



# HOW DARK WERE THE DARK AGES?

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No period of history is more misunderstood or underappreciated than The Middle Ages, the ten centuries from the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century to the start of the Renaissance in the 15th.

This is especially true between the year 1000, when global warming brought grapes to England and grain to the coasts of Greenland, doubling the population and reviving town life all across the Europe, and 1348, after the warming had ended and the Black Death arrived from the east.

Let's take a closer look at these years. We'll make a good start by dispelling some nonsense.

The people of the Middle Ages did not believe the earth was flat. They knew it was round. The ancients said it was round, the Fathers of the Church said it was round; they saw its shadow during an eclipse of the moon, and the shadow was round; they saw masts of ships sinking below the horizon – round!

More nonsense: the Middle Ages were cheerless. Quite the reverse! They were full of color, of celebrations involving everybody in town; they invented the carnival; they revived popular drama, which had lain dormant for a thousand years; whatever they did, whether it was sinning or fighting or repenting or falling in love, or traveling thousands of miles to Rome or to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher they did it with energy and gusto.

What do we owe to the Middle Ages?

How about the university? Medieval man invented it. For the first time in the history of the world, you could go to Paris or Bologna or Padua or Oxford or Prague or Cologne and study under masters of law, medicine, philosophy, and theology, and your degree – designating you as a master or a doctor – would hold good anywhere in Europe. It was an international community of scholars. A young Thomas Aquinas, born in southern Italy at the beginning of the 13th century, would travel to Cologne to study philosophy under the philosopher-biologist Albert the Great, then to Paris where he taught theology and philosophy, then to Rome, and back to France – and this sort of thing was the rule among scholars, not the exception.

How about modern science? Thomas's teacher Albert was a biologist. Why should that surprise us? Medieval man believed that God made the world as an ordered whole. They learned it both from Scripture and from pagan thinkers such as Aristotle. Science did not burst on the scene with Galileo. Copernicus died in the sixteenth century, but he was a priest-astronomer at a Polish university founded in the Middle Ages. He wasn't even the first man to suggest that

the earth orbited the sun. Others had ventured the suggestion. Most prominent was the late medieval Nicholas of Cusa – a philosopher and a cardinal in the Church.

How about architecture? If the Middle Ages were dark and ignorant, how come ordinary people – masons, carpenters, painters, sculptors, glazers – erected the most beautiful and majestic buildings to grace the earth, the Gothic cathedrals? Without power tools, with pulleys and winches and scaffolding and their bare hands, they built up lacework in stone and glass, flooding vast interior spaces with color and light; we have nothing to match their complexity and beauty.

And art? Studying the ancients, Medieval man produced whole genres of art that the world had never seen. There had never been anything like Dante's Divine Comedy or Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, or the Arthurian legends of Chretien de Troyes; or the paintings of Giotto, or the astonishingly beautiful and precise work of the illuminators of manuscripts.

What else do we owe to them? Western music – they invented our musical notation, and western harmony; not to mention the humble carols we enjoy at Christmastime. A tradition of local self-government – witness the chartered towns all over Europe. Free associations of men united for the common good: friars, guildsmen, members of lay orders devoted to good works; people who established schools, orphanages, and hospitals.

Far from the Dark Ages to which it is popularly called, The Middle Ages might better be described as the Brilliant Ages, a startling epoch of progress from science to art, from philosophy to medicine.

Indeed, in one crucial way, we are less civilized than those who enhanced human existence over a thousand years ago: we dismiss the achievements of our ancestors, and fall short of them; they honored their ancestors, and surpassed them.

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