

**Understanding  
World History**



# The Late Middle Ages



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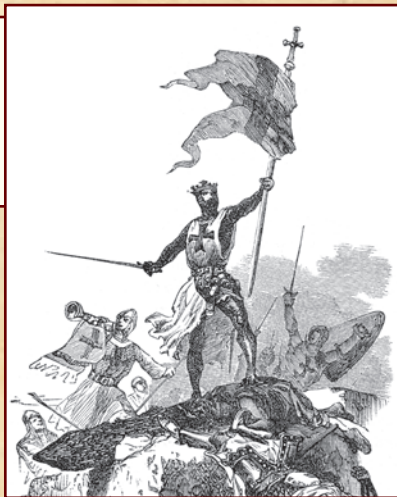
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# Important Events of the Late Middle Ages



**1096**

The Crusades, a series of religious wars between Christians and Muslims, begins marking what many historians describe as the start of the late Middle Ages in Europe.



**1075**

The first of several major reform movements of the church begins, launched by a conflict between Pope Gregory VII and some of Europe's rulers over the power to appoint church officials to their clerical offices.

**1000**

**1100**

**1200**

**1300**

**1086**

A document that was probably the first census in Europe, the Domesday Book, is completed in England to provide information to the king on taxable property.



**1108**

The rule of Louis VI, a key figure in medieval France's influential Capetian dynasty, commences.

**1215**

King John of England signs the Magna Carta, a document in which the rights and privileges of his barons were recognized and guaranteed.

**1272**

The Eighth Crusade, the last of the major Crusades, ends.



# Introduction



## The Defining Characteristics of the Late Middle Ages

**T**he era known as the late Middle Ages was a period of momentous and life-changing events. It altered forever the course of history in Europe and beyond. Wars, the rise of unified kingdoms, bloody battles among those nations, confrontations with the powerful Christian church, the loosening of a centuries-old system of economics and class—all of these and more carved the Continent into a new shape and foreshadowed equally sweeping changes to come.

No clear-cut markers define the beginning and end of the roughly five centuries that made up the late Middle Ages. Even today there is considerable debate among scholars about when this period began and ended. The period immediately before the late Middle Ages is often referred to as the early Middle Ages, an era that lasted roughly from the mid-400s to somewhere around the year 1000.

A date that is often cited as marking the beginning of the era that followed, the late Middle Ages, is 1096. That year marked the start of the first in a series of religious wars called the Crusades. These battles were between the Christian nations of Europe and the Islamic nations of the Middle East. The conflict between the forces of these two religions had begun in the seventh century and would continue, to varying degrees, to the present day.

The date marking the end of the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the next historical era is difficult to determine. Many historians



In earlier times individual people, even the most powerful, had in most cases few individual rights. During this period, however, the concept of individual human rights was very much on the rise. Medieval scholar Stu Witmer comments: “For me, a main theme of the period is the development of the individual. In Roman times there was little or no idea of the ‘individual’ but by the [end of the Middle Ages] there was no denying the individual as the most potent force in Western Europe.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Middle Class, Guilds, and Communes**

Changes in economics and society gradually took the place of strict feudalism. Lords and peasants began to exercise their collective and individual rights. For example, the nobility started to demand the right to form councils that could vote on decisions of group importance, rather than deferring to absolute rule by a king. This gave many in the

*Merchants show their wares to potential customers at a fifteenth-century market. The rise of the middle class, which consisted largely of merchants and other businesspeople, coincided with improved roads, increased trade, and the migration of rural people to cities in search of work.*





# For Further Research



## Books

Norman Bancroft-Hunt, *Living in the Middle Ages*. New York: Chelsea House, 2008.

Kevin Cunningham, *Bubonic Plague*. Edina, MN: Essential Library, 2011.

Stephen Currie, *Medieval Crusades*. San Diego, CA: Lucent, 2009.

Peter Edwards, *Europe and the Middle Ages*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009.

Katherine Hinds, *Everyday Life in Medieval Europe*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish, 2008.

Laura Scandiffio, *Crusades: Kids at the Crossroads*. Toronto, ON: Annick, 2009.

Pamela White, *Exploration in the World of the Middle Ages, 500–1500*. New York: Chelsea House, 2009.

## Websites

“The Bayeux Tapestry” ([www.hastings1066.com/baythumb.shtml](http://www.hastings1066.com/baythumb.shtml)). This site provides information on and full-color photographs of the famous tapestry commemorating the Battle of Hastings.

“Castles on the Web” ([www.castlesontheweb.com/](http://www.castlesontheweb.com/)). As the name implies, this site has extensive information, photos, and more focused on the castles of medieval Europe.

“The European Middle Ages” ([www.wsu.edu:8080/%7Edee/MA/MA.HTM](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/%7Edee/MA/MA.HTM)). This site, maintained by a history professor at Washington State University’s history department, has extensive essays on a wide range of topics.

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