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# Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300 - 1475

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BRIAN TIERNEY



*Sixth Edition*

# *Western Europe in the Middle Ages 300–1475*

SIXTH EDITION

*Brian Tierney*

*Cornell University*

*Sidney Painter*

*Late of Johns Hopkins University*



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WESTERN EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES: 300-1475, SIXTH EDITION

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## About the Authors

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After serving in the Royal Air Force, **Brian Tierney** received his B.A. and Ph.D. from Cambridge University. He has taught at Catholic University, Washington, DC, and at Cornell, where he is now Bryce and Edith M. Bowmar Professor in Humanistic Studies Emeritus. He has been the recipient of Guggenheim Fellowships and of fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Professor Tierney has been awarded the honorary degrees of Doctor of Theology by Uppsala University, Sweden, and Doctor of Humane Letters by Catholic University. A specialist in medieval church history, he has published many articles and several books, among them *Foundations of the Counciliar Theory*; *The Crisis of Church and State, 1050–1300*; and *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150–1650*. He is the coeditor with Joan Scott of *Western Societies: A Documentary History*. His most recent book is *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150–1625*.

**Sidney Painter** was chairman of the Department of History at The Johns Hopkins University from 1945 until his death in 1960. His academic degrees included a B.A. and Ph.D. from Yale and an LL.D. from Middlebury College. He taught at Yale from 1927 to 1931, when he joined the faculty at Johns Hopkins. Dr. Painter was a beloved teacher and a truly distinguished scholar. His books include *William Marshall; Scourge of the Clergy*, *Peter of Dreux, Duke of Brittany*; *French Chivalry*; *History of the English Feudal Barony*; *Reign of King John*; *Rise of the Feudal Monarchies*; and *Mediaeval Society*.



## Note on the Sixth Edition

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The various editions of this book have all been based on a few simple convictions about the writing of history. In the first place, historical discussion—even when it deals with complex themes—can almost always be presented in “the language of common sense,” plain, uncluttered English. Also, clear narrative is an essential form of historical writing, a norm to which good historians return as other fashions come and go. Finally, the purpose of historical writing is not merely to entertain (though there is no reason why it should be painfully dull); the historian’s task is to understand and to explain.

With this purpose in mind, a historian has to be sensitive to findings by scholars in other fields who, in different ways, deal with changing aspects of human society. For a medievalist, work in areas as diverse as comparative religion and historical geography is very important. Also relevant are studies in anthropology, archeology, demography, and other social sciences. The later editions of *Western Europe in the Middle Ages* have incorporated more material from these neighboring fields, but I have tried to include it unobtrusively, so as not to change the character of the work.

In this edition there are substantial revisions throughout the text. I have also added a new chapter, “Europe and Her Neighbors,” that includes extensive new material on Byzantium and Islam. The chapter on feudal society and the pages on the Carolingian renaissance have been rewritten. There is more on the roles of medieval women. I have revised the bibliographies at the end of each chapter; but, in medieval scholarship, new books often supplement earlier ones without supplanting them, so I have continued to include some of the older standard works.

Most teachers of medieval history like to supplement textbook narrative with samples of original source material and with interpretive studies by modern historians. Accordingly a revised two-volume paperback collection of medieval sources and modern readings has been prepared to accompany this book. References to *Sources* and *Readings* in the bibliographies at the ends of the chapters in the following text refer to this work, *The Middle Ages: Vol. I, Sources of Medieval History*; Vol. II, *Readings in Medieval History* (New York, 1998).

# *Preface*

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Sidney Painter's history of the Middle Ages earned a great reputation as a vivid and vigorous account of medieval life. Professor Painter did not try to write a completely balanced textbook but concentrated on those aspects of medieval society that interested him most—and his pages were alive with the learning and wit of a great scholar.

In this new book I have tried to supplement Professor Painter's work. Much of his brilliant narrative and descriptive writing on feudal politics, feudal warfare, and feudal society has been retained. The history of the early period from A.D. 300 to A.D. 800 has been written afresh. In the later chapters much of the material on church history, law, political theory, philosophy, art, and literature is also new. All the material has been rearranged to bring out more clearly the chronological structure of medieval history. I hope that, in this revised form, the book will serve the needs of a new generation of students.

The scope of the work is indicated in its title. Our central theme is the emergence of a distinctively Western civilization in medieval Europe, and we have tried to give the clearest possible account of this complex phenomenon. Accordingly, for the purposes of this book, medieval Byzantium and medieval Islam are considered primarily as formative influences on the Western world at certain crucial stages of its development. But no student of the medieval West should forget that Byzantium and the lands of Islam also nourished great civilizations that merit further study in their own right. They cannot be adequately understood as mere subtopics in a course devoted primarily to medieval Europe.

*Brian Tierney*



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# Introduction

There are two reasons for studying medieval history. The first is to learn to understand medieval civilization for its own sake, because it is intrinsically fascinating. The second is to learn to understand our modern world more deeply by exploring its medieval origins.

These are platitudes, but they were not always so. When Edward Gibbon wrote his great book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in the eighteenth century, it seemed natural to him to present the history of the medieval period as a gloomy story of degeneration and decay. Similarly, when Jacob Burckhardt wrote *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* a century later, he took it for granted that the emergence of the modern individual, the modern state, and modern civilization became possible only when Renaissance men turned their backs on the Middle Ages, which he saw as an era of "faith, illusion and childish prepossession." In these older views, the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West marked a disastrous setback in the progress of civilization and the revival of classical culture in the fifteenth century a dramatic resumption of that progress. In between stretched the stagnant Middle Ages, a thousand years of Gothic gloom, barbarism, violence, and monkish superstition.

This view of history involved two presuppositions. The first was that the culture of the Middle Ages was grossly inferior to that of the ancient world or the modern world. The second was that modern civilization grew directly from classical roots and that the life of the medieval world was essentially an aberration in the growth of modern society.

The first presupposition was rather naive, and the fact will seem self-evident to any twentieth-century person who has looked at a medieval cathedral or listened to medieval music or read the poetry of Dante and Chaucer. Fifty years ago, by way of reaction, a myth of a "golden Middle Age" grew up; but this was, if possible, even more of an oversimplification than the view it sought to correct. Perhaps, in the end, an evaluation of the aesthetic achievements of medieval civilization in comparison with those of other cultures

must be largely a matter of subjective taste. Some people will always prefer the cathedral of Chartres and some the Parthenon. The problem of historical periodization, on the other hand, is a matter for rational analysis, and the view that medieval civilization was merely an aberration in the development of the modern West has come to seem less and less tenable in the light of recent research.

Any student who seeks to understand the Middle Ages at all has to face this question of periodization. The problem is not merely a technical one for professional scholars. It involves the whole issue of how we orient ourselves in time, where we look for a tradition that will help to make the modern world intelligible. Many interrelated questions have to be considered. When did ancient civilization come to an end and the Middle Ages begin? And what are the criteria for answering such a question? When did the Western world begin to develop a distinctive religious tradition? When and how did Western people come to devise structures of government radically different from those of the ancient world and from the systems of Byzantium and Islam? When did the West begin to take the lead in technology? And what, if anything, persists of medieval achievements in all these spheres in the modern world? Such questions lead on inevitably to another problem of periodization. When did the Middle Ages end? Did the Reformation and the scientific revolution create a new world by abandoning medieval ways of thought or are such movements intelligible only as the end products of centuries of medieval development? Will the historians of some future civilization, looking on their past from a new perspective, perhaps think that twentieth-century people were still living in a "Middle Age?"

Here we can only suggest an approach to such problems. From the standpoint of a medievalist, the "fall of the Roman Empire" can be seen not only as the end of an old civilization but as the beginning of a new one. The upsurge of Christianity and the settlement of barbaric peoples in the western provinces of the empire introduced a new dynamism into the Western world. To be sure, judged by almost all conventional standards, European culture stood at a far lower point in the centuries immediately after the fall of Rome than in the preceding period. For most people, life was brutish and short. Except for a few clergy, virtually all the people of Western Europe were illiterate. There was incessant warfare. And yet this tough, savage society, with all its faults, contained an immeasurably greater potential for growth and adaptation than the sterile late classical civilization that it replaced.

The slow, painful fusion of classical, Christian, and barbarian cultures in the early Middle Ages formed the seedbed of a new civilization. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a new distinctively Western culture emerged. Since then Western society has experienced a process of continuous change, and, indeed, the rate of change has continuously accelerated; but, since the twelfth century, there has been no sudden break, no universal relapse into barbarism, no inexplicable change of direction. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—the age of the Renaissance and the Reformation—were indeed a time of brilliant achievement and bold innovation, but so were the twelfth and thir-