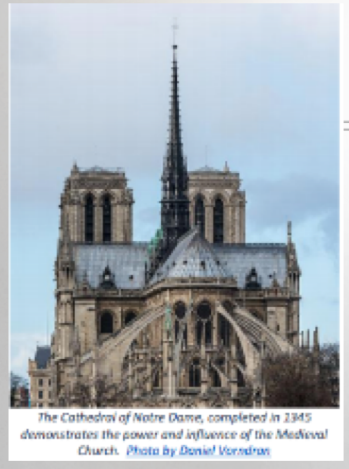
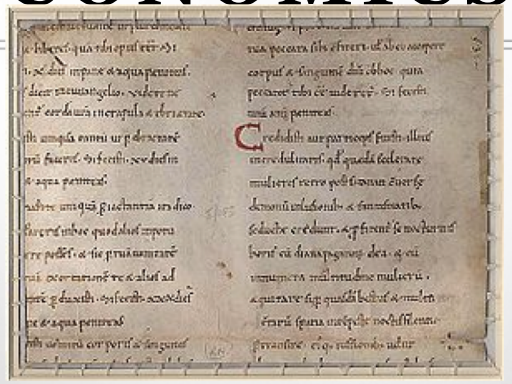
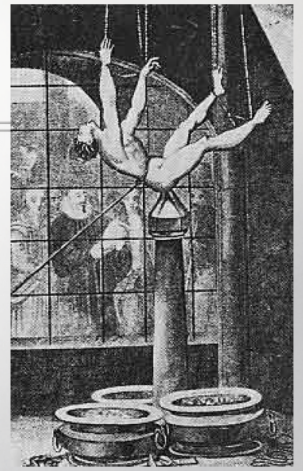
SSWH7: ANALYZE EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY WITH REGARD TO CULTURE, POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND ECONOMICS



The Cathedral of Notre Dame, completed in 1345 demonstrates the power and influence of the Medieval Church. Photo by Daniel Vorndran



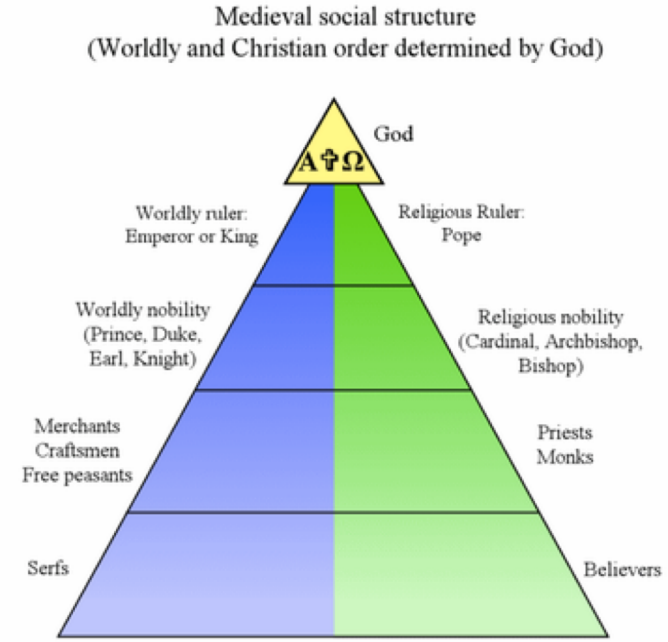


Element B: Explain the political impact of Christianity and the role of the Church in Medieval society.

MEDIEVAL CHURCH'S POLITICAL IMPACT

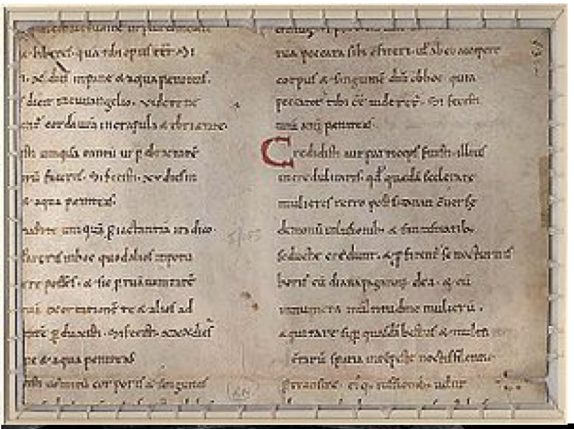
- The weak and decentralized nature of feudal states provided an opportunity for the Roman Catholic Church to emerge as both a spiritual and temporal power in medieval society.
- When the pope crowned first Pepin and later Charlemagne, he established an important and enduring precedent for papal political power in Europe (Holy Roman Emperor).

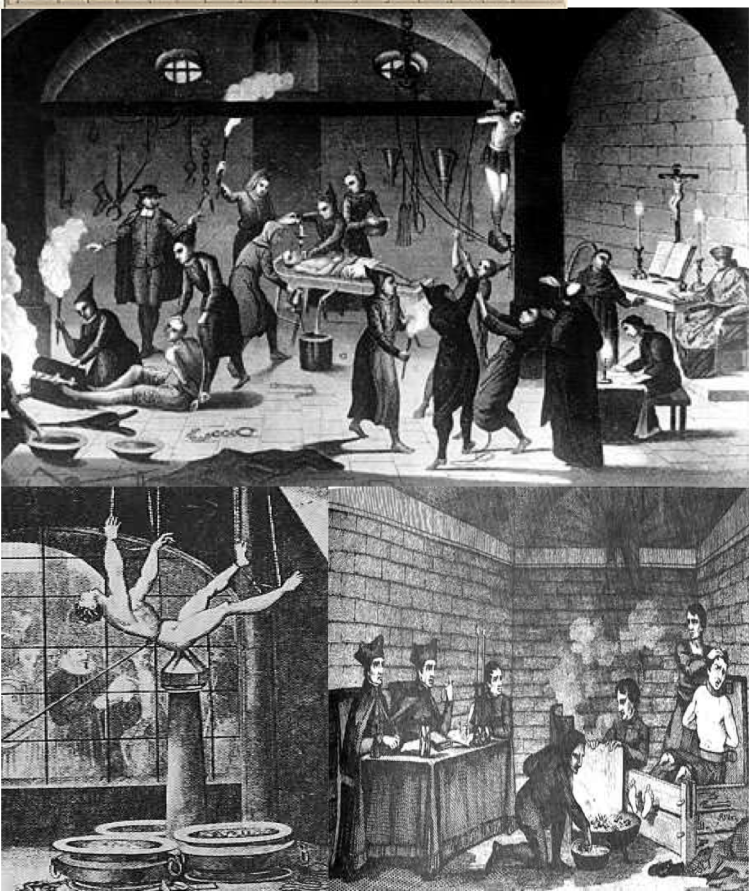
ROLE OF CHURCH IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY



- While political power and the economy of Medieval Europe was highly decentralized, the spiritual unity of the continent remained quite unified.
- The popes in Rome maintained this unity through a hierarchy of clergy that included cardinals, bishops, abbots, and parish priests.
  - The authority of the clergy over the royalty, nobility and common people was reinforced by several factors.
    1. First, medieval Catholicism taught that only the clergy could interpret the scripture.
    - This monopoly on religious authority was reinforced by the fact that medieval bibles were written in Latin, a language very few Europeans outside the clergy could read.
    2. Second, the clergy alone could administer the seven sacraments or rituals that the church said were required to achieve internal salvation in heaven.

ROLE OF CHURCH IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY





3. Third, the church enforced a law code (canon law), on all believers.
   - Canon law regulated the behavior of all church members and was enforced by a network of courts that had the authority to arrest and punish violators.
     - The punishment of the most extreme forms of heresy included torture and execution.
     - The most powerful tool of the church in maintaining its power was the threat and use of excommunication and interdict.
       - When the pope issued an excommunication, he expelled a believer from the church, thus denying them any opportunity to achieve eternal salvation and as a result condemning them to eternal punishment in hell.
     - An interdict denied the sacraments to entire regions thus condemning all of the inhabitants to hell.
     - In a society deeply rooted in faith, these served as very powerful tools in maintaining both the spiritual and secular authority of the church.

ROLE OF CHURCH IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

- The monarchs of Europe regularly attempted to temper the authority of the pope in their realms by placing their allies in the clergy.
- Because bishops served as regional church leaders throughout Europe the monarchs wanted the authority to appoint the bishops within their realms.

  - This practice of was known as lay investiture.
    - The church tolerated this practice until 1075 when Pope Gregory VII banned lay investiture.
  - This infuriated the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV who was in the process of consolidating his power.
    - Henry called on the pope to step down but the pope responded by excommunicating the emperor which severally weakened is secular authority.
    - To regain the respect of his subjects and access to internal salvation in heaven, Henry was forced to stand in the snow barefoot while wearing a itchy hair shirt and beg for forgiveness from the pope for three days.
    - In the end, Gregory withdrew the excommunication and Henry accepted the ban on lay investiture but the struggle between the popes and the monarchs of Europe endured.

ROLE OF CHURCH IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

- In addition to political and religious authority, the church was also an important force in maintaining cultural unity in Europe.
- While educational opportunities were rare in Medieval Europe, the network of Catholic monasteries did provide some opportunities for scholarship and research.
- Further, the Catholic church constructed several monumental gothic cathedrals during this period that endure as high points in European art and architecture to this day.