‘The Dark Ages’ in Europe

The term ‘The Dark Ages’ refers to the period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance: the 5th – 14th centuries. It has been suggested that this period saw little scientific and cultural advancement. However, the term doesn’t stand up to much scrutiny – and many medieval historians have dismissed it.

The Dark Ages is generally considered as the early medieval period of the European history. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe faced a drastic political, economic and social set back. The Dark Ages reflects the ill-consequences of this set back. This dark period started when the last Western Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus was defeated and deposed in 476 AD by a barbarian Odoacer. However, modern historians have renounced using this term because of its negative implications.
Later historians started mentioning this period of history as “dark:” and they did so because of the backward and depleting ways, customs and practices that prevailed after the fall of Roman Empire. With this huge political collapse, the European society was forced to fall in clutches of feudalism. The continuous struggles between barbarians, Vikings and various feudal nobles devastated the peace of common men while the common men were forced to lead their life as serfs. Life during the serfdom was typically difficult for peasants and lower class people.

Many historians used the term to denote this period just because of the reason that very little information about this period was available. No written historical records were available. However, recent discoveries have revealed a number of new facts about this time and hence, modern historians prefer not to use this term.

The term Dark Ages was first used by Italian scholar and historian, Francesco Petrarca who was also known as Petrarch. Being an Italian, he was influenced by the greatness of the ancient Roman Empire. In order to denounce the Latin literature, he coined this phrase. However, even he didn’t mean to say that the rise of Christianity caused drastic set back. Nowadays, nobody use this term, yet, it can be used to represent the period following the fall of Roman Empire in the Western World. Some historians consider it as the period from 400 to 1000 AD.
**Coining the term ‘the Dark Ages’**

The first person to coin the term ‘Dark Ages’ was believed to be Francesco Petrarca (known as Petrarch), an Italian scholar of the 14th century. He bestowed this label upon the period in which he lived as he was dismayed at the lack of good literature at that time.

The classical era was rich with apparent cultural advancement. Both Roman and Greek civilisations had provided the world with contributions to art, science, philosophy, architecture and political systems.

Granted, there were aspects of Roman and Greek society and culture that were very unsavoury (Gladiatorial combat and slavery to name a few), but after Rome’s fall and subsequent withdrawal from power, European history is portrayed as taking a ‘wrong turn’.

After Petrarch’s disparagement of the ‘dark age’ of literature, other thinkers of the time expanded this term to encompass this perceived dearth of culture in general across Europe between 500 - 1400. These dates are under constant scrutiny by historians as there is a degree of overlap in dates, cultural and regional variations and many other factors. The time is often
referred to with terms like the Middle-Ages or Feudal Period (another term that is now contentious amongst medievalists).

Later on, as more evidence came to light after the 18th century, scholars started to restrict the term ‘Dark Ages’ to the period between the 5th and 10th centuries. This period came to be referred to as the Early Middle Ages.

**Busting the ‘Dark Ages’ myth**

- Labelling this large period of history as a time of little cultural advancement and its peoples as unsophisticated is, however, a sweeping generalisation and regularly considered to be incorrect. Indeed, many argue that ‘the Dark Ages’ never truly happened.
- In a time epitomised by extensive increases in Christian missionary activity, it appears Early Middle Age kingdoms lived in a much interconnected world.
- The early English Church for instance relied heavily on priests and bishops who had trained abroad. In the late 7th century, the archbishop Theodore founded a school at Canterbury that would go on to become a key centre of scholarly learning in Anglo-Saxon England. Theodore himself had originated from Tarsus in south-eastern Asia Minor (now south-central Turkey) and had trained in Constantinople.
People were not just travelling to Anglo-Saxon England however. Anglo-Saxon men and women were also regular sights in mainland Europe. Nobles and commoners went on frequent and often perilous pilgrimages to Rome and even further afield. A record even survives of Frankish observers complaining about a monastery in Charlemagne’s kingdom that was run by an English abbot called Alcuin:

**Causes of Dark Ages**

- By the middle of the third century, the Roman Empire was in deep trouble. It was suffering from an economic crisis, a string of civil wars, two major rebellions, a plague outbreak, and many, many emperors being murdered. Diocletian managed to stabilize things, but it still did a fair amount of damage, particularly to the western parts of the empire. As a result, the fourth century saw the political and economic centre of the Roman Empire shift east towards Syria, Egypt, and Anatolia. Those were the wealthiest, most densely populated parts of the empire by that point and emperors, most notably Diocletian and Constantine, wanted to be closer to that.

- The western parts of the empire, on the other hand, were becoming increasingly poor. While some parts of the west - Italy, Sicily, and Tunisia, for instance - were still quite important, the region was increasingly becoming an economic drag. Their economies were weaker and, with the notable exception of Italy, they didn't have the population that the eastern regions had. As a result, the Western Empire (the two halves split for good in 395) was less well equipped to handle the various challenges of the fourth and fifth centuries. It wasn't strong enough to control the various tribes that migrated into its territory, nor was it wealthy enough to buy them off, while attempts to integrate these groups into Roman society seem to have been fairly clumsy.
• Because of this, the Western Empire gradually lost control of its provinces as it focused its increasingly limited resources on protecting its most valuable territories, Italy and its main agricultural provinces, Tunisia and Sicily. This ultimately failed: the Vandalic conquests of North Africa and Sicily cut Italy off from critical food supplies and ambitious commanders no longer bothered to respect the authority of either emperor, culminating in Odoacer's coup in 476.

• Put this together and you find that the Western Empire was undergoing a long, slow collapse in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Roman economy was a wreck to begin with, but the fact that the army could no longer keep the peace and the imperial government had broken down meant that the crisis deepened as various warlords competed for control of the provinces. Britain is probably the best example here. It seems to have been a fairly important part of the Roman economy, but the Roman pullout seems to have sent it into free fall, resulting in various British - and eventually Anglo-Saxon - warlords fought each other and devastated the economy to the point that the British lost the technology needed to make wheel-thrown pottery.

• The end result was that Western Europe in the sixth century was fairly poor. The cities shrunk as wealthy landowners retreated to their country estates and the poor followed them looking for work. The return to an agrarian economy meant that schools closed due to a lack of students - most families couldn't afford to support their sons' educations - and books were lost either during the wars or because very few people had the resources and opportunities need to study them, let alone copy them. This meant that most of the achievements of the ancient world were simply lost to the west for centuries, until trade with the Muslims and Byzantines caused the knowledge to slowly trickle back. Similarly, the economic collapse was so thorough, that it took centuries for most of Western Europe to recover. Spain seems to have done pretty
well, both under Visigothic and Muslim rule. On the other hand, we don't really see a recovery in England, France, and northern Italy until the 8th century, in Sicily and southern Italy until the 10th century, and in Rome itself until the Renaissance.

Europe – The Dark Ages
"The “Dark Ages” in Geography"

Every discipline has a period of evolution, glory and further degradation. When we see the history of study of Geography, Greeks and Romans pioneered it. Simultaneously, Indians too were studying Geography (not recording it, though). 5th to 1st Century BC was the Greek period of Geographical study whereas post this period the Romans advanced in this study. Post Roman era in 3–4th century AD, we say a Dark Age prevailed in the study of Geography. There were no subsequent advances in the study of Geography for centuries, especially in Europe where this Dark Age ended with the Industrial Revolution, advent of discoveries of the new lands (Americas, etc.) and further technologies inventions. But by the end of 8th century AD, World saw a rise of Arab school of Geography which ended the Dark Age in the Asia. Scholars like Ibn Khaldoun, Ibn Batuta studied various phenomena in Astronomy, Geography. Thus when we talk about the Dark Age in Geography, we say the Dark Age remained in Europe between 4th to 15th century AD whereas the Arab School rose in the Arabic world and ended the Dark Age in Asia in 8th Century itself.

- Talking of the meaning of Dark Age, it means the age where there are no significant studies in the respective discipline. The art of map making (cartography), astronomy etc. were pioneered by Europeans long before Christ but post Roman era no studies could be done in this field and a long paradigmatic vacuum was created which led to severe shortcomings to Geography.

- If you wish to know the history of this Dark Age, how and why it began and how it ended, Google might just have a few good articles.
**The impact of dark ages on the geography**

From what I have seen of the Ravenna Cosmography of 650, there was a vigorous effort to preserve all that had been accumulated in the classical past; however, where written records could no longer be compared with actual experience, you could find descriptions misunderstood or reduplicated. In one case, a deliberately false information was introduced by an interested party: ambassadors of the Franks to Justinian I hoaxed Justinian’s historian Procopius into believing that there were two great islands in the north sea, Britania and Brittia, of which Britania was in the Frankish sphere of influence and Brittia was the ancient Roman province of which Procopius had read in his books. The reason for this remarkable lie, of course, was to convince the Byzantines to leave “Frankish” Britain, which was still regularly reached by Byzantine traders, alone.

At the same time, “the dark ages” also saw some considerable expansion. Ireland and Scotland became part of the Latin west, and if you read King Alfred the Great’s English version of the late Roman historian Orosius, the king (or his collaborators) added a considerable notice about Norway and Lapland, of which the Romans had no idea, but with which the English traded regularly.

**Why do we use the term 'Dark Ages'?**

Far from 'dark', the early medieval period saw religious diversity and the invention of new forms of art. Dr Janina Ramirez, art and cultural historian, shares 5 facts

- The term ‘Dark Age’ was used by the Italian scholar and poet Petrarch in the 1330s to describe the decline in later Latin literature following the collapse of the Western Roman empire. In the 20th century, scholars used the term more specifically in relation to the 5th-10th centuries, but now it is largely seen as a derogatory term,
concerned with contrasting periods of perceived enlightenment with cultural ignorance.

- A very quick glance at the remarkable manuscripts, metalwork, texts, buildings and individuals that saturate the early medieval period reveals that ‘Dark Age’ is now very much an out-of-date term. It’s best used as a point of reference against which to show how vibrant the time in fact was.

![Gold, garnet and glass shoulder clasps from the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial, c 625AD. (British Museum)](image)

- **It was religiously diverse**

The early medieval period was characterised by widespread adherence to Christianity. However, there was a great deal of religious variety, and even the Christian church itself was a diverse and complicated entity. In the north, Scandinavia and parts of Germany adhered to Germanic paganism, with Iceland converting to Christianity in 1000 AD. Folk religious practices continued. Late in the 8th century, an Anglo-Saxon monk called Alcuin questioned why heroic legend still fascinated Christians, asking: “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?”
Within the church there were many lines of divisions. For example, Monophysitism divided society and the church, arguing that Jesus had just one nature, rather than two: human and divine, which caused division to the level of emperors, states and nations.

*The Franks Casket, carved on whale bone, with runic poetry and showing scenes of the nativity and Weland’s revenge, c700. (British Museum)*

- **It was not a time of illiteracy and ignorance**

The connection between illiteracy and ignorance is a relatively modern phenomenon. For most of the medieval period and beyond, the majority of information was transmitted orally and retained through memory. Societies such as that of the early Anglo-Saxons could recall everything from land deeds, marital associations and epic poetry. The ‘scop’ or minstrel could recite a single epic over many days, indicating hugely sophisticated mental retention. With the establishment of monasteries, literacy was largely confined within their walls. Yet in places like the holy community at Lindisfarne, the monks were able to create sophisticated theological texts, and extraordinary manuscripts.
Panels from the Ruthwell Cross showing Jesus with Mary Magdalene, and runic passages from ‘The Dream of the Rood’, 8th century, Ruthwell Church, Dumfriesshire

This was a high point for British art

Far from a ‘dark’ time when all the lights went out, the early medieval period saw the creation of some of the nation’s finest artworks. The discovery of the Sutton Hoo ship burial on the eve of the Second World War redefined how the Anglo-Saxons were perceived. The incredible beauty of the jewellery, together with the sophisticated trade links indicated by the array of finds, revealed a court that was well connected and influential. After the arrival of Christian missionaries in 597 AD, Anglo-Saxons had to get to grips with completely new technologies. Although having never made books before, within a generation or two they were creating remarkable manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the earliest surviving single copy of the Vulgate Bible, the Codex Amiatinus. They also invented a new form of art: the standing stone high cross. Arguably the most expressive is the Ruthwell
Cross, where the cross itself speaks of Christ’s passion, through the runic poetry carved on its sides.

Finds from the Staffordshire Hoard which was discovered in 2009, the largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork yet found. (Birmingham Museum)

- There is still so much to discover

With many periods in history, it can be difficult to find something new to explore or write about. Not so with the early medieval period. There are relatively few early medievalists, and a wealth of research still to be done. What’s more, advances in archaeology are only recently bringing information to light about how people in this period lived. When societies build more in timber than in stone, it can be hard to find evidence in the archaeological record, but more is coming to light now than ever before. There are the surprise discoveries: manuscripts long hidden in archives, hoards concealed in fields, references only recently translated. There is still so much to be done, and this is a rich and rewarding period to immerse you in.
**Dark Ages Weren’t So Dark: support against the Dark Age**

The centuries following the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D. are often referred to as the Dark Ages—but were they really?

- The idea of the “Dark Ages” came from later scholars who were heavily biased toward ancient Rome.

In the years following 476 A.D., various Germanic peoples conquered the former Roman Empire in the West (including Europe and North Africa), shoving aside ancient Roman traditions in favor of their own. The negative view of the so-called “Dark Ages” became popular largely because most of the written records of the time (including St. Jerome and St. Patrick in the fifth century, Gregory of Tours in the sixth and Bede in the eighth) had a strong Rome-centric bias.

While it’s true that such innovations as Roman concrete were lost, and the literacy rate was not as high in the Early Middle Ages as in ancient Rome, the idea of the so-called “Dark Ages” came from Renaissance scholars like Petrarch, who viewed ancient Greece and Rome as the pinnacle of human achievement. Accordingly, they dismissed the era that followed as a dark and chaotic time in which no great leaders emerged, no scientific accomplishments were made and no great art was produced.

- The Church replaced the Roman Empire as the most powerful force in Europe, redefining the relationship between church and state.

In Rome’s absence, Europe in the Early Middle Ages lacked a large kingdom or other political structure as a single centralizing force, apart from a brief period during the reign of the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne (more on that later). Instead, the medieval Church grew into the most powerful institution in Europe, thanks in no small part to the rise of
monasticism, a movement that began in the third century with St. Anthony of Egypt and would rise to its most influential point in the High Middle Ages (1000-1300 A.D.).

Kings, queens and other rulers during the early medieval period drew much of their authority and power from their relationship with the Church. The rise of a strong papacy, beginning with Gregory the Great (pope from 590 to 604), meant that European monarchs could not monopolize power, unlike in the days of the Roman Empire. This idea of limits on royal power would continue into the High Middle Ages, influencing such milestones as the Magna Carta and the birth of the English Parliament.

- The growth of monasticism had important implications for later Western values and attitudes.

The dominance of the Church during the Early Middle Ages was a major reason later scholars—specifically those of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries—branded the period as “unenlightened” (otherwise known as dark), believing the clergy repressed intellectual progress in favour of religious piety. But early Christian monasteries encouraged literacy and learning, and many medieval monks were both patrons of the arts and artists themselves.

One particularly influential monk of the Early Middle Ages was Benedict of Nursia (480-543), who founded the great monastery of Montecassino. His Benedictine Rule—a kind of written constitution laying out standards for the monastery and congregation and limiting the abbot’s authority according to these standards—spread across Europe, eventually becoming the model for most Western monasteries. Finally, Benedict’s insistence that “Idleness is the enemy of the soul” and his rule that monks should do manual as well as intellectual and spiritual labour anticipated the famous Protestant work ethic by centuries.
The Early middle Ages were boom times for agriculture.

Before the Early Middle Ages, Europe’s agricultural prosperity was largely limited to the south, where sandy, dry and loose soil was well suited to the earliest functioning plough, known as the scratch plough. But the invention of the heavy plough, which could turn over the much more fertile clay soil deep in the earth, would galvanize the agriculture of northern Europe by the 10th century. Another key innovation of the period was the horse collar, which was placed around a horse’s neck and shoulders to distribute weight and protect the animal when pulling a wagon or plough. Horses proved to be much more powerful and effective than oxen, and the horse collar would revolutionize both agriculture and transportation. The use of metal horseshoes had become common practice by 1000 A.D. as well.

Scientists also believe something called the Medieval Warm Period took place from 900 to 1300, during which the world experienced relatively warm conditions. This held particularly true for the Northern Hemisphere, extending from Greenland eastward through Europe. Combined with key advances in farming technology, uncommonly good weather appears to have fueled the agricultural boom of the period.

Great advances were made in science and math—in the Islamic world.

Among the more popular myths about the “Dark Ages” is the idea that the medieval Christian church suppressed natural scientists, prohibiting procedures such as autopsies and dissections and basically halting all scientific progress. Historical evidence doesn’t support this idea: Progress may have been slower in Western Europe during the Early Middle Ages, but it was steady, and it laid the foundations for future advances in the later medieval period.

At the same time, the Islamic world leaped ahead in mathematics and the sciences, building on a foundation of Greek and other ancient texts translated into Arabic. The Latin translation
of “The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing,” by the ninth-century Persian astronomer and mathematician al-Khwarizmi (c. 780-c. 850), would introduce Europe to algebra, including the first systematic solution of linear and quadratic equations; the Latinized version of al-Khwarizmi’s name gave us the word “algorithm.”

- *The Carolingian Renaissance saw a flowering in the arts, literature, architecture and other cultural realms.*

Karl, a son of Pepin the Short, inherited the Frankish kingdom with his brother Carloman when Pepin died in 768. Carloman died several years later, and 29-year-old Karl assumed complete control, beginning his historic reign as Charlemagne (or Charles the Great). Over some 50 military campaigns, his forces fought Muslims in Spain, Bavarians and Saxons in northern Germany and Lombards in Italy, expanding the Frankish empire exponentially. As representative of the first Germanic tribe to practice Catholicism, Charlemagne took seriously his duty to spread the faith. In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “emperor of the Romans,” which eventually evolved into the title of Holy Roman Emperor.

Charlemagne worked to uphold this lofty distinction, building a strong centralized state, fostering a rebirth of Roman-style architecture, promoting educational reform and ensuring the preservation of classic Latin texts. A key advancement of Charlemagne’s rule was the introduction of a standard handwriting script, known as Carolingian miniscule. With innovations like punctuation, cases and spacing between words, it revolutionized reading and writing and facilitated the production of books and other documents. Though the Carolingian dynasty had dissolved by the end of the ninth century (Charlemagne himself died in 814), his legacy would provide the foundations—including books, schools, curricula and teaching techniques—for the Renaissance and other later cultural revivals.