

the Middle AGES

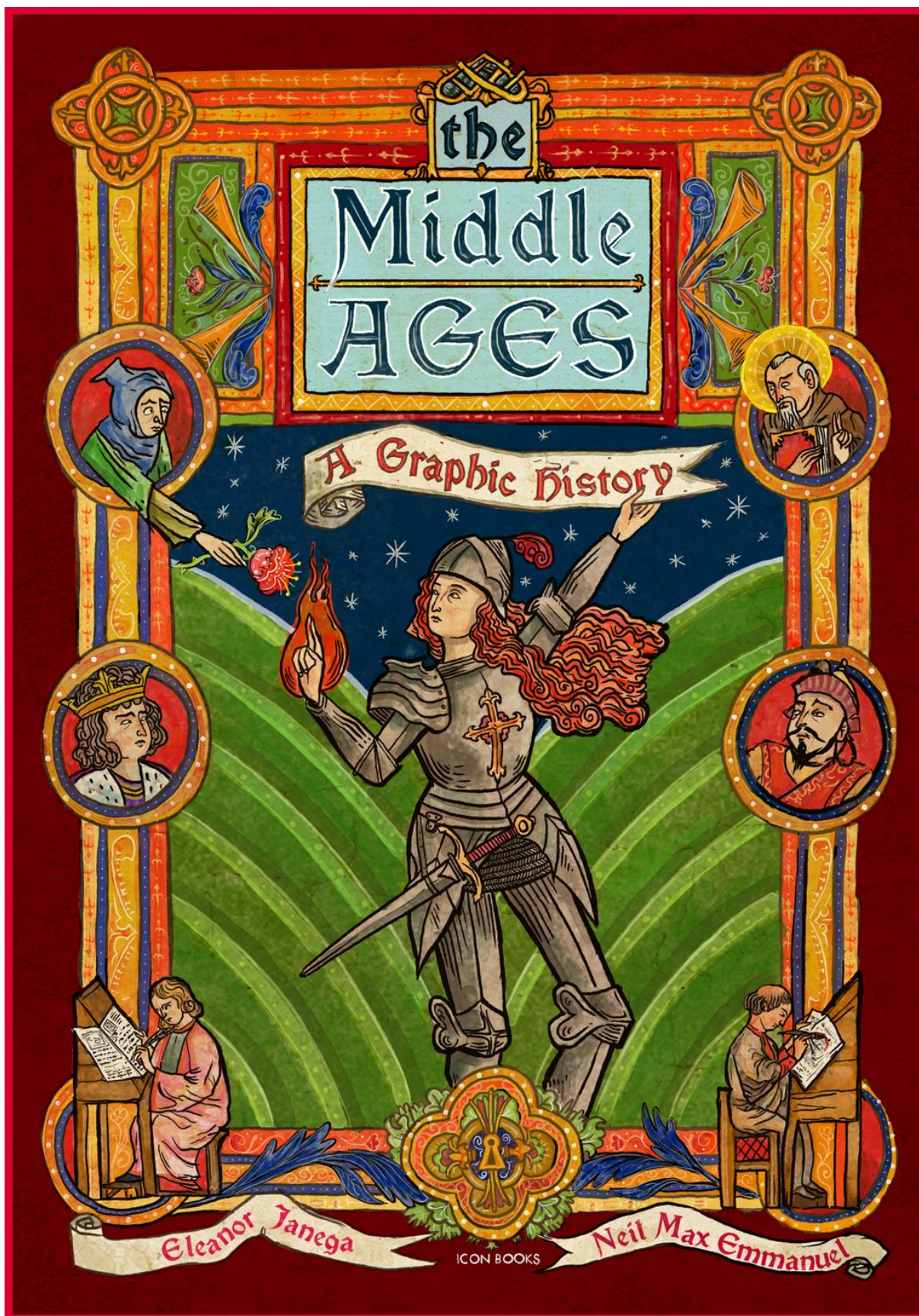
A Graphic History

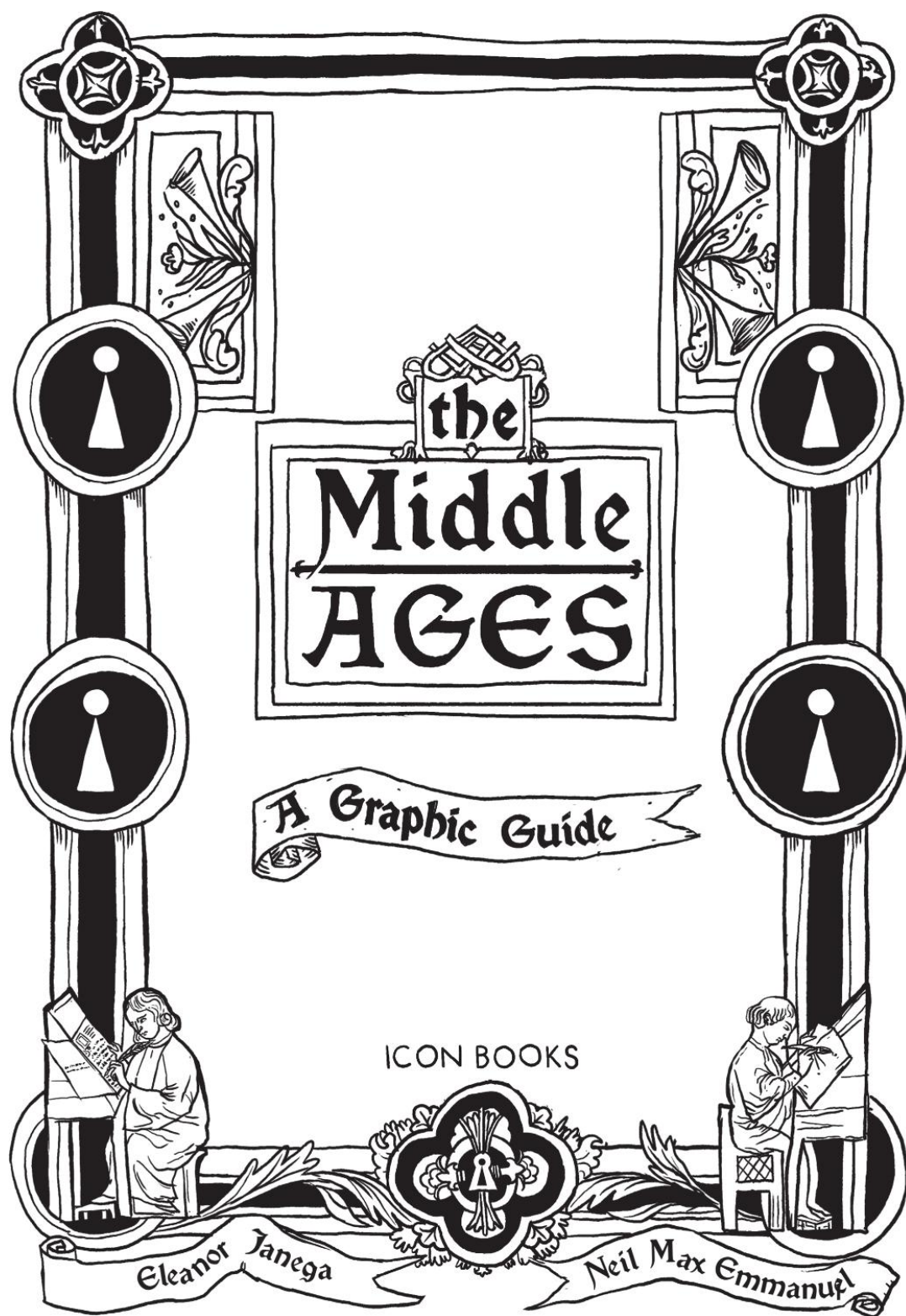


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the
**Middle
AGES**

A Graphic Guide

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Introduction: Common Misconceptions about the Middle Ages



What Is the Medieval Period?

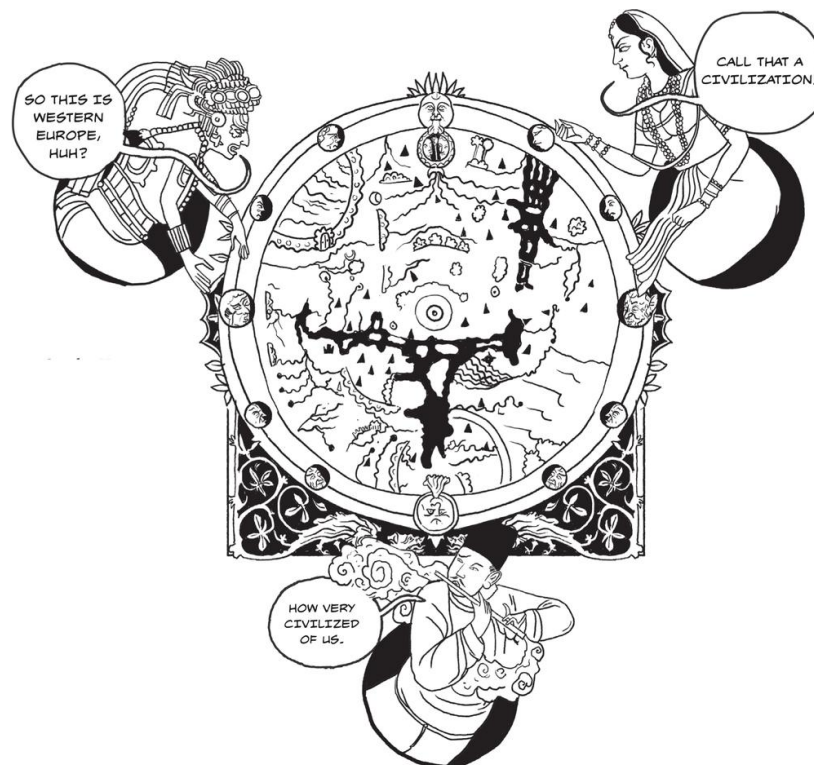


It's difficult to say when the Medieval Period ended because, when it did, no one had invented the concept of modernity yet. Historians sometimes

date it to when Europeans went to the Americas; some to “the Renaissance” in Italy; others to the rise of **Martin Luther** (1483–1546), around 1517. No matter the dates, we are talking about a thousand years’ worth of history, progress, art, politics, and life. It’s also when Europe became a force in the world, and began to catch up with the empires of Asia and Africa.



The term medieval best applies to Europe, because not every part of the world experienced a move away from an ancient to a more modernized culture in that era. Historians sometimes talk about medieval China, often meaning the period up until the **Song Dynasty** was established in 960, which means that China became “modern” about 600 years before Europe did – bureaucratic state system, gunpowder, and international exports.

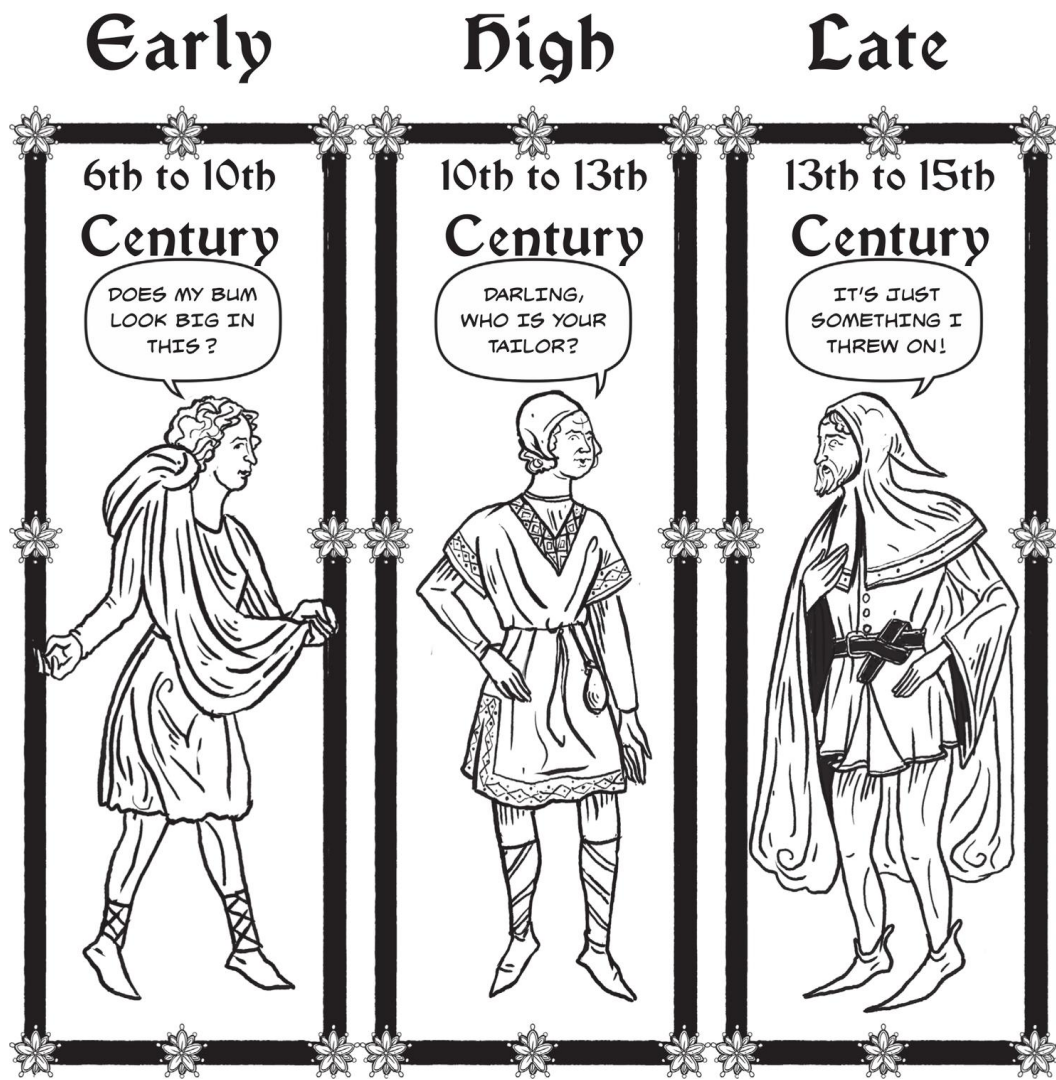


On the Yucatan peninsula, **Mayan** civilization experienced both their classic and post-classic periods, building impressive temple complexes that still stand today, and creating a complex society with mercantile, scholar and warrior classes and a thriving trade in cocoa, jade, and obsidian.

In India, the **Rashtrakuta Empire** was mining diamonds, building huge temple complexes, and trading for pearls and Italian wines.

The term “medieval” is confusing even within Europe. People in what we now call the Byzantine Empire would have told you that they were the Eastern Roman Empire. Their proof was in their intact state, their elaborate public chariot races, and the huge swathes of Roman land that they were still ruling over from Constantinople.

When we talk about something being medieval it can be confusing, because we are talking about a period of time, but not everyone across Europe during those dates had similar experiences. To make it more confusing, historians subdivide the Middle Ages into three categories: the Early (6th–10th century), High (10th–13th century), and Late (13th through the 15th century). So, the Middle Ages are a period of about a thousand years, between the fall of the Roman Empire and the dawn of the Modern era in Europe, with three time periods within it.



The Myth of the Dark Ages

So why don't most people know all of this? It partially stems from a disinterest encouraged by the popular idea that the medieval period was the **Dark Ages**.

Petrarch

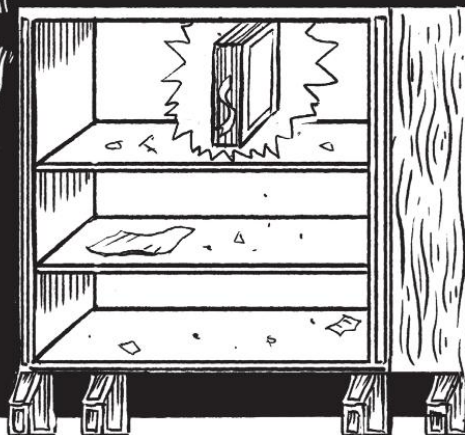
The idea of the Dark Ages is actually a medieval one, instigated by the Roman poet **Petrarch** (1304–74). Because Petrarch thought Rome should still control all of Europe, he made the term up to talk trash. If Rome wasn't in control, he didn't want to hear about it.

WELL, WE SHOULD BE IN CHARGE.

The next person to use "Dark Ages" was the cardinal and Church historian **Caesar Baronius** (1538–1607); he used it to mean the 10th and 11th centuries. Complaining about how bad **source survival** is from that period, he meant dark as in occluded, not dark as in bad.

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO WORK WHEN I DON'T HAVE SOURCES?

Caesar Baronius

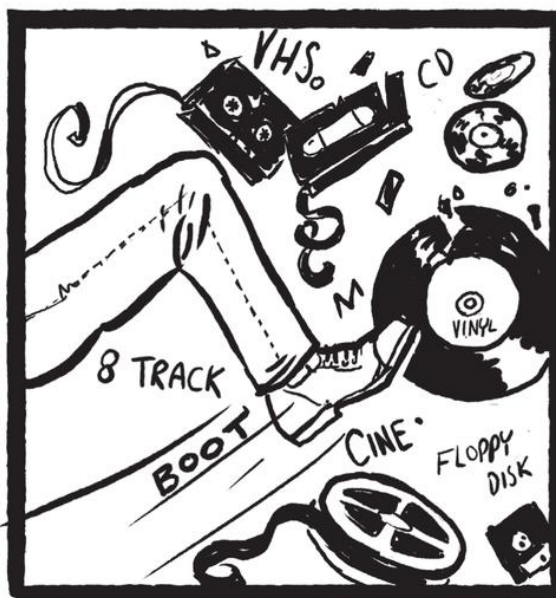
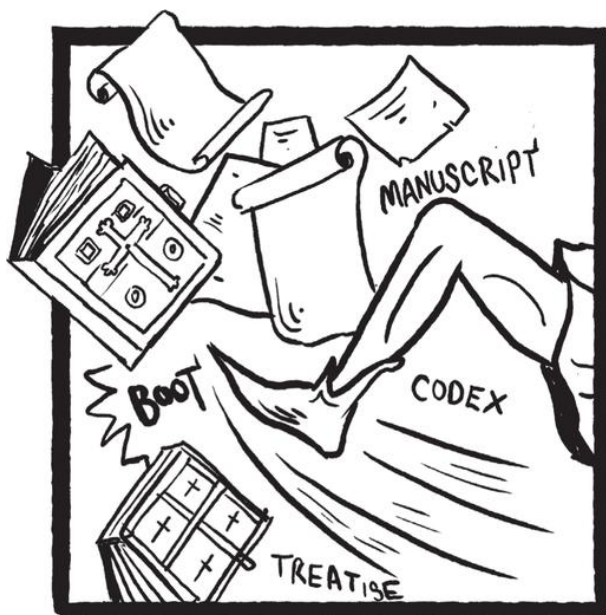




It's Baronius' meaning that historians picked up on in the 20th century, although they thought the sources were OK for the 10th and 11th centuries, and instead decided to use "Dark Ages" to mean the Early Middle Ages (6th–10th centuries), where we have terrible rates for source survival. Without a clear written record it can be hard for historians to piece together what was happening.

However, just because we don't have a written record of something, doesn't mean it wasn't worth recording. Not everyone has the room to keep admin records, journals, or outdated laws for a thousand years. Even for scientific studies conducted now, destroy dates are often only a decade. Survival rates for things like fiction books can also be low. Some popular books from the 20th century survive in lower rates than medieval popular romances.

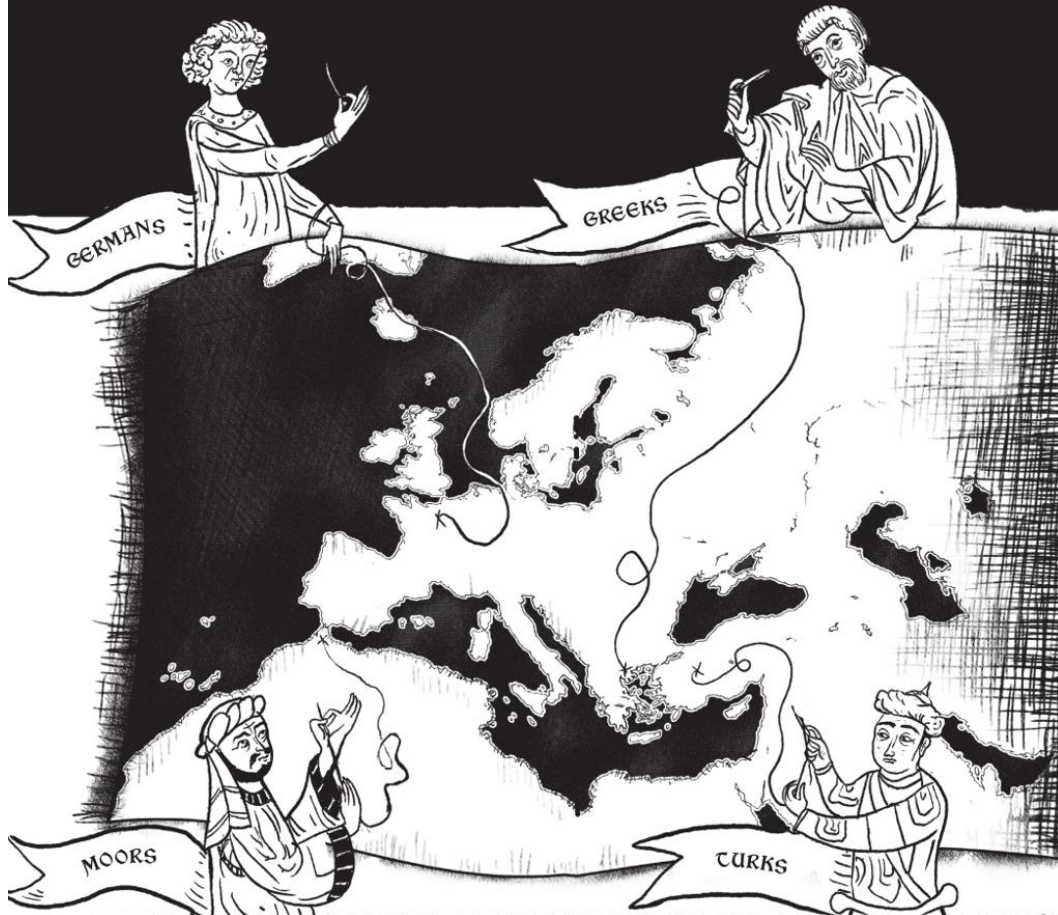
Just like you clean out your closet periodically, sometimes archives and libraries get rid of documents they don't find useful. Sometimes – like when **Henry VIII** (1491–1547) dissolved the monasteries in England, Wales, and Ireland – masses of documents are destroyed. We also lose things during wars. Ways of keeping records also change. In 1,000 years could we study your Instagram profile or will you have deleted it?



The Complexity of the Period

So medieval history isn't widely taught due to low source survival, as well as because of the misconception that the "Dark Ages" means it was a "bad time" which covered the whole medieval period. We go on with a gap in our knowledge, and tell ourselves it's fine because there is nothing to learn.

When people do study the Middle Ages, it can be difficult because, well, it's complicated! Something that's true for early medieval Italy isn't true for late medieval Germany. The multireligious, multicultural society of medieval Spain was far different from that of Scotland. It's also hard to make such comparisons because Spain, Italy, and Germany *didn't exist yet*.



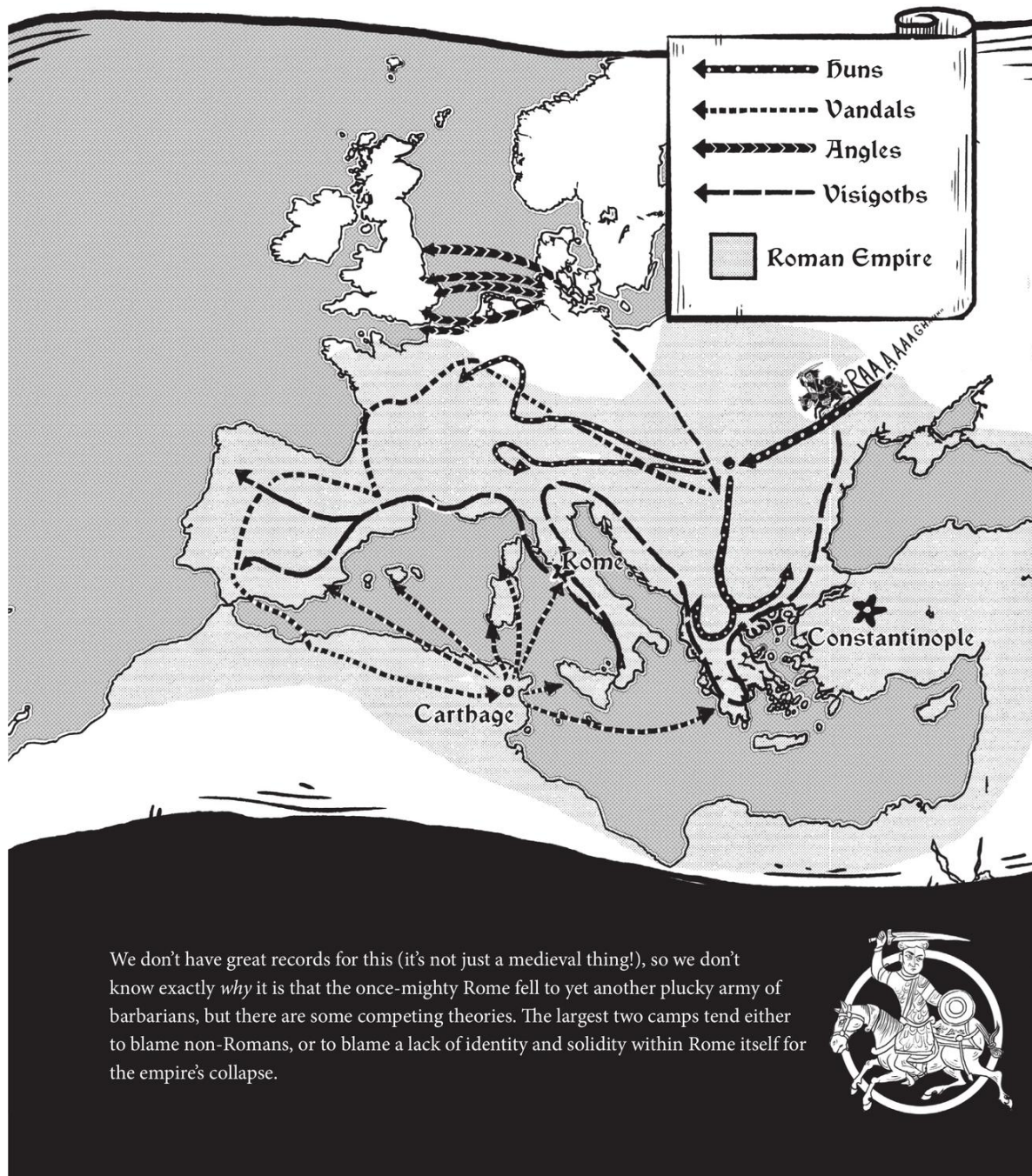
There were Spanish, Italian, and German speakers, but they weren't always ruled by the same people, and they didn't all have the same forms of government. (Try explaining that to a room of 10-year-old kids.)

The main things to accept about medieval history are: there is a lot of it; it's complicated; and you probably don't know much about it – *yet*. This book is going to help fix that. And it gets easier if you begin at the beginning: the last days of the **Roman Empire**.

Part I. Roman Inheritance



Rome in 476 wasn't the grand conqueror it had been. Rome had ditched Britannia, lost huge parts of what is now France, and already divided itself into two parts: **Western Rome** (where ground was being lost) and **Eastern Rome** (which we now call the Byzantine Empire). Barbarians (who the Romans defined as anyone who wasn't Roman) had been picking away at Roman territory since they started moving to Europe about 100 years earlier, what we call the **Age of Invasions**.

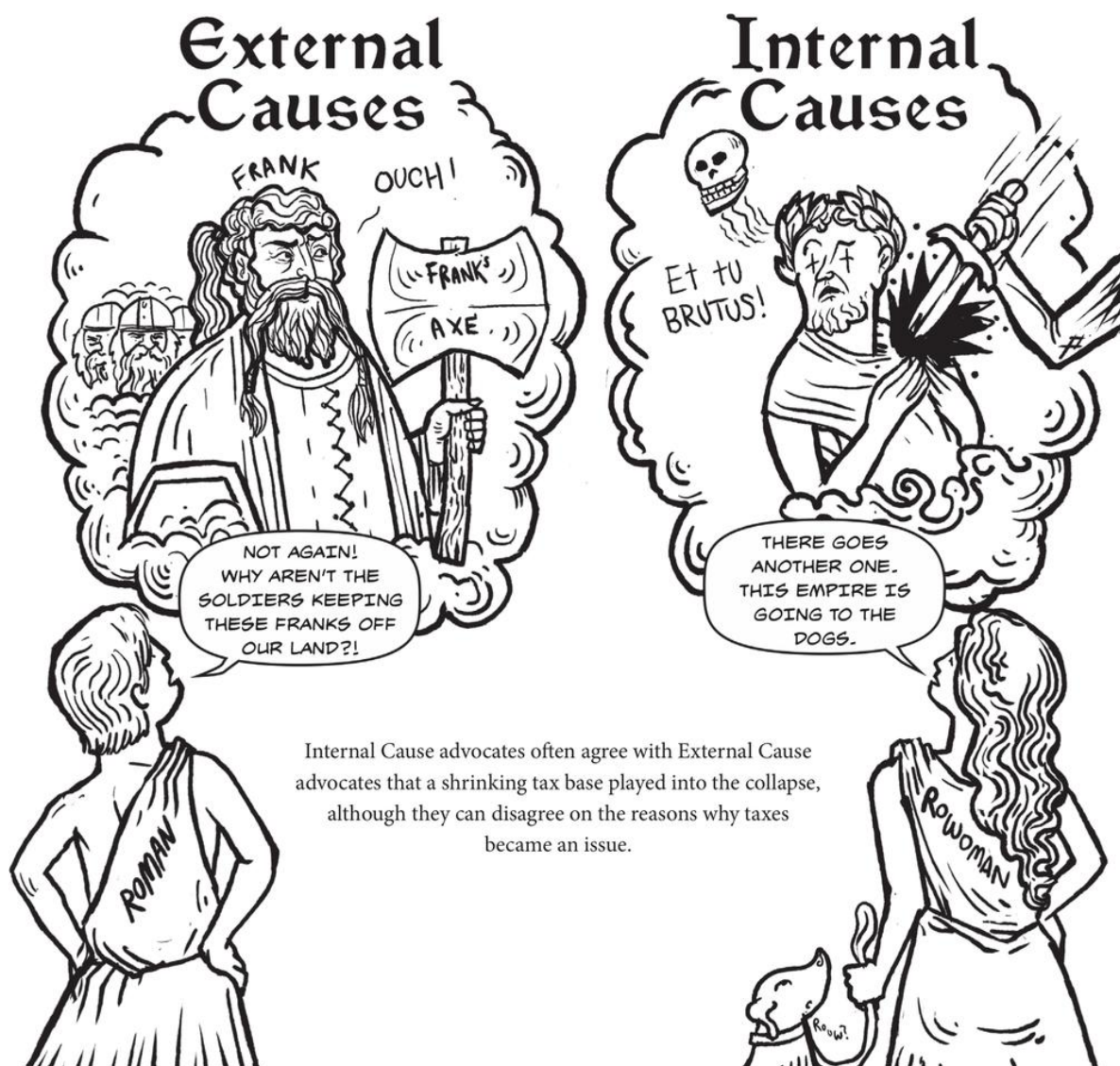


The Fall of Rome

A large contingent of historians think that the fall of Rome was brought about by the Germanic barbarians' arrival. Barbarians started showing up and settling in Roman land, leading to pressure on the military, a shrinking tax base, and general disillusionment with Roman government. What was

the point of paying taxes if the army didn't even keep barbarians off your lawn?

Other historians think that Rome fell because it was already experiencing a weakening of its core. Sometimes this is blamed on the rise of Christianity and a waning of "traditional" Roman values and introduction of new theoretical "leaders" in the Church. Others point to corruption and the general willingness of the **Praetorian Guard** to just kill any emperor they weren't feeling. Others point to economic issues from overexpansion and reliance on slave labor.

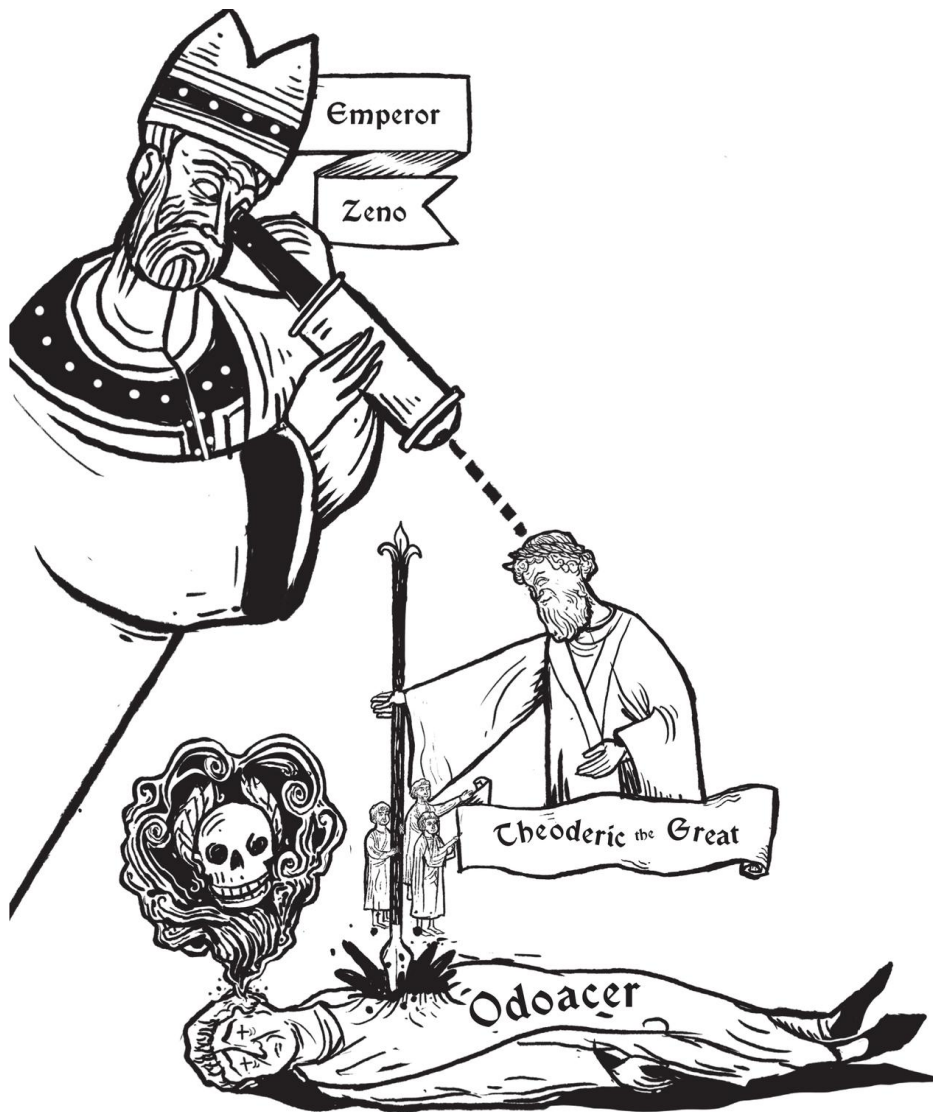


By the time Odoacer showed up with a posse of Herulian, Rugian, and Scirian warriors in 476, the Romans didn't have a lot of fight left in them. Romulus Augustulus was deposed and, well, everything continued in much the same vein. The barbarians wanted to rule a rich empire and enjoy themselves. As far as they were concerned, nothing had "fallen". They were just in charge now. If you asked a Roman on the street what they thought about the fall, they probably wouldn't understand. Meanwhile, the Eastern Roman Empire continued on in exactly the same way, largely unaffected by the migrations.

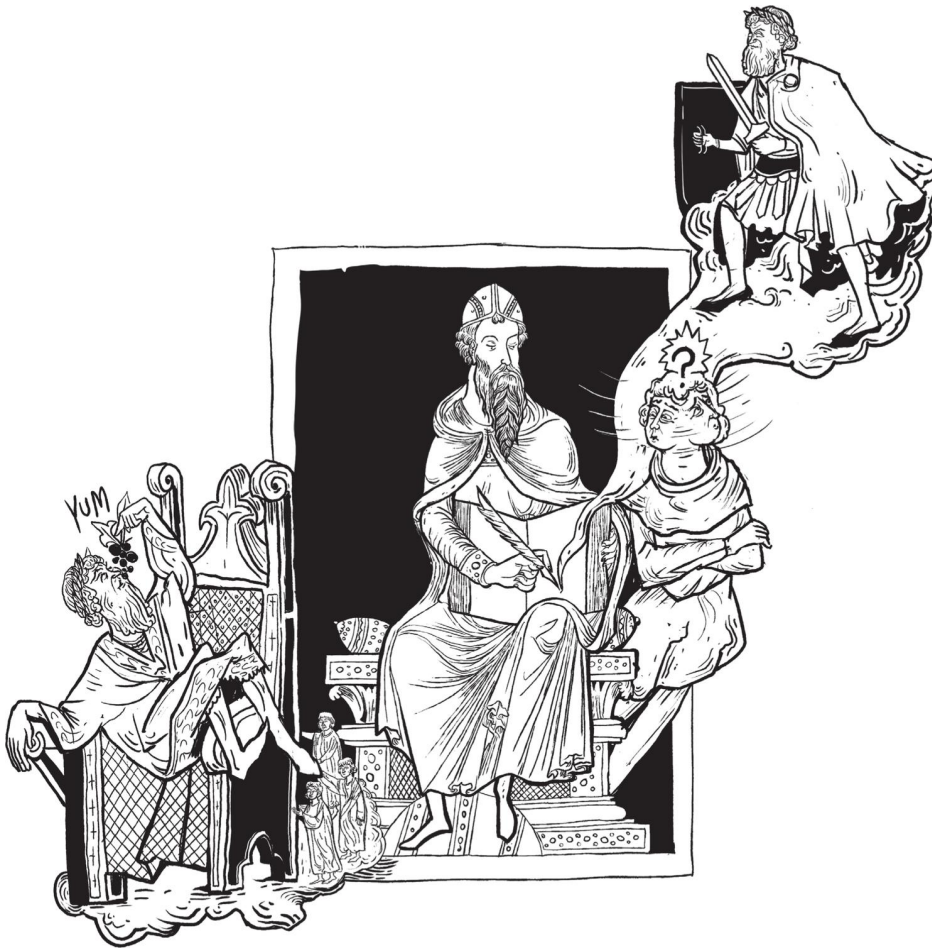


The first post-Roman ruler of the Italian peninsula, **Theoderic the Great** (454–526), was a product of the Eastern Roman Empire, an Amal who had been raised as a hostage at the court in Constantinople.

After a lavish Roman education, the **Emperor Zeno** (425–91) sent Theoderic to the Italian peninsula to overthrow Odoacer, which he accomplished by killing him at a dinner.



Theoderic then set up what we call the **Ostrogothic Kingdom**, with its capitol in Ravenna. Although it was essentially a client state of the Eastern Roman Empire, Theoderic liked to style himself as an emperor, surrounded by Romans to ensure his government was run as closely as possible to that of the old Western Rome. This gave him legitimacy as a ruler and enabled him to push around the other kings in the area.



In order to convince other people that he was, in fact, Roman, Theoderic the Great used a secret weapon: **Cassiodorus** (c.485–c.585), a Roman who did pretty much all of his writing and administration. Cassiodorus knew exactly how a Roman would write, understood Roman statecraft, and was able to paint Theoderic as the epitome of all these things. This ensured the safety and stability of the peninsula.

As a part of his strategy to secure peace, Theoderic used marriages to secure alliances, taking a wife from the Franks, and marrying his female relatives to Burgundians, Visigoths, and Vandals.

However, Cassiodorus' constant diplomatic writing, and every political marriage carried out under Theoderic, shows there was a massive *need* for diplomacy. The Roman successor states were not playing nicely, and in many ways were just as organized and had just as great a claim to Roman status as the Ostrogoths.

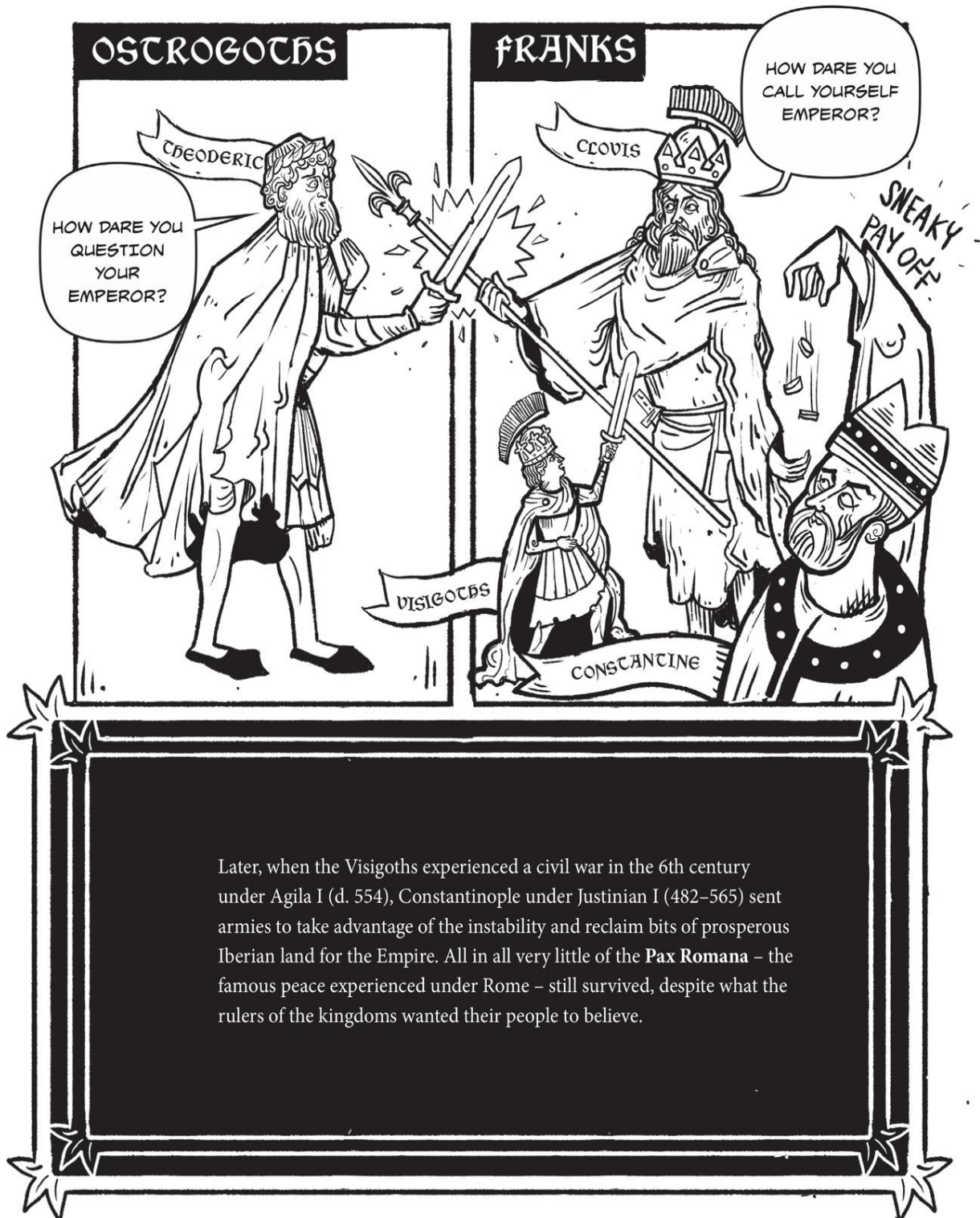
Who else might have had a claim to inherit the Roman Empire? Well, the **Visigothic Kingdom**, for example, had secured theirs through military intervention and deference to Rome. They often referred to themselves as the heirs to the Roman Empire. They had been a *foederatus* of Rome – essentially a client state – which received Roman benefits in exchange for military support. They attempted to restore Roman order on the Iberian Peninsula, with an eventual capitol in Toledo and a sophisticated, consolidated state system.



North of them, the **Franks** had established a kingdom under Theoderic's brother-in-law **Clovis I** (466–511). This was Francia, which lends its name to France now, and Clovis justified his ruling of it and his Roman credentials through timely conversion to Christianity, prominent intermarriage, the creation of what he called the **Roman Law** to guide the kingdom, and the timely decapitation of those who challenged him.

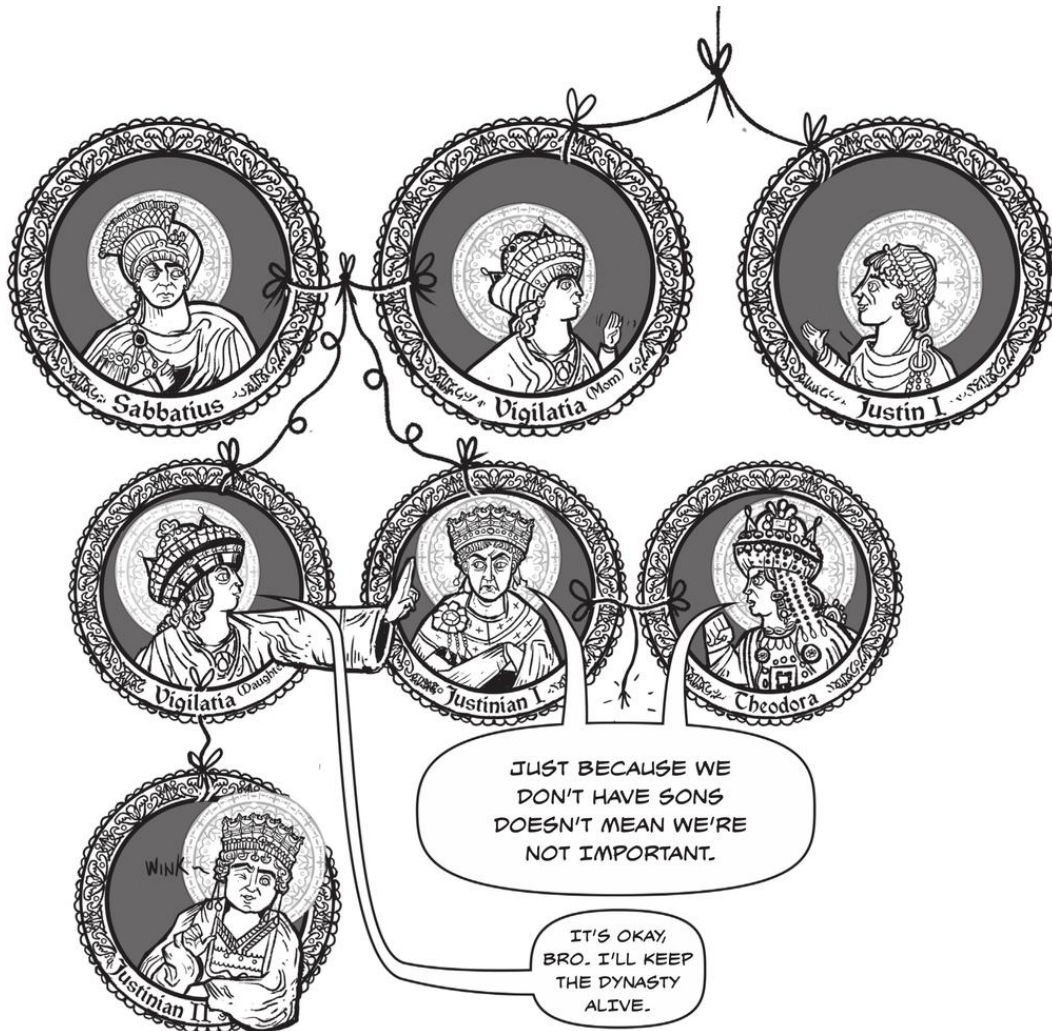
Disagreements over who was the “rightful” Roman heir weren’t just theoretical: there was extensive fighting between the successor states. The Franks and Visigoths were constantly at war over territory in what is now

southern France. Further east, when Constantinople became dissatisfied with Theoderic, as it often did, it would funnel money to Clovis and the Franks to attack the Ostrogothic kingdom.



The Byzantine Empire

While Western Europe was in a state disharmony, life in the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium, went on much as it ever had. Byzantium controlled extremely prosperous areas which provided huge tax revenues, in particular the area we now call Egypt. This allowed them to continue to support a complex state system, a huge standing army, and an imperial office.



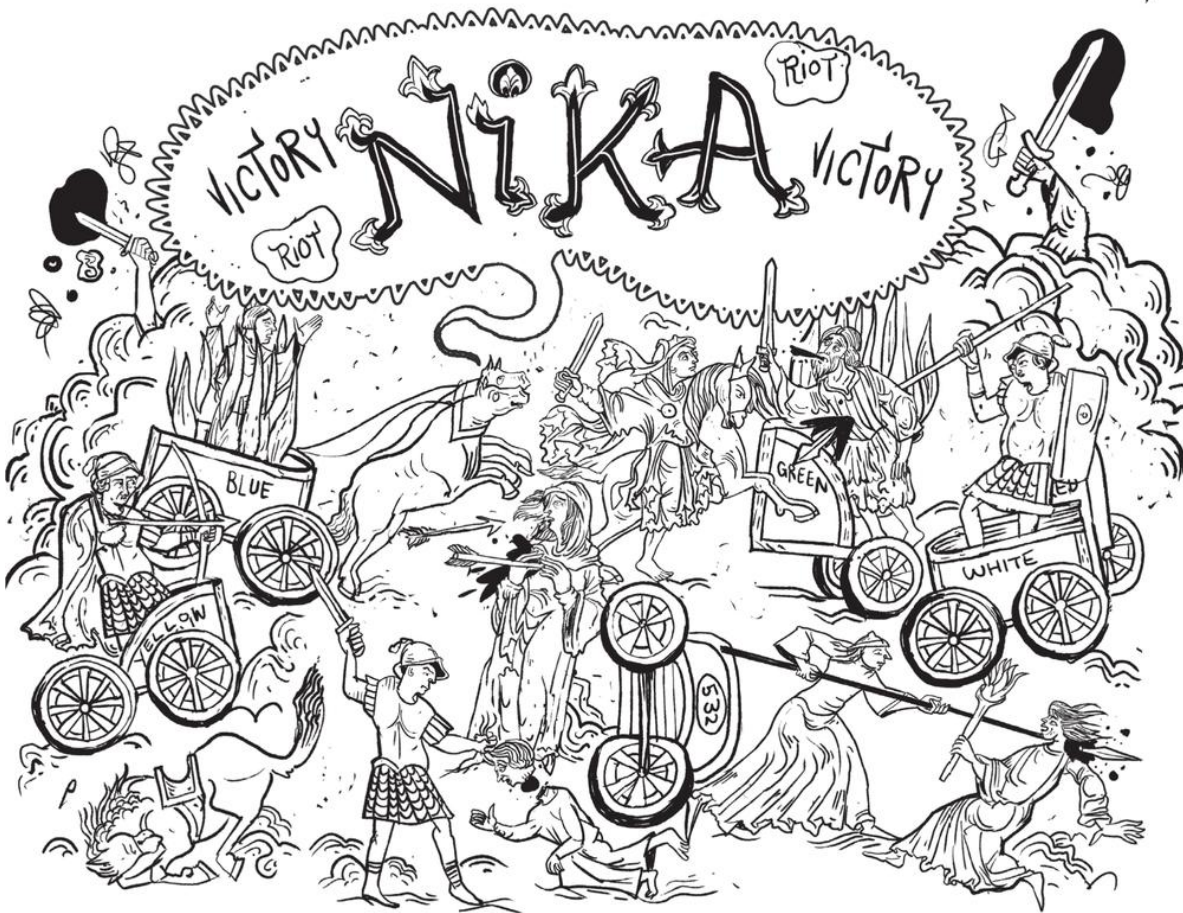
By the 6th century Byzantium was ruled by the **Justinian dynasty**, founded by **Justin I** in 518, which even reconquered some of the lands lost by the Roman Empire.

But it wasn't always smooth sailing. In 532 Constantinople saw the outbreak of the **Nika riots** – a major uprising brought to a head around the

political ramifications of ... chariot racing teams.

In Constantinople, there were four major chariot teams: the reds, whites, blues, and greens. The teams took positions on political matters and even theological problems, and, like soccer hooligans now, sometimes there were riots following races. Some members on the blue and green teams had been arrested for murder during a riot. Most were hung, but a blue and a green escaped and took refuge in a church. The crowds at the races, already angry about high taxation to fund Justinian's wars and a truce with the **Sassinids** in **Persia** next door, demanded the escapees be pardoned. They besieged the palace that Justinian was watching from. The riots lasted a week, and 30,000 people were killed.

That there were state-sponsored chariot races, and cities large enough to sustain casualties of 30,000 people, shows us just how prosperous Constantinople was. This was still the Roman Empire.



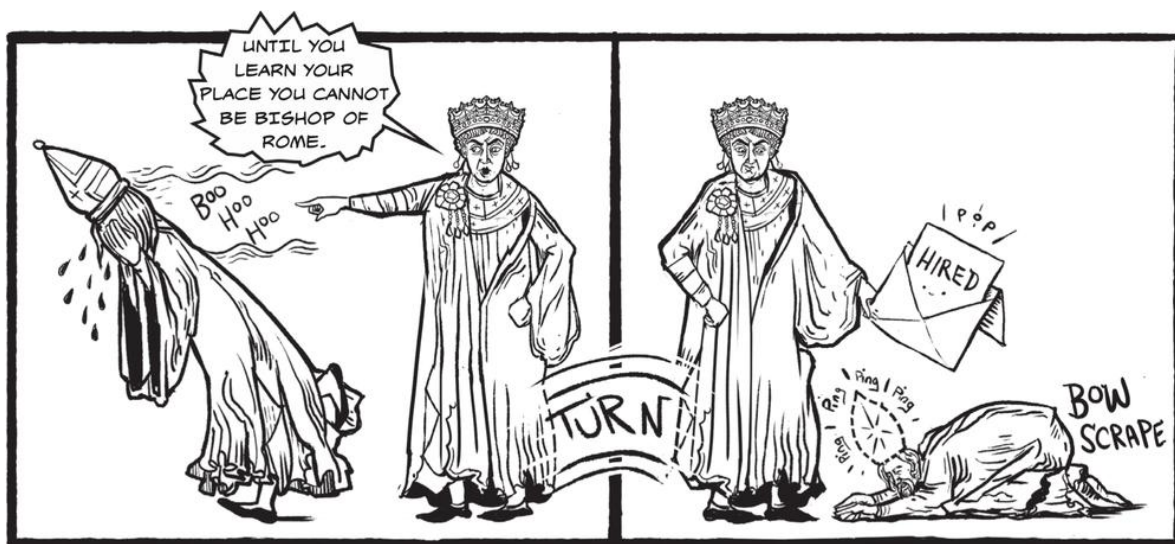
Caesaropapism

Like in the old Western Rome, the emperor was head of the Church. Historians call this **Caesaropapism**. This meant that from the time Constantinople was consecrated in 330 through to the 10th century, the emperor managed the Eastern Church by overseeing ecumenical councils (meetings of high-level clergy members and theologians to decide religious matters) and appointing **Patriarchs** – the highest-ranking bishops – who as a group were called the **Pentarchy**.



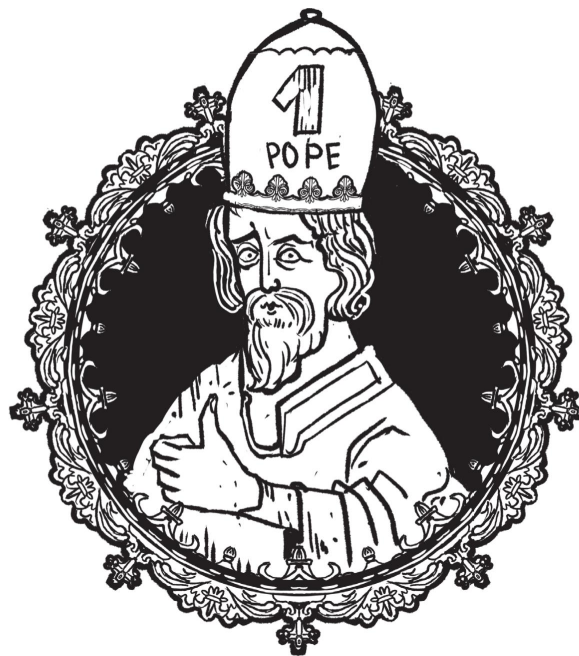
Up until the end of the 8th century, the position of “pope” did exist, but it just meant being the **Bishop of Rome**, and not a whole lot else. During a short period that we refer to as the **Ostrogothic Papacy** (493–537), the

Ostrogothic king essentially appointed the pope of his choice – a choice often made as a result of unsavory practices like bribery, which often led to outright **schism** (a split in the Church). Clearly this was not a system without its troubles, and it didn't give the popes a whole lot of clout even when they *were* elected.



Over in Constantinople, the Emperor took a dim view of all this. When in 535 Justinian took advantage of a succession crisis among the Ostrogoths to reconquer the Italian peninsula, he also deposed the sitting **Pope Silverius** (d. 537) and installed a new one: **Vigilius** (d. 555). When Vigilius died, he confirmed Pope Pelagius (d. 561). Afterwards, having made the point that his input mattered, he was happy to thereupon simply confirm popes once they were elected by the clergy of the Roman diocese. This tradition held up until **Pope Zachary** (d. 752), a period called the **Byzantine Papacy**.

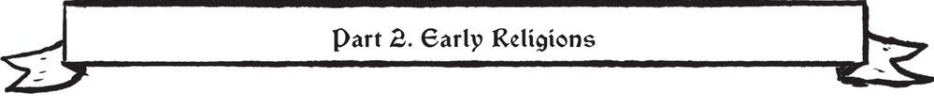
Later in this period popes became much more powerful and controlled kings, but not in the early medieval period. For centuries popes served at the pleasure of the Emperor in Constantinople, and the sway that they held didn't reach much further than Rome itself. However, it was still an attractive post as being the bishop of any major city, let alone one as rich as Rome, was extremely lucrative.



The early popes had a very powerful tool which would benefit the men who came after them – the written word. At some point, likely in the 6th century, someone began to compile the ***Liber Pontificalis***, a book of the biographies of every pope, beginning with **St Peter** (d. 30) which was continuously updated until the 15th century. The *Liber Pontificalis* allowed the papacy to portray itself as a powerful all-encompassing institution, even

when it was actually beholden to imperial whims. While it might not have done much good for the early medieval papacy, it allowed popes to build up a mythology about their importance which would suit them well in later centuries. Until then, they stayed in Rome, biding their time.



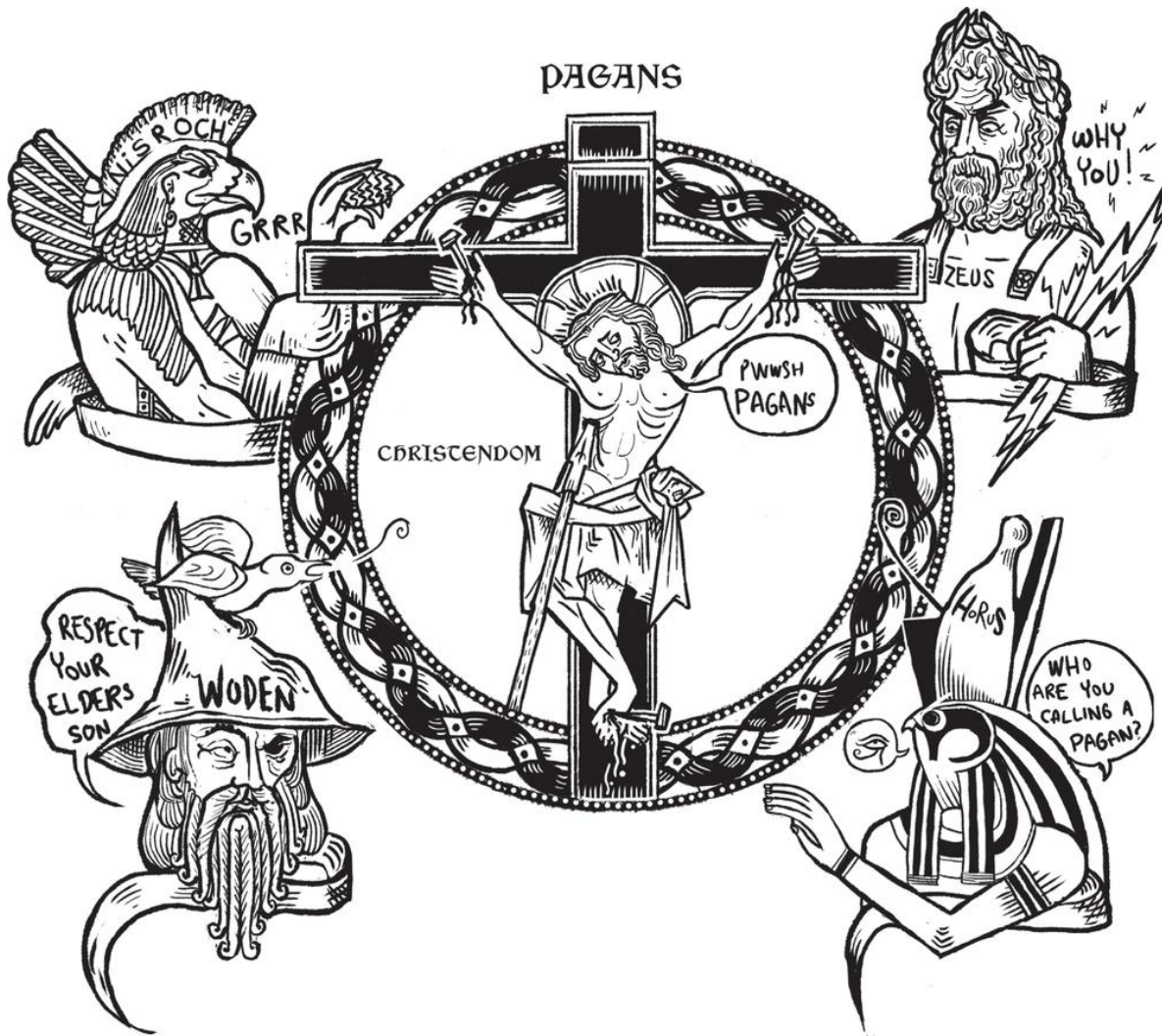


Part 2. Early Religions

For early medieval people, the most important thing wasn't who was in charge but whether or not they lived in what we refer to as **Christendom**, the community of Christian believers, wherever they may be.

Christendom was the geopolitical conception of Christian belief, and expressed the fact that Christians defined their world as being made either of true believers or of a dangerous other. In the very early medieval period this "dangerous other" largely meant pagans, whether in the Persian Sassanid Empire or on the shores of the North Sea in Europe.

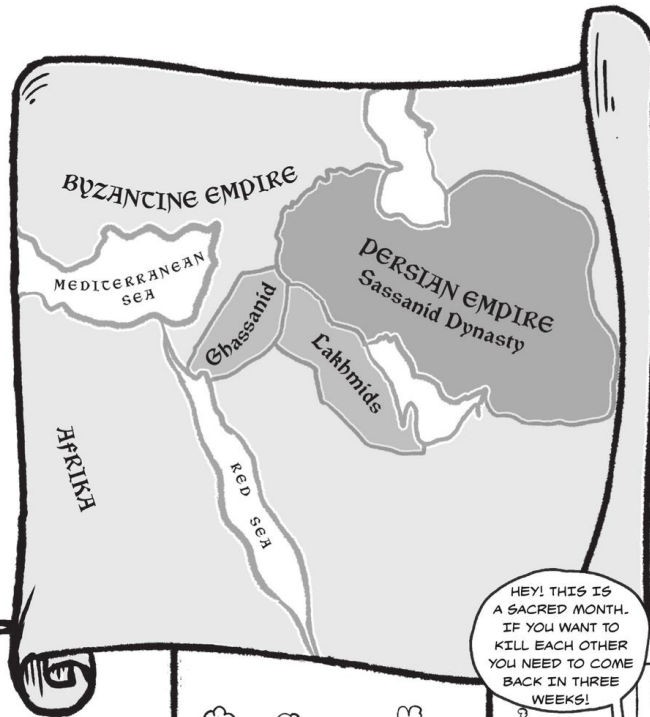
As the medieval period progressed, this idea became even more important as the Church suddenly faced off against an actual armed opponent – the believers of a new and hugely popular religion: **Islam**.



The Rise of Islam

Before the medieval period, the **Arabian Peninsula** had all sorts of religions. The majority of Arabia was **polytheistic** (with many gods) and unenthusiastic about the foreignness of the two major monotheistic religions.

Religious divisions turned into military ones, curtailing communication and trade across the region. It got so bad that eventually the **Quraysh**, the dominant tribe around **Mecca** (even then an important pilgrimage site because of the polytheistic shrine of Kaaba) started trialing out “sacred months” when violence was forbidden in order to make travel safe.



HEY! THIS IS
A SACRED MONTH.
IF YOU WANT TO
KILL EACH OTHER
YOU NEED TO COME
BACK IN THREE
WEEKS!





It was the Quraysh tribe that gave birth to arguably the most influential man of the medieval period – **Muhammad** (c.570–632). Muhammad grew up rough, an orphan in his uncle's care; he later became a merchant and arbitrator. He started going to a cave on Mt Jabal al-Nour called **Hira** to pray alone, and, tradition states, in the year 610 the angel Gabriel appeared to him and had him recite what would become the Quran.

Muhammad's visions commanded him to begin preaching about humans' responsibility to worship their creator; the Apocalypse and God's Judgement; and religious duties for the faithful.

By 630 Muhammad had converted some 10,000 people and was able to take over Mecca, which had formerly objected to him because of its importance as a polytheistic place of worship. From there, he began a series

of raids across the Arabian Peninsula, eventually uniting many of the Arabian tribes into a single Muslim polity.



After his death, the Muslims of Arabia set their sights further and kicked off what we refer to as the **early Muslim conquests**. From 634–41 they attacked Byzantine possessions in the Levant. Next, they set their sights on Egypt, taking it by 642. They then faced off against the Persian Sassanids. By 651 both Persia and Mesopotamia were Muslim. 100 years later, Muslims controlled most of the Iberian peninsula, the entire north of Africa, and as far east as modern-day Pakistan.

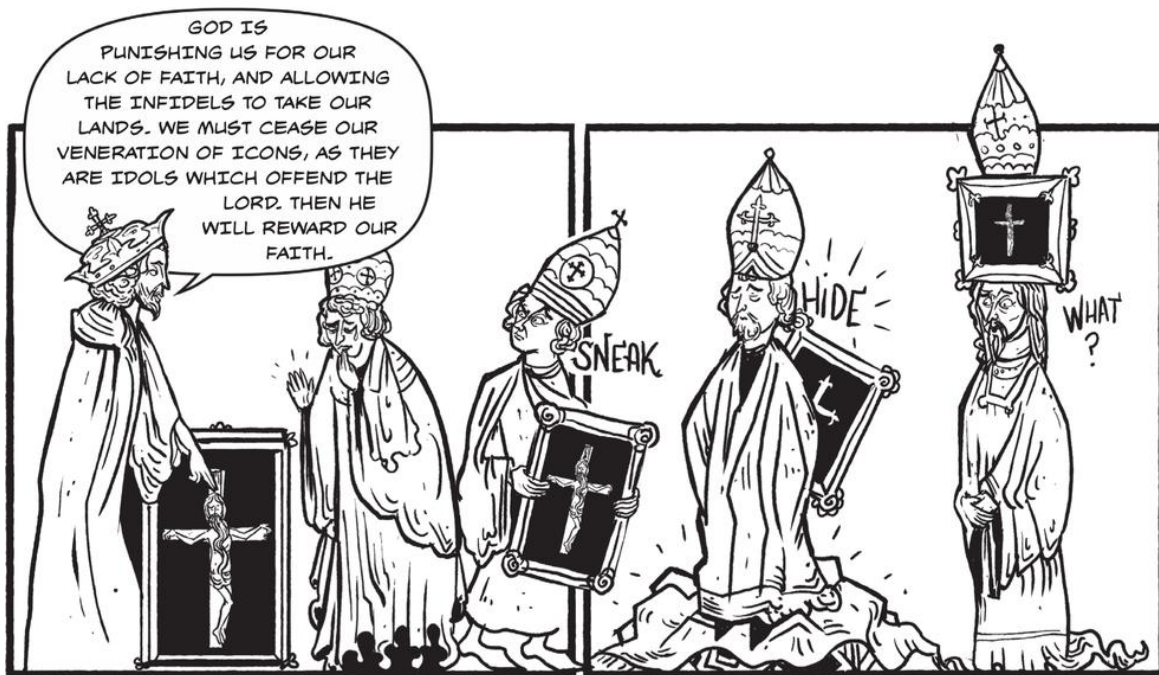
The Iconoclasm Controversy

The Byzantine Empire had lost its biggest source of tax revenue and suddenly had a new military powerhouse on its doorstep. But this wasn't

just a governmental crisis, it was also a religious one. Many of the people in areas conquered by the Muslim armies had converted to Islam. The Byzantines saw themselves as the leaders of Christendom, and losing territory to a new religious group seemed to them like punishment from God.

Add to that a huge volcanic eruption in 726 in the Aegean Sea, near what is now Santorini, which killed a lot of people, and it seemed like God might be pretty mad at Byzantium.

In response, a new religious movement called **Iconoclasm** – literally “image breaking” – sprang up, to try to appease a vengeful God.





Believers in Iconoclasm thought God was mad because they were ignoring the third commandment, that no one should make “graven images” – in this case interpreted as icons. An **icon** is a religious image, usually painted, that depicts saints, Mary, Christ, angels, or sometimes full religious scenes; they are used for religious contemplation and worship.



Iconoclasts argued this was tantamount to idol worship, and icons should be destroyed. After all, the Muslims, who didn’t believe in graven images, were thriving. As a result, sometime between 726–30, icons fell out of

favor and started to be removed from around Constantinople. This resulted in pro-icon riots and a split (loosely) between Christians in the West arguing that icons were fine, and those in the East against them.



For a while Byzantine rulers were divided into two camps: **iconodules**, or iconophiles, people who were pro-icon, and iconoclasts. In general, male rulers were iconoclasts, and female rulers (who came to power if their husband died when their sons were too young to rule) restored icon veneration, which was popular with women, especially as a form of private worship in their own homes. Later the men would reinstate Iconoclasm, especially if things were going poorly in war with either Muslim or Bulgarian forces.

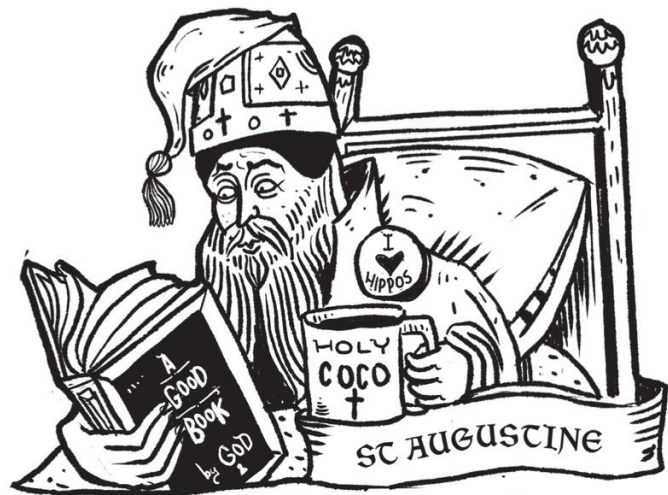
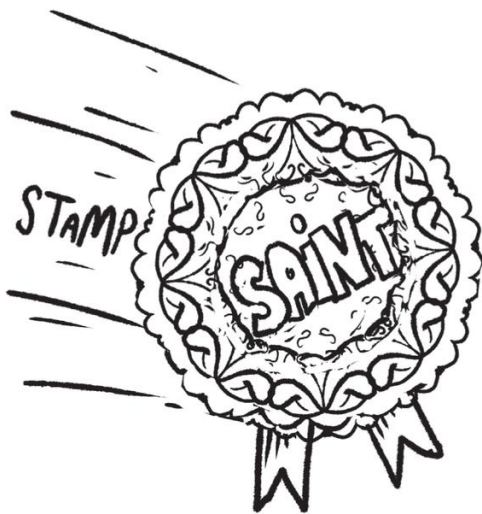
In 843 it all ended when Theodora (c.815–67) presided over a restoration of icon veneration, which is still celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent in the Orthodox calendar as **The Triumph of Orthodoxy**. It's also a popular subject for icons itself.



This episode gives us the modern word “iconoclast” – someone who attacks cherished beliefs or institutions – and it shows that when the emperor controls the Church, political and religious concerns are the same thing.

The Saints

The popularity of icons as items of veneration was tied to the worship of an ever-expanding group in the medieval period – the saints. In the early period of the Church, attaining sainthood was a looser process than it is now. Some early saints, like **Augustine** (353–430), were saints because of their contributions to theology. Others, like **Jerome** (d. 384), became saints by living in a cave in the desert, beating themselves with rocks, being tempted by sexy looking demons, and making friends with a lion. There were a lot of different ways of going about it.

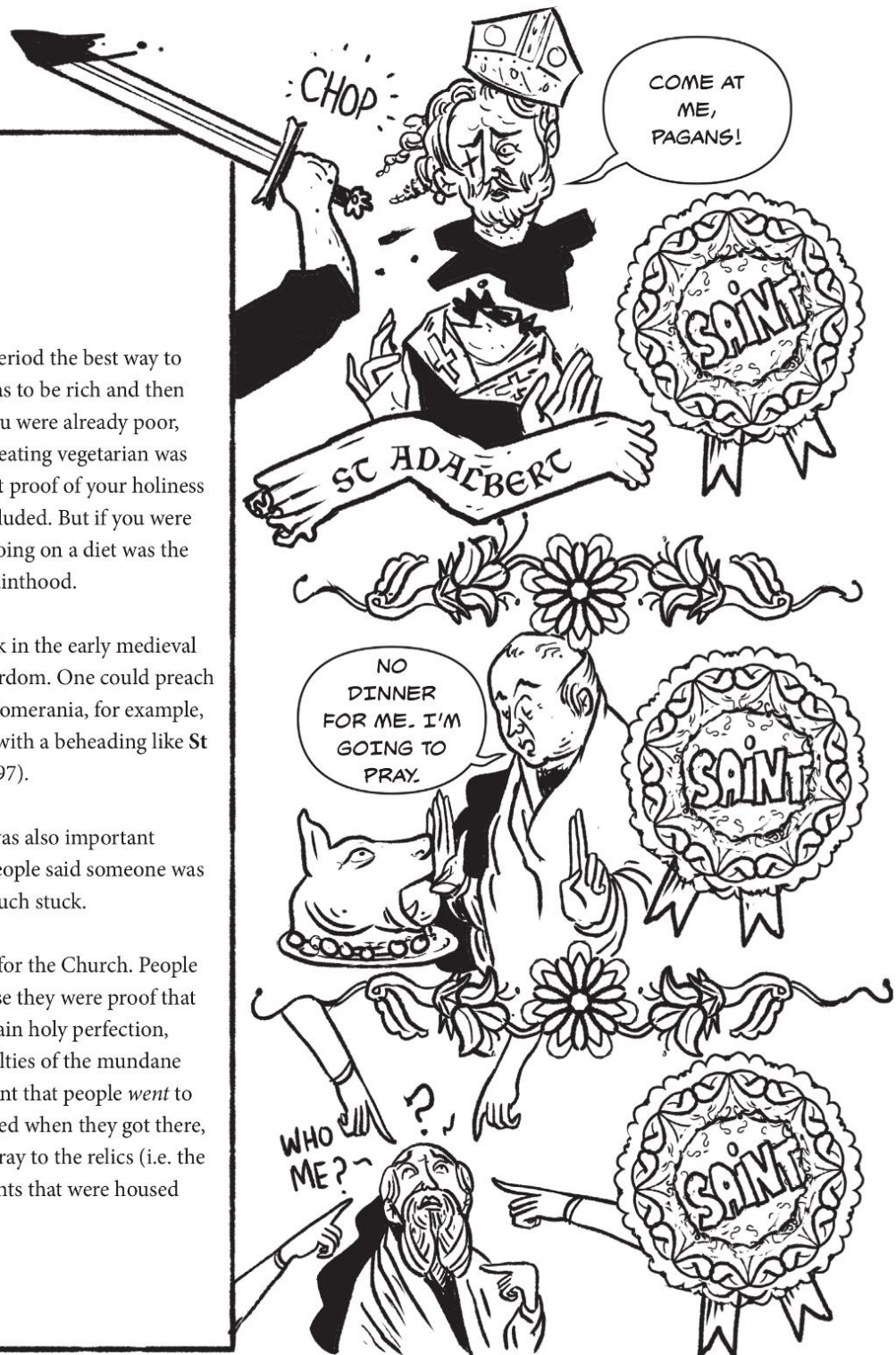


In the medieval period the best way to become a saint was to be rich and then give it all up. If you were already poor, wearing rags and eating vegetarian was just your life – not proof of your holiness – so you were excluded. But if you were a pope or royal, going on a diet was the quickest way to sainthood.

Another fast-track in the early medieval period was martyrdom. One could preach to the pagans of Pomerania, for example, and be rewarded with a beheading like **St Adalbert** (c.956–97).

Local reverence was also important because if local people said someone was a saint it pretty much stuck.

Saints were good for the Church. People liked them because they were proof that humans could attain holy perfection, despite the difficulties of the mundane world. It also meant that people *went* to church and donated when they got there, often to see and pray to the relics (i.e. the body parts) of saints that were housed there.



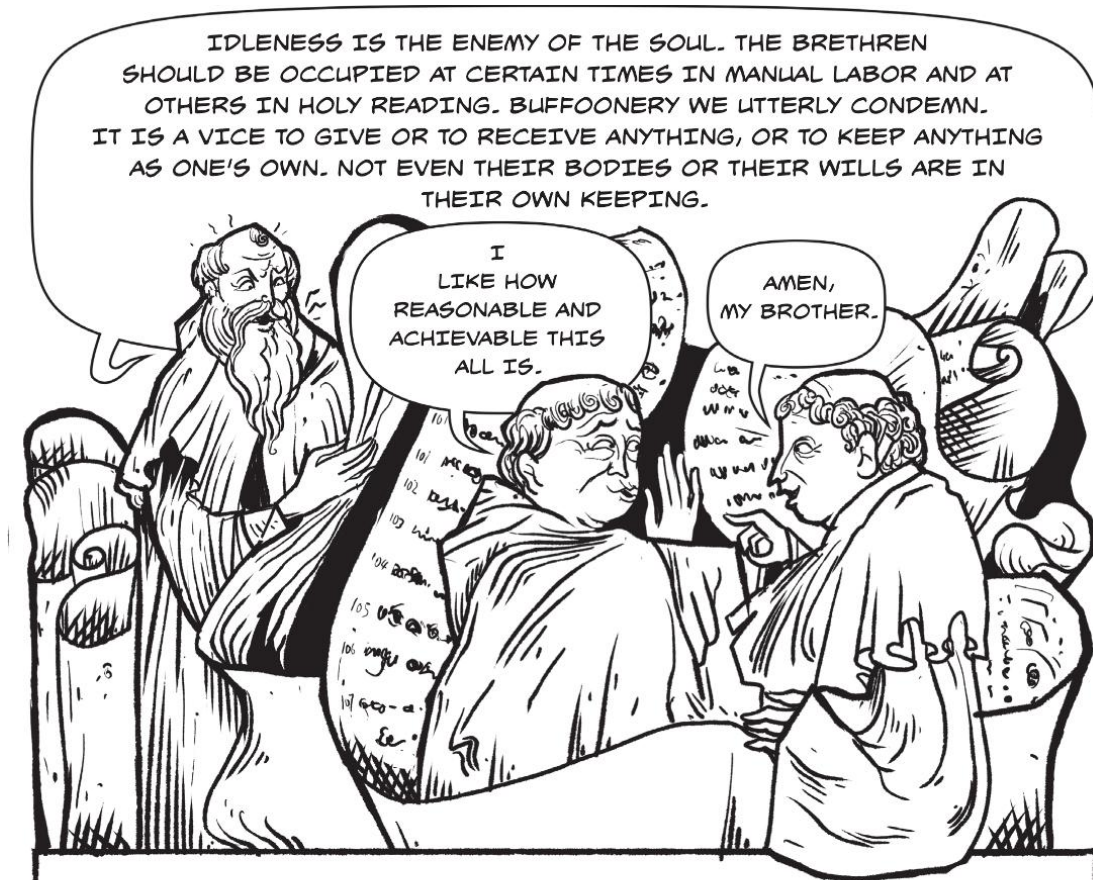
The Monastic Movement

While at first the Church was happy to take people's word on who was a saint to increase worship, when they picked for themselves they picked theologians – anyone who wanted to sort out rules they could implement. That's how **St Benedict** (480–c.537), the founder of monastic culture, got his title.

Benedict wasn't the first monk. That prize goes to the **Desert Fathers**, a group who became saints, as Peter Heather has observed, because “they sat in desert caves and tried not to wank”. Others, like **St Simeon the Stylite** (390–459), elected to live on top of a pillar for 37 years.

People loved this, but there are only so many caves and pillars available for people who want to escape the world, and there's no way for the Church to control the practice.



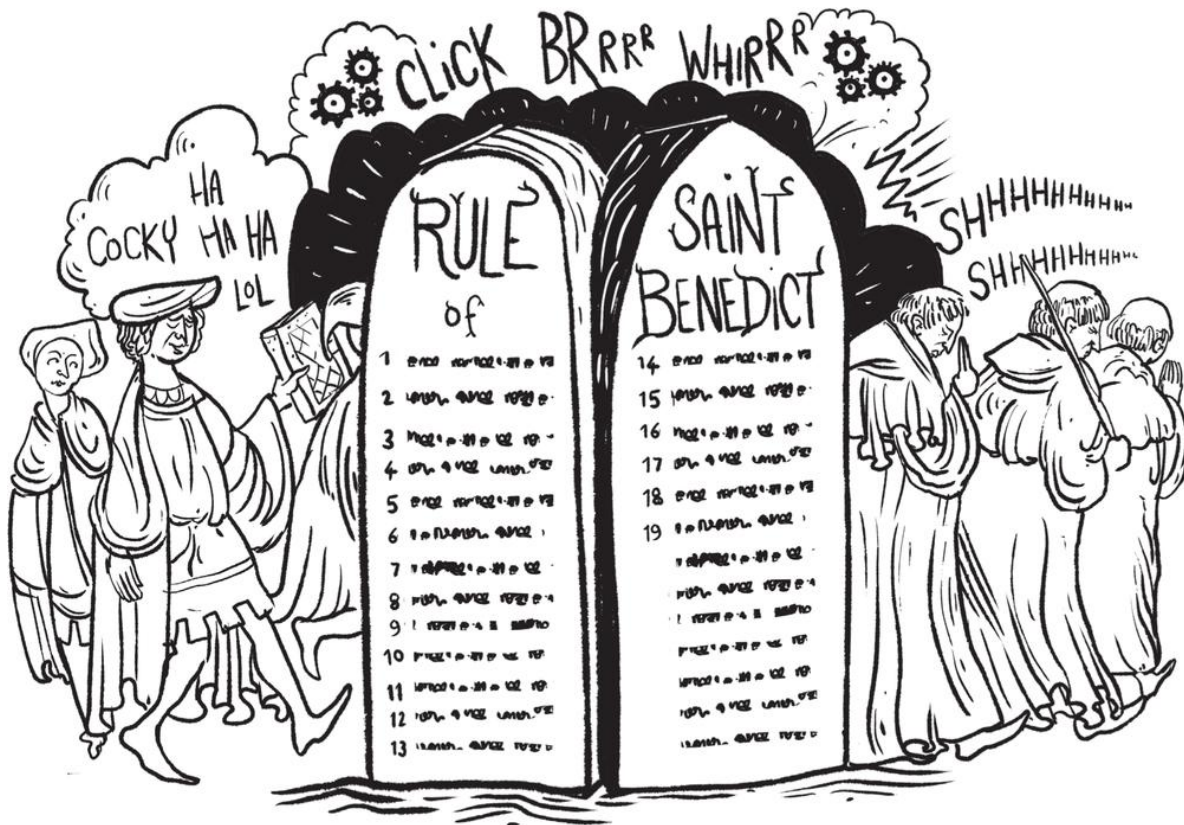


If a recluse gained a following – which many did – but had weird religious ideas, the Church didn't want to have to tell people their favorite monk was wrong. That's where St Benedict comes in. He had the idea for monasteries, where people could escape the sinful world and devote themselves to God even without a cave. He started the first one outside Rome in Montecassino.

The Church loved that he also asked monks who joined to follow a **rule** that told them exactly how they needed to behave to please God. With 73 chapters, the rule was extensive and covered everything from what monks should eat to how they should dress, the number of times a day they should pray, and how they should engage in work. The Church *loved* this.

Central to St Benedict's rule was that monks be obedient. When a new monk entered a monastery, he surrendered his will to that of the **Abbot**, who was basically the boss of the monks.

The monastery was supposed to be self-sustaining. To accomplish this, on top of praying multiple times a day, monks worked at projects like text copying, beer brewing, or gardening. To prove that they had left the world, they were to **tonsure** their hair (i.e. leave only a weird ring with a bald patch) and wear cheap scruffy robes.



The trouble with the concept of leaving the world in order to cleave to religion is that it was super popular. So, rather than marking monks and (later) nuns as separate from the rest of society, they eventually just became a new part of it.

Many monks and nuns came from rich families and were turned over by their families as **oblates** while still children, along with a substantial donation meant to help maintain the child before they became a productive member of the monastery. As a result, monasteries and nunneries became very rich and powerful. They took on more lands, built more libraries, and produced better and better beer. Soon they were huge landholders, with considerable trading power. In the early medieval period they were also the place to go for education and scholastic debate.

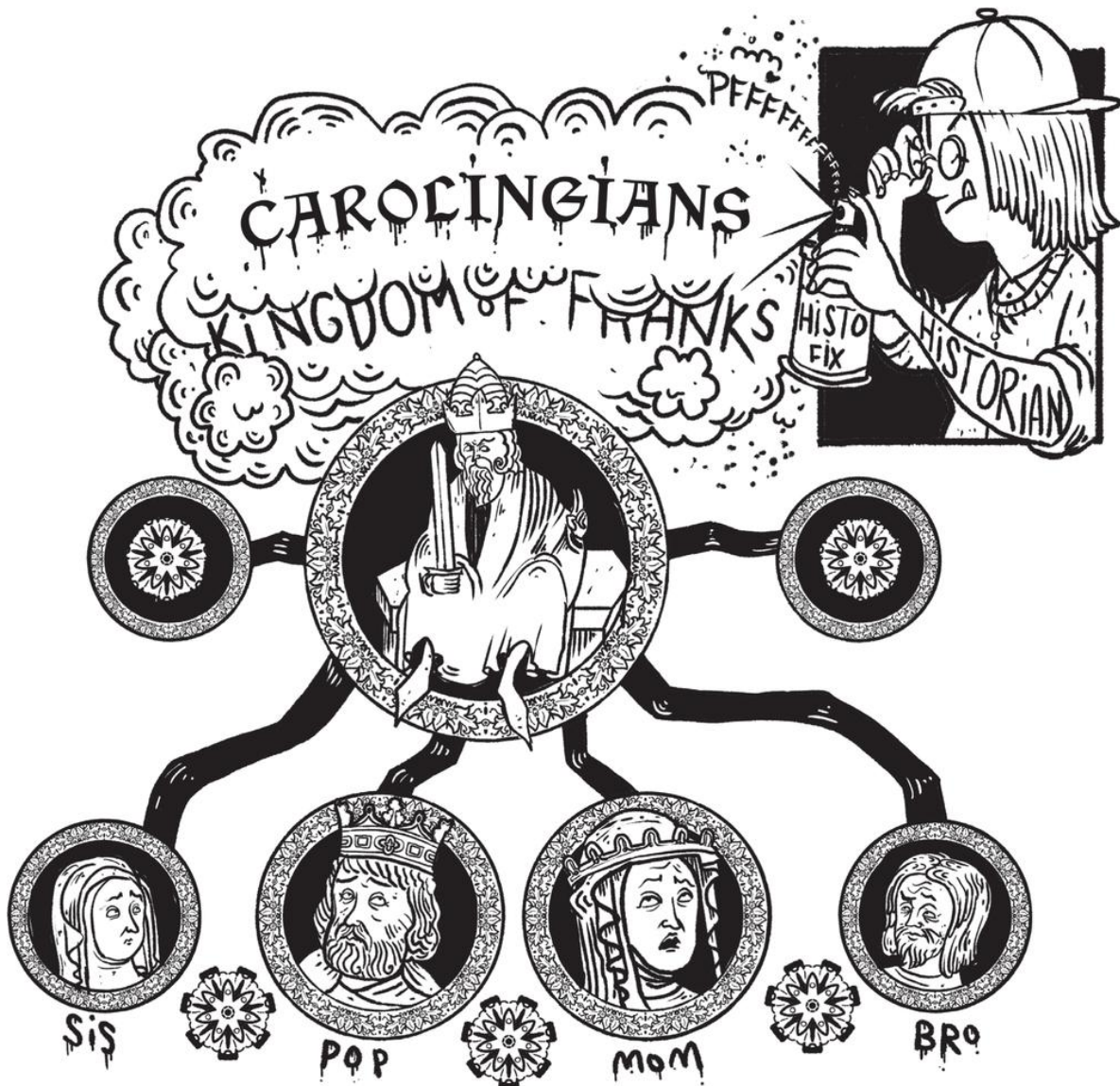
Montecassino might have been trying to avoid the outside world, but it ended up changing the world. Think about it – when you, hundreds of years later, imagine a medieval scene, who is there? A princess? A knight? Some peasants? You pictured a monk as well, right?



Part 3. The Rise of Empire and Kingship

Charlemagne

Monastic communities, and the huge numbers of skilled scribes and thinkers that they turned out, proved handy not just for the Church but for the ruling elite as well, in particular during the reign of the first medieval **Emperor of the Romans**, Charlemagne (742–814). “Charles” came from an important aristocratic family of Franks, but he became so powerful that we’ve retrospectively named the entire family the **Carolingians** after him.



Charlemagne inherited his father's **Kingdom of the Franks** as co-ruler but started thinking bigger. He saw himself as a defender of the much-beleaguered and not particularly influential papacy. To Charlemagne this meant immediately starting wars with the **Lombards**, who had been ruling the Italian peninsula since the late 6th century and who were in almost constant conflict with the Church. He also led religious wars against the Muslim kings of **al-Andalus** on the Iberian Peninsula and the pagans of **Saxony**, with varying degrees of success.



To ensure he kept power there he issued legal codes, *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, converted the pagan Saxons and, well, killed a lot of people. While the killing got him the land in the first place, the conversions and laws solidified his power. Laws proved that there was power in one specific place tied to a code of practice, just like under the Roman Empire.

The Carolingian Renaissance

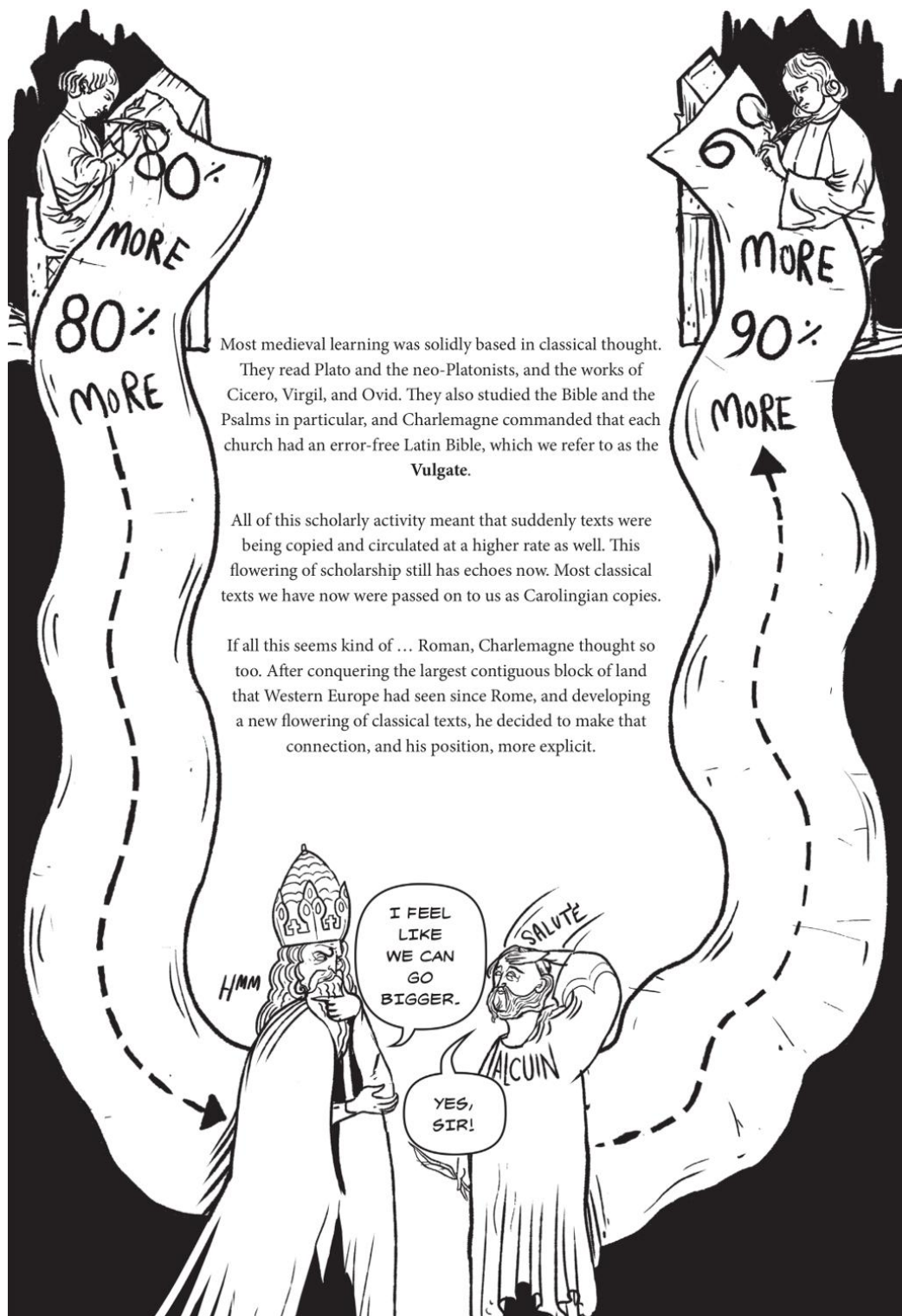
Charlemagne also launched what historians today refer to as the **Carolingian Renaissance** – a flowering of intellectual and cultural activity based around Charlemagne’s court from the late 8th to the early 9th century. He scoured Europe for clever guys, inviting them to come hang out and think. With a newly unified Western Europe this was possible, as was further travel and increased economic activity.

Notably, **Alcuin of York** (c.735–804) made it all the way down from England to write dogmatic treatises and grammars, and to help Charlemagne with things like the *Epistola de Litteris Colendis* – a letter urging the establishment of schools at monasteries and cathedrals.



The resulting schools taught seven liberal arts in two sections: the *trivium*, comprised of Grammar (reading and writing Latin), Rhetoric, and Logic,

considered the absolute basics of education; and the *quadrivium*: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy.



In 799 **Pope Leo III** (d. 816) fled Rome following a beating of historic proportions on behalf of the family of the former Pope Adrian I (d. 795), who attempted to cut out Leo's tongue and eyes. Luckily for Leo, two of Charlemagne's emissaries were there and whisked the pope away to the safety of the Frankish court.



After saving the pope and proving he was a friend of the Church, Charlemagne got thinking. The next year he marched into Rome and had Leo crown him *Imperator Romanorum*, or Emperor of the Romans, on Christmas Day 800. While great for Charlemagne, this had some unintended consequences. Firstly, by setting up Charlemagne as the emperor, Pope Leo had called into question whether or not the Eastern Roman Empire was Rome. Two Roman Empires now stood in opposition to each other, rather than two halves of a contiguous whole.



Pope Leo and the Primacy of the Papacy



As well as creating two Roman Empires, Charlemagne's coronation legitimized the papacy – which up until that point was weak enough to be suffering beat-downs in the street from rival families. The pope could now lay claim to secular backing of his office by the most powerful ruler in Western Europe.

It also gave the papacy a new type of power. As far as the Church was now concerned, in order for a Western emperor to *be* emperor they had to

receive a papal coronation, preferably in Rome. The papacy were now not only God's representatives, they were emperor makers.

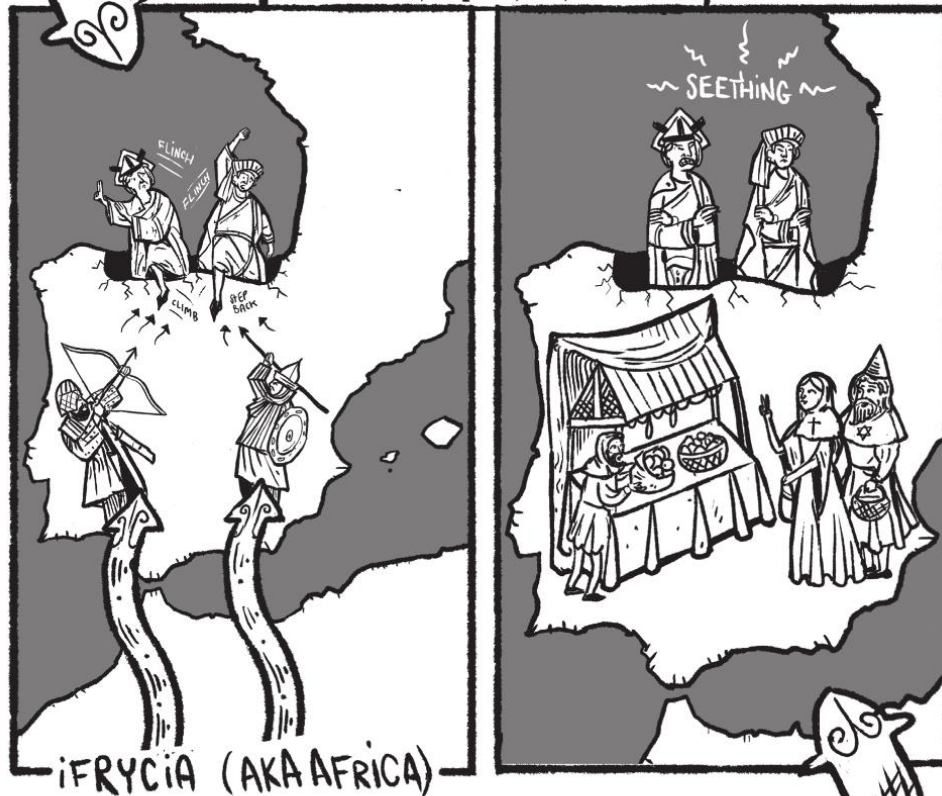
The papacy also wanted something in return – an army. They were prevented by holy orders from killing, so they wanted emperors to protect Christendom militarily.



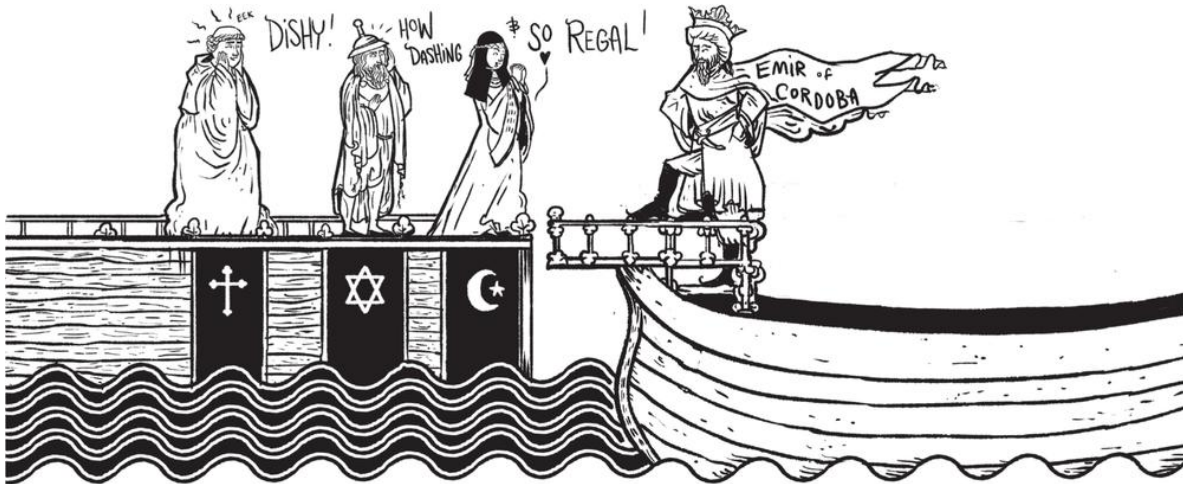
Al-Andalus

The papacy was particularly concerned with what was happening on the Iberian peninsula. There the Visigoths had fallen and the new Muslim kingdom al-Andalus had been established. This had happened after the **Umayyad Caliphate** swept across, converting and capturing most of North Africa. They rolled in from Gibraltar in 711, toppled the Visigoths almost all at once and chased them into the rump state (a real term!) of Asturias.

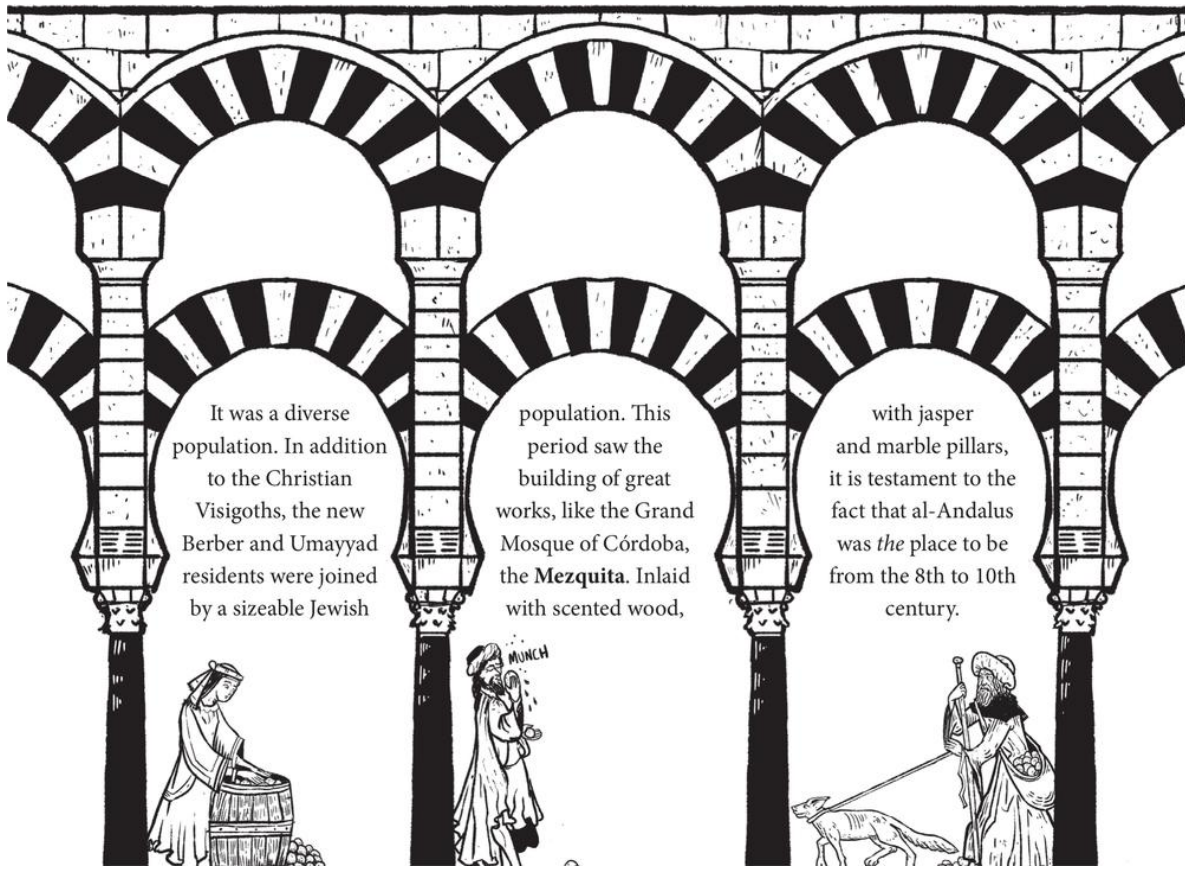
IBERIAN PENINSULA



A lot of the conquered peoples converted to Islam, but Muslim armies didn't demand it. In fact, according to Islamic law, it was illegal for Muslims to levy taxes against each other. So Muslim rulers often *wanted* big populations of unbelievers so they could levy taxes. Most Visigoths didn't bother fighting back against the invaders, and thus many Visigoth rulers maintained their lands, paid their taxes, and accepted the new status quo. Meanwhile, the Umayyad rulers, as well as their largely **Berber** armies (who had come from Northern Africa), settled down.



When the Umayyad Caliphate fell on the Arabian Peninsula in 756 to the **Abbasid** dynasty, the exiled prince **Abd al-Rahman I** (731–88) fled to al-Andalus. The new **Emir of Córdoba** and his descendants ruled al-Andalus for the next 150 years or so. Historians call this the **Golden Age of al-Andalus**. During this time, expansive irrigation systems were introduced, along with crops from the Middle East, sparking the **Arabic Agricultural Revolution**. With a stable ruling family, great trade links to the Middle East, and intensive agriculture, Córdoba under the Caliphate eventually numbered 500,000 people, more than Constantinople.



It was a diverse population. In addition to the Christian Visigoths, the new Berber and Umayyad residents were joined by a sizeable Jewish

population. This period saw the building of great works, like the Grand Mosque of Córdoba, the **Mezquita**. Inlaid with scented wood,

with jasper and marble pillars, it is testament to the fact that al-Andalus was *the* place to be from the 8th to 10th century.

Sicily and the Maritime Republics

A rich, stable society, with elaborate Mediterranean-wide trade systems, a strong army, and the possibility of choosing one of several religions, Córdoba offered its residents options for what life could be, many of which were super fun. This posed an existential threat to the papacy. But even *more* worrisome was the Islamic state on the Pope's doorstep – Sicily.

Byzantium had controlled Sicily up until the end of the 8th century. That changed in the 9th century, after a series of successful attacks from nearby Muslim Tunisia. By 878 Syracuse, the largest Sicilian city, had fallen to the Muslim forces. The Sicilian population remained mixed, with a majority Sunni Muslim group, but many remaining Greek speakers.

The papacy's concerns heightened when the kingdom started sending out raiding parties up the Italian Peninsula, starting with the neighboring **Catepanate of Italy**.



By now, following a generous donation from the Carolingians in the 8th century, the papacy controlled a substantial tract of land which we call the **Papal States**. Not bad for a group that was coming out of a period of street

brawls. These holdings allowed the Church to start pulling in some serious tax revenue and to start consolidating power.

More money meant more impressive buildings, and it meant more parish priests could be paid to administer to the needs of the various and expanding Catholic communities across Europe as populations grew and more pagans were converted.

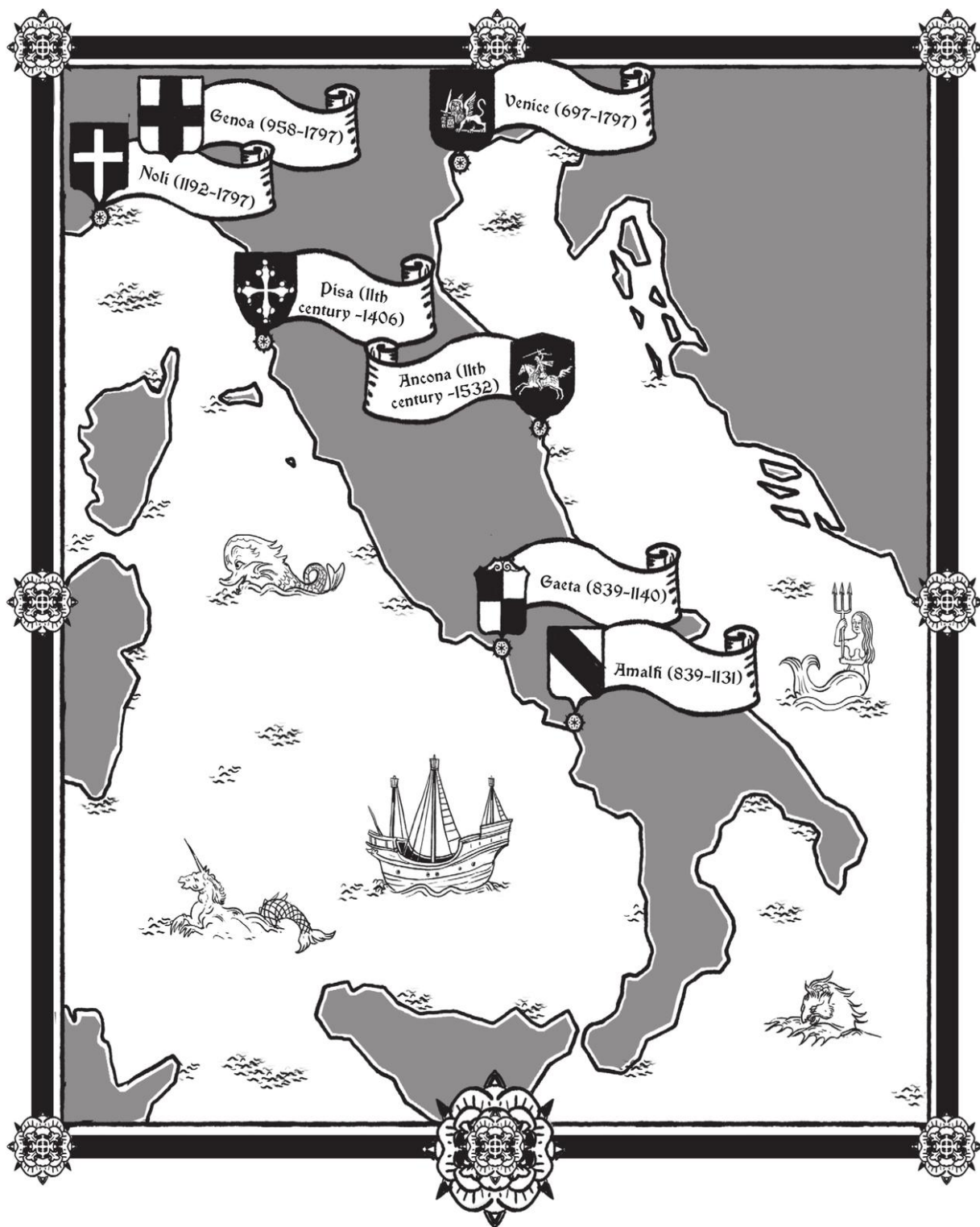


Thalassocratic City States

Adding to the general unease on the Peninsula, the late 9th and early 10th centuries saw the birth of a new sort of province, the Thalassocratic (meaning “sea power”) city states. Their whole deal, unsurprisingly, was that they had ships and therefore could trade and occasionally provide naval troops, or ferry in armies, for the right price.

They took advantage of the shrinking power of Byzantium, moving into territory that Eastern Rome was no longer able to control. They took similar advantage of any power disruptions around the Mediterranean for the rest of the medieval period. Eventually, most of the city states also controlled some overseas territories, which allowed them to expand both trade and their taxation base.

Because their money and power came from trade, they were controlled by the very rich merchant class in each city. This gave them the unique distinction of being republics in a world of kingdoms.



The Vikings

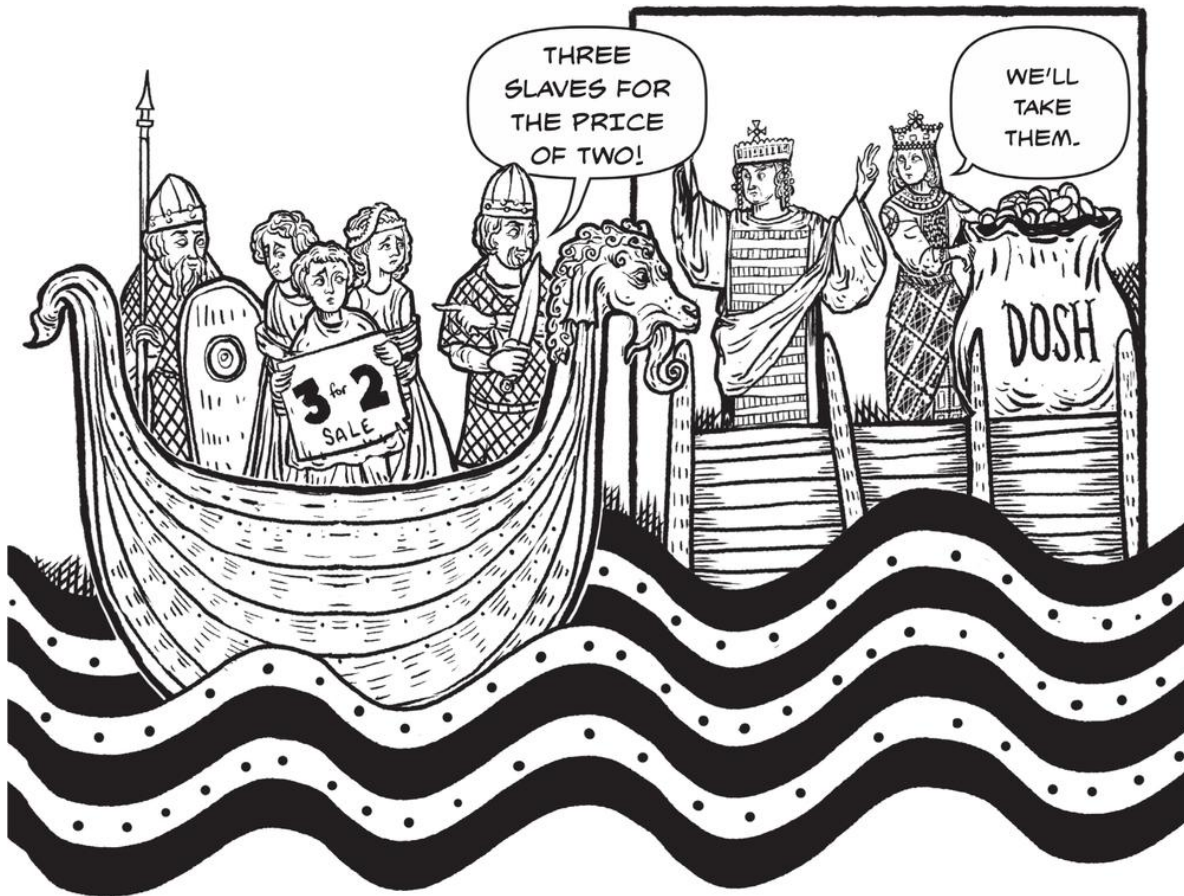
Thalassocracies were not the only industrious Europeans making money through seafaring during this period. Except they were seen as a novel innovation, rather than a serious threat. Enter the Vikings.

Viking is a term we've developed from the Old English "*wicing*", meaning "one who came from the fjords", and it generally refers to the groups of dudes from Scandinavia who started showing up from the 790s onwards, raiding whichever lands they could get their boats to.



Which was pretty much anywhere with a few feet of water because their boats had super shallow hulls. This meant that Vikings could just drift

down rivers and mess up the joint. So, while we call them “Vikings” in English, they had names in most European languages, because they made life harder for pretty much everyone on the continent.



Vikings were considered so badass that by the 10th century, Byzantine emperors had started employing them as elite imperial guards known as the **Varangian Guard**.

While that might have been nice for rich people in Constantinople who could hire them, it was not great for everyone else. The Vikings did trade commodities that people wanted – exotic furs, ivory tusks from walruses, narwhal horns (which were oft en sold as unicorn horns), and seal fat. However, they also traded slaves, which they got by just, you know, taking people during raids.

They took basically anything they could get during raids; so if you lived by the sea or a river at this point there was a very real fear that they might be

coming for you and yours. We even have archeological evidence that suggests Vikings made it as far as Baghdad.

While almost anyone near water was at risk of attack, monasteries were a particular target, because they were rich and had nice stuff to steal.

Following the attack on Lindisfarne monastery in Northumbria, Charlemagne's scandalized (and Northumbrian) secretary Alcuin wrote of the incident.

Viking attacks were a ubiquitous experience during the period from roughly 790 to 1066. Paris, one of Europe's largest cities, came under a prolonged attack in 845 until the Carolingians finally paid the Vikings to leave. As a result, historians refer to this period as the **Viking Ages**.



While we tend to focus on Viking attacks, it wasn't all war and pillage, and the Vikings eventually settled down in territories from what is now Russia to North America, and converted to Christianity.

They were the first to populate Iceland. They also started a settlement in Ireland called Duiblinn, and one in Mercia called Jorvig, which became York. They settled so extensively in Scotland that by the late 9th century they controlled most of Sutherland, named because it was the southernmost part of the rule of the *jarl* (essentially the Norse for “earl”).

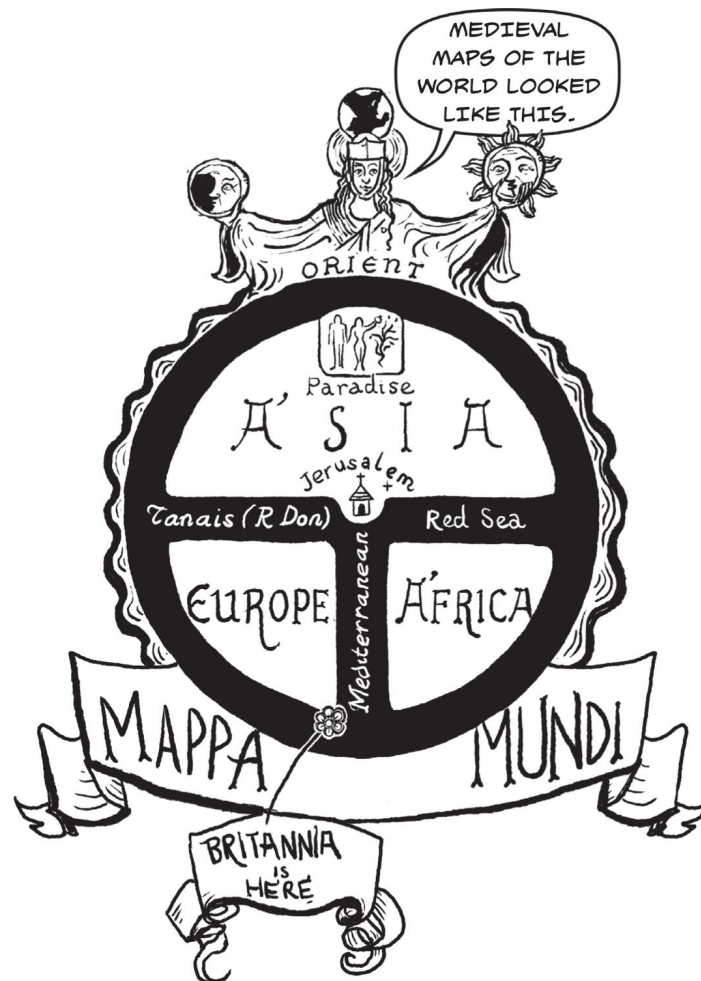


England at the Edge of the World

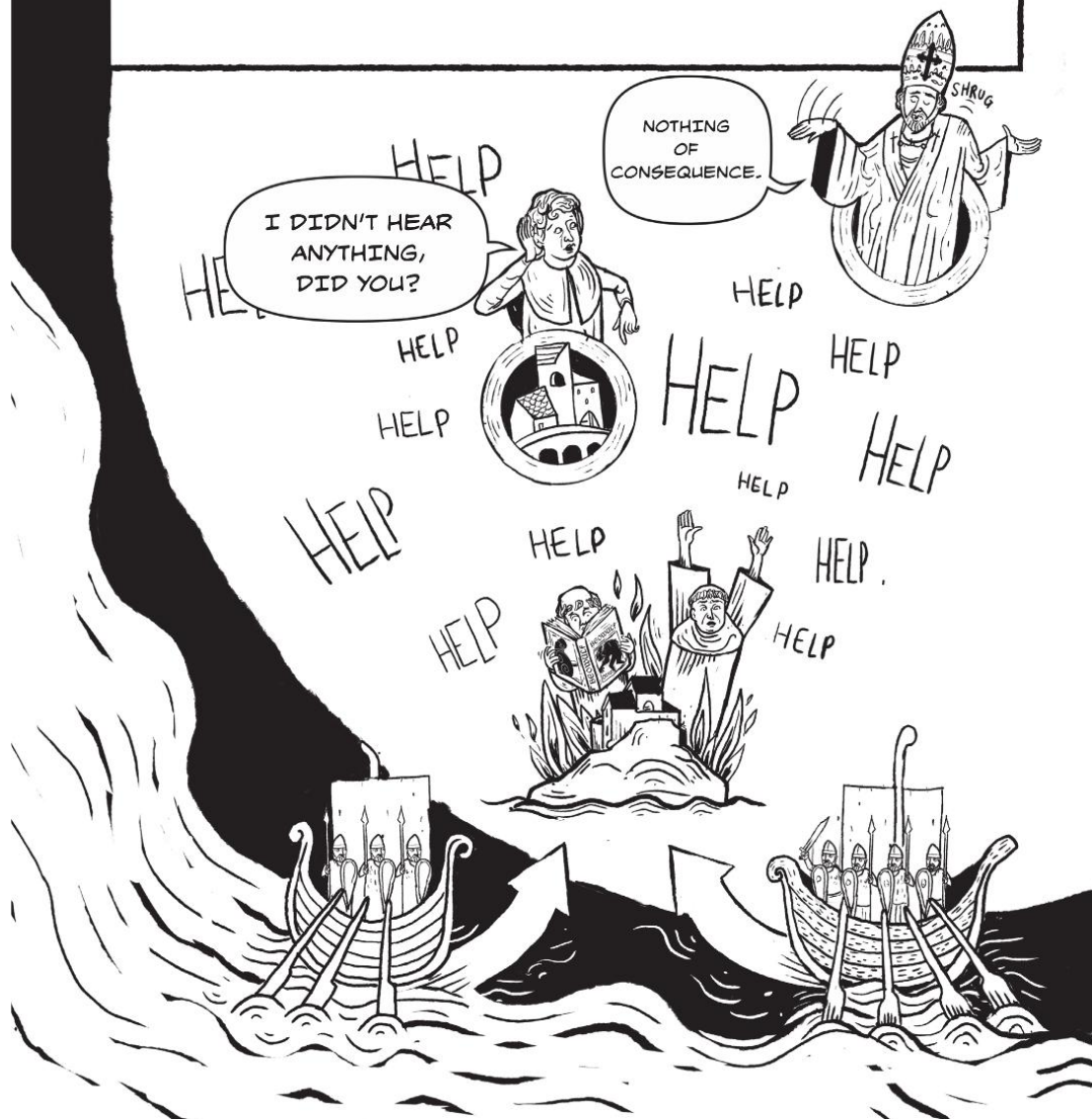
You may have noticed that so far we haven't talked much about England; that's because England didn't exist as a concept yet. Things could be Mercian, or Northumbrian ... but not "English". Also, the

island of Britannia wasn't that important in the early medieval period, which is how it was possible for Vikings to seize a bunch of land and establish their own kingdom called the **Danelaw**. Even when England gained slightly more prominence in the later medieval period, it had nowhere near the importance that it does now.

Part of the reason for Britannia's lack of prominence is that it was really far away from the Christian center of the world, Jerusalem. Plus, it didn't have a lot to offer the rest of Europe in terms of trade goods. At this time it was principally exporting plunder to Vikings.



Britannia did, however, have a thriving local culture. Its residents gave us the medieval classic *Beowulf*, for example, and introduced an impressive bureaucracy, which means we have great survival rates for documents from this period. This, combined with the fact that Britain became important after colonialism, can distort our view of the importance of English history over time, and in the medieval period in particular. There is a lot of amazing scholarship on medieval England, but in a short introduction to over a thousand years of history ... England just isn't as important as Byzantium, France, or the Holy Roman Empire.



By the 10th century, Carolingian control over what had been Charlemagne's empire had been slipping for some time. The once massive empire had been split into multiple kingdoms.

This happened because the Carolingians tended to split their holdings between sons. Eldest sons usually got to keep the title of Emperor, but land went to all sons. This kept the peace but meant the idea of a new Roman Empire was in tatters. The Carolingian sons constantly fought each other over land, attempting to recreate the glory of Charlemagne's empire.



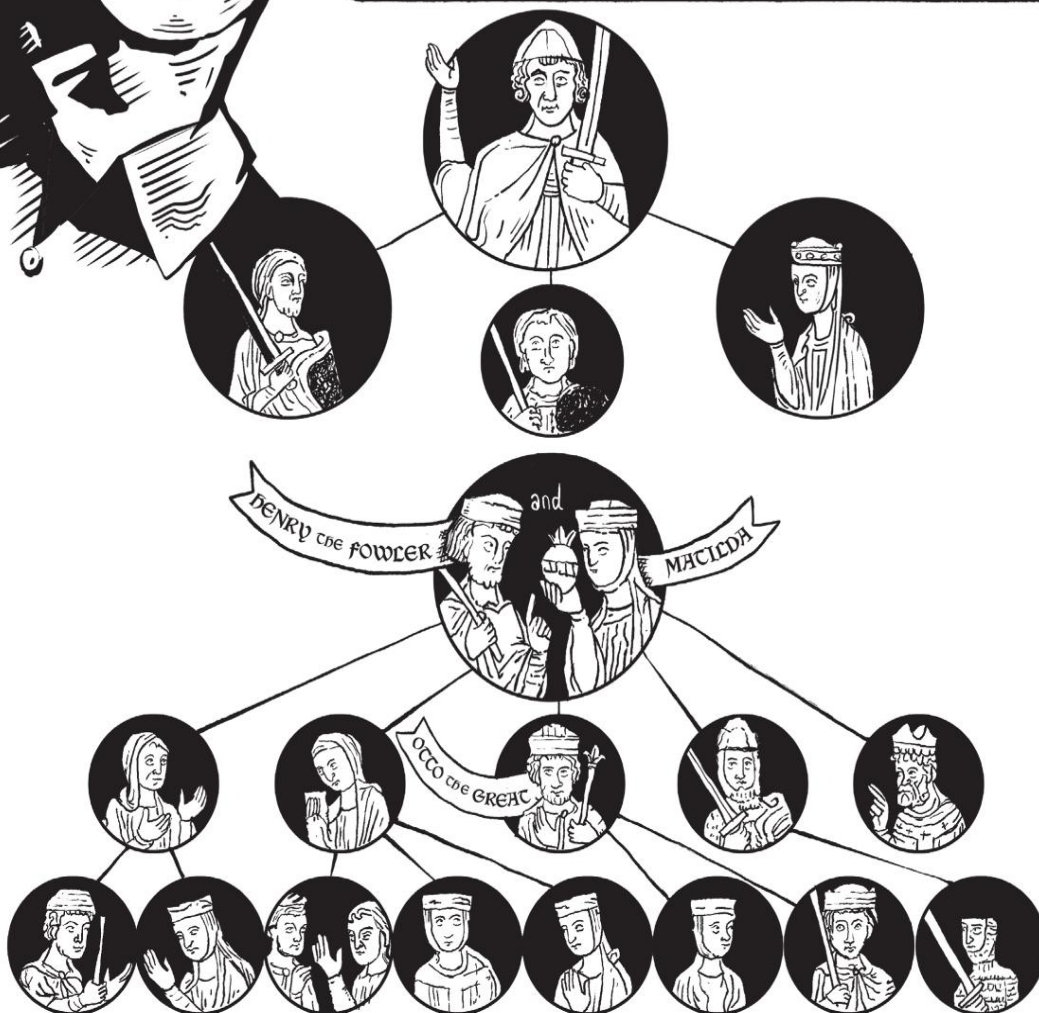
The great defenders of the Church were losing moral high ground after a series of Viking attacks and settlements, and the arrival of the **Magyars**, a tribe from the Asian steppes. The Carolingians – like most rulers in the medieval period – claimed to rule because God had anointed them to do so in his name, an idea which would be adapted into the early-modern concept of the **divine right of kings**. It was articulated in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries under the Stuarts and is also associated with the absolutism of Louis XIV of France.



The Ottonians

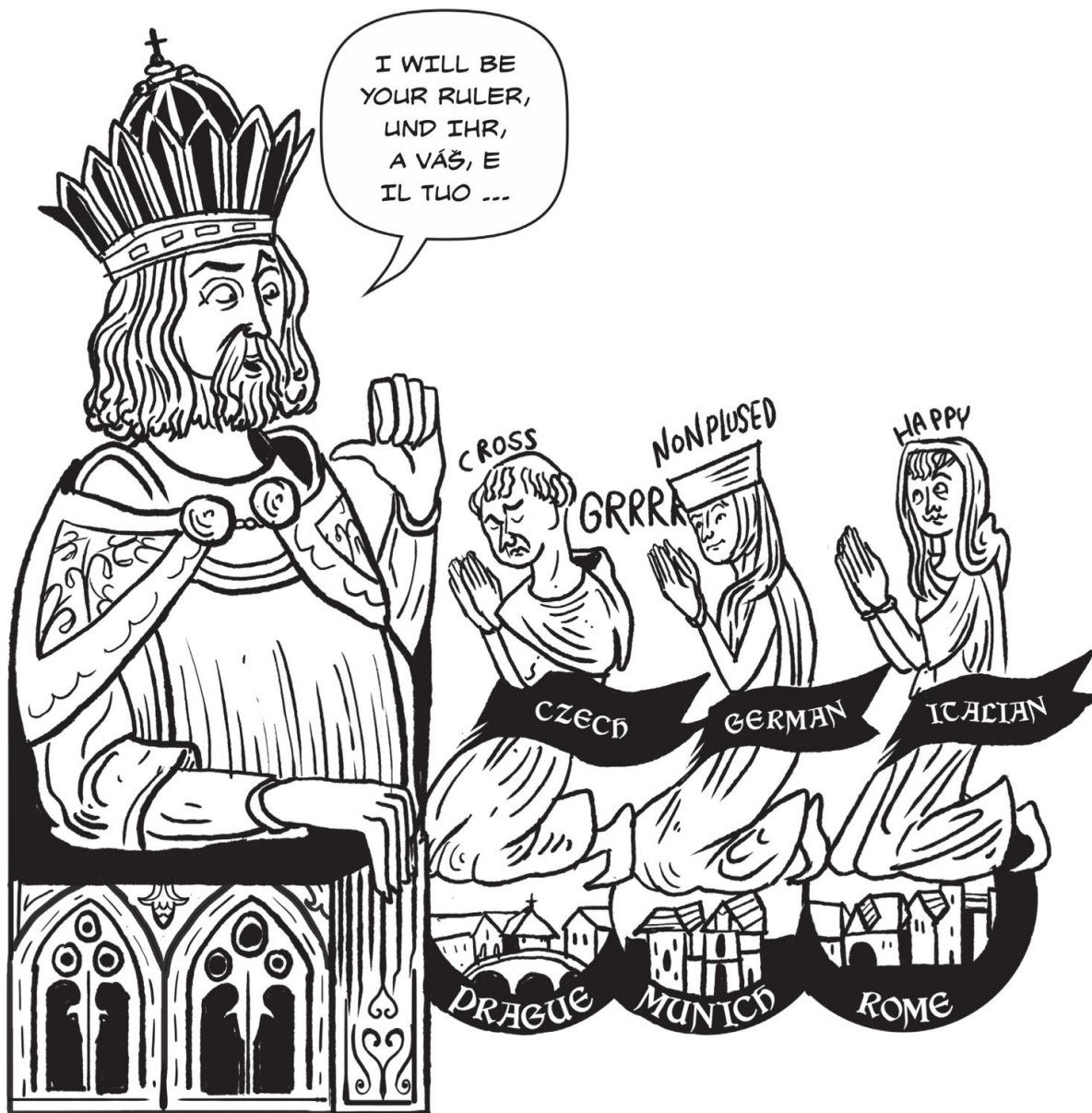


Rutger Kramer suggests we can think of the Ottonians as: “the Carolingians, but further East and more desperate”. The dynasty was founded by **Henry the Fowler** (876–936) who was elected King of the Franks in 919. Henry had his hands full fighting the Magyars and trying to establish order following the Carolingian collapse. Desperate to maintain the peace, he favored a federated approach to rule. Local rulers would control their own lands, in what are sometimes called **stem duchies**. Henry was nominally the head of these duchies but didn’t exercise any direct control over them. This suited both the other German speakers, who were sick of distant emperors who didn’t respond to local concerns, and newly conquered peoples like the Czechs just fine.



All of this prevented a catastrophic breakdown of authority in the area, and set things up nicely for Henry’s son **Otto the Great** (912–73), who gives the Ottonian dynasty its name. He was a much more aggressive ruler than

his father, and worked to reestablish himself as an emperor in Charlemagne's model. To underline this, when his father died in 936, Otto was crowned Duke of Saxony and King of Germany in Charlemagne's old capitol Aachen, making a statement that he was absolutely coming for an imperial crown. Feeling secure up north, he then started eyeing up the Italian lands to the south, and attacked the Kingdom of Italy after the Carolingian line died out there to bring it under his control. Voila! He became the first king of both the Franks and Italians since Charlemagne.



Otto kept conquering, but he wasn't yet Emperor. He finally got the title after **Pope John XII** (c.930/937–64) asked him to intervene on behalf of the Church when **Berenger II** (c.900–966), who believed he was the rightful king of Italy, began attacking papal lands. Otto kicked Berenger off the peninsula and got himself crowned Roman Emperor at St Peter's Basilica. The Roman Empire was back!

This was ratified with the *Diploma Ottonianum*, which officially stated that John XII was the spiritual head of the Church and Otto its secular protector. This meant Otto ruled by divine right with Church backing, and the Church had imperial protection.

By the time he died in 973, Otto had put together the largest empire since Charlemagne, expressly linked the imperial crown to the will of God, and created a political entity that would last long into the modern period. His ancestors would fritter away this legacy, but at the turn of the millennium there were now two Roman Empires, and kingdoms were shaping into something more like we're used to seeing on the map.



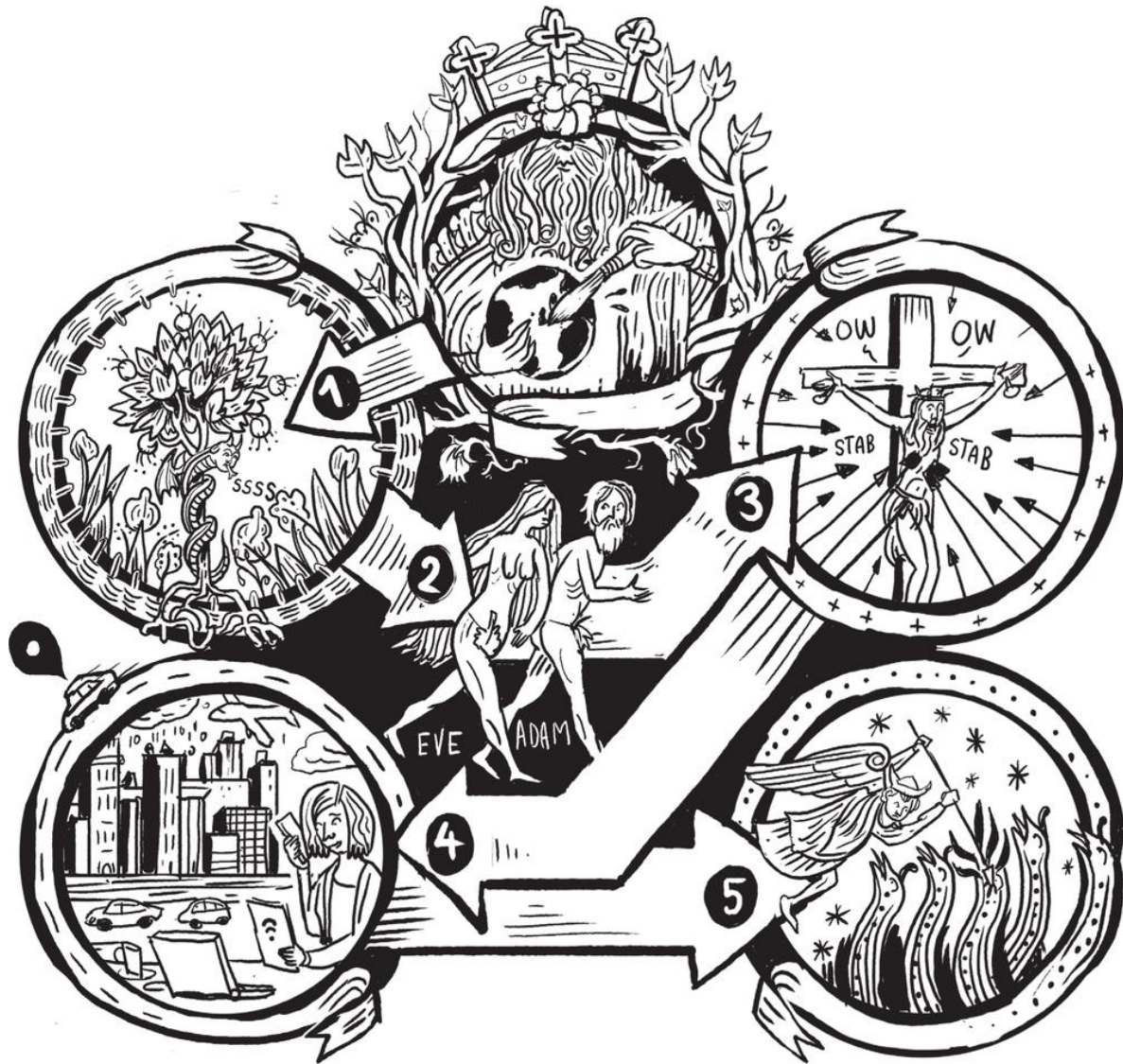


Part 4. Life around the Year 1000

Apocalyptic Anxiety

We're now at about the year 1000, which marks our exit from the early medieval period. It also marks a time when a lot of people became super anxious that the world was going to end.

This thinking makes sense in the context of a majority Christian society. Christianity is an inherently linear religion. It has an explicit beginning, when God created the world; we are living in the theoretical middle; and we are working, one way or another, towards its end, the **Apocalypse**.



Medieval Christians were always ready for the Apocalypse, which would feature, first, the time of tribulation when Antichrist would appear, rule the world and torture faithful Christians. Eventually, Antichrist would be destroyed, which would trigger the Armageddon.

The Ottonian Renaissance

Worry about the end times meant a significant number of Europeans left for Jerusalem to wait for the coming of Christ. This sudden interest in, and travel to, the east brought about a few happier changes, one of which we now call the Ottonian Renaissance. Increased travel through the Byzantine Empire, as well as the emergence of a new Western Emperor also meant

increased contact with Constantinople. This led to an increase in the number of texts which moved back and forth. There was also a fashion for Byzantine art and architecture in Western Europe. Soon buildings began to make more reference to what were seen as imperial or Roman styles.

Like Charlemagne before them, the Ottonians wanted to cement their reputation as emperors, so they directly funded a number of monasteries and charged them with creating lavishly illuminated manuscripts. They also pushed for the revival of cathedral schools, to ensure a new generation of scholars.



The Rise of the Nobility

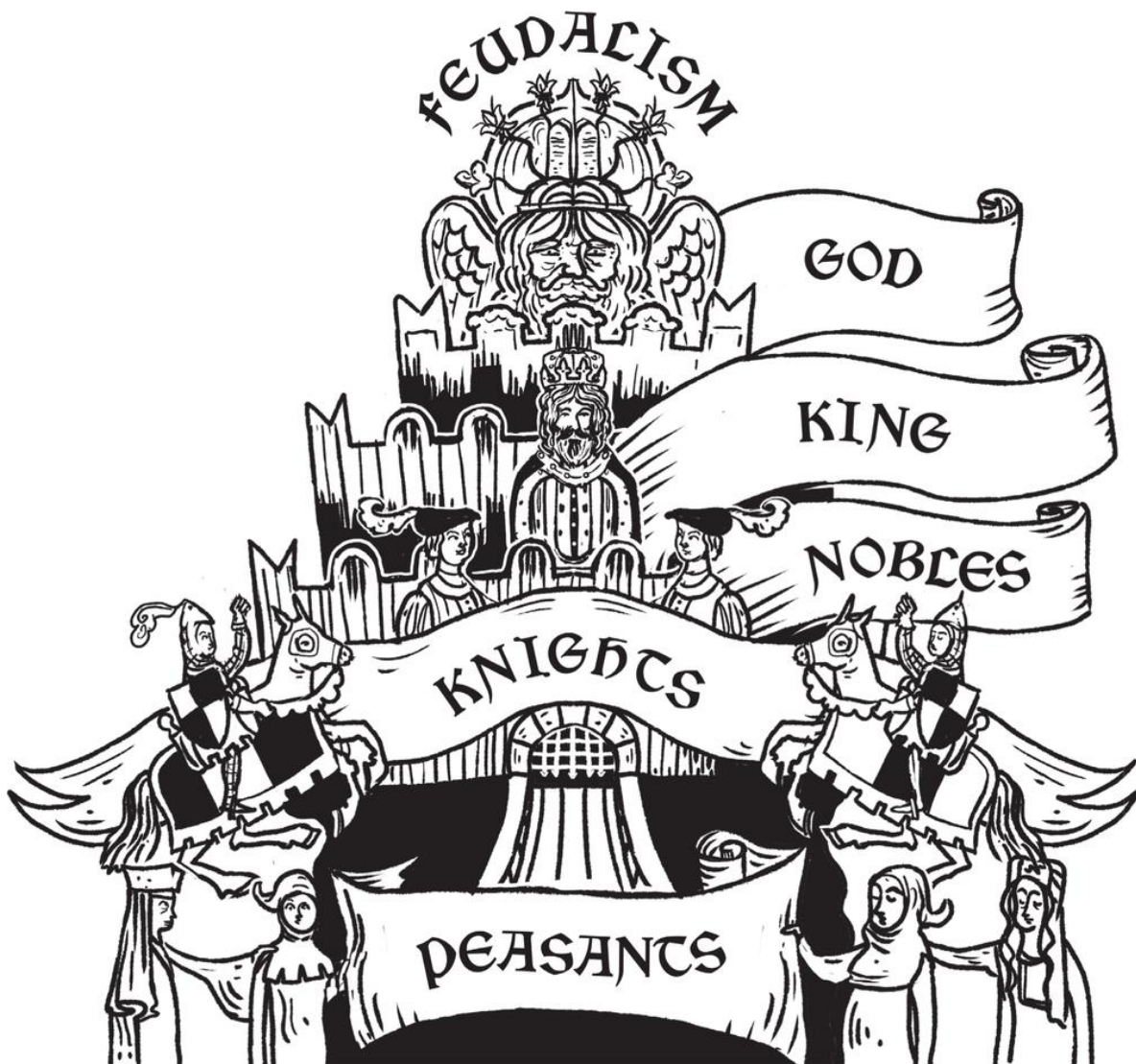
Outside of learned and imperial circles, there was also a lot for the nobility to be happy about. With the collapse of the Carolingian Empire, many local nobles saw their own power increase significantly. Often, this meant the nobles had control over collecting taxes, oversaw local courts, and collected fees on travel or on use of local mills. They were also usually the ones keeping things peaceful in their lands. This bundle of rights was termed the *seigneurie banale* by the historian Georges Duby.

The increased power of the nobility during this period is important, because it calls into question the idea that many people have of medieval society being “feudal”.



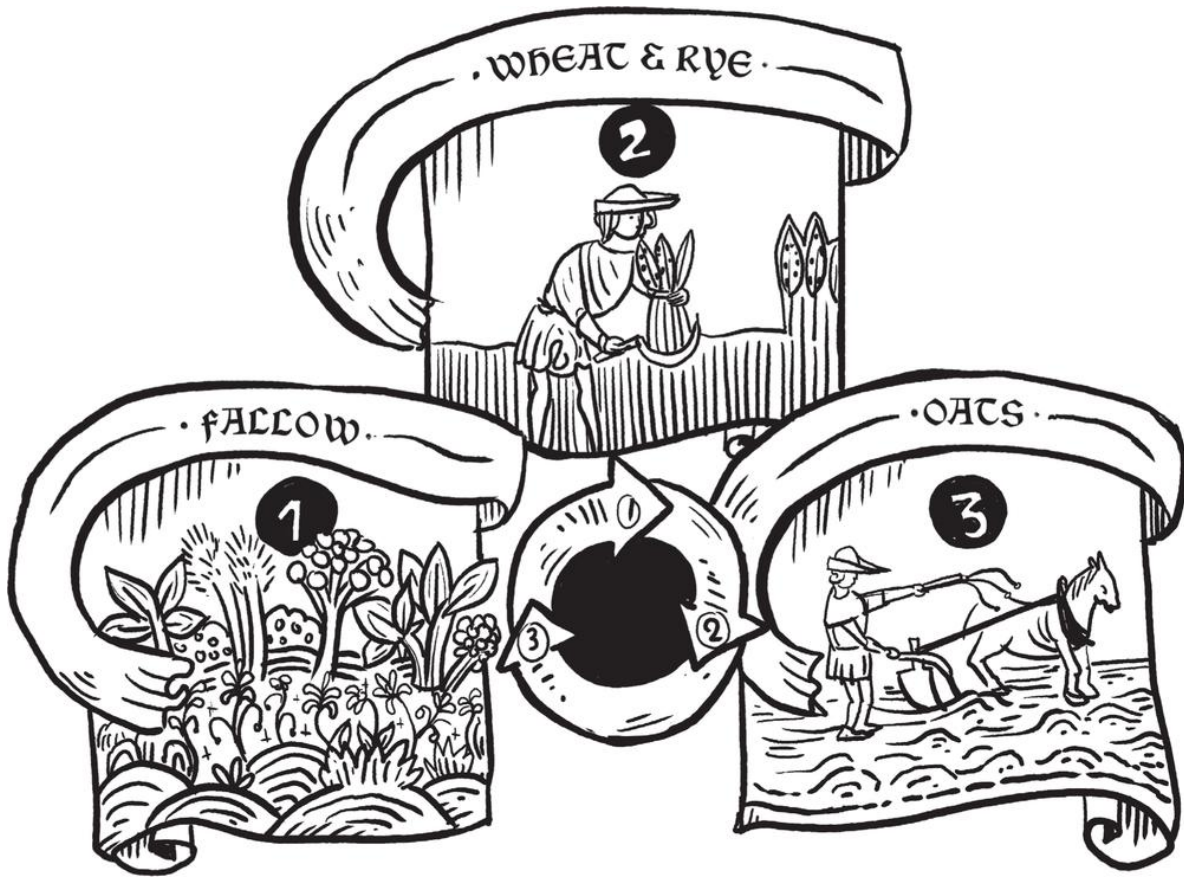
The *seigneurie banale* does bear some resemblance to **feudalism**, which is generally thought of as a sort of passing of power. A king would, in theory, grant land and lordship to a member of the nobility in return for military support when required, and that noble would oversee the king's law in his territory. The nobleman, in turn, would have a number of knights under his control, who he could offer to the king in case of war. Those knights and the noble controlled the peasants in their area, who paid them taxes.

This is a nice and neat way of explaining it, but, of course, it was never quite that simple in the majority of places for the majority of medieval people. Exactly who was in control of governance, who collected and received taxes, and how it was spent varied greatly from area to area. What may have been true in East Anglia was not necessarily true in, say, Aquitaine. Largely, what the *seigneurie banale* shows us is that in many places in Europe the nobility arguably had much more power than did royalty, who were largely absent.



The Rise of Cities

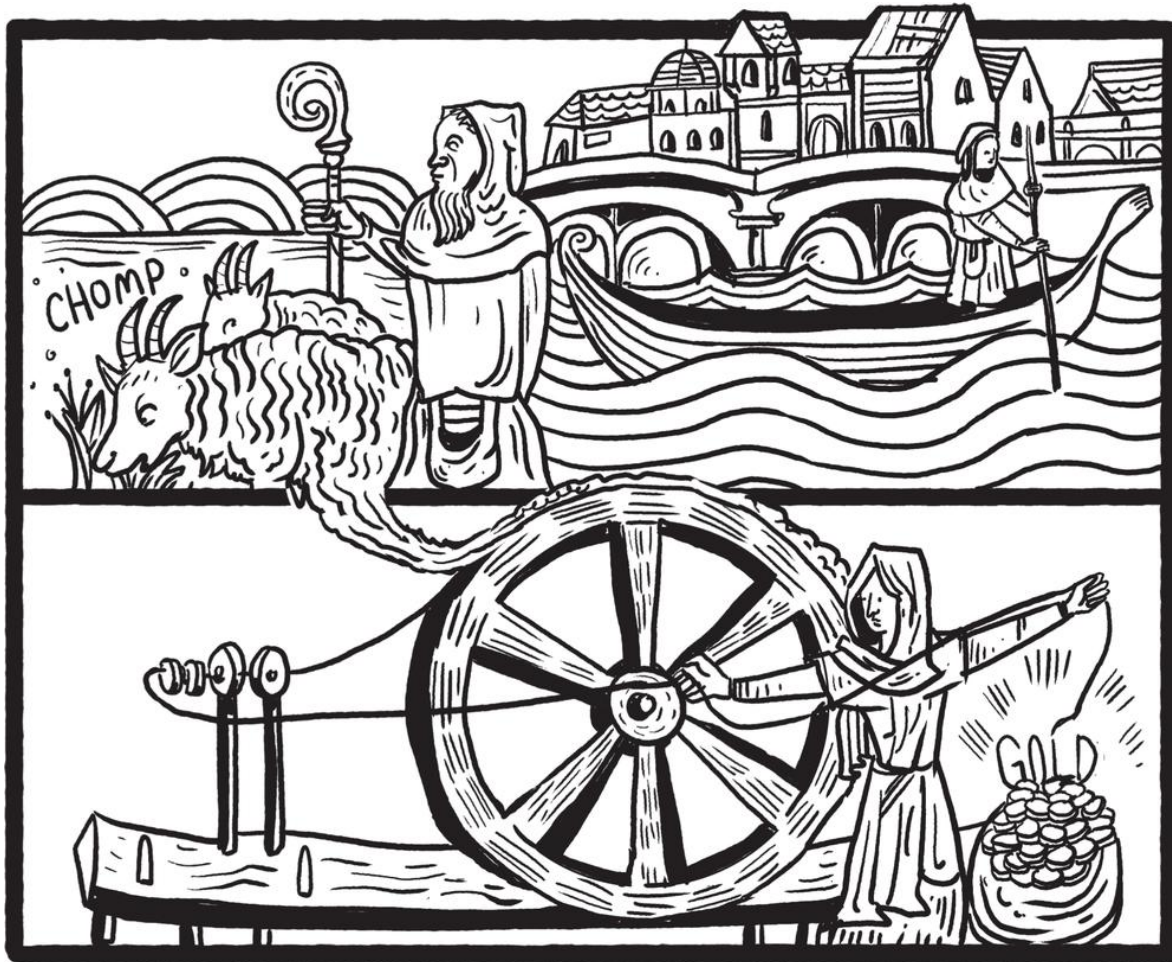
Another big change around this time was the re-emergence of cities (as opposed to smaller towns). Aside from Constantinople, Rome, Córdoba and Paris, there had been only a handful of places that would qualify as a city.



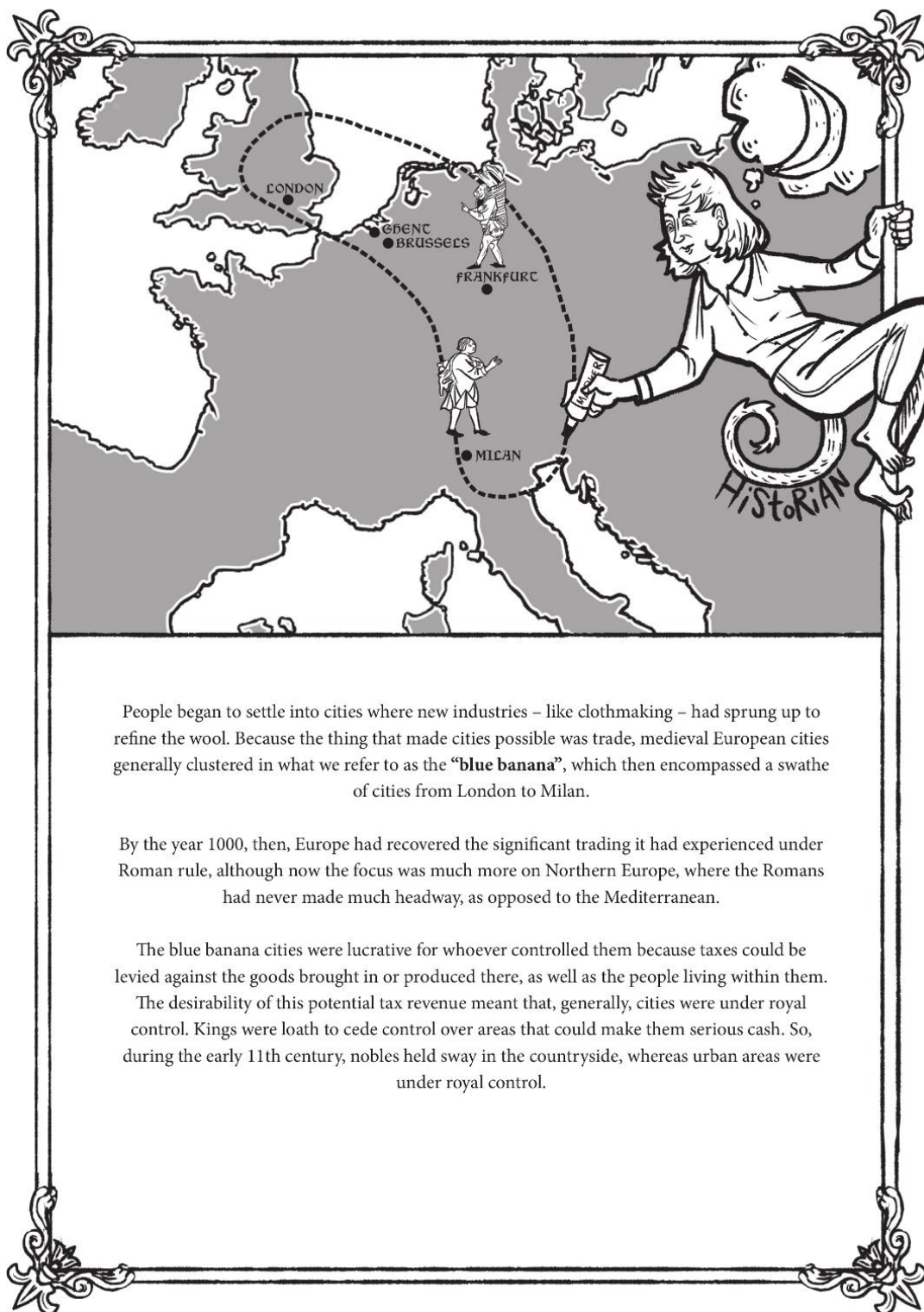
This began to change in the 10th century because of two new farming inventions – the **three-field system** and the **heavy plow**. The three-field system meant that plots of land would be divided into thirds: one section would be used for staples such as rye or winter wheat, another for things such as lentils or beans, and the third would be left fallow in order to recover from the intensive agriculture. Crop yields boomed. Meanwhile the heavy plow allowed the heavier clay-like soils of northern Europe to be tilled, meaning that more and more three-field farms could be created in areas that had previously been too difficult to farm.

These innovations meant that more food could be produced in a wider range of places. The result was surplus crops that could be easily traded and could sustain larger populations.

These expanding populations looked for more land to farm, which led to expansion into the Lowlands – what we today call Belgium and the Netherlands. These areas had been largely unusable bogs, but a series of impressive dikes helped dry land to emerge from the water. However, what was best to cultivate on newly drained land wasn't food, it was sheep. And the series of canals that had been dug to drain the land made it easy to move the resultant luxury product – wool.



Without exaggeration, wool was the most important commodity in medieval Europe. A miracle fiber that kept one warm even when wet was always in demand by a population who worked in fields, living in a world with no central heating. Wool thus became the backbone of a massive trade network.



People began to settle into cities where new industries – like clothmaking – had sprung up to refine the wool. Because the thing that made cities possible was trade, medieval European cities generally clustered in what we refer to as the **“blue banana”**, which then encompassed a swathe of cities from London to Milan.

By the year 1000, then, Europe had recovered the significant trading it had experienced under Roman rule, although now the focus was much more on Northern Europe, where the Romans had never made much headway, as opposed to the Mediterranean.

The blue banana cities were lucrative for whoever controlled them because taxes could be levied against the goods brought in or produced there, as well as the people living within them.

The desirability of this potential tax revenue meant that, generally, cities were under royal control. Kings were loath to cede control over areas that could make them serious cash. So, during the early 11th century, nobles held sway in the countryside, whereas urban areas were under royal control.

Gregorian Reforms

With travel improving and better networks between cities, the Church under Pope (and saint!) **Gregory VIII** (c.1015–85) made a play to be taken more seriously. Gregory instituted a series of changes that we refer to as the Gregorian Reforms. Some of these reforms might seem obvious to us. For example, Gregory pushed to ban priests from marrying. He also pushed for an end to simony – the practice of selling Church offices to the highest bidder.

Then, in 1075, Gregory released a document called the *Dictatus papae*, which was essentially a list of the 27 powers he felt that the Church held, and that, more explicitly, the pope himself held.



Among the more important and shocking of the *Dictatus papae* were:

- 3 *[The Pope] alone can depose or reinstate bishops.*
- 5 *The Pope may depose the absent.*
- 6 *[People] ought not to remain in the same house with those excommunicated by him.*
- 8 *He alone may use the Imperial Insignia.*
- 9 *All princes shall kiss the feet of the Pope alone.*
- 12 *It may be permitted to him to depose emperors.*
- 14 *He has the power to ordain the clerk of any parish he wishes.*
- 19 *He himself may be judged by no one.*
- 27 *He may absolve subjects from their fealty to wicked men.*



All very impressive, but the thing is, it was more like a wish list than an actual account of powers that people agreed the pope held. The fact that Gregory had to announce it means that people didn't relate to the papacy this way. And they were really not happy about it. Especially the rulers.

Suddenly the pope could excommunicate kings whenever he wanted, and, if he did, their subjects didn't have to obey them anymore! Also the pope claimed that *he* got to appoint bishops, which traditionally kings had done, bishop being a very popular role for royal and noble second sons.

The Great Schism

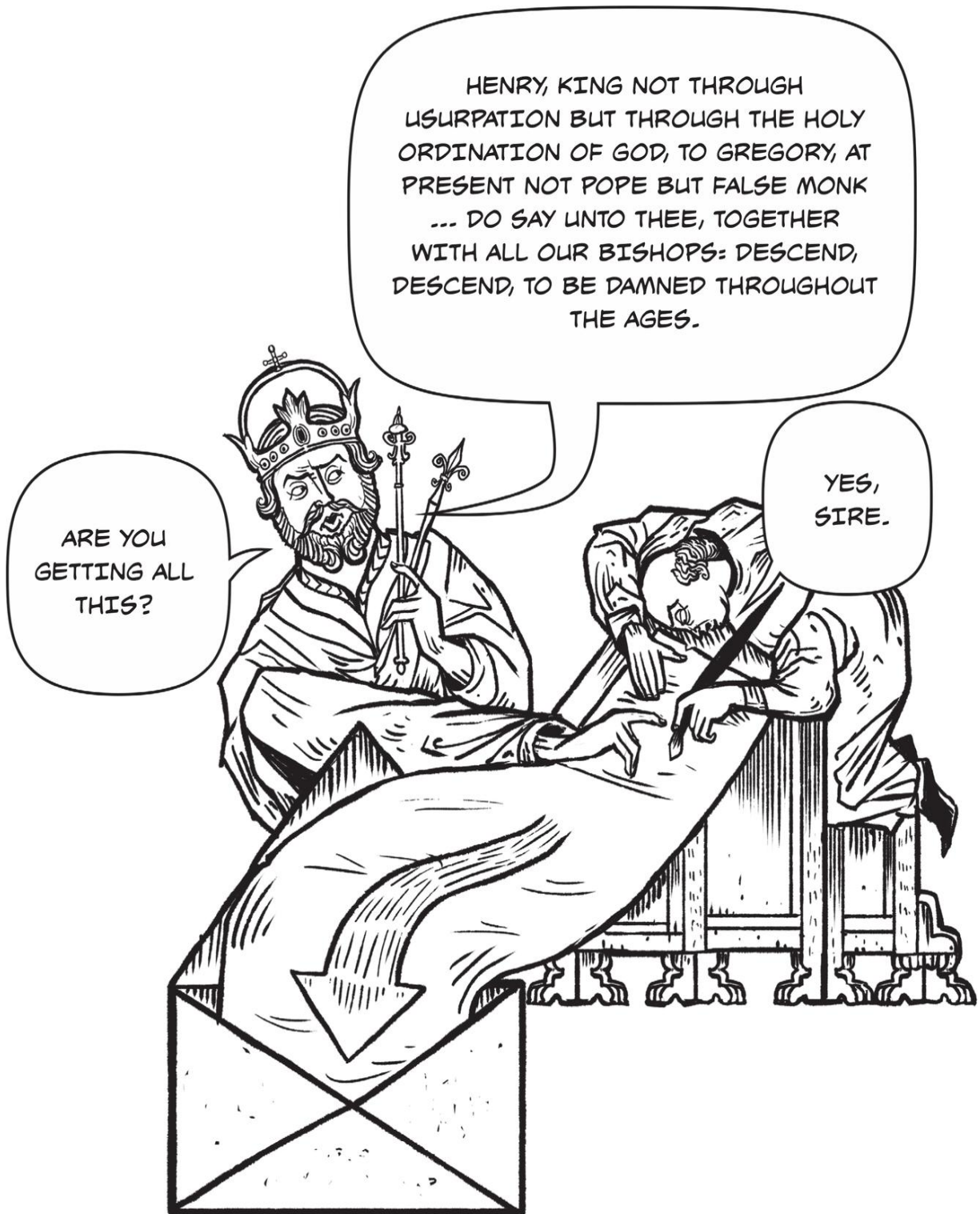
The *Dictatus* had unforeseen consequences. In Byzantium the Eastern Church was overseen by the Pentarchy: the bishops of Rome,

Constantinople, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch, who all had an equal and important say in Church matters.

The Byzantines were incensed, and the Churches split in what is called the Great Schism or **East–West Schism**. From this point on, although there were multiple attempts at reconciliation, the Latin, or **Roman Catholic**, Church, and the Greek Church, which we now refer to as the **Eastern Orthodox** Church, pursued their own religious ends.

While the other religious leaders left the West to it, there were immediate consequences for the secular people theoretically under the power of the Pope who now had no one else to appeal to.

This became a problem for the young **Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV** (1050–1106). His issues came from *Dictatus* articles 8 (“[the Pope] alone may use the Imperial Insignia”) and 13 (“it may be permitted to him to depose emperors”). In other words, it was not just that the emperor no longer got to pick the pope, but now, the pope got to pick the emperor. He pushed back in his own letter, demanding that a new pope be elected.



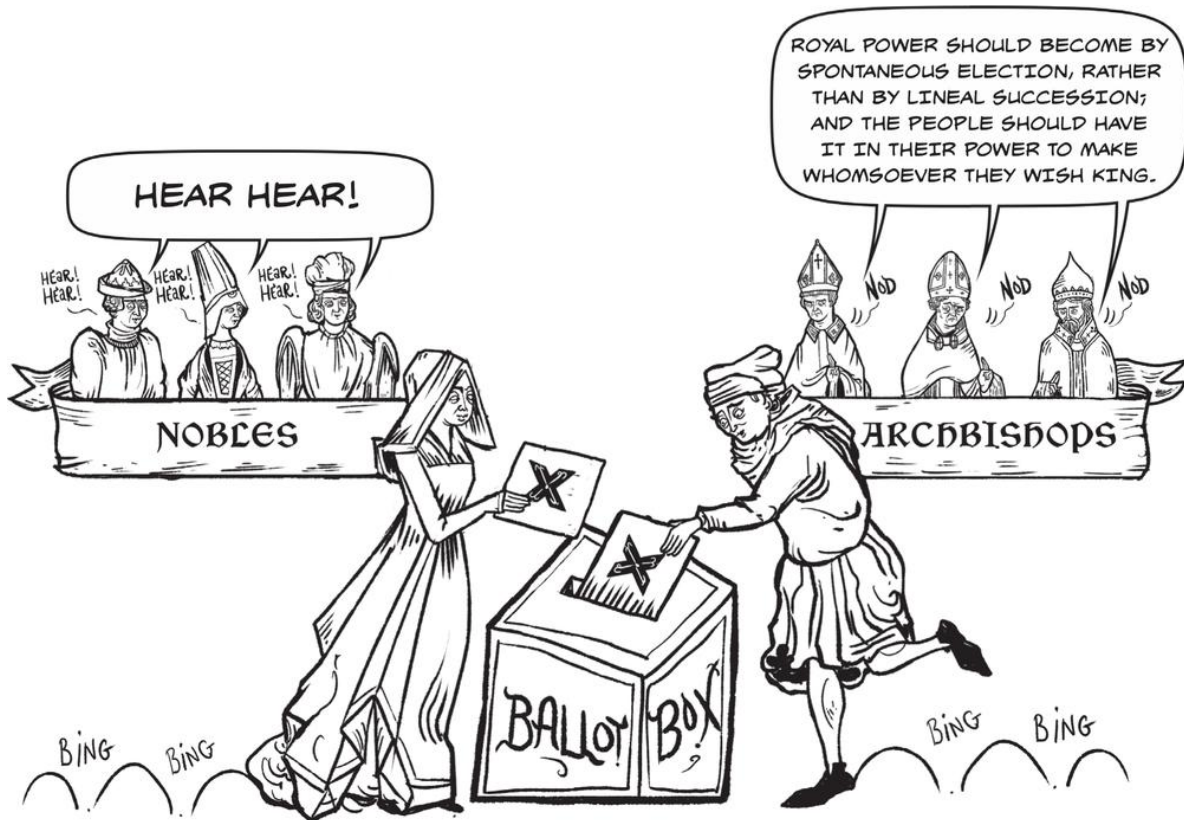
Gregory VII responded by excommunicating and deposing Henry as Holy Roman Emperor in 1076, releasing all Christians from their oath of allegiance to Henry. The most direct threat to Henry here was the release of

duties that came with the excommunication. This meant that the imperial dukes and princes could help themselves to Henry's lands because he no longer had authority. Seeing that he was losing both property and power, Henry backed down, and in January 1077 he traveled to Canossa in Italy to meet the Pope and do penance for daring to question the papacy's new powers. As proof of his piety, Henry wore a rough hair shirt and was forced by the Pope to wait in the snow for three days and three nights at the entrance to the city. This is called the **Walk to Canossa**.



Gregory was proving a point. If you can force the Holy Roman Emperor to stand in the snow for days on end, clearly you *do* actually control that office. If rulers are so frightened of excommunication that they will allow themselves to be publicly shamed, then obviously excommunication means

something. Henry did manage to get back in communion with the Catholic Church for a while, but he never regained his former authority. In fact, the lords of the empire said he had embarrassed the crown so badly it could no longer be passed down hereditarily. Instead they insisted that:



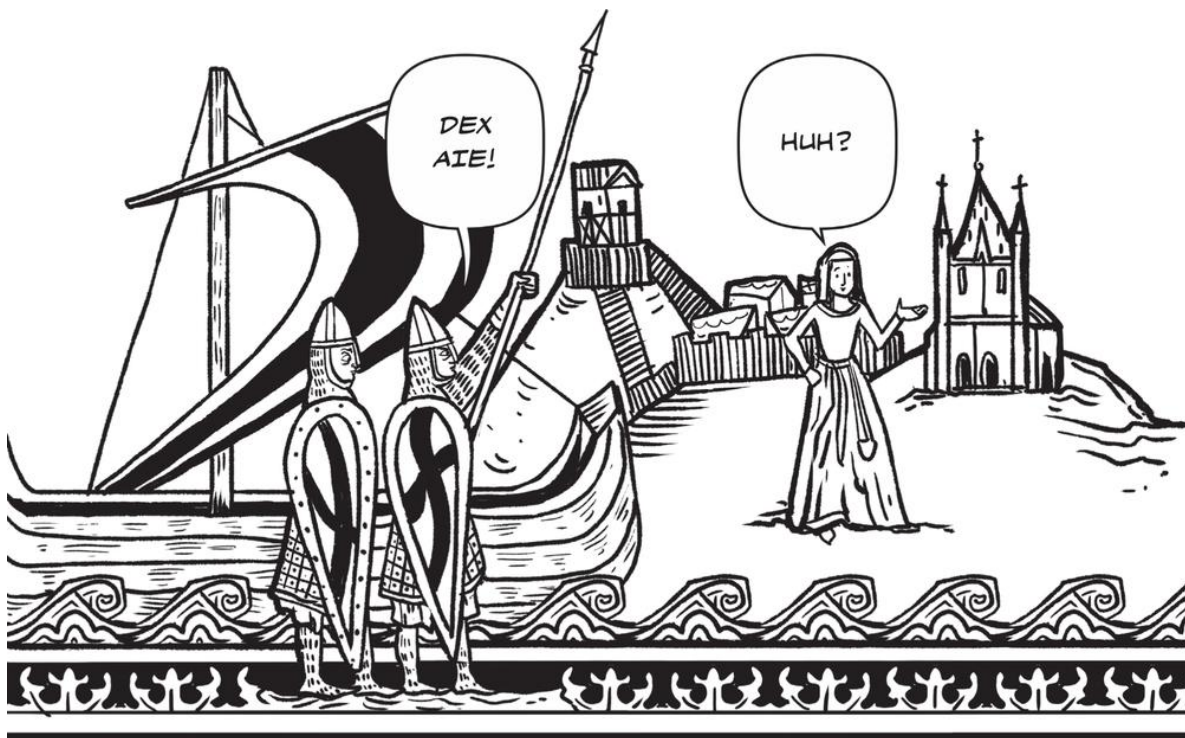
In other words, now the emperor was supposed to be *elected*, rather than simply born, and, once elected, the pope needed to sign off on it.

The Norman Conquest

While the imperial household and the papacy were at odds, a new force to contend with was emerging on the continent – the **Normans**. The Normans – as their name indicates – were originally from the kingdom of Normandy in what is now northern France. They were culturally distinct as a result of a mixing of local Gallo-Romanic and Frankish people with Vikings who had elected to stay in Normandy following years of raiding. They were formidable enough that the Duchy of Normandy was established as separate from France in 911 when the Viking leader **Rollo** (c.860–c.930) forced the Carolingian **Charles the Simple** (879–929) to cede him the

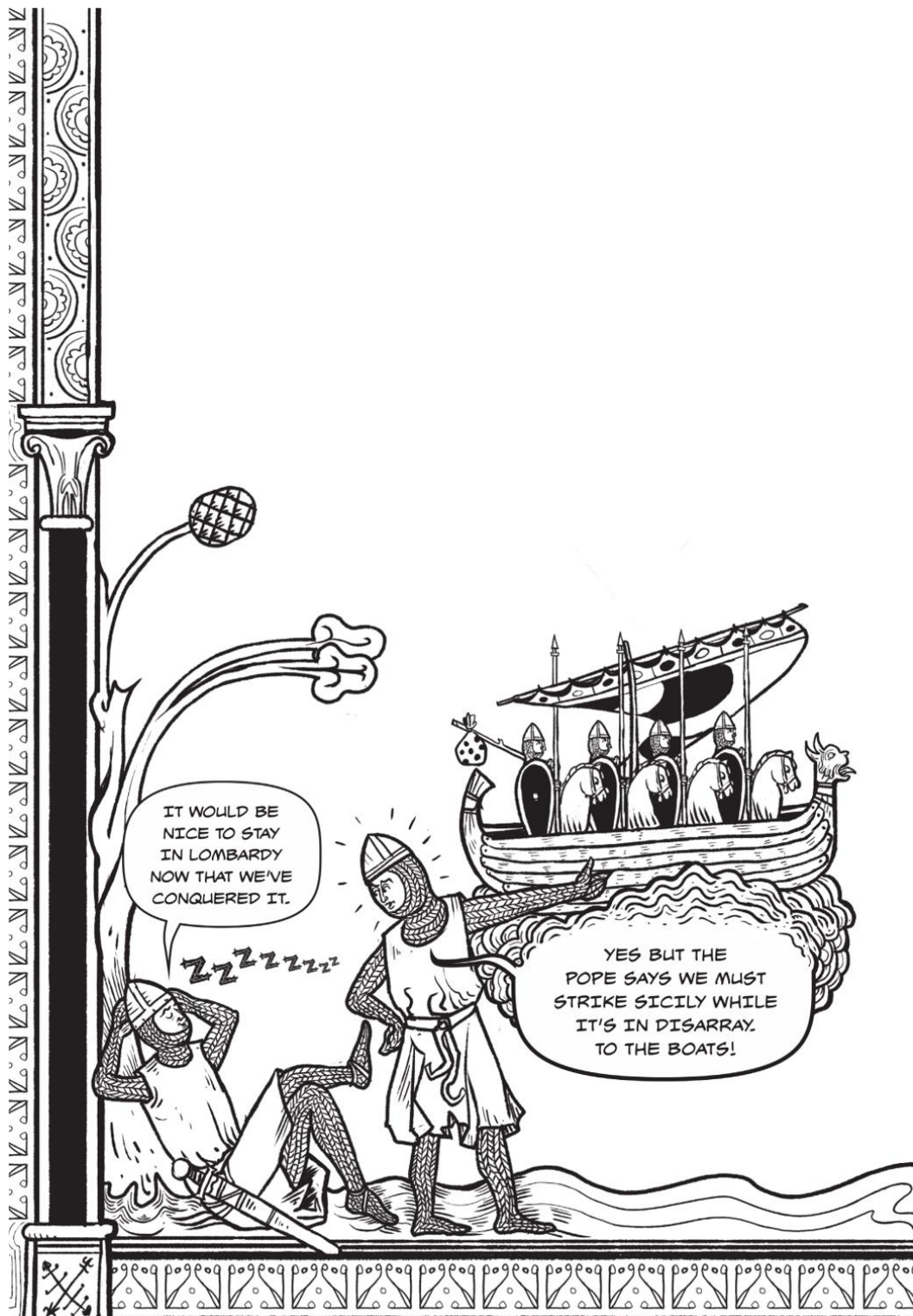
territory. The Duchy had been growing in power and prestige throughout the 10th century.

In their strategic base at Rouen the Normans spoke their own dialect of French, had a distinct form of Romanesque architecture, their own musical traditions, and – perhaps most importantly – like their Viking ancestors were famed for their military prowess. As a result they often worked as mercenary soldiers.



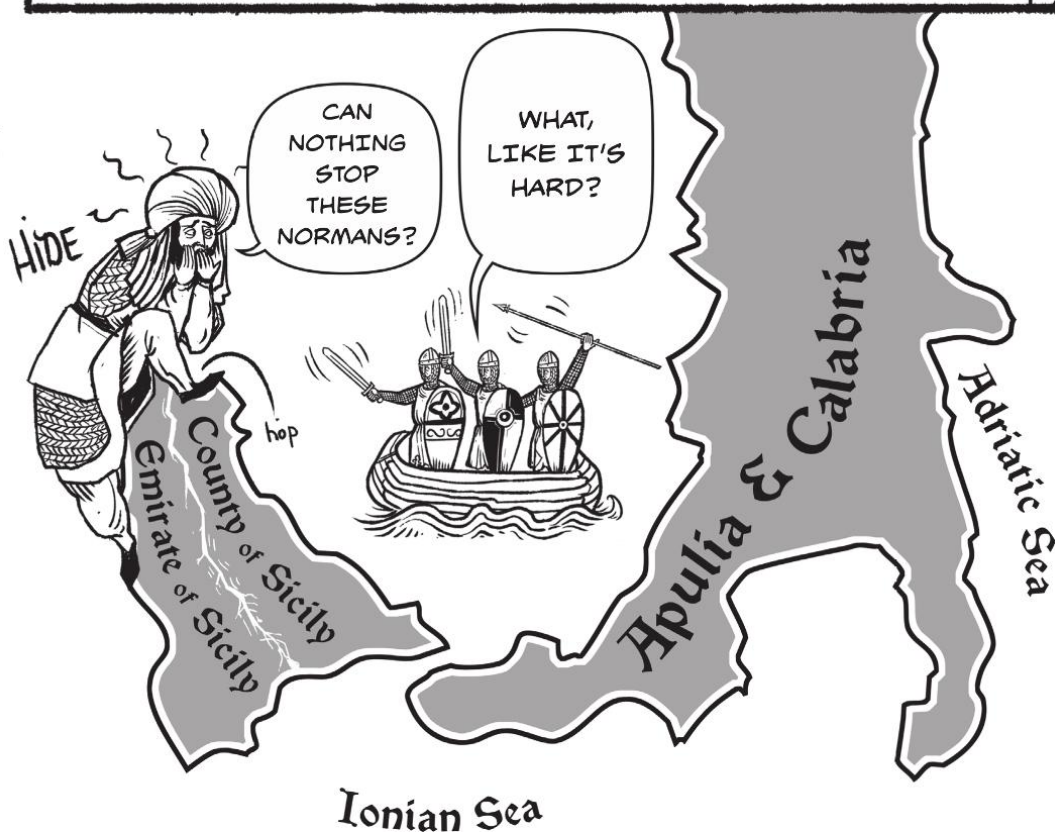
It was in their capacity as mercenaries that the Normans first arrived in what is now Southern Italy after a series of revolts broke out. The region had been destabilized by Lombard revolts against the Byzantine leaders. The Normans distinguished themselves enough in battle (and served the interests of the Lombards well enough) that soon two prominent Norman families – the **Hautevilles** and the **Drengots** – were given lands and styled as counts in Melfi and Aversa, respectively. From there, the Normans continued to expand into the hotly contested piece of land to their southern borders – the affluent and fractured Sicily. Years of contested rule had left Sicily vulnerable to attack. Wishing to bring the island back under Christian control, **Pope Nicholas II** (c.990/995–1061) encouraged one of

the Hautevilles, **Robert Guiscard** (c.1015–85), to take it back, and named him Duke of Sicily before he had even set foot there.



Because of its large population and competing loyalties, conquest of Sicily was by no means an easy thing, but the Normans would come to control over half of the island, pushing the Emirate into the southern and eastern portions. They now ruled as the Kings of Sicily.

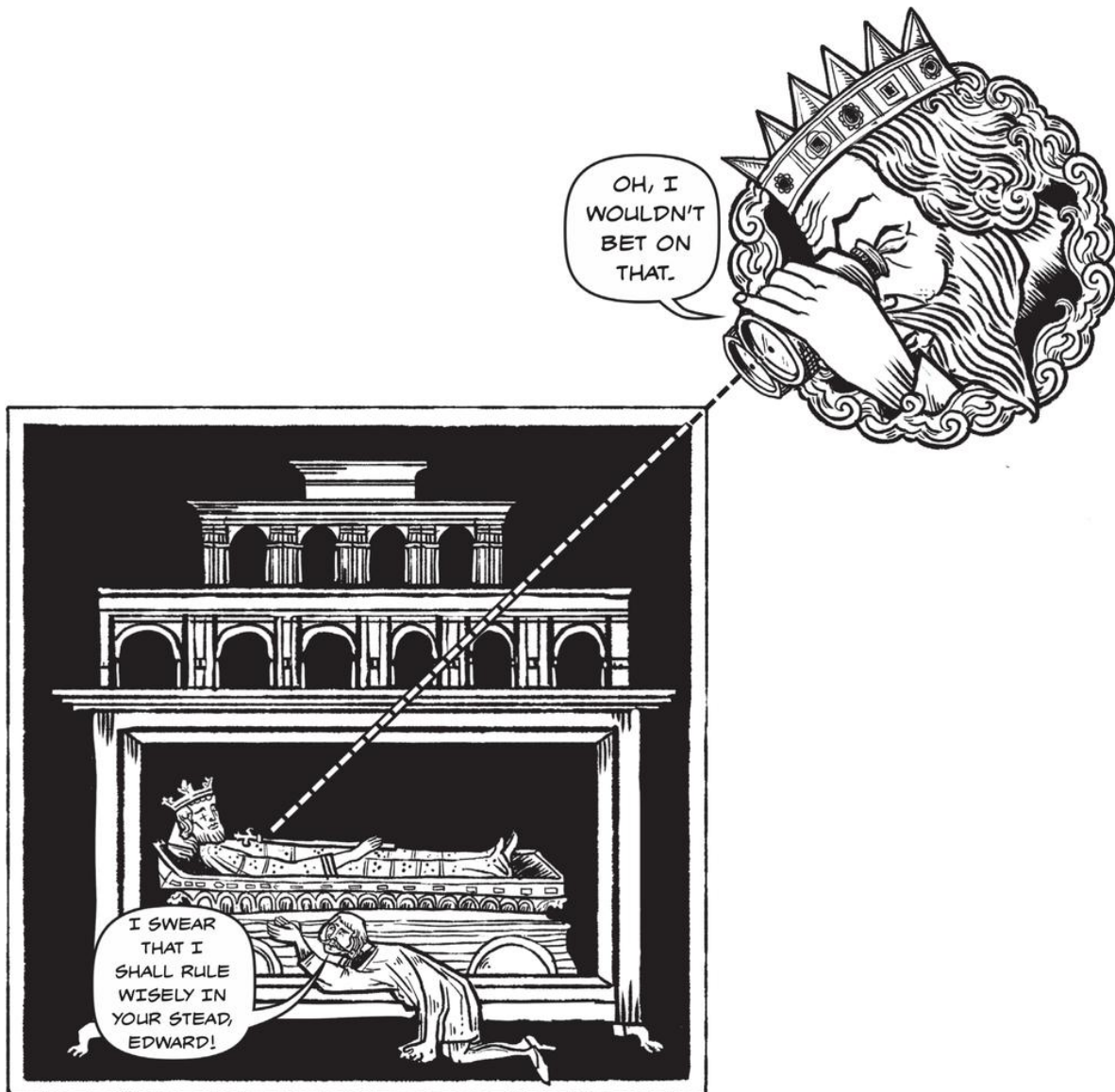
Meanwhile, the Normans were also facing down the Byzantine Empire on the Adriatic coast of Italy, and even across the sea into Croatia. They would take Apulia, Calabria, and Spoleto, and would even make some progress into the Greek islands, proving they could hold their own against a provisioned formal army.



The Normans had secured themselves a reputation as fearsome fighters by the time those who had been left at home cast their gazes northward and started the Norman invasion that everyone has heard of – the conquest of

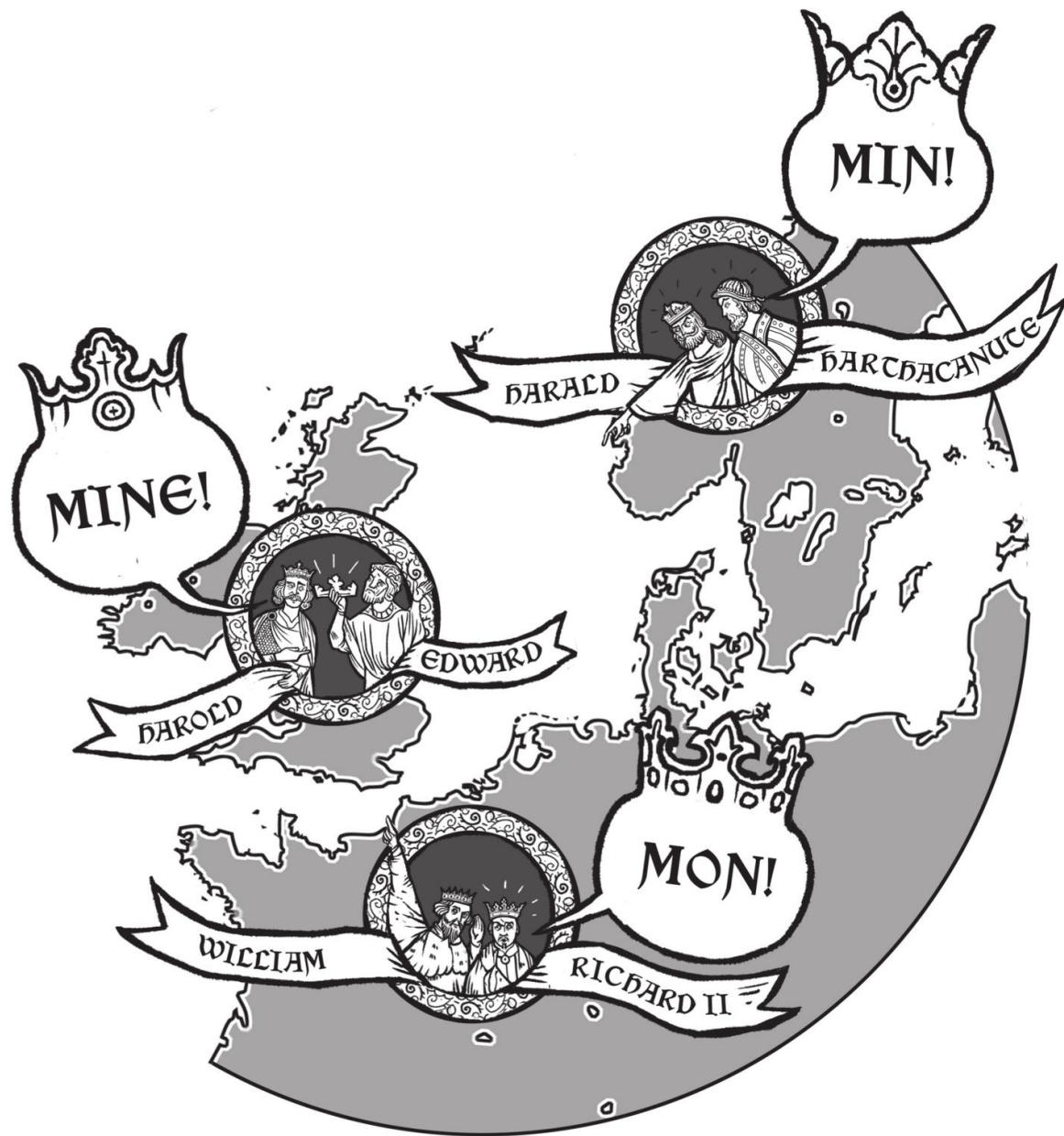
England – in 1066. If Normans could take hold of hotly contested, densely populated, economically rich areas half a continent away, why not the politically fractured backwater across the Channel?

What we now call England was very much ripe for invasion – it had been experiencing invasions for centuries from the Vikings, the (by now resident) Germanic speakers from Jutland and Frisia and, most recently, the Danes in 1016. By 1066 **Edward the Confessor** (1042–66) had clawed the throne back but died without an heir, stipulating that **Harold Godwinson** (c.1022–66), the Earl of Wessex, succeed him. The opportunity provided by this strange chain of succession was not missed in Normandy. Enter **William** (soon to be “**the Conqueror**”, c.1028–87).



As soon as Harold was crowned, William claimed that the throne had been promised to *him* by Edward, being as William was the grandson of Edward's maternal uncle, Richard II (d.1026).

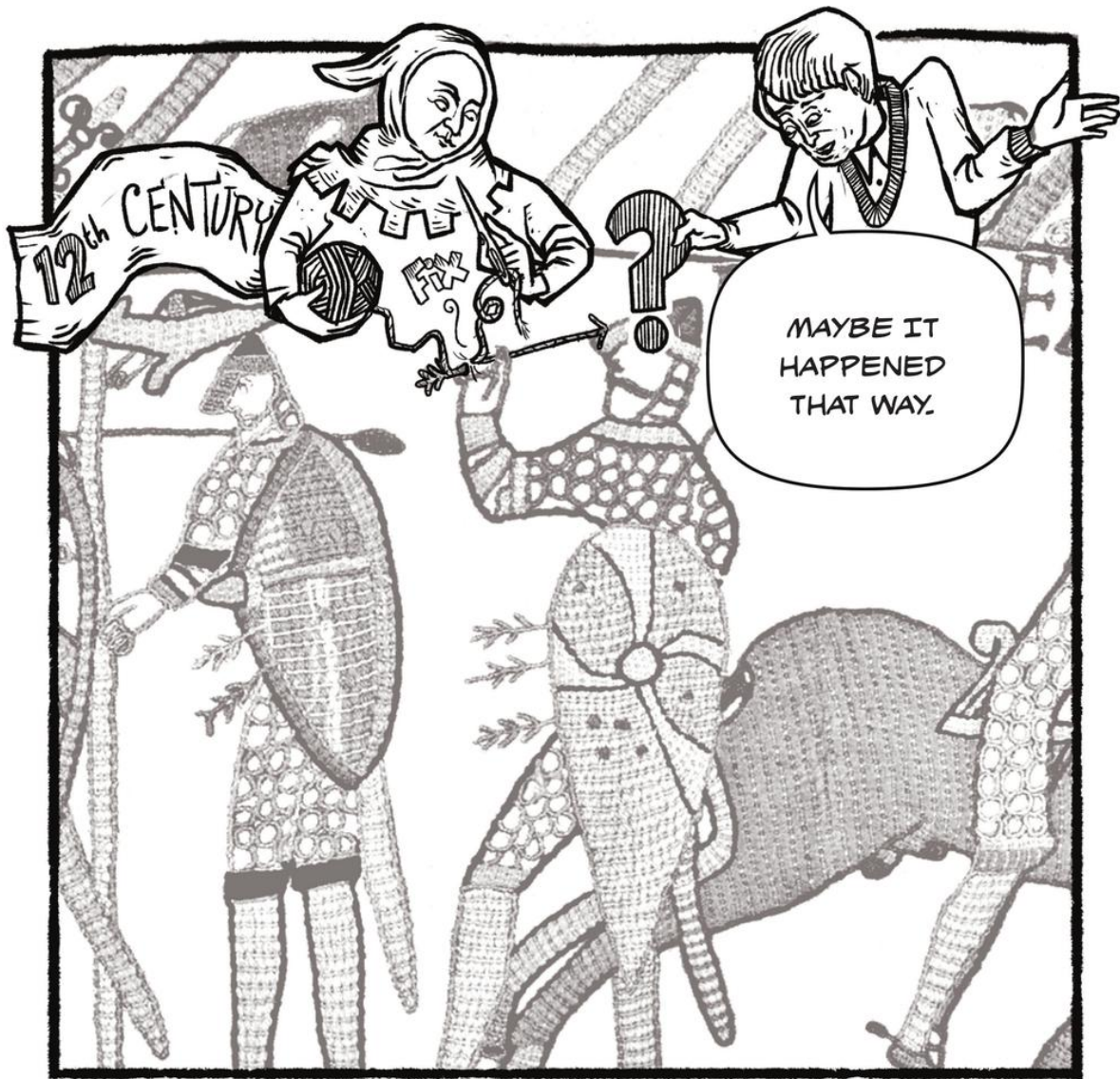
Meanwhile King Harald Hardrada III of Norway said that England was his, actually, through a complicated exchange involving Edward's half-brother and predecessor Harthacnute (c.1018–42). Neither was prepared to leave it. Both went and got armies.



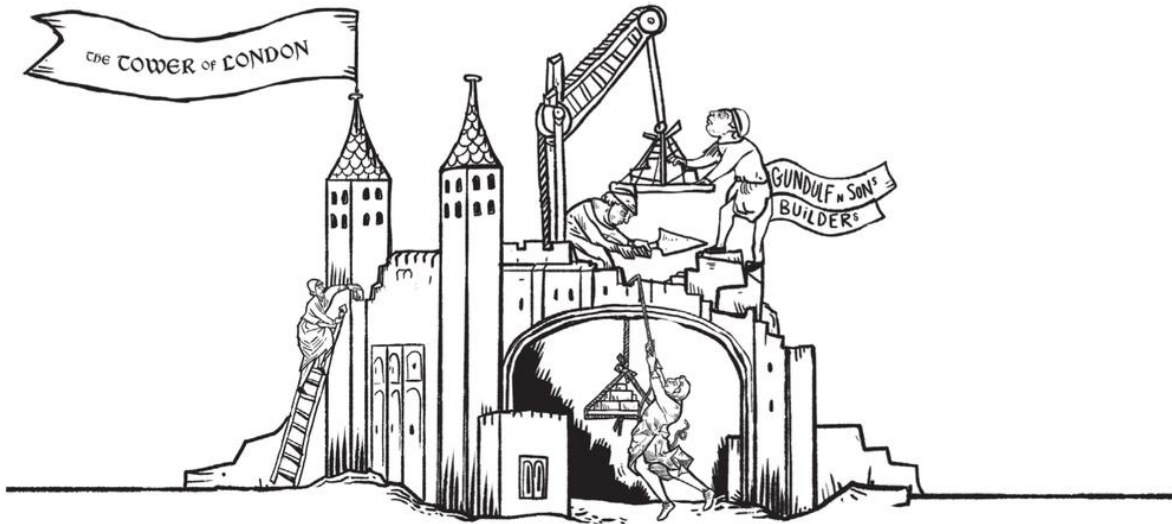
Harald Hardrada hit the traditional Norwegian invasion point of England, York, where he demolished the northern armies sent against him. The Norwegians proceeded to hang out in a small village called Stamford Bridge and lord it over everyone. Harold Godwinson marched north, killed Harald, and destroyed the Norwegians (who returned home), but with significant losses to his own forces.

Harold then had to turn around and march back to the south coast to face William and his army. It did not go well for him. On 14 October 1066 Harold's forces faced William outside of Hastings. While we are not

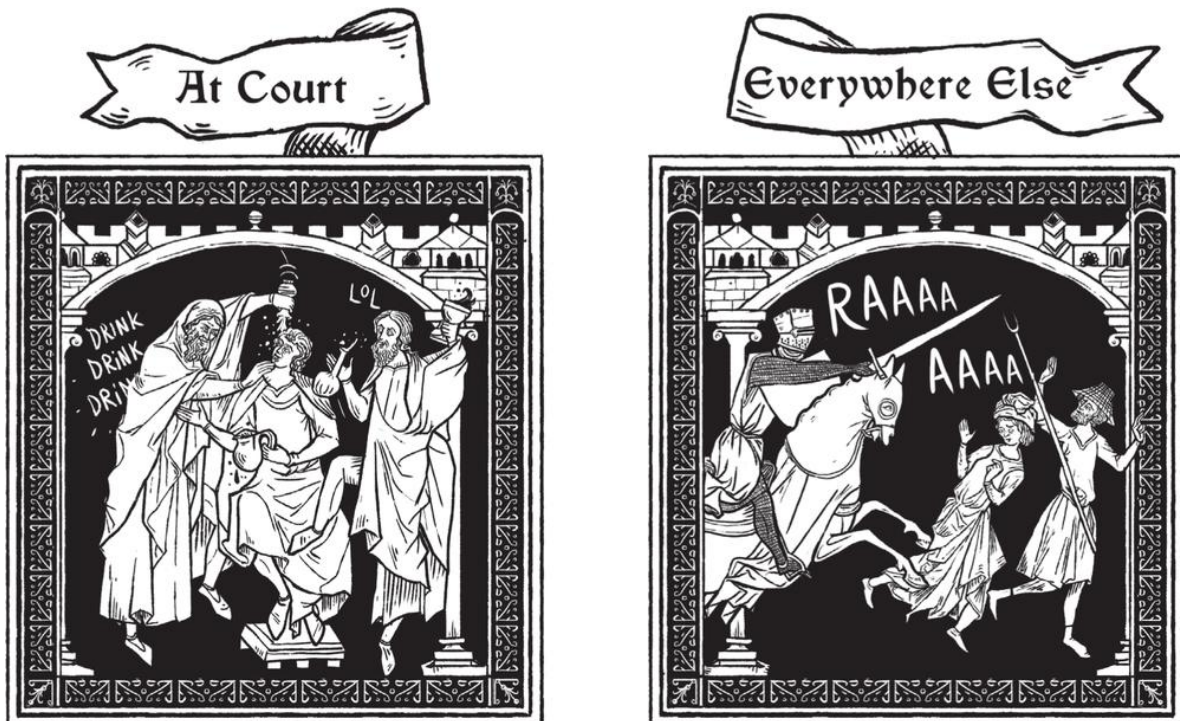
exactly sure what went down during the battle, when the dust settled, Harold was dead. Some claimed that he had been killed by William, others that the press of battle was so intense that no one knew exactly who had killed him. The **Bayeux Tapestry**, a monumental artwork about the invasion, shows Harold being killed by an arrow to the eye, although that may be a 12th-century addition.



What is certain is that Harold was dead, William had won, and there were rather a lot of triumphant Normans hanging around the joint.



William marched on London, and no one was able to mount an effective resistance. To keep it this way, he began construction of the Tower of London where he could station enough troops to oversee the commercial heart of England.



Five months after he had landed, William felt confident enough in his success to head back to Normandy and its luxurious court culture, leaving behind a few members of the local nobility who had sworn him fealty.

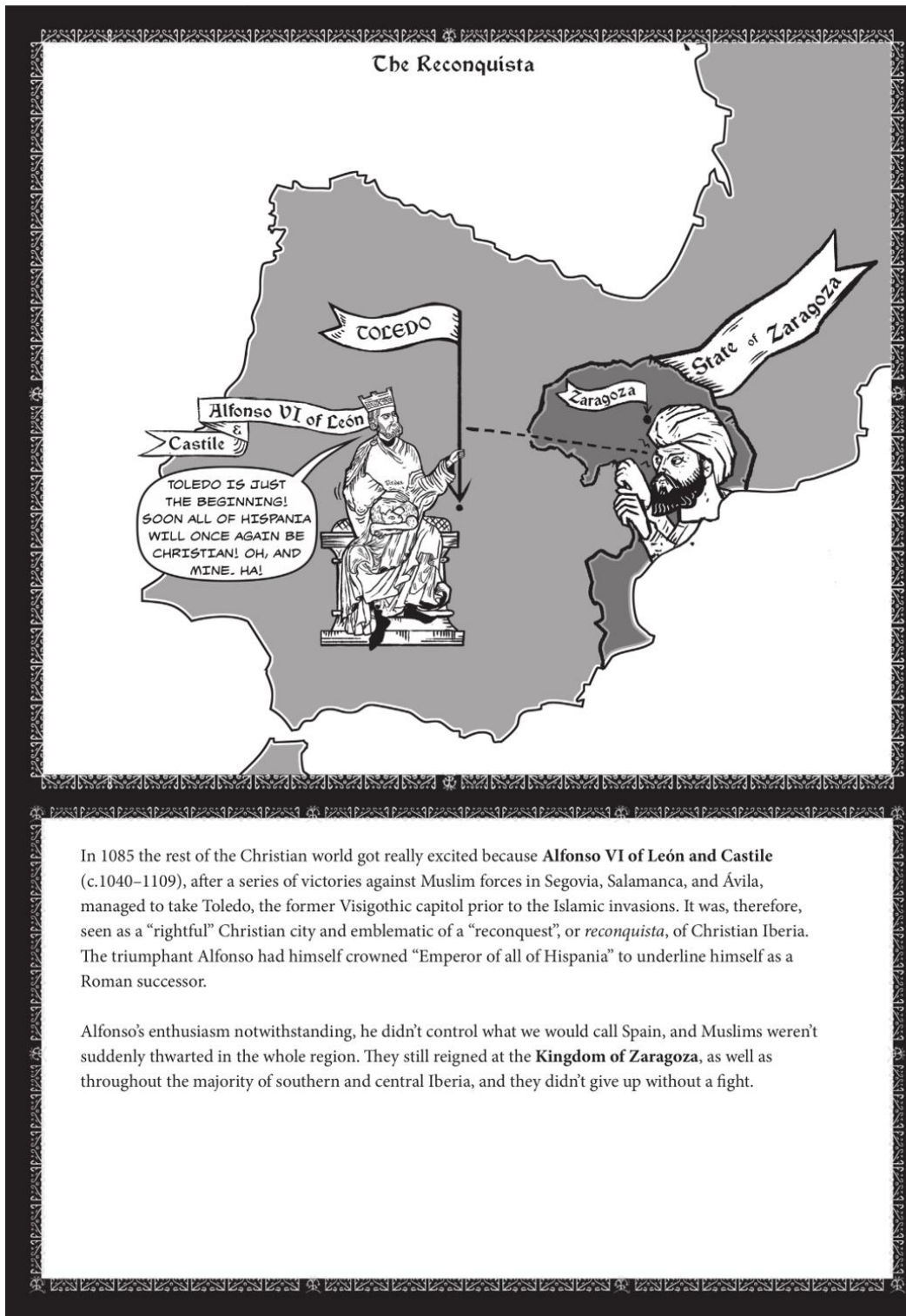
Despite resistance, the Normans slowly eliminated the power and status of almost all the former Germanic-speaking aristocracy. For the rest of the medieval period England would be controlled by a largely French-speaking aristocracy.

William and his successors spent their lives shuttling across the Channel, and most English kings would announce that they were not *just* King of England (*Rex Anglorum*) but also Duke of Normandy (*Dux Normanorum*). This tells us that rulers at the time were not “English” in the way we think of it now. They didn’t speak English, and many were buried in Normandy, or had their bodies split between England and the continent for burial.



The Normans weren’t the only conquerors able to identify and take advantage of shifting power balances, as the residents of the Iberian Peninsula were discovering. There, a power vacuum had emerged in the prosperous lands of the Caliphate of Córdoba as the Umayyad Dynasty failed. The Christian kingdoms to the North – Asturias, founded in the 8th century, and the Kingdoms of Navarre and León in the 10th – had remained a nuisance to the Caliphate by constantly attacking the region and trying to recoup land that they saw as rightfully Christian. The collapse of the Umayyad was a perfect chance to take even more.

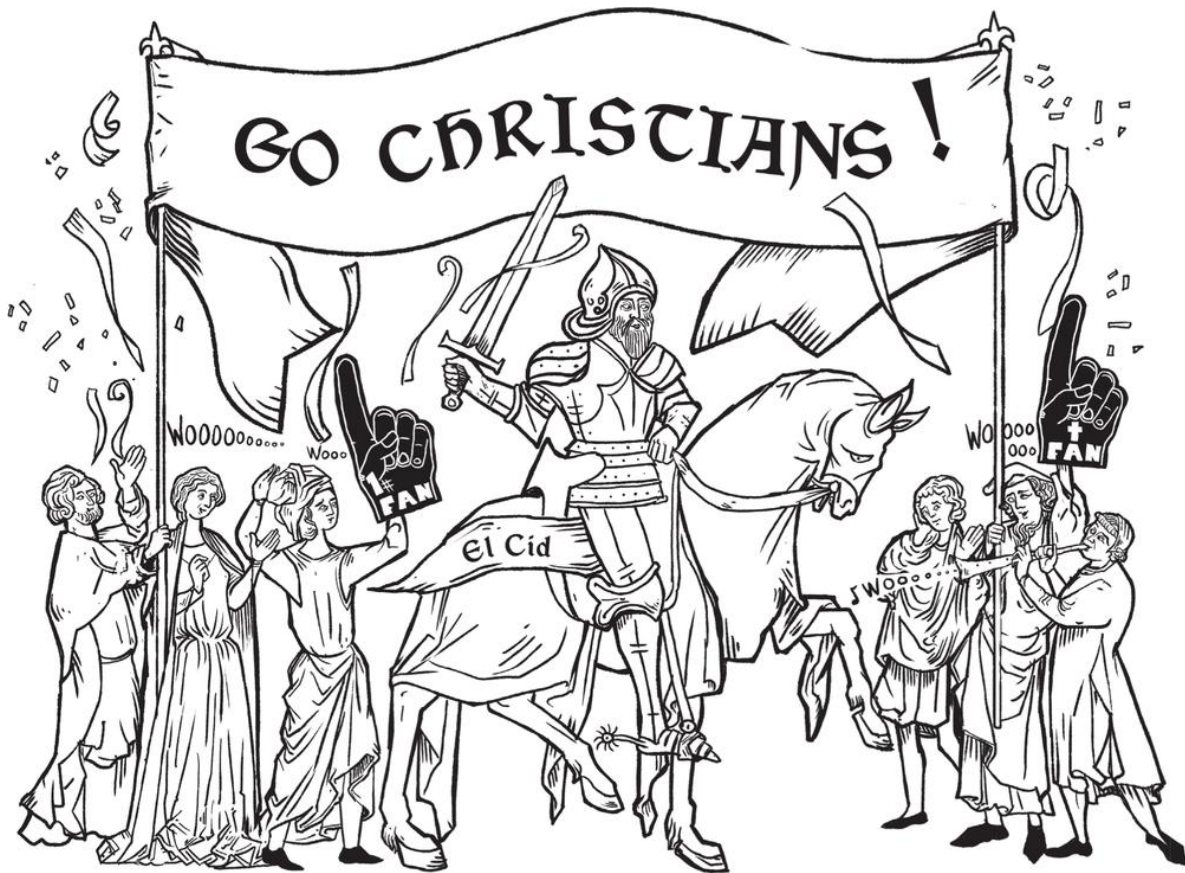




More Christians were ruling more land on the Iberian Peninsula than at any time since the Visigoths, and this trend would never reverse. What we now call the Reconquista lasted centuries and involved ongoing bloodshed, not

only between Christians and Muslims but between various Christian Iberian kingdoms as well.

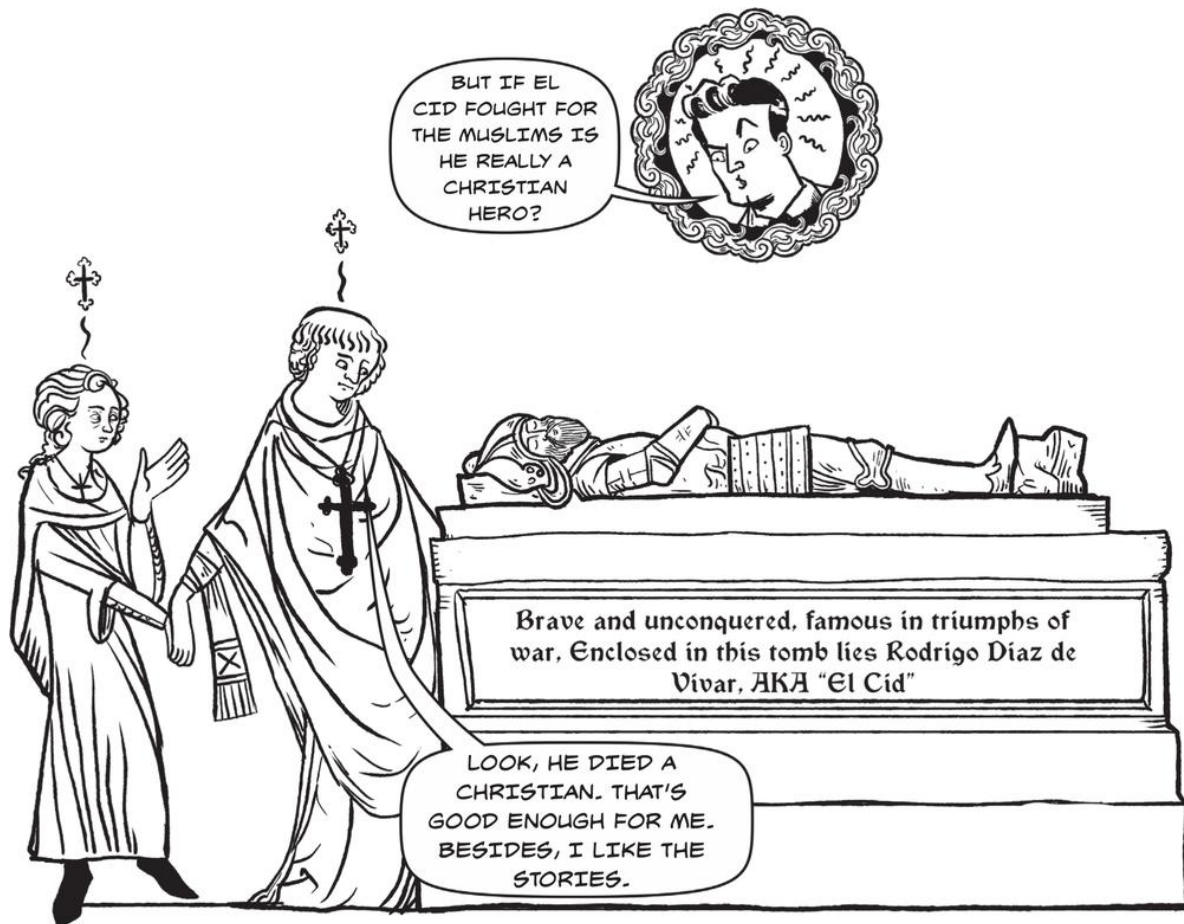
Things stayed volatile enough in the region that it was possible for individuals to sustain entire careers moving allegiances, like the most celebrated Iberian military leader of the time, **El Cid**, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (c.1043–99). Starting in the court of Castile, he had actually led armies against Alfonso, as well as against the Muslims of al-Andalus.



Eventually he fought for Alfonso when a group of Berber Almoravids crossed into Spain to attack Castile. El Cid answered the call, winning impressive victories outside of Valencia, and establishing himself as an enduring folk hero in the Spanish speaking lands.

After Alfonso had taken the crown of Emperor of all of Hispania and become the poster-boy of the Reconquista, El Cid began to fight for the Muslim court at Zaragoza against the court of Aragon. He eventually died during a siege on Valencia, and is now buried in the cathedral of Burgos.

El Cid is in many ways a perfect metaphor for the concept of the Reconquista in the 11th century. His life was testament to the fact that nothing was settled on the Iberian Peninsula. The boundaries between Muslim and Christian kingdoms were in constant flux, and a major gain one year could crumble away the next. Moreover, boundaries and alliances between Christian kingdoms themselves were also morphing. Rival brothers fought each other as often as they fought the theoretical “Muslim enemy”, and kingdoms changed names, boundaries, and priorities constantly.



The First Crusade

By the end of the 11th century, those who wanted to fight a Muslim but with the added incentive of foreign travel were in luck, because the first Crusade was about to kick off.

This came about after **Pope Urban II** (c.1035–99) received a Byzantine ambassador sent by Emperor Alexios I Komenos (c.1048–1118) in 1095. Emperor Alexios requested Christian aid as the Byzantine Empire was experiencing major land loss in Anatolia to the newly insurgent Seljuk Turks. Urban decided to present the matter at the **Council of Clermont**, a sort of mixed meeting of various members of the clergy and lay people, which agreed to act.



Whether or not the catchphrase, “God wills it!”, came from the speech or afterwards, it became hugely popular and came to be associated not with the call to liberate the occupied, formerly Byzantine cities of Antioch and Nicea, as Pope Urban had outlined, but the Holy Land in general and

Jerusalem more specifically. For the Pope, this represented a chance to help fellow Christians, but it was also an opportunity for the newly christened Universal Church to prove just how universal it could be.

Urban gathered an excited group of (mostly Francophone) nobles and knights who left for the East on 15 August 1096.



In the meantime, a group of commoners also caught Crusade fever after listening to the preaching of **Peter the Hermit** (c.1050–1115). They set off on what is known as the **People's Crusade**, which involved 40,000 followers from France, Lorraine, Flanders, and England meeting in Cologne on Easter Saturday 12 April 1096.



Anti-Semitic Violence

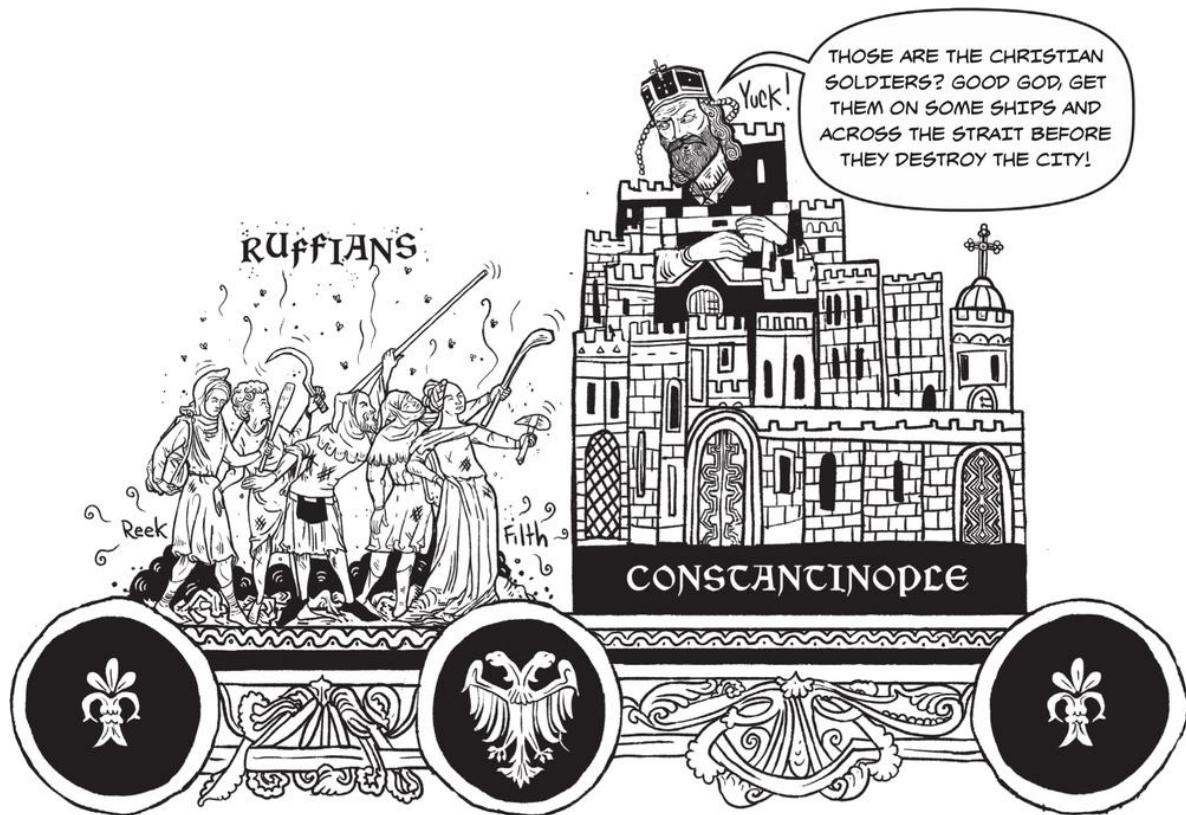
As far as the People's Crusaders were concerned, there was no need to hold off on shedding blood until they reached the Holy Land when there were perfectly good non-Christian communities to slaughter in Europe. They began attacking Jewish people in Lorraine, and continued in Cologne. As the group moved to Mainz, the Jewish community sought protection from the Bishop. The crusaders attacked them anyway, with the chronicler Albert of Aix (c.1100) recording that:



Breaking the bolts and doors, they killed the Jews, about 700 in number, who in vain resisted the force and attack of so many thousands. They killed the women, also, and with their swords pierced tender children of whatever age and sex.

By the time Peter the Hermit's army reached Constantinople, they were out of supplies and largely out of his control, attacking anyone outside of the

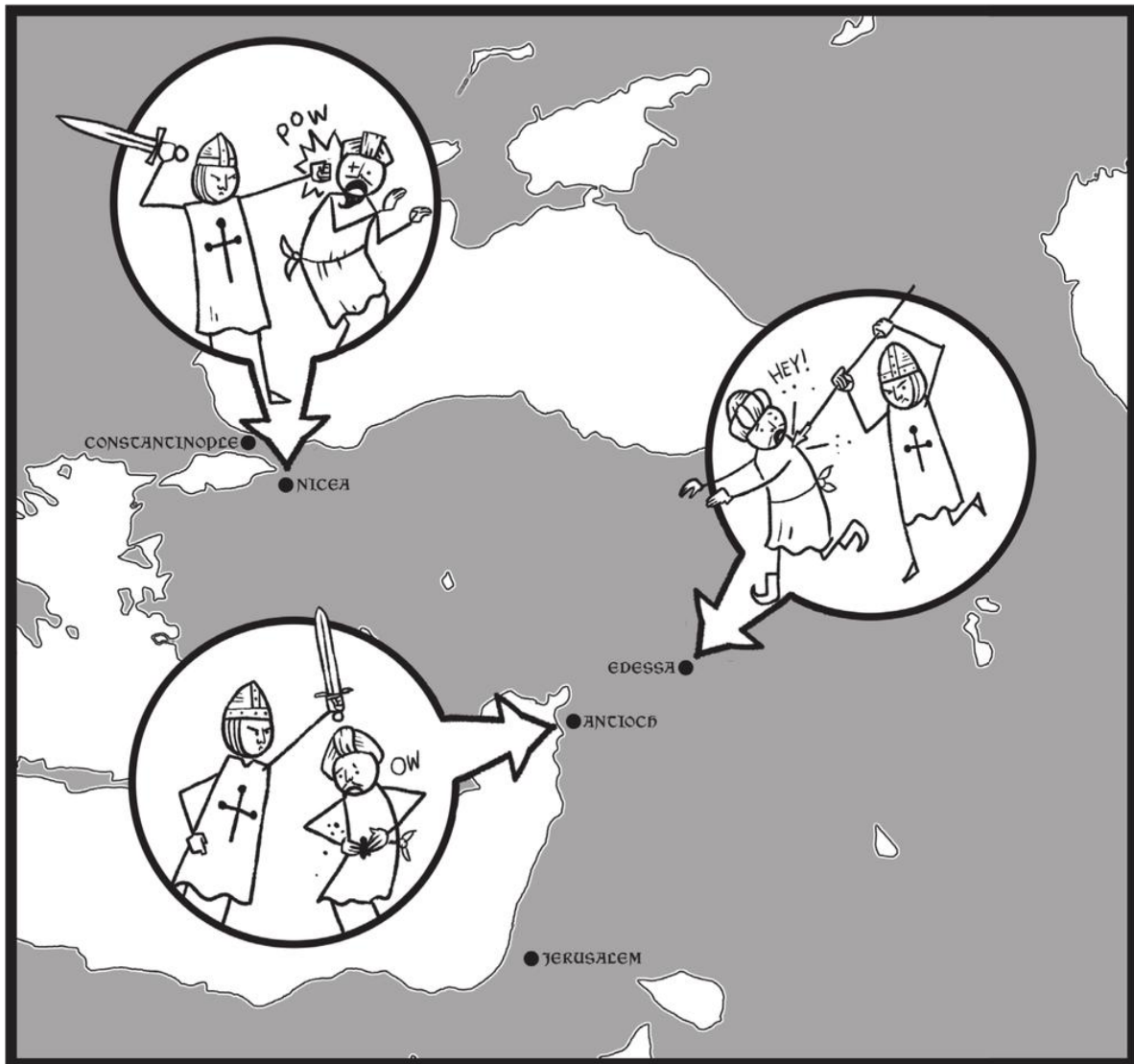
imperial city who had food. Emperor Alexios, horrified by the undisciplined group that had responded to his call, arranged for boats to carry this army across the Bosphorus and into Seljuk territory. There, the starving, completely undisciplined troops were massacred.



The People's Crusade was a disaster. It accomplished nothing other than establishing a weariness about crusaders among Jewish, Central European, and Byzantine communities alike. However, more crusaders were on their way: somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 disciplined forces under the command of knights from across the French and German lands. Whereas the crusaders had been expecting Alexios to lead them, he instead asked them to swear fealty to him and promise that any land taken from the Seljuk Turks would return to Byzantine rule.

By 1097, Alexios had shunted the crusaders to Asia Minor on their way to Nicea, a former Byzantine possession, now the capitol of the Sultanate of Rum. The crusaders besieged it, won, handed control to Byzantium, and headed east.

At this point, the armies split, with some under Baldwin of Boulogne (1060–1118) heading towards Armenia and the county of Edessa, which Baldwin was able to claim as his own in under a year.

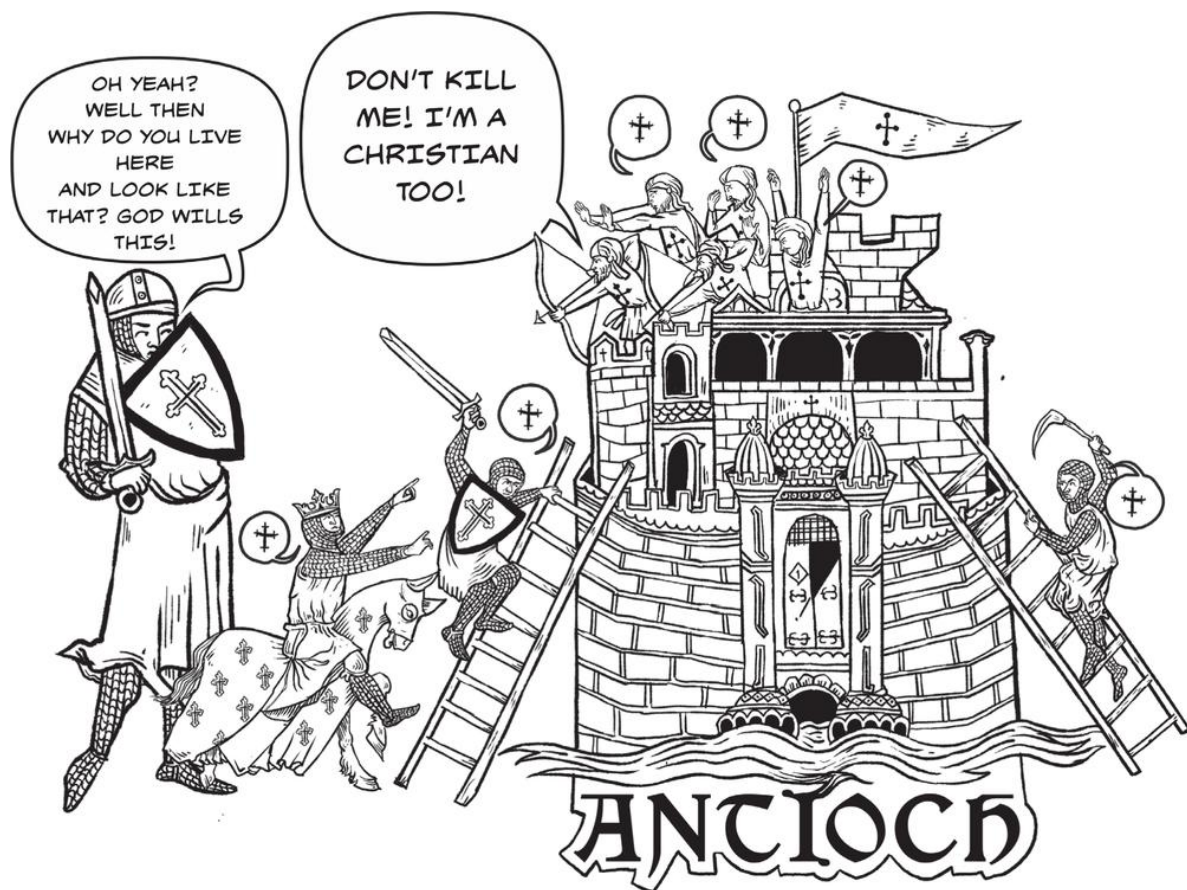


The rest of the army moved towards Antioch, arriving in 1097. After a protracted siege, in June 1098 the crusaders managed to bribe an Armenian guard to allow a small group of them into the town he oversaw. These crusaders then opened the gate, and the troops flooded into the city and proceeded to massacre it. Scholars estimate that thousands of Christians and Muslims alike were killed, since the foreign crusaders couldn't tell them apart.

The Siege of Antioch

The siege of Antioch and its aftermath are an encapsulation of the Crusades. These knights, in theory, were supposed to be ready to fight a war for God and better prepared than their common counterparts who had massacred the Jews back home. However, they were just as violent and ignorant. They interfered in a culture which was very mixed, with believers of all types, and simply killed everyone because they had no idea what was going on in the Eastern Mediterranean. Also like their People's Crusade counterparts, the crusaders were starving, short of horses, and now suffering from an outbreak of plague.

Nevertheless, on they marched towards Jerusalem, sure that God loved their indiscriminate killing and would provide.



The Siege of Jerusalem

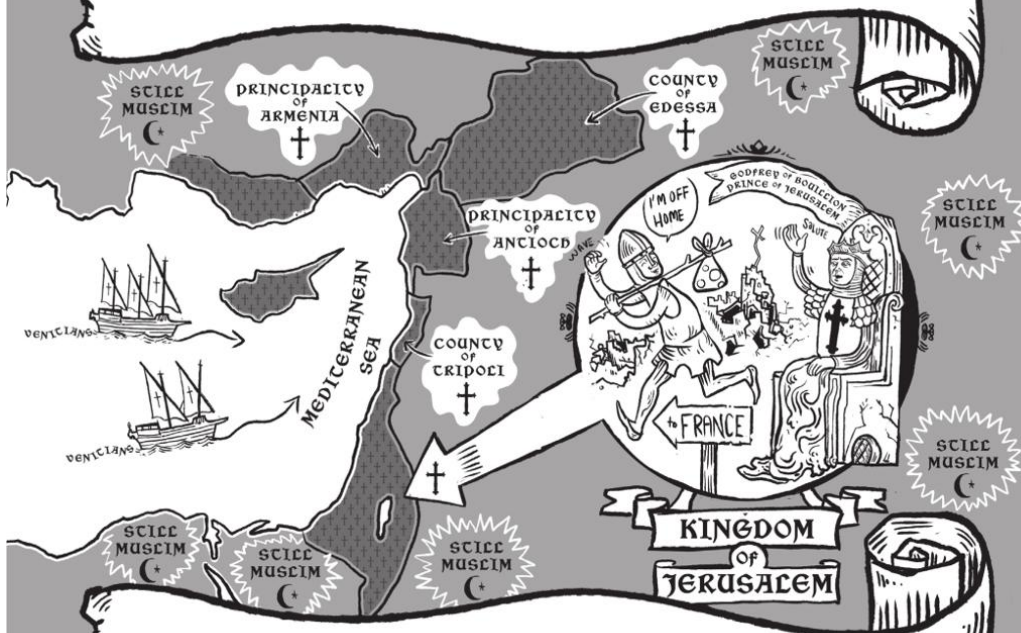
Jerusalem had just changed hands from Seljuk to Fatimid rule. The Fatimid Caliphate's major power center was in Egypt, meaning they couldn't immediately respond to attack. This favored the crusaders, who were aided by the arrival of ships from Genoa carrying engineers. They stripped their own ships for wood and constructed siege engines to breach Jerusalem's northern wall, open the gates, and begin a new slaughter.

Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. In the Temple and porch of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins.



The Crusader States After Conquest

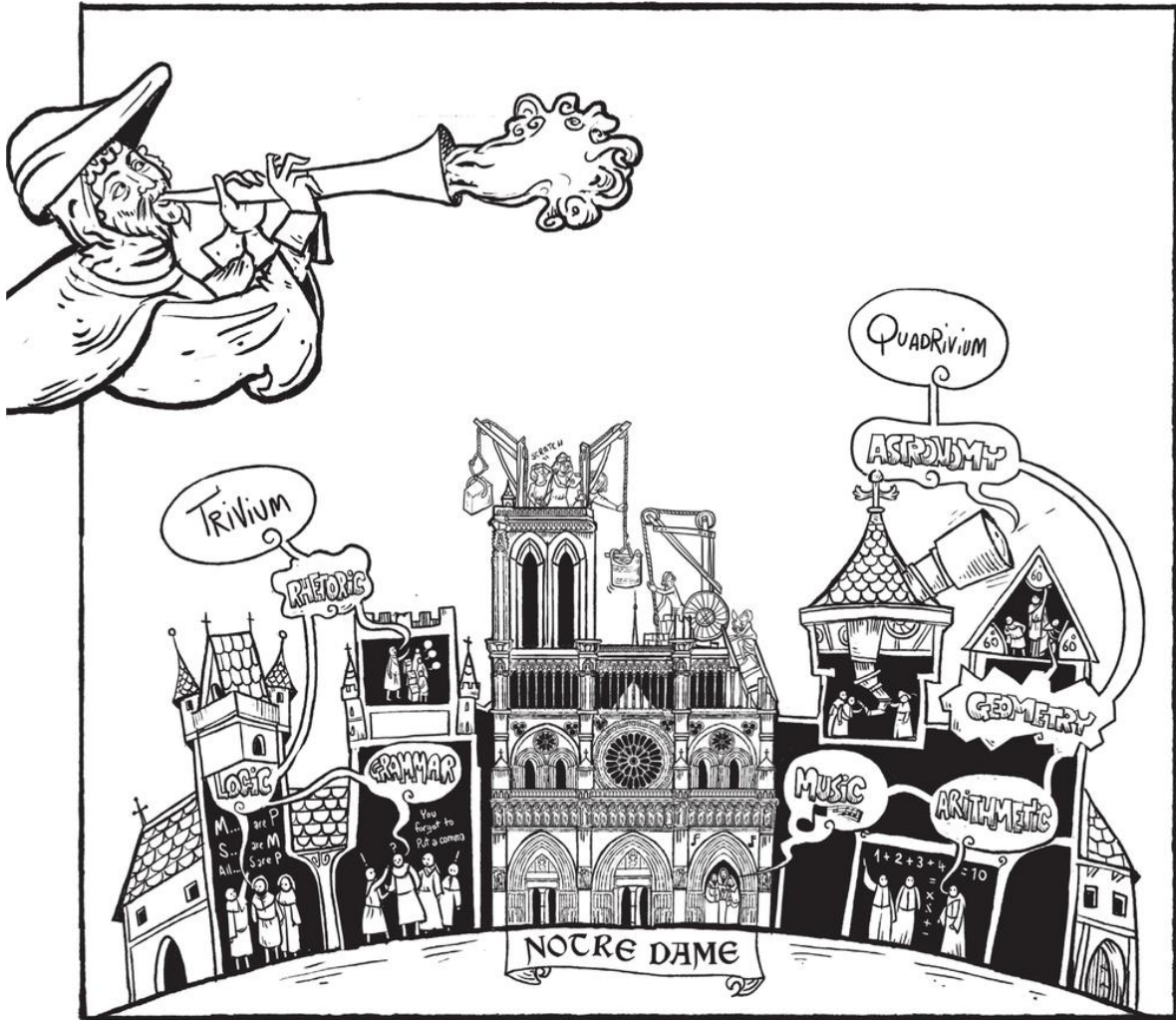
After this violent massacre, the Western Christians elected Godfrey of Bouillon (1060–1100) as the **Prince of Jerusalem**. Before dying in 1100, Godfrey had expanded into the neighboring territories, and by the early part of the 12th century the crusaders had taken hold of a great part of the Holy Land. Some went home, feted as heroes, but others, despite the protestations of Emperor Alexios, stayed put. We now collectively refer to these areas as the **Crusader States**, or sometimes the **Levant**, or the *Outremer*, meaning “overseas” in French, which gives you a good idea of who held power.



In the ports at Acre, Tyre, and Jaffa, the lingering crusaders were joined by people from the Italianate maritime republics, huge communities of Venetians, Genoese, Pisans, and Ragusans; people from the Iberian Peninsula; and Provençals. The Mediterranean settlers continued the hallmark of Mediterranean life – trade. They had ships, and knew how to get desirable and luxurious goods from the East (Oranges! Silk! Spices!) into Western European markets.

Part 5. The High Middle Ages

The Birth of Universities



Back across the sea, Christians were happy that God's will was done, that they might someday be able to visit the holiest city in Christendom, and that they now occasionally got to eat cinnamon. Also, the texts that were starting to flow in from the East alongside such luxury goods were particularly well received by a new group of people, scholars at universities. Born out of the schools at monasteries and cathedrals, the first university was founded in 1088 at Bologna, followed by the University of Paris, then Oxford. Students still studied the *trivium* and

quadrivium, but now there were degrees attached. The *trivium* got you a Bachelor of Arts, the *quadrivium* a Master of Arts, and those who wished to advance further undertook Theology and Philosophy in order to become Doctors (which we now call Doctors of Philosophy or PhDs).

The earliest universities didn't have physical campuses in the way that they do now. A university was defined not by space, but by the people who had banded together to share knowledge. These universities came into being in different ways. Bologna was created when the students banded together to hire teachers to instruct them. In Paris, teachers were paid by the Church and the students came to study under them. Oxford, meanwhile, was supported by the crown.

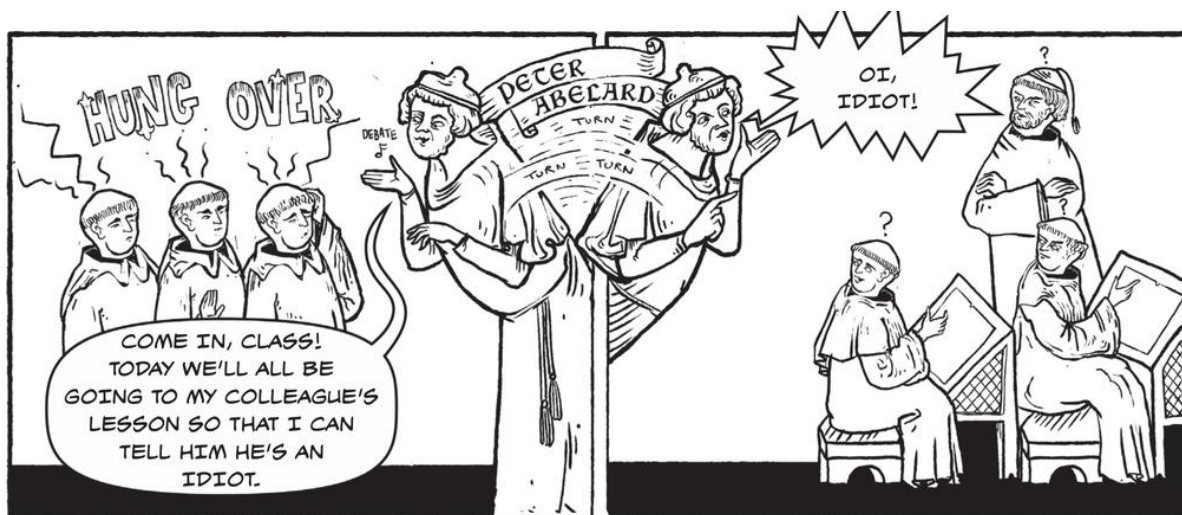
University students also differed from students today in that they were technically members of the clergy. This meant women were excluded from formal study as they couldn't take the necessary religious vows.



Being clergy was largely a legal status to keep students under the protection of the Church; they were tried in ecclesiastical courts rather than city ones. This was crucial because medieval students, just like those today, liked to get rowdy, and they could break city laws and get away with just a slap on the wrist.



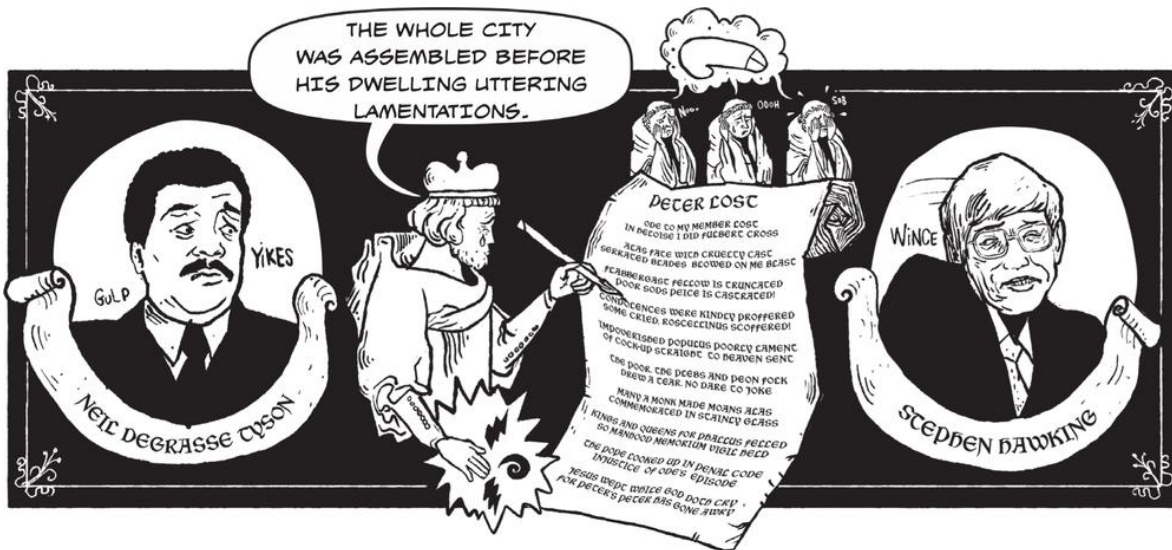
This was useful within universities too because things could get garrulous, as shown by the career of **Peter Abelard** (1079–1142). He excelled at the debate-led style of teaching and made a name for himself by literally walking into the schools of rival teachers and yelling about how they were wrong. People loved this and students began to flock to him and his school.



Because of his reputation, Abelard was engaged as a tutor to a brilliant young (rich) woman, Héloïse d'Argenteuil (c.1090/1101–1164), by her doting uncle. Abelard almost immediately began having sex with her.



Héloïse got pregnant, and her uncle got mad and castrated Abelard. According to him, all of Paris was extremely sad about his penis:



The entire story is interesting, not just because – even given Abelard’s exaggerations – it shows us how interested medieval people were in philosophy and theology. To all intents and purposes, medieval philosophers were treated how our society treats astrophysicists or cosmologists now. In terms of public reception, Abelard was the Neil deGrasse Tyson or Stephen Hawking of his day. Philosophers were revered and celebrated because they were actively explicating the divine and the world around them.

Universities bolstered a period of intensive philosophical inquiry, and attracted brilliant minds from across Christendom who demanded yet more texts from the East. Philosophers had access to more Aristotle and Plato than ever before, and also to a range of Greek and Islamic natural science texts. Classical works from the Greek physician Galen (d. c.210) circulated, but so did medieval works from Eastern scholars such as the Persian polymath **Avicenna** (930–1037) who wrote on astronomy, alchemy, geology, medicine, and theology, and composed poetry.

Rogierius (c.1140–c.1195), a scholar at Salerno, wrote the celebrated surgery manual *Chirurgiae Magistri Rogerii*. Meanwhile in Córdoba the philosopher, jurist, and physician **Averroes**, or Iban Rushd, (1126–98) wrote commentaries on Aristotle and Galen, and his own *al-Kulliyat fial-Tibb* became a standardized medical text. In the German lands, the formidable polymath **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098–1179), who was an

abbe, composer, mystic, philosopher, and the founder of natural and scientific history in Germany, was hard at work on an extensive corpus which would make her a saint.

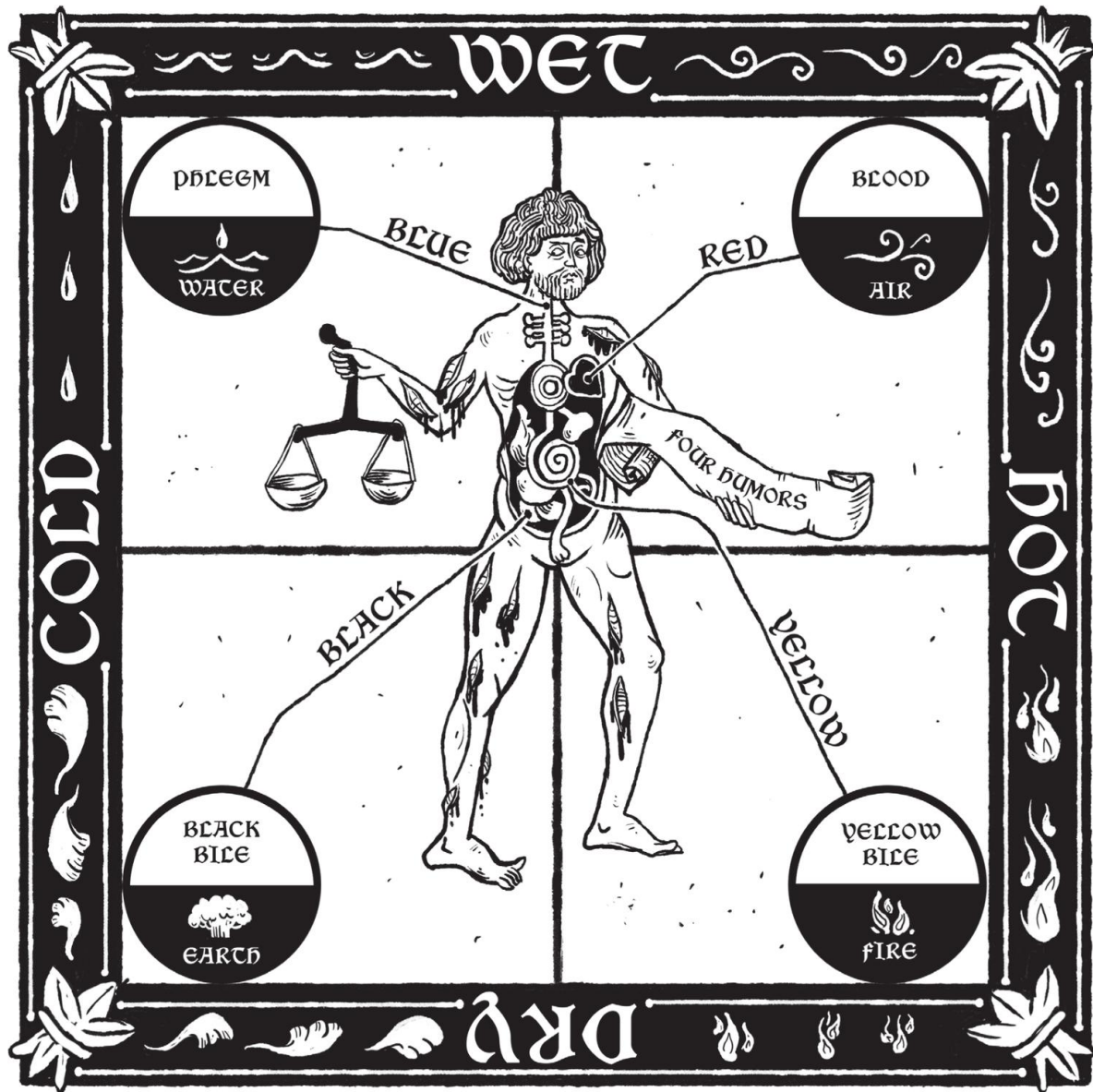


The Four Humors

If you find it strange that there were so many medieval physicians – given medieval people believed in superstitious nonsense like humors – you’ll be surprised to learn that medieval medicine was more advanced than classical medicine. And that the idea of humors is a classical

medical theory. It was Galen who initially came up with humoral theory, and it's actually a pretty complex system. To simplify, it argued that there were four humors at play in the body – blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile – which corresponded to the four elements and could be classified as various combinations of hot, dry, wet, and cold. Illness arose as a result of these humors becoming imbalanced. People's temperaments were based on their own balance of humors, and were therefore sanguine, choleric, melancholic, or phlegmatic. Humors were also tied to sex, with men being hot and dry, and women cold and wet.

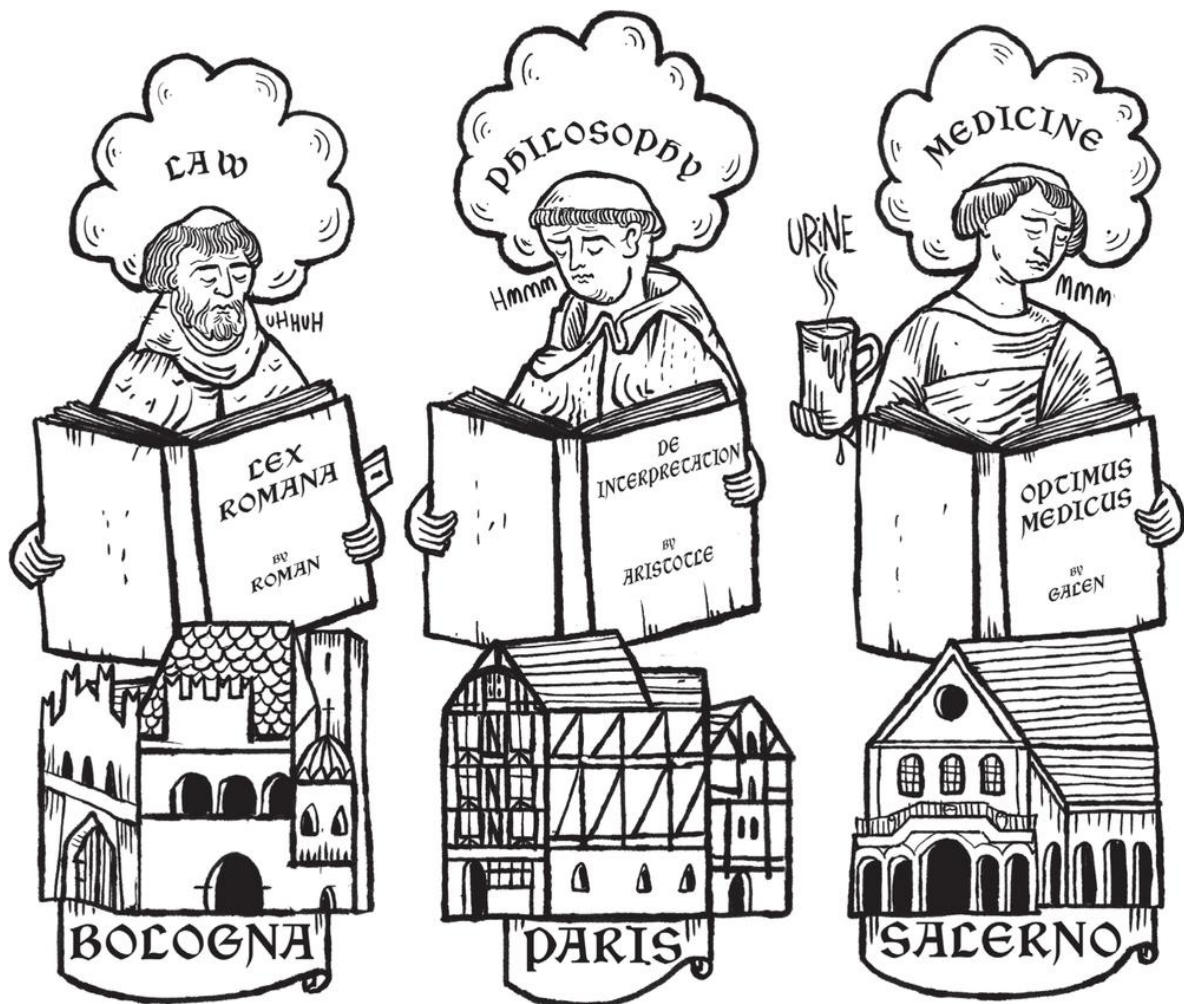
What this shows us is that medieval medical theory was all about drawing on classical authorities and expanding from there, as were almost all areas of thought! Classical knowledge wasn't lost during the Middle Ages; it formed the bedrock.



The 12th-Century Renaissance

Another area of classical study that was crucial in this period was law. Legal scholars at the University of Bologna were digging up Roman law in order to give a more specific form to their own legal codes. Just like early medieval people equated a connection to Rome with authority, the scholars of the 12th century felt that using classical precedents made law more logical and defensible.

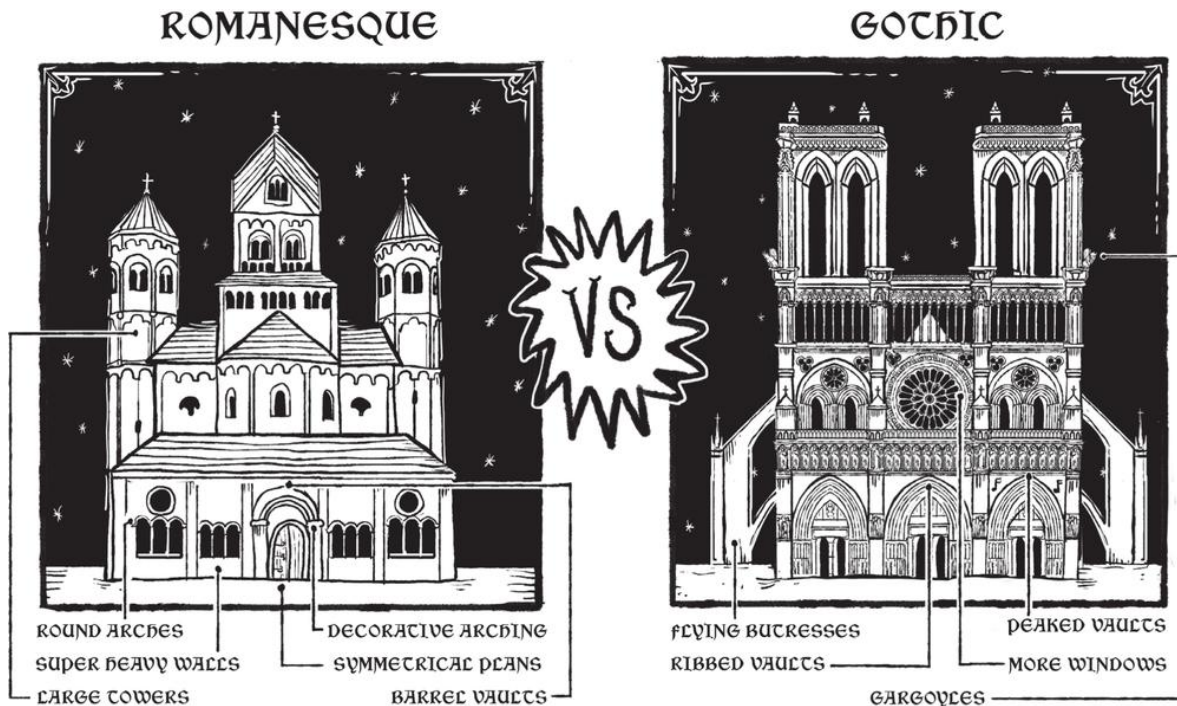
Bologna became the premier destination for legal studies, while Paris continued to attract those hoping for super-star status and dedicated to philosophy; and those interested in becoming physicians headed to Salerno. Historians refer to all of this intellectual progress, and the luminaries who dedicated their lives to it (Hildegard, Abelard, Rogerius, and Averroes), as the 12th-Century Renaissance – our third “renaissance” so far. We use this term because there were so many new texts coming into Western Europe in this period, and because scholars were expanding our understandings of so many subjects.



Gothic Architecture

An interesting way in which the 12th-Century Renaissance differed from both later and earlier ones is what happened when the new advancements

bled into the built environment. They created a massive shift in architecture and the emergence of a totally new architectural style, Gothic.



This was a conscious move away from what we call “Romanesque” architecture that dominated the early medieval period, which featured round arches, super heavy walls, barrel vaults in ceilings, large towers, decorative arching, and regular symmetrical plans.

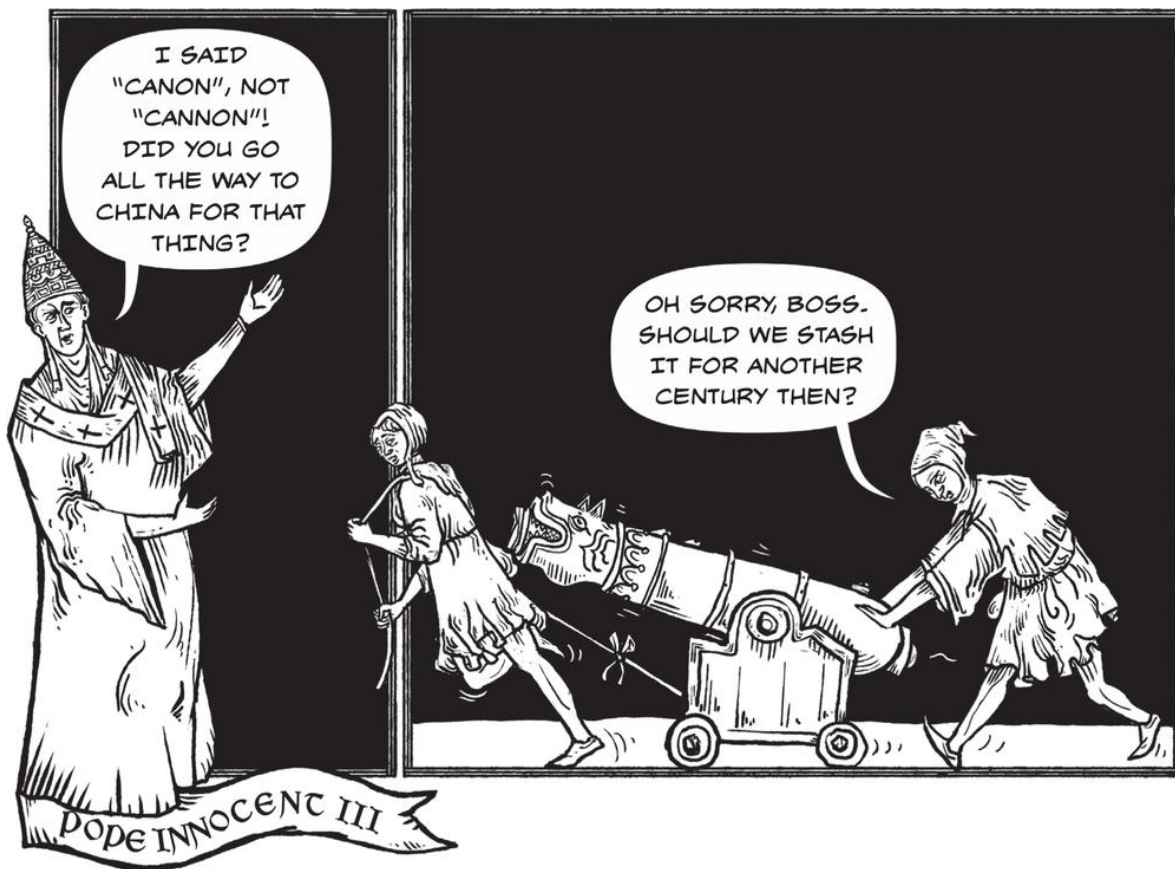
Gothic architecture, in comparison, taking cues from the Islamic architecture people saw during the Crusades, features peaked arches, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses, which allow more room for windows because the walls don’t have to hold the roof up any more. Also there are gargoyles.

The Church and the Law

The 12th-Century Renaissance created a by-product that heavily influenced the political and religious landscape: university graduates who were trained to argue. These men were literate, ready to defend their corner, and looking for work, and they helped to create one of the most

prominent features of the medieval period – the Church as a legal powerhouse. The upper echelons of the Church were suddenly populated with highly trained legal minds.

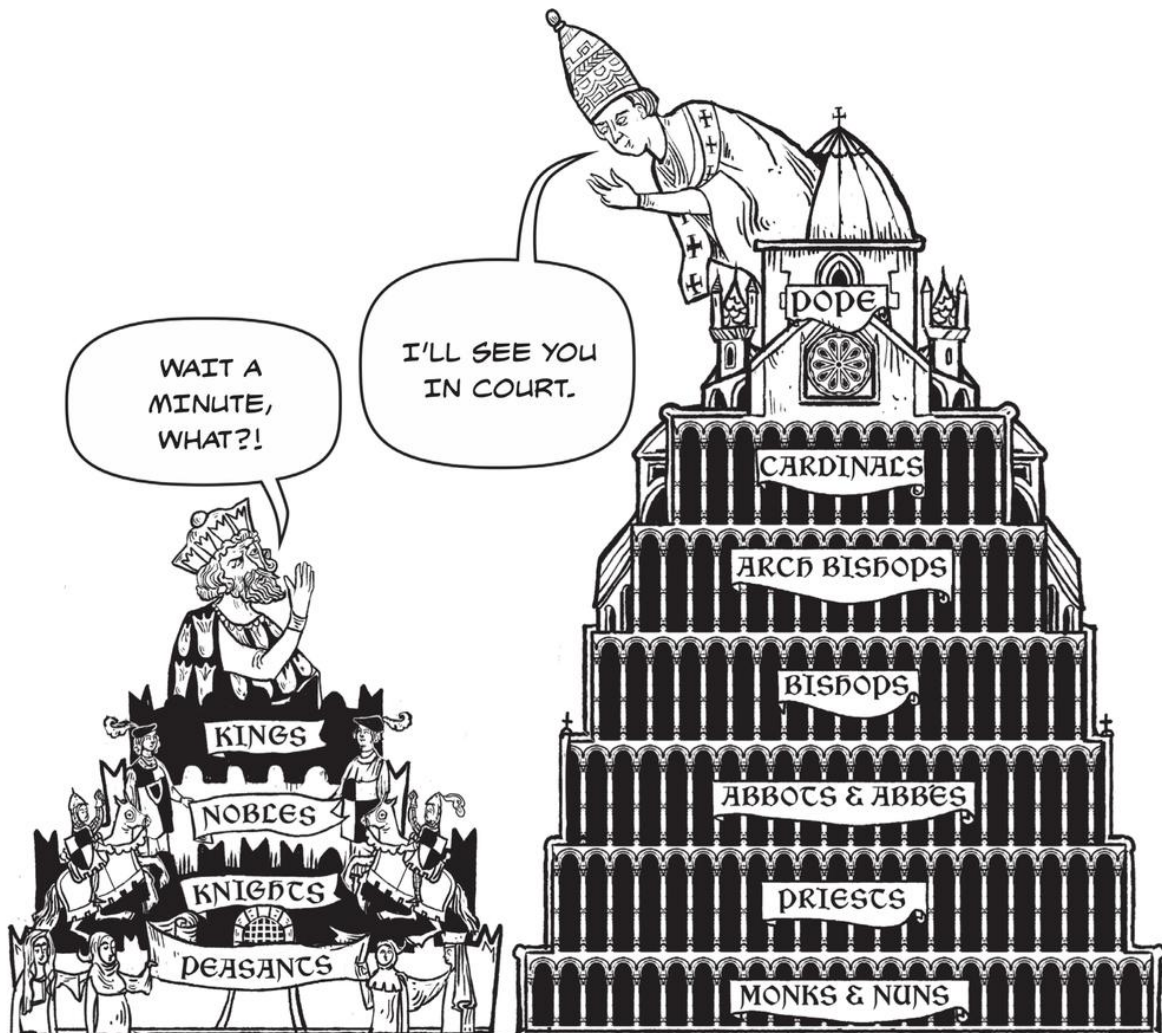
Pope Innocent III (1160/61–1216) is perhaps the most noted example of this phenomenon, and he put his skills to work to expand papal power. In 1215 he called the Fourth Lateran Council, which was dedicated to an expansion of what we call **canon law** – the legal system of the Church.



Among Innocent III's new rules were the declaration that secular rulers were responsible for banishing anyone who the Church proclaimed to be a heretic; that the Bishop of Rome was the supreme pontiff over the Eastern Patriarchs; that Muslims and Jews in Christendom should have to wear special clothing to mark themselves apart from Christians, and that Jews could not hold public office; and that no new orders of monks or nuns could be created without the pope's say. There were also a number of very technical canons which described the actual procedure for

ecclesiastical disputes, how, exactly, the Church prosecuted people, and how they were meant to respond.

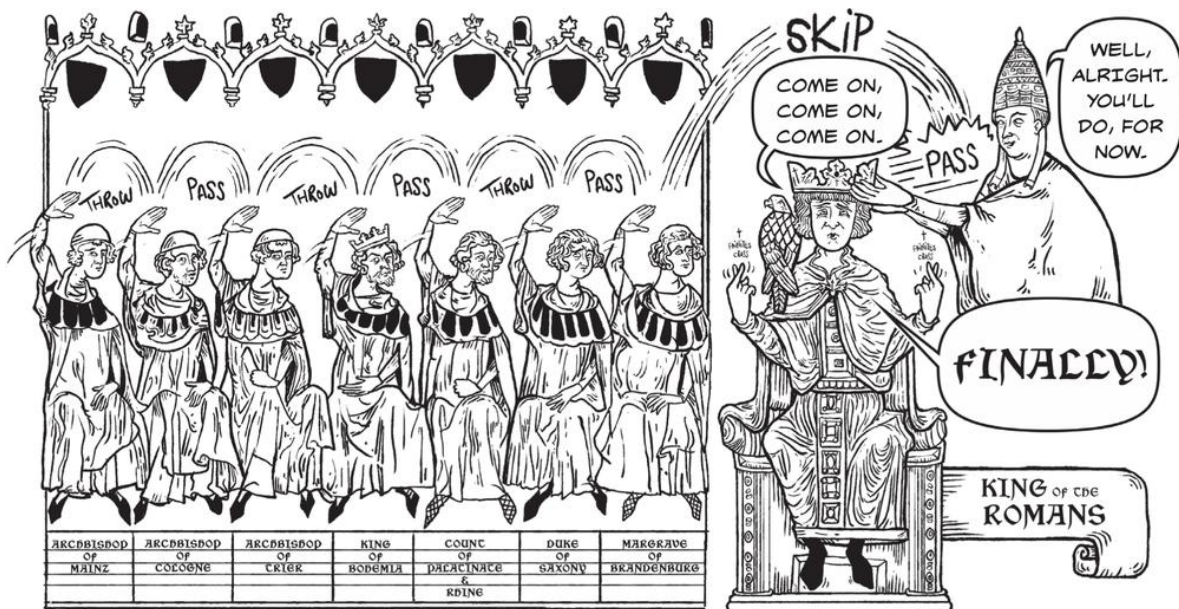
This was unprecedented. Never before had the Church had so much say in the minutiae of life in Christendom, nor been the sole arbiter of how to worship. The Church was now a *legal* entity just as much as it was a spiritual one.



Innocent III also had some things to say about the office of the Holy Roman Emperor, specifically he argued that the Empire originated, and gained its authority, from the papacy. This ushered in a new era of imperial election wherein a new emperor would be chosen by seven **imperial electors**: the Archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, as well

as the King of Bohemia, Count of the Palatinate and Rhine, Duke of Saxony, and Margrave of Brandenburg.

When all seven men agreed to a candidate, he would become King of the Romans. The pope would then consider the candidate and either agree that he was a fit defender of Christendom and crown him emperor, or tell the prince electors to try again. Even if a candidate was lucky enough to be elected King of the Romans and then crowned emperor, he essentially served at the pleasure of the papacy. This was an inversion of the previous system, where a papal coronation was a foregone conclusion for anyone who the German dukes elected.



The Crusades – Again

Now Innocent and all of his successors could more or less compel emperors into doing what they wanted. And what they wanted was to make imperial forces go on a Crusade.



By the turn of the 13th century, Innocent was advocating for Crusade number 4, because that whole Norman people ruling in the Middle East thing wasn't working. Turns out that when you violently overthrow a people and install yourself as a violent ruler over them, super far away from any military support, the locals don't like it and will continue to fight you. Weird, right?

The **second Crusade** had run from 1147–49, to try to prop up the Kingdom of Edessa, when it was attacked by the Seljuk Turks 50 years after it was established. It failed. The **third Crusade** ran from 1189–92 because the Christians had been kicked out of Jerusalem altogether by **Saladin**, aka Salah ad-Din Yusuf (1174–93). It failed too.



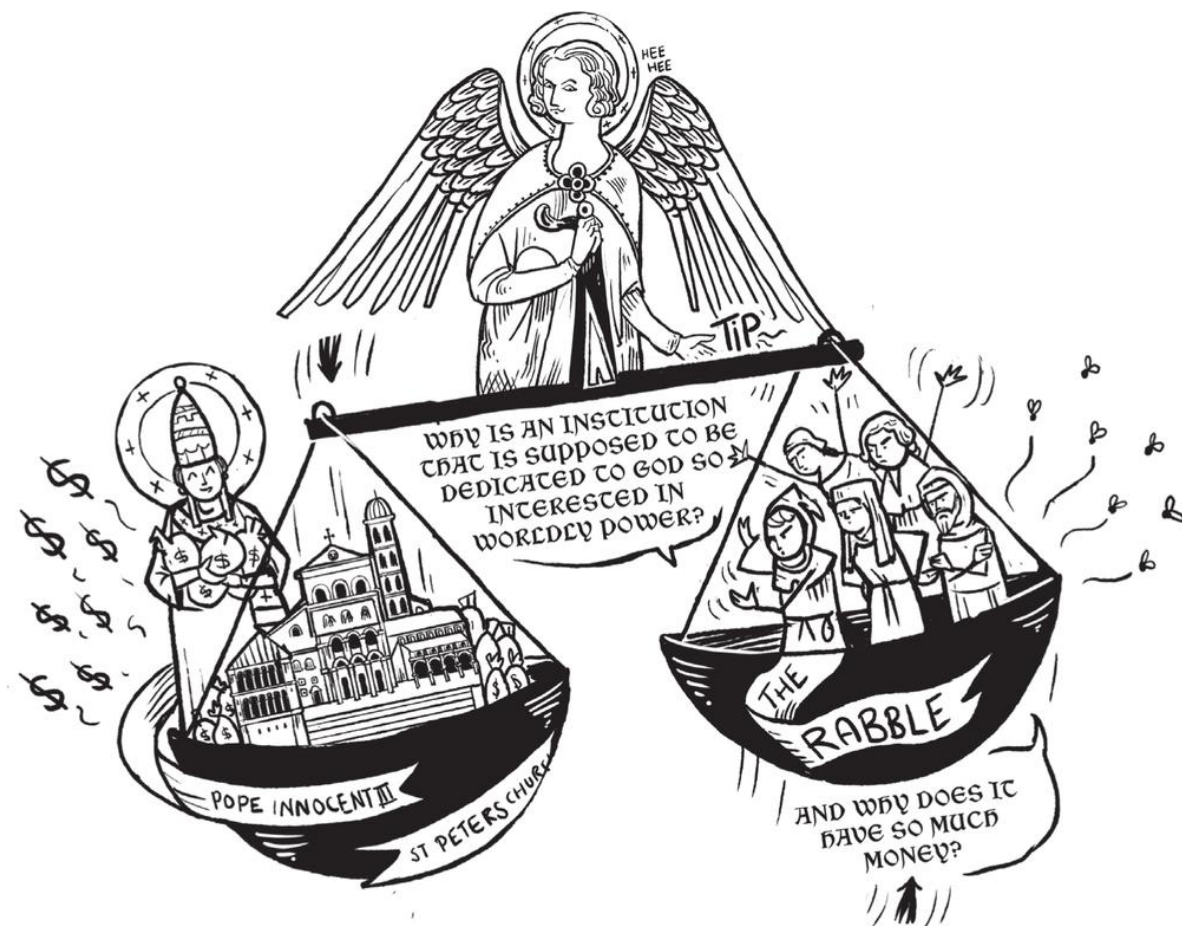
The **fourth Crusade** was ordered because Innocent III was determined that Western Europeans should not only recapture and rule Jerusalem, but also take down the entire **Ayyubid Sultanate** that Saladin had founded. As excited as Innocent was about the project, all the prospective Holy Roman Emperors resented his power play and declined to take part. A rag-tag army of volunteers from the French and Italian lands was organized instead.



The crusaders never made it past Constantinople, which they decided to attack instead. Innocent excommunicated everyone, made a failed ploy to bring Constantinople under his power, instead of under the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the whole thing fizzled out.

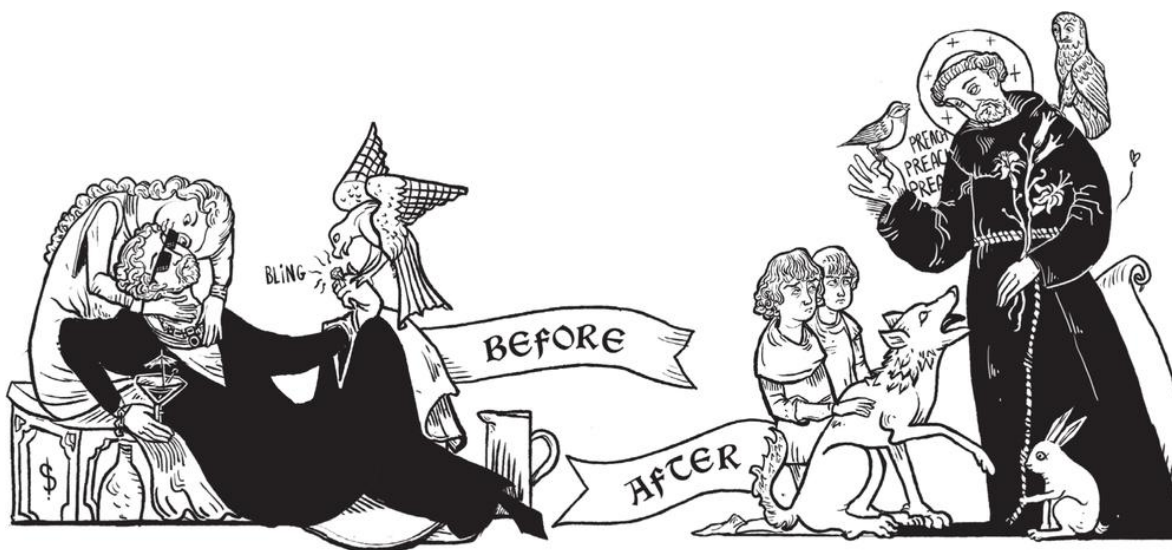


Not all of Innocent's ventures met with success, and at times his efforts to consolidate Church power were met with disapproval.



Innocent countered this by allowing a new type of monk to come into being, the **Franciscans**. The order was started by a nice Italian boy, Francesco Giovanni di Pietro Bernardone (c.1181–1226) from Assisi in

Umbria – **St Francis** to you and me. Born rich, St Francis was by all accounts extremely hot, into luxury goods, and a bit of a playboy. Then, inspired by God, he decided to live in poverty and spend his time preaching God's word. Slowly but surely he attracted a number of other dudes who were down to live in what was called apostolic poverty, and preach.



Apostolic poverty was an attempt to copy – you guessed it – the apostles, who left behind everything they had to follow Jesus. People loved this idea, and considered it a “return” to the foundational teachings of Jesus.

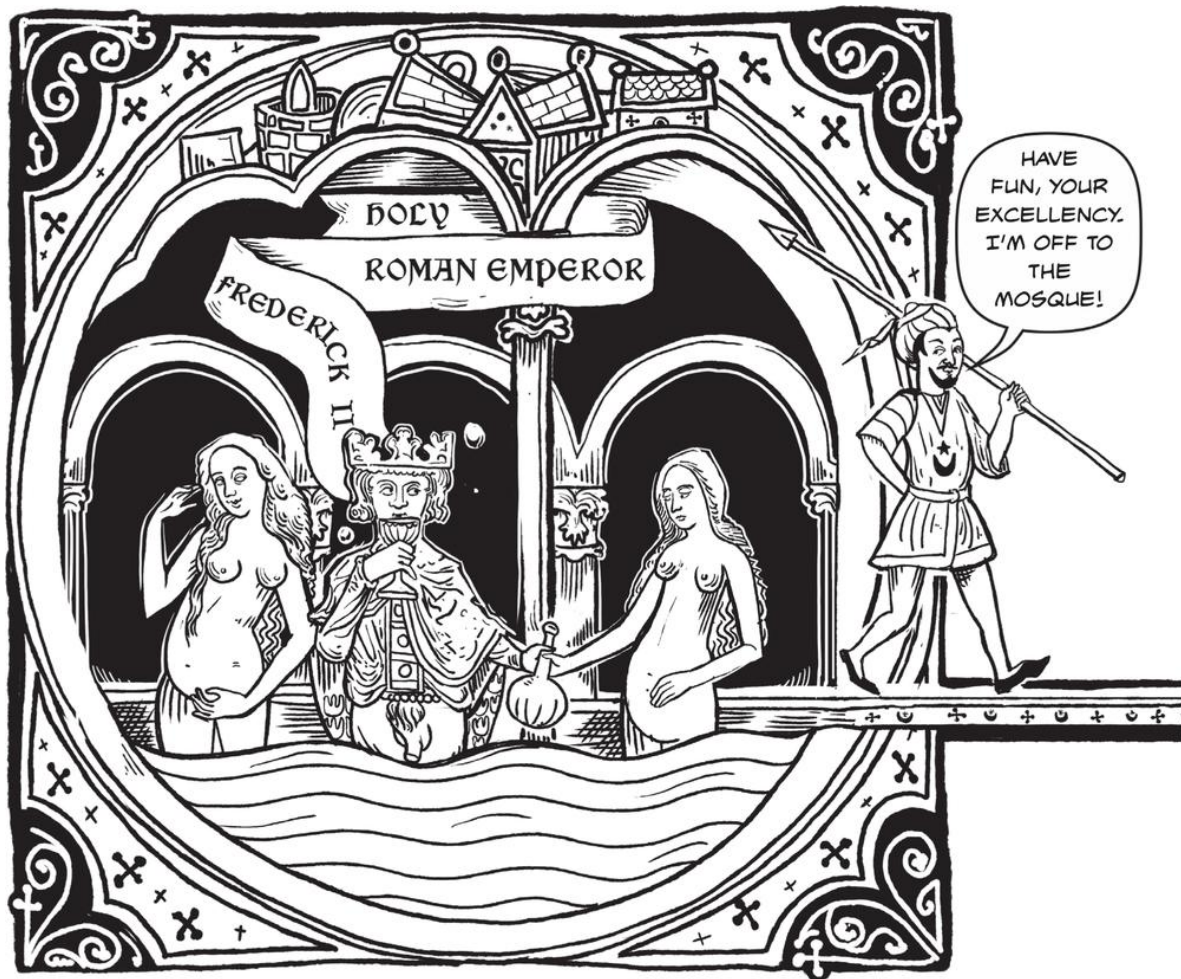
Francis and his followers were allowed to continue their order after Innocent III had a dream about St Peter's Basilica in Rome (home of the papacy) collapsing, with Francis holding it up. Francis eventually established a Rule, just like St Benedict had done, and the Franciscans officially became one of what we call the “**mendicant**” orders. The mendicants were meant to be begging orders, reliant upon others to support them. This was a very new type of monasticism because mendicants had to be a part of the world or they would quite literally starve.





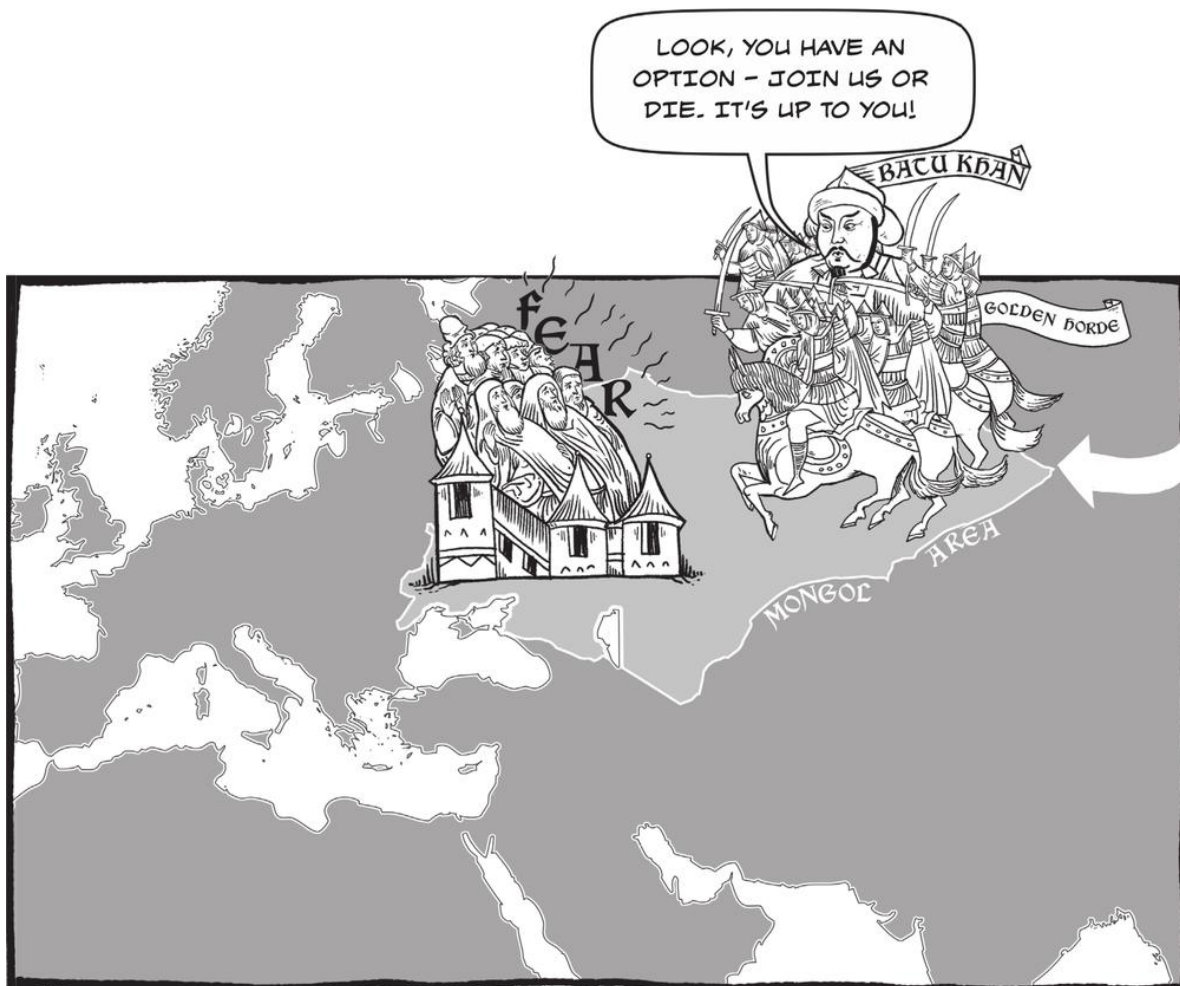
Mendicants operated in a completely different territory to other monastic orders, because they had to ensure a large enough audience to support them. This meant living in cities, in stark contrast to the monks of Benedict's time who separated themselves away from the world in mountain monasteries.

While the practicalities of life in a Franciscan order were different to those of the Benedictines, the Church used the Benedictines to say there was a *correct way to be a monk*, and the Franciscans to show there was a *correct way to do religious poverty*. The Franciscans were a bit of a PR coup; they allowed the Church to show that it was sensitive to calls for reform, while at the same time the great majority of the clergy could continue to enjoy the cushy lifestyles they had become accustomed to.



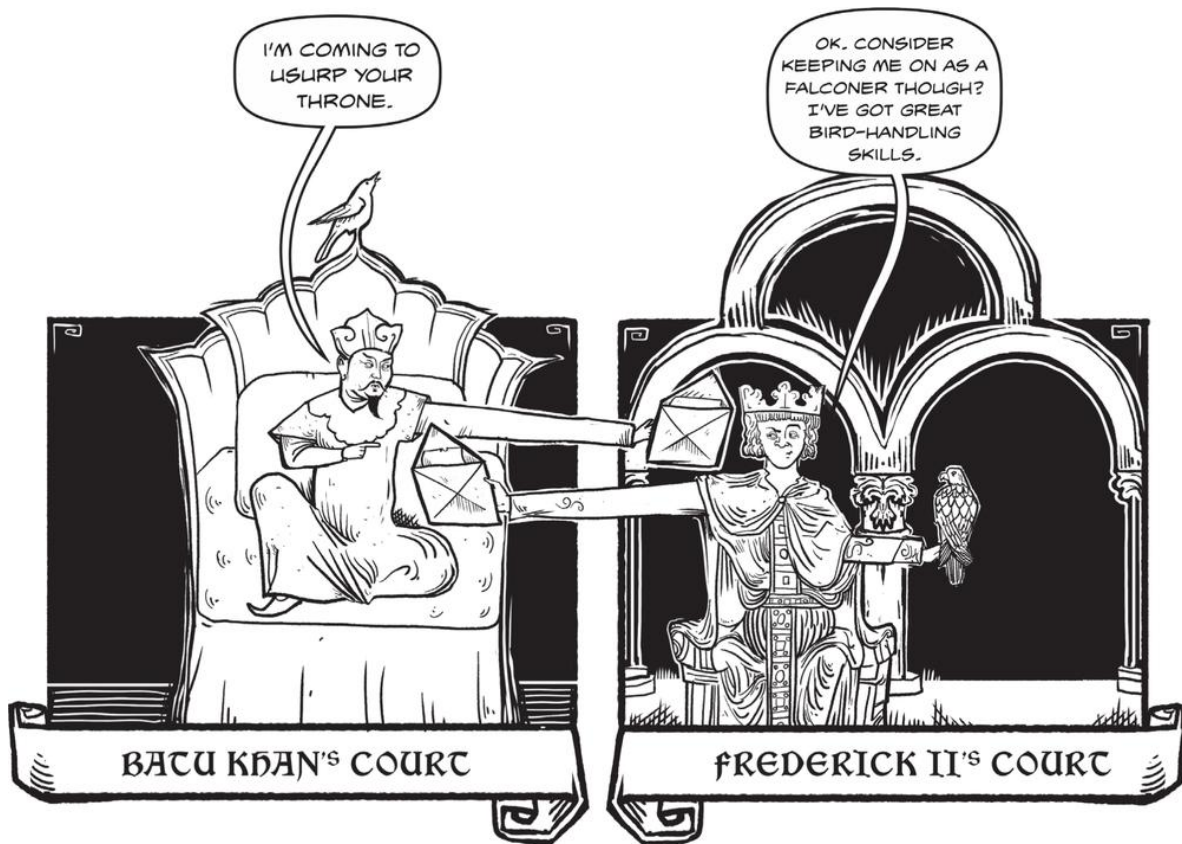
As the Church grappled with how, exactly, it could be the major world authority and simultaneously an organization dedicated to keep the teachings of a poor carpenter alive, it was being studied very closely by the new **Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II** (1194–1250). Referred to in contemporary chronicles as the “astonishment of the world”, Frederick was, among other things, a devotee of what we would now call multiculturalism, an epicure, a scholar, a patron of the arts, and a prolific lover. He was crowned in scarlet robes with Arabic inscriptions embroidered in gold. His royal guards were all Muslim so that they couldn’t be excommunicated by the Pope and would remain loyal to him. He was rumored to have a personal harem and to bathe lavishly. His court at Palermo was polyglot, with Muslim and Jewish courtiers as commonplace as Christians. In short, he did what he wanted.

Frederick was excommunicated repeatedly, which meant he had to fight wars with the German princes who saw an opportunity for land grabs. All of this came to a head with the arrival of the **Golden Horde** in Europe. A khanate founded by **Batu Khan** (c.1207–55) – who was personally appointed by the great Khan himself **Ghengis Khan** (1162–1227) and charged with expanding westward – the horde was made up largely of Mongols and Turkic people that swept out of modernday southwest Russia and Georgia. Like most khanates, they wanted one thing: tribute. If you paid them off when they came to your city, and agreed to be amalgamated into their trading network, all was well. If you didn't, they would ransack your city, kill everyone they could, and probably burn the city to the ground.



By 1241 the Horde had begun to encroach into the Polish and Hungarian kingdoms. This was a huge opportunity for Frederick. Eventually Batu

Khan found out that Frederick II existed, and sent him a letter saying:



Frederick wrote back telling Batu that he would be a good falconer for the Khan's retinue because he knew a lot about birds. The papacy was *mad*. As far as the new pope **Gregory IX** (c.1145–1241) was concerned, the emperor existed in order to protect Christendom from its enemies, and here was Frederick doing nothing when that happened. Frederick, on the other hand, wanted to know why he should rush to the defense of the Hungarians who had been very willing to pilfer imperial lands whenever Gregory got mad and excommunicated him.

Eventually, the problem solved itself when one of the other Khans, Ögedei (c.1185–1241), died. This forced Batu to return to the Mongol capital at Karakoram to attend a *kurultai*, or military council. This stopped any further encroachment into Europe as Batu focused on consolidating power in the Urals, and Christendom breathed a sigh of relief. But an inherent fear of the powerful Mongols would continue to plague Europe throughout the medieval period.



As fraught as this situation was, it was a godsend for Holy Roman Emperors. Their role was no longer theoretical. They did not exist in case something threatened Christendom, or even to lead foreign crusades at the behest of the papacy. They existed because, when a Mongol horde was at your door, someone had to fight, and the Church couldn't.

Courtly Love and the Troubadours

Although emperors were the most outspoken about not caring what the Church had to say, this was true of rich people in the High Medieval Period generally. Not caring what the papacy thought was intrinsic to the era's most celebrated literary and cultural movement, courtly love.



Actually, it's way weirder. It started in the 11th century in the Francophone courts of Aquitaine, Provence, Burgundy, Champagne, Sicily, and Normandy and spread as members of these courts were married off around Europe. Many royals and nobles married for political reasons, not love, and at court spent time in groups. Courtly love came into being sort of as a way of entertaining rich people at court who had the hots for each other.

Both Church and society generally agreed that having the hots for the people who were off limits, married or not, was very naughty. So, to get around the fact that they couldn't have a legal relationship, or sex, they wrote each other poetry and songs about how badly they wanted to bang. *That* is courtly love. More specifically, courtly love is almost all about unmarried men who have a thing for married women.

Because everyone involved had a lot of time on their hands as they hung around court, and because medieval people loved rules, eventually a code of conduct was established for how, exactly, people should conduct their

doomed love affairs. This was written by **Andreas Capellanus**, a chaplain, apparently uniquely suited to giving out romantic advice because of his vow of chastity. Andreas wrote all of his ideas down in a letter to a love-sick friend.



The result was *De Amore*, or *On Love*, which explained what love was, the rules for how to love, and a series of “court cases” with **Eleanor of Aquitaine** (1122/24–1204) and her ladies in waiting adjudicating. It was, more or less, a medieval pick-up artist manual.

1. *Marriage is no excuse for not loving.*
2. *He who is not jealous cannot love.*
3. *No one can be bound by two loves.*
4. *Love is always growing or diminishing.*
5. *It is not good for one lover to take anything against the will of the other.*

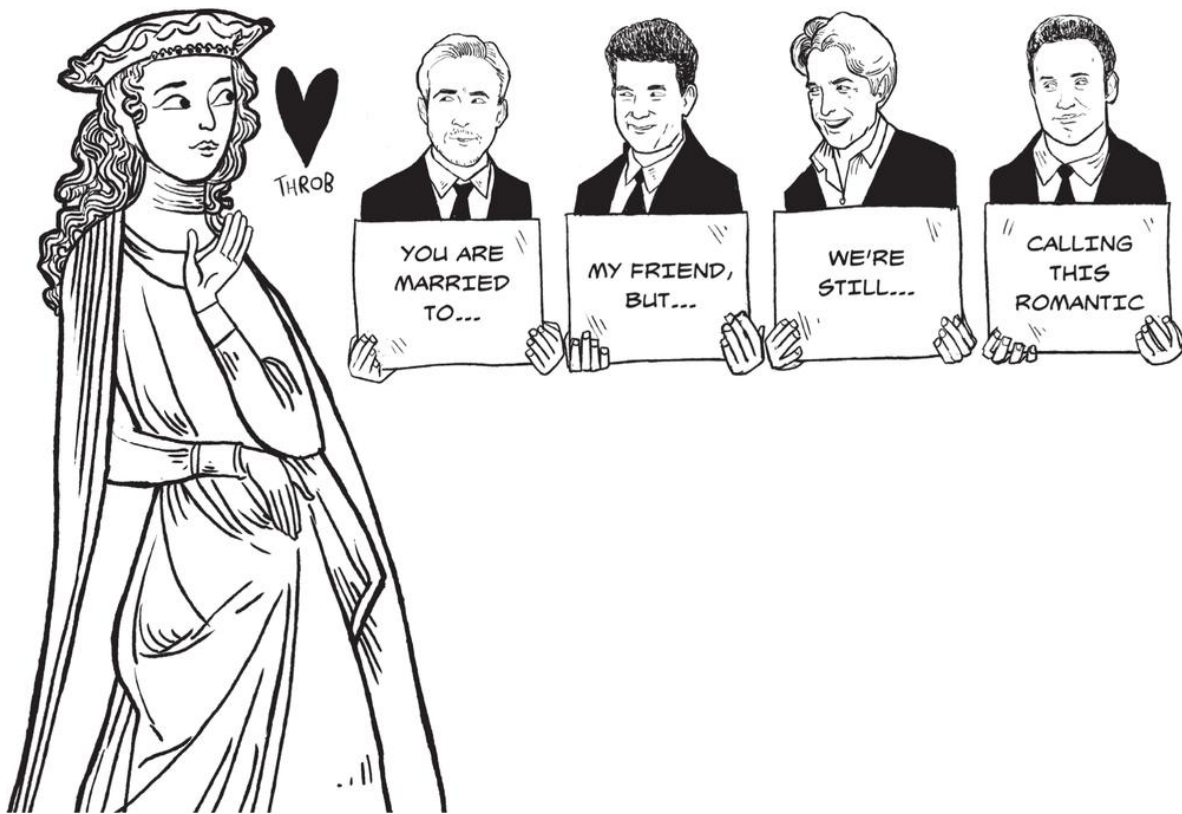
The “rules” differed hugely depending on the social standing of the people involved. Capellanus thought that only rich people could truly love; peasants and the poor didn’t understand it and simply “copulated like beasts”. He even advocated that if rich men thought peasant women were hot they could rape them.



Some historians see *De Amore* as satire, a way of drawing attention to the excesses of stylized romance at court. While it may have been received that way initially, the rules that Capellanus put down were eventually emulated as a sort of court game and repeated throughout the rest of the medieval period with some sincerity. Almost all courtly love literature, from the 13th-century equivalent of a bestseller, the *Roman de la Rose*, to the Camelot legends, to *Tristan and Isolde*, employs these tropes.

As strange as this may seem, these ideas still influence how we feel about love today. Suffering for love, love relationships which are insufficiently romantic, and blocking protagonists' true love are still the central plot points of most rom-coms, to the point where the "disposable fiancé" is an established trope.

Similarly, the concept that someone should be "owed" love for faithfulness is what underpins the entire modern concept of the friend zone.





The only real difference between our current idea of romance and medieval romance is that now we see marriage as the logical resolution to a romantic entanglement, not an impediment to it.

Courtly love literature also allows us a glimpse of how influential women actually lived during the medieval period. Because of the way that history often focuses only on powerful, influential people, we don't get to hear much about women, or women who weren't particularly powerful.

This is because, then as now, straight, Christian men were considered the default of humanity, a position which has both theological and philosophical roots.



As a general rule, women were accused of being negative foils of men. In terms of humoral theory, this meant that men were hot and dry, while women were cold and wet. Men were rational and stoic; women were irrational and ruled by their emotions. Men could master their bodies and focus on God; women were inherently sex crazed and had to be tightly controlled.

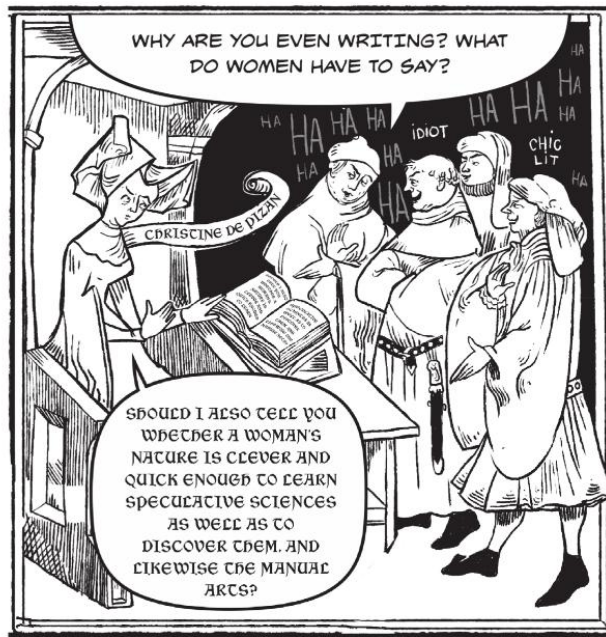


This was why most women weren't allowed prominent roles in the Church, or high-level civic roles. Royal or noble women were somewhat immune because of the circumstances of their birth, and if their husbands died, they could wield considerable power. But this doesn't mean that everyday women weren't fully involved members of society.

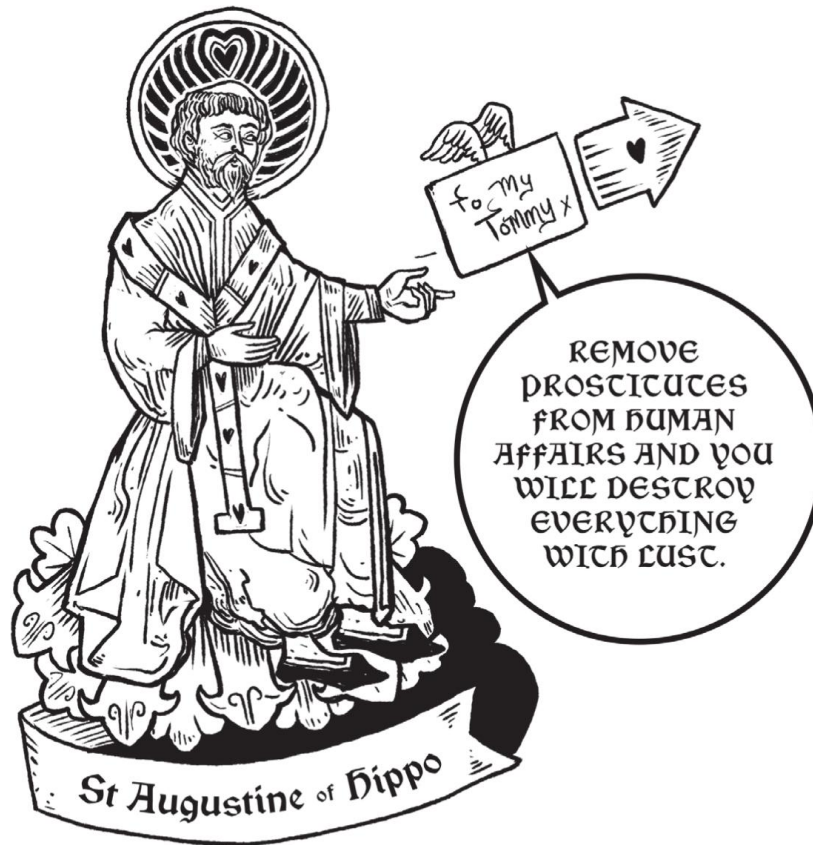


Most women participated in the same trades as the men in their family. Peasant women worked in the fields; businesswomen helped keep accounts and assisted with trade; noblewomen ran the house staff and kept an eye on finances; all women were expected to look after children and their education; nuns scribed and ran community hospitals. In short, women did most things men did in the medieval period, but we ignore them because women who adhered to social expectations were *meant* to fade into the background. That's why, even in this history, we haven't heard much from them. When we do focus on medieval women, it's generally on those who broke the rules, because they were written about.

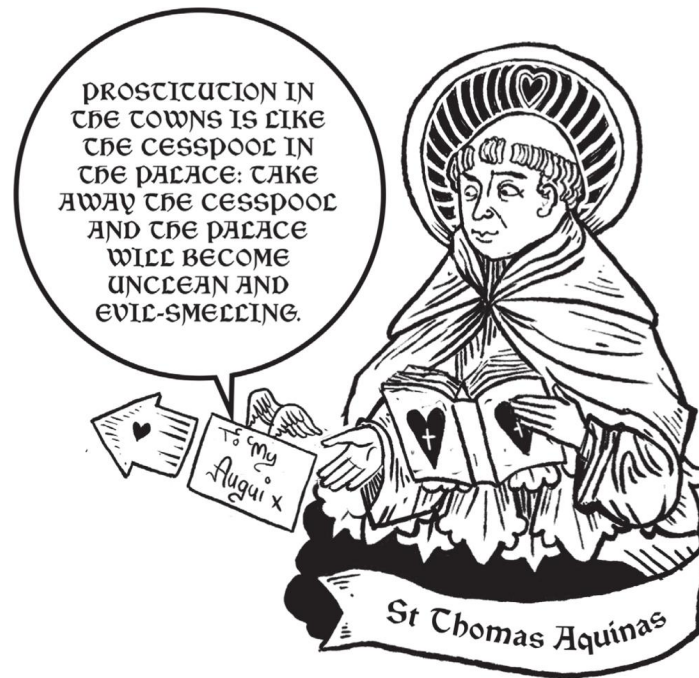
We also ignore medieval women because medieval men did. Texts written by and about women circulated less and survive in smaller numbers. The author Christine de Pizan lamented how she had to beg for respect from her male peers. Adding to the problem is that lots of medieval texts were authored anonymously; so, we tend to assume men wrote them – partially because we know men's texts survive, and partially because we're sexist too.



Sex Workers



If you were a poor woman who didn't want to get married and help your husband with his trade, there weren't a lot of options. You could enter the service of a rich household. Or, you could enter sex work, for which there was huge demand.



Although this was a religious society, there were religious reasons for the necessity of sex workers. Medieval theologians saw lust as a volatile thing that could poison the minds of men, and drive them to violence if frustrated.



As a result, most cities had a municipal brothel that the town itself chartered, or else they had specific policies that allowed for sex work.

Although sex work was considered necessary, this didn't mean people thought it was a great thing. Most cities legislated that sex work had to take place either outside of, or near, the city walls, in the equivalent of what we call red light districts today. Some cities also enforced dress codes. In London, sex workers had to wear "hoods of ray", or black and white striped headgear.



They had to be marked as others and live on the literal margins of society, but medieval people were also happy to reintegrate them to society if they got tired of their jobs. In the medieval period, the major thing that “repentant” sex workers had to do was confess their sins and then get married. However not all women wanted to leave sex work. It could be a highly lucrative position, and one where women weren’t beholden to men. Yes, you were an outsider, but you were free on the outside.



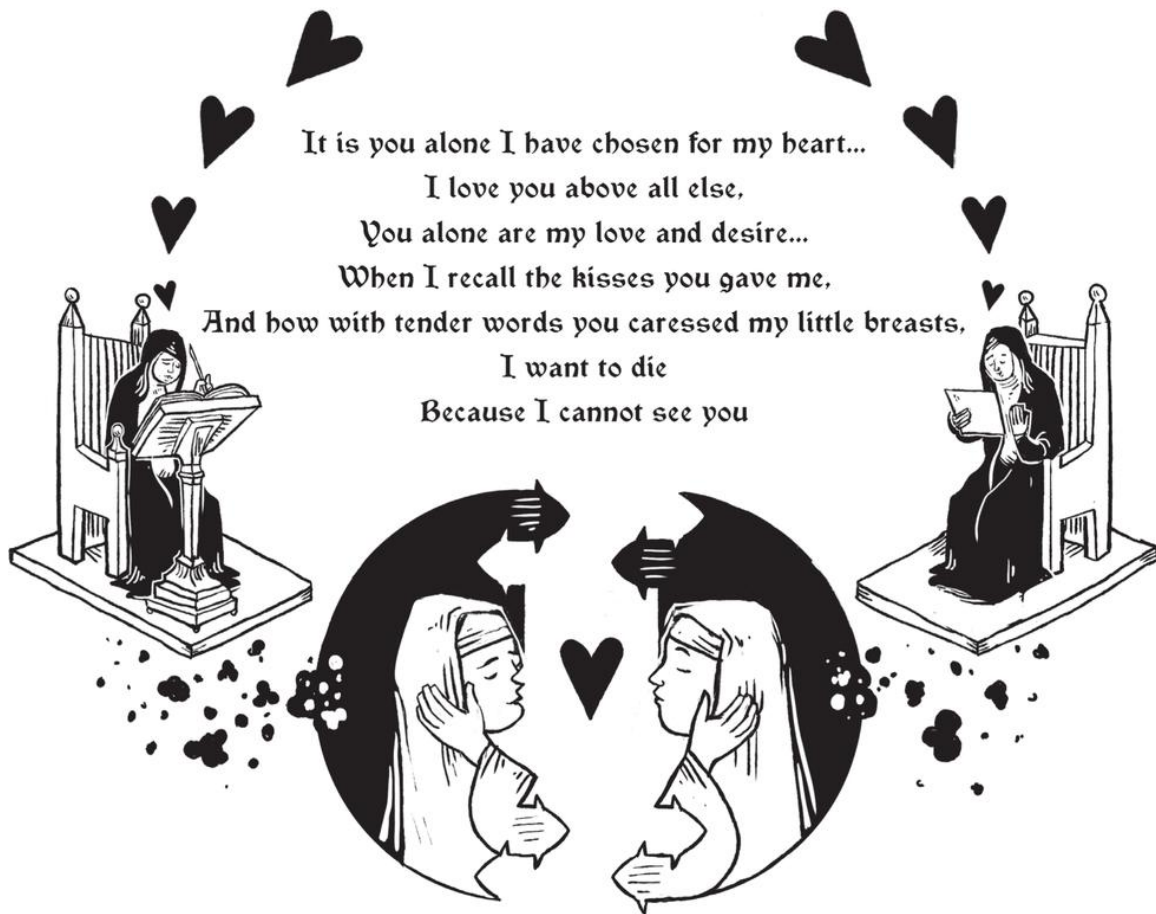
Homosexuals

Another group who found themselves as outsiders were people we would now call lesbians, gays, or bisexuals, but who medieval people called **sodomites**. “Sodomy” is *any* sex that can’t result in pregnancy: anal or oral sex, mutual masturbation – basically any form of sex other than penis in vagina with a fertile woman. So technically anyone could be a sodomite, but anyone who was having sex with a member of the same sex absolutely was, and that was not acceptable. There was no fixed concept of sexuality like we have now. No one in the medieval mind was hetero-, bi-, or homosexual. They were either having illicit sex, or they weren’t, and could be labelled that way based on their actions.

If a man also lie
with mankind, as he
lieth with a woman,
both of them have
committed an
abomination: they
shall surely be
stoned: their blood
shall be upon them



We do, however, know that some medieval people were in what we would call gay relationships. Lots of romantic, heartbreaking and even sexy letters survive from this period, written by (who we would call) gay and lesbian people.



It is you alone I have chosen for my heart...

I love you above all else,

You alone are my love and desire...

When I recall the kisses you gave me,

And how with tender words you caressed my little breasts,

I want to die

Because I cannot see you

“Homosexual” relationships did therefore exist in the medieval period, but they faced major societal and theological condemnation, and so had to be hidden – which makes it difficult for us to identify particular individuals or couples.

There could be real consequences for committing “the vice of sodomy whether actively or passively”. In Florence it was a 50-florin fine the first time, 100 florins the second, 200 the third, and 500 the fourth time. If someone was caught a sixth time, they would be burned alive.

Jews

Jewish people faced a similarly hostile environment to that faced by gay people in the medieval period. As you may remember from how the first Crusade started out, Europe was home to plenty of thriving Jewish communities. Jewish people were an integral part of the broader

community, because of one key concept: **usury**. For medieval Christians, usury (lending money at interest) was a sin. Crucially, it was not a sin for Jewish people. Therefore, anywhere commerce was strong, so was the Jewish community, which would respond to its lending needs.

Jewish people were also needed by broader society as religious tools because they are integral to the Christian Apocalypse narrative. They are meant, at the end of time, to first worship Antichrist, and then, if they survive the tribulations, to convert to Christianity.



Despite needing Jewish people to perform these key roles, Christians weren't kind to them. Jews were considered deniers of the divinity of Christ, and actively hostile to it. As a result, Jewish communities were constantly plagued with accusations of blood libel, and accused of killing Christian children to perform diabolical anti-Masses. Periodically, some Jewish communities were also targeted when powerful people found themselves in profound debt. In 1260 in England, a series of **pogroms** were carried out against Jewish communities with the express aim of destroying evidence of debt, and in London alone 500 Jews died. In 1290 following the **Edict of Expulsion**, all Jewish people were made to leave England and Wales completely.



This uneasy situation was sometimes regulated in larger cities by establishing ghettos in which Jewish people were forced to live. These areas were often gated and locked after dark, which served a dual purpose: bigoted Christians could feel protected from the theoretically bloodthirsty Jews locked inside, while Jewish people could rest easy knowing that Christians with murderous intent could not gain access.



Heretics

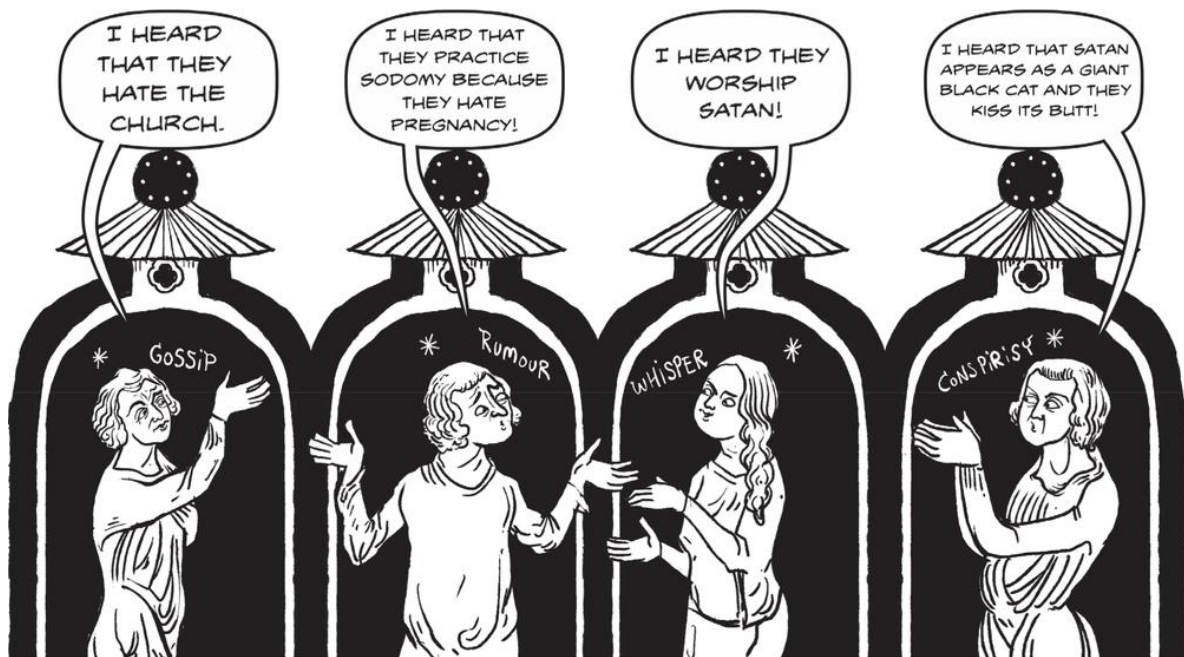
It was not only non-Christian communities that were subject to violent repression. Some groups who considered themselves Christian ended up on the wrong side of the Church. Heretics held religious views that the Church disapproved of.

Some of the most famous heretics to face wide-scale Church repression were the **Good Men and Women of Languedoc**, who the Church called **Cathars**. The Good Men were “dualists”, meaning they thought of the physical world as being inherently evil and ruled by the “demiurge”, a Satanic figure who wished to trick humans. Many of the Good Men explicitly rejected the Church as a result, because they thought it was too wealthy and powerful, and not concerned enough with spiritual salvation.

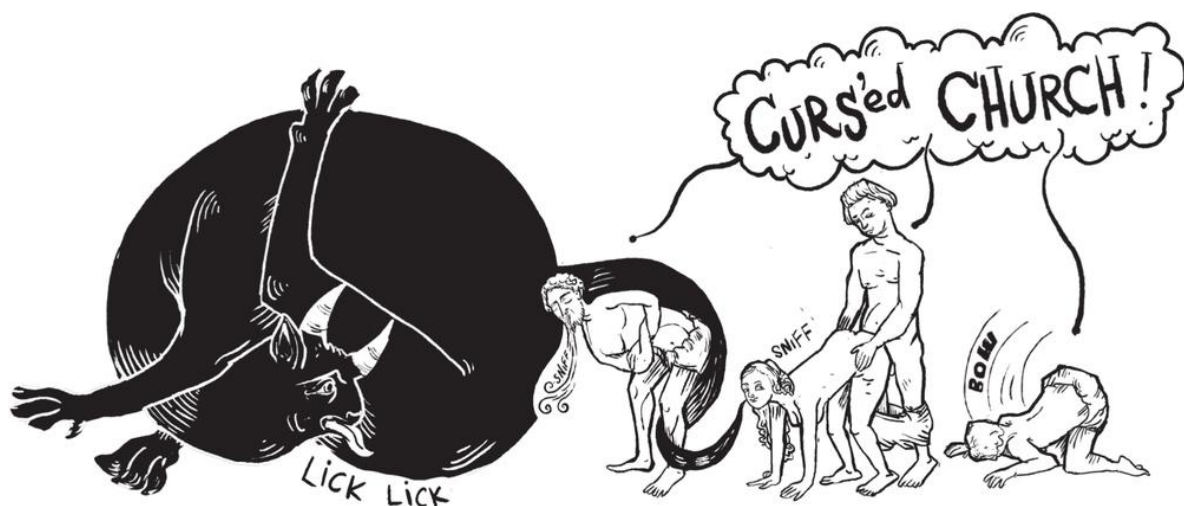
The movement took off in the Languedoc region of France in the later 11th century; by the 13th it had become popular enough that noblemen protected the Good Men. The Church’s response was to call a 20-year crusade and inquisition in the towns of what is now Southern France, the **Albigensian Crusade**.



If someone was found to be a heretic after questioning, their punishment could vary from being forced to wear a yellow cross on their clothing to being sent on crusade, and if they were unrepentant, sometimes they would be put to death. The worst example of this was the **massacre of Montségur**, where 200 Good Men were burned on a pyre in what would be called the “field of the burned” below the local fortress.



Later, rumors would spread that the Good Men were practicing dark magic and that the Church had named them Cathars because they worshipped the devil in the form of a giant black cat. The truth was much more mundane, however, if no less terrifying. The full weight of the Church and military intervention could come down on those who did not believe in the right way, and the Church alone dictated what that was.



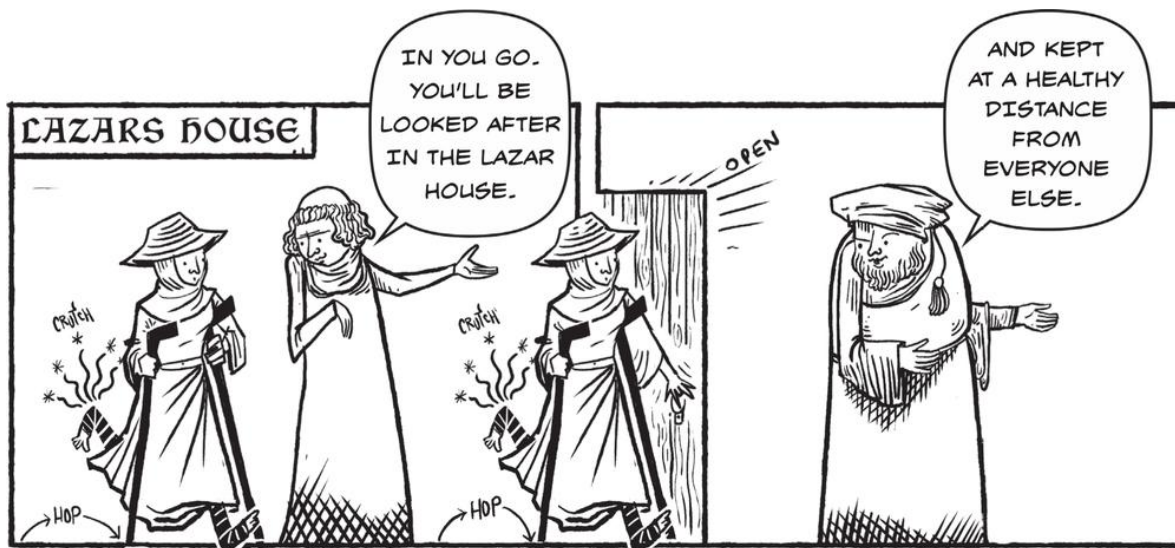
Lepers

It was also possible for medieval people to experience ostracism simply for having bad luck with their health. The most notable group to experience this were lepers. Leprosy – a bacterial disease that causes skin lesions which can cause permanent damage to the skin, limbs, eyes and even nerves – was incredibly common in the medieval period. Lepers often lost extremities too, not because of the disease itself, but because the lesions left sufferers more susceptible to other infections.

This was a major issue, not just because of the distress it caused, but because losing digits or limbs made it impossible to work a field, or do the intensive labor that the majority of people were involved in. As a result, lepers were often dependent on alms to survive.



Often the Church or the pious rich would donate to lepers. One of the major ways in which lepers received help was through the establishment of what were called Lazar Houses. Named after Lazarus, the patron saint of lepers, they were communal houses where lepers lived together, not unlike monks and nuns, usually outside of towns.



As quick as pious Christians were to donate to their suffering fellow man, they didn't necessarily want to be around them. This was partially a fear of contagion, but was also linked to the idea that lepers were corrupted morally as well as bodily once they were stricken with the disease.

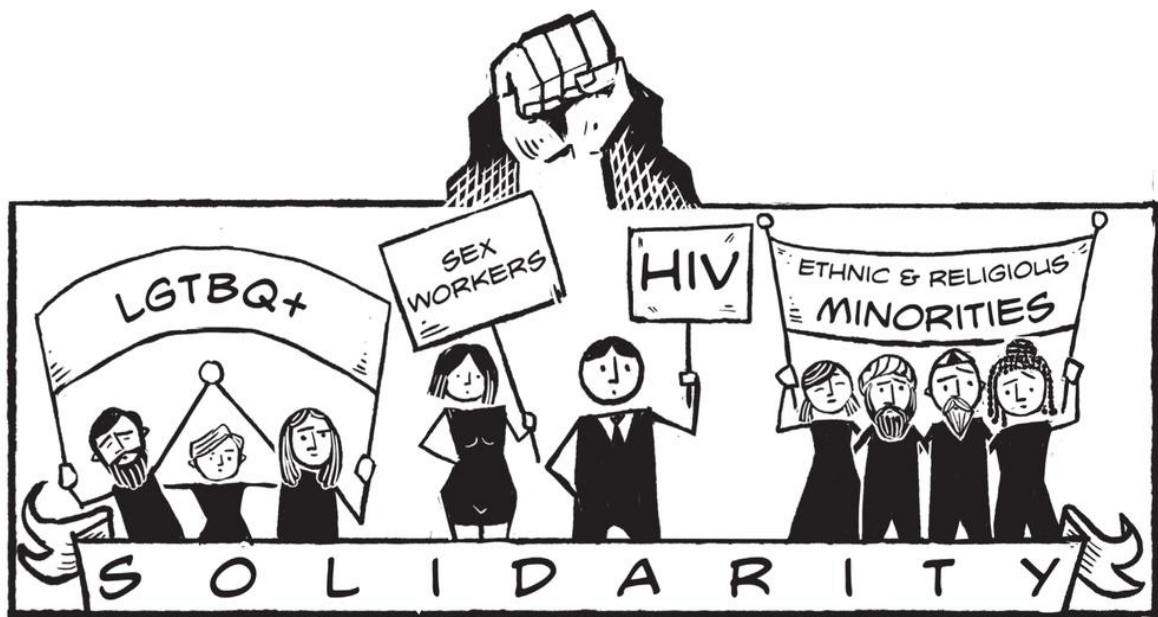


Lepers, like most marginalized groups, were a part of society, but one with which the great majority of medieval people would happily dispense if they could. They were marked out as different from respectable

society, forced to wear othering clothing, to live only in particular areas, and subjected at times to horrific violence.



How medieval society treated marginalized people is appalling. However, unfortunately, it isn't so different from our own time. Women still don't enjoy the same freedoms as men, are generally saddled with most household chores and childrearing responsibilities, and paid less than men for the same work. Sex workers are often still criminalized. The exclusion, violence, and hatred that Jewish people faced from Christians in the medieval period is dwarfed by the atrocities committed against them during the Holocaust only last century. The treatment of medieval lepers, meanwhile, is positively lovely when compared to treatment of HIV-positive people during the Aids epidemic of the late 20th century, and now. We are still prejudiced against these groups, and their stories aren't considered "real" history. That's just for straight, white, able-bodied men. We need to face up to our complicity in their erasure.



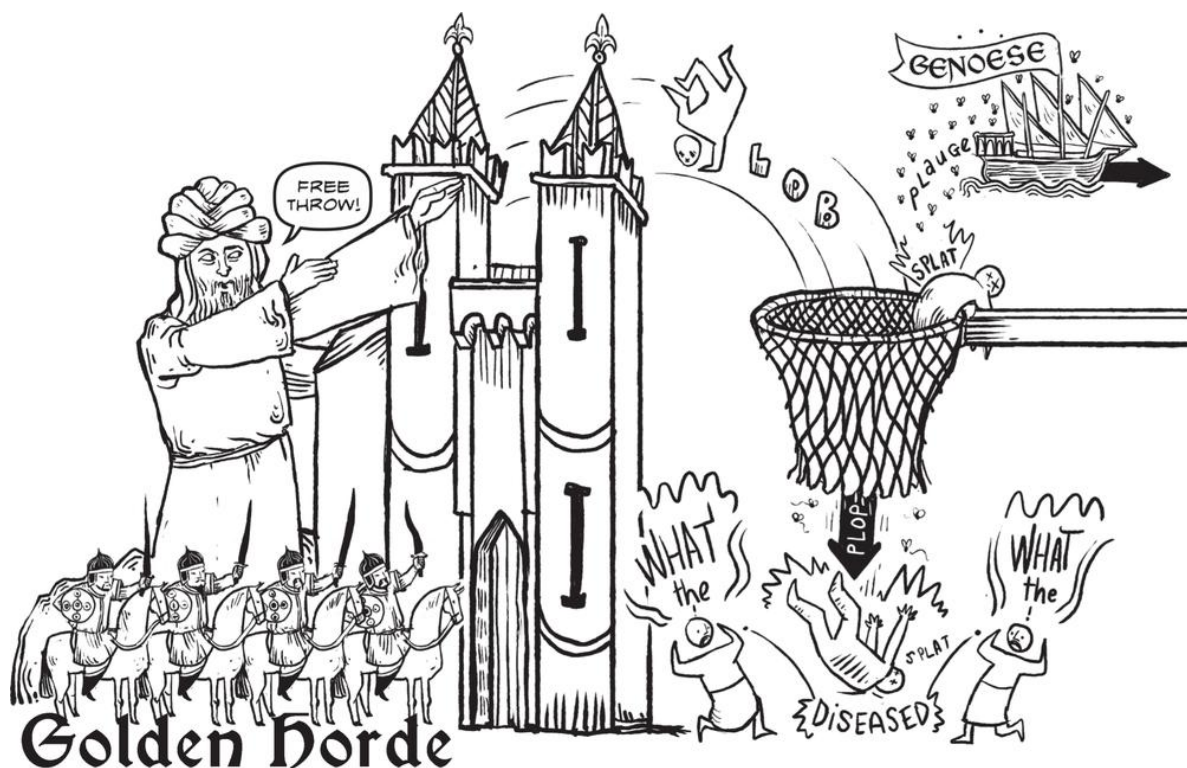
The Black Death



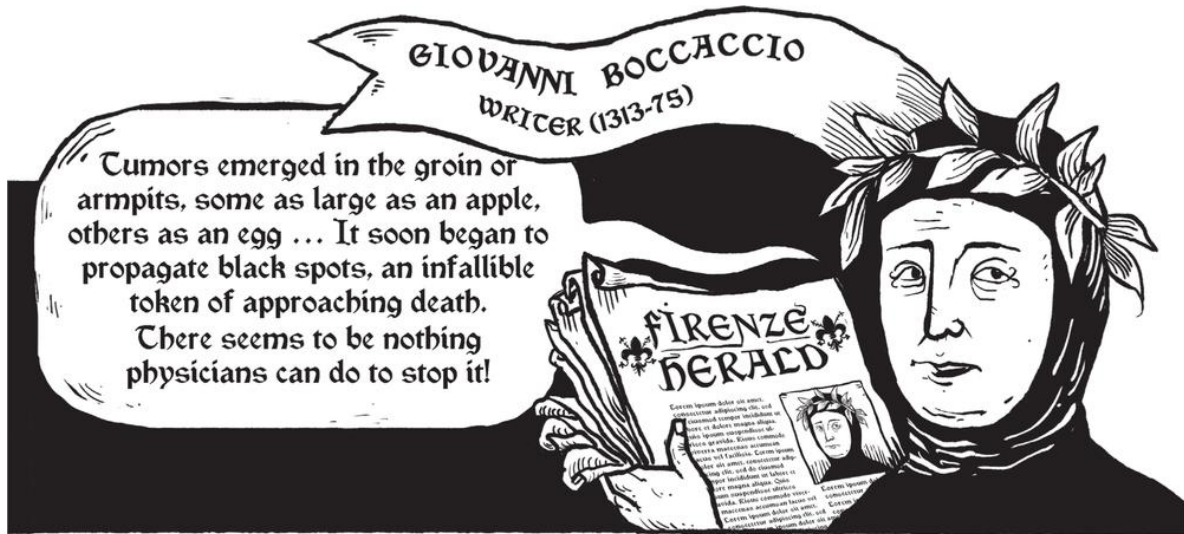
While medieval people faced varied challenges because of their place in society, the beginning of the late medieval period heralded the arrival of a completely indiscriminate factor – the Black Death. Also called the Black Plague, or even simply “the Plague”, it was an outbreak of bubonic plague caused by the bacteria on the fleas living on rodents, and *more* specifically on marmots on the Central Asian Steppe. The plague spread because **Kublai Khan** (d. 1294) had managed for the first time to conquer the whole of China, setting up his own Yuan dynasty. Wishing to promote economic recovery following the Mongol invasions, Kublai put vast sums into repairing public buildings, extending highways, and rebuilding the Grand Canal. This era of peace and diversity, referred to by historians as the **Pax Mongolica**, enabled much easier trade across Asia. But you might see some marmots, and pick up their fleas, on the way.

From there, the plague moved first into China, where it took off with alarming speed. The first recorded incursion in Europe comes from the Crimean port town of Kaffa, now called Feodosia, a thriving port at the end of the Silk Road. Kaffa had been for some years the subject of siege from the Mongol Forces of **Jani Beg** (d. 1357), also known as **Djanibek Khan**, one of the captains of the Golden Horde. His soldiers caught the plague outside the walls of Jaffa, and it jumped into the city, either through fleas or because Jani catapulted infected corpses over the wall. Either way, the city fell, and the Genoese traders who had controlled Kaffa since 1226 fled in 12 ships, taking the disease with them.

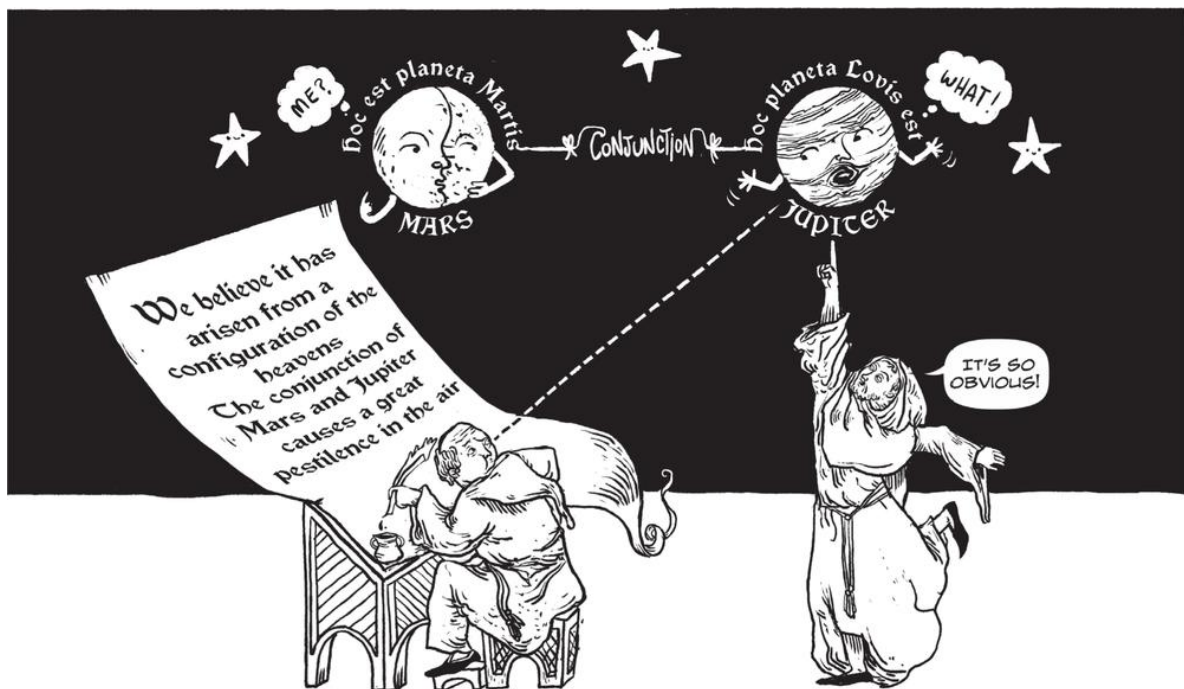
In October 1347 they took it to Sicily, in January 1348 to Genoa, Venice, then Pisa. From these major ports it swept across the European peninsula. Meanwhile the germs from Kaffa also made it across the Black Sea to Constantinople, and from there to Alexandria, Gaza, Lebanon, Palestine, and through Jerusalem and Damascus.



Some pockets of the world, especially those with more limited trading, were able to escape infection, but the great majority of Asia, Northern Africa, and Europe were afflicted.



The Black Death tended to come in waves, spreading rapidly in summers, when fleas thrived, then dying down in winter, only to recur. Physicians believed the plague was brought on by *miasma*, bad air. Less clear was where the miasma had come from. **King Philip VI** of France (1293–1350) called upon the medical faculty of the University of Paris to explain.

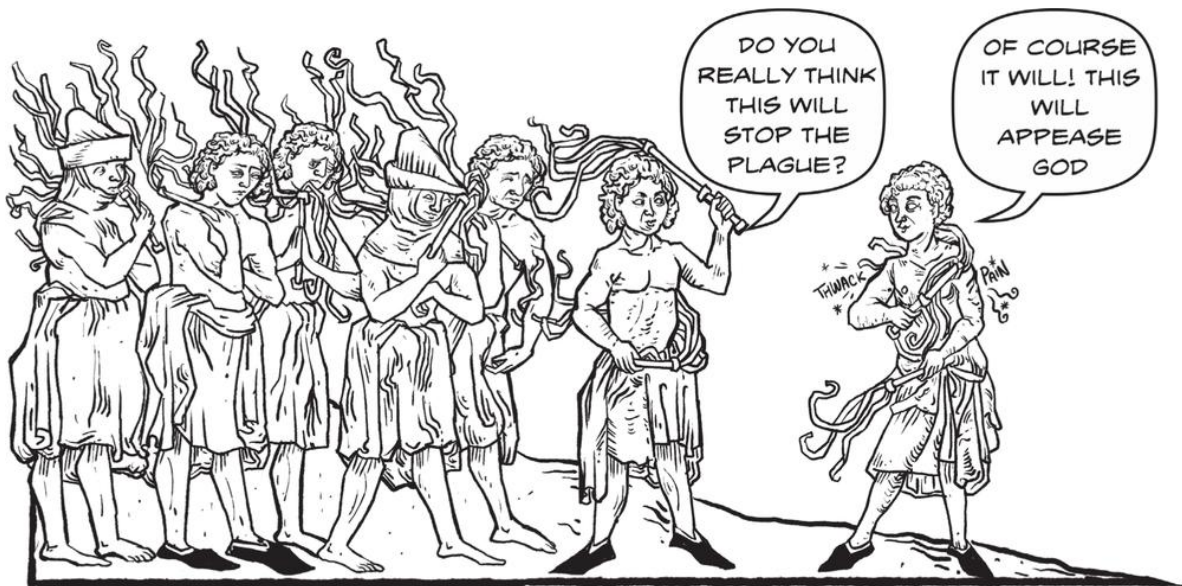


Common people largely ignored these ideas of the plague's origin, and the belief was widespread that someone was poisoning their community's

water supply. Suspicion fell upon groups of outsiders, namely the beleaguered Jewish communities, as well as foreigners or travelers. From 1348–51 Jewish people in the Low Countries, the German-speaking lands, France, the Iberian Peninsula, and Mantua and Padua were subjected to mass burnings.

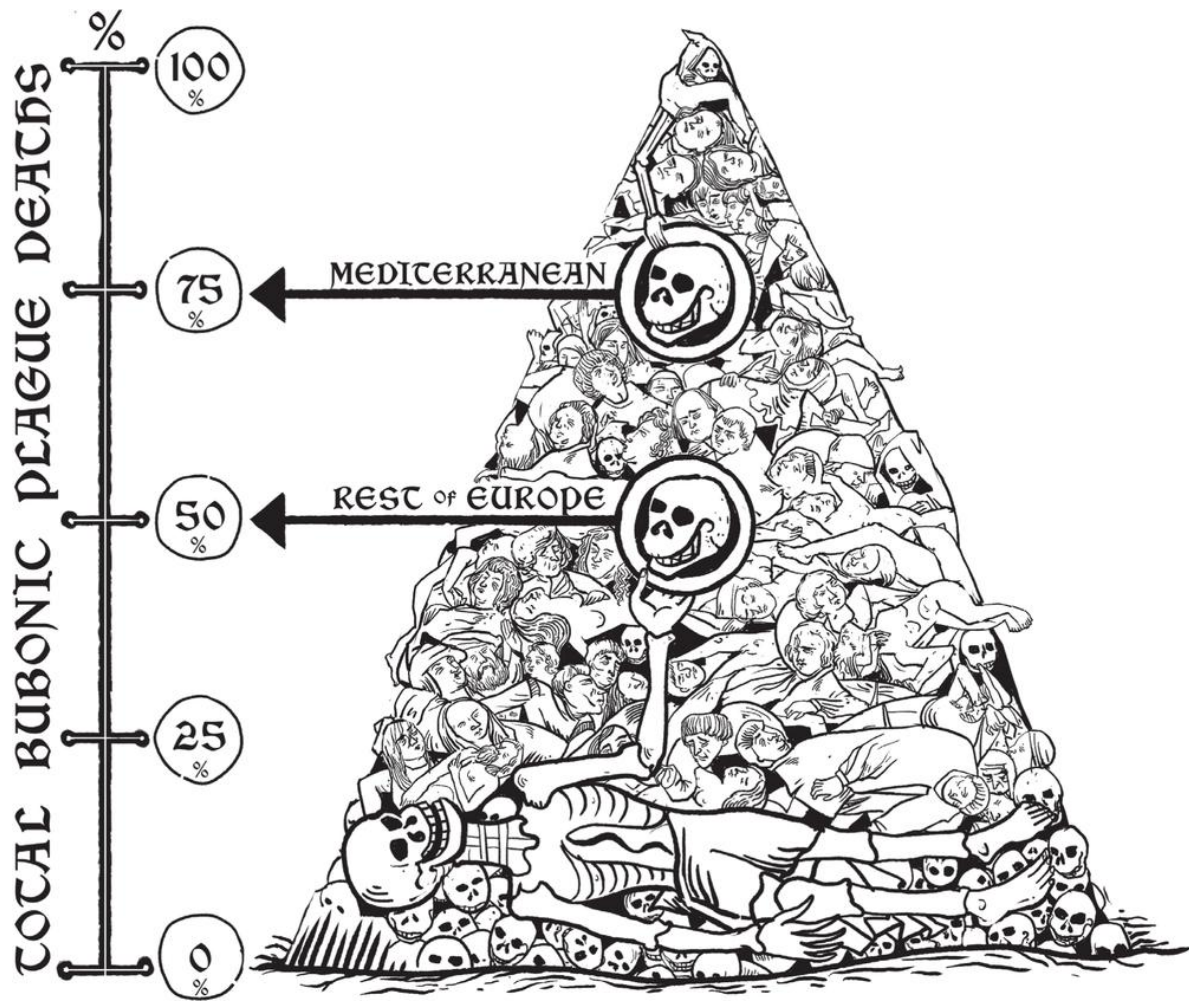


Others believed that the disease was a divine punishment from a vengeful God, dissatisfied with worldly sins. In response, the **flagellant** movement sprung up across Europe. People would form processions, barefoot and naked from the waist up, beating themselves over their right shoulder, where Jesus carried his cross. The idea was that if people suffered as Christ had, their pain could atone for the sins of the world and the plague would lift.



As odd and horrible as burning and flagellation seem to us now, it's important to understand that these people were living in a terrifying time. Somewhere between 45–50% of the population of Europe died within four years, and that's just the average. In Mediterranean Europe, the figure is probably closer to 75–80%. People were desperate to find something, anything, that would stop the pandemic. There was no medical help available, and as far as they were concerned if the Church *could* stop the plague, they would have done so.

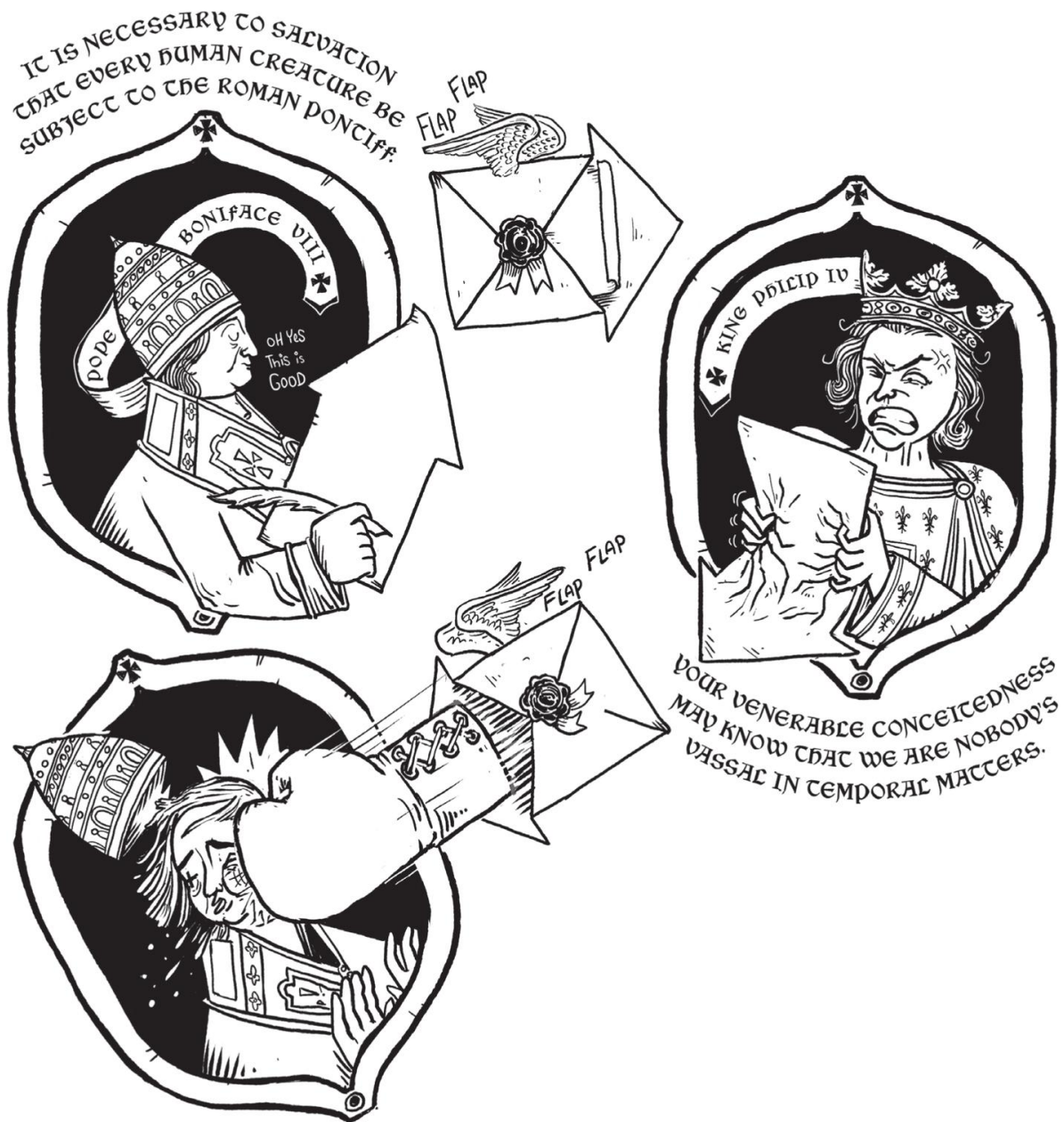
More to this point, many Christians were convinced that the Church itself was part of the problem due to its recent relocation. By the time the plague had hit, the papacy had been for some 30 years ensconced in a new papal palace in **Avignon**.



The Avignon Papacy

The move had come when in 1302, back in Rome, the Church was getting tired of simply announcing that it controlled the Holy Roman Empire, and **Pope Boniface VIII** (1230–1303) released the papal bull (a type of papal edict) *Unam Sanctum*.

This was news to kings and emperors, who were not happy about being “subject” to anyone. Was the Pope the boss of religious stuff? Sure! But they weren’t his *subjects*. He couldn’t tell them what to do when they ruled. That’s why the pope had to ask them to go on a crusade, not command them. France’s King Philip IV objected.



Philip was immediately threatened with excommunication. In response, in 1303 some of his men broke into the papal residence and administered a beatdown surpassing that of Pope Leo III. A few days later Boniface died from his injuries, his Bull of excommunication unsent.

After an 8-month interlude during which Boniface's replacement, **Pope Benedict XI** (1240–1304), pardoned everyone involved then died, rather than elect an Italianate Pope as most members of the papacy had been

before, in 1305 **Pope Clement V** (1264–1314), born in Aquitaine and King Philip's personal friend, was elected.

From this point onward most popes would come from regions in what is now France. It was Clement who decided that the interests of the papacy would be better served by moving, first to Poitiers in 1305, then in 1309 to Avignon where they set about building an opulent new palace. All of this required money, and Clement V used the ever-more centralized power of the Church to collect it. He established that all Church properties sent a tithe, or 10% of their property, to Avignon every year.





People began to grumble that the Pope was now living more like a king than a pope and that the papacy in Avignon was too extravagant and hawkish. Moreover, with the papacy gone from Rome, the local Orsini and Colonna families, who had produced a number of cardinals and popes in their time, had laid claim to the city and were more or less in open war with each other and were dividing the *rioni*, the traditional administrative areas of the city.

The chaos brought about by the papacy's exit then became a self-sustaining justification for its continued absence. How could the papacy endanger itself, and all of Christendom as well, by returning to the war-torn city it used to call home? Better to stay in Avignon and protect the interests of Christendom.



The Hundred Years War

As the Church established itself within the French orbit, the French lands were about to be embroiled in arguably the most notable conflict of the era, the Hundred Years War. The conflict so big it took a century to resolve was, in essence, a succession dispute.

The **Capetian** line hadn't managed to produce a direct male heir after the death of **Louis X** (1289–1316). Ordinarily, succession would have passed to his daughter **Joan II of Navarre** (1312–49), but Joan's mother **Margaret of Burgundy** (1290–1315) had been caught having an affair. Joan's paternity was therefore in question.

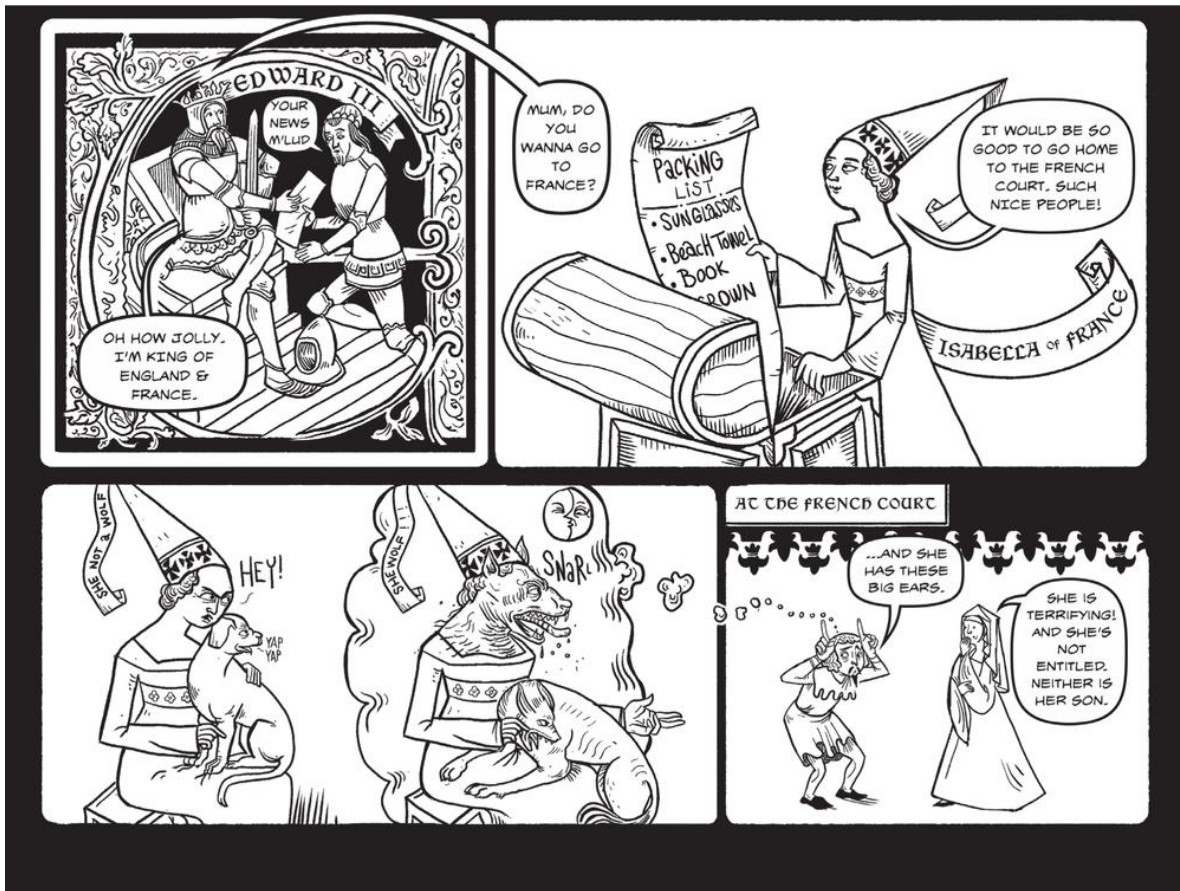
Her Uncle **Philip V** (1293–1322) decided to claim the crown, arguing that kingship couldn't run through female lines, and as the oldest Capet

man, he was king. This was all well and good until Philip died without a male heir six years later.

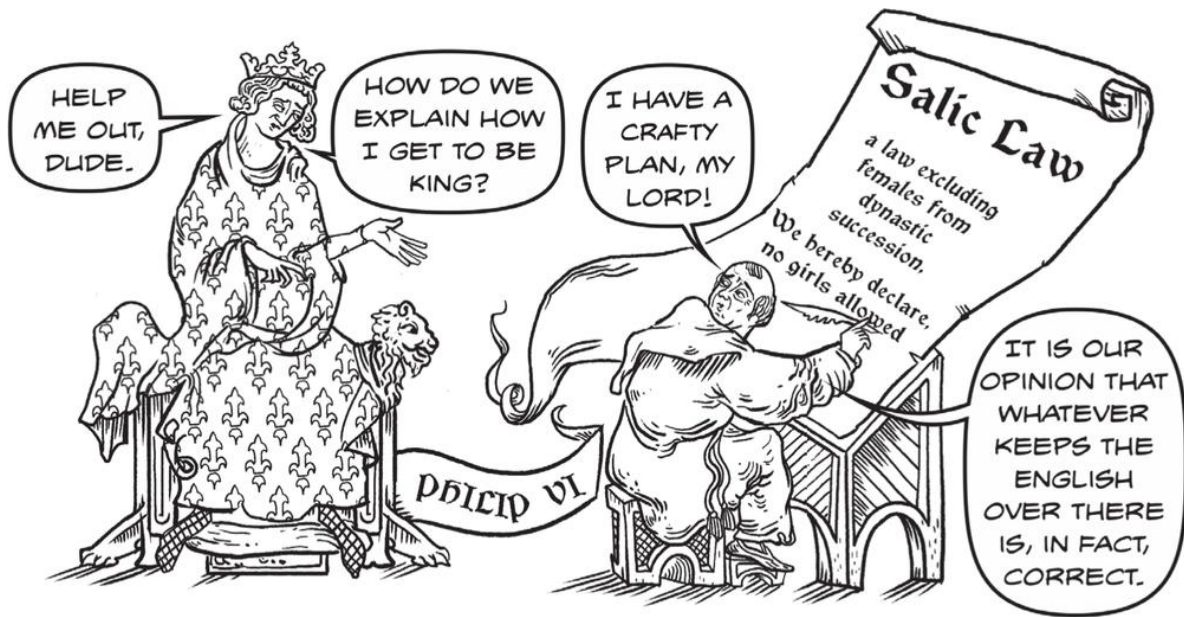


Philip's brother **Charles IV** (1294–1328) inherited the throne, given the new “no girls allowed” rule. Charles then also died without a male heir. With the Capetian line extinct, the closest living male heir was Charles's nephew, **Edward III**, King of England (1284–1327), the son of Charles's sister **Isabella of France** (1295–1358). The technical trouble with this was that if Isabella didn't have the right to inherit the crown of France, as a woman, how could she transmit it to her son?

The French nobility in charge of the decision were concerned that Isabella would be sent to rule in Edward III's stead. Nicknamed “the she-wolf”, rumored to have killed her husband **King Edward II** (1284–1327) and to be openly living with her lover, Isabella wasn't the French nobility's ideal of an easily cowed ruler.

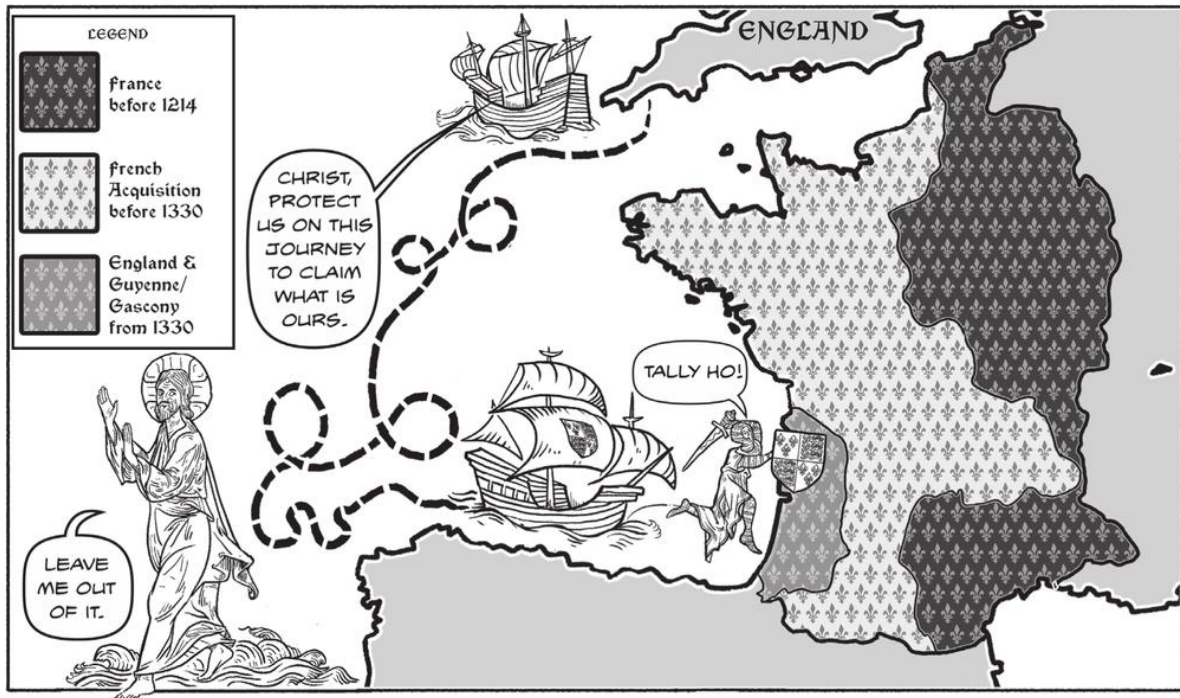


The scholars at the University of Paris were consulted and proclaimed that if a woman couldn't inherit a throne, neither could her son, a rationale codified into what is known as **Salic Law** in 1340. This meant that the closest male heir through male ancestry was Charles's cousin **Philip the Count of Valois** (1293–1350), who was duly crowned **Philip VI** in 1328.

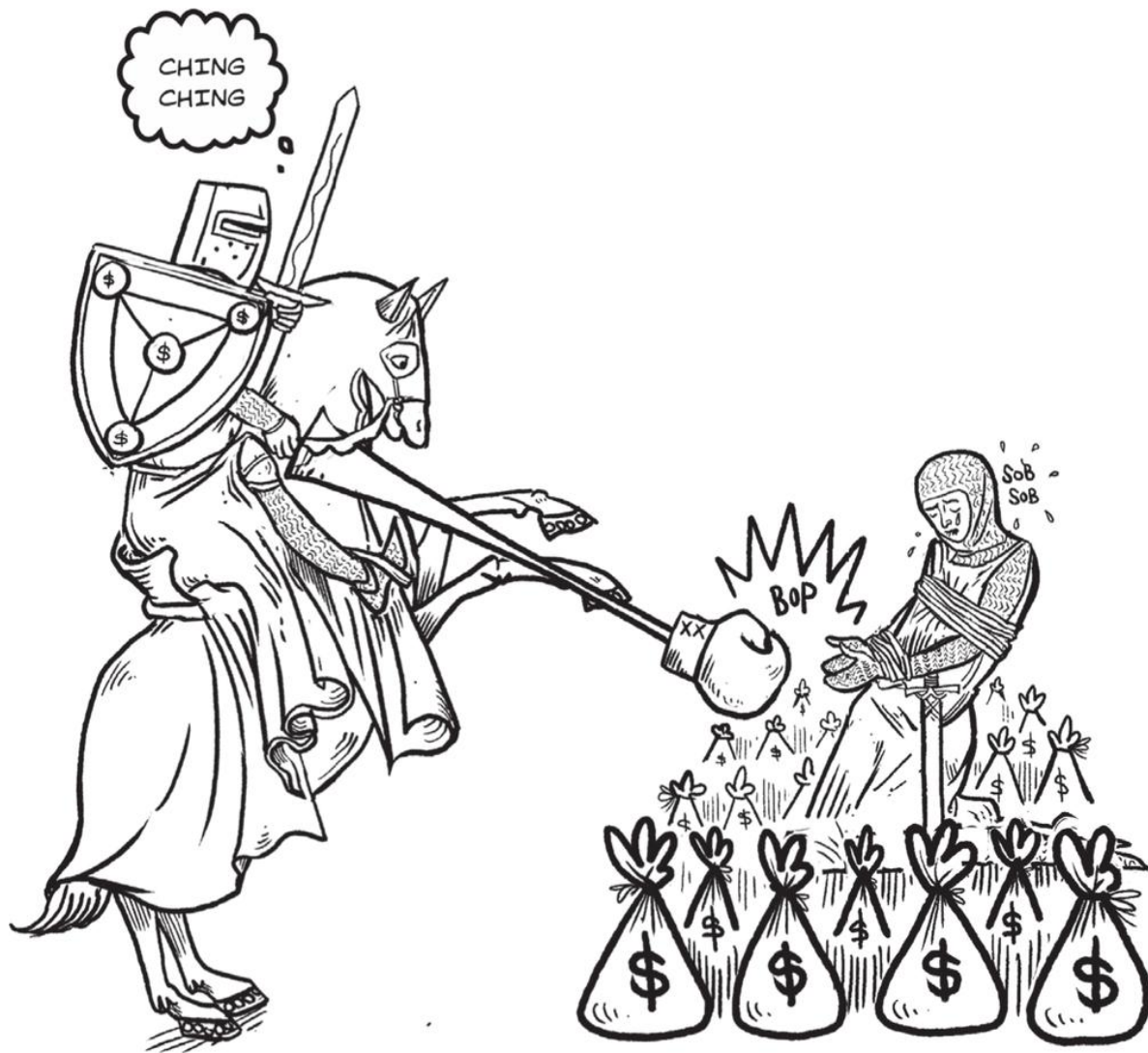


Edward III wasn't excited about this but didn't do anything until Philip VI started eating into the lands Edward held in the Guyenne region in what is now south-west France. Edward decided that if he was going to have to go down to France to fight, he might as well do it for the whole crown, and in 1340, he declared that he was King of France.

War commenced, with the French mostly trying to hit England's navy to hurt their ability to trade, and so to fund the war.



Medieval Warfare



In general, medieval warfare wasn't like warfare now, at least not for nobility. Knights wanted to capture their enemies during battle, not kill them. Captives would be taken home with the victors under arrest, then ransomed back to their houses. This raised money for the victors, which could contribute to the running of a house, or to the massive costs of war itself.

Battle horses were immensely costly and required lengthy training. Other costs included armor, swords and lances; the other horse used for riding to, but not in, battle; plus attendants to keep all of this equipment moving.

Knights sometimes died in battle, but the object was capture, an ideal encoded in the concept of **chivalry**. This wasn't a code of conduct per se,

but a set of guiding principles about a knight's duty to the Church, his Lord, and the nobility. This isn't to say that no one died in medieval wars – plenty of common people died in ditches on pikes.

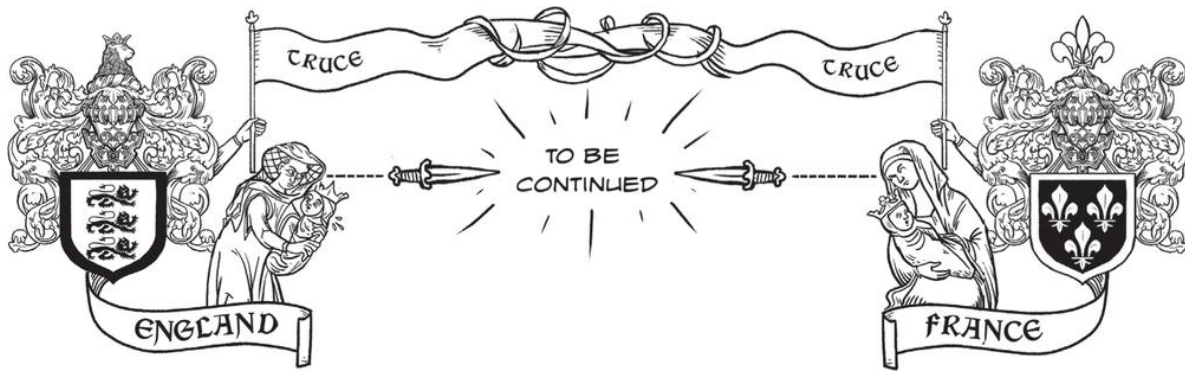


The convention of chivalric capture helps explain why the **Battle of Crécy**, one of the most famous of the war, was such a disaster. The French cavalry, eager to play rich-guy tag and make some money, ran at the English lines before the rest of the French army was ready. But the English position was set, and had a bunch of longbowmen in front of it. The longbow was a relatively new invention, so the French cavalry had no idea what it was facing and essentially charged into a slaughter with no backup.



It also explains what happened years later, when the French King **John II** (1319–64) was captured at the **Battle of Poitiers** in 1356. To get the king back, the French sent 3 million crowns and a number of hostages to England. King John then returned to France to try to drum up the necessary money to free the hostages, but he died in English captivity after his son **Louis of Anjou** (1339–84) escaped captivity and he felt honor-bound to surrender himself. Chivalry in action.

Eventually, an uneasy truce, one that would last into the 15th century, fell into place when the commoners couldn't be taxed any more, and there were two child kings on the throne. But the royals of both kingdoms were committed to coming back to the fight. In the meantime, if there was any quarrel in the rest of Europe where it was possible to take sides, they would take staunchly opposed ones. Luckily, one had just cropped up.



Following decades of complaints about the papacy's location and lavish lifestyle in Avignon, **Pope Gregory XI** (1329–78) had returned the papacy to Rome in 1376, then died a few years later. As the election of a new pope geared up, the people of Rome decided to riot to hammer home the point that they expected a Roman pontiff after a series of French ones.

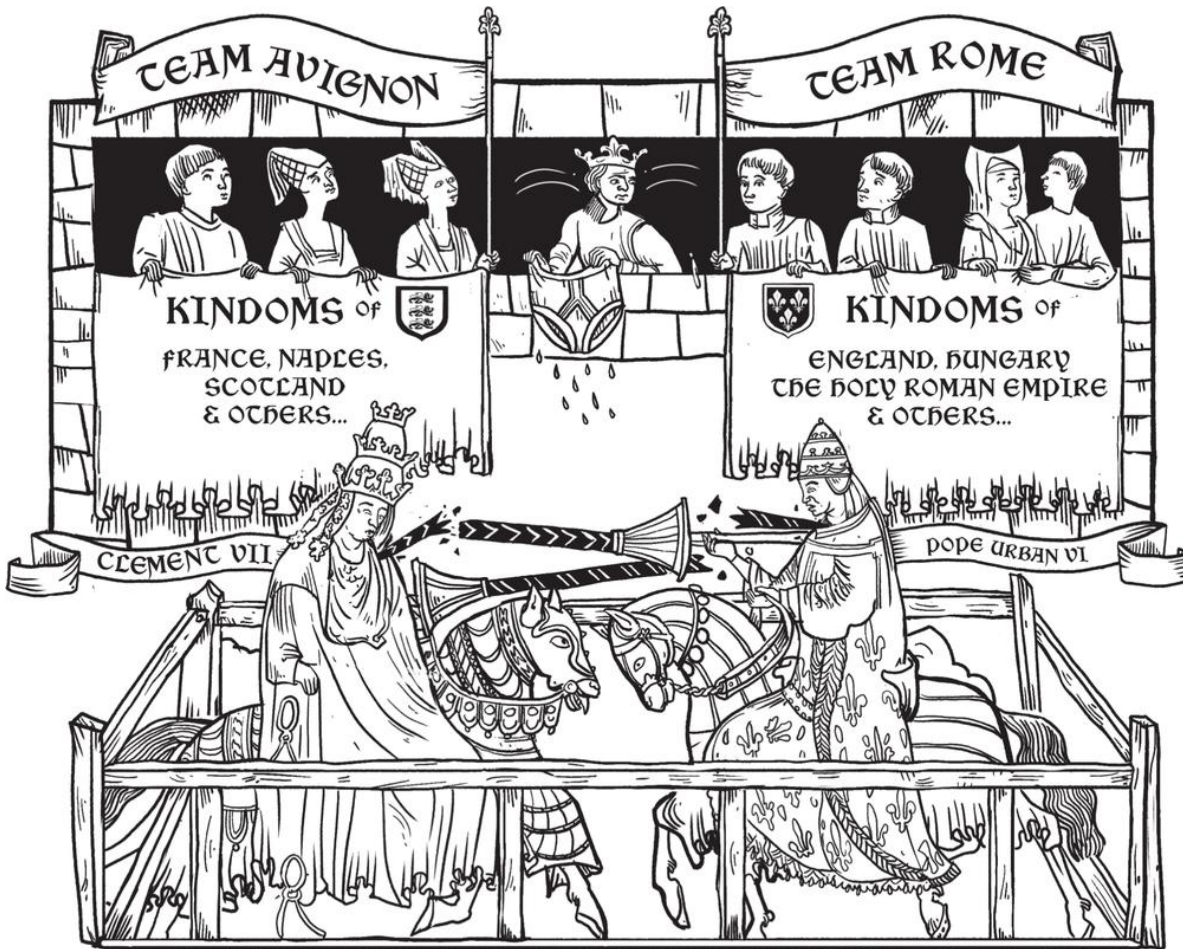


The Great Schism

Under duress, when no suitable Roman could be found, the cardinals elected **Pope Urban VI** (1318–89), a Neapolitan, and fled the city before the angry mob could figure out that a non-Roman had been elected.

Turns out, Urban was a world-class jerk. He was reactionary, deeply suspicious, and prone to fits of violence – not pope-material. Most of the cardinals immediately regretted their decision. Hoping for a do-over, they elected a new pope in September of the same year. This was **Pope** (or **Antipope**) **Clement VII** (1342–94), a native of Geneva. Seeing that both Urban and his own non-Roman background might prove problematic, Clement returned to Avignon to take up his papacy. All hell broke loose.

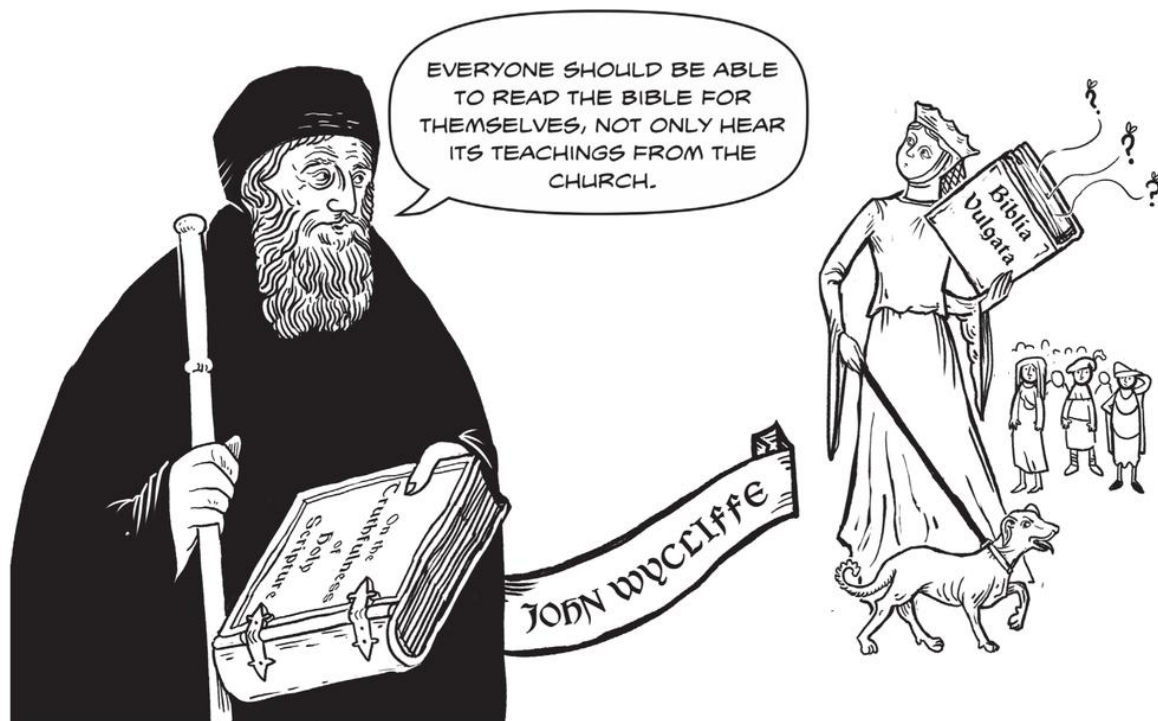
With neither man willing to step down, various kingdoms simply decided that they would pick one side or the other to support, hoping that the other would give in.



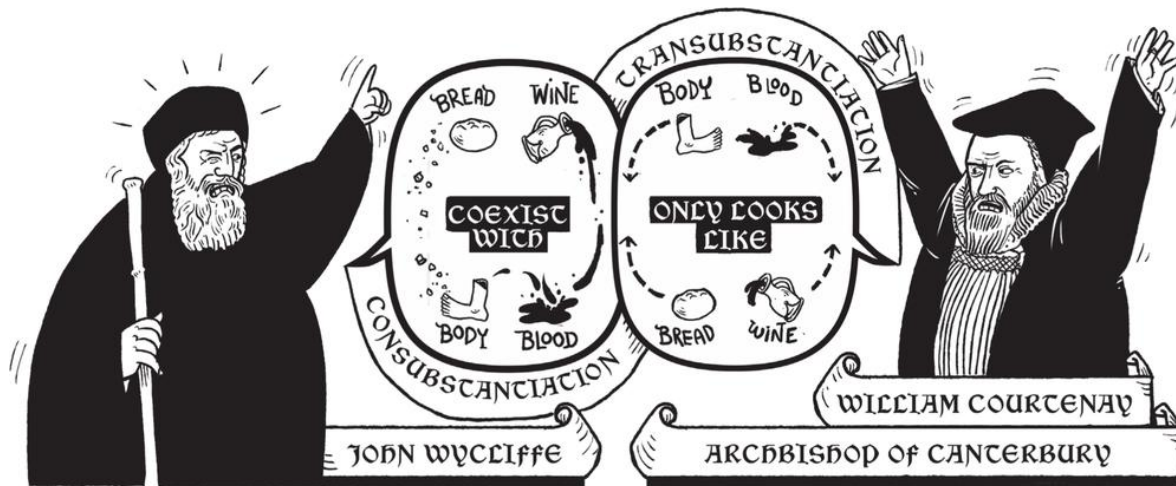
The Lollards

Overall, the reaction to the papal schism was disillusionment. People were unimpressed that not even the papacy could agree on who was in charge of their salvation. However, with the papacies distracted and squabbling, there was more room for reformers to make suggestions as to how ordinary people could see to their religious needs on their own.

This is how the Lollards came to prominence in Oxford. The Lollards followed the teachings of **John Wycliffe** (c.1320–84), a scholar and priest. Their major belief was that the most reliable way to learn about God was not through the corrupted medium of the Church, but *sola scriptura*, through the Bible, and they pushed to have it translated from Latin into English. They also called for the crown to seize and sell all Church lands.



The Church, once they cottoned on, *hated* this. They also took against Wycliffe's teaching of **consubstantiation**, as opposed to Church-approved **transubstantiation**.

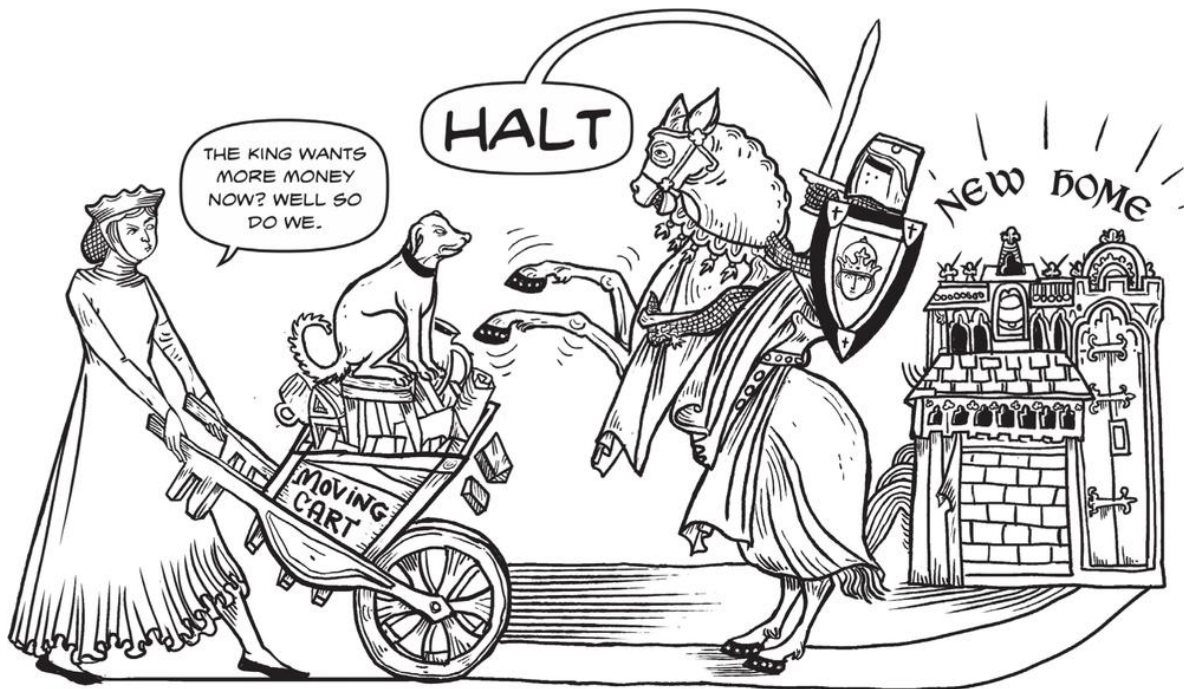


Wycliffe was condemned as a heretic, but people loved the idea that the Church was too rich and probably not a moral authority at the moment, and that they should be allowed to read the Bible on their own. The call for a religious overhaul centered on the individual appealed broadly to the English who, after losing a huge segment of the population to the Black Death, were attempting to rebuild society and their lives but facing adversity from their rulers.



Peasants' Revolts

With so many dead, the living were attempting to move into professions that had previously been closed off to them, or to charge more for their labor as there were fewer people to perform it. Serfs – unfree laborers who were bound to particular pieces of land and owed their landowners work – were interested in becoming free and seeking better prospects in a more open marketplace.

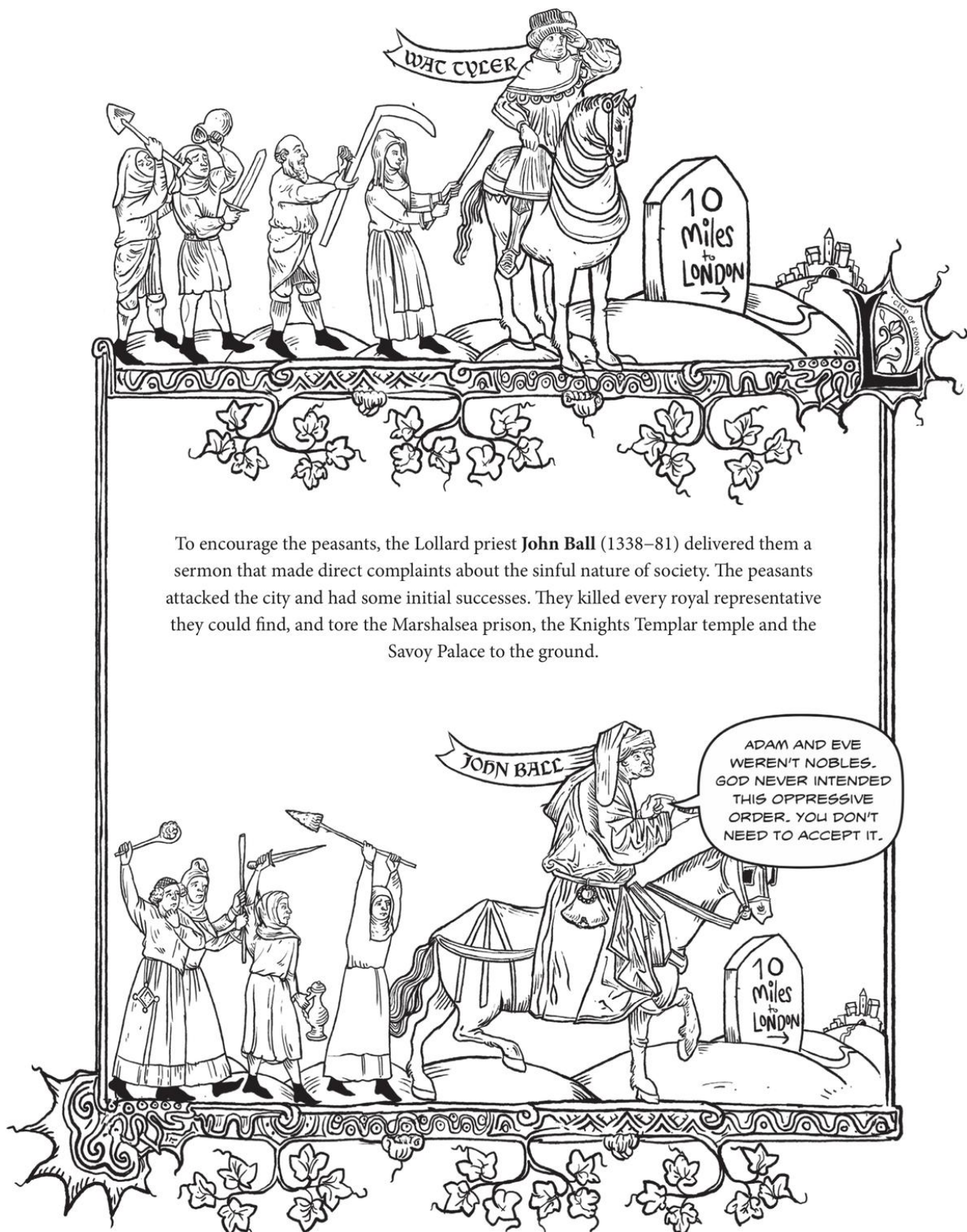


Landowners found that their profits were being eaten into. They attempted to freeze wages at pre-Plague levels and make it a crime to refuse work with an **Ordinance of Laborers** in 1348, followed by a 1351 Statute of Laborers.

At the same time, the King was leveraging heavy taxes in order to build up war coffers for yet another go at France. With a smaller post-Plague population, survivors were hit hard.

The frustrations of the common people erupted in 1381 during the **Peasants' Revolt**, when a group of rebels from the county of Kent under

the direction of **Walter “Wat” Tyler** (d. 1381) rose up and marched on London, which they saw as representative of corrupt royal authority.



The Peasants' Revolt kickstarted rebellions across the kingdom, with attacks on Church, royal, and noble property in Suffolk, Cambridge, St Albans, Beverley, Norwich, and eventually York, among other places, with peasants demanding an end to serfdom.

The well-provisioned crown and nobles were able to turn the tide, with the child-king **Richard II** (1367–1400) mocking their attempts at freedom.



The leaders of the rebellion were summarily killed, but most peasants were able to sneak back to their old lives. While the rebels didn't win their freedom, they did manage a reduction in the poll tax that was meant to fund war in France, and some pushback to the idea of constant warfare to be forever funded by a silent populace.

Even under the oppressive weight of a system that condemned them to servitude, common people nevertheless had a concept of their rights as people, and they dreamed of more.



All things considered, the 14th century wasn't the most fun time to live in Europe. With a fractured papacy, the plague recurring throughout the century, revolts from Rome to London, and an ongoing war, people could be forgiven for feeling pessimistic. The feeling of religious pessimism found expression once again in Apocalyptic thinking and sermons.

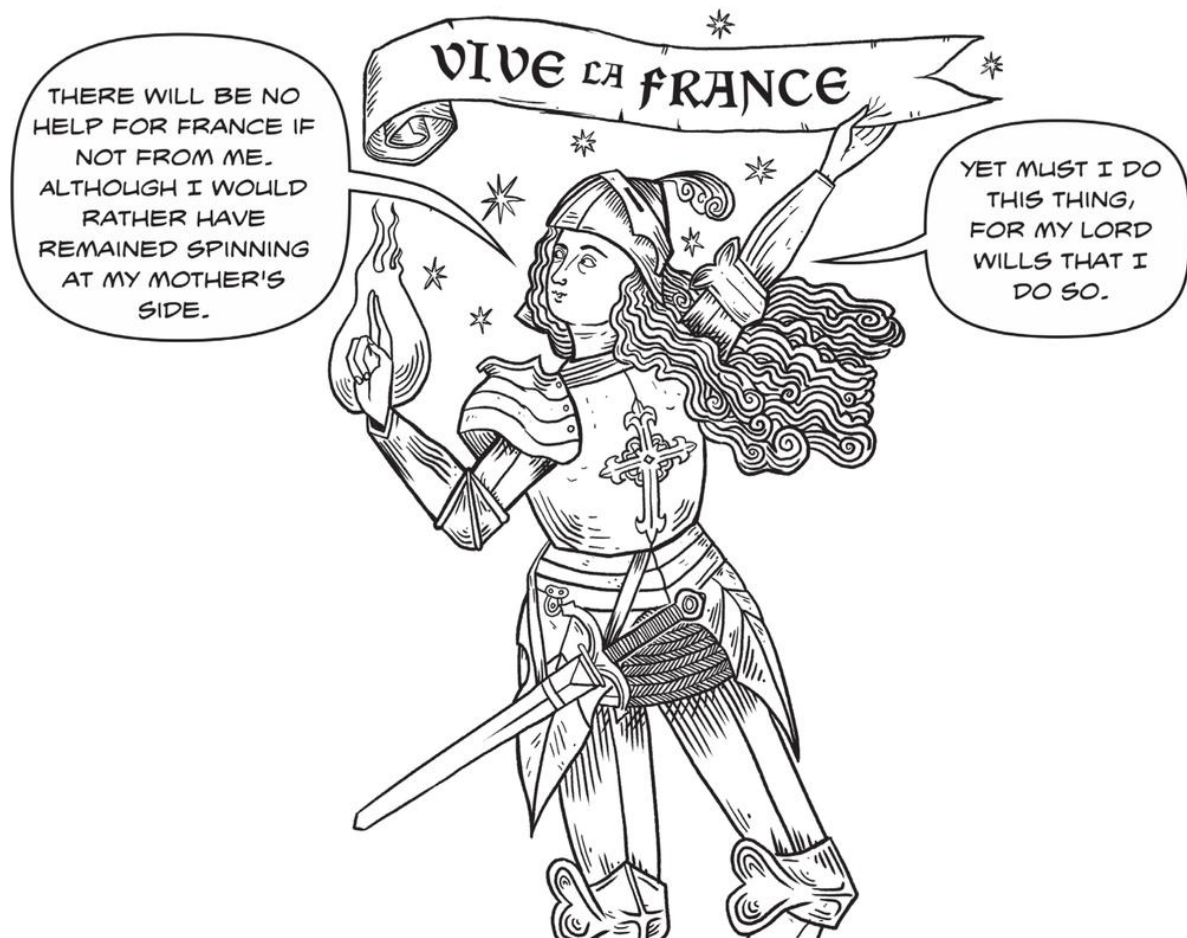


While with the benefit of hindsight, these fears look ridiculous, but a deeply religious society seeing its leadership torn apart and a series of wars, after losing a huge swathe of its population, can't be faulted for being a bit worried. Clearly though, the world did not end. Sadly, neither did things get much better as the new century began.

Joan of Arc and the End of the Hundred Years War

Meanwhile, the Hundred Years War ground on, despite the hope of abatement following the English victory at the Battle of Agincourt and signing of the Treaty of Troyes (1415).

At this point, **Joan of Arc** arrives. Born to a peasant family in Domrémy in the northeastern part of France, Joan's childhood was marred by the war and her village burned. At 16 she had visions of the Archangel Michael and various saints urging her to support the **Dauphin Charles VII** (1403–61) and drive the English from France. Convinced she had divine backing, she persuaded some soldiers to give her a garrison and to announce her at court.



Joan impressed the Dauphin with her accurate military predictions and knowledge of military technique, which she claimed to have learned through divine revelation as she herded sheep.

What Joan really offered was an opportunity to reframe the war. Suddenly this endless, violent, hated military slog wasn't simply about which rich guys inherited France. Now it was a holy war, and God had declared for France.

Soon they started winning again, routing the English from the Loire valley and opening the roads so that the Dauphin could be crowned King at Reims, as was traditional for all French kings, following his father's death.



Meanwhile, as Joan traveled to the city of Compiègne in 1430, she was ambushed and captured by the English, held prisoner and tried for heresy at Rouen, a politically motivated charge from an English side desperate to undermine the idea that the valorous French had God on their side.

On 30 May 1431 she was burned at the stake. When the fire died the English pulled back the logs to show everyone her charred corpse and prove she had not escaped. Her body was then burned two more times and the ashes scattered in the Seine so that the devout could not collect them as relics. In 1456 the papacy held a retrial of Joan, found her innocent of all charges, and declared her a martyr. She is now a saint.

Her death became a rallying point for the French, and the tides of war reversed. The last formal battles were fought in 1453; although technically it continued for another 20 years, after a century the war simply sputtered out.



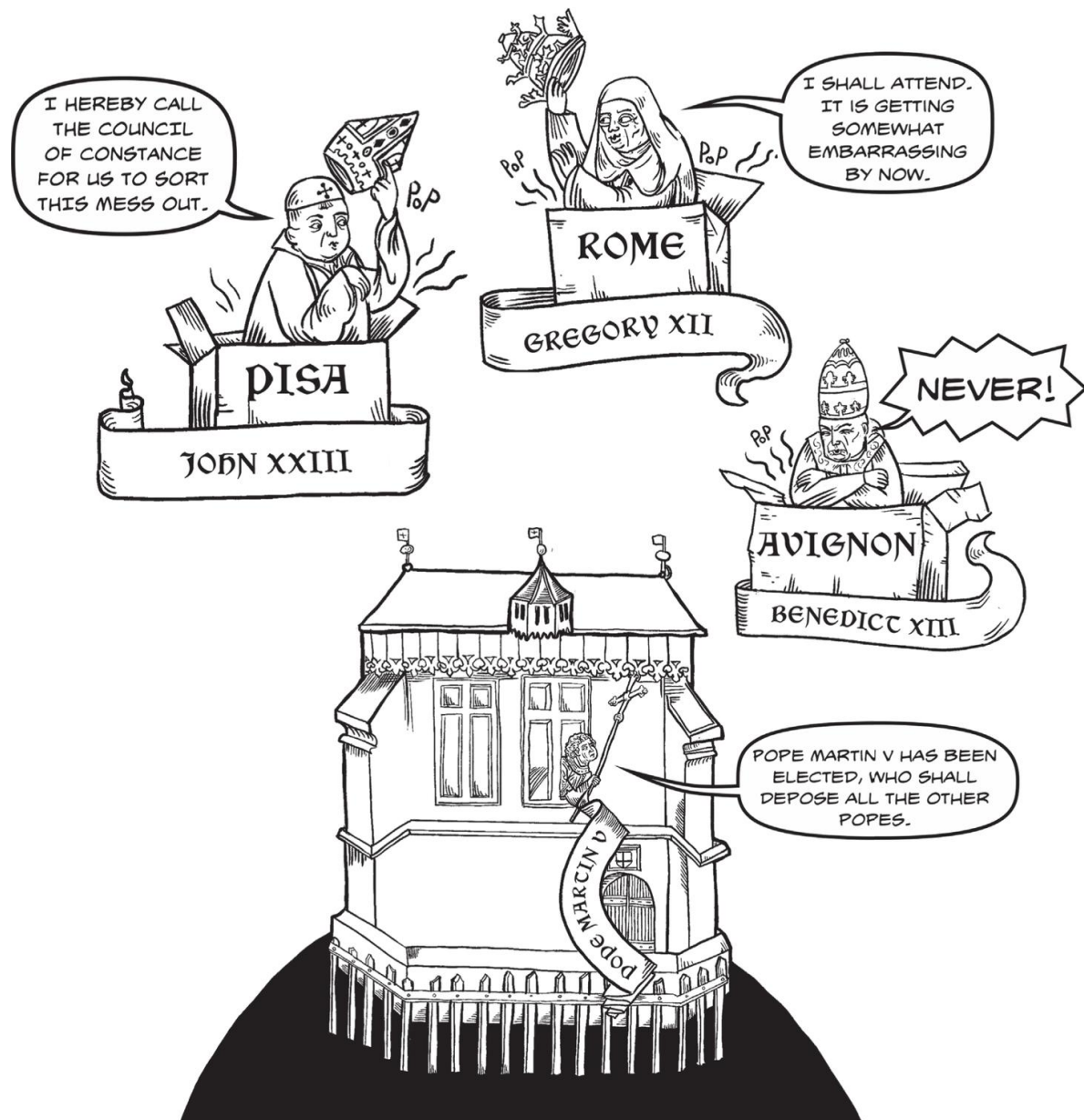
End of the Papal Schism

Meanwhile, back at the beginning of the 15th century, the papal schism – that other massive century-defining conflict – was very much still in effect.

By 1409 people were extremely over it, and the cardinals attempted to depose both the sitting popes in Avignon and Rome, and elect a new one –

Alexander V (c.1339–1410) in Pisa. Neither the Roman nor the Avignonese pope responded to this, bringing the running tally of popes to 3.

Alexander died the next year, and his successor John XXIII (c.1370–1419) called the **Council of Constance** to call the whole thing to a close. Pope Gregory XII (c.1326–1417), then Roman pontiff agreed to attend, Pope Benedict XIII (1328–1423) over in Avignon, did not. Nevertheless, the Pisan and Roman popes attended and agreed to be deposed to allow for a new election of the new Pope Martin V (1369–1431) in 1415.



Two more antipopes would be elected in Avignon, but no one took them seriously. By 1429 the last one stepped down, and Martin V was the last pope standing, firmly, in Rome.

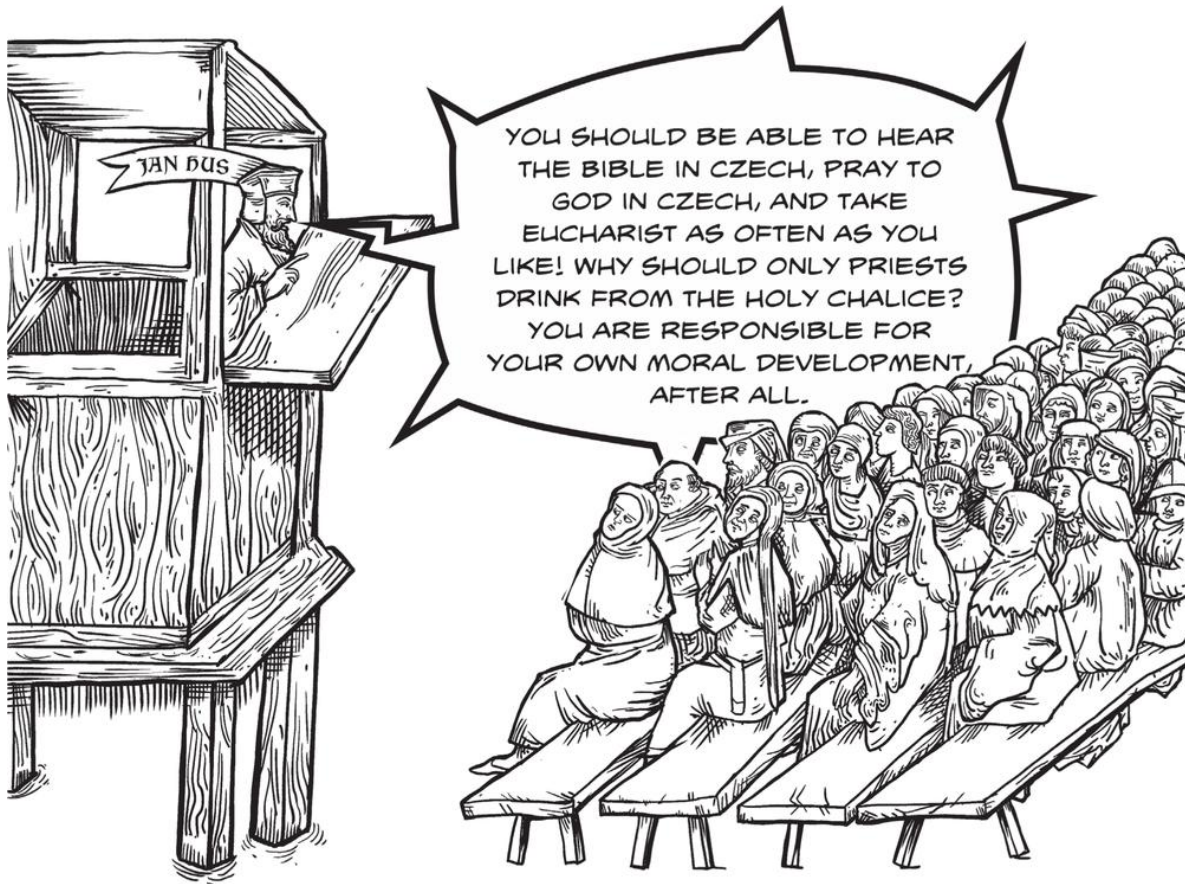
Besides being intensely weird, this entire episode had serious effects on the Catholic Church. First, it opened them up to accusations of power abuse and grasping. Second, it called into question exactly how authority was granted within the Church. Even aside from the theological questions the schism raised, a great deal of confusion remained about who had been “right” and which line of popes was legitimate.



Today we refer to the Roman line as legitimate, but this is arbitrary. If we define the Pope as the person everyone looks up to as head of the Church, during this period there were several popes. Everyone is still confused.

The Hussites

The Council of Constance may have ended one religious crisis, but it managed to start a completely new one, with the creation of a new Christian order, the Hussites. They were named for **Jan Hus** (1369–1415), a Czech priest and scholar. Hus had his own chapel in Prague called Bethlehem, where he advocated that laity should be able to take communion in both kinds – the body and blood, or bread and wine – rather than remaining restricted to bread as most were. Like the Lollards, he also felt that Bibles, prayer, and liturgy should be conducted in the vernacular (that's your mother tongue, rather than Latin).

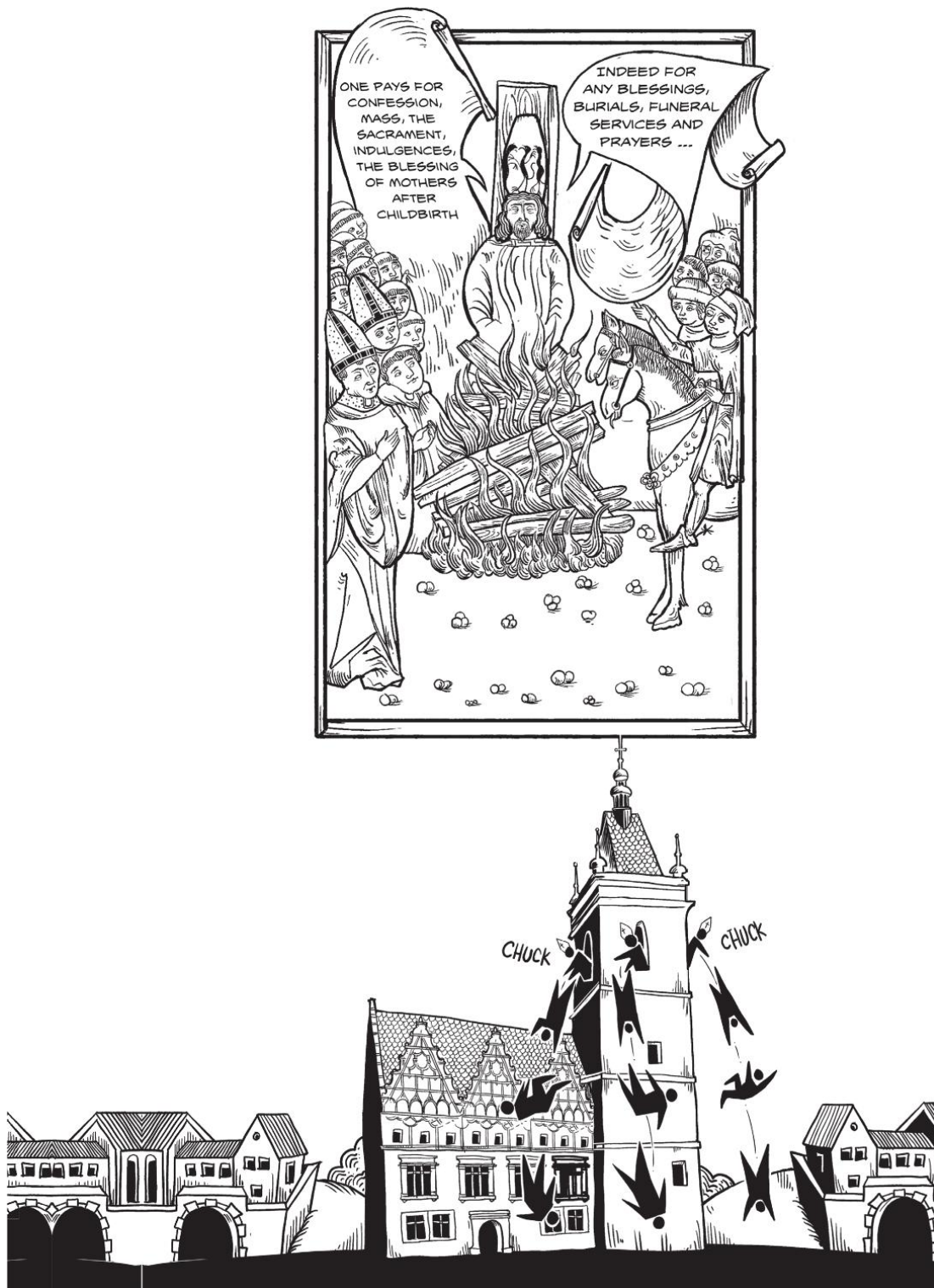


Hus also spoke out against the Church's calls for money, which made the Church angry.

He was summoned to the Council of Constance in 1414 to explain himself, and all hell broke loose. Hus was put on trial and told to recant his beliefs.

He refused, and was burned at the stake.

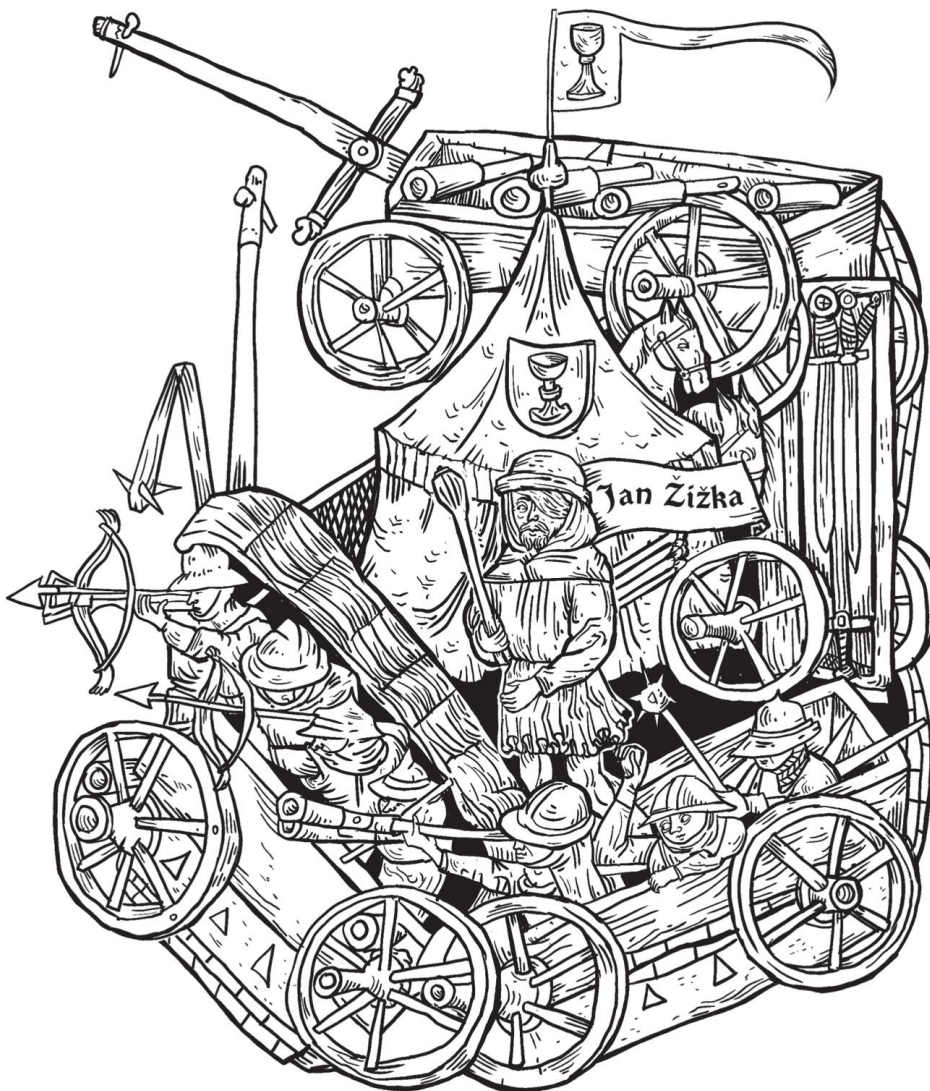
Back in Prague, Hus' followers were livid. They held that Hus was a martyr and continued their unorthodox forms of worship. By 1419 this had turned violent, and a Hussite procession entered the New Town Hall (after provocation) and threw the king's representatives out of a window, killing several, an event known as the **First Defenestration of Prague**.



By March 1420, the Church and **Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund** (1368–47) had called for a crusade “for the destruction of the Wycliffites, Hussites, and all other heretics in Bohemia”.

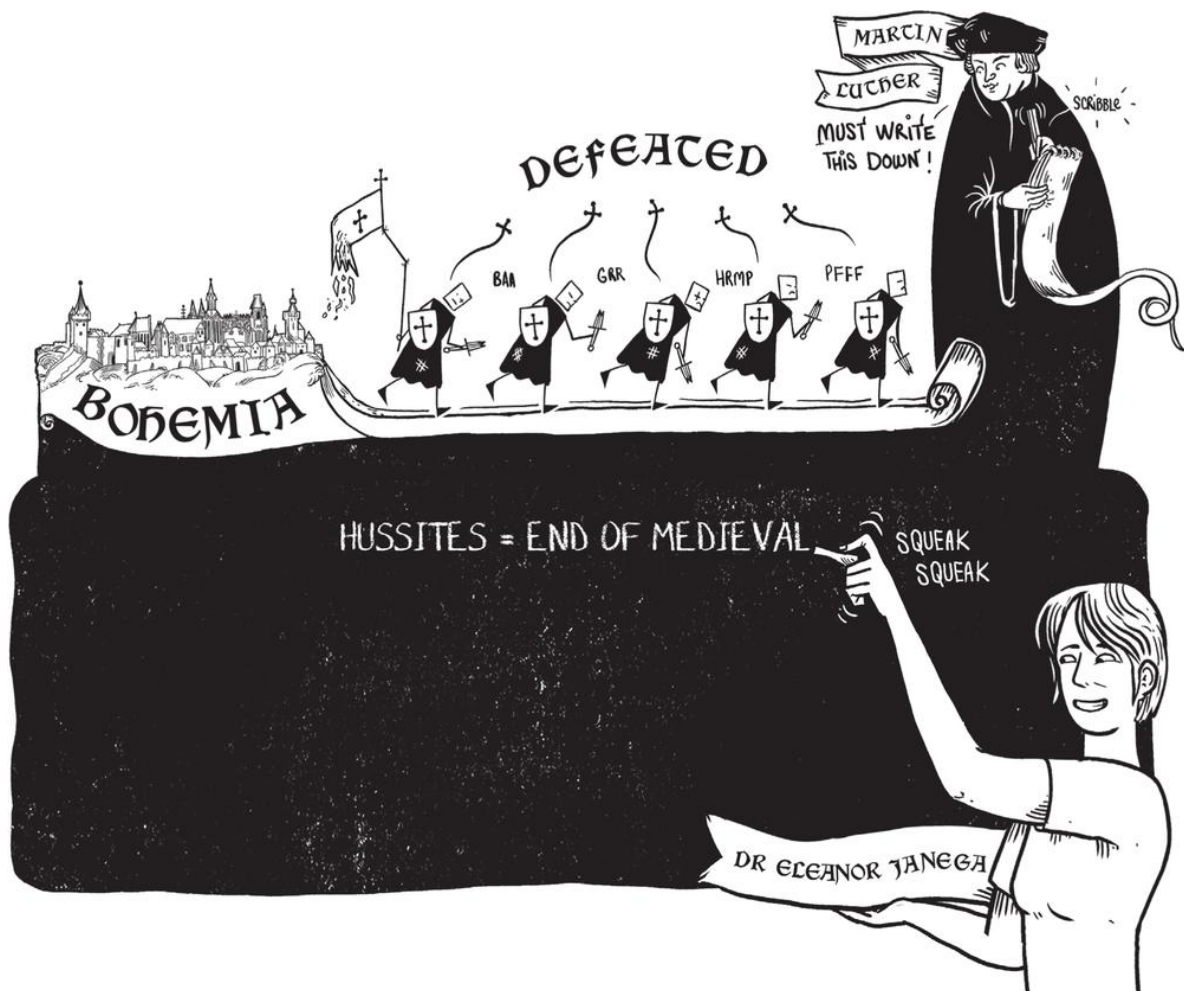
The Czechs shocked everyone with their ability to fight back. They had two advantages. First, they considered themselves to be fighting a holy war against false Christians, not simply fighting because their king made them. Second, they had incredibly good military tactics, thanks to the leadership of **Jan Žižka** (1360–1424), who came up with the idea of the **Wagenberg**, or wagon-city: the Hussites would put their carts around them as a mobile defense system and fight their opponents from its (relative) safety. The Hussites let their enemies throw themselves against the wagons and shoot arrows into them, until they were exhausted and morale was low. Then they would rush out to attack. As this was holy war, they took no prisoners.

The upshot was that the Hussites survived the crusade and an additional four crusades called in 1421, '23, '26, and '31.



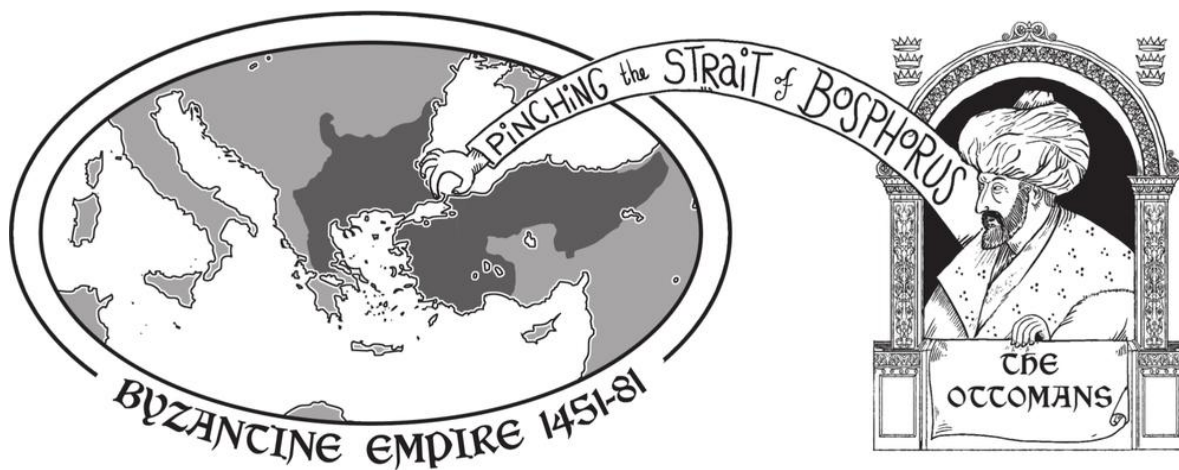
On 5 July 1436, the Holy Roman Empire gave up. Bohemia remained Hussite until the 17th century. A victory like the Hussites' was previously unheard of, but proved that it was possible to defeat the might of the Church and the Holy Roman Empire, something which Protestants would take to heart in the next century under Martin Luther. Clearly then, medieval people didn't meekly accept what the Church wanted; they questioned authority and fought for what they believed in.

For historians working on Central Europe, this marks the end of the medieval period. If we consider the Church's control of Europe to be the hallmark of medievalness, then the Hussites broke it.



The Rise of the Ottomans and Fall of Constantinople

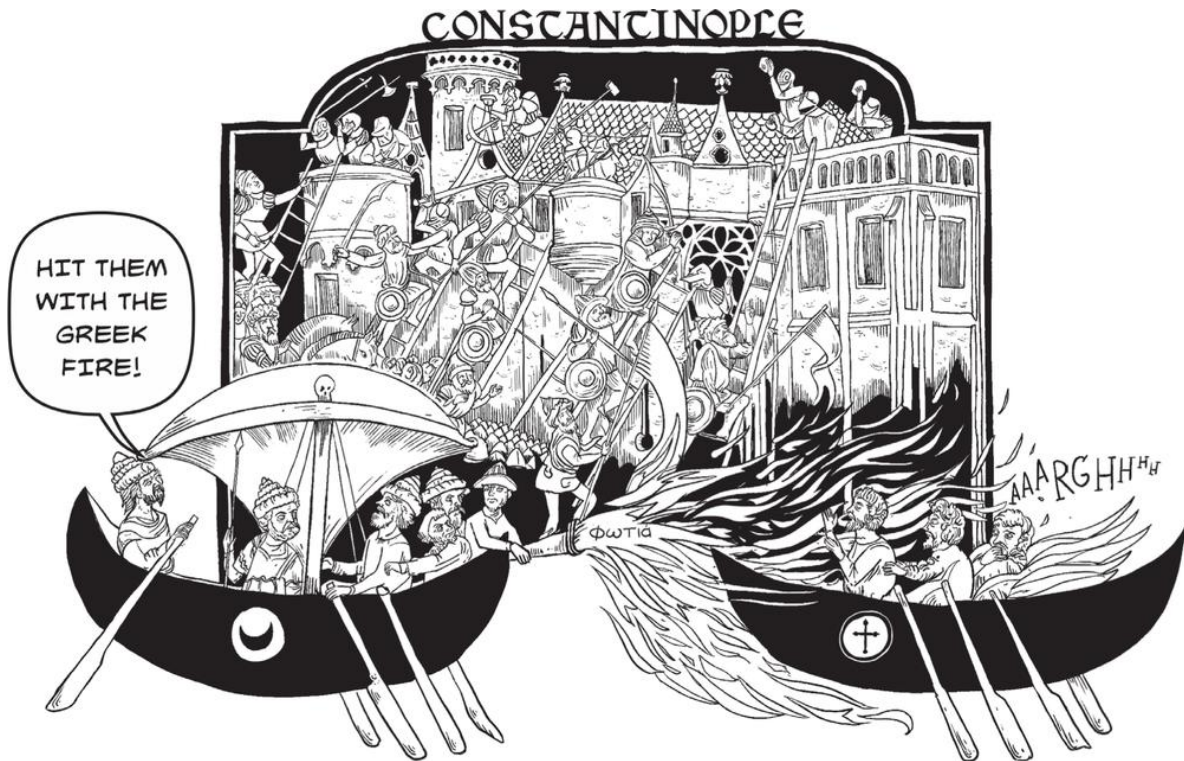
The Catholic Church was hardly the only facet of Christendom under attack. In Constantinople, the Eastern Roman Empire was enjoying its last days, while the Ottoman **Sultan Mehmed II**, “the Conqueror” (1432–81), amassed an impressive army and mass of territory. Named after Osman I (d. 1324), the Ottomans had taken advantage of the crumbling power of Eastern Rome, and the factional independent Turkish principalities that had sprung up on the Anatolian peninsula. Mehmed too sought to expand, and built a series of fortresses on the Bosphorus Strait to control trade, naming one Boğazkesen, which roughly translates to “strait-blocker” or “throat-cutter”.



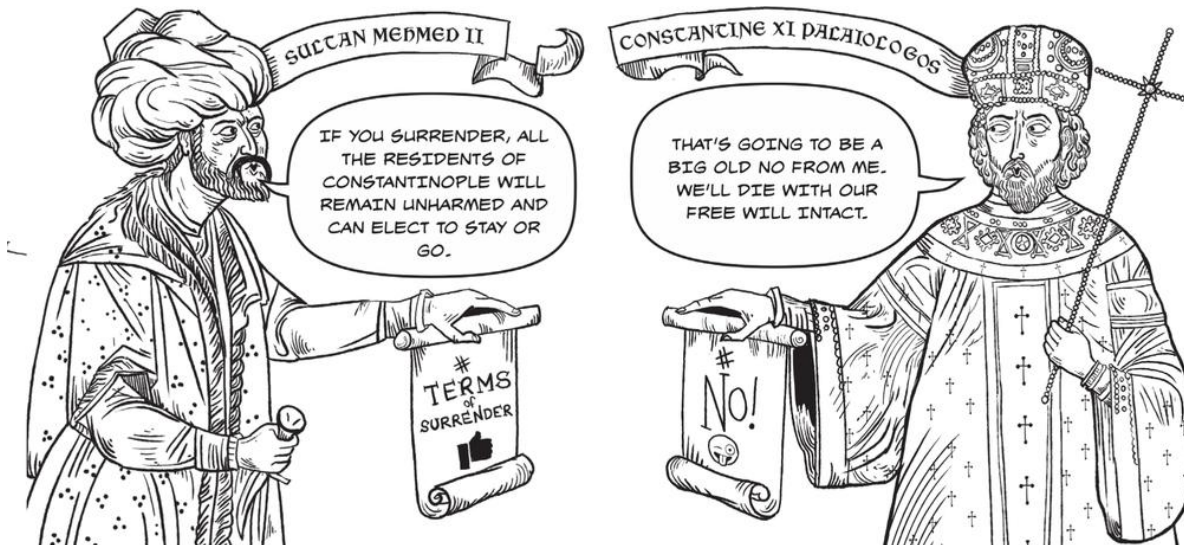
The Genoese with their ports in the Black Sea were worried, and **Emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos** (1405–53) began to sweat. He wrote for help to **Pope Nicholas V** (1397–1455), who was eager to distance himself from the embarrassment surrounding the Hussites in Bohemia. Plus, the Emperor stated willingness to reunite the Orthodox East with the Catholic West if the Ottomans could be curbed.

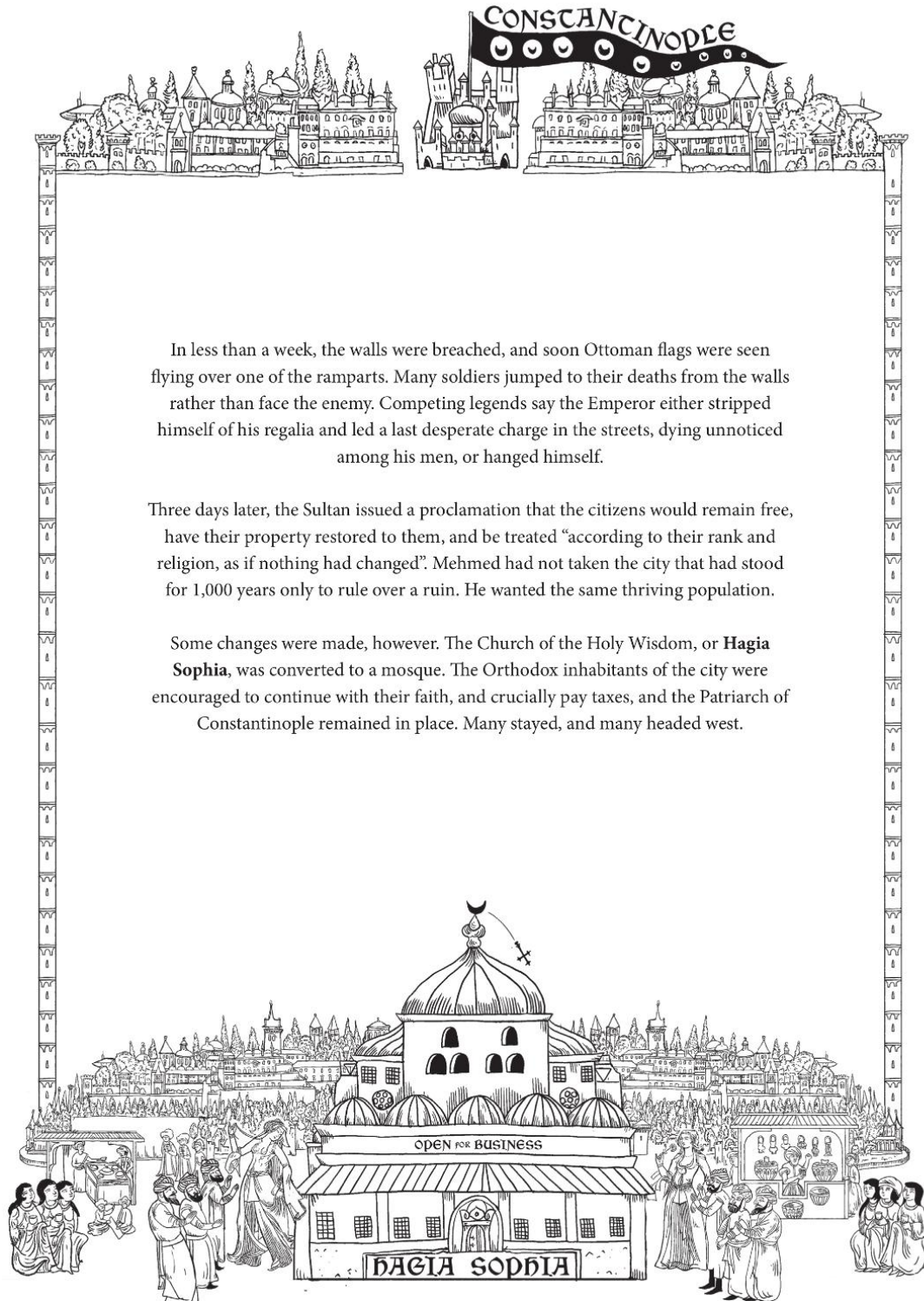


What Constantine didn't realize was that Nicholas's ability to amass troops didn't match the grandeur of his position. With the West's forces depleted by the Hundred Years War and years of unsuccessful anti-Hussite crusades, and the East's by earlier losses to Ottoman troops, they numbered 7,000 soldiers when battle began. The major response came from the Italian city-states who had trade interests in the region and wanted to maintain a Christian Constantinople to back them up. The Ottomans, in contrast, had tens of thousands of troops, all the territory surrounding the city, a fleet of hundreds of ships, and cannons.



As a siege wore on, Sultan Mehmed wrote to the Emperor with an option. He would allow the Emperor to leave with all his possessions, and take up an uncontested position as the Governor of the Peloponnese.





In less than a week, the walls were breached, and soon Ottoman flags were seen flying over one of the ramparts. Many soldiers jumped to their deaths from the walls rather than face the enemy. Competing legends say the Emperor either stripped himself of his regalia and led a last desperate charge in the streets, dying unnoticed among his men, or hanged himself.

Three days later, the Sultan issued a proclamation that the citizens would remain free, have their property restored to them, and be treated "according to their rank and religion, as if nothing had changed". Mehmed had not taken the city that had stood for 1,000 years only to rule over a ruin. He wanted the same thriving population.

Some changes were made, however. The Church of the Holy Wisdom, or **Hagia Sophia**, was converted to a mosque. The Orthodox inhabitants of the city were encouraged to continue with their faith, and crucially pay taxes, and the Patriarch of Constantinople remained in place. Many stayed, and many headed west.

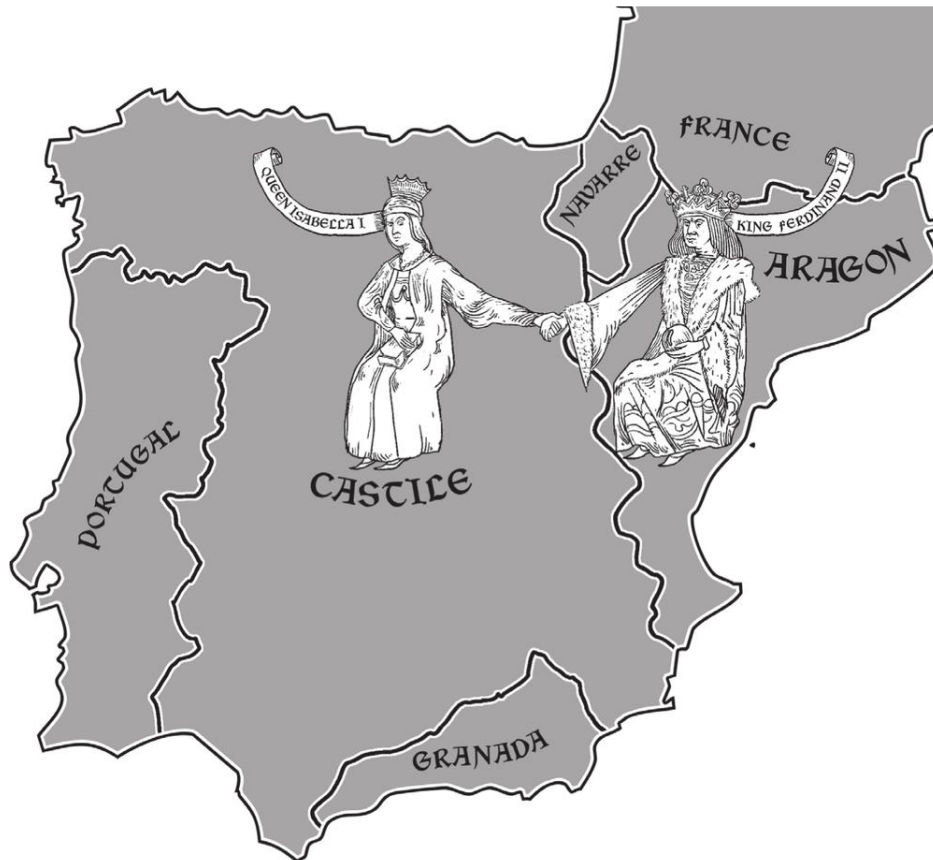
The Reconquista, Fall of Granada, and Spanish Unification

The fall of what was the last incarnation of Rome had cultural and psychological effects even on those who had never set foot in Constantinople. Christendom saw itself as having been born of and defined by the Roman Empire. The fall of Constantinople severed the last vestiges of this mythos.

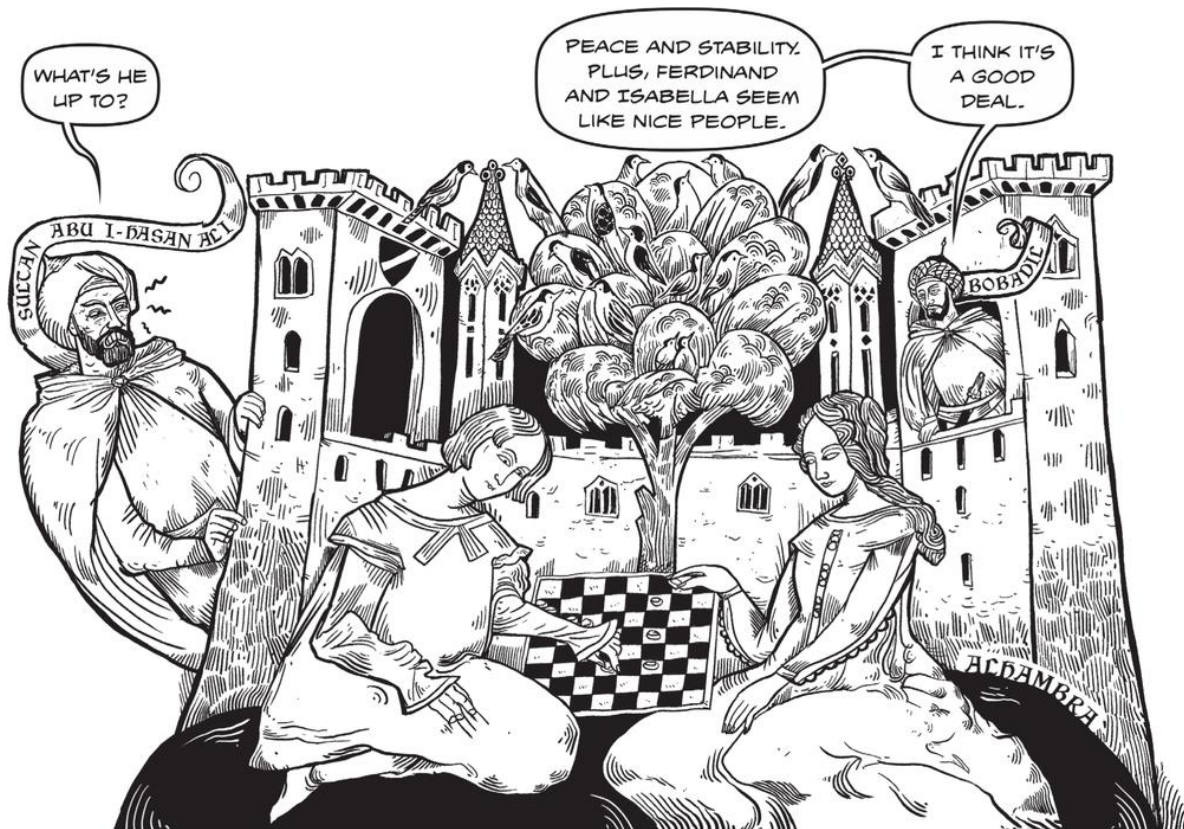
For historians, the fall of Constantinople is a similarly big deal. For those working on Byzantium, or Orthodox Christian Europe, this is often where the medieval period is seen to end. If we consider that it began with the fall of Western Rome, then the collapse of Rome in the East provides a neat bookend.



While the borders of Christendom were shrinking in the East and in Central Europe, elsewhere Catholics were pushing outward. On the Iberian Peninsula, the Catholic monarchs **Queen Isabella I of Castile** (1451–1504) and **King Ferdinand II of Aragon** (1452–1516) had united much of what would become Spain under their rule. The last holdout was the Muslim **Emirate of Granada** to the south: all that remained of the once mighty Caliphate of Córdoba. Isabella and Ferdinand were coming for it.



The time was ripe. Granada's industry was declining, and the reigning **Sultan Abu l-Hasan Ali** (d. 1485) had been challenged by his own son Abu Abdallah Muhammad, or **Bobadil** (c.1460–1533), who declared himself Emir Muhammed XII. Ferdinand and Isabella used Bobadil as a sort of proxy. He promised the Muslim Granadines peace under his watch as a Duke to the Catholic monarchs. They would not have independence, but would enjoy a return to stability.



Meanwhile the Catholics continued to take more territory. In 1487 they took the chief Granadine port town of Málaga, sold the Muslim citizens as slaves, killed all the Christians who they saw as traitors, and ransomed the Jews to their fellows in Castile. With no port to get reinforcements through, this was the zbeginning of the end for Granada.

On 25 November 1491, after an 8-month siege on the city of Granada, the **Treaty of Granada** was signed, which handed the city over to the Catholics. All Granadines were guaranteed their safety, a right to their own homes, and religious tolerance. No mosques were to be damaged. No Christians were to enter the houses of Muslims or abuse them in any way. Within a few decades these promises would all be revoked, but for now, with these nominal safeties in place, a significant proportion of the population remained Muslim. There would never again be an Emir or Sultan in what had been al-Andalus. The Reconquista was complete.



For many historians, especially those of the Iberian Peninsula, the end of the Reconquista marks – you guessed it – the end of the medieval period. We can consider that the medieval period on the peninsula has two phases: the 300 years of Visigothic rule during the early medieval period, and then 700-some years of varying degrees of Muslim control. With a decisive outcome, the thinking goes, the era comes to a close.

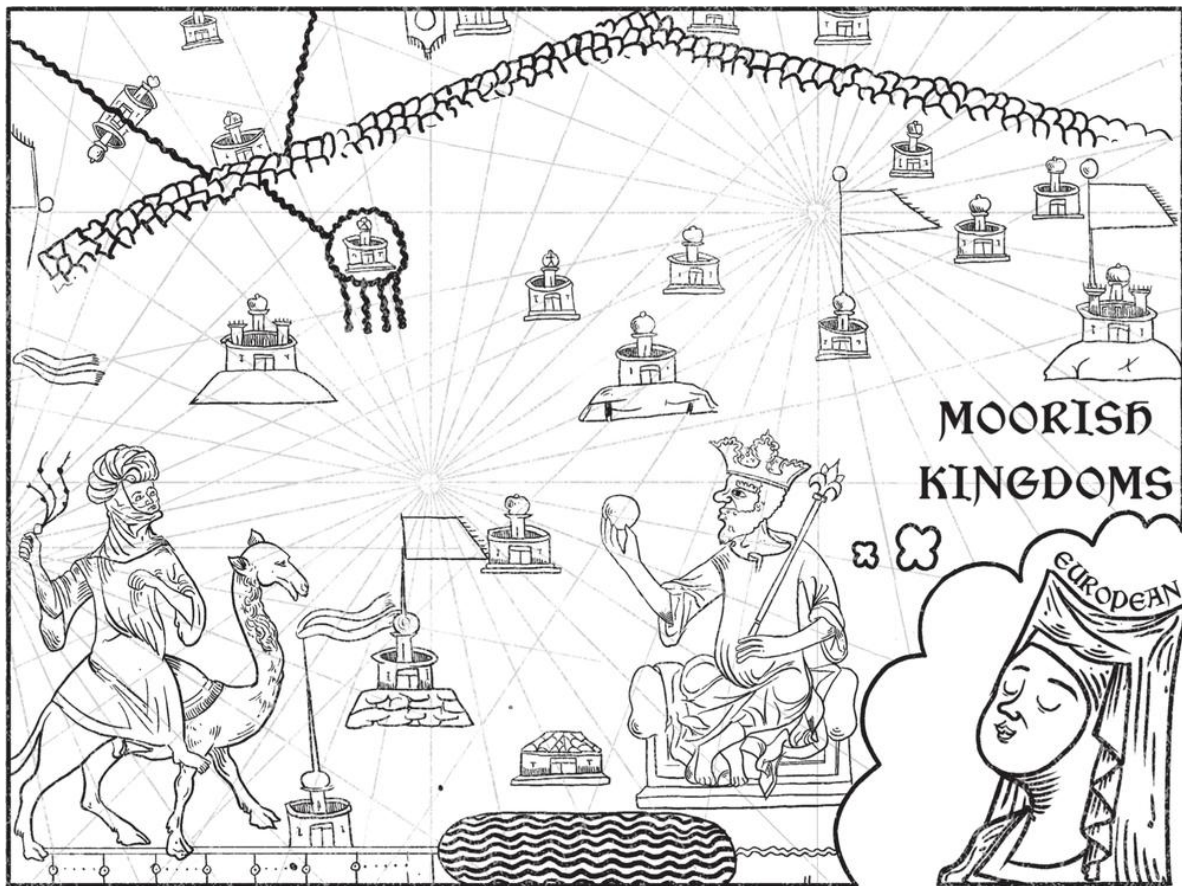
In the new era, Ferdinand and Isabella turned their attention to “cleansing” their population of dissidents during the Inquisition, and conquering, torturing, and enslaving people in new lands across the ocean. They were sat on the thrones of what we can recognize as modern Spain. It is this unification that makes the era modern.



Expansions into Africa and the Beginnings of the Slave Trade

Portugal had for some time set its sights on procuring forced labor from overseas. As Ferdinand's intentions towards the people of Málaga show, the Iberian Peninsula had a tradition of enslavement. Slaves often came from differing religious groups: Christians took Jewish and Muslim slaves, referring to the latter with the catch-all "**Moors**"; and Muslims returned the favor, enslaving Christians taken in battle. Many slaves arrived on the peninsula as a result of skirmishes in northern Africa and were generally from backgrounds that we would recognize as Berber or Arabic.

As a result of trading routes and ongoing military skirmishes, medieval Europeans knew a lot about Saharan Africa and its inhabitants. They knew about the wonders of Timbuktu, and the rich trade routes across the desert.



What Europeans were unsure of was how far these impressive “Moorish” kingdoms stretched, and how they could be exploited.

Infante Don Henrique of Portugal, better known as **Prince Henry the Navigator**, (1394–1460) decided to sail down the West-African coast to see how far the kingdoms of the Moors extended. A perk would be any slaves they could capture along the way; “Moors” were seen as fair game because of their religion.



Following Henry's initial exploration, during the 1430s and '40s, the Portuguese conducted a series of slave raids down the West Coast. Eventually, they realized they could enter into trade partnerships with African nobility and slavers on the continent. Soon Henry was selling slaves out of the port of Lagos on Portugal's south coast. This started getting sketchy, in the eyes of some Catholics, because these African slaves, still *called* Moors, didn't exhibit any of the hallmarks of Islamic faith. This was no longer about a holy war.



The Pope condoned the practice, so long as slaves were converted to Catholicism. The Pope's "moral reasoning" was that, although these slaves would lose their freedom, they gained their immortal soul. Bolstered, the Portuguese performed baptisms in Africa, and returned home with ships of fellow Christians for sale.



In Portugal these new African slaves were in great demand; they were more expensive than Moorish slaves, but already Christianized! Besides, paid laborers were in short supply in sparsely populated Portugal. Therefore, slaves represented an excellent investment if you could see your way to dehumanizing them.

Meanwhile, Prince Henry controlled a royal monopoly on sub-Saharan slaves, and the impoverished crown was making a tidy sum. So the slaves came.

Unfreedom had been common in Europe throughout the medieval period, but this relationship with slaves was something new. Serfs weren't free and couldn't negotiate the terms of their work or move down the road without permission, but they also couldn't be uprooted from their homes and families.

While people did take slaves in tit-for-tat raids with Muslims, in general it was frowned upon for Christians to keep Christian slaves. Now sub-Saharan Africans were somehow Christians but could never be freed. This new conception of slavery, and the expansion into areas previously unknown to Europeans, is often pointed to by historians as – yes – the end

of the medieval period. Some refer to this new time period of **chattel slavery**, interocean voyages, and far-flung European colonialism as the **Age of Discovery**. Others simply call it the **early modern period**.



Europe-wide Art Movements and the Myth of the Renaissance

Right now, you might be wondering when the **Renaissance** comes into our history. After all, the rediscovery of classical art and philosophy is generally taught to us as the thing that ended the medieval period.

The first time we see the term “*rinascita*” is in artist and seller **Giorgio Vasari’s** (1511–74) *The Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. It is a who’s who of 16th-century Italianate artists that explains why their work is the best and most refined the world has ever seen.

Vasari also originated the use of “Gothic” to mean medieval in relation to art and architecture – not as a style with its own relative merits but as an insult. Barbaric! And worst of all *German!* (Never mind that the style is Europe-wide.) Vasari was against any art that wasn’t: a) contemporary, and b) Italianate.



The “Renaissance” is a problematic idea because it focuses on Italian art, while equally amazing art was being made across Europe, sometimes earlier.

In the Low Lands, **Jan van Eyck** (c.1390–1441) painted with the clarity and perspective that we see as hallmarks of the Renaissance, decades before Michelangelo was born.

Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450–1516), a contemporary of Michelangelo, produced intricate works like the “Garden of Earthly Delights”.

The German **Albrecht Dürer**’s (1471–1528) paintings were so lifelike that he once dueled with another artist who couldn’t believe he used a regular paintbrush for the ultra-real hair in his portraits.



If Italianate painters ended the medieval style because they were in touch with the classics, how do their northern counterparts fit into the story?

We also often hear of the Renaissance as characterized by the “rebirth of classical philosophy”, or the “discovery of the individual”.

After the fall of Constantinople, many Greeks moved into spheres of Italianate influence, bringing with them texts, including unseen works by Aristotle and Plato. However, Aristotelian and Platonian philosophy circulated throughout the medieval period: they were the backbone of university education, and informed pretty much every Church theologian. Can you call it a *rebirth* if some new books appear from authors everyone is already obsessed with?



As for the “discovery of the individual”, the Middle Ages are littered with autobiographies. Let’s not forget Abelard’s insistence that his students wept in the street when he was castrated. Can you say that man didn’t have a firm grasp of himself?



The Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (1316–78) wrote one too. And wanna-be holy women like **Margery Kempe** (c.1373–c.1438) wrote travel memoirs recounting their mystical religious experiences. Medieval people knew themselves as individuals.



We talk about the Renaissance as a distinctive era because of **historiography**, and more specifically because of two dudes: **Jean**

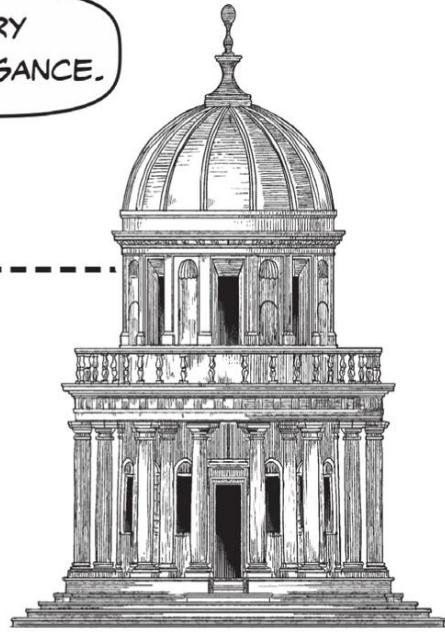
Baptiste Louis George Seroux d'Agincourt (1730–1814) and **Voltaire** (1694–1778).

Seroux, inspired by Vasari, was the first to use the term “Renaissance” as a movement, which he applied to a new kind of art and architecture that borrows from classical forms. Voltaire ran with this idea. He dubbed the medieval period an **Age of Faith**, in stark contrast to his new **Age of Reason**. Certain of his own cleverness, anything he liked was “rational”, and part of the “Renaissance”, and anything he didn’t like was irrational and medieval.

This approach still colors our relationship to the Renaissance and the medieval period. The idea of a “rebirth” from a dark era does our understanding of history a disservice. It’s just another attempt to mark out a clear distinction between periods of time, when there is no one correct answer.



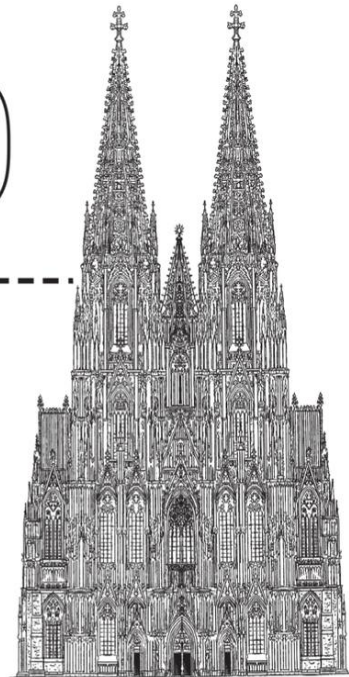
VERY
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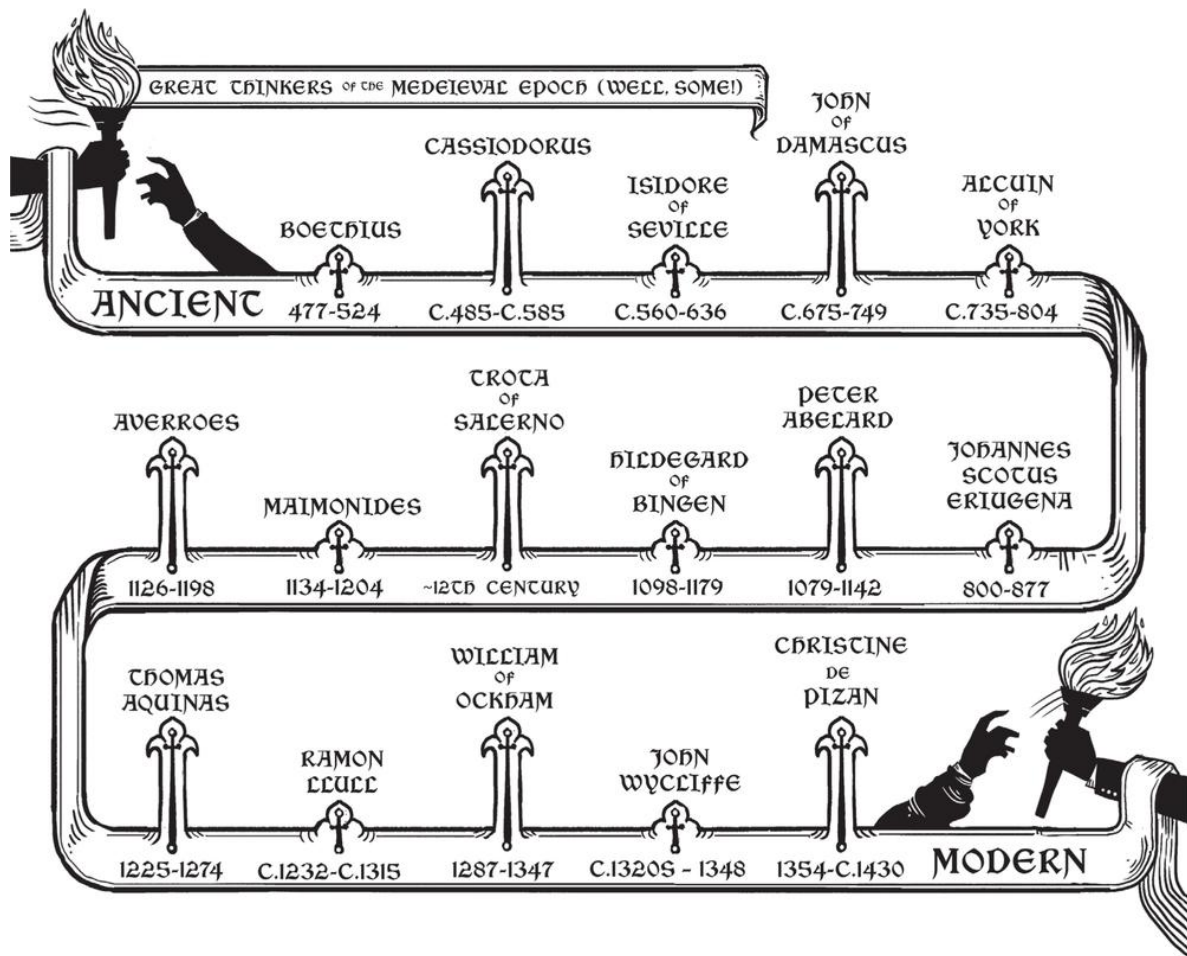
UGH!
HOW
MEDIEVAL.



KÖLNER DOM

Conclusions

The terms “medieval” and “modern” are *our* way of sorting the world out. They can be useful but only if we bear in mind that they’re subjective, flexible simplifications of complex sociopolitical developments. The Middle Ages, then, are a rich, thousand-year period of history from which we can draw these broad themes: the growth of the Church; monasticism; the rise of cities; the creation of the university system; philosophical movements; and the imperial papal rivalry. This was a time of inquiry and change, which helped to create the conditions that would make modern thought possible.



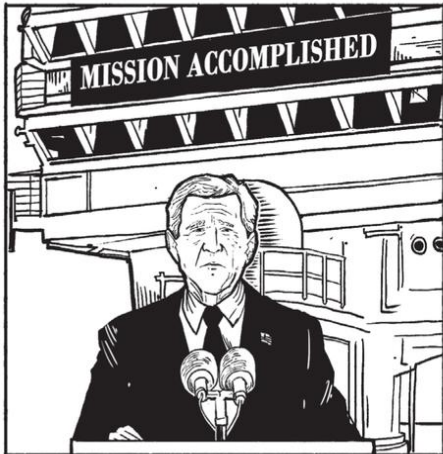
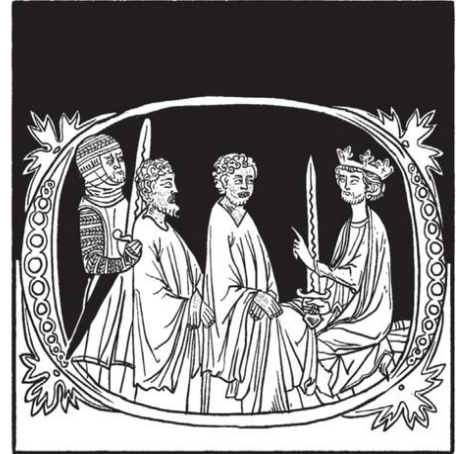
Often written off because of the religiosity of the period, it’s important to question our assumption that religion and thought are diametrically

opposed. The Church was arguably the biggest supporter of academic thought in the medieval period, which gave us great ideas in philosophy, law, natural sciences, and medicine.

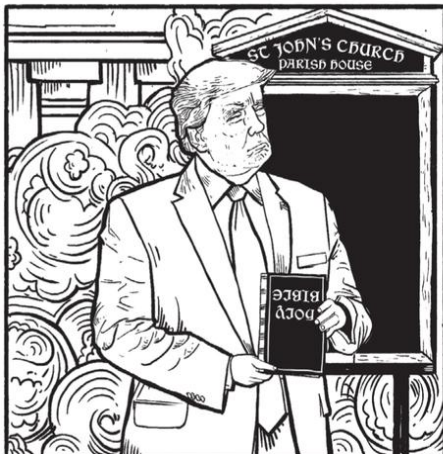
Other people drag out the “Dark Ages” label by pointing to all the barbaric things that happened during this time, like the Inquisition or witch trials – *which didn’t happen in the medieval period*. As we’ve seen, though, it did feature many wars fought in the petty interests of the rich, violent oppression of Jewish and Muslim people, second-class treatment of women, and more.



But the main structures
of the medieval world are
still present now.



And, because of the
colonialism of the
modern period, medieval
European views were
exported around the
world – not always for the
best.



If we see “darkness” as
unique to the Middle
Ages, it stops us from
confronting the terrible
things that our society
and time period are
responsible for.



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO VICTOR AMBRUS.



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is a medieval historian specialising in sexuality, apocalypticism, propaganda, and the urban experience in the medieval period generally, and in late medieval Bohemia in particular.

She teaches at the London School of Economics. Her focus is on communicating medieval history for a general audience, and to that end she blogs at going-medieval.com, and has written for *The Washington Post*, *BBC History*, and *History Today*, among others.

She can also be found hosting medieval history programmes on History Hit TV.

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has drawn his way into many roles as a motion graphics animator, illustrator, storyboard artist, cartoonist, visual facilitator, media trainer & consultant. For 10 years Neil worked with Channel 4's *Time Team* alongside the country's leading historical experts and film makers. He has since worked on many historical documentaries for BBC, Channel 4, ITV, National Geographic, and History Channel, to name a few.

Neil has illustrated the children's book *Hunting for History: Saxon Gold*, worked as a scribe/visual facilitator for the English Institute of Sport in preparation for the Japan Olympics, collaborated on The Corpse Project for the Wellcome Trust, made a series of illustrations for the Alzheimer Society and contributed to various Arts Council England funded projects that champion feminism. In between illustration and TV projects he teaches.

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