CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the political, social and economic dislocation of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Topics include the political breakdown of the Hundred Years’ War, the social and economic consequences of the Black Death, and the ecclesiastical disunity of the Babylonian Captivity, Great Schism and Conciliar Movement.

The underlying causes of the Hundred Years’ War included English possession of French lands along the coast, French support of the Bruces of Scotland (who were fighting to end English overlordship of Scotland), a quarrel over Flanders and the strong hereditary claim of King Edward III of England to the French throne. The war lasted from 1337-1453, with 68 years of at least nominal peace and 44 of active fighting. France had a much larger population and was wealthier than England, but received poor leadership from its kings and, unlike England, the country was internally divided. After early English victories, French national sentiment was spurred to unprecedented heights by Joan of Arc, and a unified France progressively forced the English back. By 1453, the English held only their coastal enclave in Calais.

The bubonic plague known as the “Black Death” hit a Europe in 1347 which had been weakened by decades of overpopulation, economic depression, famine and bad health. Raging from 1347-1350, it killed as much as two-fifths of the population of western Europe. As a result of the plague, agricultural prices fell while the cost of manufactured goods rose. Noble landowners suffered as per capita income in the cities increased. Trade guilds became powerful and monarchs were able to continue the process of governmental centralization. For the Black Death’s effect on art, see Art & the West: Images of Death in the Middle Ages.

In the thirteenth century, the church was being undermined by internal religious disunity and by the denial of imperial power, for the papacy was now on the defensive against its old anti-imperial allies. Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) tried to maintain the papal monarchy of the early thirteenth century, but a French army sent by King Philip IV surprised the pope; Boniface was beaten up and almost killed. There was no lasting papal retaliation. Pope Clement V (1305-1314) moved his permanent residence to Avignon (called the "Babylonian Captivity") and the papacy remained subservient to the French king from 1309 to 1377. From 1378 to 1417, there occurred the Great Schism in the church which saw rival popes and division of support among secular leaders. With the papacy in such chaos, there followed an attempt at conciliar government of the church. Opposition to the papacy was expressed in England by John Wycliffe and in Bohemia by John Huss. They became spokesmen for the rights of royal authority over the popes. Huss was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1415 and a fierce revolution in Bohemia resulted. Marsilius of Padua also asserted temporal supremacy of emperor over the pope. But by mid-century, the papacy had recovered adequately to assume a controlling role in church councils.

Early in the ninth century, Russia was converted to Christianity by Byzantine missionaries. The cultural center of this developing civilization was Kiev which held this position (and defended it against the Mongols) until the mid-fourteenth century when Moscow under Ivan I rose as an important power. In 1380, the Mongols were finally defeated in battle and driven out of Russia within the next century.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The Black Death: One of the great determinants of change in history is disease. The social and economic results of the plague were wide-ranging and included fluctuation of agricultural prices and city income, as well as a decline in trade and the quality of goods produced. Politically, it is important to note that the powers of the two great containers of monarchy in the Middle Ages, the church and the nobility, suffered greatly in numbers and prestige from the effects of the plague. Monarchs were able to progress toward the centralization of their governments and economies.

2. Relations Between Church and State: The late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were a period of chaos for the church. The victim of attacks by local political factions, the papacy lost respect because of its transfer to Avignon, the Schism which followed, the impact of the Conciliar Movement, the corruption of Alexander VI and others, and the French involvement in Italy. In the long run, the sword of the secular arm proved more than a match for the medieval church.

SUGGESTED FILMS

Medieval England: the Peasants’ Revolt. Learning Corporation of America. 31 min.

Dijon—the Four Grand Dukes of Burgundy (1300-1500). Roland Films. 15 min.
Joan of Arc--A Profile in Power. Learning Corporation of America. 25 min.

You Are There: The Final Hours of Joan of Arc. McGraw-Hill. 26 min.