Europe’s High Middle Ages

Many changes took place in Europe during this era but the two main forces that shaped the society of the high Middle Ages were feudalism and the Church. The Norman invasion of England introduced the rigid organization of feudal society which had developed out of the traditions of the Germanic tribes. Most people spent their lives working long hours on the land, serving the needs of their lord, and enjoying the simple pleasures that their conditions allowed.

William the Conqueror & The Battle of Hastings (1066) in The Bayeaux Tapestry

~ embroidered fabric panels made on William’s orders after the battle to convince people that he was the rightful heir to the throne

~ is a rich primary source

~ outlines the breakdown of the relationship between Harold Godwinson (crowned king of the Anglo-Saxons) and William of Normandy

~ shows feudal relationships

~ depicts preparations for war and the remarkable feat of sending a large invasion fleet

~ displays battlefield tactics and technology

With the conquest came significant changes, William introduced feudalism, stripping the English earls of their lands and giving them to knights who had helped him during the Battle of Hastings.

The Feudal System

Feudal contract: a complex system of responsibilities and obligations between lord and vassal

~ large fiefs were divided into manors (each providing income for the knight who was its lord)

~ manor was a self-sufficient agricultural community in which most of the population lived out their lives unaware of the outside world

~ common people were either serfs or peasants (freeholders)—both were obliged to work long hard days on the land and lived in modest conditions in their villages

~ lord and lady of the manor lived in large houses and were attended by many servants

~ lords had to fulfill their agreement with the King

Religion

~ dominated daily life

~ churches were found in every village and cathedrals in most towns

~ people believed they would be morally judged after death

~ to avoid damnation, they had to partake in various religious ceremonies

~ positions in society were accepted as “God’s will”

~ many dedicated themselves to God’s work (monks, priests, nuns)

~ uneducated and therefore superstitious—believed that God controlled the weather, their health, their general prosperity, their place in society

~ days of the calendar were dedicated to saints

~ ceremonies had to be blessed to ensure success

~ R.C. Church had great power over peoples’ lives—threat of excommunication = Hell

~ church provided services (baptism, marriage, burial)

~ people had to pay tithes (taxes) to the church

Laws and Systems of Justice

~ trial by ordeal/battle (winner was believed protected by God and therefore innocent)

~ 3 levels of courts: manor courts, royal courts, church courts

~ authority of the Church often clashed with the monarch (eg: Henry II and Thomas Beckett)

~ women had very few rights

Most people were uneducated and knew very little about the outside world. Even those who did travel (kings, nobles, traders) had limited knowledge of the world. Maps were rare and often inaccurate. World views were expanded through the Crusades that began in the 11th century. These holy wars began as a result of deep religious feeling and prejudice against the Muslims. Though the Crusades did not wrest the Holy Land from the Turks, they did promote trade and an exchange of ideas.

Monarchs

~ people accepted the rule of the monarch

~ king relied on the nobles to uphold the system

~ barons posed a threat to the kings—therefore treated with great respect

Eleanor of Aquitaine

~ most famous person in Europe at this time

~ held great influence as queen of both France and England

~ mother to both King Richard the Lion-Hearted and King John

~ early feminist who encouraged writing by (and about) women

~ helped spread the concepts of troubadours, chivalry, and courtly love

~ patron of the arts (music, literature, painting)

~ went on the 2nd Crusade and allowed her ladies to wear armour

~ had 8 children and lived into her early 80s

~ survived 16 years in prison (charged with treason for trying to usurp her 2nd husband Henry II of England)—released after Henry II’s death

King John & the Magna Carta

~ argued with Pope Innocent III over who should appoint the Archbishop of Canterbury—the pope excommunicated John and placed England under an interdict (no baptisms, church marriages or burials) for 5 years

~ when Innocent III encouraged the French king to invade England, John surrendered and gave the pope England as a fief

~ charged a tax for the pope called “Peter’s pence”

~ mistreated his barons (false imprisonment without trial) & confiscated the land

~ took barons’ relatives hostage (often tortured them)

~ charged illegal taxes

~ hired foreign soldiers to fight against his own people

~ 1214: barons rebelled—eventually townspeople and the Church rebelled

~ June 15, 1215: barons forced John to go to Runnymede and agree to respect the rights of the English people by agreeing to the Magna Carta

Magna Carta

~ guaranteed that free people of England would not be abused by the king

~ taxes could not be imposed without the consent of a parliament

~ no person could be arrested/imprisoned without a proper trial

~ King John, the barons, and the high church officials placed their seals on the Great Charter—signing the Magna Carta was a big step towards democracy as we know it