

Elite Culture

The twelfth century was marked by a number of cultural developments in learning, literature, architecture, and faith. All of these developments expressed a level of optimism with respect to the human condition. Commonly referred to as the “Flowering of the Middle Ages” by scholars, the cultural development in the twelfth century reached its apex in the following century with a synthesis of worldly order and spiritual harmony, the latter symbolized by the towering and upward span of the Gothic cathedral. While many of the cultural developments were headed by and served secular and church elites, they had wide ranging implications for all of medieval society.

In education, newly translated sources of ancient texts began circulating in Western Europe, in particular, those of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. These texts had a profound impact on the way students in cathedral and monastery schools—which appeared first during the Carolingian Renaissance of the ninth century—learned. Since the establishment of these schools, whose primary purpose was to train priests and monks, students studied the *trivium*, which consisted of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the *quadrivium*, which consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—otherwise known as the seven liberal arts. The primary mode of learning in these schools was through lectures delivered by the master teacher. By the eleventh century, some schools began extending parts of this curriculum beyond mere priestly or monastic training. In the twelfth century, some teachers began examining existing sources of authority and comparing newly translated ancient authorities and exposed the ways in which they contradicted one another. Chief among these teachers was Peter Abelard (1079-1142). Between 1122 and 1123, Abelard, a teacher in Paris, wrote *Sic et Non (Yes and No)*, in which he arranged opposing opinions on 156 subjects found in texts written by authorities, including the Bible, Church Fathers of late antiquity, and writings from popes. While Abelard stopped short of coming down on one side or another of the opposing opinions, he exposed the contradictions, suggesting that one must first gather as many opinions as possible and then use reason, or the new tools of logic in the newly translated texts, to decipher which of the opinions were correct. Debating these opinions became the favorite pastime of students. Use of logic to decipher correct order would become the centerpiece of a new institution of learning: the university.

Other major cultural developments of this period came in the form of new genres of literature. First, the poetry of troubadours expressed vernacular, or the spoken language (as opposed to the diplomatic and learned language of Latin). Originating in the region of southern France, troubadours were lyric poets who varied rhyme and meter. Music often accompanied their poetry. The first famous poet of this type was a nobleman, Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1071-1127), who wrote in Occitan, the spoken language in southern France. He was soon followed by many others who found a home among the courts of kings, princes, barons, and especially queens, such as William’s granddaughter Eleanor of Aquitaine (c.1122-1204), queen of France and then England.

Troubadours wrote about many topics, but chief among them was love. Dubbed by nineteenth-century scholars as “courtly love,” troubadours celebrated idealized and unattainable love. The attempt to obtain this unattainable love, usually represented by the figure of the noble court lady, resulted in a code of behavior that would deem the poet worthy of the lady’s love and attention. Such behavior was appropriate to the refinement of court society. Because the focus of the ideal and unattainable love was the beauty and virtue of the court lady, it was of little wonder that many noblewomen who held land and wealth in their own right were major patrons of troubadours.

Lyric poetry was not the only new genre of literature that was written in the vernacular and expressed a code of behavior. Long, narrative poems celebrating heroism on the battlefield, known as *chansons de geste*, also appeared in the twelfth century. These epics highlighted the virtues of the knight who was fierce on the battlefield yet refined off of it. This ethos—often referred to as chivalry from the French word for horse—and the knight’s mode of fighting—*cheval*—expressed group solidarity of knights in the face of powerful kings, a growing merchant class, and the increased use of mercenary soldiers. Chrétien de Troyes’s (c. 1150-1198) heroic knight Lancelot in his epic poem the *Legend of King Arthur* exemplifies this ethos or code of behavior.

In architecture, the Gothic cathedral was a major accomplishment and expression of optimism. Gothic architecture differed from the earlier Romanesque, which was characterized by thick, heavy walls and small windows. The darkness of the Romanesque style, which kept as much weight in the walls as possible in order to support the domed roof, stood in stark contrast to the light-filled Gothic church. Architects, beginning with those who designed and constructed the cathedral of Saint-Denis in modern France, found a way to take weight out of the walls by transferring support to the outside through flying buttress. The flying buttress redistributed the weight and allowed for pointed arches and ribbed vaulting. They also allowed for larger windows as well as a greater number of them. These windows were filled with stained glass that depicted biblical stories. Upon entering a Gothic church, the faithful’s eyes were immediately drawn upward, where he or she would presumably feel the energy and experience the light of God. The figures set in the stained glass were there to remind the faithful of his or connection to God, but it was also meant to reinforce the connection between past patriarchs and kings and the faithful’s present king, who provided order.

The Gothic style was intended to shorten the distance between heaven and earth, at least temporarily, while at the same time demonstrating the majesty of God and the gulf between the purity of heaven and the dredge of the average person’s daily experience. The latter was a matter that religious orders tried to address. The Franciscans (f. 1209) and the Dominicans (f. 1216) were religious orders that stayed in and traveled through urban spaces preaching to popular audiences. They arose as part of a growing desire for a more meaningful, everyday relationship with the divine already present in cities. Men and women alike sought new religious experiences and levied criticism against the lavish church administration, which seemed more concerned with worldly wealth than their spiritual duties. Some men and women joined together in communities focused on

what they believed was a purer form of the Christian faith. These communities, however, did not receive official sanction by church authorities and often preached ideas contrary to official doctrine, as the Roman Catholic Church defined it. The Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi, the son of a wealthy merchant who renounced his inheritance to preach penance to the town dwellers of Assisi, survived by begging, thus being called Mendicants from the Latin verb to beg, *mendicare*. They ministered to lepers, preached, and worked among the poor. The Dominicans, founded by Dominic of Guza, who sought to preach correct doctrine in an attempt to counter the unorthodox teachings of unsanctioned communities, also renounced all personal property and survived by begging. As experts in Church doctrine, many Dominicans gave up the life of itinerant preaching to teach theology in the new universities.