Prelude to the Modern World
Excerpted from The Civilization of the West by James M. Powell (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), pgs. 131-94

There is a strong tendency to stress the chaotic conditions that existed in Western Europe in the aftermath of the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. Certainly no historian should minimize the effects of internal and external disorder, weakened central authority and the fragmentation of political, economic, and social life in that period. But neither should we ignore those factors operating to create a unified society. Through the greatest turmoil, the institution of monarchy remained as a focal point. Though the power of the kings was often weak virtually to the point of nonexistence, the figure of the king remained. Moreover, the feudal system cannot be regarded as the cause of the breakdown of the central authority, but as the product of it. While it is no doubt true that the ambitions of the nobility to concentrate effective power over local affairs in their own hands frustrated efforts to build the royal authority, the main feature of feudal society was a system of personal contracts which attempted to tie an already fragmented society together, a system we recognize as feudalism. Ultimately, the role of feudalism was in the direction of unifying medieval political and social life in Western Europe. For the monarchies created in the twelfth century and even earlier were feudal in their foundations and character. The position of the king was founded on his role as lord over his vassals.

POLITICAL
Viewed from this position, the feudal age is most important for the development of Western Europe; this importance lies chiefly in the process of state-building which had its origins here. The feudal age climaxed in the creation of a stable society that stability for which men had sought since the fall of Roman government in the West. No longer may we regard these as "Dark Ages." Rather, in the feudal age, we may discover the foundations of Western European society as it moves toward its most significant achievement: the creation of the national state.

The nobles, who gained most by the decline of the Carolingian Empire (empire of Charlemagne from 750-987 AD), were the foundation of feudalism. Many of them had held positions of authority within the empire and, as the monarchy found it more difficult to enforce its will in local matters, these nobles usurped its authority. The offices, which they held during their lives, they tried to hand on to their sons to provide security for their families. Thus, in some cases, the office of count, which had been under the direct control of the crown and granted at the royal pleasure became heredity. The attacks of the Norsemen on the coastal region and up the river valleys placed the burden offense on the local authorities, who thereby came dominate the political life of the districts under their protection. These attacks also led lesser nobles and freemen to seek protection of the more powerful. Moreover, the unsettled conditions of the time encouraged the rise of adventurers; some of these sought to legitimate the positions they snatched, while others drove men to seek protection from them. In the history of the rise of the feudal system, the key to understanding the historical force operating in this period is to be found in the need men had for protection for themselves, their property and their families...

The most important role of feudalism in the early Middle Ages was political. The feudal regime was founded on the relationship between individuals and, as such, touched on the basic element the creation of the social order. It was from this foundation that the Middle Ages began the building of a new society. The task of that society was to build a new form of political institution and its goal was accomplished in the feudal monarchy.

Feudalism had developed in a monarchical society and, in some respects, was built on the idea of monarchy. Although the last Carolingians had been weak and ineffective, they theoretically retained their position at the top of the feudal hierarchy. In France, the kings were hardly able to control the activities of great lords like the dukes of Normandy and Aquitaine, but these men were their vassals. In England, the situation was different. Although there is some evidence of an incipient feudalism prior to the Norman conquest of 1066, the Anglo-Saxon kingdom was much more than the continuation of the old Germanic traditions of kingship, in which the king was the war-leader and the nobles, or thegns, constituted his companions and advisors. It was, therefore, the Norman conquest, which introduced continental feudalism into England. Moreover, the Norman kings of England were able to command the allegiance of the sub-vassals in the same way as the Dukes of Normandy. For this reason, English feudalism was more centralized than that in France. This difference explains much that is dissimilar in the development of the feudal monarchies of these two countries...

The Empire of Charlemagne had been based more in Western than in Central Europe. Indeed of the first five great duchies of Germany: Franconia, Bavaria, Swabia, Saxony, Thuringia, the first two alone had been amalgamated completely into the Frankish kingdom before the reign of Charlemagne and Saxony held out through most of his reign. Nevertheless, it was in these Eastern lands that the medieval as a successor of the Carolingian or Roman Empire so much empire as an expression came into of being, the persistence of the dream of empire in Italy. For the German kings became emperors not as the result of their creation of a strong German monarchy but rather because of their involvement in Italian affairs ....
While England and France succeeded in creating centralized states in the course of the later Middle Ages, the German monarchs, fascinated by the medieval dream of empire, turned from their task of state-building to the creation of the empire. Perhaps it would be better to say that they made this turn because it appeared to them the best way to build a state. The failure of the monarchy in the investiture controversy and the imperial involvement in Italy distracted the German monarchs from the task of creating a German state. But, in the age of the Hohenstaufen, especially in the reign of Frederick II, there was a brief moment in which the emperors glimpsed Italy as the key to the building of a unified Holy Roman Empire. The failure of this attempt paved the way for a Germany disunited under the rule of the nobles and for the development of French hegemony on the continent in the years after 1450.

The process of state-building which consumed so much of the political energies of medieval man represents only one facet in the development of civilization in the European Middle Ages. Side by side with it went the economic transformation of society. The foundation of economic life after the collapse of Roman rule in the West was almost entirely agricultural. By the later Middle Ages, an entire new urban society had sprung up. Put in these terms, it becomes immediately evident that this period witnessed significant changes in the economic history of Europe.

**ECONOMIC**

Manor and town therefore symbolize the polarity of two periods in economic development. It would be a mistake to reduce this symbol to an overly simple explanation of the direction of the economy. In fact, there is both an agricultural and urban society growing side by side throughout the Middle Ages and significant changes occurred in both. Moreover, agriculture remained the major occupation of men at the end of the period as at the beginning and many men in the towns earned their living by dealing in the products of the land. The change was in the ratio of urban to rural population, in the increase of industrial and commercial wealth accompanied by the growth of a money economy, and the growing realization of this change and its impact on the thinking of the men of this Age. Indeed, if it has now become a truism to state that the Middle Ages were not static, it still remains for us to point out that the men of that period realized that their age was not static. The study of economic history reveals the growing sense of awareness, even among churchmen, of the changing nature of their society...

From the decline of Roman civilization to the dawn of the modern age, Europe was involved in the building of a new culture. The components of that culture were Roman, Christian, barbarian, Islamic, Greek, and Byzantine -- to name only the more important. But these varied elements combined in the unity of medieval culture to form one of the most important stages in the development of Western thought.

**INTELLECTUAL**

Because the medieval intellect represented a stage in European intellectual development, it must be viewed as part of the whole pattern of that growth and not as an isolated phenomenon. The importance of medieval thought to the West lies in its direct relationship to the rise of new ideas and institutions that would play a major role in shaping the thinking of modern men. In the pages that follow, we shall attempt to point out some areas in which that influence has been greatest, while providing an understanding of the nature of medieval culture itself. Certainly no age in the history of mankind has been unimportant, but certain periods do have a special importance in light of their contribution to future age or trend. The Middle Ages witnessed the birth of a distinctly European culture.

Between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries the Middle Ages witnessed the making of scholasticism, the revival of Roman law and the founding of the universities. Scholasticism, the method of the schoolmen, was the first systemized approach to knowledge since the age of Aristotle, to whom it owed so much for its logical framework. The revival of Roman law was much more than a rediscovery of the *Corpus Juris Civilis* (Body of Civil Law) of Justinian; the commentators of the eleventh and twelfth centuries -- called glossators-- breathed new life into the Roman legal principles while applying them to current problems. The founding of the universities provided European civilization with an adaptable institution uniquely suited to preserving and enlarging the bounds of traditional wisdom.

The early Middle Ages had lived under the long shadow cast by the authority of antiquity. The men of that period had, for the most part, sought truth among the works of those whose learning they respected. As late as the twelfth century, Bernard of Chartres challenged his contemporaries to see that their accomplishments were made possible by the fact that they were "pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants." This attitude represented the conviction of most thinkers that they could do no better than to rely on the great writers of antiquity and the Fathers of the Church. It is not surprising that tradition produced largely encyclopedias, compendia and commentaries...

The contribution of the Middle Ages by its development of the scholastic method, its revival of legal learning, and its
founding of the universities ranks with the greatest in the history of human development. Although medieval intellectuals were sometimes obscurantist, although their methods never led them to trust experience and observation to the extent that moderns have found valuable and necessary in learning about this universe, the balance sheet must indicate that they were truly creative innovators.

**LITERATURE & ART**

In a society in which religion and the Church played such a leading role, one expects to find that literature and the arts reflected this dominance. Certainly our experience one with Egyptian civilization has borne this out. In medieval society, the strength of the clergy as the literate class of the early Middle Ages goes far to account for the small amount of non-religious writing from that period. After the rise of towns, however, one would expect to find more secular literature; although the amount does increase somewhat, it is still rather small before the early fourteenth century. The simple fact is that the literate layman of the high Middle Ages did not compose literature and was still pretty much content with the traditional fare provided by clerics and traveling minstrels. He was more likely involved in business or served at the court of a lay or ecclesiastical lord. He was more common in Italy than in Northern Europe, and it is there that we witness the bulk of his literary output, in the letters written in his official capacity and in town chronicles. There is also some poetry from southern France and Italy. The total is by no means impressive, especially when compared with the output of the clergy.

The major language of medieval literature was Latin, not the language of Cicero and Vergil, but the Latin of the Church, which had its origins in the Latin speech of the Roman masses. The continual study of Latin grammar in the Middle Ages did produce a few outstanding stylists like John of Salisbury in the twelfth century, but most writers adopted a utilitarian view toward the learning of the language and made little conscious effort to improve their writing. There, was, in fact, a rather strong anti-Intellectual strain running through that society and influenced by a Christian renunciation of learning that frowned on such things.

The vernacular languages, both Romance and Germanic, possessed some literature of their own. Romance tongues, descendants of the vulgar Latin of the classical period but much corrupted by the process of barbarization, developed in the area where Roman influence had been greatest – in France, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, although Romanian provides an example of a Romance language in Southeastern Europe. The Germanic languages flourished to the North, in Germany, the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and those regions where Germanic influence made inroads into the Romance regions, especially along the Rhine-Danube frontier, be divided into the traditional epic and the saga of the early fold and poetry and tales composed during the Middle Ages itself...

The art of the Middle Ages had its roots in classical antiquity. Early Christian Churches were formerly Roman temples and the favored architecture in the late imperial period was the so-called basilican style, characterized by its arched roof and double colonnade with clerestory. From the basilica, the early medieval architecture developed the Romanesque, which remained dominant in Southern Europe throughout the Middle Ages, but gave way the Gothic in the North. The thick walls of Romanesque churches needed to support the weight of their great roofs, made it difficult to provide sufficient windows for adequate lighting. The total impression of the Romanesque architecture is one of dignity and stateliness, with major emphasis on the heavy side. The early twelfth century saw builders in Northern Europe begin to utilize the pointed arch and exterior buttressing to create buildings that were higher and lighter than the Romanesque. The delicate balance between thrust from the roof and buttressing permitted a widespread use of windows. Indeed, at Chartres and the Sainte Chapelle, windows cover most of the wall space with tremendous effect, for the artists in stained glass had an opportunity to display their work to its greatest benefit. The glass of Chartres had excited the artistic admiration of men in every age...

Sculpture and painting of a religious nature predominated in the Middle Ages. The rise of Gothic encouraged the use of statuary in conjunction with the structure itself, while the Romanesque favored the free-standing techniques of antiquity. However, no firm line can be drawn between them in this matter. There was a considerable amount of free-standing sculpture, especially in wood, done in the North in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most popular were figures of the Madonna and Child, and Virgin Mary alone, and the saints. Painting had existed in classical antiquity, but the loss of the art meant that its revival followed the lines laid down by sculpture and mosaic during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. During the thirteenth century, the influence of Byzantine and Gothic models was most important. There was a lack of perspective in the figures portrayed and little attention was given to natural groupings of individuals in the composition. It was not until the time of Giotto, who died in 1336, that the first advances were made in securing a three-dimensional effect in painting. Despite these technical problems, however, the later Middle Ages saw the foundation for the blossoming of art in the Renaissance.

Historians seeking the meaning of medieval literature and art have often spent much time in discussing the relationships
between this period and antiquity as well as its connections with the Renaissance. The results of these discussions have been very fruitful to a better understanding of the Middle Ages by revealing that this era was not a gap or hyphen between two great ages in the history of human culture, but rather was an age that played an important role by preserving and transforming its ancient heritage and by providing the foundation for the creative age that followed. But it has not been sufficiently stressed that the processes whereby the men of the Middle Ages worked to accomplish these ends were not automatic or determined. Their efforts were creative in the fullest sense of the word. They did not merely transmit what they had received from the past to the future; they created a new synthesis, uniquely their own, that deserves to be understood because of its important role in the shaping of Western civilization.

RELIGION
Wherever one turns in his investigation of the Middle Ages he finds the Church. It is not alone that the monks were the literate class nor that the vast majority of Western Europeans belonged to the Church. These facts were evident to all and accepted by all. But the Church was more than the communion of the faithful; it was an integral part of the structure of society, taking its place alongside or even above the developing feudal monarchies and the empire. Above all, the Church came to mean the Papacy and the hierarchy, the visible signs of the internal control which the church attempted to exercise in the affairs of men. In a very important sense, the medieval Church was a government and, in the course of time, had developed to a high degree the machinery of government. But the process of creating the medieval Church of the thirteenth century, with its strong Papacy and mighty administrative machinery; had its roots far earlier in the Middle Ages.

The medieval Church was not, however, a monolithic state. It remained throughout its existence a vibrant organism pulsing with change pulsing however. While the forces of centralization were strongest, the work of reform continued under the direction of the Papacy in the hands of new religious orders admirably suited to bring the message of religion to the men of the town. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), one of the most admired figures of the Middle Ages, founded his order of begging, or mendicant, friars with the approval of Pope Innocent III. Francis rebelled against the increasing materialism of his age. Himself the son of a merchant, he rejected the attitudes of the rising urban middle class and called on all to embrace the poverty which Christ had enjoined upon his followers in the gospels. His call electrified the age and attracted men and women from every walk of life to his two foundations for men and women. Unfortunately, his own inability to realize the difficulties of translating his dream into institutional reality led to disillusionment within his lifetime and the gradual transformation of the Franciscan order into a more traditional organization. Nevertheless many of Francis' ideals informed their work and preaching; they carried them throughout the cities of Europe and into the universities.

Within medieval Europe, heresy became an increasingly serious problem after the early twelfth century. The attempt to destroy the Albigensian heretics, who professed a kind of Manichaean dualism and frowned on bodily pleasure, was successful only to the extent that it destroyed their major centers and forced them to flee. Their followers found refuge in the towns of northern Italy, where they continued to preach their doctrines throughout the late medieval period. Another important group, the Waldensians, followers of a merchant of Lyons, embraced apostolic poverty and traveled about preaching the message of the gospels. They ran afoul of ecclesiastical authority and were condemned as heretics. Most of these groups, with the exception of the Albigensians, flourished in the towns. Beyond a doubt, their message was not merely theological but also social. In fact, their major problems seem to have arisen from their rejection of the social teachings of their age and their attempt to overthrow them. In the later period, their successors embraced theories justifying the violent overthrow of existing institutions, including the destruction of both Church and monarchy. These ideas persisted to form a very important element in the developing of early fundamentalist Protestantism.

The importance of the Church in medieval society has led historians to attempt to contrast the medieval and modern periods by the gradual decline in the power of the Papacy and the Church it represented. There is much to be said for this manner of portrayal, for the age following the death of Pope Boniface VIII does usher in a decline. But the Church still remained a viable and influential element in the new society that was created. The Church did not end with the Middle Ages; it survived not as a relic but as a continuing force....

Between 1300 and 1500, the great shift from medieval to modern civilization occurred. In many respects, the modern age fulfilled the work of the Middle Ages. That work was, first and most important, the creation of Europe as the seat of Western Civilization. The age of transition began the last stage in that process: the development of a secular Western culture.