIAN, AND HOHENSTAUFEN DYNASTIES	448
APPENDIX H	GERMANY: THE LATE MEDIEVAL EMPERORS	449
APPENDIX I	THE SPANISH KINGDOMS, 1000–1250	450
APPENDIX J	THE SPANISH KINGDOMS, 1250–1500	451
INDEX		453

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



The time I have spent working on this book has been challenging, humbling, and exhilarating, and I have learned to depend more than ever on the kindness of friends. For all their help, patience, and sustaining love, I thank David and Heather Sundahl, Daniel and Martha Stid, Lisa Lovett and Julie Reuben, Bruce Schulman and Alice Killian, “Grandma Perc” Thornberg, Bill Wallace, Jim and Laura Wooster, Cheryl and Paul Minor, Bill and Alice King, and Andrea Suess Taylor. Many colleagues helped out with information, recommendations, and encouragement; I thank especially Paul Freedman and Caroline Walker Bynum, who showed great kindness at a particularly difficult time. Nancy Lane, former history editor at Oxford University Press, first persuaded me to write this book, and Gioia Stevens, Linda Jarkesy, and Peter Coveney helped guide me through to the end. Linda especially proved helpful during the challenging task of revising the manuscript, and Peter was an ideal harbor pilot steering the ship into port. I am grateful to the numerous readers, both faculty-specialists and students, who commented on the initial prospectus and the subsequent drafts of the manuscript; I have heeded most of their advice and am solely responsible for all that remains incorrect, misplaced, or misleading. My wife Nelina gave her usual scrupulous attention to my writing style, striving as ever to stamp out the worst of my idiosyncracies. More than a few of them remain in evidence here despite her best efforts. I am aware of my many faults as a writer, but I happen to remain rather fond of some of them. Our six-year-old son Scott sat on my lap and helped me print out the final copy of the manuscript while waiting patiently for his turn to use the computer; if there are any errant S-C-O-T-Ts buried in the text, the reader will know whom to blame.

Eliza McClennen drew the maps that appear throughout the book and has my thanks for her good cheer and speedy pen. Working with her again after too long a hiatus was one of the many pleasures I had in writing the book. Several of my students at Boston University—especially Letta Christianson, Andrew Donnelly, Ali Glass, and Chris Halfond—helped select the maps and photo illustrations and suggested source quotations that they had found most enlightening in the classroom. They will all have been graduated by the time this book appears in print. I shall miss seeing them around the office.

Each chapter has a *Suggested Reading* list appended to it. I have tried to make the lists as up to date as possible and to avoid repetition between them. Each list recommends pertinent “Texts” (primary sources, usually historical or literary, that were written in the period that each chapter discusses and that illustrate many of its chief themes), “Source Anthologies” (collections of primary materials, usually in abbreviated form and organized around a central topic), and “Studies” (works

of recent scholarship on ideas, events, or people mentioned in the chapter). The lists make no claim to be comprehensive; I hope they are merely a useful beginning to further research. I have tried to limit the lists only to books that are still in print, hence many well-known classics of medieval scholarship are omitted. In the case of reprints, I have given the publication dates of the most recent editions.

On the matter of dates, I should say that I have chosen to run counter to the growing trend among historians to use the Common Era. I endorse the use of the Common Era in general, since it has the attraction of religious non-partisanship in a religiously heterogeneous society, but at least one aspect of the present book is the formation of the older tradition itself: how and why western Europe developed the sort of society that chose the birth of Jesus as its chronometrical focal point. Thus I use the traditional B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domini) designations. My aim throughout, however, is not to endorse a bias but to supply the context that gave birth to it.

Passages from the Hebrew Bible are quoted from *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Jewish Publication Society, 1985); passages from the New Testament are quoted from *The New Jerusalem Bible* (revised edition, 1985); and passages from the Qur'an are quoted from *The Holy Qur'an: English Translation of the Meanings, with Commentary* (King Fahd Holy Qur'an Printing Complex, 1410 A.H.). I have borrowed one translation, in Chapter 15, from *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, edited by Emilie Amt (1993). All other translations in this book are my own.



This page intentionally left blank

INTRODUCTION



Why the Middle Ages Matter

Anyone who has ever laughed her way through *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, felt her soul stir when standing in one of Europe's great cathedrals, grown excited when reading about the chivalric exploits of mail-clad knights, or thrilled to the sounds of Gregorian chant knows that the Middle Ages are fun. There is no harm in admitting it. Signs of the pleasure we take in medieval life abound in our culture, from the mock sword fights of our childhood to the prominence of medieval settings in our popular literature and movies, from the crowds that flock annually to costumed medieval fairs to the groups of college students who enroll in classes on Chaucer and Dante. Part of our enjoyment derives from the perceived strangeness of medieval life. Until we become more familiar with them, medieval people strike us as rather odd: We marvel at their actions or laugh at their absurdities because they seem more unlike us than any other of our ancestors do. After all, as is well known, people in medieval Europe believed in miracles and witches. They long thought the surest way to determine whether or not a man was guilty of a crime was to tie him up and throw him into a lake that been blessed by a priest.¹ They were convinced that daily bathing was harmful to one's health; that magical incantations could transform common metals into gold; that a reliable method of contraception was for the woman, during intercourse, to wear a necklace of strung weasel-testicles; that one could rid oneself of toothache by spitting into the opened mouth of a frog; and that the appearance of comets usually signified some kind of heavenly favor or disfavor for whatever was happening in the realm at the time.

But the Middle Ages have a real significance far greater than their entertainment value, and so long as we merely revel in the fun of their uniqueness we will never fully understand our medieval ancestors or learn what they have to teach us. The starting assumption of this book, therefore, is that the Middle Ages really do matter and that studying them is important. The simplest reason for this assertion is that despite initial appearances the medieval world and the modern world have many things in common, and by understanding the origins of contemporary phenomena we gain if not a truer than at least a more sophisticated appreciation of them. How is this so? We can trace a surprising number of modern ideas, technologies, institutions, and cultural practices back to the medieval centuries—by which we mean the period roughly from 400 to 1400. Parliamentary government, banks, algebra, mechanical clocks, trials by jury, women playwrights, polyphonic music, universities, paper mills, citizen armies, distilled liquor, medical dissection, the novel, law schools, eyeglasses, the modern calendar, insurance

1. If the "pure" water "accepted" the man—that is, if he drowned—he was proved innocent.

companies, navigational maps, bookstores, the mafia, and even an early version of the game of baseball all appeared for the first time in western history in the Middle Ages. Modern ideas about the nature of citizenship and the authority of the State, about law and romance, about the need to control the manufacture and distribution of weaponry, also first materialized in these centuries. Even something as modern, if not postmodern, as the literary theory of deconstruction has roots in the medieval philosophers' debates over Realism and Nominalism, although those roots stretch back even further to the time of Plato.

Recognizing the medieval/modern connection illumines and enriches our understanding of the world around us. Why the tradition of college campuses having their own autonomous police forces? Because universities, when they came into existence at the very end of the twelfth century, were designed as self-governing institutions legally independent of the urban communities that housed them. This tradition is also the origin of the famous "town/gown" tensions that have always characterized urban universities: Students on boisterous weekend exploits might damage urban property, but they stood outside the jurisdiction of the urban police. Why do priests raise the offering of the Mass above their heads when they celebrate Communion? Because the medieval Church taught that the faithful had only to see the bread and wine, not partake of them, in order to receive the spiritual benefit of the Mass. Needless to say, this practice also reduced the Church's expenditures on those commodities. How did the popular custom of decorating eggs and awaiting pleasant bunnies at Easter begin? Peasants on medieval manors owed a special tax to their lords every Easter Sunday, which, lacking money, they paid with what they had available.² Why do we purchase tourist trinkets when we travel—such as Eiffel Tower key chains to prove we've been to Paris, or beer steins to commemorate our trips to Munich? Because medieval pilgrims often undertook their voyages as an imposed penance for their sins and had to provide proof of their successful journeys in order to receive pardon; bringing back a trademark local ware was the easiest way of proving that one had in fact reached one's assigned destination. Knowing such things adds a rich texture to our lives that we should not deprive ourselves of.

While these points are significant by themselves, medieval history has an even larger importance for modern students. Medieval civilization was an alloy, the product of the amalgamation of three distinct cultures: classical Rome, Latin Christianity, and early Germanic society. It was a civilization that, for all its ethnic, social, and political plurality, regarded itself as an organic whole. The medieval worldview regarded life as an essential unity—that is, it believed that there existed a super-arching unifying structure, divinely and naturally ordained, that held together and gave meaning to the obvious pluralism and diversity of everyday existence. This unifying vision is the most distinctive characteristic of the medieval mentality. Whether in terms of its intellectual and artistic life, with their emphases on the systematizing of knowledge and the integration of motifs, genres, and styles into larger constructs; or in terms of its political and social life, with their emphases on state-building and the interdependence of each segment of society in prescribed roles; or in terms of its ethnic, sexual, and religious relations, with their attempts to regulate the roles of each group and the rules of their interaction—the principal thrust of medieval civilization was to connect what was disparate and to find stability in the multifarious unity that resulted. John of Salisbury, an important

2. That's right: The Easter bunny was eaten by the nobles.

political theorist of the twelfth century, provided an illustration of this belief in organic wholeness when he likened a political state to the human body:

Those who guide religious life [in any given commonwealth] should be respected and honored as the body's soul. . . . The role of the body's head is played by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who represent Him on earth and carry out His sacred office, just as in a human body the head is both animated and governed by the soul. The place of the heart is filled by the central court, from which all actions, whether good or bad, originate. Judges and local administrators represent the eyes, ears, and tongue; and their civil servants and military men correspond to the hands. . . . Tax officials and accountants correspond to the stomach and the intestines. . . . Peasants identify with the body's feet, since they work upon the soil . . . and propel the weight of the entire body forward.

Such a mentality categorized individuals and established legal and social hierarchies, but the essential cast of this mind was to unite, not to atomize, the distinct elements of society. It assigned a role for every individual but always integrated those individuals into the larger social body.

This concern to find and define a collective cultural identity greater than individual traits of ethnicity, social class, political tradition, and gender is the medieval world's most lasting legacy; and in light of our contemporary concerns about social diversity and cultural pluralism—what we often describe as our regard for multiculturalism—the medieval struggle to establish a meaningful, ordered sense of heterogeneity within unity takes on a particular relevance, not as a prescription for how to resolve contemporary issues about individual or group identity but as an illuminating example of how questions that confront us were dealt with in the past. Just as in any other aspect of our public and private lives, it helps to know that other people have confronted similar problems, and we can learn valuable lessons from their successes and failures.

This book will emphasize the ways in which medieval people sought to recognize heterogeneity and difference while seeking to create a meaningful unity out of it, and this emphasis sets us apart from more traditional ways of writing medieval history. With regard to politics, we will pay less attention to the specific details of individual rulers than do other books, and will emphasize instead how the varying political traditions of medieval Europe (generally rural-monarchical in northern Europe, and urban-communal in the Mediterranean lands) emerged as responses evolving from different local needs yet aiming at the same goal of creating a stable ordering of Christian society. We will discuss how techniques of food production in rural areas, or the regulated ethnic demography of urban centers (that is, allowing Jews to live in this quarter of the city, Muslims in that quarter, Venetians over here, Barcelonans over there, etc.) exemplified efforts to modulate social organization and identity. We will examine phenomena such as scholasticism and cathedral building as models of how thinkers, architects, and artists sought to meld vast all-encompassing superstructures of diverse ideas, styles, and techniques into harmonious wholes. And on the darker side, we will consider how the medieval mania for identifying lepers, heretics, Jews, homosexuals, witches, criminals, and other general "evil-doers" characterized both a desire to stamp them out at times, and, at other times, to define their proper (if decidedly inferior) place in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Medieval Europe emerged slowly from the rubble of the fallen Roman Empire and struggled through several centuries of warfare, poverty, and disease before

achieving a tentative, fragile stability under the Carolingian rulers of the eighth and ninth centuries. After the Carolingians, a second period of disarray descended, until at some point in the eleventh century Europe quite literally rebuilt itself—physically, politically, spiritually, economically, and socially—and entered a period of impressive expansion, wealth, stability, and intellectual and artistic revival. Many of those gains were lost, as we shall see, in the calamities of the fourteenth century; but by that point the foundations were securely laid for Europe to move into the Renaissance with both the technological and economic means, and the ideological convictions, that would prepare Europe to dominate the globe. The long centuries of the Middle Ages saw western Europe transform itself from a sparsely populated, impoverished, technologically primitive, socially chaotic, and often barbaric place to the world's wealthiest, best educated, most technologically developed, and most powerful civilization to date. As we shall see, much of that transformation depended precisely on the ways in which the many worlds of the Middle Ages tried to fashion the connections and conflicts of everyday life into a unified vision of human existence.

THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES



The Third through Ninth Centuries

	PART ONE	
---	-----------------	---

This page intentionally left blank



THE ROMAN WORLD AT ITS HEIGHT

The Roman Empire of the first and second centuries A.D. comprised the largest, wealthiest, most diverse, and most stable society of the ancient world. No other ancient empire—not the Assyrian, not the Persian, not the Athenian—had succeeded on such a scale at holding together in harmony so many peoples, faiths, and traditions. Historians commonly describe these two centuries as the period of the *Pax Romana* (“the Roman Peace”), an age when a strong central government engineered and maintained the social stability that allowed people to prosper. The sheer vastness of the empire was astonishing: It stretched over three thousand miles from west to east, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and reached northward to Hadrian’s Wall, a fortification built in A.D. 122 to protect Roman Britain from the Picts of Scotland, and southward to the upper edge of the Sahara. Within this vast territory lived as many as fifty to sixty million people.

The prosperity of those centuries came at a high cost. Rome’s rise to power was the result of military might, after all, and long centuries of warfare had preceded “the Roman peace.” In the bloody Punic Wars of the third century B.C. Rome defeated Carthage, its main rival for control of the western and central Mediterranean, before turning its eyes aggressively eastward and subduing the weakened Greek states left over from the collapse of Alexander the Great’s empire. But soon after it had conquered the known world, the Roman state went to war against itself: Civil wars raged for well over a century as various factions struggled not only to control the new superstate but to reshape it according to opposing principles. Some factions favored preserving the decentralized administrative practices of the early Republic, while others, such as the faction led by Julius Caesar, championed a strong centralized authority; some favored a rigid aristocratic authoritarianism, while others promoted a more radically democratic society. These long wars ended in a bizarre compromise. The empire of the Pax Romana period was a thoroughly centralized state that delegated most of its day-to-day authority to local officials; and it was a decidedly hierarchical society, almost obsessive in its concern to define every individual’s social and legal classification; and yet it remained a remarkably fluid world in which a family could rise from slavery to aristocratic status in as few as three generations.

Two factors did the most to shape the Roman world and foster its remarkable vitality and stability: the Mediterranean Sea and the Roman army.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF EMPIRE

The Roman world, like the medieval world that succeeded it, was centered on the Mediterranean. The sea provided food, of course, but more importantly it

- [read Hard Revolution \(Derek Strange and Terry Quinn Series, Book 4\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [read online Byzantine Armies 886-1118 \(Men-at-Arms, Volume 89\)](#)
- [download The Hellion and the Highlander \(Devil of the Highlands, Book 3\)](#)
- [click Learning Outside the Lines: Two Ivy League Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD Give you the Tools for Academic Success and Educational Revolution book](#)
- [click Selected Tales and Sketches pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)

- <http://diy-chirol.com/lib/550-AP-Calculus-AB---BC-Practice-Questions.pdf>
- <http://www.khoi.dk/?books/How-to-Solve-it-by-Computer.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/Learning-and-Expanding-with-Activity-Theory.pdf>
- <http://www.mmastyles.com/books/Learning-Outside-the-Lines--Two-Ivy-League-Students-with-Learning-Disabilities-and-ADHD-Give-you-the-Tools-for-Ac>
- <http://kamallubana.com/?library/Selected-Tales-and-Sketches.pdf>