

Early Middle Ages

(24 lectures, 30 minutes/lecture)
Course No. 8267

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We often call them the "Dark Ages," the era which spanned the decline and fall of Rome's western empire and lingered for centuries, a time when the Ancient World was ending and Europe had seemingly vanished into ignorance and shadow, its literacy and urban life declining, its isolation from the rest of the world increasing.

It was a time of *decline*, with the empire fighting to defend itself against an endless onslaught of attacks from all directions: the Vikings from the North, the Huns and other Barbarians from the East, the Muslim empire from the south.

It was a time of *death and disease*, with outbreaks of plague ripping through populations both urban and rural.

It was a time of *fear*, when religious persecution ebbed and flowed with the whims of those in power.

And as Rome's power and population diminished, so, too, did its ability to handle the administrative burdens of an overextended empire. Fewer records were kept, leaving an often-empty legacy to historians attempting to understand the age.

But modern archaeology has begun to unearth an increasing number of clues to this once-lost era. And as historians have joined them to sift through those clues—including evidence of a vast arc of Viking trade reaching from Scandinavia to Asia—new light has begun to fall across those once "dark" ages and their fascinating personalities and events.

"A World Recognizably Becoming Our Own"

In his new course on **The Early Middle Ages**—which traces a journey from Scandinavia across northern and central Europe to the farthest reaches of the Byzantine and Islamic empires—Professor Philip Daileader shares this new understanding of a world, no matter how far away and strange it may seem, that is "recognizably becoming our own."

"In countless ways, seemingly obscure events and developments from the 'Dark Ages' impinge on the lives of people today.

"This is true in the realm of religion, because our period saw the triumph of Christianity over paganism... This is true in the realm of language, because every word that we speak and write—indeed, the handwriting that we use each and every day—is a product of the historical forces that

we will study... And this is true in the realm of family life, because many practices that existed in 300—such as polygyny, marriage within the kin group, and infanticide—are illegal today and were vanishing or completely gone by the year 1000."

Why Study "The Dark Ages"?

As Professor Daileader points out, given the period's dismal reputation and its temporal remoteness from the 21st century, one might wonder why the histories of the later Roman Empire and the Early Middle Ages should command our attention.

First, he suggests, the years from 300 to 1000 present us with some of the most challenging questions historians have ever had to tackle:

- Why did the Roman Empire fall?
- Why did the ancient world give way to the medieval world?
- Why did Christian monotheism become the dominant religion in Europe?

Secondly, this period commands our attention because of some of the people who lived during it.

"Theologians and philosophers such as St. Augustine were going to exert a commanding influence on European thought for well over a millennium after their death," he notes. "To understand later medieval thinkers, to understand Reformation thinkers, such as Martin Luther, one needs to know something about figures such as St. Augustine."

To be sure, the Early Middle Ages were not without figures who still pique our interest today, such as King Arthur and Charlemagne.

As Professor Daileader considers the extent to which the historical realities of Arthur and Charlemagne match up to the legends that have become attached to their names, he repeatedly fascinates with revealing personal insights, such as Charlemagne's love for simply bobbing around in hot baths, or the window offered into his personality by a contemporary biography penned by a friend and confidante named Einhard.

Einhard's writing is detailed, but the lectures point out that some of those details—including those about the ruler's difficulty in writing his name and chanting Latin liturgy—suggest that his largely complimentary account of Charlemagne's intellectual achievements is exaggerated.

Finally, Professor Daileader emphasizes the importance of understanding the Early Middle Ages as a vital underpinning for what was to come. Even if its accomplishments pale somewhat in comparison to those of the Late Middle Ages or the Italian Renaissance, those later developments are nonetheless built upon foundations established during the Early Middle Ages.

"Without some important transformations that occurred during this period, the rest would not have been possible. To understand fully the High Middle Ages or the Italian Renaissance, it is necessary to understand the Early Middle Ages," he states.

What Do We Know? Great Historians View the "Dark Ages"

A four-time winner of Harvard University's Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, Professor Daileader creates a framework for that understanding by using the contrasting historical theories offered by two extremely influential historians:

- Edward Gibbon, the English author of the monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, whose explanations closely followed those of the Roman moralists of the 4th and 5th centuries, and
- Henri Pirenne, the Belgian thinker who injected a newfound emphasis on social and especially economic factors into the analysis of history.

Beginning with their two contrasting viewpoints, Professor Daileader offers a fast-moving portrait of a period of history that consistently belies its reputation as dark or dismal.

You learn, for example, the role of Gibbon's massive ego in his choice of the subject matter that would make him famous, as well as the intensity of his animosity toward Christianity and willingness to express in his writings startling accusations against it.

You study, in depth, the possible reasons for the decline of Rome's vast eastern and western empires, and whether and how Rome actually "fell."

Christianity, as you might expect, plays a tremendously important role in the period covered by this course, but always in unexpected ways.

Professor Daileader explains, for example, how the increasing difficulty of achieving martyrdom—a chore even in a pre-Christian Roman empire and a near impossibility under Constantine—created a need for new paths toward "Christian heroicism."

Those paths might be as expected as monasticism or as outlandish as the pole-sitting Stylites, whose demonstrations of devotion might last for decades and offer Professor Daileader an opportunity to demonstrate his delightful sense of classroom wit.

Hear the Arrest of Jesus... Rewritten As a Norse Saga

You'll also encounter a style of Christian writing you may well never have seen before, as Professor Daileader explores the strategies the Carolingians used to convert Saxons to Christianity and reads a passage describing the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as rendered in one of the most unusual of these writings—*The Heliand*, a Carolingian translation of the Gospels dramatically rewritten as a Norse saga.

And you'll learn the strange fear that drove Charlemagne to restore Latin literacy during the "Carolingian Renaissance"—including some samples from the standardized tests given prospective priests that offer a hint as to the immense task the Carolingians were up against.

The tests put forth, for example, by Louis the Pious, the son of Charlemagne, included questions

on such basic elements of Christian theology as, "Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?"

"Even more amazing," notes Professor Daileader, "answer sheets were provided for the examiners... because it was by no means certain that the person grading the test was going to know whether this was a 'true' or a 'false.' "

You encounter extraordinary successes as well, learning how the often incomprehensible copied texts left behind by the Romans and Barbarians led the Carolingians to develop basics that we now take for granted, including spaces between words, punctuation, and even the form of handwriting we still use today.

You discover the curious reason why Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks worked harder than their counterparts on the continent, and how this contributed to their monasteries becoming the intellectual centers of their day during the 6th-century re-Christianization of Anglo-Saxon England.

The Profound Impact of the Viking and Islamic Cultures

The Early Middle Ages were marked by startling contributions from many cultures, often in surprising ways.

Though the Vikings, for example, are often presented to us only as warlike invaders, Professor Daileader reveals how they were, in fact, far more complex than that one-dimensional picture indicates.

Yes, their fierce raids for wealth and slaves did result in the sacking of almost every important town in the Carolingian empire multiple times in the 9th century. In fact, citizens even grew to expect the annual Viking raids.

But they also established a remarkable trading network—the Northern Arc—the routes of which took them not only across Europe, but to northern Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. Archaeologists, in fact, have even unearthed a Viking-age statue of Buddha in a Scandinavian bog.

The Vikings' reputation in matters of invasion does not go unexamined, however, and these lectures also explain why the raiders from the north enjoyed such success.

Professor Daileader explains the technological advantage provided by their longboats—the European network of rivers that allowed them to exploit this advantage to the fullest, their ability to carry those longboats across land when they needed to reach new rivers, and the desperate payment of Carolingian protection money—*danegeld*—that really offered little protection at all; after taking their payout, the Vikings would often simply move on to raid neighboring territories.

Professor Daileader also offers a fascinating glimpse into Islamic culture during this crucial period. You'll see the birth of Islam in the land where, before Muhammad, most of the people

were actually pagan polytheists whose worship included several gods in addition to Allah, and the countless ways in which the Arabs transformed Spain—or *al-Andalus*—during the golden age of Islamic rule.

During this golden age, Islamic rulers brought great technological advances in agriculture to *al-Andalus*, making the nation a center of complex religious and ethnic diversity and a great seat of scholarship whose ruler was himself rumored to possess a library of more than 400,000 volumes.

You'll also enjoy a remarkable glimpse into the court of *al-Andalus*'s 10th-century ruler, Emir Abd al-Rahman III, who used dazzling tricks including "light shows"—using a bowl of mercury and the architecture of his reception hall—to impress his visitors.

If the demonstration wasn't forceful enough, of course, his visitors could also dwell upon the reputation this ruler had gained for forcefully defending his power, for Abd al-Rahman III had once disinterred and crucified the *11-years-dead corpse of an enemy's father* to prove a point that even death held no shelter from his wrath!

One of the most interesting subjects covered by Professor Daileader during his lectures on Islam's role in this period is the origin of the idea of *jihad*, which had a very different meaning in the time of Muhammad than so many of us associate with it today.

Professor Daileader concludes this enlightening look at the "Dark Ages" with a discussion on how Gibbon and Pirenne have fared through the lens of historical hindsight, and how even today's historians will one day face the same judgment.

Course Lecture Titles

Part 1

1. Long Shadows and the Dark Ages
2. Diocletian and the Crises of the Third Century
3. Constantine the Great-Christian Emperor
4. Pagans and Christians in the Fourth Century
5. Athletes of God
6. Augustine, Part One
7. Augustine, Part Two
8. Barbarians at the Gate
9. Franks and Goths
10. Arthur's England
11. Justinian and the Byzantine Empire
12. The House of Islam

Part 2

13. Rise of the Carolingians
14. Charlemagne
15. Carolingian Christianity
16. The Carolingian Renaissance
17. Fury of the Northmen
18. Collapse of the Carolingian Empire
19. The Birth of France and Germany
20. England in the Age of Alfred
21. Al-Andalus-Islamic Spain
22. Carolingian Europe-Gateway to the Middle Ages
23. Family Life—How Then Became Now
24. Long Shadows and the Dark Ages Revisited