

# WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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## POLITICAL HISTORY

### GOVERNMENT

**Overview** It is worth starting with the sense that the ‘idea’ of nationality’ came only recently into the western world: such an idea was hardly imaginable to a citizen of the Middle Ages in Europe--for that matter, perhaps, to any earlier citizen of West European society, in which tribalism, monarchy, and regionalism--cf. the city-state in Greece--had hitherto provided the available exemplars. Similarly, it was still to be a good three to four centuries, after the end of the Middle Ages, before Mediaeval culture could fall under the organizational spell of the notion of the nation.

**The early mediaeval period, in Western Europe** The early mediaeval period, let’s say from 400-1000 C.E., brings together many kinds of governmental process--much of it constructed around the institutions of Feudalism, with its regional agricultural underpinnings. During this period there were significant moments of coming-together, when a competent ruler and a cultural milieu coincided, as during the reign of Charles Martel (686-741 C.E.), in what was a proto-France, or of the Emperor Charlemagne (742-814 C.E.), around whom what we call the Carolingian Renaissance of literature and art took shape. There was the fictive Holy Roman Empire, often traced in origin to Charlemagne himself, sometimes to Otto I (dating from 962 C.E.), and nominally existent until the early 19th century, after having survived dynastic episodes of many varieties. In the larger sense, however, the governments of early mediaeval Europe were fleeting operations, rarely far from the kinds of threat posed by Barbarians to the Late Roman Empire, and frequently harassed almost to death by the incursion of tribal forces like the Huns, Magyars, Vikings, and Anglo Saxons, who appeared out of nowhere and undermined the best efforts of settled life.

**The Church** It is no surprise that the Catholic Church entered the picture early, by the third and fourth centuries C.E., to provide structure and, increasingly, secular possessions and power. Following on such Church Councils as Nicaea (325 C.E.), in which the Church consolidated its fundamental beliefs, and asserted its primacy as an interpreter, for the civilized world, of the ‘mysteries of faith,’ the Church in Rome, and its satellite power centers throughout Europe and North Africa, became the firmest structure for communities cut loose, in the earlier centuries of the Middle Age, from any kind of secular governance.

**The later Middle Ages** The last centuries of the Middle Ages (1000 C.E.-1400 C.E.), while known for such world transforming achievements of mind as Scholastic Philosophy or the Gothic Cathedral, was unfortunately fraught with social-political instability and with such dreadful interventions as the Black Plague, a pandemic thought to have halved the population of Europe in the 14th century. The Frankish Empire pushed its boundaries significantly into northern Europe, as did the equally loosely constituted Germanic empire, which is estimated to have tripled its nominal size during the centuries in question. The expansion of the Franks into Spain, in the 12th and 13th centuries, was directed to (eventually) expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

**Observation** The history of the centuries that precede the Renaissance, and follow the Greco-Roman, are hard to beat into intellectual shape. Huge cultural achievements there were, the greatest of them powered by the strange risk of faith, and both science and innovation, as well as the explosion of

universities, marking new growth points for humanity. However the thread of social-cultural maturing had been snipped, and it would be here, if anywhere, that the word 'dark' could be invoked for these ages.

## MILITARY

**Overview** Throughout the post classical period in Europe, the Middle Ages, there was a slowly growing development of larger and more coherent social units; not yet states in the modern sense, even at the end of the postclassical period, but coherent language and culture units which resembled the states to be of France, Italy, Spain, England, and Germany. As these coherent units grew, representing as they did coagulations of capital and assets--as in the powerful centers of Feudalism--it became increasingly necessary to provide effective defense machineries for centers of settlement, just as, in the late Mediaeval period, hungry and aggressive nomadic groups--the Magyars, the Huns, the Mongols, the Vikings--staged frequent aggressions against settled communities, thus helping to hone the arts of attack machinery.

**Warfare in Theory** The military textbook of prime importance, throughout the post classical period, was Vegetius Renatus' *De Re Militari, On Military Affairs*, composed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. On the whole--and this betrays the lag time between theory and the growing practice of the period--Renatus formulates a guidebook for successful military practice. He recommends that the infantry be considered the core of the army, and that generals should initiate battle only when they are sure of winning. Pitched battles were to be discouraged, and were in fact rare. In the Middle Ages. This textbook, influential still in the fifteenth century, though long supplanted by skills and materials on the ground, was still being ordered into translation by Henry VII of England, in the fifteenth century--evidence of the distance theory was behind both the growing technologies of defensive and proactive warfare.

**Defensive warfare** The evolution of walled cities, in the post classical period, made for styles of warfare sharply different from those in the Greco-Roman period. Against invaders it was important to oppose the most impregnable possible defense, which was becoming the *castle*. Throughout Europe castles sprang up wherever there was a considerable Feudal community, and with time these castles became harder to breach. The best engineers of the times were recruited for castle construction, and made regular advances in such technologies as drawbridge construction, the creation of heavily fortified walls, the assurance of a long term fresh water supply within the castle precinct, the construction of hidden wall slits for arrow or crossbow shooting, and the perfection of the resources needed for pouring down cascades of boiling water or hot lava on the heads of the enemy.

**Siege warfare** The obverse of defensive warfare, of course, was siege warfare, the most common form of organized military aggression in the post classical period. This kind of assault procedure demanded money, time, and expertise, just as did the defensive strategies of the castle. New devices were invented for scaling castle walls, for battering foundations, for hurling catapults, and, In the final centuries of the post classical period in Europe, for employing cannon and gunpowder, with increasing accuracy and effect. While the initial introduction of gunpowder into Europe can be credited to Mongols working from China, by the fifteenth century European gunpowder manufacture was well developed on its own.

**Recruiting and soldiery** The manpower behind the above warfare forms was throughout the Mediaeval period recruited along lines dictated by the social agencies involved. For a long time there survived the ancient Greco Roman practice by which citizens saw to their own arming, and considered it part of their individual duties to prepare for and enter into the military actions of the community. This involved considerable outlays of personal expenditure for armor, a practice which survived at many points in the Middle Ages, when knights supplied themselves and their feudal retainers with armor and cavalry for a large number of supporters. There were at the same time, throughout the later Middle Ages, occasions on which ever larger communities, small cities, found themselves obliged to finance standing armies, as supports for the entire community.

## SOCIAL HISTORY

## SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**Overview** The period of time covered by the Western European Middle Ages is vast, over a millennium by any account, and the societies at play in that period vary greatly from one another. However there is a normative tenor to the social organizations of the period, itself rooted in the inheritance from the Roman Empire, the overwhelmingly agricultural demands of daily life, and the distinctive blend of the Catholic Church with aristocratic values. That normative tenor, traceable through the 'middle period,' is the static quality of the society of the time, a static quality embodied in the notion of 'estates,' or 'social roles' into which all members of civilized western society were divided. It is a static quality we will see yielding, as we move toward the High Middle Ages, 1300-1500, thanks to an increasing interest in commerce, middlemen, investment, and the entrepreneurial life of cities.

**The three estates** By a broad, and often repeated formula, mediaeval Western European society functioned around three 'estates,' or broad social conditions': the clergy, the warriors, the laborers; the *oratores*, the *bellatores*, and the *laboratores*. The large omission from this more or less indicative triad, which is otherwise intact, is the *nobility*: for European societies were consistently monarchical, depending on *father-kings* to make and enact the laws, *queens*--not infrequently the power behind the monarch, *princes*--forever jostling for the succession, *princesses*--bait for profitable foreign alliances and land consolidations, and a gaggle of aristocrats, self-interested advisors and ministers forever on the look-out for the good of the kingdom and the good of number one. Depending on the period of the Middle Ages, one would determine how effective the nobles were, and in what way; from the thirteenth century on, at their best, they proved to be exemplars of chivalry and 'elite Christian values of charity and responsibility'; of negligible society-building value in the early centuries of the post classical period.

**Labor** Ninety percent of both the populations and the GNP of mediaeval states --the first millennium, anyway--was based on agriculture. Mechanization was all the time on the rise--with ploughs, horse collars, horse shoes, and three field planting experiments--yet human labor was the overwhelming fact of life on the feudal estates of mediaeval Europe. It is roughly accurate--the reference is strongly to western Europe-- to divide the providers of that labor into three groups of peasantry: *freemen*, *serfs*, and *slaves*. *Freemen* possessed some land, but worked for the feudal lord under whose sponsorship they owned their land. *Serfs* were landless servants of manorial lords. *Slaves*, less free than serfs, were simply possessions of the lords of the manor, to be disposed of at will. The prominence of one or the other of these groups depended on the region and the century.

**The clergy** The clergy were the active priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, which from the early centuries of the postclassical era, as early as the third century C.E. in Rome, had acquired power and high administrative influence within the Roman Empire. The clergy, from Cardinals and Bishops of the Church to the humblest monks and nuns, were charged with the spiritual welfare of their people, and enjoined by Saint Paul to 'pray ceaselessly.' While the Church was by and large patriarchal, and while the highest church positions were usually reserved for the nobility, there were a large number of distinguished women--abbesses, administrators, and writer/mystics--who were enabled to find a voice in societies otherwise essentially deaf to women's inner lives.

**The fighters** The clergy were deputed to pray for the community, the laborers to feed the community, and the warriors--among whom the horse riding knights were the symbol of mediaeval prowess and protectiveness--were expected to defend the community. There was, of course, a long story to be told, of the development of military skills throughout the Middle Ages, but no other sector of the military won the supreme symbolic attention reserved for the cavalry riding nobility constituting the institution

of *chivalry*, from its intimate association with the culture of the *horse*, *cheval* in French. (One can think ahead to Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, in the sixteenth century, for a satire on the conflation of nobility with *chevalerie*; not every nobleman could stick to a horse's back.) From 1170-1220 dates the high period of Chivalry, promoted by Church concerns for moral improvement, fine ladies' longing for finer relations between the sexes, and the nobility's general interest in fine poetry and song, which were products of Chivalry and the cult of woman.

## **GENDER RELATIONS**

Confining ourselves to Western Europe we will need to wait until the Christian factor grows prominent In Rome—from the third century on, perhaps—until we see the potentials of this new and struggling religion, which gradually permeated the Roman provinces, nudging out rural paganism, which was rooted there, and would remain stubbornly, In pockets, throughout the first millennium. Elements of paganism which exalted earth, moon and fertility goddesses were omnipresent in prehistorical Gaul and Britannia, and it was not impossible to graft, onto those elements, a new cult in which a divine Virgin sat next to god, humility and grace were prioritized, and sooner or later opportunities arose for women to play active roles in the new institution.

**Church.** While men carried out the administrative efforts of the Catholic Church, from the beginning, and in the farther reaches of Empire as the Church spread, there was from early days an opportunity for women to serve In the church, notably as deaconesses—though very specifically not in a priestly function, a bone of bitter contention in the Catholic Church to our day. The role of deaconess, which was available to provincials, and soon the role of Abbess, or directress of a nunnery, were far from the usual aspirations of 'west European provincial' women, and yet in some cases opened purviews and possibilities for women, which had during the early post classical centuries been unimaginable.

**Early Middle Ages (476-1000)** In general the development of the convent, inside the growing monastic practice of the Church, was providing multiple opportunities for women's occupational lives. The role of Abbess, in particular, became a springboard for women of power and ability to make themselves heard within the increasingly open society. An example would be Hilda of Whitby (614-680), who founded and led the powerful Abbey of Whitby, and proved to be a leader in the formulation of ecclesiastical policy. Short of that kind of female prominence, of course, there was a growing front of occupations in which women could not only provide for their families, but could move into the spheres of commercial production. Spinning was one of these occupations: by the High Middle Ages (1000-1300 C.E.) efficient spinning wheels had replaced the spindle and distaff; brewery was a traditional female occupation, and was a home activity until the introduction of hops; midwifery became an increasingly specialized task, specific to women, and as this science developed, with subsequent benefit for female lives, the mortality of numerous women—especially as nutrition improved--rivalled that of their male counterparts; many women lived into their seventies. For the vast majority of peasant women, however, although they seem to have enjoyed social equality with their mates, the ceiling of life was typically only twenty five years, for much of this early mediaeval period.

**High Middle Ages. (1000-1300).** The High Middle Ages saw the rise to prominence of a number of powerful and/ or highly literate women throughout western Europe. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) was wealthy and much sought after, deeply involved in patronage of some of the most talented writers of her time—like Chretien de Troyes, the author of *Perceval*. Other women of talent and ability emulated the achievements of Eleanor, while in various cases—of queens regnant—artistic and secular power were joined. It is noteworthy that female artisans, like their male counterparts, began in this period to organize in guilds.

**Late Middle Ages** (1300-1500) Significant female voices, from the late middle ages, echo from figures as widely separated as brilliant mystics (like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and Saint Teresa of Avila, all of whom have remained staunch pillars of the Catholic tradition) and social critics like Christine de Pisan, whose books were opinion shapers. Christine came out as a strong opponent of misogyny in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, and her *Treasure of the City of Ladies* provides life style advice for women of all classes, with an eye to their distinctive needs. In her advice to women of royal status, she offers vigorous advice for the avoidance of conflict, and above all warfare, the consequences of which, for all involved, surpass in horror anything that can easily be anticipated.

**Marriage and law.** Women's marriage rites (and rights) and economic freedom varied greatly during the millennium under consideration here. In the purely legal sense women were their husbands' property, during the entire period we consider, and yet, as we often see in the cases where the husband predeceases the wife, the wife can take over the husband's property and business, as well as the right to pass on the family inheritance as she chooses. This of course would be an exceptional case, and would in any event in no way apply to women serfs, to which group the majority belonged, especially in the earlier Middle Ages. Women of the lower peasantry had their rights—including rights of the bedroom—and the right to be buried where they liked, apart from their husbands. But from this serfdom to Me Too is a step!

## **ECONOMIC HISTORY**

### **INNOVATIONS**

**Growth.** Christian art tradition, in sculpture, naturally kept its head low; for as members of a proscribed religion, in ancient Rome, and as themselves a scattered and highly diverse set of religious recruits, the early Christians had little connection with sculpture except through the funereal motifs they carved on sarcophagi. This role expanded with the gradual expansion of the church form, which with the growth of the faith required larger structures for the exercise of their worship, and the early Christians proceeded to re adapt the Roman basilica into auditorium-like spaces where proto Church services could gradually be held. (Thus the beginning of a Christian sense of architecture.) Though these structures could well have served as settings for sculptural decoration, the early Christians, abhorring graven images, refused for a long time to take that path. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory declared that mural paintings should be added to churches, as ways to record sacred history, but sculptures were still avoided as graven images.

**Charlemagne.** Until the time of Charlemagne, in the early ninth century, sculpture was hardly to be found in Christian culture—give or take Celtic crosses with decorative motifs or the first stages of Byzantine painting. Charlemagne, however, established a vigorous art impulse and sponsored the work of many architectural projects, which inevitably, in his successors, the three Ottonian rulers, led to the gradual incorporation of sculptural work into the work of making Christian churches. The opening out of confident Christian culture was at this point awaiting the Crusades, in which Christian conquests in the Holy Land, and the return of holy relics captured in skirmishes along the way, inspired a period of intense church building in the West, where abbots and priors were competing for the talents of sculptors who could help to decorate the churches of the new Romanesque style (1000-1200).

**Gothic.** Gothic church construction, and the sculptural work called in for decoration and instruction, took its cues from the Romanesque, with its rounded arches and thick walls. Over time the Gothic cathedral soared gradually out into the narrow nave, high thin intricate walls, high-arching spires, and stained glass windows which we know from the cathedrals at Chartres or Notre Dame. The Cathedral was seen as a microcosm of God's creation, and in time, between 1150-1300, became a treasure house of fine sculptural ornamentations, sculptured tales, statues of holy figures surrounded by images of the great Old Testament prophets. The summit of religious sculpture in the West is to be found on the vast cathedrals we owe to the High Gothic period.

## TRADE

**Overview** From the early Mediaeval period to the flourishing of cities, cathedrals, and international trade in the thirteenth century, is a long stretch. If we date the breakdown of the Roman economy to the fifth century C.E., we will have to wait five or six centuries before we see the emergence of a vigorous trading economy in Europe. Involved in that development are gradual improvements in transportation--both by sea and land, in agricultural efficiency and know how, in the concentration of capital in banking centers, and in manufacturing processes, which readied foodstuffs, fabrics, and even building materials for long-distance transport.

**The early Middle Ages** The term 'dark ages,' pejoratively first applied during the Renaissance, but now rarely used, usually designated the period from 500-1000 C.E., when the deterioration of social life, transportation, and trade had replaced the still serviceable vestiges of the Roman Imperial structure, which succumbed to 'barbarism,' both internal and external, by the mid-fifth century C.E. This 'early' period was not without cultural development--think of the Benedictine monastic tradition or the Carolingian Renaissance of the 9<sup>th</sup> century--but its foundations, in a still pretty stagnant agricultural economy, with little more than local trade, were mired down and unprogressive.

**The trade explosion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries** Trade, culture, military prowess and urbanization went hand in hand in the Later Middle Ages. One can look at three facets of this development of trade: the maritime explosion of trading networks among interlinked regions; the growth of a commercial and banking culture; the rapid development of cities, with their fairs, markets, and manufacturing centers.

**Maritime trade** The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a rapid expansion of ocean trade. One factor in this expansion was the growing expertise in ship building, commercialization of seaworthy manpower, and establishment of reliable ports and harbors to which to ship the increasingly abundant products of European industry: wool, processed fabrics, wines, foodstuffs, horses. That is not to mention the exponential development of European port systems at which to receive spices and oils from as far away as China, the fruits and fabrics of the Muslim Near East, and wool from the British Isles, ready for the refinements of the Flanders textile industry.

**Commercial and banking culture** To bankroll the exploding maritime undertakings, of the High Middle Ages, required a network of lenders and bankers, who could put their hands on enough venture capital to send fleets of expensive cargo, of hundreds of workers and oarsmen, and often of cattle and cavalry, far across the ocean. The seed ground for this new commercial industry was in large part the wealthy cities of North Italy--Genoa, Venice, Florence--in which high commerce and high culture co-existed at a fruitful level never since attained.

**Cities and their relation to trade** The two centuries which culminate the movement of Mediaeval Europe, the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, saw the rapid growth of population, of urbanization, and of the centrality of the city to commerce and trade. We talk here of a period during which great fairs attracted the economic energy of the civilized world, bringing together merchants from both the local scene and from as far away as ships could transport goods. We talk also of the atmosphere of the larger cities--say in Paris or Northern Italy or Flanders--where negotiations and deals were the name of the game, and rich and powerful families regularly schmoozed with international bankers. We also speak of the advent of the 'age of discovery,' in which the great European explorers—Columbus, Vasco da Gama—began to open virtually unknown dimensions of the world's oceans, and, with them new shores and continents from which to 'trade' unfamiliar products, ranging from sugar cane to gold, from slaves to rubber.

**Shipping.** Trade in the earlier mediaeval period of Western Europe gradually fell into a pattern which retained the traditional Roman reliance on shipping—and on the industries of ship building—and which relied on a complex system of transportation waterways, which included local rivers and water passages, as well as everything from bay traffic, hugging the shore, to areas through the turbulence which the Mediterranean can become. In the period before the seventh century, when Romans were themselves

losing the authority to manage large shipments of goods, it seems that the most desirable material of transportation was luxuries—precious metals, horses, and slaves—and that Jews and Syrians played leading roles in the dark period between the seventh and the ninth centuries, when with the culture in general a deeper economy and a more diversified set of consumer desires began to reshape the market.

**City-states.** By the ninth century, and later, certain major Italian city-states—Venice, Pisa, Amalfi, Genoa—took over the primacy of Western European trade, establishing connections with Arab traders in the Levant. (Trade between the above ports took place with such commodities as: spices, gold, perfume, slaves, luxury textiles, animal skins, leather goods, jewels...in other words with high priced commodities for the elite. (Upturned wrecks of oil and wine bearing amphorae, on the bottom of the Mediterranean, continue to turn up in our own time, not infrequently from an age close to the very late mediaeval period we are discussing.) The same kinds of shipped commodity exchange were of course also taking place from productive ports in other parts of the Roman Empire (or former Roman Empire.) In North Western Europe—through the eleventh century—the Vikings carried on a heavy trade in slaves; Scandinavian fish and timber moved south to England and Saxony; after the Norman Conquest of 1056, the British began importing cloth and wine, while exporting cereals and wool, from which the Flemish wove stunning cloths.

**Industrial shipping.** On a level closer to industrial shipping, and ultimately to urban and infrastructural establishments, there was, by the thirteenth century, a growing volume of transport of materials like iron, copper, and tin, which profited not only from better roads but from better ships, with simpler construction and increased carrying capacity. With the technological developments in shipping followed a lowering of costs, and at the same time a wider use of 'venture capital,' with the expanding nucleus of well to do business man lenders in the cities.

**Markets.** At the same time that shipping led the way, in lucrative and adventurous trading, there was an increasingly robust inland market life, which continued to prove the backbone of social and economic development throughout the Middle Ages, surviving wars and plagues as it had to, in order that the people could eat. At least until the ninth century, by which time urban growth, more wealth concentration, and improved agricultural conditions had broadened the individual's experience, weekly local markets, or regional fairs were the entrepôts for commodities and foodstuffs that made daily life real, and sometimes even tasty.

**Fairs.** Such fairs were typically managed, and profited from, by large scale estate owners, town councils, and even churches or monasteries—which provided venues and accounting services for the fair itself. Sometimes these fairs--which assembled produce and goods from a wide radius of local markets, and which typically fell on church holy days, when 'ordinary people' were free to attend—were taken over by whole communities, and specific items like fish, meat, or bread were sold in specific parts of a town, and at specific times. With the increasing organization of these fairs, there developed a class of entrepreneurial hucksters, who frequently appeared at people's doors, peddling their wares.

**Shops.** In the larger communities of Western Europe, especially after the ninth century, there came the gradual development of fixed market centers working from shops. (Typically a merchant resident would set up his storefront in front of his house, ideally in a position from which he could look down from his front window onto the pulse of potential customers in the street below. Frequently the city would do what was possible to organize these home/shops so that they would be clustered together, facilitating customer browsing, and municipal inspection.

## CULTURAL HISTORY

### VERBAL ARTS

#### Literature

**Church.** As secular literature—think Ovid, Petronius, Horace—waned in the Roman Empire, the world of written literacy and thought morphed into the culture of the early Christian Church. Much of the written work to be created through that Church was written in Latin—such widely separated works as St

Augustine's *City of God* (early fifth century), Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (730), King Alfred the Great's (849-899) chronicle of the History of England, the Danish tale of Saxo Grammaticus (1180-1220)—and reflected the perspectives of the Catholic Church. (Furthermore, almost all works of science, philosophy, or jurisprudence, written throughout the mediaeval period, were created in Latin.) Among those perspectives were two which particularly shaped the development of culture, both theological and literary. There was the notion that the events of human life and history are of symbolic—often the thinking is allegorical, *beyond* symbolical—importance. There was also the notion that human life is a journey—the instance of Jesus Christ would be exemplary—that our true home is in the world beyond, and the church is our vehicle for reaching that home.

**Preservation.** Not only did the Church establish and bequeath the world view of mediaeval literature, but it was instrumental in preserving the literature that got produced in mediaeval culture, not to mention select texts of those ancient cultures, Greco-Roman, which though only dimly recalled were a hidden wellspring of the mediaeval energy in culture. The work of preserving—in a world boiling with marauders, outlyers, and foes for prey—was largely carried out by monastic scribes; the first major monastery was established in 529, at Monte Cassino in Italy, and in the following three centuries monastic missions (Irish into Great Britain; Gothic into the upper Danube) preserved both Christian texts and a random assortment of ancient works—both of which assured what little continuity remained, between the 'ancient world,' now a memory, and the self-defining and diverse elements of a mediaeval world. Outside the monastery walls there slowly evolved a vernacular literature, written (or oral) in the languages (Old French, Old English, High German) themselves taking distinctive regional forms from the various late stages of Latin, which they had inherited.

**The Vernacular.** The vernacular was the area in which the new in both oral and written creativity was being formulated. Yes, there is a firm continuity, flowing on from pre-Christian tale, saga, prayer into the mediaeval period. This oral flow gave birth to great works of imaginative power like the Poetic *Eddas*, the Anglo Saxon *Beowulf*, or the Germanic *Song of Hildebrand*, all of which were later recorded by Christian scribes, who infused this transformed work with the 'Christian perspectives' mentioned above. Among the distinguished landmarks, of literature directly written in western European vernacular, were the French *Song of Roland*, the poems and tales of Boccaccio (1313-1375) and Petrarch (1304-1374) (the first mediaeval writer to present himself as an individual with a daily life—when he describes the view of a beautiful mountain it is without the antique mythological apps mandatory in Hellenistic or Roman praise-poems, but from the perspective of an awed regular guy on a trip); Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1400)—a mini epic panning a social crosscut of pilgrims making their way to Canterbury; the peak of world experience in language, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320), which, in tracking human life in terms of a moral toward perfection, brings the sensibility and the creative light of the mediaeval period to its ultimate clarity.

**The unity.** From Augustine in the fifth century, to Chaucer, Dante, and Petrarch, there are rough continuities within the vernacular achievements of mediaeval literature. In these writers the blessing of woman—as always a simulacrum of the Holy Virgin—elevates and charms the narration. Every creative voice, behind the vernacular texts, is a penitent sinner on the journey of life. Love of every kind, both licit and austere, and reckless, plays its part in the formation of narratives—whether of Petrarca's about Laura, Dante's about Beatrice, or Augustine's guilty love for Monica.

## Languages

**The three phyla.** The period of a millennium and a half, which we hope to cover with the term 'postclassical', is one in which the phenomenon of language development manifests concurrently with socio-political development, among the tribal units interweaving and mutually conflicting along a wide territorial band, reaching—in the case of our three phyla—from the eastern portions of the British Isles (formative English), through the marches and fortified boundaries of a fallen Rome whose language, a degraded Latin, was falling apart into 'vulgar Latin', the mother of the Romance languages, to the multi-terrained landscape of contemporary Germany north into Scandinavia, and as far offshore as Iceland, in all of which areas formative establishments of a Germanic language were coalescing and growing internally.

**Development.** Cultural and political developments were doubtless markers of the process by which fairly limited language tools were refined into the potentialities of, say, literary expression and communication. (We have started, in other words, into the 'evolution of culture,' which as we know accelerates incrementally, once established, once the premises of writing, and communicating that writing, and retaining the memory of the past have been widely internalized. On the horizon from the early postclassical we can see the *Nibelungenlied*, *The Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decamerone* or the *Chanson de Roland*. The question is what will take us to that horizon? (The perception that languages constantly *grow* takes us back to incisive German linguists like Franz Bopp (1791-1867 and August Pott (1802-1888), who opened up the idea that languages grow like species in the evolutionary schema of Charles Darwin.) A number of different explanations were in the air, by the mid-nineteenth century, to account for the internal drivers that set languages in purposeful motion: the shaping and fine tuning of verbal forms under the pressure of needing efficient communication; the enrichment of individual languages by borrowing from others; the improvement of speakers' locations, from the point of view of accumulating positive new experiences; migrations, in which new pidgins and creoles are invented, which have the power to regenerate or remake old language forms.

## Script

**Alphabet.** The Latin alphabet contained 23 letters, in the form in which it diffused out into the postclassical, and soon mediaeval, European world. As it so diffused, of course, it provided for a rapid increase in the number of users of the Latin alphabet, for example among many former Greek speakers, who were to undergo now this subtle undermining of Hellenism by the Roman spirit. Among the essential enrichments of the new alphabet, of course, was the growing use of it in cursive or handwriting form, the inevitable usage element in a culture coming to rely increasingly on the message, document, the memoir—all those appurtenances of a newly complex administrative world like that of the Carolingian Renaissance, in the eighth century. In the post classical centuries preceding Charlemagne, and devoted characteristically to prayer and the preservation of ancient texts, the chief modifications of alphabet were those introduced by the handwriting process. It is to be added that the letter forms familiar to us today, in the Latin alphabet we use—as on the screen before you—are close to the forms being worked out in handwriting in the early postclassical years. A touching instance is that the Latin script written by Roman soldiers on Hadrian's Wall, in 100 A.D., is very close to the orthography of the Latin alphabet taught in Western European languages in the twentieth century.

**Monasteries.** The Christian monks who took it upon themselves to save the texts of classical literature, and especially of the Church Fathers, copied their material onto codices whose material was parchment, and they did so, in the vast monasteries like the Benedict of Monte Cassino, more or less in the Latin alphabet of the Roman Empire—but with many local variations. Italian manuscripts of the seventh and eighth centuries are likely to be written entirely in capital letters, and to assume a formal and aesthetic look, while the manuscripts of contemporary Irish monks are far more workaday, like the hand of Roman soldiers at Hadrian's Wall. Those same Irish monks, however, appear to have been the innovators of the capital letter which begins the sentence, and does even more, by introducing the concept of 'lower case' into European spelling.

**Alcuin.** From the time of Charlemagne date many of the defining traits of the written Latin alphabet, for in the court at Aachen there was a palace workshop at which many experts in hand-writing exercised their skills. The imported British scholar, Alcuin, performed miracles of direction, leading talented scribes into one book preservation project after another. The turnout from these projects was a large manuscript repository, in a monastery near Tours—of which Alcuin became abbot—of many of the finest examples of mediaeval manuscript illumination.

**Ogam.** That we not oversimplify, in this rapid survey of script creation for the Latin alphabet, we must at least mention two other versions of Western European alphabet, whose limited period of effect falls within the Postclassical period. *Runic alphabets*, found on stones, trees, or other natural sources, appear to have been used to record documents of Old Irish, and as such were commonly inscribed throughout Ireland and Wales, throughout the postclassical period, at least until the early twelfth century. The *ogham* alphabet, in use from the fourth to the ninth centuries, was a vehicle for writing Irish; it appears, as well as on other venues, on massive stone glyphs found in Wales and Ireland. We must see these two

alphabetic efforts as local and cumbersome efforts to work within the Latin alphabet to communicate simple messages, and, especially in the case of runes, to preserve and transmit secret messages –the word *rune*, after all, appearing to derive from an archaic Germanic root meaning ‘secret,’ or ‘whisper.’

**CyrillicScript.** The primary scripts of Western Europe, in post classical times, have been the Latin and the Cyrillic scripts, frequently called alphabets. The Cyrillic script, which currently is used for a wide spread of languages in Eurasia, is the national script for various Slavic, Turkic, and Persian nations in Eastern Europe, and enjoys its own antiquity, having been founded by Saints Cyril and Methodius (9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and at that time made the official script of the Bulgarian Empire. The Cyrillic script was named the third official script of the European Union—in addition to Latin and Greek—with the accession of Bulgaria to the Union, in 2007. Thus, while not exactly part of the Ur-alphabetic foundation of Western European scripts, Cyrillic deserves mention, before we pass to Latin, the chief script of Western Europe.

## Mythology

**Mediaeval.** When we view the mass of materials that compose Norse mythology, its extensive thirteenth century manuscripts, the great cast of major players, the high drama in which they engaged, we realize that the coalescence point, of all these themes and creations, is clearly the postclassical era, with a peak toward the thirteenth century. It is here—and this ‘here’ is wide and amorphous—that we find the Norse mythical cosmos (our example of choice in these texts) at its most formed—and presumably belief-sustained.

**Characters.** The cast of divine figures—every national mythology can be viewed as a psychodrama sustained from within the *Volk*—centers around Thor, the ‘father of the gods,’ their power center, who is married to the beautiful blonde *Sif*. Thor is a force of stability, who is constantly en garde to destroy his many foes. While Thor is a stable, avenger god, fighting always to preserve the good, he is often thought out in relations to Odin, ‘one eyed, wolf and raven flanked,’—in other words partly feral, but at the same time a tragically self-destructive figure like Prometheus, ever hungry for knowledge, ever eager to put that knowledge to the use of mankind. (A characteristic story portrays Odin hanging himself upside down for nine days on the cosmological tree (Yggdrasil) to gain knowledge of a runic (secret disclosing) alphabet, which he can pass on to mankind).

**Odin.** Odin, this malleable and modern figure, has for wife the powerful goddess Frigg, who can foretell the future but will tell no one what it will be. This couple have as son the god Baldr, who, killed by the brilliant trickster Loki, is relegated to the role of king of Hell. A predator, a body snatcher on Hell, is the sexy goddess, Freyja, who claims a portion of all the slain for herself. Freyja rides into battle, to reclaim whom she can of the slain, and at the same time to continue her search for her husband Odr.

**Freyr** Freyja’s brother, the god Freyr, is like Odin, a multifaceted god figure, with whom the poetic imagination can work, to transcend the simple—but well nigh endless—network of god-figures and god-relationships through which the creating imagination configures ever new themes of implication. We can say of Freyr, for instance, that where he goes there is a spirit of calm, peace, the pastoral, and sexuality. The consequences of this mood-coloration are that Freyr is love-susceptible, and falls for the beauty, Gerdr, but at the price—and here is the epic bite in the great mythologies—of his own doom.

**Njordr.** We are on the way to the continuation of the lego puzzle; the mother of Freya and Freyr is the sister of another power god, Njordr, whose moods and strength overwhelm them. The skein of connections passes out farther into the supra local blue, in which the millennial intelligence of the Nordic Volk draws its values together, sets down benchmarks for reflection, and sharpens the raw materials of thinking, for such repositories of tale as the *Poetic Edda*, or, also over in Iceland, for the tragic vision of epics like the thirteenth century *Njalasaga*, in which doom, pride, and honor confect a brutal cocktail of revenge.

**Finale.** It is in its concluding vision that Norse mythology, in its classical form, transformed the puzzling in it into vision; I mean in the vision of the twilight of the gods (*Ragna rok*), the world-overturning, god-destroying power explosion with which this universe is destroyed. Whereupon, after this catastrophe, the

fields of the earth were born anew fresh and green, ready for repopulation by two humans who appear 'from a wood.'

**Cosmology - Networks.** The character networks we allude to above were part and parcel of a cosmology, which gave them their *raison d'être*, as a theology gives to the supernatural figures who play out a particular religion. (In whose mind was such a *raison d'être* formulated? To whom do we owe the total fabrication of any myth? Is it any wonder that the mystique of the *Volk*, which proved disastrous in the early twentieth century, led the answer to our question into shapeless speculation?) If not the *Volk*, who created a cosmology in which 'all beings live in nine worlds, that center around the cosmological tree, Yggdrasil'? Who ascribed to the gods the heavenly dwelling of Asgard, while consigning humanity—oh yes, and elves and dwarves-- to Midgard, a region near the center of the cosmos? And who but language consigned personality and gender to the major astronomical bodies of the cosmos? (Sol, a goddess, the sun; Mani, a god, the moon; Joerd, a goddess, the earth...) Rhetorical questions of this sort simply throw us back on our own 'empiricized' universe, the personality-less cosmos we have been forging, in the west, since the seventeenth century—Newton, Galileo, Kepler—and force us to wonder whether perhaps our own cosmology may not also be a special kind of imaginative recreation of the universe.

## Folklore

**Pagans.** From the writings of the Christian fathers during the first centuries of our era, we know that Christianity only slowly disengaged itself from the pagan world—*paganus*, *pagan*, being the Latin word from 'in the provinces, provincial—as cities grew, as imperial power, like that of the Emperor Constantine, shifted the center of culture to Christianity and in fact to the East—and as the western culture world, increasingly aware of itself with the passage of time, gained deeper insight into the special traits of one's, as opposed to 'the other's', cultural environment. While this kind of understanding was growing—shall we say a proto anthropology—the Christian perspective was increasingly incorporating the notion that it, itself, was in part a construct built on assumptions *inherited* from pre classical myth and folklore. This notion was evidently accurate, for pre-Christian folkloric beliefs continued 'to exert an influence on popular religion within the late Anglo-Saxon period.'

**Casket.** On the eighth century Northumbrian Franks casket, a small whale's bone casket, we find bands of relief ornamentation among whose foci are startling contrasts like that between the Adoration of the Magi and the old Germanic pre-Christian myth of Weyland the Smith. (Among plausible identifications, of the remaining configurations of the ornamentation of the casket, are Hengest and Horsa, the mythical founders of the British nation, and even figures from Homer's *Iliad*. (We see what ornamental company the Adoration was able to keep; a model of the kind of postclassical syncretism available to a certain brilliant Anglo Saxon scholar- sculptor.) Even in the eleventh century, wrote one historian, 'important aspects of lay Christianity were still influenced by traditional indigenous practices.' The contents of the folklore we know little of, except through its incorporation in postclassical practices. It appears to have survived even after Christianity had tolled its death knoll.

**Scandinavia.** Pagan folkloric practices persisted right through the eleventh century—practices like veneration of wells, trees, and stones, which were linked to holy mass or sacred scripture through tales and legends. Subsequent folkloric observations, of the remains of the pagan into the Christian era, are numerous but anecdotal; for instance, the claim that the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance, performed every year in a village in Staffordshire, contains sharp elements of pre Christian paganism. The antlers of the deer who previously performed in that dance have been carbon dated, and found to derive from eleventh century Norwegian antlers. It is presumed that the antlers were brought from Norway to England—where reindeer were extinct by that time. The folklore of paganism, inside of early postclassical British culture, is supported by any number of such arguable tales.

**Literary Folklore.** There are many conceptions of what folklore is. In the academic sense we know that the term *folklore* was created by William Thoms, in 1846, and that he intended by the term 'the knowledge and traditions of a particular group, frequently passed along by word of mouth.' The path of that study to its current status as a highly specialized academic specialty, which tracks not only verbal lore but material lore—the objects significant in folk memory—and customary lore, the repository of

customs which give their stamp to a particular group, is an example of creative synthesis. The growth of this study, which will concern us below as we approach our own time, was far from suspected, in the postclassical period before us, but in hindsight we can easily extend our sense of the folkloric elements of mediaeval England, out beyond the boundaries of material lore (artefacts), and customary lore (the Abbots Bromley Horn Dance) to the sophisticated achievements of writers (the maker of *Beowulf*), and the preservers of tradition (the transmitters of the Arthurian Legends or the Robin Hood Tales.) Folklore would in time—already in our own recent decades—become a multifaceted academic study, reflecting the light of analysis back onto ages when folklore was created but not yet made an object of conscious awareness.

## VISUAL ARTS

### Painting

**Christian.** The postclassical trajectory of European painting—once again excluding the highly sophisticated decorative painting of Rome itself, which we are viewing as part of the classical, not the western European, world—involves the effort to find a new set of visual styles for the quickly self-empowering Christian element in western Europe. Frescos, illuminated manuscripts, and sculptures were the main painted surfaces, on which the early Christians tried to express their distinctive view of the world. Their limits, in the pre-Nicene period (prior to 325), were tight. The Christians were a small a community, still despised by the majority, and poor. For a long time symbols such as the peacock, the fish, and the vintner were the chief visual benchmark of the growing Christian community.

**Development.** Visual symbols of the new, and often proscribed, religion were everywhere to be found in the spreading Christian culture-zone, but they were necessarily restrained; one might say for the next four hundred years after Nicaea, a period during which Christian culture and art was slowly merging with the eastern traditions of the Byzantine, as well as spreading throughout Rome—where the papal presence guaranteed a climate for the arts, despite the serious eclipse of all the now abandoned structures of *Romanitas*. In the western 'Roman empire'—say in the courts of Charlemagne, in the monasteries of Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England—painting on manuscripts, decoratable surfaces of churches—these arts continued to be refined, and while remaining in the huge shadow of gothic architecture—construction at the monastery at Cluny began in 911, at Chartres Cathedral in 1194, at Notre Dame de Paris in 1163—the painting arts grew steadily in sophistication and acclaim. Cimabue (1240-1302) and Giotto (1266-1337) were on the horizon, with their Byzantine tinged portraits of Christ—angular, severe, bearded—slowly emerging out of themselves into portraits belonging to all mankind, rather than surges of regional historical brilliance.

### Sculpture

**Growth.** Christian art tradition, in sculpture, naturally kept its head low; for as members of a proscribed religion, in ancient Rome, and as themselves a scattered and highly diverse set of religious recruits, the early Christians had little connection with sculpture except through the funereal motifs they carved on sarcophagi. This role expanded with the gradual expansion of the church form, which with the growth of the faith required larger structures for the exercise of their worship, and the early Christians proceeded to re adapt the Roman basilica into auditorium-like spaces where proto Church services could gradually be held. (Thus the beginning of a Christian sense of architecture.) Though these structures could well have served as settings for sculptural decoration, the early Christians, abhorring graven images, refused for a long time to take that path. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory declared that mural paintings should be added to churches, as ways to record sacred history, but sculptures were still avoided as graven images.

**Charlemagne.** Until the time of Charlemagne, in the early ninth century, sculpture was hardly to be found in Christian culture—give or take Celtic crosses with decorative motifs or the first stages of Byzantine painting. Charlemagne, however, established a vigorous art impulse and sponsored the work of many architectural projects, which inevitably, in his successors, the three Ottonian rulers, led to the gradual incorporation of sculptural work into the work of making Christian churches. The opening out of confident Christian culture was at this point awaiting the Crusades, in which Christian conquests in the Holy Land, and the return of holy relics captured in skirmishes along the way, inspired a period of intense

church building in the West, where abbots and priors were competing for the talents of sculptors who could help to decorate the churches of the new Romanesque style (1000-1200).

## Architecture

**Gothic.** Gothic church construction, and the sculptural work called in for decoration and instruction, took its cues from the Romanesque, with its rounded arches and thick walls. Over time the Gothic cathedral soared gradually out into the narrow nave, high thin intricate walls, high-arching spires, and stained glass windows which we know from the cathedrals at Chartres or Notre Dame. The Cathedral was seen as a microcosm of God's creation, and in time, between 1150-1300, became a treasure house of fine sculptural ornamentations, sculptured tales, statues of holy figures surrounded by images of the great Old Testament prophets. The summit of religious sculpture in the West is to be found on the vast cathedrals we owe to the High Gothic period.

## Architecture

**Romanesque.** As with all the artistic continuities in Western Europe, the transition from the Neolithic to the post classical is sharp and abrupt. By 313 A.D., when Constantine had helped to convert the Roman Empire to Christianity, there was already a profusion of structures, around Rome, in which the growing (but still suppressed) Christian community had been meeting and unifying itself. With the adoption of Christianity by the Empire, the Church began to take advantage of certain kinds of *basilica*, large structures constructed by the Romans for official business, which could be converted into larger structures for Church purposes, and which—the basilica form—were to become launching pads for the great Byzantine churches like Hagia Sophia. The basilica style, as it developed in western Europe, evolved slowly, from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, into the Romanesque style, the earliest mature style.

**Gothic.** By the twelfth century, a new church style—the Gothic, identical to new church building today—had made its way out through the constructive processes of the Romanesque. Flying buttresses, ribbed walls, and vaulted arches became the trademarks of this new style, which was to generate the greatest of the cathedrals, especially in France, and to recommend itself as an essential adornment to every proud city of believers. The greatest of the patrons of these new cathedrals—like the French abbot Suger—were associates of Kings, major historians of their time, and farsighted students of the development of city life. They were precise students of math and geometry, who valued the classical perfections of the finest cathedrals, who foresaw the perspectival and adorational features of the interiors of the finest cathedrals, and spared no detail of attention—consider the pop fascination of gargoyles—in order to assure that their creations displayed the maximum of the vivid struggle of good with evil.

## PERFORMING ARTS

### Dance

**Erotics.** From prehistoric cave paintings, and illustrations of dance, in particular, we assume the artistic sensibility of the Neolithic pre-Europeans who were long term inhabitants of Western Europe. With the decline of the Roman Empire, which set in in the first centuries A.D., and the early Christian struggle toward institutional respectability, then toward such assertively doctrinal power as we see exercised at the Council of Nicaea (325), from those moves in history we assess the gradual disappearance of the prehistoric in Europe, that culture period summoned up for us, in our day, by such evocative novels as William Golding's *Pincher Martin*. We begin to see that an early world, in which dancing styles the Christians were largely to reject, as far too erotic, far too directed to promoting crop fertility instead of the praise of god, was—except among the 'northern heathen tribes'—to be largely purified of its pagan elements. Dance as an expression of the joy of life was on the whole proscribed by the early Christian church, which considered such jubilant dancing the work of the devil.

**Two minds.** The Christian Church, as it turned out, was of two minds about dancing, an issue which was constantly pressing in the early period of the Church. Apart from the opinions of Saint Augustine, 354-430, who was severely opposed to dancing, there was the opposite view of St. Basil of Caesarea

(350 A.D.) who declared that dancing was the most noble activity of the angels, a theory later supported by the Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, a weighty endorsement from a most respected source.

**St. Vitus.** In the high Middle Ages, itself, there was a prominent kind of dance-- named for a frenzy - afflicted holy man of the third century-- which was accepted by the church for its relevance to social crisis. We are here in the time of the Black Plague, dreadful and unexplained disease outbursts, which itself, is thought to have destroyed a third of the population of Europe. (Popular opinion was that a spider bite was the source of the plague infection, whence the Italian dance name, *tarantella*, has to this day lasted as a reminder of the terrors behind it.) This holy/damned dance would express itself in masses of victims leaping and jumping in the air, with mouths foaming, and eyes red with epileptic terror.

**High Middle Ages.** In the high Middle Ages, shall we say in the time of Dante and Chaucer, the kinds of dance taking over Western Europe were of three kinds, corresponding to the three chief social classes of the time: the nobility, the clergy, the peasantry. The clergy—with undoubted exceptions-- as can be imagined, were chiefly involved in stately processional dances, employed around the holy mass. (In African Catholic Churches of our day, the group dances at the time of 'Harvest,' circle colorfully around the nave of the church.) Among the nobles, the knights, there was already a courtly tradition of formal dancing, full of the poetry of restrained love, while among the peasantry dancing meant the round dances, often full of cavorting high jinks, erotic horseplay, and uninhibited sport. The kind of social free for all, on the peasant level, we see depicted in the paintings of Breughel!

## Music

**Liturgical chant,** emerging from the actions of the mass, was the first impulse to a distinctive music rooted in Christianity. Saint Ambrose collated much of this material in the fourth century A.D.; the majority of the church music popular at the time represented the type of chant practiced in Rome. (Real popular music? The music of the streets? We're not talking that always human daily buzz, so dealing with what we have, with what survived, we remain with what we know, what had institutional church status to build it. Yet we have ahead of us, not far, plenty of later mediaeval secular song, itself developing concurrently with the liturgical.) For several centuries, the primary growth within this liturgical music came from the invention of *tropes*, musical or textual enrichments, by which the musical material of the mass became more popularly engaging.

**Polyphony.** Onto the base of liturgical chant the biggest developmental innovation, emerging during the early Middle Ages, was *polyphony*, 'the simultaneous sounding of two or more melodic lines.' With the development of polyphony, as was made clear by the eleventh century Italian monk and theorist, Guido d'Arezzo, one could enjoy such high octave events as two voices singing over and under one another, and at the same time singing two different songs. The next great development, was *Ars Nova*, which sprang in the fourteenth century from the intellectual milieu of the Church of Notre Dame.

## Popular music.

By the early twelfth century there was a fully developed secular/popular current in mediaeval music. Especially in France, first among the so-called *goliards*, itinerant clerics and students, then among the more knightly *troubadours*, these dashing individuals—*meistersingers* and *minne*(love) singers in Germany—became a fixed and romantic factor in regions like southern France, where they commingled with poets in a rich literary/musical symbiosis. (Richard Wagner's 19th century opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, deals with the times of this group.) The master of the art-song was the Frenchman, Guillaume de Machaut, who was especially noted for his dexterity in the polyphonic song form of the *motet*.

## Theatre

**Division.** Two totally diverse forms of theatrical life emerge from the largely empty record of the first five centuries. The Byzantine Empire, in its center, Constantinople, sported two theaters, at which, according to slight surviving evidence, comedies, dances, and tragedies were performed to enthusiastic audiences.

(The same, here and there in pre-decline Rome, was to be found, for there the great work of Plautus and Terence continued to live sporadically among the scattered intelligentsia.) The other form of theatrical life known to us from western Europe is itinerant bands of performers of skits or rural plays, of which we know nothing textual now, except that the Church considered them pagan and dangerous.

**Church.** Already early in the mediaeval period, churches in Europe had begun staging small plays illustrating biblical topics; these plays were performed in connection with the church calendar, and increasingly were coordinated with events in the drama the mass unfolded. Using for stage properties many of the appurtenances of the mass—censers, altars, vestments—the makers of these small dramas developed their own kind of liturgical pre drama, the first written and recorded being *Whom do you seek?*, an Easter trope—see entry on music in Western Europe—composed around 925. By the tenth century formal dramatic work had set in, centered as the surviving work all is, around Church festivals and the appurtenances of the mass. The first vivid theatrical creator was Hroswitha (935-973), a northern German canoness, who wrote six plays modelled on the comedies of Terence, the earliest master of Latin drama. They are the first known plays written by a female dramatist, and the first truly recognizable plays of the Western postclassical period.

**High Middle Ages.** By the high middle ages liturgical theater—focused on the practice and theology of the Catholic mass—was springing up around every major worship center in western Europe. One byproduct of these theatrical dramas was the Feast of Fool thematic, in which comic episodes would be set aside in which the lesser clergy could mock their pompous seniors, and even the way—though never the substance of the way--the seniors dealt with the mass. It cannot have been long, given this turn to internal critique, that performances of religious plays outside the church began to crop up. Smaller playlets were joined to larger, and before long substantial small plays, still of course built out of Christian thematics, were omnipresent in western Europe.

**In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries** there was an increase in the number of religious plays performed outside the church, and frequently in the correspondingly growing number of towns in which people could gather for entertainment. A number of twelfth century plays remain, like *The Mystery of Adam* (1150) or a variety of contemporary plays in French, plays on *The Resurrection* or *The Three Magi*.

**Cycles.** In the following two and a half centuries, to the brink of the Renaissance, there was rapid development of towns, new political structures, intercity and even international trade, and with this growth there was a corresponding growth of mystery plays and morality plays, the former often staged in the form of play-cycles (The York cycle, 48 plays); (The Chester cycle, 24 plays); the Wakefield cycle, 32 plays)—to pick only examples from the British Isles, while the fact was that such large scale dramatic creations were springing up throughout Europe ;at a festival drama cycle in Valenciennes France (1547) for instance, seventy two actors, mostly local, performed in more than one hundred roles. The diversity of roles increasingly included, as we will not be surprised to know, thoroughly secular role intruders—villains, clowns, devils—lest we forget that this drama was on its way to eventual transformation into the secular powers of Renaissance English drama.

**The secular.** Secular dramatic performances gradually grew up throughout Europe. Many of these 'plays,' like *The Play of the Greenwood* (1276) by Adam de la Halle, were full of satirical scenes, ghosts, and fairies, clearly cutting a path into the real/imaginary world lived by the peasant on the street. Satirical plays were created throughout the continent after the thirteenth century—usually directing their barbs at the corrupt and comical in or out of the church. The best known of these satirists is the German Hans Sachs (1494-1576), to whom we are indebted for 198 satire-plays.

**Actors.** As the drama gradually passed away from its dependence on the church, professional actors appeared performing both in England and across the channel. The end of the strictly mediaeval period of drama history, in Europe, was approaching, with the decline in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, with the Protestant Reformation, and in fact—from the mid sixteenth century on-- with the banning of religious theater in many countries.

## WORLDVIEW

## Philosophy

**Christianity.** Mediaeval philosophy in Western Europe was one day to be a child of classical antiquity—the philosophers of the Greco-Roman world—but that would be more than a millennium after the death of Jesus Christ, after the dissemination of classical manuscripts and the education of the first classical scholars had made its appearance in the new Europe. By this time the Aristotle central to the thinking of pre-Christian Greek thought would have become a widely translated presence in European intellectual life. In the meantime, what we can properly call western European philosophy had taken off from a growing systematic reflection on the perspectives of the Christian religion, which was the active driver of speculative thought in the millennium that followed the death of Jesus Christ.

**St. Augustine.** The central issues of mediaeval philosophy gathered around the nature and existence of God, the nature of faith, ethical questions and their special relevance to salvation. For the greatest of the western thinkers, during this period, philosophy was considered a handmaid to theology, although the greatest of those thinkers--Saint Augustine (354-430), Boethius (477-524), Saint Anselm (1093-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)-- all contributed powerfully to the basic literature of philosophical analysis. Saint Augustine opened the individual as a person in direct spiritual connection with God, and lay the foundations for inquiries, active today, into the psychology of religious experience. (His *City of God* reads human civilization as a diminished mirror of the divine presence; in *The Confession* she makes his own weaknesses and sinful nature the core of a self-scrutiny that reduced him to his mortal weakness.

**Aquinas.** Saint Anselm (1033—1109) has been credited with formulating the ontological argument for the existence of God, and for having given philosophical underpinning to the doctrine of the Atonement. His leading formula, in which he digs back into the thought of Augustine, is that we believe in order to understand, while understanding is nonetheless an essential achievement for testing the full character of belief. Saint Thomas Aquinas systematized the consequences of faith in God, applying rigorous argument--logic, epistemology--to the salvation structure of Christian belief. His *Summa Theologiae*(1265-1274) is widely considered a Bible of mediaeval Christian thought.

## Religion

**Evolution.** The threshold dividing pre-Christian religion from the early movements toward a new institutional religion embracing the followers of Jesus Christ, was only slowly definable, and in fact the life of the *pagans* persisted far into the so-called mediaeval period of the Christian faith. (Walter Pater's novel *Marius the Epicurean*, 1885, depicts the life of a young man growing up a typical aristocratic *paganus* in the mid second century, the period of the Antonine Emperors in Rome. The picture of this young man's aristocratic sensibility, his aversion to the Christian ascetic world, gives us a vivid insight into the kinds of culture clash the early Christian view of the world provoked around it. From the Christian standpoint, we would be reading this threshold very differently, the way Saint Paul read it, as a barrier of fire crossed into a new salvational world, or in the way Saint Augustine (354-430) read it, as a metaphor (virtually) for a point at which the soul crosses into new territory, faces its own interior terrors, and sees an inner light which gives meaning to life. Around these highly varying views, of the new world painfully under construction by the still minority of outside the law Christians, the institutionalized figures of Roman myth were being gradually bled of their once robust claims on morals and belief.

**Development.** The development of the Christian religion, during the century which followed the fall of the Roman Empire, 476, is most easily traced by the landmarks of public achievement—things written, thoughts thought, cathedrals built—and yet we can be sure that the real 'development,' that assured the very rapid growth of Christianity in Western Europe was due to the relevance of this belief-set to people's lives, was, on the whole, the pragmatic play-out that the religion realized in the lives of small people in small parishes—not to minimize, of course, the importance to the religion of high-level power moves; the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (312) and the elevation of Constantinople to the Capital of Christendom; the Council of Nicaea (325), which consolidated Church doctrine to that date, and 'confirmed' the Church; the establishment of the influential monastic orders--Benedictines (6<sup>th</sup> century), Cistercians and Franciscans (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries); the outfitting of eight major crusades to the Holy

Land between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries; the outlays of funds and faith needed to cover the landscape of Europe with noticeable places of worship, ranging from country church to metropolitan basilicas, from modest arched Romanesque structures to the high vaulted Gothic masterpieces of Notre Dame (1163) or Chartres (1200). By the time of Chaucer (14<sup>th</sup> century) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) it was acceptable to speak of Western Europe as essentially Roman Catholicism.

**Other religions.** It is not supposed, of course, that the pagan theme simply vanished from European religious consciousness, or that other major religions than Christian Catholicism were absent from mediaeval Europe.

**Muslims.** Not an historical factor in Europe before the death of the Prophet Mohamed (571-632), and the rapid emergence of Islam into North African and Western Europe, Islam did in fact root deeply in Europe, and from 711 until 1492 established an influential rule in Spain, where for a significant time Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted, exchanging ideas and exercising fertile mutual respect. Besides that European presence, Islam was from its earliest historical outreach widely distributed throughout the Balkans.

**Jews.** Jews were settled in Italy even before the rise of the Roman Empire; they were widespread in Greece and on the Greek islands, and maintained a substantial colony in Rome until their expulsion in 139. Jews prospered in many of the developing European states of the mediaeval world, but at the same time suffered continuing persecutions—loss of citizenship rights in Rome, recurring pogroms throughout Europe, and subjection to Islamic rule during the Islamic caliphate in Spain.

## Science

**Empire.** Thus it is that with the advent of that Empire, and of the Greek science it accumulated into its own, the Romans found themselves falling, at just the time when they were faced with ‘foreign barbarians,’ like Alaric, who were quite unprepared to value the cultural heritage of Rome. Out ahead of Roman science, in the wilderness of a shaggy empire full of foes, there lay lands in which the main concern was inevitably survival and not much more. From the considerable science Rome was itself ready to pass on, the new ‘Christian’ communities on the collapsed Roman frontiers were barely in a position to inherit much richness.

**Rationalists.** The major thinkers, of the early post Roman acculturation, were rationalists, people of cultivation and disciplined mind like Isidore of Seville (6<sup>th</sup> century), the Venerable Bede (7<sup>th</sup> century), or Jean Buridan (14<sup>th</sup> century) who lived their relatively provincial lives from whatever scientific advances the Greeks and Romans had bequeathed them, but with nothing like scientific theory to guide them; unless it be the one overruling ‘theory,’ that the universe was shaped by the hand of God, and that the universe consequently shows order and harmony within it, if the observer looks carefully enough.

**Necessity.** By the later mediaeval period, the Renaissance of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when art, architecture, and philosophical theory were maturing to a world level, the exercise of scientific intelligence was largely confined to the thinking of monastics whose interest in nature was, if keen, not analytical. That interest was driven by present need, to figure out what herbs had medicinal properties, the need to plot the movements of the stars, so that the date of Easter could be fixed. This latter need lay behind the inquiries of the Carolingian Renaissance, in part the result of an enlightened and inquiring ruler, Charlemagne. Under his inspiration, decrees were promulgated, authorizing the foundation of schools of learning, monastic or under the protection of a cathedral. Fresh and original concerns for science got expressed in such institutions. A new era was at hand, of intellectual readiness, for rich discussions from ancient Greek and contemporary Arabic texts.

**Universities.** In the last centuries of the mediaeval period the birth and spread of Universities proved the most effective seedbed of new ideas. By the year 1200 scholars and students possessed Latin translations of many major Greek authors—Ptolemy, Galen, Aristotle, Euclid—plus the available in-Latin works of Averroes, Avicenna, and Maimonides—all of which Muslim and Jewish material lay ready to hand in the rich Islamic caliphate of occupied Spain. A synthesis of talented Latin scholars—Robert

Grosseteste, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Duns Scotus were at the center of a matrix of fresh conceptions of the natural world. The most notable of these twelfth and thirteenth century intellectuals was Thomas Aquinas. (1225-1274), declared 'a doctor of the Church,' whose rethinking of both Aristotle and Saint Augustine generated both the method and the sensibility required for a full understanding of the natural world. Two of Aquinas' contemporaries, Robert Grosseteste—the founder of the Oxford Franciscan School—and Roger Bacon, laid great stress on mere observation, watching and thinking about the natural world.

**Empiricism.** While all these theologian scholars were empiricists, who directed their attention to observation of the natural world, Bacon laid out what they considered the operative method for interpreting natural phenomena. Observation, hypothesis, and experimentation were the three stages of a methodically effective account of nature and its phenomena. While the fruits of this method remained limited—equipment was rudimentary, and constructed experiments, as opposed to direct observation—intentions aligned with the increasingly effective work that lay just ahead, at the close of the mediaeval period.