The ABC’s of the Middle Ages and Renaissance

By Amanda Dennison

World History
Alchemy is a science used to combine elements to create new things. It was also used to try to find a way to live forever. Alchemy was used in the Middle Ages, and even before it, in Asia. It is our basis for modern chemistry and medicine. Many alchemists have tried to create the fabled philosopher's stone, the elixir of life, which they believed would keep them alive forever.
The Black Death, more commonly known as The Black Plague, was a disaster spread by foreign rats brought to Europe from trading ships. It swept throughout much of Europe, killing about one-third of its population. It lasted from 1347 to 1351, and it was not caused by only one single disease, but by several forms. One common form was the bubonic plague; an even deadlier one could spread through the air, and kill in less than a day.
C is for Christianity

Christianity was the most common religion during the Middle Ages. It was enforced by the pope, and any person who was said to be going against the church was excommunicated, or even killed. After a while though, many people felt as if the Christian Church became too corrupted. As a result, branches of Christianity were created. The most common branch of the Middle Ages was Catholic, though.
Dante Alighieri was an Italian writer, politician, and poet. In Dante’s works, he did not write in Latin, but in the language of his home, Italian. Dante showed that he thought that the people’s language was just as good as Latin. Later writers follow him in his footsteps, by writing in their home language. Dante’s most famous work is The Divine Comedy, which describes the many problems he saw in the Italian society.
E is for Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the most powerful people in the Middle Ages. She ruled Aquitaine, a region in southwestern France, as the king’s vassal. Eleanor became queen of France in 1137 when she married King Louis VII. She became queen of England, after divorcing Louis and marrying King Henry II of England. While was queen of England, she spent much of her time ruling her own territory. She had many children and two of her sons became king of England.
Feudalism is the system of promises that control the relationship between lords and vassals. A lord and a knight would create a contract, called a feudal contract, to come to an agreement on their obligations for each other. The most common payment to a vassal from a lord is a fief, a piece of land from the lord’s territory. Other obligations include jobs done by the lord for the vassal. A vassal would have to vow loyalty.
A guild is an association of craftsmen, or merchants. Such guilds are: baking, sewing, or carving. There are more guilds than that, but those are some basic guilds. An apprentice of a master must create a masterpiece and show it to the master to become a master themselves. Then, the apprentice will be granted mastership of that craft. The newly made master, will be then granted into the guild, and able to sell their crafts.
H is for Heraldry

Heraldry, otherwise known as a coat of arms, is a knight’s basic identification. Each symbol, color, and animal represent a specific idea. Coat of arms, or heraldry, are given to a specific family. The designs would be pasted onto the knight’s shield, so other knights would know who it is. As an example, the color red on heraldry would represent a warrior.
In the Middle Ages, monks would write manuscripts. As they wrote, they would illuminate words, otherwise, make the first letters fancy and attractive. You may have seen this in some books, but it was big in the Middle Ages. As you can see in the picture, the first letter on the page has a very detailed and designed appearance. This technique would make the monks’ manuscripts more attractive.
Joan of Arc was a teenage, French peasant girl who, near the end of the Hundred Years’ War, rallied up the French troops. The English were too late by the time they captured and killed Joan. Meaning that the French had driven the English out of their country in 1453. Joan’s act of rallying up the troops and fighting in the war was considered wrong. The people thought that women should not fight in wars, nor fight whatsoever.
A knight is a warrior who fought for a lord or nobleman. The knights required a payment of land, titles, or money in exchange for their fighting. A knight would usually be seen on a heavy warhorse, as shown above. The knight would have to follow chivalry, or the code that knights go by. Knights could be considered similar to samurai from Japan, in a way.
Leonardo de Vinci is most famously known for the Mona Lisa. In fact, he was also an inventor, sculptor, engineer, architect, town planner, and mapmaker. His ideas about creating wings so people can fly, was the basis for the Wright brothers’ inventions. As an artist, he studied anatomy, the human body, to make his art more realistic. Leonardo de Vinci dissected corpses to study the jaw and its muscles, yet his paintings show emotion, shown in the Mona Lisa.
M is for Manor

A manor is a piece of land owned by a knight or a lord. On a manor, it would include many different buildings such as, a manor house or castle, a small village for peasants, serf huts, and many more. On a manor, there are different classes of a title. A lord, who owned the land, a vassal or knight, peasants who were obligated to stay on the manor and now leaving, and serfs, whom worked the fields and harvested crops; also obligated to stay on the manor.
Niccolò Machiavelli was an Italian writer and politician. He wrote The Prince, which gives leaders advice on how to rule. He did not care about theories or what should work. Machiavelli argued that rulers had to focus on “here and now” not theories. He believed that rulers had to be ruthless to keep order, and in this way, he serves as a good example of Renaissance interest in human behavior and society.
O is for Oubliette

An oubliette is a form of a dungeon in the Middle Ages. It has only one hatch in the ceiling, preventing any prisoners to escape. In these cells, prisoners were often left to die there. The word oubliette comes from the French word, oublier, meaning to forget. In this case, this means the prisoners who were held in the oubliette will soon be forgotten.
The pope is the head of the Christian Church. Since most Europeans in the Middle Ages belonged to this church, the pope had a great amount of power. People saw the pope as God’s representative on Earth, so they looked up to him as guidance on how to live and pray. Since the pope was considered God’s representative, he had to decide what the church will teach, and to make policies. Along with deciding teachings and policies, the pope would decide when someone was acting against the church.
Queen Isabella is considered one of the greatest monarchs in Spanish history. Although, she never really was the queen of Spain, she was the queen of Castile, but had no official power in her husband’s kingdom, Aragon. However, in practice the two ruled the kingdom together. In addition to her part in the Reconquista, she made great contribution to Spanish society. She encouraged religion and education and supported many artists.
The Renaissance, or renewal of Europe, is one of the most recognizable periods in history. It was a sudden burst of the arts and science. It arose with a great spark of new interests and ideas after the Dark Ages. This is the period of Leonardo de Vinci and William Shakespeare. It lasted from 1271 to 1600.
A serf is the lowest class on a manor. A serf is basically the fieldworkers and servants. A serf would be legally bound to their manor, meaning they could not legally move away from the manor. Serfs were not paid for their labor, but were not like the life of a slave. Serfs had not much freedom, only enough to that they could have a small hut on the manor land.
The Thirty Years’ War lasted from 1618 to 1648. It was a series of wars fought in central Europe, involving most of Europe’s countries. It was one of the longest and most destructive conflicts in European history. It is also one of the longest continuous wars in modern history. It was originally fought for a religious reason, between Catholics and Protestants, but it became a general conflict involving most of the great powers of the time.
Universities played a big role in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. During the Renaissance, though, universities flourished with books and new ideas. Universities, in the Renaissance, had a more Humanist outlook. In fact, the teachers who taught there were Humanists themselves. In addition, the creation of books rose the interest in education, making more people want to learn.
A vassal was a person who granted the use of land. A vassal would give a knight this in return for rendering homage and usually military service. Its equivalence is to a lord. This exchange is connected to the feudal system. This exchange may be seen in the picture shown above.
William Shakespeare is a very famous Renaissance writer. He is considered the greatest writer in the English language. Shakespeare in most famous for his plays, and he wrote over 30 comedies, tragedies, and histories. Two of his most famous plays are Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, which, ironically, are both tragedies. Like Dante, he wrote in the language of the people of his home.
The Exchequer is the financial department of the royal government. It is originated as an office in the twelfth century. It had two parts, the Lower Exchequer of Receipt, where money was received and distributed. Then, the Upper Exchequer, where accounts were rendered. It is basically an earlier form of a bank.
Y is for Yew

A yew is a type of tree put onto a coat of arms. It represents death and eternal life. As stated in ‘heraldry’, each symbol means a specific thing. A yew means death and eternal life, because it is considered the tree of eternity. In general, a yew tree represents great age, rebirth, and reincarnation.
Zadar, otherwise known as Zara, is a city in Croatia. It was a city that, in the Crusades, Venetians asked knights to conquer to collect money and goods. After the knights conquered Zadar, they conquered Constantinople. Zadar was a trade city along the Mediterranean. It was conquered to obtain money to pay for the voyage to go to the war.
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University.

Vassal.

Exchequer.

Yew.

About The Author

Amanda Dennison is a 12-year-old sister and daughter, who lives with her family in Fairfield, California. Her hobbies include drawing, singing, and video games. Her picture above was drawn by her digitally, meaning she drew it on her computer. She has two older sisters, Brittany and Kayla, who are both in college. Amanda participates in her school band, and in the school choir. In her band, she plays trumpet, and is the only female seventh grade trumpet player. Amanda spends most of her time drawing or being with her sister, or even both at the same time. Almost all of her teachers from all grades have loved her being in their classes, and she hopes that this pattern will continue.
Dedicated to Shadow, my cat who lives outside, whom I rarely ever see.
“Great ABC book!”

“Wow, I can read this over and over!”

“I never knew history could be so interesting.”

“Amazing work.”

“Couldn’t put it down!”