



TEACHER'S GUIDE

The Dark Ages



Introduction

By the 5th century, the Roman Empire had conquered a stunning expanse of territories and people throughout Europe. After the empire crumbled from within, unable to sustain its own borders, a power vacuum was left in its wake. With no unified power source to claim these lands, chaos abounded as roaming warlords and violent bands of warriors circulated throughout Europe. No longer organized around a unified empire, territory was up for grabs, and power was often seized by despotic rulers and their armies. This downshift in progress left Europeans more susceptible than ever to the ravages of natural disaster and disease. Waves of warfare together with famine, plague, erratic weather patterns and persecution led to a centuries-long era of economic, political, and cultural decline. *The Dark Ages*, a gripping two-hour documentary, captures this tumultuous era, from the fall of Rome through the eventual light of progress revealed at the dawn of the Middle Ages. This documentary chronicles this backward recession into violence and disarray, tracing the rise of major leaders and conflicts from Greece and Turkey to the east to France and Spain in the west.

Frankish leader Clovis rose to power at the end of the 5th century, uniting tribes in the region, converting to Christianity, and forming an alliance with the Catholic Church. King Clovis solidified his power through harsh punishment and repression, an approach to rule that echoed throughout the Dark Ages. Even powerful Emperor Justinian and his dedicated wife Theodora failed to maintain control during this era as Constantinople and the rest of Europe became crippled by the bubonic plague. Some beacons of justice and progress did emerge during the Dark Ages; studious monks such as St. Benedict garnered new philosophical insights, the Byzantines constructed glorious monuments including the Hagia Sophia, and King Charlemagne of France provided a model pathway toward revitalization in the 8th century. Yet despite these flickers of advancement and innovation, from the 5th century through the Middle Ages, Europe was dominated by bitter warfare, crude violence, and the erratic whims of weather and disease. *The Dark Ages*, with riveting tales from the era and dramatic commentary from historians, provides

educators and their students with a fascinating view of the critical historical era between the glory of Rome and the onset of the Medieval era.

Viewing Activity

As students watch this program, ask them to listen to the music and images used in this documentary. Ask students to make a list of adjectives describing the sounds they hear and the imagery they see. After viewing the program, ask students to reflect upon and think critically about the ways these aspects of the documentary influence their interpretation. Engage in a short discussion the adjectives they chose and their reactions to these questions. If students are working individually, ask them to compose a one page essay responding to the music and images used in the documentary.

Objectives

By viewing this program, students will learn about the period known as the Dark Ages. Students will examine significant changes in world history between the fall of Rome in the 5th century AD and the Crusades. They will explore the significant developments of the Dark Ages including the decline of the Roman empire, the rise and fall of the Byzantine Empire, the effects of the bubonic Plague, and the key conflicts and holy wars that shaped this era. Students will also think critically about historical decline and progress, and the role of political leaders in this era.

Curriculum Links

The Dark Ages is a useful program for History, Global Studies, Social Studies and Religion courses. This documentary is appropriate for 8th grade students and above. Due to some strong language, situations, and images, we recommend that teachers view the program before showing it to students. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education:

- (1) *Values, Beliefs, Political Ideas, and Institutions*
- (2) *Patterns of Social and Political Interaction*
- (3) *Human Interaction with the Environment*
- (4) *Civilization, Cultural Diffusion, and Innovation*

Vocabulary

Using a dictionary (www.merriamwebster.com), students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

besieged	despots	endemic
formidable	monastic	pagan
pandemic	perilous	plunder
progress	ravaged	subjugation
succumb	tyrannical	withered

Discussion Questions

1. According to this documentary, during what time period did Europe fall into the Dark Ages? When did it emerge from this difficult period?
2. One of the commentators in this documentary refers to Rome as the “mother of the world.” What do you think this phrase means? What were the consequences of the fall of Rome for the rest of Europe?

3. During the Dark Ages, most of Europe experienced what one historian calls an “undeniable downshift in society’s progress.” What were some examples of reversal of progress during the Dark Ages that you learned about from watching this program?
4. Why was Clovis an important historical figure during the Dark Ages? What was the significance of his conversion to Christianity?
5. Describe the Byzantine Emperor Justinian and the Empress Theodora. Was was significant about their rule? Why do you think they were ultimately unable to hold on to power in Constantinople?
6. What were the consequences of the Plague throughout Europe? How do you think it changed the daily lives of those who survived the scourge, both in the short term and in the long term?
7. Why do you think the work of monks is mentioned in this documentary? Why were their studies unique during the Dark Ages? What do you think were the challenges of their lifestyle during this era?
8. Why do you think Charlemagne is considered one of the “most illuminating figures of the Dark Ages”? What were his major contributions to European history?
9. What role did militarized knights and Vikings play during the Dark Ages? Why do you think there was so much violence and chaos during this time period?
10. How, when, and why did the first Crusade transpire? How long did the Crusades last?
11. How did Europe finally emerge from the Dark Ages? What are some of the reasons this documentary gives for the decline of the Dark Ages and the onset of the Middle Ages?

Extended Activities

1. The era known as the Dark Ages covered an extensive period of time and was experienced throughout a vast amount of territory. Break up into groups of three to give. After watching this program, review this era in your textbooks and through further research at the library or on the Internet. Review the timeframe and geographic scope of the Dark Ages. Then, create illustrated timelines using PowerPoint, white roll out paper, or another format. These timelines should include key turning points during the Dark Ages and the locations in which they transpired.
2. The Emperor Justinian is highlighted in this documentary for his role in transforming Byzantine society. One of his most lasting changes was the creation of the Justinian Code, a new system of legal regulations and rules based on Roman law. At the library or using the Internet, research the Justinian Code. Write a short essay of 2-3 pages, or a one page document in bullet format, summarizing this code and its contents.
3. The Dark Ages era has been described as a time of disease, warfare, violence, and chaos. This documentary also focuses on some of the beacons of light which emerged during this era, including the contributions of monks and the construction of monuments such as the Hagia Sophia. After watching this documentary, chose one of the historical figures described or discussed in this program. These could be leaders such as Clovis or Charlemagne, or every day figures such as a monk, knight, or average citizen hit by the plague. Write a letter or journal entry from this person’s perspective, describing life and circumstances during the Dark Ages. Be sure to include information indicating the location and timeframe from which you are writing.

Additional Resources

Books

Cantor, Norman. *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*. (Harper Perennial, 2002).

Gregory Tony. *The Dark Ages (Illustrated History of the World Series.)* (Facts on File, 1993).

Wood, Michael. *In Search of the Dark Ages*. (BBC Books, 2005).

Websites

An excellent site from the BBC on the history of the Dark Ages:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/dark_origins.shtml

A site from the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the Age of Justinian:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/just/hd_just.htm

Biography and links on the life of Charlemagne:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.html>