

Major Themes: The Middle Ages

FEUDALISM (800-1400 CE)

To protect themselves from rival attacks and provide for their basic economic needs, Western European kingdoms adopted a feudal system (feudalism) which helped people survive the breakdown of central government and order after the fall of Roman Empire. **Feudalism** was characterized by a number of social, political, and economic relationships. Kings offered nobles a tract of land, called a feud or **fief**, in exchange for loyalty and service. The nobles would build castles, called **manors**, where laborers called serfs would work to produce food, clothing, and other goods and services for everyone living in the nobleman's territory. In exchange for giving the local lord a portion of their harvest, the serfs were protected from outside attacks by the lord's armies, which were made up of armed, trained warriors on horseback called knights. The feudal system could be problematic, especially among the wealthy lords who could manage larger tracts of land and maintain larger armies. Since the king relied on the lords to provide him with an army in times of war, the nobles often fought amongst themselves for power or challenged the king's authority. Frequent crop failures, the large loss of life stemming from the Black Death, and the increasing use of coins which allowed serfs to pay off labor debts or purchase freedom all contributed to the decline of manorialism and the feudal system by the end of the 14th century.



Major Time Periods:

800 CE – The Franks introduce feudal system concept to Western Europe

1066 CE – William the Conqueror begins distributing land to Norman nobles who helped him take over England

1086 CE – Domesday Book, public records of all landowners in England, is compiled

1100-1200 CE – Shogunates, the Japanese version of feudalism, is developed

1315-1322 CE – Great Famine spreads across European farms

FAITH (570-1350 CE)



In the 7th century, a new monotheistic religion called **Islam** emerged from Mecca, an important city through which many trade routes passed. Islam was founded by Muhammad, who preached in his belief in Allah, the same God of Abraham worshipped by Jews and Christians. Muhammad's influence grew; by the time he died, most of the tribes on the Arabian Peninsula converted to Islam. Meanwhile, the authority of the Catholic Church (the first group of Christianity) grew in Europe. Disagreements over Church doctrine between leaders in Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East will lead to the **Great Schism**, the first permanent break in the Church. Greece and Russia will become followers of the Eastern Orthodox Church, while all lands to the west of Rome formed the Roman Catholic Church, whose authority and influence grew even stronger. For hundreds of years, Christian pilgrims regularly visited Jerusalem, where many Biblical events were said to have taken place. In the 11th century, Seljuk Turks, followers of Islam, took control of the Holy Land and drove out the Christians. Pope Urban II, hoping to heal the differences in the Church while trying to stave off a Muslim invasion of Constantinople, called on all Christians in Europe to fight a Crusade to recapture the Holy Land from Muslim rule. Over the next two centuries, several **Crusades** would be fought, but Christians never achieved more than temporary control of Jerusalem. Major effects of the Crusades included a polar division of East and West based on religious differences, the increased influence of the Church in politics, and an increase of intolerance between Christians, Muslims, Jews, heretics and pagans.

Major Events:

507-632 CE – Life of Muhammad, prophet of Islam

1054 CE – The Great Schism establishes Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox forms of Christianity

1088-1099 CE – Pope Urban II reigns as head of the Catholic Church

1095-1291 CE- The Crusades

1189-1192 CE- Third Crusade is fought between forces of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin

JUSTICE

As the Western Roman Empire broke apart, the Eastern portion evolved into a new empire, called the Byzantines. Their emperor, Justinian, centralized government authority and strengthened bureaucracy. He also collected Roman laws, modernized them, and streamlined them into a simplified legal code, **Justinian's Code**, which was easier for citizens to follow and abide by. In England, it was believed that the only way to keep order was to make sure that people were scared of the punishments given for crimes committed. For this reason, all crimes had harsh punishments, from stealing to burglary to heresy. King Henry II will outline the **English Common Law** system, establishing trial by jury, use of legal precedent, and acceptable forms of bail that provides the model for criminal justice around the world. In addition to establishing rules of law and order, England also developed a unique form of government. After years of escalating taxes, disastrous foreign policies, and rebellion amongst his nobles, King John was forced to sign the **Magna Carta**, the first written constitution in European history. The document detailed the property rights of barons, required the King to consult a group of advisors before collecting new taxes, and guaranteed all free men the right to a trial by jury. While governments grew more powerful in Europe, imperial governments were weakening in Japan. Noble landowners gathered huge private armies and fought each other for power; they then gave the emperor a figurehead status while declaring themselves **shoguns**, the real rulers of Japan. The remaining nobles became daimyos and controlled local provinces and the held the loyalty of the samurai, trained warriors who provided military protection for the provinces. The shogunates would remain in control of Japan until 1867.



Major Events:

803 CE – Byzantine Emperor Justinian collects and organizes laws from the Roman Empire into one legal code

1163-1166 CE – Henry II reforms, codifies, and expands English Common Laws

1192-1333 CE – Kamakura Shogunate holds political power in Japan

1215 CE – King John signs the Magna Carta

1215 CE- Pope Innocent III bans priests from overseeing trials by ordeal and combat

TRADE (1000-1400 CE)



After the fall of the Roman Empire, trade declined as it was unsafe for merchants to travel without being robbed or killed by warring tribes. During the 11th and 12th centuries, demand for **foreign products** like lemons, spices, sugar and rugs led to increased trade in the Middle East and other parts of the world. When the Crusades interrupted overland trade routes, merchants would travel across the Mediterranean Sea to meet demand. In Africa, the Sahara Desert acted as a natural barrier between Sub-Saharan African tribes and the people of the Mediterranean and Asia, but trade was not entirely impossible. Traders were especially motivated to cross the desert after **Mansa Musa**, Sultan of the Mali Empire and the

richest man in history, completed a pilgrimage to Mecca that displayed his vast amount of wealth. Western African kingdoms were willing to trade gold and goods for salt, which was not locally available but needed for human survival. Trade became extremely profitable, and other goods and ideas were exchanged along various routes, including Islamic beliefs and the concept of zero in mathematics. Unfortunately, communicable diseases were also spread along these trade routes. **Bubonic Plague**, known in the Middle Ages as the Black Death, will travel from Asia through rat fleas and will be transmitted to humans. In Europe, the Black Death will cause massive devastation, killing over 1/3 of the human population.

Major Events:

1000-1276 CE – Porcelain is produced and exported from China, becoming a major economic activity

1200-1400 CE – Hanseatic League dominates trade in Northern Europe

1207-1350 CE – Stability of the *Pax Mongolica* allows the Silk Road to reopen

1325 CE – Mansa Musa completes the hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca

1347 CE – Bubonic Plague is transmitted to humans via rat fleas travelling along the Silk Road