

## The Early, High and Late Middle Ages



By [Melissa Snell](#) - Updated July 11, 2019

Although in some languages the Middle Ages are labeled in the singular (it's *le moyen age* in French and *das mittlere Alter* in German), it is difficult to think of the era as anything other than ages *plural*. This is in part because of the numerous subjects encompassed by this long period of time, and in part because of the chronological sub-eras within the era.

Generally, the medieval era is divided into three periods: the Early Middle Ages, the High Middle Ages, and the Late Middle Ages. Like the Middle Ages itself, each of these three periods lacks hard and fast parameters.

### Early Middle Ages

The Early Medieval Era is sometimes still called the Dark Ages. This epithet originated with those who wanted to compare the earlier period unfavorably with their own so-called "enlightened" age. Modern scholars who have actually studied the time period would not so readily use the label, since passing judgment on the past interferes with a true understanding of the time and its people. Yet the term is still somewhat apt for the simple reason that we know relatively little about events and [material culture](#) in those times.

This era is often considered, to begin with, the "fall of Rome" and end sometime in the 11th century. It encompasses the reigns of [Charlemagne](#), Alfred the Great, and the Danish Kings of England; it saw frequent Viking activity, the [Iconoclastic Controversy](#), and the birth and rapid expansion of Islam in Northern Africa and Spain. Over these centuries, Christianity spread throughout much of Europe, and the Papacy evolved into a powerful political entity.

The Early Middle Ages are also sometimes referred to as [Late Antiquity](#). This time period is usually viewed as beginning in the third century and stretching to the seventh century, and sometimes as late as the eighth. Some scholars see Late Antiquity as distinct and separate from both the Ancient world and the Medieval one; others see it as a bridge between the two where significant factors from both eras overlap.

## High Middle Ages

The High Medieval Era is the period of time that seems to typify the Middle Ages best. Usually beginning with the 11th century, some scholars end it in 1300 and others extend it for as much as another 150 years. Even limiting it to a mere 300 years, the High Middle Ages saw such significant events as Norman conquests in Britain and Sicily, the earlier [Crusades](#), the Investiture Controversy and the signing of the [Magna Carta](#). By the end of the 11th century, nearly every corner of Europe had become Christianized (with the notable exception of much of Spain), and the Papacy, long established as a political force, was in constant struggle with some secular governments and alliance with others.

This period is often what we think of when someone mentions "medieval culture." It is sometimes referred to as the "flowering" of medieval society, thanks to an intellectual renaissance in the 12th century, such notable philosophers as [Peter Abelard](#) and Thomas Aquinas, and the establishment of such Universities as those in Paris, Oxford, and Bologna. There was an explosion of stone castle-building and the construction of some of the most magnificent cathedrals in Europe.

In terms of material culture and political structure, the High Middle Ages saw medievalism at its peak. What we call [feudalism](#) today was firmly established in Britain and parts of Europe; trade in luxury items, as well as staples, flourished; towns were granted charters of privilege and even established anew by feudal lords with alacrity, and a well-fed population was beginning to burgeon. By the end of the thirteenth century, Europe was at an economic and cultural height, perched at the verge of a downturn.

## Late Middle Ages

The end of the Middle Ages can be characterized as a transformation from the medieval world to the early modern one. It is often considered to begin in 1300, though some scholars look at the mid- to late-fifteenth century as the beginning of the end. Once again, the *end* of the end is debatable, ranging from 1500 to 1650.

Cataclysmic and awesome events of the 14th century include the Hundred Years War, the [Black Death](#), the [Avignon Papacy](#), the Italian Renaissance, and the Peasants' Revolt. The 15th century saw [Joan of Arc](#) burned at the stake, the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, the Moors were driven from Spain and the Jews expelled, the Wars of the Roses and the voyage of Columbus to the New World. The 16th century was wracked by the Reformation and blessed by the birth of Shakespeare. The 17th century, rarely included within the medieval era, saw the Great Fire of London, a rash of witch hunts, and the Thirty Years War.

Though famine and disease had always been a lurking presence, the Late Medieval era saw the horrific results of both in abundance. The Black Death, preceded by famine and overpopulation, wiped out at least a third of Europe and marked the end of the prosperity that had characterized the high medieval era. The Church, once so highly respected by the general populace, suffered reduced status when some of its priests refused to minister to the dying during the plague and sparked

resentment when it enjoyed enormous profits in bequests from plague victims. More and more towns and cities were wresting control of their own governments from the hands of the clergy or nobility that had previously ruled them. And the reduction in population triggered economic and political changes that would never be reversed.

High medieval society had been characterized by *the corporation*. The nobility, the clergy, the peasantry, the **guilds**—all were group entities that saw to the welfare of their members but put the welfare of the community, and their own community in particular, first. Now, as was reflected in the Italian Renaissance, a new regard for the value of the individual was growing. By no means was late medieval nor early modern society a culture of equality, but the seeds of the idea of human rights had been sown.

The viewpoints examined in the previous pages are by no means the only ways to look at the Middle Ages. Anyone studying a smaller geographical area, such as Great Britain or the Iberian Peninsula, will much more easily discover start- and end-dates for the era. Students of art, literature, sociology, militaria, and any number of subjects will each find specific turning points pertinent to their topic of interest. And I don't doubt that you, too, will see a particular event that strikes you as possessed of such towering importance that it defines the beginning or end of the medieval era for you.

The comment has been made that all historical eras are arbitrary definitions and, therefore, how the Middle Ages is defined really has no significance. I believe that the true historian will find something lacking in this approach. Defining historical eras not only makes each era more accessible to the newcomer, it helps the serious student identify interrelated events, recognize patterns of cause and effect, understand the influence of a period's culture on those who lived within it and, ultimately, find a deeper meaning in the story of our past.

So make your own choice, and reap the benefits of approaching the Middle Ages from your own unique perspective. Whether you are a serious scholar following the path of higher education or a devoted amateur like me, any conclusions you can support with facts will not only have validity but will help you make the Middle Ages your own. And do not be surprised if your view of Medieval times changes over the course of your studies. My own outlook has certainly evolved in the last 25 years, and will most likely continue to do so as long as the Middle Ages continues to hold me in its thrall.

**Source:** <https://www.thoughtco.com/defining-the-middle-ages-part-6-1788883>