

CHAPTER ONE

THE QUEST FOR THE MIDDLE AGES

I

BETWEEN ROME AND RENAISSANCE

In France, Germany, and Italy they still call it the Middle Age. In English-speaking countries since about 1840 it is generally referred to in the plural—the Middle Ages—signifying the several distinct sub-eras during one very long epoch. Whether called by the singular or the plural, the medieval era in Western civilization is the millennium that stretched from the fall of the Roman Empire in Europe (about A.D. 450) to the Italian Renaissance of the late fifteenth century. The question that has engaged the lifetime interest and work of thousands of historians, literary critics, art historians, philosophers, theologians, and archaeologists in modern times is, What happened between Rome and the Renaissance? What was the nature of the European medieval world, and what is its connection to our own?

Interest in the meaning and relevance of the Middle Ages stretches far beyond academia. Books about King Arthur and his Round Table, both fiction and nonfiction, constitute a thriving cottage industry. In 1978 Barbara Tuchman, a distinguished historian although not an academic, published a best-selling medieval book, *A Distant Mirror*, that demonstrated to almost universal satisfaction similarities between the troubled fourteenth century in Europe and the more depressing moments of the twentieth century. In 1990 no fewer than three Hollywood film companies almost simultaneously announced they were going to produce a new movie about Robin Hood, to replace the jovial 1938 film that starred Errol Flynn and Olivia De Havilland, and a new blockbuster film about the mythic medieval hero is now actually in production. Perhaps on a more exalted level of discourse, the papacy in 1987 prohibited a professor of theology at

the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., from teaching about sexuality in a manner that sharply departed from allegedly authoritative medieval Catholic tradition. *Hagar the Horrible*, the rambunctious Viking, is a favorite comic strip. Every summer tens of thousands of middle-class Americans climb into tour buses in London, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome, and Vienna and spend a week or two visiting medieval cathedrals and the remains of medieval castles. Curiosity is thereby stimulated about the people who created the world of castle and cathedral.

In 1984 the English translation of a novel by an Italian professor of medieval literature, *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, surprised the New York publishing world by becoming a phenomenal best seller. The popularity of Eco's highly cerebral novel was helped by its being cast in the form of a detective story. Yet the setting was the fourteenth century, and the story is placed in the context of one of the more dramatic conflicts within the medieval church: between the papacy and the radical, or Spiritual, wing of the order of Franciscan friars over the nature of the church and its role in society.

Asked to explain the phenomenal success of his novel, Eco modestly attributed it "to a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages . . . both in Europe and America." Another comment by Eco puts it more sharply: "[T]he fact is that everyone has his own ideas, usually corrupt, of the Middle Ages." The huge popular success of Eco's and Tuchman's medieval books gave new attention to the ideas held about the Middle Ages by the leading academic medievalists of the twentieth century, whose research and insight the two best-selling authors had freely drawn upon. Specifying parallels between the agonies of the fourteenth and twentieth centuries or setting a brilliant detective story within the conflict between the papacy and the Spiritual Franciscans was only a small sliver of the medieval European experience that stretched for a millennium beyond the fall of the Roman Empire. Which additional interpretations or fascinating data loom strongly out of the work of three generations of medievalists since 1900? Which were the colossal personalities and dramatic crises that the medievalists had revealed? What further parallels or contrasts could be drawn between the Middle Ages and our own culture and society? How do the medieval sensibility, imagination, and faith relate to our own set of assumptions and perceptions? These were subjects broached by sophisticated literary agents and editors as they took luncheons in two-star restaurants with academic medievalists, seeking to find at

least one who, like Tuchman (but certainly not Eco), wrote suburban middle-class prose.

Out of this talent search came a 1987 book by an academic medievalist that indeed gained a wide audience: the persuasive and crisply written biography of the late fourteenth-century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer by Stanford University literature professor Donald R. Howard. "The readers who made Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* a best seller have another treat in store for them," enthused the reviewer in the *Chicago Tribune*.

Barbara Tuchman never had more than a B.A. from Radcliffe College and was proud of being a self-taught, nonacademic historian. Eco and Howard were literature professors at major universities. But in all three instances their popular books were based not only on their own reading and research but also on the vast corpus of mainline scholarly work in the twentieth century on the European Middle Ages. Much of this scholarly work is too technical to be accessible to the general college-educated reader. But it is the base upon which highly readable accounts of the medieval world are constructed.

Scrutiny of the work of the leading academic medievalists, such as that attempted in this book, reveals a condition that prevails generally in the university humanities. The medievalists' work is obviously divisible into distinct groups or schools of interpretation, and they differ among themselves, sometimes vehemently, on the essential character and the precise development of medieval civilization. To outsiders, such academic debate can seem to be hairsplitting chatter of cloistered professors. But a closer look reveals much that is at stake in these debates, because during their course hypotheses are tested, ideas refined, and ultimately a consensus is reached. Academic medievalists constitute the interpretive community to which the popular writers about the Middle Ages, like Tuchman, Eco, and Howard defer in their highly imaginative writings.

In spite of perceptual variety and debate, we can assert the basic facts about the Middle Ages in a manner that reflects a broad, if not universal, consensus among academic medievalists. The magnificent Roman Empire in Western Europe went into irrevocable economic, political, and military decline sometime after the middle of the fourth century. The effective political leadership the Romans had enjoyed for many centuries now became rarer, the best managers possibly being siphoned off to rule the church. But the main problem was that there was a sharp decrease in the size of the population, at least

exacerbated, if not entirely caused, by the spread of the bubonic plague and venereal disease. Population decline meant a diminution in agricultural and industrial production, a shrinking of the government's tax base, and a weakening of the military capability of the Roman Empire. Rome could no longer defend in the fifth century its long eastern frontiers on the Rhine and Danube rivers against the German invaders or protect Britain from incursions of the Scandinavian kin of the Germans from Denmark and what is today northwest Germany. The Germans were drawn into the Empire by its great wealth, now prey to theft, and its richly cultivated lands, now open to annexation by Germanic peoples. The latter were further pushed into the Roman Empire by the penetration behind them into the Danube basin of Central Asian warrior groups such as the Huns, ethnically akin to the people of Mongolia.

The once-great Roman Empire, its beautiful cities, its capable government and lawcourts, its deeply learned schools and libraries, descended into the twilight of the Dark Ages of the sixth and seventh centuries, in which literate civilization survived only in a handful of ecclesiastical centers, mostly walled Benedictine monasteries. Western Europe was further cut off from the vibrant economic and intellectual life that still prevailed in the eastern Mediterranean, centered on great cities like Constantinople (today Istanbul in Turkey) and Alexandria, by the explosive and completely unanticipated expansion of Muslim Arabs in the late seventh century. The Arabs had conquered—with the aid of newly converted groups to Islam from the old societies of the Mediterranean coastline—North Africa, Sicily, and most of Christian Spain by the mid-eighth century.

At that point something creative stirred in the northern half of Germanic France. A heroic warrior family emerged to exercise leadership over the other Germanic chieftains. This family's lands lay in the Seine Valley, where high productivity of oats fed the horses belonging to the family's armored cavalry. The Muslim advance into France was halted in the 730s, and the Arabs were driven back to Spain. Out of this one warrior family came the emperor Charlemagne, who reigned from 768 to 814. He gathered at his court in Aachen in the Rhine Valley the most learned churchmen from not only France but also England and northern Italy, and there was an intensive recovery of classical Latin learning and remarkable progress in all the arts.

This new Carolingian civilization of Western Europe was politically too fragmented to withstand a renewed Scandinavian invasion

in the ninth century. Charlemagne's great empire slowly split apart after his death into a myriad of feudal principalities. But both west and east of the Rhine River in the tenth century an aristocratic family persuaded the church to designate it the holder of the title and privileges of sacred kingship. Thereby the memory of the ambitious Carolingian experiment of a unified political system was preserved into the new era of population growth, economic expansion, improved literacy, and stabilized political and social order that marked the late tenth century. Herein, in this space and time—northern France, southern England, the Rhine and Rhône valleys, and northern Italy around the year 1000—lies the crucible of medieval Europe.

By the year 1000 European society was relatively stable and successful—at least in comparison with the chaos and disintegration of 600. Western Europe was growing, economically and intellectually; technological resources increasingly were integrated with the social structure, and the elite class of landed nobility was self-confident and reasonably efficient. The population was still thin, but it had started to increase rapidly for the first time since about A.D. 400. No one has fully explained why the population was static for six hundred years, but historians blame disease, the meager food supply, and the chronic violence of European society. There always is an unknown factor in demography, but it is generally true that populations grow in times of economic prosperity, such as the late tenth century. The population of Western Europe in 1000 is estimated at ten million people, close to what it was in the Roman Empire.

The environment was still primitive and underdeveloped, and perhaps half of Western Europe was still useless for agriculture. Large parts of Germany, northern France, and central England were covered with huge, uninhabited forests, while some areas facing the North Sea in the Low Countries, northern Germany, and eastern England were unusable marshlands. These coastal lands have been fruitful since the seventeenth century; but at the end of the tenth century nobody in Europe knew anything about drainage, and the shoreline was in many places much farther inland in 1000 than it is today. Between the fourth and the eighteenth century, no one in Europe knew how to build good roads, and apart from a few Roman survivals there were no real roads in eleventh-century Europe. Europe was fortunate, however, in its extensive river system, especially involving the Rhine, which made long-distance travel and commerce possible. The Danube was too far east for all except Vikings and Slavs and a few intrepid merchants, but there was heavy traffic on the Rhine, the

Seine, the Rhône, and the estuary of the Thames. Centers of population grew up near rivers, and the noticeable emptiness of most of central France can be ascribed to the absence of useful rivers.

Western Europe remained technologically backward in 1000, but its agricultural situation had been improved around 800 by the coming into general use of a heavy, wheeled plow. Farmers began at last to get fairly good yields from their hard soil, which required a deep furrow. The light plows of the Romans, which scratched the thin surface of the Mediterranean soil, were not effective in northern Europe, and this partly explains why the Romans did not settle far from a few centers of civilization in the north. It took several centuries for northern Europeans to develop their own equipment and techniques, but with the increasing stability of life after 900, the food supply began to grow—an essential factor in the progress of society and civilization. With the production of varied and abundant crops, including grapes as well as grains and high-protein foods like beans, European civilization began to move forward after 900.

Despite its emperors and popes and kings, tenth-century Europe had a patrimonial, nucleated society based on the domination by great aristocratic families over everything (even the church) within their own territorial domains. Bastard sons and younger brothers of the local lords became bishops or abbots of local churches and monasteries. Religion, as well as government and economy and law, was dominated by the great families. Everything belonged to the lords, who became more and more greedy and aggressive—particularly on their own estates—as the years went by. By 1000 they were depriving their peasants even of the right to keep pigs or hunt in the forest, which, like everything else, belonged to the lord. As far as we know, however, there was no peasant dissent and no rebellion. Because they were either too content or too effectively repressed, tenth-century peasants did not protest; the lower classes of rural society were (and remained for a long time) politically inert.

Change came to the stable society of 1000, but it did not originate at the bottom of the social pyramid. Rather, it began at the top, among the great aristocracy. The main characteristic of European social history is its constancy, the aristocratic, high familial domination of society that continued even past the Industrial Revolution. It was an effective system, and thus its persistence is not surprising. The nobility produced not only warlords but scholars, poets, artists, and religious leaders.

The ecclesiastical buildings of A.D. 1000 in the Romanesque style

were much more imposing than anything built in Europe in the preceding five hundred years. Some of these fortresslike stone structures, with marvelously elaborate sculptures, still stand, particularly in the Rhineland and southern France. These were expensive structures, for piety was fashionable in 1000; the European nobility liked priests and monks and were willing patrons of ecclesiastical architecture and clerical pursuits.

Tenth-century churchmen were highly honored and well rewarded, but religious enthusiasm is only one explanation for the increase in their number during the late tenth and eleventh centuries. The demand for clerical services increased very rapidly because churchmen were still almost the only literate people in Europe and thus immensely useful in any task requiring writing. They drew up the wills and charters and tax documents and letters without which aristocratic households and royal courts could not function. "Chapel" and "chancery" were interchangeable terms, and the identification of the religious class with the intellectual class (which included an educated bureaucracy) gave a unique character to medieval civilization.

By 1000 this elite and growing group of educated churchmen had developed an extremely complex theological system that was in many respects unlike the religious beliefs of the common people. There was gross superstition and heathenism within popular Christianity in the tenth century, and many beliefs that formed no part of the faith of educated men were tacitly accepted by the church. Under the leadership of Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century, the church had decided to accommodate and accept the prevailing popular religion with its magic, devils, and fertility cults. Contemporary leaders realized that the conversion of the heathen Germans would have to be gradual, that drastic excision of their ancient paganism was neither possible nor desirable. Nineteenth-century Protestant scholars used to denounce the medieval church for its laxity and tolerance of superstition, but it seems probable that Gregory made a wise decision and that the church would not have survived with a different, more stringent attitude.

However, pagan superstition was not part of official theology—a rich and complicated network of traditions from many sources. The Old and New Testaments and the patristic writings (St. Augustine was the most influential of the Church Fathers) were central strands in medieval Christianity, but other strands were derived from the classical culture of Greece and Rome and from the mystical neo-Platonism that developed in Alexandria in the third century A.D.