

2.5 Middle Ages and Christianity



Main Idea The Roman Catholic Church and the feudal system influenced Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Western Europe entered a period known as the **Middle Ages**, which lasted from about 500 to 1500. During this period, Western Europe consisted of numerous kingdoms. Castles, like those on the Rhine River in Germany, served as defensive fortresses. The Roman Catholic Church helped unite people during the Middle Ages, and the feudal system provided a social structure.

The Roman Catholic Church

In 1054, Christianity officially divided into two parts: the Roman Catholic Church in Western Europe and the Eastern Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe. The Roman Catholic Church was the center of life for most people in Western Europe. It cared for the sick, provided education, and helped preserve books and learning.

The Church also played a leading role in government. It collected taxes, made its own laws, and waged wars. In 1096, the Church began a series of **Crusades**. These were military expeditions undertaken to take back holy lands in Southwest Asia from Muslim control. The Crusades cost many lives and ended in 1291.

The Feudal System

The many kingdoms of Western Europe were often at war. From about 400 to 800, a German group called the Franks stopped the fighting and unified most of Western Europe. Their most important leader was Charlemagne (SHAHR luh mayn).

When Charlemagne died in 814, war

between the kingdoms returned and Western Europe again became divided. To provide security for each kingdom, the feudal system developed. The **feudal system** was a social structure that was organized like a pyramid. At the top was a king who owned vast territory. Beneath the king were lords, powerful noblemen who owned land. The lords gave pieces of their land to vassals, who pledged their loyalty and service to the lord. Some vassals also served as knights, who were warriors on horseback.

Each lord lived on an estate called a manor, which functioned as a small

village. **Serfs**, who farmed the lord's land in return for shelter and protection, were at the bottom of the pyramid. Serf families dwelt in small huts on the manor and gave most of the crops they grew to their lord.

The Growth of Towns

In time, the growth of towns helped end the feudal system. Trade and businesses developed, and people began to leave the manors. A deadly disease called the bubonic plague, which swept through Europe in 1347, also weakened the feudal system. The plague killed millions and greatly reduced the workforce in the towns. Desperate for workers, employers offered higher wages. As a result, farmers left the country to seek the higher-paying jobs in the towns.

Before You Move On

Summarize In what ways did the Roman Catholic Church and the feudal system influence Western Europe during the Middle Ages?

MANOR IN THE MIDDLE AGES

...shows a simplified
manor. Rolling fields
...outside its walls.

The church was
the center of life
on the manor.

The lord lived in
relative safety and
ease in his castle.

...lived in tiny
...with dirt floors.

...protected the
...from rival lords.

ONGOING ASSESSMENT

VIEWING LAB



GeoJournal

1. **Interpret Visuals** What details in the illustration suggest the measures taken to protect those who lived in the manor?
2. **Make Inferences** Notice the position of the church in the manor. Why might it have been positioned near the lord's castle?
3. **Compare and Contrast** Based on the illustration and what you have read, in what ways did life probably differ for lords and serfs?