The Late Middle Ages

The first half of the 14th century witnessed an economic decline that began with the first retrenchment after the long, gently inflationary rise of a unified economy that had been under way since the 11th century. The European climate itself was worsening: the Medieval Warm Period or Medieval Climate Optimum was a time of unusually warm climate in Europe, leading to the onset of the Little Ice Age. The Little Ice Age was a period of cooling occurring after the Medieval Climate Optimum.

The Black Death, also known as the Black Plague, was a devastating pandemic that first struck large areas of Western Europe lost around a third—in some places as much as half—of their population to disease, especially in the crowded conditions of the towns. As a consequence, the mass population loss greatly accelerated social and economic change during the 14th and 15th centuries. In Western Europe, the sudden scarcity of cheap labour provided an incentive for landlords to compete for peasants by offering wages and freedoms, an innovation that, some argue, represents the roots of capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system in which the means of production are owned mostly privately.

Politically, the later Middle Ages were typified by the decline of feudal power replaced by the development of strong, royalty-based nation-states. This consolidation did not decrease the frequency of war, the Late Middle Ages seeing such protracted conflicts as the Hundred Years' War between England and France. Participation in these wars weakened the eastern Christian nations in their confrontations with an increasing expanding Islam.

Christendom was increasingly divided in this period, notably during the 14th century. The Western Schism or Papal Schism was a split within the Catholic Church that lasted from 1378 until 1418. These divides resulted in greater loyalty to regional or national churches, and though lay piety rarely wavered, secular solutions, rather than religious ones, were increasingly sought for the social problems of the time. The Lutherans' split with the Roman Catholic Church in 1517, and the subsequent division between Catholicism and Protestantism signaled the end of the old order.

Throughout the Late Middle Ages, stresses such as the Great Famine of 1315-1317, the Black Death, also known as the Black Plague, and popular rebellions by peasants in the countryside, particularly in the west, encouraged creative social, economic, and technological responses that signaled the end of the old medieval order and laid the groundwork for further great changes in the Early Modern Period.

Adapted from: