

Period Overview and Supporting Information

Life in fifteenth-century Europe: Before industrialization or urbanization, let alone computers or the digital age, the majority of Europeans were poor and illiterate. Most people worked on farms, tending crops or animals. A tiny minority formed a wealthy aristocracy that owned most of the land and wielded all of the political power. But more powerful even than them was the Church.

Children in fifteenth-century Europe: Most children—unless they were in the tiny minority whose families were not poor—received no education and were expected to work hard from a very young age, at farming, shepherding, or whatever their parents set them to do. Some were given away as servants or sold as slaves, because their parents could not care for them or needed the money, or because their parents believed that they were giving their children a chance at a better life than the one they would have had at home.

The Church: In the fifteenth century, the Church—no one called it the Catholic Church, because until the Reformation there were no other churches in the West!—was extremely important. Most governments were small, weak, or fragmented. The Church was not only the spiritual institution of most Europeans, but was also the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful institution in all of western Europe.

Fall of Constantinople: After its decline in the fifth century, the Roman Empire had divided into two parts: the eastern half—called the Byzantine Empire—used Greek as its learned language, and had Constantinople as its capitol, while the western part—western Europe—used Latin as its scholarly language, and had Rome as its capitol. The two parts had their tensions, but both were Christian areas. Then, in the spring of 1453, the Ottoman (or Turkish) empire captured the city of Constantinople and all its vast libraries of classical learning, and renamed the city Istanbul. To fifteenth-century Christians, the fall of Constantinople was a catastrophe. They feared that the Muslim Turks might go on to conquer the rest of Europe and to stamp out Christianity. Many thought that the fall of Constantinople was a sign that the end of days was coming.

End of days: Medieval Christians believed that Christ's second coming was imminent. They were always on the lookout for signs that the end of days, in which a series of major disasters would strike and Christ would return to earth, was approaching. Some took the fall of Constantinople to

be a harbinger of the end of days—Constantinople was, after all, a major center of Christian authority, the “Rome of the east” —and became extremely anxious about the fate of the Church, humanity, and the world.

Acre: A city in what is now the state of Israel, north of Haifa, on the Mediterranean coast, known as a thriving port and a beautiful city. In the medieval period, Muslims and Christians fought one another for control of the city; in 1517, it was taken by the Ottoman Empire.

Galley: A type of large ship powered by both sails and oars, the latter worked by huge numbers of slaves, convicts, and prisoners of war. In the fifteenth century most of warships in the Mediterranean were galleys.

Hospitallers: also known as the Knights Hospitaller or the Knights of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem. The Hospitallers were a knightly order that aimed to combine the ideals of the pious monk and the martial knight. By the 1450s their official mission was to care for and protect Christian pilgrims to the Promised Land. However, many—Christians as well as Muslims—feared the Hospitallers for their naval military expertise; while the Hospitallers claimed to fight Muslim pirates on the Mediterranean, many thought they were little more than Christian pirates themselves.

Classical Greek texts: Some of the most revered works of antiquity were written in ancient Greek. Until 1453 these Greek works had been available in the imperial library of the Byzantine Empire, in Constantinople, but were unavailable in western Europe, which had historically favored Latin texts. With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, these texts seemed lost to Christians (though eventually refugees who fled Constantinople for Italy reintroduced some Greek classical texts to western Europe). Arab scholars, however, had the Greek texts, both in the original Greek and in Arabic translations.

The Children’ s Crusade: Waged mostly between the years 1000 and 1300, the Crusades were a set of religiously motivated military campaigns to retake the Holy Land from Muslim control. While there is no record of a children’ s crusade in 1453, there was a large children’ s crusade in the year 1212. As many as 50,000 children followed their leaders, a French shepherd boy named Stephen and a German boy named Nicholas, believing that the sea would part for them and

that they would walk from Europe to Jerusalem. Historians disagree over whether there was one unified crusade or two (one French, one German) and over the children's fate: Some say the children were sold into slavery, but others maintain that most of the children either returned to their homes or settled down in the European port towns where their crusades ended (such as Marseille).