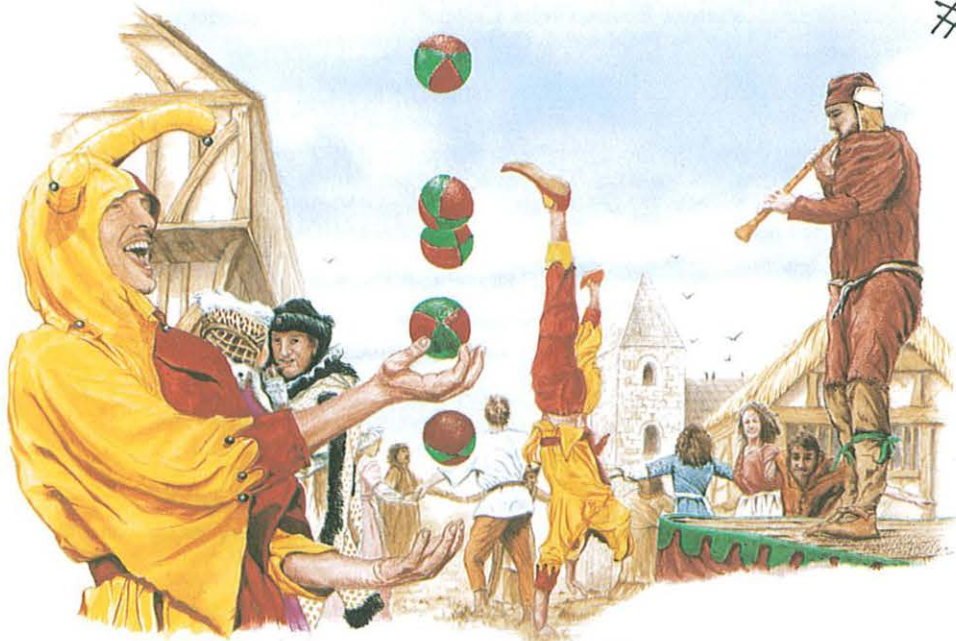


THE MIDDLE AGES

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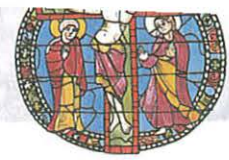


1993



Viking

A CHRISTIAN EUROPE



The great cathedral of Hagia Sophia was built in the city of Constantinople in the early sixth century. This cathedral, built on the orders of the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian, dazzled everyone with its beauty.

An important change took place in western Europe during the last years of the Roman Empire. In the fourth century, the Emperor Constantine gave up the worship of the old pagan gods of Rome. Instead he began to follow a new religion that had arisen in the east of the empire. It was called Christianity.

PAGAN TO CHRISTIAN

The Germanic tribes who attacked the Roman Empire were pagan (they worshipped gods associated with the natural world). Christian missionaries worked in many countries to convert these tribes to Christianity. A monk called Bede, who lived in England in the seventh century, wrote a book about the spread of Christianity. He explained how the missionaries sometimes used pagan customs as a way of helping people understand Christianity. Bede quoted a letter from Pope Gregory I to a missionary named Augustine, who worked among the Anglo-Saxons of England. Gregory told Augustine that he should not destroy pagan temples, but dedicate them to Christ instead.

THE CHURCH OF ROME

As Christianity spread, the Church of Rome developed a very special position. The claim of Rome to be the most important of all Christian churches came to be accepted throughout western Europe. Rome was considered an important religious center by Christians because both St. Peter and St. Paul were believed to have been martyred there. The bishop of Rome (the pope) was regarded as taking the place of St. Peter in the Church. Because of this, he claimed power over Christians everywhere. This claim was disputed in the area that had formed the Roman Empire in the East.

A carved cross erected in Ruthwell in Scotland around the year 700. Many such crosses were erected in Anglo-Saxon times as people were converted to Christianity. Some marked sites where missionaries taught people about the new religion.



A baptism taking place in church. Christian baptism was spread through Europe by missionaries as part of the process of converting different countries to Christianity.

THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

The pope came to have very great power. When the last Roman emperor in the West was thrown from office in 476 A.D., the pope began to play an important part instead. Pope Gregory I (590-604), for example, helped to defend the people of Italy against the Lombard raiders who had attacked them. He also carried out many tasks that had previously been the work of the emperor's officials, such as distributing corn. The actions of popes like Gregory I meant that the Church came to have political as well as religious power.

The pope and other leading members of the clergy claimed the right to influence many aspects of government in different countries. They believed that the authority of kings and queens was given to them by the Church. The coronation ceremony was a sign of this belief. When a king or queen was crowned, it was an important clergyman, such as an archbishop, who placed the crown on the new ruler's head. The pope himself crowned the Emperor Charlemagne in 800. Many believed that rituals like this showed that the Church was more powerful and important than kings and queens.



THE WEALTH OF THE CHURCH

The power and wealth of the Church were obvious to many people in their everyday lives. The buildings of the Church made everyone aware of these things. Few villages were without a church—a stone building which towered above the little huts and cottages of the peasants. In many places there were also large monasteries and cathedrals, magnificent complexes of buildings designed in the most up-to-date architectural styles. They were elaborate and costly to build. Many medieval church buildings may still be seen, such as the Abbaye-aux-Hommes in Caen, Normandy, and Speyer Cathedral in Germany. These buildings dedicated to God dominated the landscape and made private houses look small and insignificant. Only the castles of high-ranking nobles and knights made an impression like this.

A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Religious belief was a part of everyday life in the Middle Ages, which also contributed to the power of the Church. People looked to the Church and its leaders to explain events in the world around them. Disasters like storms, disease, or famine were often explained as punishments sent by God. People hoped that prayer and religious devotion would keep away events of this kind.

When the people of Europe were first converted to Christianity, many pagan places of worship were taken over and used for Christian services. In time, fine buildings were specially built for Christian worship. Here we see a great cathedral being built.

