**THE MIDDLE AGES – AN INTRODUCTION**

The Middle Ages is generally believed to have started with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and to have lasted about 1,000 years until about 1450. The beginning of the Middle Ages is called the Dark Ages because the great civilization of Rome had been conquered.

Life was very hard in the Middle Ages. Very few people could read or write. Their lack of knowledge often led to superstitious beliefs. People thought that fate ruled their existence; therefore, there was little hope for the improvement of their condition. During the years of the Roman Empire, the poor people were protected by the soldiers of the emperor. When the empire fell, there were no laws to protect them, so they turned to the lords to keep the peace and to act on their behalf. This willingness to be ruled by the lords led to the beginnings of feudalism. Some peasants were free, but most became serfs to a lord. This meant they were bound to the lord’s land and paid very high rent to the lord.

The only hope that most people had was their belief that the next life in heaven would be better than life on earth. The Crusades were launched to bring Jerusalem under Christian control because the Muslims had denied pilgrims access to the city. The experiences of the traveling crusaders opened up new worlds and new ideas to the medieval people.

Prior to the Middle Ages, many groups of people led invasions in European lands. They included the Huns from Central Asia, the barbarian tribes from Scotland and the Germanic tribes, which included the Vandals, Lombards, Goths and Franks. During the Middle Ages, there were barbarian invasions, which included the Viking raids and the raids of the Mongols, who controlled most of Russia and eastern Europe.

Almost half of the people in Western Europe died from the bubonic plague. This disease, which killed 35 million Asians, was brought to Europe by ships coming back from China. Rats traveled on the ships. Fleas living on the blood of these infected rats transferred the disease to people. Lymph nodes swelled and burst and the skin turned a dark gray color. Medicinal care and cleanliness were lacking. Superstition ruled.

It should be noted that other parts of the world were thriving in this era. North Africa, the Middle East, China, India and other parts of the world were experiencing great changes. The Renaissance began in about 1450. Renaissance is a French word that means “rebirth.” This rebirth began when European scholars became more aware of and interested in the world around them. The art became more true to life. People began to learn about new lands, customs and beliefs, as the century culminated with the Age of Exploration.