

CHAPTER 12:

MIDDLE AGES: EUROPE

432 to 1500

INTRO

The thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century to the Renaissance in the 16th century is known as the Middle Ages – the era of knights and kings, Crusades and Vikings, castles and catapults, and stories of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and Ivanhoe. It all existed within a feudal government system, set up to protect villagers from invading tribes.



It worked like this: The king would give a large portion of land – called a fief – to a duke, who would look after it for him. The duke would swear fealty (loyalty) to the king and send knights to help him at times of war. He'd have farmers work the land and send food. The duke would divide up his lands among his counts, barons or earls, who would in turn pledge their allegiance to both the duke and the king. And they too would send their soldiers. It was a pyramid scheme of sorts that enabled a king to control his subjects.

MIDDLE AGES: EUROPE

LYRICS

I'm on a crusade for Christendom,
The holy cross on my neck like floss,
Steel sword and a black horse.
It's 1095 AD,
The Byzantine Empire is in need,
Alexius is calling me
Like I'm his last hope;
Urban II is Pope.
I cross foreign lands
With dust in my throat,
Thus began the war,
200 years or more,
Straight thuggin' between the
Christians and Muslims.
I'm led by Richard I,
The lion hearted,
In a fight against Saladin
And all of his men.
With legends like
Robin Hood and Ivanhoe,
One king finally crowned,
Now the cities can grow.

*We tell a story that's
Right from the pages,
Talk about Europe,
Talk about the Middle Ages
In dark times,
We knights are the bravest,
Crusades and plagues,
It's dangerous.*

Now you're a serf,
But the surf's never up,
You're working in the fields,
But you're covered in mud.
You're not slave,

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

I'm on a crusade for Christendom...

One of the most powerful forces in Europe during the Middle Ages was the Catholic Church. In many ways it united various nation states even when they otherwise did not get along. The large and undefined region they all occupied was not called Europe back then, but "**Christendom**" or the community of Christians.

1095 AD the Byzantine Empire is in need...

In 1095 AD, **Byzantine Emperor Alexius** sent out word that he needed help holding off the invading Turks. The Pope at the time, **Urban II**, made a famous proclamation in Clermont France. He told all Christian soldiers they should join in the fight and go to Alexius's aid. Armies of knights from across Europe made their way east toward Jerusalem, wearing crosses over their armor. Thus began the **First Crusade**.

Thus began the war, 200 years or more...

There wasn't just one holy war, but a series of Crusades over a period of 200 years. In each, the Christian European forces fought the Muslim Turks for control of the Holy Land. The Third Crusade pitted two of the most famous and brilliant men of the time against one another - **Richard I** of England and **Saladin** of Egypt and Syria.

I'm led by Richard I, the lion hearted...

The son of Henry II of England, Richard (1157-1199) was a popular king who

Floerabulary

went off to fight in the Crusades. While he was away, he put his brother, Prince John into power, setting off a chain of events. King Richard spent only six months of his 10 year reign as king in England (he thought it was rainy and gloomy there); the rest of the time he was off fighting for the Holy Land or resided on his fabulous estates in France. He was written into English folklore as the good king in the story of Robin Hood.

One king finally crowned, now the cities can grow...

Feudalism began to decline after the Crusades. Because of the development of cities and economies, kings could just hire the armies they needed. They didn't have to worry about the vassal system — exchanging land for military service. Europe was transitioning toward a money-based economy and away from one based on agriculture.

During the early Middle Ages, there was no such thing as Germany, Spain or Ireland. Instead, kingdoms and fiefdoms were spread out all over the place. Some kings were more powerful than others and began to consolidate their power, making alliances and taking over territory. Out of all this emerged the nation-state, a sovereign power usually run by a single king. By the end of the Middle Ages, the nations of France, England and Spain had emerged beneath royal monarchies.

It's dangerous...

The great era of Roman rule came to an end thanks to tribes of Germanic people from the north. The Romans called them barbarians, their way of saying "people who don't speak

like us." Two examples of these "barbarians" were the Goths and the Vandals. The **Goths** were from what is now the eastern part of Germany. In the third century, weak leaders controlled the Roman Empire, which was reeling from fights with the Persians.

The Goths saw this as an opportunity. They wanted territory near them along the Danube River, then held by the Romans. And so they took it, defeating the Roman army at the site. Emboldened by this success, they began to raid farther and farther into Roman territory. They ultimately sacked the city of Rome itself in 410. The **Vandals**, likewise, attacked the Romans about 270. They, too, were after territory and power. The Romans didn't like them, which is why someone who tags their name on a wall today is accused of *vandalism*.

Now you're a serf but the serf's never up...

If anyone really had it rough in the Middle Ages, though, it was the **serf**. He or she was bound to their lord for life. It wasn't exactly slavery, but it was pretty close. The serf wasn't allowed to leave the manor without permission from the lord, and couldn't marry or do much of anything unless the lord gave his blessing. The only good thing about being a serf was that if they could escape, make it to a town, and live there for a year and a day without getting caught, they were free.

You pay those high taxes to your lord, and he protects you from invading hordes...

The **peasants** were the working class under feudalism. They usually were the ones who did the farming, though

MIDDLE AGES EUROPE

LYRICS continued

But you can't leave,
Need permission, like
"Excuse me, could I take a walk
Down the street?"
You pay those high taxes
To your lord,
And he protects you from
Invading hordes.
Knights fight from on horses,
Ride when their lord orders.
Own land, the strongest forces.
The king does whatever he wants.
He's a jerk.
You need a Magua Carta.
"That might work!"
But get set for the men
From the North,
Vikings in longboats with oars
And there's the No. 1 killer.
That's Attila the Hun,
Marching from the East.
So get ready to run.
But even Charlemagne
Can't save you, hide,
When the plague rages.
You're gonno die.



some were servants. Usually, they didn't own their own land, so they had to pay a certain percentage of their income to the person who did own it, like paying rent. This was usually most of what they made, so they stayed very poor.

In exchange for protection from the local noblemen, they were obliged to be foot soldiers in times of war. Even if they owned their own farm, they still had to pay the powerful for protection against thieves and invaders. Though they were free, peasants lived a hardscrabble life of work and toil and were often taken advantage of by the "noble" classes.

Knights fight from on horses, ride when their lord orders...

The men of the noble class were often the **knights**. One of the nice things about being a knight was that if you went into battle — and there was always a war going on somewhere — you got to wear armor and ride a horse. Being up high and protected gave you a huge advantage over foot soldiers; you could ride right over them. No wonder everyone wanted to be a knight.

Knights were **vassals** — that is, they promised to lend their military might to a duke or baron in exchange for large tracts of land. They practiced their craft — fighting with swords, axes, and lances — constantly. When there was no battle to be fought, they would often compete in contests to show who was best. They lived by a code of honor called **chivalry**, which was based on courage, loyalty, and kind treatment of others — usually noblewomen. There's a common misconception that knights couldn't move around in their armor and had

FLOCAB SPITS FACTS LIKE AN ALMANAC

If we all came from Ethiopia hundreds of thousands of years ago, then we're all one people. So why are white people light-skinned and black people dark-skinned? The answer, mostly, is vitamins.

All people originally had brown skin, most likely. Some humans decided to move north, where there was food, but the climate was colder, with shorter days and less sunlight. The people with dark skin started dying faster than those with light skin, because people with light skin were able to soak up vitamin D better. Meanwhile, some people stuck around Ethiopia or moved south. Among these people, the light-skinned people started dying faster, because dark skin was better equipped to handle the sun's rays. Genetically speaking, these are tiny, tiny differences.

to be hoisted into the saddle. This wasn't true. They couldn't exactly skip, but they were plenty mobile. In the scheme of things, they had a pretty nice life. Until another knight began hacking at them.

The strongest forces...

Before you could become a knight,

you had to help a knight. **Squires** were the young sons of noblemen who apprenticed themselves to a knight. This helped them learn how to fight and understand the ways of chivalry. In exchange for being taught, squires performed tasks for the knights: They served them meals, polished their armor, helped them suit up for battle (it's impossible to put on your own armor), and even followed them off to war. If they performed all these tasks well, they'd be knighted themselves at about the age of 21.

Pages were the little brothers of the squires. They served in various capacities at the court of a knight or king, running errands and bringing messages. They learned manners, how to read and write, how to ride a horse, and began to study swordsmanship. At age 13 the page graduated to life as a squire.

You need a Magna Carta...

King John will always be known for two things. He was the villain against whom Robin Hood and his merry men fought, and he was the king who approved the **Magna Carta** ("Great Charter"). This document was a huge step forward for Western civilization. By stamping it with his seal, King John essentially agreed that he was subject to the law of the land, just like everyone else - Kings would no longer be all-powerful. The Magna Carta granted the people of England many basic human rights. (Of course, most of these were still slanted toward the wealthy.) King John did not want to sign it, but he was forced to by many of his noblemen. When the American colonists were putting their political ideas on paper, they were inspired by older documents like the Magna

Carta.

But get set for the men from the North, Vikings in longboats with oars...

In the early days, Europe was an **agrarian** society - life revolved around farming. Somewhere around 500-600 AD, people from what is now Scandinavia - particularly Norway, Denmark, and Sweden - felt like they were running out of land for their crops. Great seamen, they hopped in their boats and went off exploring, searching for more territory. These were the **Vikings**, who traveled by sea in famous longships, narrow vessels with dragonheads at the bow. They would pull up in their boats and raid villages all over what is now Britain, Ireland, France, even as far away as Morocco. They'd take whatever they wanted from the locals, kill those who resisted, and make settlements. They mixed with the French, for example, and became the Normans. They merged with the Slavic people of Eastern Europe and became Russians. Known as the **Norsemen** - or men of the north - the Vikings would make it to North America, long before Columbus did. But they didn't see anything too amazing, and turned around, forgetting about this new world.

And there's the No. 1 killer, that's Attila the Hun...

The **Huns** were another group of invaders. A horse-riding people from Mongolia, they moved to an area along the Danube River in the 270s. They then pushed west, fighting the Goths. The Huns were led by a very powerful leader named **Attila** (406-453), who caused fear everywhere he went. The Romans were terrified of him; even the barbarians were

scared. Attila raided all across Europe, but he was afraid to go to Rome itself because he heard that Italy was infected with disease.

But even Charlemagne can't save your hide...

Charles the Great, more often known as **Charlemagne** (768-814), was another powerful ruler with an interest in Rome. A masterful military strategist, he built an empire in what is now France and expanded it to include parts of Spain, Germany, and, most important, Italy. **Charlemagne** built the largest kingdom Europe had seen since the Roman Empire - in fact, he proclaimed himself Roman Emperor. (This was 300 years after the Roman Empire fell to pieces.) He was a devout Christian, and his rule brought together many elements of European civilization that had been separate before - Rome, Christianity, and Germanic and Frank tribes.

When the plague rages, you're gonna die...

The **bubonic plague** (a.k.a. the "Black Death") descended upon Europe in the 1300s. A horrible illness that made its way west from Central Asia along trade routes, the disease caused black spots to appear on the body. It killed most people who contracted it - about a third of everyone in Europe at the time. It spread quickly because of poor hygiene and the lack of good food. Many people thought it was a punishment sent by God.