

Learning and Art in the Middle Ages

Many people believe that the Middle Ages were a dark time, a time when the light of learning did not shine very brightly. It is true that with the fall of the Roman Empire, European civilization suffered a huge setback. It is not true, however, that intellectual matters did not play any role in the life of medieval society. In fact, as we shall see, intellectual life flourished in the High and the Late Middle Ages.

The Fall of the Roman Empire and the Decline of Intellectual Life in the Early Middle Ages

5 When the last West-Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus was forced off the throne by the Germanic chieftain* Odoacer in AD 476, ancient Rome came to its political and military end. The eastern parts of the Roman Empire lived on under the name of the Byzantine Empire until its capital, Constantinople, fell to the Ottomans in 1453. The Western Roman Empire, however, collapsed when “barbarian” tribes invaded its territory and destroyed its central government as well as its civil administration. The fall of Rome left the people of Western Europe in a state of uncertainty. There was no central government that could, for instance, protect people from bands of ma-
10 rauders*. Many people therefore fled to powerful landlords* on whom they came to depend.

At a time when most people thought only of their physical survival, the number of people who could read and write was very little. The education system had broken down completely – there simply was no strong gov-
15 ernment to organize teaching and learning. For several hundred years, monasteries* became the centres of intel- lectual life. Charlemagne was the first medieval ruler who tried to reorganize the education system. One of his orders reads, “Let every monastery and every abbey* have its school, where boys may be taught the Psalms, the system of musical notation*, singing, arithmetic, and grammar, and let the books which are given them be free from faults, and let care be taken that the boys do not spoil them either when reading or writing.”

For the survival of Western civilization monasteries are of great importance. The intellectual interests of the
20 monks were often very limited, though. They revolved mainly around the question of how souls could be saved for the Christian Church. It was only in the late eleventh century that interest in art and culture revived in the world outside the cloister*: with the rise of cities a very productive period began in the history of Western civil- ization and its culture.

Teaching and learning

Without a reliable central government, the Church became the only provider of education throughout the Early
25 Middle Ages. Apart from clerics* who needed to be able to read the Scripture*, few people felt the need for an education. They did not even see any practical purpose in basics such as the ability to read and write. Peasants, who made up more than ninety percent of early medieval society, were generally too concerned with their daily work to spend time reading and writing, and since there were only few moderate-sized towns, there was little need for skills like reading, writing, or calculating. Even among the nobility educational standards were poor.
30 Generally, chivalric* qualifications such as the ability to ride, hunt, and fight were thought to be more important among the aristocracy than literacy*. Those noblemen who wanted an education for their children either sent their sons or daughters to monasteries (or nunneries*) or hired a clergyman to teach their children at home.

For a more thorough education boys and girls had to go to a grammar school which was usually attached to a religious institution such as a monastery (“monastic school”) or a cathedral (“cathedral school”). The aim of
35 these schools was to increase literacy among the clergy; they needed, after all, to be able to read the Scripture. Apart from clergymen (it was not uncommon in the Early and High Middle Ages for a clergyman to have a wife and consequently children), only noblemen could afford to send their children to such schools. Pupils at these clerical schools spent most of their time reading, writing, and speaking Latin. Latin was then a living language. It

was spoken by scholars, lawyers, and even merchants throughout Europe. Life at grammar schools was hard: pupils studied for up to nine hours a day, even on Saturdays and Sundays. Just like in classical antiquity, teachers in medieval times expected strict discipline from their students. If they misbehaved, teachers used corporal punishment*. Students were also hit when they made mistakes – teachers believed it would make them learn better.

5 As soon as the pupils had mastered their Latin, they could go on to the seven liberal arts* (grammar, rhetoric, and logic as well as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). Those who were interested in law, medicine, and theology (the most valued subject) needed to find a good teacher. Such highly specialized teachers often attracted students from all over Europe. When the number of both students and teachers at one place increased, they formed a *universitas* (Latin = “association of people”) for better protection and to be granted privileges. The first institutions of higher education were the medical school at Salerno (9th century), the law school at Bologna (c. 1088), followed by the universities in Paris (c. 1150), Oxford (1167), Cambridge (1209) and many others mainly in France and Italy. The first universities in what is today Germany were founded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Heidelberg in 1386, Cologne in 1388, Erfurt in 1392). By the end of the Middle Ages, the need for higher education had become so great that practically every major city throughout Europe had its own university. All in all there were almost a hundred universities spread throughout Europe by the end of the Middle Ages.

There are many similarities between medieval universities and present-day ones. Like today, students in the Middle Ages were awarded their first degrees (*artium baccalaureus*, B.A., and *artium magister*, M.A.) after having studied for a period of four to six years. Once they had completed their liberal arts curriculum*, they could choose courses of study in medicine, law, and theology which all took a minimum of ten years and concluded with a doctor’s degree. And like today, the discipline of the students during classes and the interest with which they learned varied greatly and were a constant source of quarrels between teachers and parents on the one hand and the students on the other.

Classes were usually held in the form of lectures*. The teacher read from one of the rare and expensive books. Since students could normally not afford to buy books (only the invention of the printing press* by Gutenberg in the middle of the fifteenth century made books affordable to students), they had to take notes or learn the texts studied in class by heart. Once they had completed their studies they could stay on at university as lecturers, make a career in the Church, or, if they held a degree in Roman law or Church law, look for well-paid jobs in the growing public administration*.

Towards a New Way of Thinking: The Development of Scholasticism*

30 The rise of universities and the general need for education was caused by a number of developments. First, the growing number of bigger cities required skilled administrators who helped organize communities of several thousand people. Second, a new class of profit-seeking businessmen emerged at the end of the tenth century who needed a good education to run their growing businesses. Third, traders as well as the Crusaders had established contacts with the Islamic world. In places like the Near East and the Iberian Peninsula – Spain and Portugal were under Islamic rule for several hundred years in the Middle Ages – Europeans met Arabic scholars who had preserved the writings of Greek philosophers when these had long been forgotten in Europe. Europeans were thus reintroduced to the learning of ancient Greek philosophers and scientists like Galen and Hippocrates (in the fields of medicine), Ptolemy (in geography and astronomy), Euclid (in mathematics) and especially Aristotle (philosophy).

40 The Greeks had a very rational way of thinking and wanted to find out the truth about things. The impact they had on Europeans, who at the time still had an absolute faith in God, was huge. They now needed to reconcile* their world-view, which was still dominated by religion very much, with the truth-seeking method of the

Greeks. The attempts to solve this theological and philosophical problem kept European scholars busy for much of the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries and came to be called “scholasticism.”

One of the most famous scholastics was Peter Abelard (1079-1142), a teacher of theology in Paris. He was the most radical thinker of his time, which made him very popular with his students. (Today he is best known for his colourful personality and for his love-affair with his beautiful student Héloïse.) Some medieval sources say he literally attracted thousands. In his lectures and writings, he applied the rational thought he had found in the writings of ancient Greeks to the Bible and the teachings of the Church Fathers.* Abelard, for instance, compared the Scripture with writings from the Church Fathers to try to solve contradictions with the help of reason and logic. His aim was to strengthen the Christian faith. Faith, he said, needed truth: “The first key to wisdom is assiduous and frequent questioning ... For by doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we arrive at truth.” Unlike Renaissance thinkers, though, scholastics remained in a world in which everything revolved around the Christian Church. They still used doubt to affirm faith, not to point out alternatives.

However, some scholastics were too far ahead of their time. Roger Bacon (1214–1294), for instance, refused to believe what the Church told him. He may even have spent some years in prison for asking too many questions that challenged the Christian world-view. Bacon wanted to find out more about the world than the Christian religion could tell him. Inspired by the Greek philosopher Plato, he was one of the first Europeans in the Middle Ages who used an experimental form of science to explain the world around him. He, for instance, collected scientific instruments and experimented in the fields of astronomy, mathematics, and optics. He even predicted the invention of microscopes and telescopes, the technology of hydraulics, steamships and flying machines.

The Fine Arts*

Compared with today, only few people in the Middle Ages had the free time and the wealth to buy and to appreciate works of art. At the time, it was most important to live a good Christian life and devote all of one’s energies to serve God and to prepare for life after death. Producing art, i.e., objects that were of no direct practical use, was seen as vain*, as a sinful waste of time. Most medieval art was therefore of a religious nature, produced for the glorification of God. A good example of this phenomenon is medieval architecture.

Architecture

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, when the growing cities needed new churches and when the revival of trade had made the cities rich, architects developed a new building style that radically changed the appearance of churches and cathedrals: the Gothic* style. It originated in France and quickly spread throughout all of Europe. Some people criticized this new style for not following the rules of classical architecture and named it after the barbarian tribe of the Goths. Gothic architecture today is seen as one of the most beautiful styles in building history. Gothic style greatly differs from the building style of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Romanesque* period. The main difference is the emphasis that Gothic builders placed on the beauty of their constructions: it even seems as if they competed against each other to see who could build the most beautiful place of worship, and thus, who could best glorify God.

While Romanesque churches and cathedrals (especially the early ones) looked massive and strong, almost like fortresses*, Gothic churches appeared very light, almost fragile*. Everything about them was directed upward, toward heaven: the impressively tall spires*, the pointed arches*, the high walls, and the flying buttresses*, which carried much of the weight of the whole building and allowed their architects to construct thin walls with huge windows. The heavy stone ceilings of the Romanesque period required thick walls with only relatively small windows which made the atmosphere inside characteristically gloomy (at least from our perspective).

Gothic churches had large colourful stained-glass* windows. The sunlight that streamed through them created a mystic atmosphere. Upon entering a Gothic cathedral, medieval church-goers immediately felt they were in a very special place, just right to honour God. Besides creating the right atmosphere for the worship of God, stained glass windows also functioned as a kind of picture book: the paintings on the glass told stories from the Bible or the lives of saints and made it possible for illiterate people to “read” for themselves the stories of Christianity. Stained glass windows were, in fact, so popular that they became one of the major forms of visual art of the Middle Ages.

As can be imagined, building a Gothic cathedral was an enormous project. It kept a whole community busy for generations – sometimes for more than a century and all classes contributed to building them: from those who brought food to the workmen to highly-skilled craftsmen* such as architects, engineers*, and glaziers*, and from the simple bricklayers* to artists such as stonemasons*, sculptors*, and painters. But since cathedrals were seen as both reflecting the wealth and power of their builders and as a service to God, many communities were ready to spend a great deal of money on such a project.

The Visual Arts*

Most forms of visual art had a religious purpose. Artists painted religious motifs such as scenes from the Bible, portraits of popes, saints, or angels. Apart from the stained-glass windows mentioned above, painters also used walls or ceilings of churches as canvas* for their paintings. A special form of medieval painting was the so-called fresco*. They were painted on the walls or the ceilings of the church when the plaster* was still fresh (therefore called “al fresco”).

Until the sixteenth century, when canvas became widely used, many artists used wooden panels for their paintings (panel painting*). They usually stood on the altar and attracted the attention of church-goers with their Biblical motifs.

Another major form of medieval painting was beautifully decorated books (so-called illuminated manuscripts*). Before the invention of the printing press, most books were produced in the scriptoria* of monasteries. Some of these books (such as beautiful altar bibles or expensive books of hours*) had little paintings (called miniatures), beautifully decorated initials* and text borders in them. In some cases it took the scribes* years to finish one book which is why illuminated manuscripts were very expensive. Until the 13th century, most of the illuminated books were decorated with religious motifs.

All these forms of visual art had one thing in common: they had no depth, i.e. looked flat. The reason for this is that artists in the Middle Ages painted the objects in their pictures according to their importance, not according to their real physical shape. It was not the point of medieval artists to paint as realistically as possible. Rather, they wanted to give their pictures as much meaning as possible, so that people could easily understand the religious message of their works of art. It was not until the Renaissance that the central perspective*, the technique that gives painting its depth (its three dimensions), was rediscovered.

Literature

Literature as we know it today depends on literacy: someone needs to write the literary text down, usually in the form of a book, and others have to be able to read it. It is estimated that only one percent of the population was literate by the end of the fifteenth century – even after the revival of intellectual life and after the foundation of many universities! Compared with today there were accordingly only very few potential authors. It is therefore not surprising that the literary production of the Middle Ages was relatively small.

In the literary production of the Middle Ages, monasteries played a central role. Monks wrote a lot of religious texts themselves (such as comments on the Bible, religious poetry, etc.), but they also copied secular books. Monasteries therefore could own a relatively large collection of books.

The language, literary style, and topics varied from century to century, from country to country, and from region to region. Up to the fourteenth century, most writers throughout Europe used Latin as their literary language, but this changed in the course of the fourteenth century when authors started to use the languages spoken in their regions, the so-called vernacular languages*. Abandoning Latin as early as the thirteenth century, poets from Sicily and other parts of Southern Italy were forerunners in the use of vernacular languages. In England, regional English dialects replaced Latin and French as the language of literature. The most well-known vernacular writers from this time were Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) from Italy and Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) from England. Dante's and Chaucer's language was so much admired that it became a model for Italians and the English and thus had a lasting influence on their country's national language.

10 Dante and Chaucer both produced masterpieces of world literature – texts that have ever since been continually referred to by writers all over the world. In the *Divine Comedy* Dante describes his imaginary journey through the alternatives of life after death, namely Hell, Purgatory*, and Paradise. On this trip he is first guided by the Roman poet Virgil and then by Beatrice (the love of Dante's real life) who takes him to Paradise. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is about a group of pilgrims who travel to the shrine* of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. 15 On their journey they tell tales to entertain each other. These tales have all become an important part of English culture.

Other well-known pieces of medieval literature are long poems about the adventures of Germanic warrior heroes, e.g. from Germany the *Song of Hildebrand* (*Hildebrandlied*, 8th century) and the *Song of the Nibelungs* (*Nibelungenlied*) and from England *Beowulf* (8th to 10th century). They are all so-called epic poems*, long stories written in verse. Their authors tell tales about warriors and glorify virtues* such as honour and courage. The heroes from these texts are all great fighters: some even slay dragons like Siegfried from the *Song of the Nibelungs* and Beowulf from the epic poem that bears his name. Of great importance were also the stories traded on around King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table.

Another popular topic was courtly love* (German = "Minne"). "Minne" was usually written in verse, but it was meant to be performed by a bard* (called "Minnesänger" in German and "troubadours" in French) at the courts of European kings and queens. Some of these bards travelled all over Europe to entertain the nobility. Poetry about courtly love was mainly an oral* form of literature: minnesinger and troubadours learnt their texts by heart and then recited them to their audiences. Their poetry was usually about the love of a knight for a beautiful lady. Sometimes, there were even contests between these bards.

30 Just like courtly love poetry, much of medieval literature had an oral tradition. This made it possible for people in the Middle Ages to satisfy the basic human need for storytelling at a time when most people could not afford books. The oral tradition of medieval literature is one of the reasons why so much of it was lost over the centuries.

Andreas Gaile

Glossar

<i>chieftain</i>	head of a tribe	Stammesfürst, Heerführer
<i>marauder</i>	s. o. who is out to plunder, s. o. who goes around stealing things	Marodeur, Plünderer
<i>landlord</i>	powerful lord on a large piece of land	hier: Grundherr
<i>monastery</i>	place where monks live and work	Kloster
<i>abbey</i>	monastery ruled by an abbot	Abtei
<i>musical notation</i>	system of signs in music	Notensatz
<i>cloister</i>	monastery	Kloster
<i>clerics</i>	s. o. working for the Christian Church	Kleriker
<i>Scripture</i>	Bible	Heilige Schrift
<i>chivalric</i>	in the fashion of a medieval knight	ritterlich
<i>literacy</i>	ability to read and write	Lese- und Schreibfähigkeit
<i>nunnery</i>	place where nuns live	Nonnenkloster
<i>corporal punishment</i>	punishment by means of physical force	körperliche Züchtigung
<i>liberal arts</i>	subjects of scholarly interest like grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and music.	die Freien Künste
<i>curriculum</i>	range of subjects taught at an educational institution	Lehrplan
<i>lecture</i>	long talk a professor or teacher gives to a group of people	Vorlesung
<i>printing press</i>	machine that prints on paper	Druckmaschine
<i>public administration</i>	institutions like a townhall and its mayor that ensure that the city, district or the whole country are run well	öffentliche Verwaltung
<i>scholasticism</i>	method of thinking and studying used by medieval philosophers	Scholastik
<i>to reconcile</i>	finding a way in which two apparently oppositional ideas can both be true and acceptable	in Einklang bringen
<i>Church Fathers</i>	theologians from the Early Middle Ages who had shaped people's understanding of Christianity through their commentaries on the Scripture and who were traditionally accepted without question).	Kirchenväter
<i>fine arts</i>	forms of art that are produced for their beauty	die Schönen Künste
<i>vain</i>	being proud of s. th.; vanity is one of the seven deadly sins	eitel, eingebildet, nutzlos
<i>Gothic</i>	architectural style of the 12th to 16th c.	Gotik
<i>Romanesque</i>	architectural style of the 10th to early 13th c.	Romanik
<i>fortress</i>	building with big walls that can be easily defended	Festung
<i>fragile</i>	easily broken or damaged	fragil, zerbrechlich
<i>spire</i>	roof (esp. of a church) that rises steeply upwards(q. v. illustration)	Kirchturm
<i>pointed arch</i>	q. v. illustration	Spitzbogen
<i>flying buttress</i>	q. v. illustration	Strebpfeiler
<i>to stain</i>	here: to colour	färben, malen
<i>stained glass</i>	coloured glass	bemaltes oder gefärbtes Glas, Glasmalerei
<i>engineer</i>	person who constructs various things	Ingenieur
<i>glazier</i>	s. o. who makes glass	Glaser
<i>stonemason</i>	s.o. who makes all sorts of structures out of stone (e.g. buildings or sculptures)	Steinmetz
<i>sculptor</i>	s. o. who shapes s. th. out of stone (e. g. a sculpture)	Bildhauer
<i>visual arts</i>	drawing, painting, photography, print-making, filmmaking	Bildende Kunst
<i>fresco</i>	painting made on a wall or ceiling while the plaster is still wet	Fresko

<i>plaster</i>	substance used to cover walls with a smooth surface	Verputz
<i>panel painting</i>	painting on one or several wooden boards	Tafelmalerei
<i>canvas</i>	strong, hard cloth used to paint on	Leinwand
<i>illuminated manuscript</i>	manuscript with beautiful handpainted decoration	Buchmalerei
<i>scriptorium (pl. scriptoria)</i>	room in which monks used to write, copy, or illuminate books	Schreibstube eines Klosters
<i>book of hours</i>	collection of prayers and readings from the Scripture	Stundenbuch (spezielles Gebetsbuch)
<i>miniature</i>	very small painting	Miniatur
<i>initial</i>	letter at the beginning of a book, chapter, or paragraph that is larger than the rest of the text	Initiale (verzierter Anfangsbuchstabe)
<i>scribe</i>	s. o. who writes (copies) books as a profession	Schreiber
<i>central perspective</i>	method used to give a painting depth	Zentralperspektive
<i>vernacular language</i>	native language of a country or a region	Mundart, Volksmund
<i>Purgatory</i>	place where the souls of dead people suffer until they are clean	Purgatorium, Fegefeuer
<i>shrine</i>	place connected with a holy event or person	Schrein (zur Heiligenverehrung)
<i>epic poem</i>	long story written in verse (usually about a hero or a whole people)	Versepos
<i>virtue</i>	goodness of character or behaviour	Tugend
<i>courtly love</i>	medieval European idea of expressing one's love and admiration for a lady	Minne, höfische Liebe
<i>bard</i>	professional poet	Barde
<i>oral</i>	by word of mouth	mündlich