SOURCES IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE AND HISTORY

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Preface

This anthology contains a variety of sources pertaining to the history and culture of the Middle Ages. The documents and images represent a broad spectrum of topics dealing with medieval civilization and illustrate social, intellectual, literary, and artistic history, as well as the political developments of the era. The book has been designed either to be used alone or to accompany the standard textbooks on medieval history, medieval literature, art history, and humanities. It consists of fourteen chapters arranged in chronological order, in which selections from primary sources are carefully coordinated to furnish an overview of the political and cultural life of the medieval period. In order to coordinate basic themes, the introductory material and the questions at the end of the selections provide cross-references among the chapters where appropriate.

The book contains many documents traditionally included in medieval history source readers, and it enhances this traditional content with selections that offer greater variety and style. In addition to literary excerpts, each chapter contains sections identified as “Interpreting the Evidence,” in which images are specifically coordinated with documents, offering an opportunity to compare various ways of viewing an individual or a topic.

The materials in this book trace the development of medieval civilization from the era of the Roman Emperor Diocletian to the late fourteenth century. The events of these years are viewed from various perspectives, including selections from legal documents, annals, letters, contemporaneous biographies, theological and philosophical treatises, historical writings, and literary extracts. The sources have been chosen to integrate social and cultural history with more traditional material; hence, selections that inform the student about women and marginal groups in the medieval world are included alongside works that treat topics that are more common in the field, such as the Rule of Saint Benedict or Magna Carta. In addition, the inclusion of material from Muslim and Byzantine areas shows the multifaceted nature of medieval civilization. Some chapters deal with aspects of cultural history and include writings concerning art and architecture, as well as selections from literature and philosophical works.

Scholars do not agree on the exact timeframe of the Middle Ages. I have chosen to begin this collection with the division of the Roman Empire during the reign of the emperor Diocletian (284–305) because this event was a determining factor in the future development of civilization in both the East and the West. During the medieval era there were two distinct entities—the empire in the West, eventually known as the “Holy Roman Empire,” and the Byzantine Empire in the East, which endured until the fifteenth century. The documents in this collection demonstrate various aspects of life in both
Preface

geographical areas and trace interactions between the two empires.

The organization of the material moves chronologically from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, as the Roman world was transformed by the influences of the Germanic people and the Christian religion (Chapter 1). Several of the Germanic leaders established kingdoms in the subsequent centuries; the Visigoths conquered the Iberian Peninsula, the Franks assumed leadership in France, and the Ostrogoths settled in Italy, where Theodoric attempted to continue Roman traditions, as will be seen in Chapter 2.

One of the most important events of the sixth century was the birth of Mohammad and the subsequent emergence of Islam (Chapter 3). The Muslims were a significant factor in the history of the Middle Ages, as the documents in this collection attest. For reasons of accessibility, diacritical markings have not been included in Arabic names and phrases.

The fusion of Germanic and Christian traditions was exemplified in the person and empire of Charlemagne, who, in addition to building a vast empire, patronized scholarship and the arts. The Carolingian contribution to medieval civilization was immense and created a bridge between antiquity and the High Middle Ages through its intellectual contributions (Chapter 4).

Following the reign of Charlemagne, the empire was destroyed due to many factors. In addition to warfare among the emperor’s descendants, the Europeans were invaded from the south by the Muslims, from the east by the Magyars, and from the north by the Vikings. The civilization that emerged from this onslaught had a very different character. Instead of centralized government, the political system was based upon control by various powerful lords who established bonds of loyalty among themselves. They offered protection to the peasants, who were obligated to support their masters through agricultural labor. The documents contained in Chapter 5 demonstrate various aspects of the lives of aristocratic men and women as well as the lives of serfs, as the people bound to the manor were known.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries monarchs were able to consolidate their power in areas of Europe—a trend that continued in the High Middle Ages. Various documents, including historical accounts, letters, and legal codes, as well as visual and literary evidence, allow the reader to experience the stress and struggle of building kingdoms in England, France, Germany (known as the Holy Roman Empire for much of the period), Hungary, and the Iberian Peninsula (Chapters 6, 9, and Chapter 11).

Another broad theme of this book deals with the religious experience of medieval people. Chapter 7 discusses two aspects of spiritual fervor that characterized the eleventh and twelfth centuries—monasticism and the Crusades. Chapter 12 offers evidence of lay spirituality as well as the creation of new monastic orders.

Chapters 8, 10, and 13 deal with the artistic, literary, and philosophical aspects of medieval life during the eras often called Romanesque (the eleventh and twelfth centuries) and Gothic (the thirteenth century), though the chronological divide between the two styles is fluid. In particular, the “Interpreting the Evidence” sections offer an opportunity to analyze aspects of political and artistic history in tandem.

The book closes with a view of the fourteenth century, which was a time of creativity as well as crisis. The people of Europe and the Middle East dealt with famine, plague, war, peasant rebellion, and a crisis in the Church; however, as the documents demonstrate, it was also a time of spiritual regeneration and artistic as well as literary innovation.

Although the book is organized chronologically, the Contents at the beginning of the book is presented in two different ways in order to accommodate professors and students who choose to view the history of the era either topically or thematically. The approach on pages iii–xii presents the material as it is actually organized in the chapters themselves. The second version on pages xiii–xx offers a breakdown based on the following themes: (1) The Germanic Tribal Tradition, (2) Government, Politics, and the Law, (3) Islam, (4) Byzantium, (5) Daily Life, (6) Women, (7) Technology, (8) Medieval Warfare and the Crusades, (9) Religious History, (10) Papal–Imperial Relations, (11) Monasticism, (12) Pilgrimage, (13) Art and Architecture, (14) Literature, (15) Intellectual History and Philosophy, and (16) Interpreting the Evidence. The Topical Contents section can be used to facilitate an alternative method of teaching
the era and provides ready access to the material for classes in humanities, art history, and medieval literature, in addition to standard history courses.

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Introduction to the Student

This book is a collection of various kinds of historical documents, including edicts, letters, biographical and autobiographical writings, poetry, literature, philosophy, and statistical surveys. In addition, there are a number of visual sources, which can also be viewed as "historical documents," including manuscript illuminations, ivory carvings, mosaics, frescoes, sculpture, and photos of buildings. Where these appear, they are presented in conjunction with the written documents and are coordinated for comparative analysis in features titled "Interpreting the Evidence" that appear in every chapter.

As you study each of these sources, there are specific questions you should contemplate. First of all, what is the nature of the document? Is it an edict issued by a monarch, or a segment of a biography, or a statistical analysis, or a work of poetry or fiction? The answer to this question will determine the framework for your analysis.

Second, who was the author of the source and what was his or her relationship to the event being described? You should also observe when and where the document was written. For example, is it an eyewitness account, or an historical analysis written after the event? Is it a poem that reflects the aesthetic atmosphere of the time period? It is important to place this information in context, and to examine the document with this in mind. The introductory material for each document will help you to answer these questions, and your ideas about the material should take these facts into account.

As you read the source, analyze the reasons why it was created and what the potential audience may have been. Consider whether the account is reliable, or whether the author may have presented the material from a nonobjective point of view. For example, would a biographer working at the court of a king be likely to present an unfavorable portrayal of the monarch?

Questions for Discussion follow each of the documents. These are designed to stimulate conversation about the source, and to suggest paths of analysis; however, they are only a beginning for your research, and further questions should arise from your encounters with the material. As you will soon realize, the documents in this collection present a variety of interpretive challenges and offer many opportunities to experience the fascination of historical research and analysis.