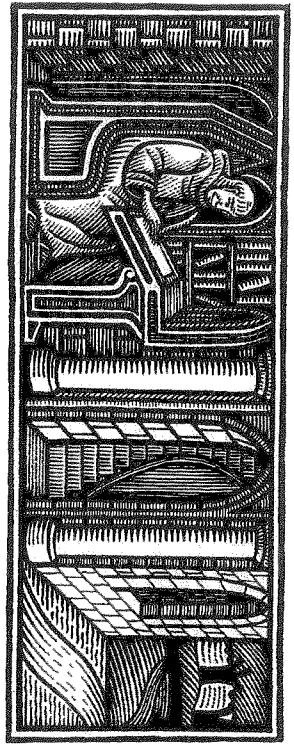


2100  
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Nov

## THE STARRY NIGHT BEGINS



You will probably agree that the peoples' migrations were a sort of thunderstorm. But you may be surprised to hear that the Middle Ages were like a starry night. Let me explain. Have you ever heard people talking about the Dark Ages? This is the name given to the period which followed the collapse of the Roman empire when very few people could read or write and hardly anyone knew what was going on in the world. And because of this, they loved telling each other all sorts of weird and wonderful tales and were generally very superstitious. 'Dark', too, because houses in those days were small and dark, and because the streets and highways that the Romans had built had all fallen into decay and were overgrown and their camps and cities had become grass-covered ruins. The good Roman laws were forgotten and the beautiful Greek statues had been smashed to pieces. All this is true. And it isn't really surprising, given all the dreadful upheavals and war-torn years of the Migrations.

But there was more to it than that. It wasn't all dark. It was more like a starry night. For above all the dread and uncertainty in which

ignorant people lived like children in the dark – frightened of witches and wizards, of the Devil and evil spirits – above it all was the bright starlit sky of the new faith, showing them the way. And just as you don't get lost so easily in the woods if you can see stars like the Great Bear or the Pole Star, people no longer lost their way completely, no matter how much they stumbled in the dark. For they were sure of one thing: God had given souls to all men, and they were all equal in his eyes, beggars and kings alike. This meant there must be no more slaves – that human beings must no longer be treated as if they were things. That the one, invisible, God the Creator of the world, who through his mercy saves mankind, asks us to be good. Not that in those days there were only good people. There were just as many cruel, savage, brutal and pitiless warriors in Italy as there were in the lands where the Germans lived, who behaved in a reckless, ruthless and bloodthirsty manner. But now when they did so it was with a worse conscience than in Roman times. They knew they were wicked. And they feared the wrath of God.

Many people wished to live in strict accordance with God's will. They fled the bustling cities and the crowds where the temptations to do wrong is always present and, like the hermits of India, withdrew into the desert for prayer and penitence. These were the earliest Christian monks. They were first seen in the East, in Egypt and in Palestine. To many of them, what was most important was to do penance. They had learnt something about it from those Indian priests who, as you may remember, had special ways of tormenting themselves. Now some of these monks went and sat on the top of tall pillars in the centre of towns, where, barely moving, they spent their lives meditating on the sinfulness of mankind. The little food they needed was pulled up in a basket. There they sat, above all the bustle, and hoped it would bring them nearer to God. People called them *Stylites*, meaning pillar saints (from *stylos*, the Greek word for pillar).

But in the West, in Italy, there was a holy man who, like the Buddha, could find no inner calm in the solitary life of a penitent. He was a monk named Benedict, meaning the Blessed One. He was

convinced that penitence wasn't all that Christ wanted. One must not only *become* good, one must *do* good. And if you want to do good, it's no use sitting on a pillar. You must work. And so his motto was: Pray and work. With a few like-minded monks he formed a community to put his rule into practice. This sort of monastic community is known as an Order, and his is called after him, the Order of the Benedictines. Monks like these lived in monasteries. Anyone wishing to enter a monastery and become a member of that Order for the rest of his life had to make three vows: to possess nothing; to remain unmarried; and to obey the head of the monastery, the abbot, in all things.

Once consecrated as a monk you didn't just pray — though of course prayer was taken very seriously and Mass was celebrated several times a day — you were also expected to do good. But for this you needed some skill or knowledge. And this is how the Benedictine monks became the only people at that time to concern themselves with the thought and discoveries of antiquity. They gathered together all the ancient scrolls and manuscripts they could find so they could study them. And they made copies for others to read. Year in, year out, they filled the pages of thick parchment volumes with their fine, flowing script, copying not only bibles and the lives of saints but ancient Greek and Latin poems as well. We would know very few of these if it hadn't been for the efforts of those monks. Not only that, but they laboriously copied other ancient works on the natural sciences and agriculture, over and over again, taking infinite care not to make mistakes. For, apart from the Bible, what mattered most to them was to be able to cultivate the land properly so that they could grow cereals and bread, not only for themselves but for the poor. In those lawless times wayside inns had all but disappeared, and anyone bold enough to travel had to look for shelter overnight in a monastery. There they were well received. Silence reigned, together with hard work and contemplation. The monks also took it upon themselves to educate the children who lived near their monasteries. They taught them reading and writing, to speak Latin and how to understand the Bible. Those few scattered monasteries were the only places in

those days where learning and the handing down of knowledge went on and all memory of Greek and Roman thought was not extinguished.

But it wasn't only in Italy that there were monasteries like these. Monks wanted to build them in wild and out-of-the-way places where they could preach the Gospel, educate people and clear the useless forest for cultivation. Many of the earliest monasteries were built in Ireland and in England which, being islands, had suffered less from the storm of the Migrations. Germanic tribes had settled there too, among whom were the Angles and the Saxons, and Christianity had taken root there very early.

Monks then began to make their way from the British Isles to the kingdoms of the Gauls and the Germans, preaching and teaching as they went. There were still many Germans to convert, though their most powerful leader was a Christian, if only in name. He was called Clovis, and was a member of the Merovingian family. He had become king of the Franks at the age of fifteen, and by a combination of courage, intrigue and murder had brought half of Germania and much of what we now call France — which takes its name from his tribe — together under his rule.

Clovis had himself and his tribe baptised in 496, probably in the belief that the Christian god was a powerful demon who would help him to victory. For he was not devout. There was still much work for the monks to do in Germania. And indeed, they did a great deal. They founded monasteries and taught the Franks and the Alemanni how to grow fruit and vines, proving to the barbarian warriors that there was more to life than brute force and deeds of valour. They frequently acted as advisers to the Christian kings of the Franks at the Merovingian court. And because they were the best at reading and writing they wrote down the laws and did all the king's written work for him. Now the work of writing was also that of ruling: they composed letters to other kings and kept in touch with the pope in Rome. Which meant, in fact, that beneath their plain hooded cloaks those monks were the real masters of the still very disorderly kingdom of the Franks.

Other monks from Britain braved the wild stretches of land and dense forests of northern Germania, and what we know as the Netherlands today. These were very dangerous places to preach the Gospel. The peasants and warriors who lived there weren't even Christian in name and held fast to the beliefs of their ancestors. They prayed to Odin, the god of Battle, whom they worshipped not in temples but in the open air, often beneath ancient trees which they held sacred. One day an English monk and priest called Boniface came and preached under one of these trees. To prove to the northern Germans that Odin was only a fairy-tale figure, he picked up an axe to chop down the sacred tree. Everyone expected him to be struck down on the spot by a bolt of lightning from the heavens. But the tree fell and nothing happened. Lots of people then came to him to be baptised for they no longer believed in the power of Odin or in other gods, but other people were angry and in 754 they killed him.

Nevertheless paganism in Germany was at an end. Before long almost everyone was going to the simple wooden churches which the monks built next to their monasteries, and after the service they would ask the monks' advice on such things as how to cure a sick cow, or how to protect their apple trees against an infestation of caterpillars. The monks were also visited by the mighty, and of these it was often the most brutal and savage who readily gave them large tracts of land, for when they did so they hoped that God would pardon their sins. In this way the monasteries became rich and powerful, but the monks themselves, in their simple, narrow cells, remained poor, praying and working, just as St Benedict had told them.

## Medieval Times

### Reading and Questions

Directions: After reading each handout, answer all questions in your history notebooks, under unit one

Questions for "The Starry Night Begins"

1. In the first paragraph of the reading it defines the Dark Ages. How is this time in history defined?
2. According to the reading, what were people of this time sure of?
3. What did the Christian Monks do during this time?
4. What did the monk Benedict believe?
5. What did these monks do that was so important in the preservation and continuation of knowledge and education? What do you think of their acts?
6. What did the priest Boniface do to the German people to prove that their god Odin was only a "fairy-tale figure"?