

[All Empires Home](#) [History Forum](#) [About All Empires](#) [Contribute Content](#) [Search Site](#)

The Dynamic Middle Ages

By [Mangudai](#)

Category: [Medieval Europe](#)

The Dynamic Middle Ages - Debunking the myth of the so called "Dark Ages"

In 1984, the Swedish historian Michael Nordberg published his synthesis on the modern scholarly view on the Middle Ages – "Den dynamiska medeltiden" (The dynamic Middle Ages). This was one of the first attempts to reach out to the casual reader with the dominant scholarly view on the reality behind the so called "Dark Ages". Since that time onwards, there have been many other publications from scholars and amateur historians alike worldwide who effectively debunk the old myth about the dark "Dark Ages". It's interesting to see how large the gap is between the scholars and the laymen. Whereas professional historians have come to accept a much more balanced view on the period ca 500-1500, most "ordinary" people seem to be stuck with the erroneous idea of the "Dark Ages", i.e. the Middle Ages as a period of backwardness, ignorance and underdevelopment.

Why then have the Medieval period become associated with "dark ages"? First you have to blame the humanists of the renaissance, who regarded themselves as "rediscoverers" of a lost, glorious "golden age" – the classical Antiquity. According to these renaissance snobs, the period between theirs and the lost "Golden age" was a "Media aetas", i.e. the Middle ages – a historical parenthesis and a dark period of no development. Then, in the 18th century during the age of reason, scholars came to view the Middle ages as a time of ignorance and superstition, in contrast to their own period of enlightenment. Then in 1860, the Swiss scholar Jacob Burckhardt published his work *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* ("The renaissance culture in Italy") where the myth of the "Dark ages" that was invented by 16th century intellectuals unfortunately was perpetuated and conveyed to the layman. But since the early 19th century, historians have studied the Middle Ages and come up with a view on the period very different from that of Burckhardt's thesis. The great problem in studying the Middle Ages is that prior to the 9th century, sources are very few. This is not because the people living in that age were stupid or illiterate; it's due to that people mostly wrote on papyri, which unfortunately haven't survived. yes sir

Yes, the Middle ages were truly a period of darkness – since they lacked access to electrical lights! This humorous sentence is often mentioned by my history professor Dick Harrison – one of the leading historians specialised on the Medieval era, and author of many books where he dismisses the popular image of the middle ages as a period of stagnation and ignorance. Can anyone answer me why the middle ages should be considered an era of backwardness? According to popular imagination, the "glorious" culture of classical Greece and Rome was destroyed by rapacious barbarians in the 5th century. Wrong! The "barbarians" adopted classical culture, they didn't destroy it. When the Visigoth king Ataulf married, he was dressed in Toga and the Ostrogoth ruler Theoderik the Great portrayed himself as a roman emperor in mosaic. Another "barbaric" king, the Visigoth Sisebut wrote a work on astronomy in the 7th century, where he discusses the orbit of the moon! During the age of Charlemagne, many scholars contributed to what has been called "the Carolingian renaissance". The learned Anglo-Saxon abbot Alkuin (d. 804) studied the ancient classics at the court in Aachen, founded several schools and produced a number of works in history, education-books and poetry. In Paris, there were no less than 26 public baths in the late 13th century, just like in ancient Rome (it was actually first during the "glorious" age of renaissance that people got scared of water, since it actually could spread diseases). Only in some remote areas of the Roman Empire like Britain and Hungary did the classic civilisation fade away. Many of the Roman cities shrunk and some were even abandoned, but that is due to that people preferred to move to the

countryside and take up farming.

During the High Middle Ages Europe was in a process of immense development and technological and societal expansion. During this time we get the first universities, where not only theology was studied (as some might believe) but also theoretical physics, optics, astronomy, mathematics and other sciences. People from all over the Christian world, even from remote Scandinavia and Iceland, came to study at famous universities like Bologna or Sorbonne. During the 14th century, empiric studies in the school of nominalism lay the foundation of the modern scientific method. Just because one was Christian, one was far from locked and stuck with dogma. On the contrary, it was often the clergy, monks and nuns who produced great thinkers and scientists – Yes, even Pope John XXI (d. 1277) wrote books on logic and medicine! Already in the 6th century we have Issodorus of Seville, the father of modern science and vividly studied in both the Christian and Muslim world during the middle ages. Then we have English bishop Robert Grosseteste (1168-1253), who wrote several works on astronomy, physics and optics. His disciples in the so called Oxford-school continued his work and focused their work on mathematics and experimental science. Then we have the monk and scientist, author and inventor Roger Bacon (1214-1292) who developed the theoretical optics. Then we have a bunch of philosophers like Berengar of Tours, Pierre Abélard, Roscelin, William Ockham, John Duns, Jean Buridan, Bonaventura, Nicolas Oresme - the latter was a poor Norman son of a peasant (born ca 1320) who became a doctor, bishop, scientist and author of no less than 35 works on theology, economy, politics, mathematics, physics and astronomy. He was the first to perform calculations involving probability, and invented mathematical graphs. Most people know of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who embraced the works of Aristotle and Averroes. Dominican friar Durand de Saint-Pourcain discovered around 1320 that the planetal orbits are not concentric, but excentric (proved in the 17th century by Kepler). During the high Middle Ages the scholars and scientists commented and developed ancient knowledge. In the 11th century, the philosophical school of Scholastics was born. The scholastics studied Arab and classic antique scholars, especially Aristotle. They used a strict scientific argumentation in their studies, used to this day.

It was not until the time of the celebrated renaissance that the Catholic Church began to oppose science when they made the teachings of Aristotle as doctrine that you were not supposed to question. Whereas the medieval intellectuals studied freely, Bruno and other early modern thinkers got burned at the stake and Galileo was kept in arrest and forced to call back his statements. Why then is the Middle Ages considered especially "dark"?

One popular myth holds it that the literacy dropped during the Middle Ages. However nothing supports that claim as professor Harrison has shown. In Novgorod archaeologists have found thousands of medieval letters written by ordinary people on birch bark. In Scandinavia, runes continued to be the writing of choice among the commons, as there are hundreds of medieval runic inscriptions on wood.

Another popular myth that is supposed to prove that people were dumb and stupid during the Middle Ages is that they believed the earth was flat. This is wrong, since Thomas Aquinas clearly states that the earth is a Globe in his Summa Theologica. Besides, some Swedish peasants believed that the earth was flat still well into the 19th century. Is that an indication of that people during the 19th century was stupid?

Agriculture developed dramatic during the middle ages, horses replaced the slow oxen for ploughing, wooden primitive ploughs were replaced by real ploughs of iron and wheel-ploughs, these innovations together with allowing fields to lie fallow, more effective crop-rotation and new crops and cereals yielded more grain and could feed a larger population in areas with otherwise poor soil. Medieval peasants have been considered in the popular minds as non free serfs living miserable lives. It's true that many were serfs, but it's far from the complete truth, in Scandinavia peasants always remained independent, and peasants became independent in the Ditmarsch peasant-republic and in the confederation of Switzerland. In France, Spain and Britain, serfdom demised in the 13th century. Nevertheless, serfdom continued to exist long after the Middle Ages (abolished in Russia not until 1861) and had existed well before in the servi castati and coloni of the Roman empire (not to mention that most agrarian labourers were slaves working at the latifundiae). The wind mill was invented and the ancient water mill was improved and spread more widely across Europe. Wilderness was turned into areas of agriculture, marches were drained and new roads and bridges made transport easier. Proto-

History Articles

- [Articles Index](#)
- [Monthly Features](#)
- [General History Articles](#)
- [Ancient Near East](#)
- [Classical Europe and Mediterranean](#)
- [East Asia](#)
- [Steppes & Central Asia](#)
- [South and SE Asia](#)
- [Medieval Europe](#)
- [Medieval Iran](#)

- [& Islamic Middle East](#)
- [African History \(-1750\)](#)
- [Pre-Columbian Americas](#)
- [Early Modern Era](#)
- [19'th Century \(1789-1914\)](#)
- [20'th Century](#)
- [21'st Century](#)
- [Total Quiz Archive](#)
- [Access Account](#)

industrial centra for fabric-production grew in Flanders, Northern Italy and in France. The metallurgy developed and steel could be made cheaper and stronger. Blast furnaces appeared, and water-power was used in the production of steel. Otherwise, the making of more advance armour couldn't have been possible.

Especially during the high middle ages, population growth resulted in the foundation of many cities. The independent and educated burghers of the cities sometimes founded their own republics and city communes, free from the rule of kings. Trade connected the growing cities; in the Baltic the German Hansa connected Novgorod, Hamburg, Lübeck, Visby, Riga, Bergen and many other cities from the 13th century onwards. In the Mediterranean Venice and Genoa prospered from foreign trade, and along the coasts of Flanders large cities like Bruges grew rich. In northern Italy, modern banking, book-keeping and the foundation for trade capitalism was born in the 13th century. Glasses was invented in the 13th century, books became to be used (previously fragile scrolls had been used) and Europeans adopted paper, stirrups, gunpowder, the compass and other foreign inventions as well as Arabic numerals, Muslim science, poetry and culture. Is this backwardness?

Medieval poetry, literature and music flourished, novels were written and plays were performed. We have great medieval authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, Chiaro Davanzati, Gottfried von Strassbourg, Chrétien de Troyes, Christine de Pisan ("the first feminist"), Boccaccio (author of the first Novel"), Petrarca, Francois Villon, Dante and many, many others. Great classics were written like Decamerone, Canterbury tales, the stories of King Arthur, the Norse Sagas, Nibelungenlied and others. Great composers and troubadours like Guillaume de Machaut (d. 1377), Walter von der Vogelweide, or Francesco Landini (1317-1397) produced beautiful musical pieces enjoyed still today, not to mention Gregorian choirs.

Architectural achievements characterises the Middle Ages – just look at the great cathedrals of France and Germany where new methods of masonry and building techniques were used.

Scandinavia in the 8th century was a sparsely populated area where chiefs and petty kings fought each other for power. There was slavery and no science. In the 13th century though, Scandinavia had produced three real kingdoms – Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Thanks to improved agriculture, the population grew and cities were founded. Slavery was abolished, schools opened, coins were struck and buildings in brick and stone (never seen before) like castles, churches and cathedrals appeared. Christian monks brought science, law, new ideas, European technology and literature (sure the Vikings had runes, but no real books). Christianity tied Scandinavia to Europe, and conveyed to us the traditions and learnings of Greece, Rome and the Arab world. "Dark ages" indeed?

"The dark ages" is a concept that refuses to go away, like wine-stains on a white shirt or ingrained mould in the bathroom. As I've noted, ever since the 15th century has the era between the 5th century and the 15th century been a rubbish-dump of history where all misery and everything bad have been tossed. When something is perceived as backward, ignorant or just "bad", we use to call it "medieval" or say it's "like back in the Dark Ages" and so on. Even in our time people have continued the stupid idea that things like superstition, ignorance, oppression, poverty, social inequality and injustices, serf hood, illiteracy, bad hygiene and more is supposed to be unique for the middle ages! (like every other period in history have been perfect...). Medieval man have stereotypically been described as a pale, dirty, thin and frightened individual that hides in his dark and rough woollen hood, his claw-like hands is grasping a big wooden cross. Around him the shady streets are covered with filth and garbage – an environment perfectly fit for a 60's B-horror movie... And the classic Roman? Of course he's a well-fed aristocrat dressed in a shiny toga with olive twigs on his head, discussing politics and philosophy below the shiny white pillars of marble.

All focus have by tradition been put on the poor and underprivileged of medieval society, whereas by contrast the classic antiquity or early modern era have been viewed as an idyllic fairytale of happy and educated high-class people dressed in beautiful clothes of silk, living in their white-shimmering world of marble. Who wants to think of all the millions and millions of slaves, poor masses of proletarii and the serflike coloni peasants who populated the Roman empire – when you instead can focus on magnificent conquerors, emperors and educated men dressed in toga? Who wants to depict the slum of Rome with filthy overcrowded streets and

hundreds of beggars when you instead can rest your eyes on splendid palaces of marble and aqueducts?! The same thing with the time following the middle ages – people just want to hear about magnificent renaissance-princes, rich snobs and educated Italian humanists in Firenze or Milan – not the great mass of “ordinary” people whose lives went on in the same way as during the preceding centuries.

Every era possesses their negative and positive parts, the positive sides during the Middle Ages though have been consciously forgotten, just as the negative sides of antiquity and renaissance have been defused. It’s interesting to analyze how different opinions people use to have on the same things depending whether it’s “medieval” or “classic”. The splendid gothic cathedrals and monasteries have been regarded as symbols of papal oppression and ignorance, whereas their antique equivalents – the Greek and Roman temples (where animals were sacrificed and magicians dug in entrails to tell the future) – is just being regarded as examples of advanced architecture. When the roman legions marched out to extend the realm of the empire or quell a rebellion in blood it is “glorious and exciting”, but when the medieval army is depicted it’s suddenly “brutal and warlike”. When rival Roman commanders fought each other and devastates each others domains, it’s a “clever struggle for power”, whilst the medieval lords fighting each other are “pillaging barbarians”. The enormous conquests and bloody campaigns of Alexander the Great and Caesar have always fascinated people, whereas the medieval crusades are regarded as historical embarrassments and deterrent examples of imperialism. When the Romans demand taxes from their subjects it’s a sign of an efficient and advanced state-apparatus, but when the medieval ruler collects taxes it’s on the contrary “oppression” of free men. Roman emperors are always (no matter how insane and pervert) “glorious” statesmen, whereas the medieval kings and emperors are portrayed as power-hungry tyrants. The “medieval torture” and brutal executions are world famous, despite the fact that the most advanced torture in Europe came after the middle ages during the early modern era (not to mention the Romans with their crucifixions and other cruel punishments). The witch-hunts have likewise been associated with the middle ages in an anachronistic way, despite the fact that the large-scale, real hunts for witches in Europe raged in the 16th to 17th centuries (during the “enlighten age of renaissance”). The classic Greek and Roman poetry have always been appreciated, but medieval poems have not been regarded as equally interesting in spite of its diversity and richness.

Well I can go on for ever with examples, and you can probably think of a lot more illustrations that are supposed to describe the so called “Dark Ages”. It’s clear however, that the classic antiquity and renaissance is associated with- and represented by its positives sides, real or imagined. Quite the opposite in the case of the Middle Ages; here the epoch in question is consequently represented by the negative aspects, whereas all the positive ones are deliberately forgotten or even denied. This is to me a real distortion of history. The thing is, isn’t time to scrap the old myth about the “Dark Ages” for good?

The idea of that science and learning died during the Middle Ages and miraculously revived during the renaissance is pure nonsense. In fact, one can argue that it was in fact the renaissance snobs who took a step backward in development as they only copied the works of the classics! Big deal anyway, the majority of people in Europe remained illiterate, uneducated and lived simple lives as peasants whether they lived in ancient Rome, during the Middle ages, the renaissance or the early modern era up to the French revolution. It was not until the 18th century these conditions became to change, and it was first in fairly recent times (with industrialization) that ordinary people could enjoy education, high standard of living and individual freedom in a democratic society.

