



# The Late Medieval Age of Crisis and Renewal, 1300-1500: A Biographical Dictionary (The Great Cultural Eras of the Western World)

By Clayton J. Drees

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Late medieval Europe was an age of crisis. With the Papacy removed to Avignon, the schism in the Catholic Church shook the very core of medieval belief. The Hundred Years' War devastated France. The Black Death decimated the population. Yet out of this crisis grew an age of renewal, leading to the Renaissance. The great Italian city-states developed. Humanism reawakened interest in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome. Dante and Boccaccio began writing in their Tuscan vernacular. Italian artists became humanists and flourished. As the genius of Italy began spreading to northern and western Europe at the end of the 15th century, the age of renewal was completed. This book provides thorough basic information on the major cultural figures of this tumultuous era of crisis and renewal.

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### Editorial Review

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Reviewed with *Renaissance and Reformation, 1500-1620*.

These two biographical dictionaries introduce Greenwood's interdisciplinary series, Great Cultural Eras of the Western World. Each dictionary includes approximately 350 alphabetically arranged "biographical vignettes." The "culture" of the series title, according to Carney, denotes "those who made contributions to art and architecture, music, philosophy, religion, political and social thought, science, math, literature, history, or education." Carney is associate professor of English at the College of New Jersey, and Drees is associate professor of history at Virginia Wesleyan College.

Entries in each volume are 250 to 1,000 words long, with most filling one or two pages. Each entry is signed by its contributor. *Renaissance* and *Reformation* includes a list of 72 contributors with their academic affiliations but not their positions. *The Late Medieval Age* lists only the names of its 86 contributors; it does not include their institutions or positions. Most entries are clearly written, concise, and summarize the person's claim to fame in the first sentence or two. A few articles, especially those in *The Late Medieval Age*, are a bit facile. For example, Leonardo da Vinci is described as the painter of the "breathtaking" *Last Supper* and the "ageless" *Mona Lisa*.

Each entry includes a bibliography of several English-language books or, less frequently, articles. Although quite a few books from the 1990s and a smattering of primary sources are cited, most items are monographs published before 1990. The bibliography for Artemisia Gentileschi lists books published in 1987 and 1989 but not Ward Bissell's *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art: Critical Reading and Catalogue Raisonne*, published in 1999. Several articles on Netherlandish painters cite only Edwin Panofsky's *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1971) and not more recent books and articles.

Although Carney's introduction notes that an effort was made to include subjects "not as prominent in the historical canon," the introductory material in neither volume explains the process by which the entries were selected. An appendix in *The Late Medieval Age* listing figures according to 28 occupations includes bankers, heretics, inquisitors, literary figures, printers, and rebels, as well as military leaders, popes, kings, and queens. *Renaissance and Reformation* lists its subjects by discipline, rather than occupation. Disciplines include art and architecture, drama and theater, travel, law and political theory, and women. Dictionaries such as these must be selective, but some exclusions are puzzling. Marco Polo, William Wallace (of *Braveheart* fame), and court painter Orazio Gentileschi (father of Artemisia and, until recently, better known) come to mind. Both dictionaries are tightly focused geographically as well as chronologically. Although neither dictionary defines its geographic scope, both are limited to western Europe and a few eastern European and Scandinavian countries, as implied by the series name and demonstrated in the appendixes listing subjects by geographic region.

Each volume includes a general bibliography arranged by topic and an index to alternative names and individuals mentioned within entries.

Most of the individuals included in the *The Late Medieval Age* and *Renaissance and Reformation* are also represented in the two major encyclopedias covering these two periods, the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Scribner, 1982-1989) and the *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* (Scribner, 1999). Individuals without entries

in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* include William Lyndwood, "the most prominent canon lawyer of the Middle Ages," and Jacques de Molay, the last grand master of the Order of the Knights of the Temple. Many individuals covered by the Greenwood dictionaries are also included in major subject encyclopedias such as the *Dictionary of Art* (Grove, 1996). The Greenwood dictionaries are optional choices for reference collections that already own the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, the *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, and a good selection of subject encyclopedias. The most appreciative audience for the Greenwood series will be students doing course work or research papers on the specific historical periods covered by the dictionaries. Libraries supporting courses in medieval and Renaissance history may want to acquire these books for reference or circulating collections. *RBB*

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#### Review

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#### About the Author

CLAYTON J. DREES is Associate Professor of History at Virginia Wesleyan College, where he has taught European and African History since 1992. He has been department chair since 1998. He is author of *Authority and Dissent in the English Church* (1997).

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