

# Was Medieval Europe really “Dark”?

## There Was Nothing Dark About the Dark Ages

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The Middle Ages are often said to be 'dark' because of a supposed lack of scientific and cultural advancement. The 'Dark Ages' have often been described as a 'backwards' time in human history.

- During this time, feudalism was the dominant political system. The feudal system of labor hindered upward social mobility, which essentially means that poor people had very little opportunity to improve their condition in life.
- Religious superstition was also widespread during this time. The Catholic Church was extremely institutionalized, and often opposed the scientific and cultural advancements the Greeks and Romans had pioneered.
- The 'Dark Ages' were a difficult time in which to live: famine and disease were common. The 'Black Death' (bubonic plague) devastated Europe in the late 1340s, killing an estimated 100-200 million people.
- Warfare was also a part of everyday life. The Europeans and the Muslims of the Arab world fought numerous conflicts. These conflicts, called the Crusades, began in 1095 and ended in 1291.

Another reason why the Middle Ages are often called the 'Dark Ages' is because compared with other eras. While this time was not like the Golden Ages of Greece or Rome, it does have its merits.

## Was Medieval Europe really “Dark”?

It is a popularly accepted that the classical Western civilizations, Greece and Rome contributed much of what is now the modern world. Our writing system, legal system, system of governance, democracy, science, medicine civil works and engineering, architectural forms among others has their roots in the classical civilizations. However, when Rome finally fell in 476 this signaled the end of the classical period in Western history. And with the fall, went all the learning and scholarship. Did it really?

The consensus of many historians was the Middle or Medieval Age began after 395, when the Roman Empire was last a unified entity. After 395, the Roman Empire was split into two halves - the Western Empire centered at Rome and the Eastern Empire of Byzantium centered in Constantinople. The decline of the Empire happened soon after the split, but this was not a sudden “fall” as popularly imagined. The “fall” was actually a 300-year long decline. First, Roman institutions of state declined, followed by political authority, and lastly, massive de-urbanization. This meant that the social, political organization of the city, which characterized Roman living unraveled and Europeans began to live once more in villages. Rome started as a village and eventually reverted to being as one. Thus it will not surprise anyone that the famous Roman engineering works were ruined; the magnificent structures, temples and aqueducts were used just as a source of stone. However, we have to remember that this was only true for the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Empire or Byzantium continued to prosper and this survived until 1454 when the Muslim Turks defeated Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium.

The period between 395 and 1000 is known as the Early Middle Ages or the “Dark Ages” since it is popularly believed that very few literary, artistic and scientific output have survived from this period. (This phrase was coined by an Italian scholar named Francesco Petrarch - AFTER the Early Middle Ages.) It is also in this period that the Roman Catholic Church became the sole political and social authority, filling that which was once occupied by Rome. In doing so, the Church practically guaranteed social organization, provided health services since the monks preserved classical medical knowledge, and kept classical learning alive in its monasteries and abbeys. The Church preserved literacy among its clergy. However, most citizens, other than the Catholic officials, remained largely illiterate.

The popular notion is that there was no science or learning during this period or the High or Late periods that followed. This could not be farther from the truth. The medieval period laid down the foundations of modern science and created the university (although run exclusively by and for the Roman Catholic Church). Much of these foundations lay on the idea of preserving knowledge through the written record via books.

And the spirit of invention never died even in the so-called “Dark Ages”. Metallurgy (the study of metals) reached a high point in the early middle ages. Eyeglasses were invented soon after. The first mechanical clocks were invented in England. The Medievals also understood the principles of engineering statics magnificently demonstrated in the great Gothic cathedrals of

Europe, which still stand 800 years after they were constructed. It should be noted, however, that many scientific “discoveries” were in fact based on incorrect assumptions and “magic”. This should not diminish the value of the process.

The medieval period set the stage for the development of modern science. It was able to do this since the Roman Catholic Church (the only Western European institution that survived Rome’s collapse). Recent scholarship has brought to light the scientific and cultural contributions of the Medieval world. Historians also recognize the intellectual strength of the medieval scholastics. This period is not as dark as it was once viewed.

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**5 point HW (0.5 for each correct response)**

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5. Complete the reading comprehension questions associated with this reading. (10 questions)
6. CLICK **FINISH QUIZ** (top right of screen after you have checked over all your answers)

\*You can now skip questions and go back to them at your own pace 😊