

History
UNFOLDING

CHRISTENDOM

THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Christendom: The High Middle Ages

Introduction

Emerging From a Dark Age

This MindSparks set is the second of two covering the history of Christian Europe and the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages. The first set is titled Christendom: After Rome's Fall (HS844).

This set focuses on the growing strength and vitality of Christian Europe after the chaos that had kept it on the defensive through much of the ninth and tenth centuries. While the region remained overwhelmingly agrarian, steady advancements in technology were already underway. It developed slowly in these high Middle Ages, but in later centuries it would usher in a far more rapid commercial and industrial transformation. For now, greater wealth and population did make possible a growth of towns and a revival of trade. Meanwhile, the Catholic Church reached the pinnacle of its power and in many different ways expressed a growing confidence in its Christian vision. As the feudal age faded, Europe was poised to lead the world into a new, more dynamic modern era.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in this story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Feudal Order

The images here focus on the agrarian basis of life in Europe and the full flowering of its feudal social and political order.

The Universal Church

In its Gothic architecture, its growing intellectual foundation, and its more activist spiritual and monastic efforts, the Roman Catholic Church fully expressed its authority and confidence.

Europe and the World Beyond

While the Byzantine Empire was besieged by Muslim expansion and began to weaken, Europeans felt ready to mount a counterattack. The Crusades were the result. They failed, but are still evidence of an increasingly outward-looking Europe. The illustrations here focus on the Crusades, the revival of towns and trade, and even the Black Death as examples of the effects of this new spirit.

Beyond Lord and Vassal

From the 13th century on, the feudal order began to fade away. In its place began to appear the growing power of kings and the monarchical state. The illustrations here look at three episodes in which this theme can be seen.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Christendom: The High Middle Ages***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand the concept of feudalism and the nature of the feudal order that developed in the high Middle Ages in Europe.

The Feudal Order

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

The Middle Ages was a bleak time in Europe. Its people for the most part lived in great poverty and insecurity. Yet this was not as backward and unchanging a time as it is often seen. These images of peasant farmers suggest the simple level at which most people lived. However, they also hint at some big changes. The iron farm implements these peasants had were being modified and improved in the Middle Ages in ways that would boost farm production substantially. A new iron plow, heavier than before, was able to dig deeper furrows. An effective horse collar allowed greater use of horses, which were far more efficient than oxen. By the late Middle Ages a new dynamic Europe was starting to emerge.

Illustrations 2A & 2B

Medieval Europe was the high point of the “feudal” age. Both scenes here illustrate the feudal system in different ways. Peasants lived and worked as serfs on a lord’s manor. The manor was self-sufficient, and money and trade were rare. Illustration 2A shows a serf paying the fees due to his lord “in kind.” The lord had enormous power over the serfs on his manor. But he also owed them security and military defense in return for their labor and in-kind payments. The lord of the manor in turn was often bound to fight as a knight for his own prince—the higher noble who granted him his land. Illustration 2B shows a man being knighted by his lord. This personal bond between lord and vassal was the essential element making for a feudal political order.

Illustration 3

This scene shows another knighting ceremony. As it suggests, the lord-vassal relationship was based on a strong sense of duty and honor. The vassal who was granted land took a solemn oath to serve the person who granted it. The oath of loyalty was binding for life; anyone who broke it was considered a traitor. In a feudal order, it is this personal bond, not citizenship in a nation or other territory, that is the real basis of political order. Though from a later time, this illustration captures the emotional spirit of the feudal bond. It was a bond based on a code of chivalry. Along with respect for the lord, there was a duty to defend the honor of the lord’s lady. This code may have softened somewhat the otherwise harsher aspects of life women experienced in medieval Europe.

Lesson 1—The Feudal Order

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. This illustration shows six peasant farmers from Europe during the Middle Ages. How can you tell these people lived in the Middle Ages?
2. The illustration also helps show how primitive farming methods were in the Middle Ages. How does the illustration show this?
3. Nevertheless, farm techniques in the Middle Ages were improving. New methods of growing food were developed during the Middle Ages to keep up with the increasing population of Europe. For example, the use of iron in farming tools was increasing. Why might this have been an important change?
4. A key improvement in the Middle Ages was the use of a heavier iron plow along with a special collar that enabled easier harnessing of horses. Why would those two changes have been important? Can you think of other important agricultural improvements during the Middle Ages?

Follow-up Activities

1. Conduct research into the development of the iron plow and the horse collar in the Middle Ages. Find pictures or diagrams of these important agricultural improvements. Also try to find images of peasants actually using them. Write short paragraphs for each of your visuals. Use the images and paragraphs in a bulletin-board display.
2. Create a diagram of a medieval manor from around the 11th century CE. Be sure to include a diagram of the three-field system. In addition to the fields, be sure to show the serfs' homes, the lord's actual manor (or castle), the village and the commons, the mill, the church, and anything else likely to have been part of a typical medieval manor. Finally, in an inset with your diagram, show what a single peasant's holdings would have looked like. Use your diagram as the basis of a brief talk to the class on manorialism.