



Cathedral, Forge and Waterwheel: Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages

By Joseph Gies, Frances Gies

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An illuminating look at the monumental inventions of the Middle Ages, by the authors of *Life in a Medieval Castle*.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Historians, write Frances and Joseph Gies, have long tended to view the Middle Ages as a period of intellectual and scientific stagnation, a long era of backwardness, ignorance, and inertia. Many scholars of the Renaissance era, however, thought otherwise; the mathematician Jerome Cardan, for one, held that three medieval inventions--the magnetic compass, the printing press, and gunpowder--were of such significance that "the whole of antiquity has nothing equal to show."

In their lively history of medieval technology, the Gies team writes of such advances as the heavy plow, the Gothic flying buttress, linen undergarments, water pumps, and the lateen sail. During the medieval millennium, they suggest, a great technological and social revolution occurred "with the disappearance of mass slavery, the shift to water- and wind-power, the introduction of the open-field system of agriculture, and the importation, adaptation, or invention of an array of devices, from the wheelbarrow to double-entry bookkeeping." Many of those inventions or adaptations, brought into Europe from China and the Middle East, have scarcely been improved on today.

The medieval technological revolution, the authors conclude, came at a cost: much of Europe was deforested to make room for cropland and to fire kilns and furnaces, and mechanization made obsolete many handicraft skills. Yet, they add, the workers and inventors of the Middle Ages "all transformed the world, on balance very much to the world's advantage." --*Gregory McNamee*

From Library Journal

Moving chronologically through a millennium (500-1500 A.D.), the authors (who have written numerous books on medieval life, including *Life in a Medieval City*, LJ 2/1/70) show that the term "Dark Ages" is a misnomer by deftly tracing the period's "main technological elements, . . . their known or probable sources, and their principal impacts." In addition to the technological developments highlighted in the book's title, the authors cover such topics as the textile industry and shipbuilding/rigging, plus obligatory topics like printing, engineering, and gunpowder. Throughout, they nimbly weave medieval cultural history into the discussion. Informative, readable, enjoyable, and well written, this work is directed to general readers. Highly recommended for all collections.

- *Michael D. Cramer, Virginia Polytechnic & State Univ. Libs.*, Blacksburg
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From [Booklist](#)

The flame of human ingenuity burned with surprising intensity during the medieval centuries. Already well known for their extensive research into medieval history and social life, the Gieses here explode the myth of the Dark Ages, showing that the Fall of Rome did not plunge Europe into stagnation and lethargy. Rather, the archaeological and historical record reveals that medieval Europeans borrowed discoveries from other lands (such as the compass, Hindu-Arabic numbers, gunpowder, and paper) and developed their own indigenous technologies (such as those in wind and water mills), so making continual progress in the use of natural resources. In the fields, peasants used a new harness (from China) to put the horse to work in place of the ox; in the forge, the blacksmith developed case-hardened tools for the carpenter; on the open seas, the sailor manipulated the new lateen sail to guide ships constructed with radical new hull designs. While most of the technological development was anonymous and practical, medieval advances in fields such as astronomy and navigation led directly toward the feats of Copernicus and Columbus. Contemporary readers-

-prone to take computers and smart bombs for granted--will learn much from this chronicle of monks writing on lime-treated parchments and of knights fighting with newly devised stirrups. *Bryce Christensen*

Users Review

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Lisa Gonzales:

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