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LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND A RELATIVELY
NEW AND OBSCURE EXPLANATION FOR THEIR END

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The Middle Ages have been loosely described as the period in history between ancient and modern times in Western Europe. Historians differ as to the precise beginning and end of the Middle Ages, but they roughly spanned the period of from 400 A.D. to 1500 A.D. This time in history is also known as the medieval period, the word medieval having its derivation from the Latin words medium and aevum.

Before the beginning of the Middle Ages, Western Europe was part of the Roman Empire. By the year 400 A.D., however, the influence and power of the Roman Empire had begun to decline to the extent that it was no longer practical or possible to control this vast empire that extended well beyond the gates of Rome. Politically, economically, socially, and spiritually the empire had declined. The large armies that had once protected the huge geographical area comprising the empire and that had provided the stability needed for the existence of a strong colonial government, were recalled to Rome to protect the city from enemies from both within and without the city. At this same general time in history, the invasions by Germanic tribes began which weakened, and ultimately destroyed, the influence of classical

civilization upon Western Europe. These invaders were those tribes of people who lived just beyond the Northern and Eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire. For the most part, they had migrated from Scandanavia in the Third Century A.D. Generally speaking, these people were crude and ignorant in comparison to the relatively sophisticated inhabitants of the Roman Empire, and they had absolutely no regard for the aesthetic and cultural atmosphere created by the influence of Rome.

The invasions by the barbaric tribes destroyed the existing strong central government in Western Europe, and these invasions, over a period of many years, resulted in the establishment of numerous small kingdoms. The relentless attacks by the Germanic tribes also gradually destroyed the trade routes linking Western Europe to the rest of the world. These trade routes had been in existance for hundreds of years and without the continuing commerce they provided, there was no constant contact with any of the remainder of the civilized world and, as a result, Western Europe was virtually isolated. With the elimination of this trade and commerce, the vast majority of the people populating Western Europe were compelled to earn a living by working with the land. This natural progression caused the disappearance of

the middle class for all practical purposes, as this class had consisted of the no longer needed tradesmen and artisans. The boorish, loutish, barbaric way of life of the German tribes gradually replaced the cultured Roman style of life. Educational and cultural endeavors were all but forgotten. Schools disappeared, with the final impact being that almost no one could read or write. The disappearance of the institutions of learning eventually resulted in the gradual destruction of what little remained of ancient Greek and Roman knowledge. The great skills of ancient literature, architecture, painting, and sculpture were forgotten.

Everyday life in the Middle Ages can only be described as an arduous struggle to survive. Regardless of the glamorous appeal of the Crusades, the Age of Chivalry and castle life, the day to day drudgery and almost insurmountable obstacles to any semblance of genteel living would make all but the most robust and adventuresome of us cringe at the thought of living one thousand years ago. Even our most essential necessities would have been considered luxuries. The life of this period is extremely difficult to visualize because of the dramatic difference in our quality of life and the quality of life that existed in the Middle Ages. Consider, if

you will, how our own lives have changed in just the last fifty years. During the Middle Ages at least half of the land could not be cultivated because of the dense forests and murky swamps that covered Europe. The life expectancy of a man in the Middle Ages was only thirty years, this low chronological age being the result of continuous warfare among the numerous kingdoms, and diseases such as the Black Death that destroyed from one-fourth to one-half of the population of Europe. Fewer than twenty per cent of the people who lived in the Middle Ages ever traveled more than ten miles from their place of birth.

The numerous small kingdoms that arose as a consequence of the multitude of invasions eventually gave birth to feudalism. Feudalism was the inevitable product of the failure of a central government to provide for the basic functions of society. Private arrangements had to be made to substitute for the failure of public authority. Feudalism was political, economic, and social. It included the relationships of lords and vassals. It included the system of government employed in these medieval monarchies. It included the system of land tenure by which land was held in return for definite services rendered. Feudalism was both extremely complex and also fundamentally simple. Medieval society was sharply

divided into three classes of those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked. These were the lords, the clergy, and the peasants or serfs. The peasants were by far the largest class and they existed only to provide a comfortable life for the lords and the clergy.

It is difficult to overestimate the effect of the physical environment upon the life of man in the Middle Ages. His food, costume, dwelling, industry, and culture were determined almost entirely by his immediate neighborhood.

Fear and a great appreciation of the forces in nature long influenced the religious life. Comets, earthquakes, floods, famine, and plague were viewed as consequences for gross deviation from accepted religious beliefs, just as fair weather and the resulting adequate crop production were viewed as the result of appropriate religious convictions.

The ordinary peasant had but one realistic choice in life - he had to forfeit any independence he might once have possessed and enter the service of the nearest lord who would provide protection for him and his family.

The houses of the peasants were located in a village near the reigning lord's castle. These houses, if they could be called such, were mostly rude wooden huts thatched with straw to protect the

inhabitants from the elements. The huts consisted of one room which was windowless, dark, dingy, and unhealthy. There was a fire in the center of the room to provide heat and a cooking source. For hundreds of years these fires were vented through an open doorway because the chimney had not yet been invented.

It was routine for the peasant's chickens, sheep, and pigs to live under the same roof with the family, and even to sleep on the same beds of straw upon the earthen floor. The clothing was coarse and simple and made from the skins, furs, and woven fabrics of the surrounding countryside. The streets of the village were narrow, unpaved, and mud-filled. There were no facilities constructed for the removal of sewage, and the uneaten food, garbage, and human excrement were thrown into the street. Middle Age man was totally unaware of the correlation between sanitation and disease.

The food eaten by the people of the Middle Ages would shock the health conscious people of today. There was no knowledge of calories, vitamins, carbohydrates, or any other essentials necessary for a balanced diet. Green vegetables and fruits were eaten only in season because of the lack of means of preservation for later consumption. The medieval diet consisted largely of starches and proteins. The

average meal was comprised only of meat, bread, and a beverage, almost always alcoholic such as beer, ale, or wine. However, what the medieval person lacked in variety was more than compensated for in quantity. At a medieval meal one could anticipate great quantities of roasted beef, mutton, venison, pork, fish, eels, lampreys, shellfish, chicken, pheasant, quail, duck, wheat cakes, pastries, and custards, all washed down by prodigious amounts of beer, ale, and wine.

Table manners were somewhat casual, by today's standards, but an etiquette of sorts did exist. It was considered acceptable for one to wear his hat to the table, but it was considered most uncouth to pick one's teeth with his knife or to spit while at the table. Knives and spoons were the only eating utensils, as forks had not yet made an appearance. On one eating utensil upon which expense or effort was not spared was the drinking receptacle. Depending on one's position in society, the goblet ranged from being jewel-enladen gold to carefully carved wood. But, without exception, all of them were large and they had a minimum volume of at least one quart. In some medieval monasteries, where the monks were limited to one cup of wine daily, the goblets held as much as two quarts.

The every day life of the majority of people living during the Middle Ages centered around the work

required to plant, cultivate, and harvest the crops. The idle time, of which there was a great deal, was spent sitting around the fire in either the castle or the crude huts drinking various spirits from the large goblets.

This forlorn and depressing period of man's history ended around the year 1500 A.D. Numerous explanations for the demise of the Middle Ages have been cited by historians. The actual end was probably the result of a combination of reasons. Various explanations include the theory that strong governments were formed and feudalism ended because of the rise of intelligent and capable lords who ruled in increasingly progressive fashion. These strong lords were responsible for the rise of such nation-states as France and England, and city-states as Florence and Venice. Furthermore, the rise of these nations and city-states encouraged the rebirth of the middle class, and therefore the reappearance of tradesmen and craftsmen, who were in return responsible for the reopening of the trade routes that had long been closed. It has even been suggested that the huge number of deaths during the Medieval Plague, or Black Death as it was known, contributed to the end of the Middle Ages. This explanation depends upon the premise that the huge number of deaths loosened the

stranglehold of the clergy upon the peasantry. Priests died in the same horrible fashion as the lowest peasant. Priests were then perceived as being mortal and not nearly as influential as before the Black Death. The resulting decline in absolute religious influence allowed governmental reform through the appearance of an increasing number of intelligent and capable lords.

There is yet another explanation for the demise of the Middle Ages, and the ensuing rise of Western Civilization. This theory was first advanced some seven years ago by Geoffrey Colvin, a researcher for Fortune magazine. The description which follows probably best explains his novel solution.

Imagine, if you will, waking up one thousand years ago after a night of tossing and turning on a pile of filthy straw. The first sensation you feel is a terrific pain in your head which unfortunately reminded you of the evening before. It had been a rough one, by any standard, with lots of roasted hares and eels and suckling pigs and pheasants to eat, and non-stop dancing with the ladies of the village, all the while gulping down huge quantities of beer and wine from your immense wooden goblet. But now it is daylight and you stagger from your windowless hovel and try to decide what you can pour into your aching, throbbing, and thirsty head. You could go to the well

for a drink of water, which might or might not be lethal. You could have another goblet of wine, which causes an involuntary shudder, or you could have a goblet of beer. These choices do not leave a responsible alternative, but something was needed, and upon further reflection you decide that you are extremely thirsty. A tall lukewarm flagon of beer just might hit the spot. You pour one flagon, drink it down, and then decide that yes, this is just the thing, and pour another one. Now at this point you say to yourself that time is fleeting and you simply must get yourself to work, but then, after all, these flagons of beer certainly did hit the spot, and say to yourself that maybe your head does in fact require a little more rest and you head back to your pile of straw with yet another flagon of beer.

This is literally what happened in Western Europe for eleven hundred years - the Middle Ages. It is little wonder that so-called medieval "artists" painted only stick-like figures in hackneyed poses, that medieval "musicians" sat around in dour groups tooting instruments that we today use for calling geese, and that medieval "writers" were unable to do anything more creative than copy ancient manuscripts.

This was not a happy time, but, of course, it did come to an end. The question is why? The solution follows.

In the Tenth Century A.D., the use of coffee spread from Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula and from there to Turkey, Persia, and the Middle East. With the importation of coffee to these areas, and the re-establishment of the previously destroyed Roman trade routes coffee was introduced to the people of Western Europe. Immediately thereafter, the day to day life of the population of Western Europe changed dramatically. There was now a morning alternative to the flagon of beer. Painting, music, sculpture, and other examples of art and day to day life quickly evolved from the primitive to the sophisticated.

Gentlemen, the evidence is clear, straight-forward, overwhelming and leaves but one historical interpretation - coffee caused the Renaissance. Without coffee we might still be worshipping comets and giving each other the plague. This explanation is one of those things that seem perfectly obvious once it is finally stated, something like the Law of Supply and Demand.

Gentlemen, the final proof is so apparent when you consider that another name for the Renaissance is, yes, the Great Awakening.