



LESSON 3.4.3 | READ | The Not So “Dark Ages” — Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

PURPOSE

How we learn and view history depends upon the perspective of the people telling the story. For those of us who grew up learning history as western civilization, we often learned about the stories of great men, great deeds, and great (or not so great) wars. However, it’s important to examine history from multiple perspectives and through different and filters. In order to get a more balanced view of not only European history, but also the history of other cultures and geographical regions during this era, it is necessary to look beyond European sources and Europe in general. This article

(and subsequent activities) examines major themes and occurrences throughout the world. It addresses life in Europe following the fall of the Roman Empire; from the feudal system and the dominance of the Catholic Church in everyday lives. We also read about how the “Dark Ages” in China weren’t dark at all. Finally, we learn more about our old friends the Muslims and the Mongols. Provide students with a copy of *The Not So “Dark Ages”* edited by Bridgette Byrd O’Connor.

PROCESS

Have students read the following article. Host a discussion of themes following their completion of the reading.

ATTACHMENT

- *The Not So “Dark Ages”* — edited by Bridgette Byrd O’Connor.



READING | The Not So “Dark Ages” — Edited by Bridgette Byrd O’Connor

How we learn and view history really depends upon the perspective of the people telling the story. For those of us who grew up learning history as Western Civilization, we often learned about the stories of great men, great deeds, and great (or not so great) wars. The course often began with the cradle of civilization – Mesopotamia – and then moved to Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. With the fall of Rome came the Middle Ages and the Crusades followed by the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution, and the modern era of world wars. And this history seems to fit nicely together and tells a compelling story; however, what about the rest of the world? Also, the focus of this history is very one-sided and Eurocentric. Therefore, in order to get a more balanced view of not only European history but also the history of other cultures and geographical regions during these eras, it is necessary to look beyond European sources and Europe in general. That is not to say that we should ignore the history of Western civilization but we should certainly take a more critical approach to how this history has been presented.

One of the classic time periods that historians of Western civilization have focused upon has been the Middle Ages, which is also known by many to be the “Dark Ages”. What made this period of history so “dark” and indeed were there really a bunch of uneducated people wandering around the countryside trying to avoid horribly unpleasant attacks from Germanic tribes of marauders? Well, the answer is yes, it was a little dark when compared to earlier civilizations but learning and cultural achievements weren’t exactly dead. And yes, there were some rather unpleasant semi-nomadic people running around the countryside wreaking havoc but there was also a lot more to both European history and the history of the world during this period that traditionally has

been overlooked by standard high school history courses.

So to get the whole European focus out of the way and to explain why this era of history was somewhat “dark”, here’s a synopsis of what happened.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire left a vacuum of power in Europe. This simply meant that there was no longer a large empire in power to keep up a regular army and make sure that the citizens of the empire were protected and the borders were secure. There were a number of different Germanic tribes wandering around Europe at this time and they were not known for being nice. In fact, many were quite vicious and believed in an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth type of laws and punishment. For the most part, this was completely foreign to how the Romans approached law and government.

As there was no empire left to protect the people from invasions, the wealthy had to think of some way to secure their property. These wealthy people, or lords, decided to enter into a contract with a number of either lesser nobles or knights. This feudal contract was established between the lord and his vassal whereby the lord would give the vassal a piece of land in exchange for military service (protection), grain, or labor. These knights or vassals would then do the same things with people who were lower on the social ladder than them. So a knight might exchange a small piece of his land to a farmer in exchange for grain or service on his land. The farmer would usually work for the knight 2-3 days a week, farming his land so that the knight was free to fight for the lord. These types of arrangements proved to be beneficial to all people involved as it was a symbiotic relationship (the lord got protection while the knight received land and the knight had someone to work his fields while the farmer had a plot of land to farm for himself). The lowest people in this social structure were the serfs. These people were basically ►



slaves and they could be bought and sold with the property, much like African-Americans slaves in America. This social structure was extremely rigid and it was nearly impossible to move up the ladder. If you were born a serf then you would remain a serf unless you could afford to buy your freedom, which is something that was seldom achieved.

As people began to become more secure in their surroundings, they started to move around and establish new towns and cities. People also began to focus on things other than protection, and these things included crafts such as textiles, iron and metal work, and pottery. This was also the period in which people began building grand cathedrals. These cathedrals were built in major towns for a variety of reasons: to praise God, to be a refuge for the people in hard times, and to bring business to the town. If a town had a particularly spectacular cathedral, especially one that had a holy relic that was known to be miraculous then hundreds of people would journey to the town on a pilgrimage. These travelers or pilgrims would bring in a great deal of money to the local shops and businesses of the town.

Larger towns often held sporting events in order to bring in more tourists. Medieval sports included tournaments where knights would joust and compete in sword fights for the amusement of the people and to practice their skills when there were no wars to be fought. While most of the people were illiterate during the Middle Ages, there were those who could read and write, especially religious orders of men and women. The medieval period is probably best known for being a particularly religious time period, when new orders of nuns and monks were formed. This flourishing of religious spirit and the foundation of monasteries was called the monastic movement. Monasteries and nunneries were popping up all over Europe. One of the monks' main goals was to educate the people and many monasteries established

schools to educate the youth of the town where they were located.

As you might be able to guess, the medieval period was one that almost completely revolved around religion. The Catholic Church was extremely powerful and wealthy. They controlled educational institutions, cathedrals, and even had a powerful influence on towns and kings. At this time the Catholic Church was the church of Europe – the only church of Europe – and it was centered in Vatican City (Rome) where the apostle Peter (the first pope) had lived and died and where he built the first church. The Catholic Church also believed that they were the one and only true religion. This would soon prove to be problematic as there developed a schism within the church, and when another monotheistic faith was founded in the 7th century, tensions increased.

As previously stated in the article on Islam, this faith spread slowly across the Middle East and into North Africa and Spain. However, even though people in this area were relatively slow to convert to Islam, by 900 CE most of those living under Muslim rulers in modern day Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Spain had accepted the faith. The vast majority of Muslim rulers did not push conversion on their people, with many Muslims, Christians, and Jews living together peacefully. However, this peace was relatively short lived after the leader of the Byzantine Empire asked for Pope Urban II's help in protecting Constantinople from the Seljuk Turks, which kicked off the Crusades.

Traditional history casts the Crusades as a series of holy wars that lasted from the 11th to the 13th centuries but they were more than wars over religion. As John Green points out in the Dark Ages video, had the Crusades been all about faith then they probably would have started a couple centuries before this when the Muslim empire was growing. But remember that the Muslim rulers weren't particularly concerned with



converting all of the people they governed and therefore, they weren't seen as being overly problematic for Christians or Jews. They were, of course, still viewed as believing in the "incorrect" faith but the same could be said of how the Muslims viewed Christians or how everyone viewed the Jews.

Up to the early 11th century, relations between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East were pretty chill, with Muslims welcoming Christians to the Holy Land because they made money off the pilgrims. Therefore, why would you want to disrupt a money-making enterprise? But in 1037 a new group of Muslims took over the area and they invaded the holy cities, therefore making it more difficult for the Christians to visit the holy sites. When the Eastern Roman Empire began to feel threatened, the Byzantine leader asked for help, which was a big deal because the eastern and western branches of the church did not get along. Just as the Roman Empire had divided between east (centered at Constantinople, Turkey) and west (centered at Rome, Italy), so too did the Catholic Church, with the leaders of each side claiming that they were the ones who were correct in their rites, rituals, and interpretations of the faith. Over time this bitter feud between the pope of the western branch and the patriarch of the eastern branch led to a Great Schism. This schism divided the church into the west (Roman Catholic) and east (Greek or Eastern Orthodox). Each church worships in almost exactly the same ways with mass, saints, and the Eucharist, but they remain divided. As if all of this wasn't enough trouble, there were also rival kingdoms warring it out in Europe. The kings of the numerous European kingdoms during the Middle Ages were often fighting amongst themselves over power and territory. In doing this, they were creating some havoc and general unrest, and there was a great loss of property and people when these rival kingdoms decided to fight. Pope Urban II was well aware of these problems and devised a way to possibly end the division in the Church and between

kingdoms: shift the focus away from your own issues and place them upon a common "enemy". The result was a series of political and religious wars that lasted (on and off) for two centuries. In the end, the Christians "lost" the Holy Land – although it was never really there's to begin with – and the Muslim Empire grew. While there was a massive loss of life on both sides of the fighting, the long-term effects of the wars were more positive.

During the Crusades Europeans learned more about Arabic and Muslim culture and vice versa, with both areas benefitting from prolonged contact with each other. Needless to say, war is not the best place to share ideas; however, there certainly was an exchange of both goods and ideas throughout these two centuries of warfare. Many European kingdoms were strengthened after the wars because these monarchs could consolidate their power after a large percentage of lords either died or lost their land to the king as repayment for loans made for war supplies. The Muslim empire grew substantially after the Crusades with the Ottoman Turks establishing a unified empire that extended throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and into Spain. With control of the territory that connected Asia with Europe, the Ottoman economy soared with increased trade. Italy, in particular the city-state of Venice, became extremely wealthy from the Crusades as they were responsible for most of the shipbuilding that took place during this era and then established a lucrative trade agreement with the Ottomans after the wars ended. This wealth was one of the main reasons why the Renaissance began in Italy: the Venetians, and later the Florentines, had amassed a fortune large enough to pay artists, architects, and authors such as Michelangelo and da Vinci. The trade monopoly established by the Muslim empire inspired Europeans to devise a way to cut out the middleman in their trade with Asia, which led to the Age of Exploration and the eventual "discovery" of the Americas. ►



The revival of learning and the concentration on antiquity that characterized the Renaissance came as a result of the rediscovery of ancient texts that were copied by both the Arabs and Christian monks. And finally, advances in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine made by Arab scholars were introduced to Europe, which led to changes in the way Europeans viewed the known universe (Copernicus and the heliocentric theory) and in the way we count (by using the Arabic, but really Indian, number system).

Meanwhile in China, the “Dark Ages” didn’t really exist at all. You’ll remember from the article about the fall of empires that China was in a state of disarray after the end of the Han dynasty in 220 CE. As a result of the fall of this dynasty, trade along the Silk Road routes suffered because there were no longer large empires to maintain the roads and no large army to help protect merchants and travelers. It wasn’t until the Tang dynasty rose to power in the early 7th century CE that prolonged stability returned to China and thus to the Silk Roads, especially since this was also the time period that the Muslim empire was growing in the Middle East. The Tang Empire lasted almost 300 years and during this time the Chinese expanded their territory, maintained the roads and canals that were necessary for trade, and the population soared. Agricultural innovations increased, which meant there was more food for the people and more food usually equates to an increase in population. Unfortunately, the Tang got greedy, the empire grew too big, and the emperor taxed the people too much, which is the classic recipe for the failure of empires. However, this recipe always seems to get lost over the years because rulers continually make the same mistakes over and over again! The Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) rose to power after the demise of the Tang and while the Song emperors ruled over a smaller land area, the empire still became very wealthy. During this time population doubled (thanks

again to those agricultural improvements) due to the cultivation of a new strain of rice. It was also during the reign of the Tang and Song that the Chinese went on an inventing spree: gunpowder, advances in printing, the magnetic compass, and paper money. International trade flourished during this period and internally, China had a stable government with well trained bureaucrats thanks to the extension of the use of the civil service exam and hiring based upon merit rather than money or connections. However, even with all of these accomplishments, the Song could not keep, as John Green would say ... “wait for it”... the Mongols out of China.

The Mongols had plagued the northern borders of China for a number of years as Genghis Khan organized raids and eventually took monetary pay offs from the Chinese to stop attacking them. Genghis never fulfilled his goal of conquering China; however, in 1279 his grandson Kublai Khan finally achieved what his grandfather could not. While Genghis’ Mongolian empire stretched across 11 million miles, it was almost impossible to maintain an empire of this size. So when Genghis died, it was split into four khanates with Kublai Khan taking control of the khanate that included Mongolia, Tibet, Korea, and northern China (soon to be all of China). Once Kublai Khan conquered all of China, he decided to govern from China, which was a completely novel thing to do for Mongol rulers, and established a new Mongolian-Chinese dynasty called the Yuan (1271-1368). During this period a Mongol leader controlled the area from the Persian Empire to China, which meant that the area along with Silk Road routes was stable and safe. As a result, foreign trade increased and China became very wealthy, as Chinese products were some of the most sought after goods in Afro-Eurasia. We know a great deal about some of these products and life at the Khan court from the travels of the European explorer Marco Polo, who was employed by the Khan for 17 years. Polo describes black rocks that were ►



used for heating (coal), a horned elephant (rhinoceros), and paper that was used for trade (paper currency), which were all items that were unknown to the vast majority of Europeans. Therefore, the expansion of trade under Kublai Khan generated interest in new, and often exotic, goods, which also increased the exchange of ideas such as inventions and the spread of different faiths as well as the spread of disease. It was the increase in these exchanges that led to innovation in sailing and agricultural techniques, which inspired adventurers to explore new lands and led to a huge increase in population; that is until the Black Death wiped out millions of people.

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*Big History Project. "Unit 8: Expansion and Interconnection."
<https://www.bighistoryproject.com>. Web.*