

Powers and Thrones

What's in it for me? Journey through a portal into the medieval world.

You might know the period of history after the fall of the Roman Empire as the “Dark Ages.” Even the term medieval is often used as a pejorative, signaling cruelty, stupidity, or unjustified violence. But the Middle Ages weren't just a vacuum between the classical world and modernity. In many ways, this rich millennium of history shaped the world we know today. Spanning from the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fourth century to the Protestant Reformation in the fifteenth, these blinks survey the rulers and forces that shaped the Middle Ages. You'll get to know famous leaders such as Attila the Hun and Justinian I, as well as other kinds of power, such as migration, global networks, and new technologies. In these blinks, you'll learn

what climate change has to do with the collapse of the Roman Empire; how the Crusades were more than a conflict between Christians and Muslims; and how the rise of trading networks facilitated the spread of the Black Death.

Climate change and mass migration led to the collapse of the western Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire was a global force for more than one thousand years. During its heyday, it spanned northern Africa, Asia Minor, and most of Europe. Roman rule influenced the politics, culture, religion, and military of its dominions. It had transformed from its pagan beginnings to an empire-wide adoption of Christianity, solidifying Christianity's status as a major global religion. Its official language, Latin, would influence languages across the European continent and remain the de facto written language in western Europe throughout the Middle Ages. But by the fourth century CE, the Roman mega-state was beginning to collapse. And, surprisingly, a large factor in its fall was climate change – thousands of miles away from central Italy. The key message here is: Climate change and mass migration led to the collapse of the western Roman Empire. In the mid-fourth century, eastern Asia experienced the most severe drought recorded in the last two millennia. So the Huns, a nomadic people living in eastern Asia at that time, began to migrate across the Volga river, invading the lands of Germanic tribes known as the Goths. Since the Huns had an upper hand with their advanced archery capabilities, huge bands of Gothic tribes were forced to flee and seek refuge in the Roman Empire. Soon, eastern Europe was overwhelmed with a migrant crisis. At first, the Roman Empire was able to control the crisis. Emperor Theodosius I made arrangements to settle and employ the Goths in the Roman army. But in the 390s, the Huns continued their march west, displacing an even larger population of non-Roman tribal groups. Over the decades that followed, waves of barbarian migrant tribespeople posed an increasing threat to Roman power. Perhaps the most famous barbarian assault on the Roman Empire was led by Attila the Hun, who, in the fifth century, united the Huns and many Germanic tribespeople against Roman rule. Attila's barbarian army pillaged its way from eastern Europe into Italy before he decided to retreat, his forces decimated by disease and a lack of resources. Ironically, Attila's death the following year caused further chaos, as Germanic tribespeople freed from Hunnic

rule scattered across Europe. The power of the western Roman Empire had all but dissolved by the time a coalition of Gothic tribes led by Odoacer deposed the final Roman emperor, Romulus Augustus, in 476. In the wake of the empire's collapse, barbarian realms including the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths, the Burgundians, and the Franks established themselves across Europe, laying the foundations for the kingdoms of medieval Europe.

In the sixth century, the eastern Roman Empire was remodeled as the Byzantine superstate.

While the western Roman Empire deteriorated, the eastern Roman Empire remained largely intact. The eastern Roman capital of Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, persisted despite Hunnic and Gothic attacks. And after Attila's fall from power, the eastern Empire experienced a time of peace. Following the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the eastern Roman Empire began to transform into what is known as Byzantium, or the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantine Empire reached its height during the reign of Justinian I, who succeeded his uncle Justin I in 527. With the help of his wife and empress Theodora, Justinian launched an ambitious plan to restore the eastern Roman Empire. Here's the key message: In the sixth century, the eastern Roman Empire was remodeled as the Byzantine superstate. Within six months of taking the throne, Justinian commissioned the reform and recodification of the entirety of Roman law. Known as the Justinian Code, Justinian's system of law endured for most of the Byzantine era. Justinian's accomplishments also include erecting the Hagia Sophia, a huge basilica housing a Christian cathedral that was intended to be the greatest church on Earth. Meanwhile, he set out to retake some former Roman lands that had been seized by barbarians. With a powerful armada led by Belisarius, Byzantium reconquered the western Mediterranean coast, including North Africa, Italy, and Rome. But soon, the skies began to darken – literally. Due to volcanic eruptions, an ominous gloom enveloped the earth, causing one of humanity's most severe global environmental crises. Compounding this was the first global pandemic, known as the Plague of Justinian. This disease, the bubonic plague, may have killed up to 100 million people, and the empire's economy was plunged into turmoil. Soon, Justinian's fortunes took a turn for the worse, and by the time he died in 565, his dream of restoring the glory of the Roman Empire had dimmed. Yet the transformation of the eastern Roman Empire to Byzantium was not yet completed. Half a century after Justinian, another emperor, called Heraclius, came to power. In order to distinguish the eastern empire from the Latin West, Heraclius adopted Greek as Byzantium's official state language. With its power stemming from Constantinople, the state was now focused on eastern Mediterranean domination, while its geopolitical rivals were in the south and east. This remained the case until the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans nine centuries later.

In the seventh and eighth centuries, the foundation of Islam led to the establishment of the far-reaching Islamic Empire.

In the early seventh century, Byzantium had just defeated Persia when another global superpower reared its head. Over 2000 kilometers from Constantinople, a man from Mecca named Muhammad was visited by an angel and came to understand himself as the Prophet and messenger of Allah. The rituals and prayers he was entrusted with were later collected as the Qur-an, forming the foundations of a new religion called Islam. Muhammad quickly gained a following among ordinary Meccans. In 622, he and his Muslim followers left Mecca for Yathrib, where tribal elders had asked him to settle a feud between pagan tribes and Jews. Muhammad successfully united the splintered factions in an umma, or community. But this new community was unlike the tribes of the time. Muhammad's umma was a monotheistic state characterized by religious obedience. It was, in essence, the first Islamic state. Within a few years, Muhammad conquered Mecca with an army of 10,000 Muslim converts. Those who did not convert to Islam were executed. The spread of the Islamic Empire had begun. The key message is this: In the seventh and eighth centuries, the foundation of Islam led to the establishment of the far-reaching Islamic Empire. After the death of Muhammad in 634, Muhammad's friend Abu Bakr claimed to be his rightful successor. In the years that followed, the Rashidun Caliphate brought much of the Middle East under its control. A significant conquest was that of Byzantine Syria between 632 and 642. Not only did this cut off the eastern part of the Byzantine empire, but it also marked the beginning of a new global superpower that would soon encompass the Middle East, central Asia, northern Africa, and the Iberian peninsula. By the early eighth century, the Umayyad Caliphate controlled the largest territory since the Roman Empire of the fifth century. One of the most important figures of this period was the caliph Abd al-Malik. Previous caliphs hadn't forced their subjects to convert to Islam. But al-Malik was determined to run things differently. At the end of the seventh century, he introduced an Islamic coinage known as the dinar and ordered public servants across Umayyad territory to speak Arabic exclusively. This Arabization led to the gradual adoption of Islam across Umayyad territories, which can still be felt in the majority of these areas today. Between 747 and 750, the Umayyad dynasty was overthrown by a new dynasty called the Abbasids who claimed their lineage from Muhammad's bloodline. Through their assembly of massive libraries, the Abbasids ensured the preservation of classical knowledge and technology that would become integral to the advances of the late-medieval European Renaissance.

After the Franks revived a Christian, pseudo-Roman Empire in the west, Viking invasions prompted the creation of Normandy.

Among the barbarian kingdoms established in the fifth century, the most successful was that of the Franks. Originating as a coalition of German war-bands, the Franks had settled west of the Rhine during the age of barbarian migrations before slowly gaining power in the collapsed Roman state. Over the two and a half centuries of the ruling Merovingian dynasty, the Franks gradually expanded to assume the land of neighboring tribes. Eventually, they occupied the majority of modern France, and received tribute from tribes in Bavaria, Thuringia, and portions of Saxony. But it wasn't until the mid-eighth century, during the Carolingian dynasty, that one Frankish king would dramatically alter the course of European history. His name was Charlemagne. The key

message here is: After the Franks revived a Christian, pseudo-Roman Empire in the west, Viking invasions prompted the creation of Normandy. Charlemagne began his reign by launching his military ambitions to take over the west. In the years that followed, he removed the Lombards from power in northern Italy, led an incursion into Muslim Spain, and campaigned against the pagan Saxons, forcing them to convert to Christianity. At the height of his reign in the year 800, Charlemagne's realm covered most of western Europe, and he was crowned by the pope as the first Holy Roman Emperor. But after his death, Charlemagne's plans to restore western and central Europe to their imperial glory didn't roll out as he'd hoped. While Charlemagne's heirs failed to live up to his ambitions, another enemy soon arrived on the geopolitical stage. These violent pagan warriors, collectively known as the Vikings, took Europe and other parts of the world by storm. Staging infamously violent raids of monasteries and villages along the river Seine and beyond, the Vikings soon surpassed the Franks as Europe's most feared military power. By the tenth century, Viking efforts had evolved into a full-blown campaign for expansion and settlement. So Charles the Simple, the king of West Francia, struck a deal with the Viking leader, Rollo. In return for Rollo abandoning his raids and converting to Christianity, Charles offered him the lands around the Seine Valley. Rollo agreed, and his new Christian realm became the duchy of Normandy. Meanwhile, the Carolingian Empire continued to splinter. Western Francia became the kingdom of France and, later, Eastern Francia became the Holy Roman Empire. The birth of these two great powers lasted throughout the Middle Ages and its echoes are heard even today.

Around the turn of the first millennium, new forms of cultural soft power emerged amid changes in social organization.

Empires and dynasties weren't the only forms of power in medieval Europe. Around the turn of the first millennium emerged new forms of cultural soft power. These are the archetypes that likely come to mind when you think of the Middle Ages. Around the year 1000, developments in agriculture began to provide landowners with disposable income from sales of abundant crops, thanks to a favorable climate known as the Medieval Climate Optimum. And those landowners chose to spend their money on their salvation. Copious donations funded the construction of magnificent monasteries, while the wealthy paid monks to pray on their behalf for forgiveness of their sins. Monasticism soon became a central feature of the Middle Ages, and the clergy enjoyed increasing influence in Europe. Monasteries weren't just places for the godly to pray. By the eleventh century, they were centers of education, literacy, hospitality, medical treatment, care of the elderly, and spiritual counseling. Here's the key message: Around the turn of the first millennium, new forms of cultural soft power emerged amid changes in social organization. As monasteries were gaining prominence in western Europe, the status and relevance of heavily armored mounted soldiers called knights also came to define medieval life. According to some historians, the rising importance of knights instigated the so-called age of feudalism. Feudalism was the pyramid-shaped social structure in which lords granted land to vassals, who then subcontracted it to less-wealthy men in exchange for further service such as assistance or agricultural labor. Since being a knight was an expensive endeavor, in order to fund their careers,

knights fought on behalf of greater lords or kings in exchange for land. The expense of supporting knights led to the significance of knighthood within the new medieval social structure. It also led to the invention of chivalry. In times of peace, wealth and high rank afforded knights an aristocratic lifestyle. The new upper-class consciousness fetishized ostensibly knightly virtues based on a code of honor and conduct called chivalry. Chivalry was so important in medieval society that it became something like a secular religion. While knights enjoyed their new social status, the reality of being a knight was objectively horrible. Training, riding, and fighting in armor were painful and frightening. But instead of writing about these realities, the Middle Ages invented a new art genre lauding knights as heroic questers and romantics. Stories revolving around knights, such as the tales of King Arthur, continue to be popular today.

While the early Crusades were a tool for papal ambition, they were later used against enemies at large.

The new soft powers of knights and the clergy contributed to the emergence of a phenomenon that would define the next few centuries of life in the Middle Ages: the Crusades. Around the late eleventh century, relations between the Holy Roman Empire and Byzantium had become fraught. In 1054, a major schism had developed between the churches of Rome and Constantinople over disagreements about such matters as the duration of fasts. But when the Byzantine emperor Alexios I sent a plea for military support against a group of Muslims called the Seljuk Turks, Pope Urban II saw an opportunity. If he agreed to help, Christians could drive the Muslims out of the Holy City of Jerusalem entirely. In 1095, Urban proclaimed the First Crusade, issuing a call to arms across western Europe. He promised that those who died along the way or while fighting would be granted forgiveness for their sins and an immediate passage to heaven. The key message is this: While the early Crusades were a tool for papal ambition, they were later used against enemies at large. The First Crusade went so well that the crusaders were sure God was on their side. Staffed by knights as well as religious zealots, the crusaders pillaged their way across Asia Minor and into Syria. Along the way, they besieged Nicaea, Dorylaeum, Antioch, and Edessa before marching on to Jerusalem. Aided by timely reinforcements and siege equipment, the crusaders breached the walls of Jerusalem and massacred the inhabitants of the Holy City. Their victory led to the establishment of four crusader states, where many crusaders chose to remain when the fighting was done. Today, the Crusades are often misconstrued as a conflict between Christians and Muslims. But they were, in fact, a tool employed by the Roman Church against all of its enemies. Around the 1140s, groups of Saxon nobles were granted permission by Pope Eugene III to crusade against the pagan Slavic peoples in what are now northern Germany and western Poland. These so-called Northern Crusades, which involved converting pagans to Christianity and seizing their lands, lasted until the fifteenth century. Other crusades included wars against Mongol chieftains, French heretics, Christian kings, and even Holy Roman Emperors. Although Jerusalem fell to the Turkish warlord Saladin after the Second Crusade, crusades to the east didn't stop altogether. But while these supposedly Christian incursions lasted beyond the Middle Ages, by the mid-thirteenth century, the eastern crusader states were already in a state of decline.

Medieval merchants, scholars, and builders helped shape the world we know today.

Trade has existed throughout human history. Yet even the scale of trade in the Roman Empire paled in comparison with that of the Commercial Revolution, which occurred during the Middle Ages. Around the turn of the first millennium, the period of economic stagnation that had defined Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire began to shift. The expansion of overland trading networks in western Europe, combined with new farming technologies, facilitated the rise of a new culture of markets and fairs across Europe. And thanks to a surge in coin production and basic financial services such as moneylending, spending money was easier than ever before. The key message here is: Medieval merchants, scholars, and builders helped shape the world we know today. The Commercial Revolution wasn't limited to western Europe. In the eleventh century, Italian merchants began to set up shops in foreign ports across the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and northern Africa. Soon, the economies of a handful of Italian cities, including Venice and Genoa, began to skyrocket. Meanwhile, adventurers such as the Venetian Marco Polo blazed new long-distance trading routes across the medieval world. It wasn't long before this new merchant class began to wield unprecedented power. Merchants from Italian city-states as well as northern Europe, England, and France served as cultural ambassadors and diplomatic envoys. They held significant power in their respective kingdoms' economies, and employed their wealth to fund wars and political regimes and to become patrons of the arts. The rise of the new merchant class was due in part to its development of financial techniques. Many of these advances provided the foundations for our modern form of capitalism. Around the 1340s, merchants began to formalize methods of investing capital jointly in commercial ventures in order to share the risks and profits of shipping. This practice among multiple investors and partners included tracking assets and liabilities as well as the projection of future performance. It was, in essence, the foundation of the modern company. But merchants weren't the only emerging power in the High Middle Ages. Scholars and builders also helped shape the medieval world. From the late eleventh century, scholars founded universities, reviving the wisdom of ancient philosophers during a period known as the Renaissance of the twelfth century. And across the medieval world, architects and engineers built cities, cathedrals, and castles. Many of these buildings still stand centuries later, serving as portals to the Middle Ages.

In the fourteenth century, the Black Death devastated medieval populations and radically reshaped the Western world.

At the turn of the fourteenth century, temperatures began to drop sharply due to intense volcanic activity worldwide. At the same time, the population boom that had driven economic activity, commerce, and invention from the millennium on had reached its limits. Overpopulation combined with the so-called Little Ice Age resulted in the Great Famine of 1315 to 1321. To make matters worse, around the early 1330s, a new

mutation of the bacillus *Y. pestis* that had caused the Justinian pandemic in the sixth century began circulating in central Asia. Symptoms included fever, painful swellings, uncontrollable vomiting, internal bleeding, and death within days. Like the older strain of *Y. pestis*, this illness could spread via flea-bites or infected rodents. But this new illness was also airborne, and so could also be spread through the breath of an infected person. Here's the key message: In the fourteenth century, the Black Death devastated medieval populations and radically reshaped the Western world. The Black Death, as it came to be called, spread throughout the East. When the Mongols invaded the Genoese-held port of Caffa on the Black Sea in the 1340s, they were so sick that they eventually abandoned the siege – but not before dumping their soldiers' corpses in the city in hopes that the smell would kill its inhabitants. Soon after, merchants brought the disease to Italy and Constantinople, and it began ripping through medieval Europe. During the first wave of the Black Death, up to 60 percent of the populations in the most severely affected countries died. Mass funerals were held for such large numbers of people that there was insufficient room to bury them all. People desperate to escape the disease tried preventative measures and remedies that ranged from plague-themed prayers to bloody self-flagellation. The secondary waves of the plague in Europe were not as catastrophic as the first – though, to be sure, they caused extensive misery, and prevented populations from truly rebounding until after the Middle Ages. Yet the Black Death did more to medieval Europe than devastate its peoples. The pandemic exposed many of the weaknesses and inequalities in Western society. The late fourteenth century saw large-scale and violent popular uprisings against authorities in Flanders, France, Normandy, Italy, and England. While these rebellions failed in an immediate sense, they were testaments to the fact that class relations had shifted dramatically. For many realms, gone were the days of serfdom. In place of land grants, soldiers were given salaried contracts. And in the years that followed, those who survived the plague would be inspired to carve out a new world.

During the late Middle Ages, wealthy patrons funded artists, inventors, and explorers.

Starting in the late fourteenth century, a cultural movement called the Renaissance, or “rebirth,” flourished in Italy and, later, across Europe. The Renaissance was a time of intellectual and artistic advancement that revived and built on ancient Greek and Roman culture while developing new inventions and ideas in art, architecture, literature, medicine, anatomy, and political philosophy. In Florence, the rise of the Medici banking family as a political dynasty led to their patronage of the arts and sciences. They financed, among others, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, and the building of Saint Peter's Basilica. In turn, patronage gave the wealthy a sophisticated edge, while portraiture became a new kind of propaganda for politicians. From the beginning of the Renaissance, people were aware that it was a new age. But this period of inventiveness wasn't limited to the arts and sciences. Soon, explorers set out to discover new worlds. The key message is this: During the late Middle Ages, wealthy patrons funded artists, inventors, and explorers. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, marking the end of the Byzantine Empire. And while trade with the Ottoman Empire was possible, the new geopolitical situation made doing business in the East less appealing. So fifteenth-century merchant adventurers set out to find alternatives. The most important navigator of the late Middle Ages was

the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus. Columbus believed that within 3000 miles of the Atlantic, he could reach the Far East, bypassing the Ottoman Empire. Columbus believed that in that way he could revive the project of converting eastern kings to Christianity. After persistent lobbying of various kingdoms, Columbus secured backing for his project from the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile. In 1492, three ships set off from the southern coast of Spain to the Canary Islands, and then into the unknown. During their 33 days at sea, Columbus's crew grew increasingly restless. They were on the brink of mutiny when a sailor finally caught sight of land. Of course, Columbus wasn't the first person to find the Americas. Archaeologists believe Native Americans arrived on the North American continent from Siberia and remained there for over 10,000 years before European contact. And in the eleventh century, the Vikings had briefly settled in what is now Newfoundland. But Christopher Columbus's arrival in what is today the Bahamas marked a new chapter in European history. The exploration of the New World was now set in motion.

The invention of the printing press and shifting religious dogma led to the Protestant Reformation, signaling the end of the Middle Ages.

Up until the late Middle Ages, making a book was a long and tedious process. A single book could take a scribe hundreds or even thousands of hours to finish. But during the 1430s, a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg set out to revolutionize manuscript production. Borrowing money to fund equipment and labor, Gutenberg set out to build a machine that could replicate pages at a previously inconceivable speed. Gutenberg's Bible was printed in the 1450s. But the communications revolution it set off changed more than the nature of writing. In the span of a few decades, the invention of the printing press plunged the established order in Europe into a state of crisis. The key message here is: The invention of the printing press and shifting religious dogma led to the Protestant Reformation, signaling the end of the Middle Ages. During the late Middle Ages, paying a monk to pray for you wasn't the only way to achieve salvation. You could also buy something called an indulgence. An indulgence was a letter issued or signed by the pope that granted a reduction in the suffering the buyer's soul would experience in Purgatory. For the clergy, indulgences were a lucrative business. Revenue from sales was directed to projects such as the construction of new cathedrals. And with the new ability to mass-produce indulgence documents via the printing press, popes were beginning to get greedy. So when Pope Leo X offered indulgences with the aim of raising money for his pet building project of St Peter's Basilica, many noted his blatant corruption. In 1517, a young German professor at the University of Wittenberg named Martin Luther published his Ninety-five Theses. In it, he held out indulgences as an example of the Church's abuse of power. Luther argued that the path to heaven could be achieved simply through belief, love of one's fellow humans, and prayer. Thanks to the printing press, Luther's text quickly went viral in Germany and beyond, and soon, a major movement called the Protestant Reformation was underway. While Luther further developed his ideas into a new Christian sect called Lutheranism, across Europe, separate groups of Protestant reformers such as the Huguenots flourished. Before long, the schism between Catholicism and Protestantism had become irreconcilable. And in 1527, the Sack of Rome, led by the mutinous troops of the Holy Roman Emperor

Charles V, left the heart of the Church devastated. By the 1530s, western Europe had shifted beyond its medieval form. The Protestant Reformation marked the point at which the Middle Ages drew to a close, leaving behind the foundations of the modern era.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: The medieval world was forged by forces similar to those that occupy us today, including climate change, pandemics, mass migration, and technological advances. In western Europe, the fractured Carolingian Empire formed the foundations of recognizable medieval European kingdoms such as those of France and the Holy Roman Empire. In the wake of the Black Death, the Renaissance, encounters with the New World, communication technology, and the Protestant Reformation contributed to the dawn of the modern era.