The Middle Ages

I. INTRODUCTION

Middle Ages are the period in Europe dating from the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, around the 5th century, to the 15th century. However, the fixing of dates for the beginning and end of the Middle Ages is arbitrary; at neither time was there any sharp break in the cultural development of the continent. The term seems to have been first used by in a book published in 1483. The term implied a suspension of time and, especially, a suspension of progress - a period of cultural stagnation, once referred to as the Dark Ages, between the glory of classical antiquity and the rebirth of that glory in the beginnings of the modern world. Modern scholarship generally divides the Middle Ages into three stages and is much more concerned with diversity even within the subdivisions.

II. EARLY MIDDLE AGES

No one definitive event marks the end of antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Neither the sack of Rome by the Goths under Alaric I in 410 nor the deposition in 476 of Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor in the West, impressed their contemporaries as epoch-making catastrophes. Rather, by the end of the 5th century the culmination of several long-term trends, including a severe economic dislocation and the invasions and settlement of Germanic peoples within the borders of the Western Empire, had changed the face of Europe. For the next 300 years western Europe remained essentially a culture of Germanic invaders, albeit one uniquely superimposed on the complex, elaborate culture of the Roman Empire, which was never entirely lost or forgotten.

A. Fragmentation of Authority

Although during this period the loose confederation of tribes began to coalesce into kingdoms, virtually no machinery of government existed, and political and economic development was local in nature. The defining structure for most of European society was the Frankish tribe. Regular commerce had ceased almost entirely, although - as modern scholars maintain - the money economy never entirely vanished. But the use of cash did become much more rare. In the culmination of a process begun during the Roman Empire, peasants became bound to the land and dependent on landlords for protection and the rudimentary administration of justice. Among the warrior aristocracy the most important social bonds were ties of kinship, but feudal connections were also...
emerging. These ties, which traded land for military and other services, may have been rooted in the old Roman patron-client relationship or in the Germanic comitatus, the group of fighting companions. All such connections impeded any tendency toward political consolidation. It was a time of localization and de-centralization; the Germanic culture of the Franks, their language and customs, would be the unifying force.

B. The Church

The only universal European institution was the church, and even there a fragmentation of authority was the rule; all power within the church hierarchy was in the hands of local bishops. The bishop of Rome, the pope, had a certain fatherly preeminence. However, neither the elaborate machinery of ecclesiastical government nor the idea of a monarchical church headed by the pope was to be developed for another 500 years. The church saw itself as the spiritual community of Christian believers, in exile from God's kingdom, living in a hostile world, serving the poor, the oppressed, and fostering education; it was now that the monasteries became the centers of learning. The most important members of this community were found outside the hierarchy of church government, in the monasteries that dotted Europe.

Opposed to the forces of fragmentation and local development were the tendencies within the church toward standardizing the rite, the calendar, and the monastic rule. Besides such administrative measures, the cultural memory of the control of the Roman Empire persisted. By the 9th century, with the rise to power of the Carolingians, the beginnings of a new European unity based on the Roman legacy may be found, for the political power of the emperor Karl the Great (also known as “Charlemagne”) depended on educational reforms that preserved, and kept in place, materials, methods, and aims from the Roman past.

Another unifying force amid the fragmentation of the Early Middle Ages was the main concepts of the Christian faith (distinct from the institution of the Church - in the absence of a structural hierarchy to unify, concepts unified): common ideas about love, forgiveness, being of service to one’s fellow human, and the dignity and value of human life formed the core of the emerging European culture.

C. Culture and Learning

Cultural activity during the early Middle Ages consisted, first, in appropriating and systematizing the knowledge of the past. The works of classical authors were copied and annotated. At the center of learned activity stood the Bible, and secular learning
became regarded as preparation for understanding the holy text. For this reason, the study of languages was encouraged: Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Even Arabic was studied, because the philosophers of the time read, and were read by, their Islamic counterparts. Abelard, Anselm, and Aquinas, among many others, were part of a lively east-west dialogue between the Christian thinkers and the Islamic thinkers - a dialogue centering mainly around metaphysical issues. Trade caravans carried the latest philosophical books, along with their more business-like cargo of spices, tapestries, jewels, and gold.

The early Middle Ages drew to a close in the 10th century with new migrations and invasions - the coming of the Vikings from the north and the Magyars from the Asian steppes - and the weakening of all forces of European unity and expansion. The resulting violence and dislocation caused lands to be withdrawn from cultivation, population to decline, and the monasteries again became outposts, preserving civilization. Nevertheless, the cultural work of assimilating the legacy of antiquity had been done, and it was not to be lost.

III. HIGH MIDDLE AGES

By the year 1050 Europe stood on the verge of an unprecedented period of development. The era of migrations had come to a close, and Europe experienced the continuity and dynamic growth of a settled population. Town life, and with it regular and large-scale trade and commerce, was revived. The society and culture of the High Middle Ages were complex, dynamic, and innovative. This period has become the center of attention for modern medieval scholarship, and it has come to be known as the renaissance of the 12th century.

A. Church

During the High Middle Ages the Roman Catholic church, organized into an elaborate hierarchy, was the most sophisticated governing institution in western Europe. Through diplomacy and the administration of justice in the extensive system of church courts it also exercised a directive power throughout Europe. Such diplomacy avoided several wars and found peaceful solutions to international tensions. In addition, the monastic orders grew and flourished: orders such as the Cistercians were famous as drainers of marshland and clearers of forest. Movements as the Franciscans, dedicated to voluntary poverty and renunciation, soon became thoroughly engaged in the newly-emergent urban life, because the poor were shifting to the urban centers from the country side. The Franciscans offered aid to anyone who had need of it. No longer did
the church see itself as the heavenly city in exile; it was at the center of existence. High medieval spirituality became individualized. It was located in the objective matter of bread and wine, and in the subjective, emotional identification of the individual believer with the suffering humanity of Christ. Not merely feeling, but taking concrete actions to help one’s fellow humans, became the hallmark of the church.

B. Intellectual Quests

Throughout the cultural sphere an unprecedented intellectual ferment developed. New educational institutions, such as cathedral and monastic schools, prospered, and the first universities were established. Advanced degrees in medicine, law, and theology were offered, and in each field inquiry was intense. The medical writings of antiquity, many of which had been preserved also by Arab scholars, were read anew and translated. Both ecclesiastical and civil law, especially at the famous university in Bologna, were systematized, commented on, and questioned as they had never been before. These investigations were influential in the development of new methodologies that would bear rich fruit throughout all fields of study. Scholasticism became popular and the writings of the church were studied again, theological doctrines and practices were explored, and problematic areas of the Christian tradition were discussed. The 12th century thus ushered in a great age of philosophy in the West.

C. Artistic Innovations

Innovations took place in the creative arts as well. Literacy was no longer merely a requirement of the clergy, and the result was a flowering of new literature, both in Latin and - for the first time - in the vernacular languages. These new writings were addressed to a literary public that had both the education and the leisure to read, and expressed the new complexity of life and engagement with the world. In painting unprecedented attention was given to the depiction of emotional extremes and to the natural and workaday world. In architecture the Romanesque style was perfected through the erection of numerous churches, especially along the pilgrimage routes in France and Spain, even as it began to give way to the Gothic style, which in the next centuries would become the prevailing international mode of building.

D. New European Unity

During the 13th century the achievements of the 12th were codified and synthesized. The church had become the great European institution; trade and commerce had tied Europe into an economic unity. Travel, whether for pilgrimage, trade, or study at a
university, became relatively easy and common. This was also a century of Crusades. These wars, begun in the late 11th century, were motivated by an alliance of merchants, bankers, and local princes, who understood that there was money to be made, if Europeans, instead of Arabs, controlled certain trading routes. Needing to legitimize the undertaking, a religious excuse was fabricated. Some were ready to fight, in response to several centuries of Islamic invasions and attacks. But the Crusades proved to be unpopular with the commoners, and it was through pressure from monks and from town councils that the Crusades eventually stopped. The High Middle Ages culminated in the great cultural achievements of Gothic architecture, the philosophic works of Thomas Aquinas, and the imaginative vision of the totality of human life in *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.

IV. LATE MIDDLE AGES

If the High Middle Ages were marked by the achievement of institutional unity and intellectual synthesis, the late Middle Ages were characterized by conflict and dissolution. It was then that the secular state began to emerge - even though it often was no more than an incipient national feeling - and the struggle for supremacy between church and state became a fixture of European history for the next several centuries. The struggle between church and state arose from the distinction, for almost the first time, between church and Christian: the Crusades had made it clear that the institutional Church had taken on its own life, separate from the ethic of Christianity as service to mankind. The Christians became the chief critics of the church, and the state could claim that it was sometimes more Christian than the Church. Towns and cities, continuing to grow in size and prosperity, began to strive for political self-control, and the urban conflict became internal as well, as various classes and interests vied for control.

A. Beginnings of Political Science

One result of this struggle, particularly in the seignorial or feudal corporations, was the intensification of political and social thinking. This thought focused on the secular state in its own right, independent of the church or community of believers.

The independence of political inquiry is only one facet of a major trend in late medieval thinking. The grand project of high medieval philosophy, the attempt to reach a synthesis of all knowledge and experience, both human and divine, was becoming impossible. Some modern scholars have seen in this trend toward the specialization and narrowing of philosophical inquiry a loss of direction or decay. Others regard it as a new beginning - the beginning, for example, of the empirical investigation of the
physical world, which can be traced to the breakdown of the high medieval philosophical synthesis.

B. New Spirituality

Although these philosophical developments were important, the spirituality of the late Middle Ages was the true register of the social and cultural turmoil of the age. Late medieval spirituality was characterized by an intense search for the direct experience of God, whether through the private, interior ecstasy of mystical illumination, or through the personal scrutiny of God's word in the Bible. In either case, the established church - both in its traditional function as interpreter of doctrine and in its institutional role as conveyer of the sacraments - found itself not so much embattled as dispensed with.

Mystical experience was potentially available to everyone, lay or cleric, man or woman, learned or illiterate. Conceived of as a personal gift of God, it stood sharply removed from social rank or cultural attainment. It was unworldly, irrational, private, and authoritative. Devotional reading of the Bible, in its turn, brought an awareness of a church strikingly different from the all-encompassing, worldly medieval institution. Christ and the apostles presented an image of radical simplicity, and using the life of Christ as a model to be imitated, individuals began to organize themselves into apostolic communities. Movements such as the Brethren of the Common Life and the Spiritual Franciscans proliferated throughout Europe. Sometimes they endeavored to reform the church from within, to lead it back to apostolic simplicity and purity; at other times they simply disengaged themselves from all existing institutions.

In many instances such movements took on a fervor, particularly among the disenfranchised workers in the late medieval towns, who lived in a state of perpetual crisis. After the catastrophic appearance in the 1340’s of the Black Death, which killed about a fourth of Europe's population, bands of these believers, returning to the beginning-point of Christian thought and life, could be found throughout Europe, hoping to re-focus, and re-build, a shattered society.

This process of spiritual unrest and innovation would end in the Protestant Reformation. The new national identities would lead to the triumph of the modern nation-state. The continual expansion of trade and finance would lay the groundwork for the revolutionary transformation of the European economy. Thus, in the dissolution of the medieval world, in its social and cultural turmoil, the seeds of the modern age may be found.