

The Crisis of the Later Middle Ages



I. Prelude to Disaster

A. Agricultural Crisis

1. In the early fourteenth century severe weather damaged crops, leading to famine (1315–1322).
2. Poor nutrition increased susceptibility to disease and facilitated epidemics (for example, typhoid).
3. Social consequences of famines and epidemics included depopulation of some areas, a volatile land market, and unstable international trade.
4. Government measures, such as price controls, were ineffective.
5. The starving scapegoated and attacked Jews, lepers, and the wealthy.

II. The Black Death

A. Arrival in Europe and Spread

1. Genoese ships brought the plague to Italy in 1347.
2. From there it spread to southern Germany, France, and then England.

B. Pathology and Care

1. Fleas often living on black rats bore the plague bacillus.
2. Poor sanitary conditions and lack of bathing facilitated the spread of the disease.
3. The appearance of a single boil was followed by bleeding under the skin, vomiting of blood, and death.
4. Medieval doctors had no way of coping with the plague.
5. Black rats mostly stayed in cities, so the disease was concentrated there.
6. In England perhaps one-third of the population died—in some Italian cities more than one-half.
7. The plague reached Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and Russia.

C. Social, Economic, and Cultural Consequences

1. Priests often took great risks to minister to the sick and had a high mortality rate. Church officials sanctioned unorthodox measures in the emergency, such as laymen administering extreme unction.
2. The plague made labor more expensive and benefited peasants and artisans.
3. The decline in production caused inflation.
4. Guilds accepted many new members, often unrelated to old guild members.
5. The plague caused profound pessimism, religious fanaticism (flagellants), suspicion of travelers and pilgrims, and slighting of funeral rites.
6. New colleges were endowed to deal with the shortage of priests.
7. By traumatizing medieval society and the Church, the plague ultimately contributed to the Reformation.

III. The Hundred Years' War (ca 1337–1453)

A. Causes

1. In 1328 French barons denied the claim of English King Edward III to the French throne and chose as king Philip VI of Valois.
2. In 1337 Philip confiscated Edward III's holding of Aquitaine.
3. The Hundred Years' War also became a French civil war as some French barons supported Edward III's claims to stop the centralizing drive of the French monarchy.

B. The Popular Response

1. Both English and French kings used priests to stimulate patriotism among the people.
2. War provided poor knights and others (criminals who enlisted, for example) with opportunities for plunder and new estates.

C. Course of the War to 1419

1. The English scored successes early on.
2. At Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415), the English longbowmen were instrumental in defeating the French.

D. Joan of Arc and France's Victory

1. In 1429 the French peasant girl Joan of Arc claimed divine inspiration and helped turn the tide in favor of the French.
2. She was captured by the English, tried, and executed on charges of witchcraft.
3. The war ended in 1453 with the English holding only the port of Calais in France.

E. Costs and Consequences

1. The war was terrifically costly for both sides and local government in England fell into disarray as so many sheriffs were serving abroad as knights.
2. To pay for the war, Edward III had to negotiate almost constantly with the barons in Parliament, thus strengthening the institution.
3. The war promoted the growth of nationalism in both countries.

IV. The Decline of the Church's Prestige

A. The Babylonian Captivity

1. From 1309–1376 the popes resided in Avignon, France, under control of the French monarchy.
 2. After returning to Rome in 1377, Urban VI succeeded to the papacy. Antagonized by Urban's anti-corruption campaign, a number of cardinals returned to France and chose a different Pope, Clement VII, who would reside in Avignon.
- B. The Great Schism
1. Kings lined up behind one pope or the other based on political considerations.
 2. The schism confused common people and discredited the Church among some.
- C. The Conciliar Movement
1. Before the schism Marsiglio, rector of the University of Paris, argued that the Church should be led by a council superior to the pope.
 2. The English scholar John Wyclif (ca 1330–1384) argued that there was no scriptural foundation for the pope's temporal power. He also argued that all Christians should read the Bible for themselves.
 3. The cardinals of Avignon and Rome summoned a council at Pisa in 1409 that deposed both popes and elected a third, but the old popes refused to step down, leading to a threefold schism.
 4. The German emperor Sigismund organized a council at Constance that met from 1414–1418 and resolved the schism, electing a new pope (and burning the heretic John Hus at the stake).
- V. The Life of the People
- A. Marriage
1. There was a high frequency of premarital sex and conception.
 2. Most marriages were between partners from the same village, and arranged by parents.
 3. Letters between John and Margaret Paston of the gentry class show that Margaret managed family lands and business while John worked in London.
 4. Men in their midtwenties generally married women in their midteens.
 5. Legalized prostitution was the sexual outlet for unmarried men.
 6. Divorce did not exist, but there were disputes because many couples were privately married (without a public religious ceremony).
- B. Life in the Parish
1. Religious festivals corresponded to the agricultural calendar.
 2. Peasants hated their ancient service obligations to the lord.
 3. In the fourteenth century entrance into guilds became more difficult. Many guilds excluded women.
 4. Entertainments were often violent^{3/4}executions, bullfighting and bear-baiting, tournaments, wrestling matches, and so on.
 5. Consumption of alcohol was high.
 6. In the late Middle Ages the laity exercised increased influence over parish affairs, church property, and so on.
- C. Fur-Collar Crime

1. To maintain their standard of living as prices rose, some nobles and gentry turned to outright robbery and extortion.

D. Peasant Revolts

1. Frequent revolts provide evidence of the suffering and exploitation of peasants.
2. Flanders was the most highly urbanized region in northern Europe.
3. Uprisings in Flanders (1323–1328) represent the first mass movements of the fourteenth century.
4. Following fighting along the French-Flemish border, heavy indemnities were placed on the peasants.
5. In response, revolts broke out in 1323, revolts that evolved into a larger movement.
6. A French army crushed the peasant forces in 1328.
7. In 1358 French peasants, tormented by famine, plague, and high taxes to finance the Hundred Years' War, rebelled in the so-called Jacquerie.
8. In 1381 rising peasant expectations of well-being in England collided with reimposition of a head tax on peasants to start a peasant rebellion, probably the largest of the Middle Ages.
9. Rebellions also occurred in the late fourteenth century in Florence, Spain, and the cities of Germany.

E. Race and Ethnicity on the Frontiers

1. In early periods of conquest and colonization in the Middle Ages, newly arrived populations tended to live under their own laws, while the “native” populations retained their own laws and customs. Only in Ireland did England impose its legal system, and exclude the Irish from it.
2. In the fourteenth century regulations, laws, and customs discriminating among different ethnic groups on the basis of “blood descent” multiplied. These separated Germans from Slavs in Eastern Europe, Irish from English in Ireland, Spanish from Moors in Spain, and so on.

VI. Vernacular Literature

A. National Languages and Literature

1. In the fourteenth century writers began writing in their vernacular languages all over Europe.
2. Dante Alighieri of Florence wrote the Divine Comedy in Italian.
3. Geoffrey Chaucer of London wrote The Canterbury Tales in English.
4. François Villon of Paris wrote ballads celebrating the life of the common people in French.
5. Christine de Pisan of Bologna wrote in a wide variety of genres in French.
6. In Bohemia the arrival of Germans triggered the development of vernacular Czech literature, beginning with translations of German knightly sagas and religious writings.
7. Beginning in the fourteenth century, literacy rates rose among men and women, reflecting the greater complexity of society, the growth of commerce, and expanding government bureaucracy.