

Explore More—How Europe’s Geography Affected People’s Lives

Directions: *Listen to your teacher talk about the geography of Europe and the Eurasian landmass. You’ll learn more about Europe’s location, waterways, vegetation, and climate. You’ll also hear how these factors were related to people’s lives in the Middle Ages. Refer to the maps in your Explore Geography Picture Dictionary to locate the places your teacher mentions and to see the topography of the continent. Circle any words in the text that you don’t understand. Underline or highlight important ideas in the text. Write notes in the margins to help you understand key points. Then answer the questions in your own words.*

The Eurasian Landmass and Europe

Even though Europe is considered its own continent, one of the seven of the world, it is actually part of a larger mass of land. Europe forms the western portion of the landmass and Asia forms the eastern part of the same landmass. This entire mass is called Eurasia. The Ural Mountains, the Ural River, part of the Caspian Sea, and the Caucasus Mountains mark the boundary between Europe and Asia. Europe has mountainous regions and islands. It also has peninsulas like the Italian Peninsula, Scandinavian Peninsula, and the Iberian Peninsula.

Find the Scandinavian, Iberian, and Italian peninsulas on the map in your textbook.

Europe today is divided into many different countries, each with their own individual governments and leaders. In ancient times, however, it was controlled mainly by two vast powers: the Greeks and the Romans. Our modern concept of Europe developed after the Western Roman Empire fell in A.D. 476. At that time, people from all over the European continent and Asia began to settle in the lands and introduce a variety of cultural traditions to people already in the region. With this instability came the desire for powerful leaders that would bring order, protection, and stability to those who survived the fall of the Western Roman Empire. The Christian Church was a stabilizing force during what is known as the medieval period or the Middle Ages, which lasted from approximately A.D. 500 to about 1350.

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Europe's Waterways, Vegetation, and Climate

Europe is crossed by various waterways. The Seine River runs through modern-day France; the Danube River crosses part of modern Germany, Austria, and Hungary; and the Tiber River is in modern-day Italy. To the south of the continent is the Mediterranean Sea. To the north is the Baltic Sea above part of Germany and Poland, and the North Sea above part of Germany and the Netherlands and to the east of Great Britain.

Europe has many forests, although many of them have been cut down for human settlements. Pine trees, fir trees, and oak, elm, and maple trees are often found in the central part of the continent that stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the boundary of Asia. In the high mountains of the northern portion of the continent, you might see mosses, shrubs, lichens, and wild flowers. There are prairies on the Great European Plain. The Mediterranean region has many olive trees and other fruits like grapes and figs.

The climate of Europe is usually moderate. In the northern part of the continent, it is temperate cool. For most of the remaining part of the continent, it is temperate warm.

Europe's Geography and People's Lives in the Middle Ages

The geography of Europe had a powerful impact on the lives of the people who lived there during the Middle Ages.

Look at a map of Europe in your textbook or the Explore Geography Picture Dictionary.

It determined how people migrated—in what direction they relocated and settled. Geography during the Middle Ages also determined which groups would have frequent contact for trading purposes, the sharing of ideas and traditions, and the possibility for wars and conflicts. In the same way, people in some areas of medieval Europe had little contact with other groups.

Natural boundaries often provided protection from invaders. In areas where the geography of the land was open and easier to cross, people would be far more vulnerable to attack by other groups. Geography also affected the crops that people could grow, the types of shelters or homes that could be built, and the animals that were available for food. Since the people who lived during the Middle Ages did not have the modern conveniences and technological advances that people living now do, their lives were often more affected by the geography of the land than are our lives today. ❖

YOUR TURN!

Write your answers to the following questions.

1. What is Eurasia? Describe the location of Europe on the Eurasian land mass.

2. What are some of Europe's major waterways?

3. Briefly describe Europe's topography, vegetation, and climate.

4. How did Europe's geography affect people's lives during the Middle Ages?

5. On the time line below, mark the span of time that historians usually refer to as the “Middle Ages” in Europe:

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Questions for further discussion:

- Using your textbook, historical anthology, and the *Explore Geography Picture Dictionary*, identify Europe’s predominant economic system during the Middle Ages. Discuss the ways in which the geography of Europe influenced this economic system.
- Discuss the sources of historical continuity in terms of Europe’s geography and how the combination of ideas, events, and human actions explains the emergence of new patterns.
- What would you like to know more about in terms of European geography and the relationship between geography and people’s lives during the Middle Ages? Frame questions that you can answer by historical study and research. Conduct this research and discuss your findings.