



The Middle Ages

Morris Bishop

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In this single indispensable volume, one of America's ranking scholars combines a life's work of research and teaching with the art of lively narration. Both authoritative and beautifully told, THE MIDDLE AGES is the full story of the thousand years between the fall of Rome and the Renaissance — a time that saw the rise of kings and emperors, the flowering of knighthood, the development of Europe, the increasing power of the Church, and the advent of the middle class. With exceptional grace and wit, Morris Bishop vividly reconstructs this distinctive era of European history in a work that will inform and delight scholars and general readers alike.

The Middle Ages Details

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Sam says

Why do I rate a dry history book so high? Because it's not dry at all it's very interesting and engaging. Don't be surprised if you find yourself talking about its details with friends and family. This book exemplifies Bill Cosby's cartoon admonition if you're not careful you might learn something.

Ben says

Like your British grandfather telling stories by the fire. There are no notes or references, so who knows how accurate this is, but Bishop's a good storyteller.

Kevin McGrath says

Very interesting content but reads a bit like a textbook. Covers a wide swath. Basically all of Europe for hundreds of years. What various classes of people ate (diet), did for work (occupations), wore (fashion), learned (education), lived (living conditions, community, social), how they entertained themselves (art & sport), etc. Not to mention government (Feudalism, etc.), war, religion and so on. A very ambitious topic in just over 250 pages.

Bill says

This is a good brief overview of history and culture of the middle ages. It shows that this was by no means a stagnant period of European history. The book would be much more useful if it included a bibliography and a reference list. I expect this omission is the publisher's fault, not the author's. There is no excuse for omitting these scholarly additions to an e-book, where the additional pages would cost virtually nothing. The book has no maps or illustrations. The chapter on medieval art prompted me to go back to my art history textbook.

Kiwi Begs2Differ \ says

I really enjoyed this book, I thought it was well organised. The first couple of chapters are dedicated to the main historical events, divided into early period and high/late middle ages. The following chapters are dedicated to specific topics: the hierarchical structure of feudal society, war, chivalry, religion, trade, education, literature, drama, sciences and the arts.

This book may not appeal to serious scholars (it is lacking even the basic references to sources, no notes are provided, etc.) and I noticed a couple of mistakes and some wide generalization (e.g. regarding local governance and the arts). Overall, however, it is a well written, informative and very enjoyable introduction to the middle ages period in Europe. Recommended.

Greg Strandberg says

Do you want to know what happened from about 300 AD to around 1000 or so? Then this book gives you good, solid chapters that make sense.

We had it for our Medieval European history course in university, and it was pretty good. I read it a few times in that regard, as you do when you read the same chapter a few times that week.

I'd actually like to read this again, because we all know how 'in one ear and out the other' college books can be.

Hayward Chan says

Before buying this book, set your expectation straight: it isn't an event-driven history book with details about every war and political change. It's about life and the state of the art throughout the middle ages. Historical events are included only if they help making the point.

Knowing that it is an old book, I find it surprising readable. Granted, I need to look up the dictionary every now and then (English is my second language and I am not a liberal arts major), but the narrative is fluent and concise. I wish there are more pictures and maps. I need to keep myself online to look up the mentioned places every now and then, but Bishop definitely does a great job in describing in words.

I am completely ignorant of the middle age history. After reading the book, even though I still don't know all the popes, wars and dynasties in detail, I have a pretty firm grasp of how people live and think in the "middle" ages.

Amy says

What sets this book apart is that it focuses more on what life was like in these days rather than the major players and battles. It does have plenty of places, dates, and names too, but also goes into what people ate, how the feudal system worked, and what life was like for people in different social classes and much more.

If I was a writer of Fantasy this would be an essential book for world building.

Samantha S. says

If you are even remotely interested in the Middle Ages, this book is quite the find. Bishop's writing is clear, accessible, detailed and very funny. A solid primer on a strange age

David says

Good overview of the period.

I did not like the way this book was organized. The book covers large topics (knights, art, thought) and then bounces around over 500 years and multiple countries on that topic. The result is some amusing anecdotes (and I certainly learned some things), but this approach made the book a good cure for insomnia.

David Howells says

A good insight...

A good book that kept me interested all the way through. Not a lot of depth to it however but then again one shouldn't expect it as the time span is rather wide and it covers virtually all of Europe. A very readable book that is enough to whet the appetite for something more substantive. Don't be misled though as I garnered a considerable amount of new information. My only critique was that it needed some expansive detail in quite a few places.

Dave Miller says

"It's All left to the imagination."

I really enjoyed the audiobook for the most part. It was very interesting to hear about what life was like for various types of people in the middle ages rather than endless names of kings and battles and dates. The big problem I had with this audiobook was that the later chapters talked a lot about art and architecture. It would have been very helpful to have have a pdf guidebook with PICTURES and illustrations. I even purchased the kindle ebook in hopes of getting pictures, diagrams and maps, but it had NONE! An ebook that discuss art and architecture without a single picture. Boo

adrienne says

easily readable, but completely lacking footnotes/references/bibliography, even for the most simple of things like a king's birth date. Where he uses quotations, he notes the person who (supposedly?) made the statement, but not where he actually found the citation.

good for a beginner book or a pleasure read, but i could never recommend using this as a reference for anything serious; it would rank, at absolute best, as a tertiary source.

given 3 stars because it is an enjoyable read, if one is looking for a non-scholarly overview of the era.

LeAnn says

Morris Bishop's highly readable survey of The Middle Ages condenses a thousand years of history often dismissed for its darkness, violence, and superstition and incorrectly portrayed as an unfortunate chasm between the glory of ancient times and the Renaissance that drew on a renewed interest in the classics.

Bishop's survey, unlike Asimov's histories, covers the period thematically rather than chronologically. For a span of time that includes the Dark Ages when much of what was written was either lost or barely preserved, this approach works rather well. Ten chapters cover familiar medieval topics such as Knights in Battle, The Noble's Life, An Age of Faith, and The Artists' Legacy. Less familiar topics (to me, anyway) included Towns and Trade, The Life of Labor, and The Life of Thought.

Perhaps some of the most surprising history of the Middle Ages is the development of capitalism and commerce and the rise of towns, which greatly promoted the common welfare, including the privilege of self-government purchased from money-strapped nobles. Trade guilds are early unions. Towns offered freedom to serfs in exchange for their employment.

Bishop declares that the Middle Ages ended by bequeathing modern times more than it had received itself, a rather astonishing claim unless the reader allows for his others: that the Middle Ages accomplished much in terms of art, architecture, literature, learning, and wisdom.

Tim Martin says

The Middle Ages by Morris Bishop is an enjoyable and witty overview of the history, culture, and society of Medieval Europe. The first chapter, "The Long Dark," looks at the beginning of the medieval period, the author arguing that the Middle Ages should be seen as both a continuation of the language, institutions, and artistry of not only old Rome but also of cultures independent of it, such as that of the Franks and Saxons and a formation, the beginning of our modern world, the end of pagan classical civilization. Charlemagne is a major figure in this chapter; his coronation as the first Roman emperor in the West in more than 300 years (in the year 800) marked a major shift in power, from the East to the West, the development of a culture that was not a satellite of Byzantium but rather firmly European, and the very birth of European civilization.

Chapter two focused on the history of the High Middle Ages, focusing in large part on the year 1000 as a major turning point, that despite Viking threats "one could point to certain gains, to certain justifications for hope," as the West was in generally a better shape and the broad outline of the major modern states had begun to take form. Technology continued to advance, with the advent of the spinning wheel, mechanical weight-driven clock, compass, and fixed rudder. Notable in the chapter is King Henry II (who laid the foundations of English common law and the institution of limited monarchy).

The next chapter focused on knights and the crusades. Bishop noted that the crusades were "the first wars fought for an ideal" and that they were promoted with all the tools of the propagandist, among them atrocity stories, lies, and inflammatory speeches. Also interesting was his coverage of Saladin (the "pet enemy" of the West), the description of crusade battles (Richard the Lion-Hearted took Acre in 1191 with the help of a catapult known as Bad Neighbor), and why the crusades ultimately failed (they did not correspond to any temporal aim, as Europe had no need for Jerusalem or Syria, and Europe would have benefited more from a stronger Byzantine Empire though the crusades achieved in fact quite the opposite).

Chapter four focused on the life of the noble, on what in fact feudalism really was, the bloody nature of the family feuds of the nobles, the "bundle of paradoxes" that was the noble (he could be both gallant and bloodthirsty, charitable and immoral), and many of the elements of their daily lives. We learn for instance that window glass was rare for centuries and for long time was treated with great care, as Bishop tells of some nobles who removed and wrapped window glass before long journeys. Throughout much of the Middle Ages pockets were unknown, blonde hair was much prized in Italy (ladies spent a great deal of time bleaching it), hard soap was a luxury item and did not appear until the 12th century, and dinner guests were provided with spoons but had to bring their own knives (forks were a rarity).

Chapter five looked at Christianity, arguing that the church, in many senses, was more than merely the patron of medieval culture, that it was medieval culture. He argued that the pope's involvement in political affairs blunted church authority, laying the papacy open to "mockery and shame" by overuse of crusades and excommunication for temporal gains. The coverage of the cult of relics was fascinating (so morbid was this that Saint Romuald of Ravenna, visiting France, heard people propose he was more valuable dead than alive and barely escaped). The life of the monastery was well covered, as well as St. Francis and the Franciscans, Dominic of Caleruega and the Dominicans, the Waldenses (early evangelical, almost Protestant, Christians), and the Cathari (dualistic heretics).

Chapter six looked at towns and trade. Interesting tidbits include the fact that the last name Walker comes from the cloth trade (walkers stamped on cloth to shrink and compact it), that bankers first appeared in medieval trade fairs (money changers or "bankers" got the name from the banks or benches that they laid out their coins), artisans kept virtually no stock in stores (they worked only on orders), and our hook-and-ladder companies comes from the hooks supplied in medieval cities to pull burning thatch from roofs to the street.

Chapter seven looked at the life of labor. Bishop looked at how the manorial system functioned, the daily life of the peasant, leprosy, and the state of medieval medicine.

The eighth chapter focused on the life of thought, the author examining how schools worked and what it was like to have been a student, the origins of medieval science and secular scholarship (as scholars realized that the physical world was "no mere ugly training camp for the soul" but worthy of study in its own right), and famous medieval writers like Dante and Boccaccio.

Chapter nine dealt with medieval art, architecture, and music. Fascinating coverage of the evolution of building styles, the construction of cathedrals, the use of stained glass (which told the stories of the Christian faith through "colored sunshine", though Bishop felt the term stained glass was incorrect, as it was not stained with color but rather infused with it), the work and role of artisans in society, and the origins of musical notation (developed during the eleventh century into our recognizably modern form, which was also when our notes were named - ut, re, mi, fa, so, la - from the opening syllables of the successive lines of a familiar hymn).

The final chapter dealt with the end of the Middle Ages. Major topics include papal conflicts such as the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Schism, the challenges posed by John Wycliffe and John Hus, the "greatest calamity" to befall the Western world (the Black Death), the Hundred Years War (a "futile war,...it achieved little except destruction, misery, and death"), and Joan of Arc.
