

SETTING THE STAGE: BACKGROUND TO THE RENAISSANCE

What follows sets a stage for our course, and provides a condensed version of part of chapter 13 (pages 411-427). This brief summary will address the more important concepts, developments, ideas, and events that took place in the time of before the Renaissance era. You may use your textbook and other provided resources to supplement this summary.

BACKGROUND: THE MIDDLE AGES

The **Middle Ages** period generally refers to the period from 500-1450 CE, and is historically divided between “Dark Ages”, from 500-1000, and the High Middle Ages, from 1000-1450. Before 500 the Romans had established an empire which established a significant degree of uniform law across much of the Mediterranean and Western Europe; a model of rulership—the Caesar, or emperor; a language of elites—Latin; a modernized system of infrastructure—roads, bridges, and aqueducts; and by the end an officially sanctioned religion, Christianity. Generally speaking, after the collapse of the Roman Empire in 500, there was an increase in disorder and fragmentation, caused by ongoing migration of new groups like the Vandals and the Goths; invasions—especially the Vikings in the 9th century; the spread of Islam which threatened northern centers of power and moved into the Iberian peninsula; and a collapse of the strong level of central authority possessed by Roman emperors of the past. Vulnerable people now sought the protection from powerful families in local areas; they traded their labor for protection, and so marked the early beginnings of a social order called feudalism. These families would also serve as the basis for Europe’s nobility. Others sought the refuge of religion, and joined monasteries, where monks stowed away scholarly classical texts to protect them from the “barbarians”.

While “barbarians” did visit Europe—especially Scandinavian Vikings—this did not mean that Europe was completely devoid of any form of government. Stronger groups emerged over time, and one, the Franks, under Charlemagne, established a new “Holy Roman Empire”, which would be divided among 3 sons. These 3 new kingdoms resembled, vaguely, what would look like a rough map of modern Europe. While the French region kept somewhat unified, Charlemagne’s two other sons in central and eastern Europe allowed their kingdoms to be divided and fragmented even further. England as well was becoming more recognizable. Invaded by the Saxons, who brought over tribal traditions of consensus based government, England would also face invasion from the Normans, who brought over their more Romanized traditions of rational law and imperial rule. England, in fact, would mix these two traditions, and would ultimately have a legislative body and a monarch. To the East the Byzantine Empire, which had split away from the Roman Empire in 330 CE, maintained its autocratic government and Christian orthodox religion through a succession of dynasties. Europeans may have felt beleaguered by Vikings to the north, and advancing Muslim civilization to the south, but this did not mean that Europe was a void of culture and government in these so-called “Dark Ages”.

EUROPE IN 1000 AD: Note that the Holy Roman Empire was actually divided up into multiple individual principalities and political units, which you can’t see on this map.



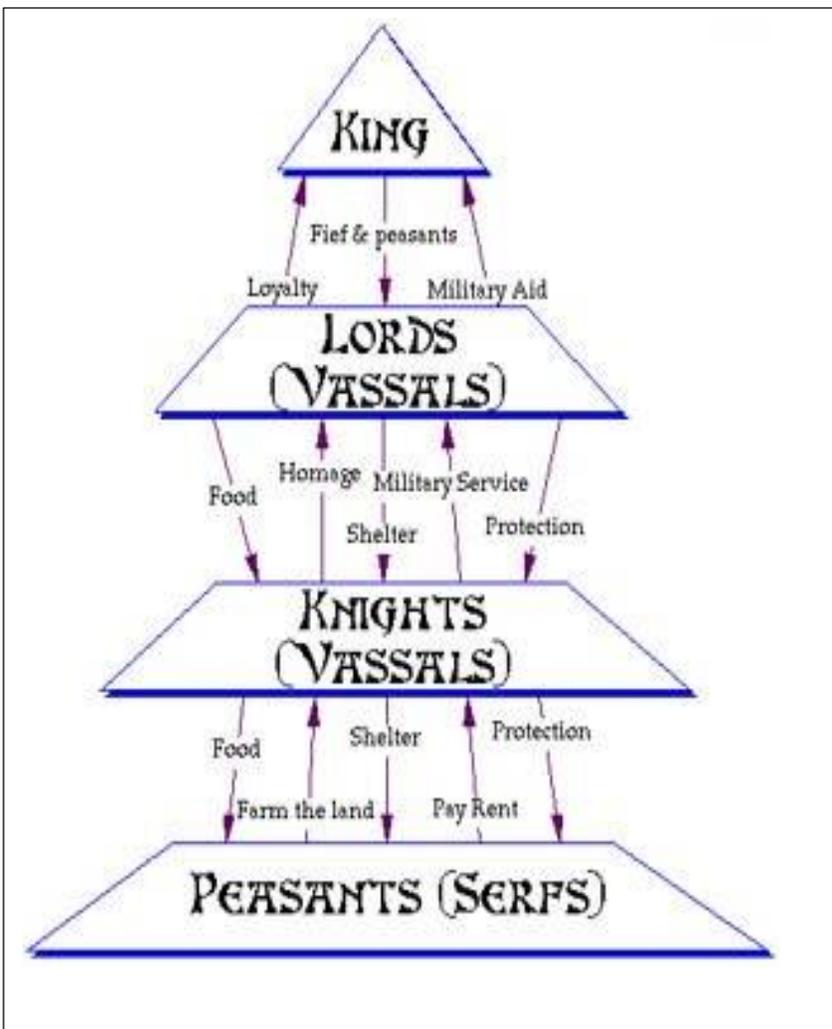
THINGS TURN AROUND: 1000-1300, HIGH MIDDLE AGES

By the 11 and 12th centuries, Europe began to “turn a corner”, at least in terms of achieving relative stability within its own borders, and showing signs of economic recovery and growth. As well, the seemingly relentless Viking invasions had died off, especially as the seafarers intermarried into other European societies and pursued more peaceful “career paths”.

The Crusades: While Islam was being gradually pushed southward on the Iberian peninsula, it had expanded significantly in the Middle East, including the Holy Lands, and ultimately controlling strategically vital lands, cities, and ports. Europeans, united somewhat by faith and led by the Church and monarchs, participated in a series of ultimately seven crusades against Muslim centers of power in the Holy Land from the 11th to the 13th centuries. While the Crusades were tarnished and unsuccessful, there were other more interesting effects: monarchs and popes were strengthened, nobles were weakened, finances were modernized, ideas and goods were exchanged, trade networks were increased, and urban centers grew, all signs of economic growth. Ports and river towns, benefitted tremendously, from Palermo in Sicily to London along the Thames River. They of course lay along Europe’s natural highways. While subsistence agriculture was still the dominant economy in Europe, there was an increase in the population of merchants and artisans in these cities, though overall their numbers were small. There was an increased use of money rather than barter as well. Population growth was sure and steady, but nothing like it is today.

European Society: Generally speaking, Europeans in the Middle Ages understood themselves as belonging to one of three social groups: the clergy or church, the nobility—including knights-- and monarchy, and everyone else. Much of this society was organized in a surprisingly efficient system called feudalism, in which monarchs, the nobility, and the peasantry fulfilled mutual obligations and duties. Nobles, as “vassals”, held feudal “fiefs”, or lands given to them by the monarch, and of course the monarch received military

assistance and wealth from his nobles. The peasants, protected by everyone above them, worked the land. All shared a common religious faith in this kind of community. There was a place for everyone, and everyone was in their place.



Parallel to this structure was the Church.

Kings often claimed the authority to control the Church within their kingdoms, including the right to appoint bishops. Some estimate, as well, that the Church owned up to 1/3 land in certain areas. Conflict was inevitable. Here’s the breakdown of the Church hierarchy:

- Pope
- Cardinals
- Archbishops
- Bishops
- Parish Priests

Parallel to this Church structure itself was the monastic system—also under papal control—including monasteries and convents.

Another smaller but energetic class were people who became powerful through commerce and craft. In towns and cities craftsmen organized into guilds, and a business class, including bankers and creditors, appeared in urban areas, especially the city-states on the Italian peninsula. The development of this class, among other factors, would help undermine the structure of feudalism in different parts of Europe over time.

There were no truly absolute monarchs in the Middle Ages. Even the Holy Roman Emperor lacked complete authority—and his job was an elected position to begin with. Monarchs had to contend with often unruly nobles and a vigilant Church, both of whom pursued their own interests and defended their values. The Church, as well, was a significant landholder across Europe. The extent to which the church exercised power and authority within secular kingdoms was a sore point between monarchs and popes.

The Church was very powerful, and competed with the monarchs and nobility (who turn competed with each other). The Church exercised financial power, property power, and cultural power, especially the ability to excommunicate. Many priests were illiterate, and those who could read and write were found in the upper levels of the clergy, whose ranks were often supplied by nobles.

Not knowing how to read was one thing; not knowing the time was another. A medieval person's sense of chronology was different: life was lived seasonally, and many could not identify their birth year. Surnames were rare. Life was lived permanently local for the most part. It was a matter of survival, subsistence, and faith in a better afterlife. Life expectancy itself was roughly 35 years, and upwards of 1/3 of children died before the age of 5. There was little public sanitation and no recognizable form of a police force; local and private violence was endemic. When night fell, the lights were truly out, something very hard to find in any industrialized country today. There was no real "childhood" to speak of: children were expected to act like adults as soon as possible, especially in poorer families.

Marriages were arranged for practical reasons, namely to maintain or increase property, although this does not mean that love was absent in a marriage.

Some historians could claim that life for women was arguably better in the late middle ages than afterwards. A noticeable number of noblewomen at this time were educated, literate, and daughters could enter convents, which were led and managed by women. Peasant women worked alongside their husbands, unlike a more modern division of labor. In town women in commercial families sometimes informally managed business and property. Many women in fact were brought up for "masculine" crimes—not witchcraft—but carrying out physical violence and managing prostitutes. There were moral and legal precepts that limited the agency (control and freedom) of women—decided by men, of course, but these by no means were absolute in reality.

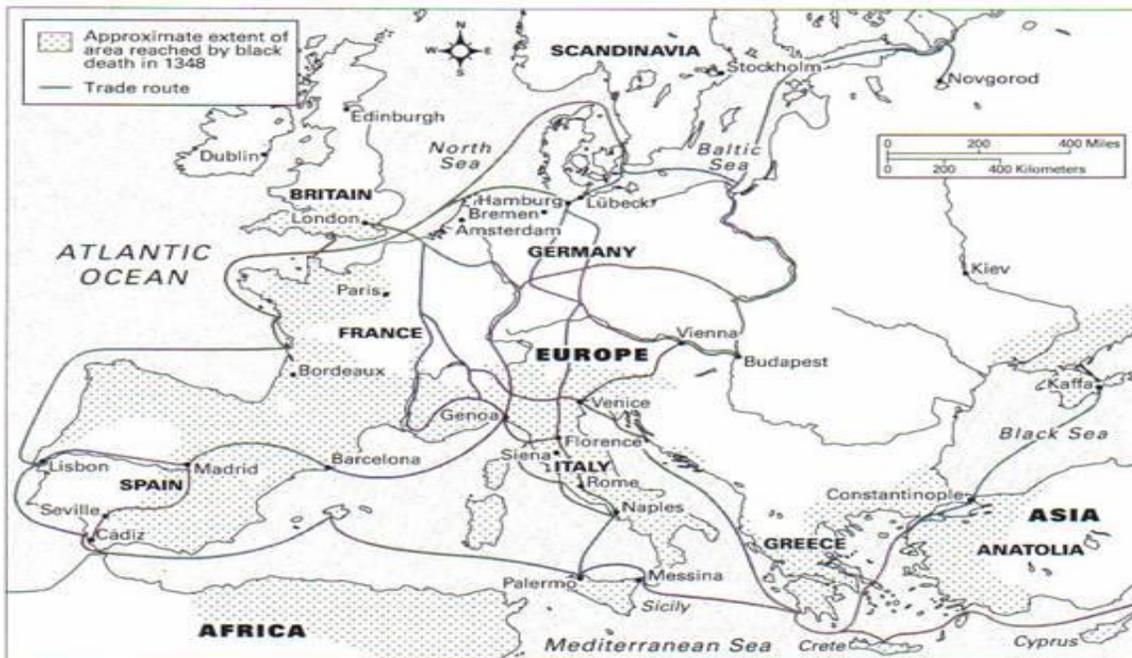
The political outlines of a modern Europe underwent some key changes. By 1300 Charlemagne's dream of a Holy Roman Empire fractured even further into various smaller kingdoms, principalities, and counties. The Holy Roman Emperor was an elected position, and the electors were the most powerful nobles in central Europe. In some sense being the job of emperor was a thankless, difficult job, and trying to govern over this situation was like trying to herd cats. Over time the Hapsburg noble family became more or less the permanent imperial family.

THE 14TH AND EARLY 15TH CENTURIES: A TIME OF CRISIS

The Crusades were over, cities were growing, trade was increasing, and governments were modernizing: maybe Europe escaped the Dark Ages for good. The population of Europe probably doubled between 1000-1300, even with the inherent dangers of ordinary life. A series of crises, however, occurred in the 14th century that profoundly disrupted and the lives of Europeans, and yet also set the stage for a renewal of civilization — the Renaissance.

CRISIS: THE LITTLE ICE AGE AND FAMINE: Beginning in the late, the Baltic Sea froze over in 1303, 1306 and 1307, something never before seen by Europeans. What they were seeing was the beginning of a Little Ice Age, which would last until the mid-19th century. Alpine glaciers advanced, destroying farming villages. Portuguese experienced more snowstorms. Norse settlements in Greenland were cut off and ultimately abandoned. English fisherman benefitted as cod moved southward—obviously Norse fisherman suffered. Europeans could no longer count on warm summers for agriculture: and the result of colder, rainy summers was famine, which would spread in 1315-1317, and especially weakened densely populated areas. Europeans became chronically undernourished: there would be less resistance to various to new devastating illnesses down the line.

CRISIS: THE BLACK DEATH: In 1346 Black Death, arrived in Europe via the Black Sea on ships with rats that carried fleas that carried the virus. It swept rapidly along preexisting trade routes, and, as an airborne disease, could be caught by sneezing or coughing. The plague of 1346-1351 wiped out a third to one-half of an already weakened European population. The Black Death itself refers to actually 3 kinds of plagues that appeared: the bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague.



It was an awful spectacle that took place in stages. At first, nausea and headaches, then the appearance of egg-sized swellings—the buboes, which turn black, and then begin to ooze pus and blood. The body began to reek. Death from infection occurred within 3-4 days. There were other forms, pneumonic plague—arguably deadlier because it was airborne, and septicemic plague through sores.

The plague wiped out a third to half of Europe's population, which would not recover for several hundred years. Some areas suffered a 75-80% death rate. Isolated areas, like the islands off the coast of Scotland, avoided the Black Death. The cities of Genoa and Dublin were more typical: in both about 35% of the population died. In Paris the population dropped by 42%, by 66% percent in Caux, Normandy, by 90% in Florence, Italy. Densely populated areas were hit hard, scarcely populated areas less so.

Efforts to stop the disease failed. One person could mean the death of an entire village. All social classes were vulnerable to the plague -- wealthy merchants, nobles, peasants, the educated, the illiterate. The efforts of physicians were by and large useless. Trained in medieval universities, physicians did not have a modern understanding of science, and saw themselves superior to surgeons (essentially barbers and butchers) and apothecaries (pharmacists) of this time. Various quack explanations were proposed: the sign of Aquarius corrupted the air and poisoned the heart. A series of earthquakes sent toxic fumes from the Earth's center. Some explanations were both ridiculous *and* destructive. European Jews were blamed for the plague, and anti-Semitic attacks took place in several locations. In 1349, the Jewish communities of Mainz and Cologne were destroyed and in that same year, the citizens of Strasbourg murdered 2,000 Jews. Monarchs and princes either couldn't or wouldn't control these acts of mob behavior. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities were destroyed. Many Jews went to eastwards, to Poland, where the effects of the plague were not as severe, and where Jews were welcomed by monarchs for their talents and economic resources. Other Europeans blamed themselves: religious followers known as *flagellants*, who formed groups without church approval, beat themselves with cords in ritual penance to the point of bleeding. Others responded in various ways: living more temperate lives, going on pilgrimages giving themselves over to their impulses. A "*Cult of Death*" emerged that reacted to this environment through art and literature. A common artistic image was the "*Dance of the Dead*", in which no social class was spared.



Other effects of the plague were profound and surprising.

Farm laborers and artisans who survived saw their value and wages increase, and could force their employers to pay higher wages and higher prices for work and goods. Agricultural productivity and prices fell, but craft products became more expensive. Landowners and nobles were hurt, and some tried to reverse their bad luck by forcing peasants to stay on their farms while freezing their wages, a specific goal of the English Parliament's *Statute of Laborers* of 1351. Along with destructive wars, the Black Death exacerbated the effects several revolts of commoners against an apparently insensitive nobility.

Craft artisans in cities had long been organized in guilds, which controlled access, training, and prices. Artisans who survived the plague emerged more powerful and sought to consolidate their improved position in society. A revolution began to emerge in the field of medicine, as new ranks of physicians and surgeons replaced those who had fallen to the plague. Surgeons, once seen as the "hacks" of medicine, in fact, became equal in status to physicians at the University of Paris by 1390. Patients demanded better services, and quasi-modern hospitals began to emerge at this time.

Upper class widows of nobles and merchants benefitted to a degree: the Black Death forced another look at laws regarding property inheritance by women when their husbands died, especially so in England, where women could now inherit property, maintain estates, manage commerce, and actually join guilds (though not participate in their political activities). Many women chose to remain celibate, many entering convents.

The Church suffered as well. Prayers, pilgrimages, and masses did not appear to work. For many God seemed to be punishing humanity. A whole generation of clerics was massively reduced, and many sought to escape affected areas in order to avoid the unpleasant fate of ordinary persons. Those who stayed to comfort the suffering and administer last rites most likely died of the plague themselves. The Black Death undermined faith in the Church as a reliable protector against the evil in the world.

CRISIS: THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR Along with famine and a plague, Europeans faced war. The *Hundred Years' War* began in May 1337, in some sense over a family squabble. When French king Charles IV, died without a male heir, the English king Edward III—who happened to be a grandson of an *earlier* French king, claimed the throne. French nobles would have none of this, and chose the next closest *French* relative to their dead king, Philip VI of Valois. Compounding this disagreement was the fact that England already had land in France, held as "fiefs" from earlier Norman history—this actually made Edward III a vassal to Philip VI! Edward III unsurprisingly was not about to be anyone's vassal. Finally, France and England both wanted control over a commercial powerhouse, the bustling city of Flanders, the cloth center of Europe. The problem here? Flanders was a fief of France, but Flanders also depended on England for wool to make cloth. Clearly this would be a war that involved a family squabble, national identity, and control for territory and wealth. It's important to note that both monarchs needed the support of their nobility-dominated legislative assemblies: Parliament in England, and the Estates General in France. Generally speaking, France entered the war weaker than England because of its own internal divisions and desire of nobles to haggle with the king, who wanted to raise taxes

for the war. The French would have this problem for the entire war. The English monarchs were more skillful in negotiating with their nobles in Parliament, a more united bloc of nobles.

The war took place in a few key stages.

The First Stage: Edward III Who Almost Nailed It: Edward III was crafty. He embargoed English wool to Flanders, a fief of French fief, which caused a Flemish revolt against France, and led to a Flemish treaty with England in 1340. The Battle of Crecy in 1346 resulted in the English control of the port of Calais, right along the Channel. The English would control Calais until 1558.

Then the Black Death appeared, which understandably hurt the belligerents' capacity to wage war.

In 1356 Edward took the French king, John II, hostage. The Estates General in this climate pressed its advantage, and led by the powerful merchant Etienne Marcel, demanded a "Magna Carta" for France, which would give it power similar to England's Parliament. But the French lacked enough unity to make the Estates General an effective way to govern. Worse, the French privileged classes tried to force the peasantry to pay more taxes—the *taille and gabelle*--and repair properties without being compensated. A breaking point was reached with the Jacquerie (named after Jacques Bonhomme, a hero to common people), a series of bloody rebellions of commoners, furious at the burdens imposed upon themselves, against the nobles, in 1358. This was quickly put down by the nobility.

In 1360 a treaty had been reached, the Peace of Bretigny-Calais. The results: Edward was no longer a vassal; France paid a hefty ransom for King John II's release, and Edward played nicely by renouncing the French throne. Then Edward died in 1377, and the treaty fell apart.

The Second Stage: The Triumph of Henry V: Under Richard II, the English had their own Jacquerie. In 1381, Wat Tyler, a journeyman and John Ball, a priest, united peasants and artisans in a revolt against a poll tax passed by Richard II. The Wat Tyler Rebellion was brutally crushed, and Tyler killed. For a time these internal problems would somewhat weaken English efforts against the French.

Years later, Henry V of England seized a new opportunity: the growing problems between the Kingdom of France and its next-door neighbor, the powerful duchy of Burgundy to the east. Henry exploited this division and routed the French at Agincourt in 1415, an event which would serve as the subject of a Shakespeare play. (The Burgundians align themselves with the English at this point) At the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, Henry V was named the heir of his counterpart, French king Charles VI. Then they both died within months of each other in 1422. A young Charles VII retreated to Bourges in the south, and aligned himself with the other French who considered the Troyes treaty worthless.

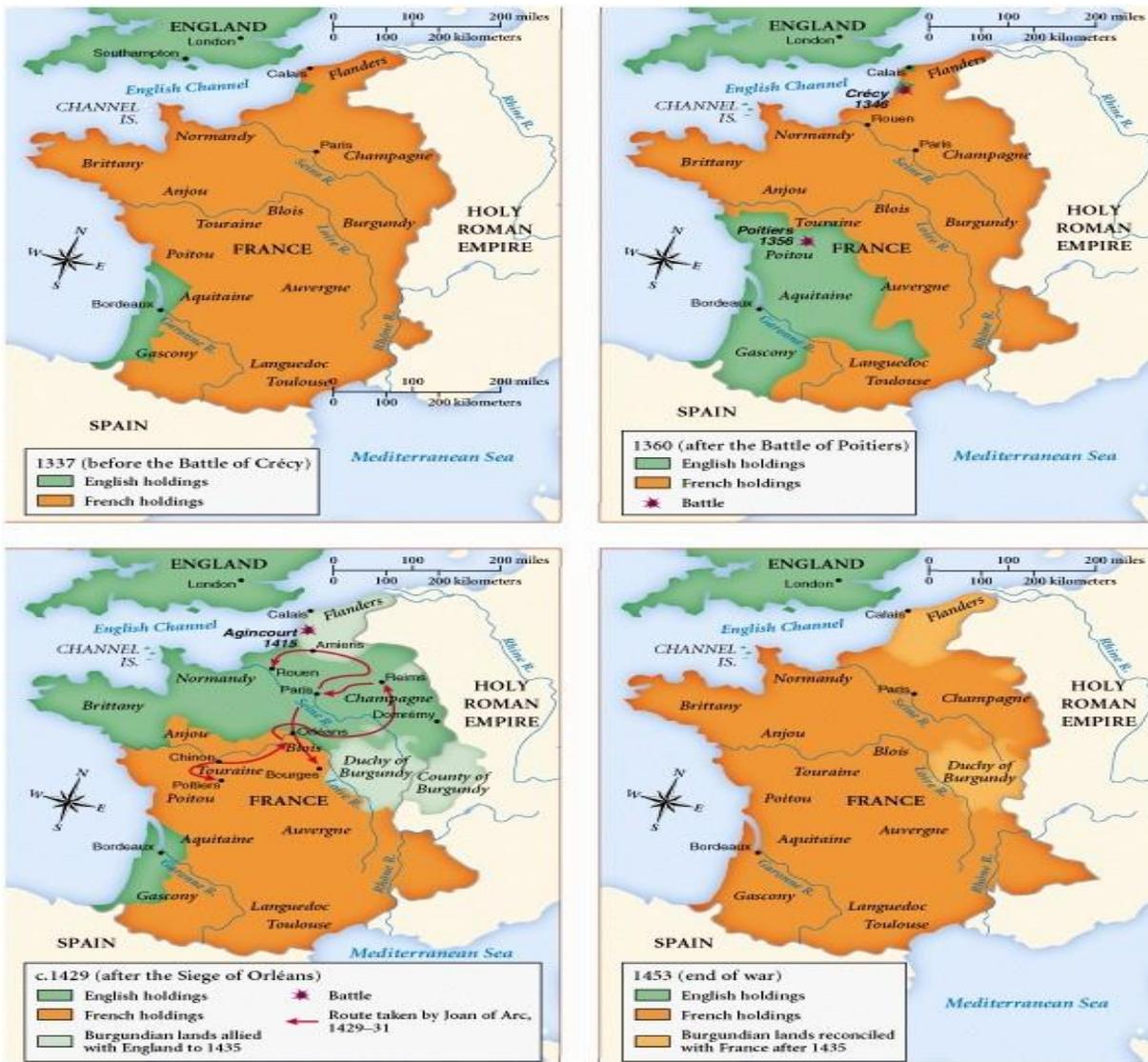
The Third Stage: The Joan of Arc Burned At The Stake Part: By the 1420s, France was dangerously close to collapsing, having suffered one embarrassing defeat after another. Charles VII was tucked away in southern France, and waiting for a change of fortune.

In 1429 a young peasant woman, Joan of Arc, presented herself to King Charles. She claimed God sent her to deliver the city of Orleans from the tired English forces who had for months been carrying out a siege. At this point, Charles would try anything. It was a gamble: it would add a religious element to this war. If she was considered a heretic England would have the moral upper hand. French clerics verified her purity, and so, appointed as a kind of symbolic head of the French forces, Joan of Arc changed the momentum in favor of the French, in part because of the enemy's exhausted condition, and very importantly, because of her own nationalistic and symbolic appeal. Soon after Charles VII was crowned in 1429, although the English still held some areas. Joan of Arc was captured by France's rivals, the Burgundians, who turned her over to the English. She was tried and executed in 1431. Rather than demoralize the French, the execution turned Joan into a national martyr. In 1435 the Burgundians switched over to the French side, which allowed France to push England all the way to the port of Calais. The war ended in 1453.

The effects of the war are notable. The war was costly, and aggravated the destruction and trauma caused by the plague and the famine. It showed that ordinary people could reach their breaking points, resulting in violent revolts, which were suppressed. The French, of course, suffered more than their English counterparts. Often "Free Companies" of soldiers pillaged, robbed, looted, and killed innocent people. To stop this from happening, the French government formed its first standing, or permanent, army in 1445, a step in a more modern direction.

The war helped both countries forge a sense of national identity. The English stop using French as the official court language. The French rally around the divine and nationalistic cause of Joan of Arc. The modern borders of France, as well, became more recognizable. England truly became an island nation, which shaped much of its national character.

The governments of both wars were forced to modernize their finances, and a modern system of taxation and revenue emerges in the French government. England's parliament became more powerful as monarchs tried to gain support for waging war. France's estates general retreated to the political background.



CRISIS: PROBLEMS FOR THE CHURCH: The Great Schism and Religious Unrest: Throughout the plague and war the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant religious institution in Western Europe. The Roman Catholic Church had for a long time split from the Orthodox Church. The two Christian faiths had different beliefs about theology, and about the priesthood. Much of Spain, North Africa, and parts of the Mediterranean governed under Islamic laws. By 1300, the Ottoman Empire, and Islamic state which had emerged in Turkey, aggrandized more territory in these same areas.

In the 12th and 13th centuries Catholic popes had created a kind of “papal monarchy”, which looked more like a secular government and maybe a little less like a church. Politics and power clearly became more important to the pope and his cardinals. Legal, financial, and dogmatic power was centralized, to the point when, in 1301, Pope Boniface claimed that “God has set popes over kings and kingdoms.” Popes also claimed that it was illegal for monarchs to tax the clergy, and championed clerical independence within secular states, both of which became big points of contention in the 100 Years War. Monarchs as well began to challenge Church authority, especially in France. Pope Boniface’s “Unam Sanctum” of 1302 claimed spiritual authority over temporal authority, which caused an angry French reaction, in which the pope was actually almost killed. After Boniface died (of natural causes), King Philip of France pressured Pope Clement V to the move the papacy to Avignon, France. There the popes lived from 1309-1376, a period often called the Babylonian Captivity of the church. What would happen next was bizarre.

In 1377 Pope Gregory XI brought the papacy back to Rome. After he died, Roman citizens pressured the cardinals to elect an Italian for the papacy. The cardinals chose an archbishop, who took the name Urban VI. Urban wanted to reform the church in different ways, including attacking the easy living and clerical luxury on the part of the cardinals, who then slipped away from Rome and met

in secret to pick a new pope, who happened to be a cousin of the king of France, Clement. So by 1378 there were now two popes in Europe: Urban at Rome and Clement in Avignon, thus marking the Great Schism, which lasted until 1417. Of course the popes excommunicated each other, and of course the powers of Europe aligned themselves with their preferred pope: Urban or Clement. For example, Scotland, England's enemy, supported the French pope, while the German Emperor, suspicious of France, recognized Urban. Ultimately, a council was convened at the set Italy, in 1409, where a gathering of theologians and other church officials dumped both popes and selected another. The result was the creation of *three* popes, each claiming power. Everyone in Europe, it seemed, would be going to hell. Fed up with this situation, the German Emperor posted a Council at the imperial city of Constance in 1414, where one pope in 1417 was decided upon: Martin V. So ended the Great Schism.

This long-term controversy had significant effects on the church, and religious faith. Some wanted to reform the Church by establishing periodic councils, or assemblies, that represented Christians and would shape policy with the pope. Many of these philosophical conciliarists also supported the idea of separation of church and state. One notable in this conciliar movement was Marsiglio of Padua, who in his *Defensor Paci* argued that the church should be subordinate to the state, and that spiritual authority should lay with a council of laymen and priests. John Wyclif of England went further, and claimed that any spiritual authority should rest on scripture alone, which meant that the church would have to give up its claims of secular power, not to mention its property. Wyclif's followers, called Lollards, were encouraged to read the bible for themselves, and in their own vernacular, English. In the Czech region of central Europe, Jan Hus built on Wyclif's ideas, denied papal authority, and called for translations of the Bible into the local language, and declared indulgences pointless. Like Wyclif, he gained many followers, to the point where he himself was invited to the 1415 Council of Constance. His invitation was in fact a death sentence, and Hus was tried, condemned, and burned at the stake. Nevertheless, in 1430 the emperor did finally recognize the Hussite church, an act that acknowledged, in some sense, a growing Czech national identity.

Other groups as well explored alternative but safer paths of reform, ones where they were less reliant on a seemingly unreliable and distant church hierarchy. Christians on their own formed *confraternities*, voluntary groups organized by devotional preference in cities and towns. They organized religious events for their communities, and so provided lay leadership for the faithful. In Holland, by the end of the late 14th century, laypeople formed a group called the Brethren and Sisters of the Common life. They lived in organized Christian communities which emphasized simplicity, charity, hospitality, and education. These voluntary and popular expressions of faith demonstrated that ordinary Christians begin to rely less on papal authority. Many Europeans now tried to make religion a personal experience.

By the beginning of the Renaissance the reputation of the church had been tarnished by the Schism and traumatized by the Black Death and to a degree the Hundred Years War. For many Europeans the church seem to fail to respond effectively to the needs of its faithful, and so they turned to other means for their own salvation.

CRISIS: THE SACK OF CONSTANTINOPLE--The Ottoman Expansion Midway into the 16th century the city of Constantinople, in many ways the most important strategic gateway to Asia, was the center of what was by now a weak empire. It was ripe for the picking. Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI failed to gain enough military support from Western Europe in order to offset the threat of the Ottomans, a newer Muslim empire from Turkey, led by Sultan Mehmed II. After a seven week siege in the late spring of 1453, the Ottomans had essentially removed the last vestige of the Byzantine Empire -- in some sense the very last true vestige of the old Roman Empire. The Ottomans gained a very important strategic foothold which would serve as a launch pad for further conquests into Eastern Europe. Had Western Europe not been divided by war and faith, perhaps Constantinople would have remained in the hands of Christian Europe. Or not.

There were a few significant effects. This was yet another shocking, traumatic blow to European Christianity, and introduced a new power that Europeans have to contend with: the Ottomans. Trade routes to Asia that had once been open to West Europeans were now too large degree closed. They would have to find another route to get to Asia.

While Mehmed II himself became a new Roman-style emperor of sorts (Islam would be the official religion, of course), others later would claim that mystical imperial lineage, namely orthodox Russia to the north, and also Serbia and Bulgaria. This dream of a crusade to rescue Constantinople would become very important in later history.

Finally, the exodus of Byzantine émigrés—including librarians, scholars, philosophers, humanists, scientists, writers, astronomers, and poets—westwards would change European society in new ways. The Italian city-states received these new guests, the product of a kind of "brain drain" as a result of the fall of Constantinople. Many historians believe that this in fact was an important trigger point for the Renaissance, our next topic of study.

