

The Middle Ages

The theater was at its peak during the ancient Greek era. Theater continued during the Roman Empire, but was never as important as it had been earlier. We refer to the era after the fall of the Roman Empire as the Medieval Ages, the Middle Ages, or sometimes the Dark Ages. The church became the major force in the lives of the people at this time. At first the leaders of the church outlawed theater. They believed that it was vulgar and evil. Only a few groups of strolling players continued to perform.

After many years, the theater was re-born as part of the church services. At first, the priests enacted a short scene within the mass. The earliest of these scenes was the story of Jesus' resurrection from the tomb at Easter. Later, other masses also had short scenes included. The name given to a short biblical scene was *trope*.

The tropes were very popular. The priests soon realized they were a valuable way to tell the stories of the Bible. In time, the tropes became more elaborate, and the priests began to present more than one trope at a time. Soon the priests were presenting several tropes together to help celebrate certain festivals. The tropes that were shown together became known as *cycles*. The clergy built a small stage for each cycle inside the church. Each cycle told a complete story, and the congregation moved from one stage to the next to see each cycle.

Many of the clergy believed that staging the tropes was important but was taking too much of their time. Eventually, Pope Innocent II ordered that the tropes be moved outdoors. Members of the craft guilds (which trained and organized workers in each major occupation) replaced the clergy in the preparation of the tropes.

This new arrangement worked well. The clergy was able to devote more time to other church work. The members of the guilds were able to give their time working on the cycles as a means of helping the church. At times, workmen built small sets on a large platform on the steps to the church. They then presented a cycle in front of each set. The audience gathered in front of the platform to watch the entire series of cycles.

In other towns, cycles were presented on several carts. These carts resembled floats in today's parades. The audience gathered at several locations. Each cart, called a pageant wagon, stopped at each location. They presented their trope and then moved to the next location and presented it again. Then the wagon following them presented the next trope in the cycle. All of the wagons stopped at each place until they had presented all the cycles at all of the locations.

Theater had regained importance by the end of the Middle Ages. At the end of the era, writers began producing secular or non-religious plays again.



Cycles were sometimes presented on pageant wagons.

Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. What is the period following the fall of the Roman Empire known as?

2. Why was theater outlawed for a time?

3. Who were the only performers in the early Medieval era?

4. In what institution was theater reborn?

5. What was a trope?

6. What was a set of tropes performed together known as?

7. Where were the tropes originally presented?

8. To whom did the clergy turn production of scenes over? Why?

9. What was the function of the pageant wagons?

10. What types of plays were becoming popular by the end of the Middle Ages?

Name _____ Date _____

Sequencing

Indicate by number the order in which the following events occurred:

- _____ Pageant wagons are first used.
- _____ The church outlaws theater.
- _____ Theater continues throughout the Roman era.
- _____ Writers of the Medieval era begin to write non-religious plays.
- _____ Series of scenes called cycles are presented.
- _____ The great Greek era of the theater.
- _____ The first trope appears in the mass.
- _____ The presentations are moved outside the church.

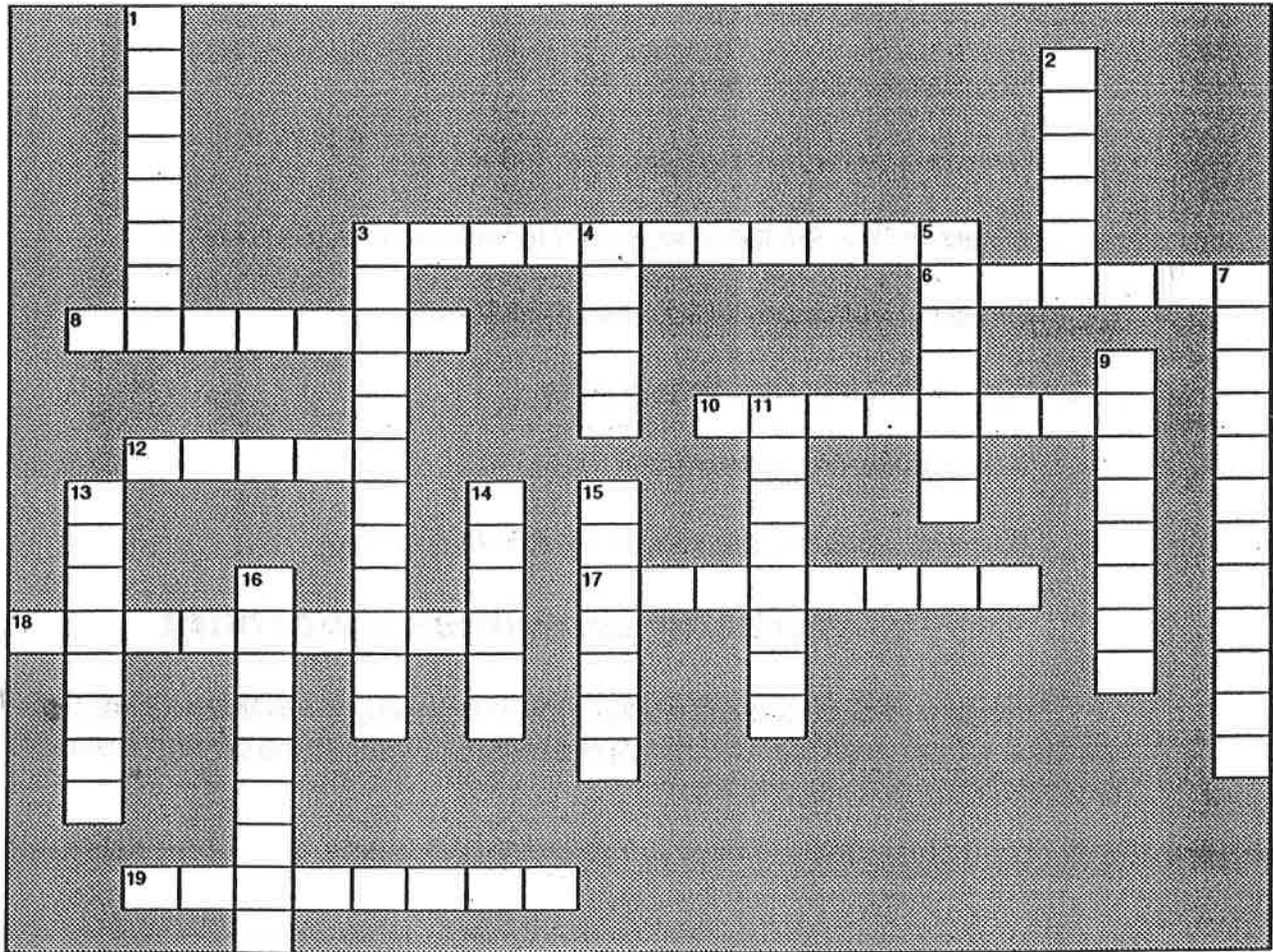
Write an Eyewitness Account

Imagine that you are attending a church service in the Middle Ages. Describe what you think a trope was like. How was it presented? What did the set and costumes look like? How well did the actors perform?

Name _____ Date _____

Crossword Puzzle

Use the clues below to complete the puzzle. Answers may be found in the narrative about theater during the Middle Ages.



ACROSS

- 3. These organizations took over the presentation of scenes from the clergy. (two words)
- 6. The first scene presented in a mass took place at this time of the year.
- 8. Carts used to present plays were called _____ wagons.
- 10. Each cycle told a _____ story.
- 12. Tropes told stories from this book.
- 17. This pope moved the plays outside the church.
- 18. At the beginning of the Middle Ages, only _____ players continued to perform.
- 19. At first, the church _____ theater.

- 3. This group watched the cycles.
- 4. A short scene inserted into the church service.
- 5. By the end of the Middle Ages, this type of play was being produced.
- 7. The first scene to be portrayed in a church showed this.
- 9. Another name for the Middle Ages
- 11. Eventually, the presentation of scenes was moved here.
- 13. This was sometimes built on the steps of the church; entire cycles could be performed on it.
- 14. These were built in churches for cycles to be performed on.
- 15. These men were the first actors in Medieval drama.
- 16. As tropes grew in popularity, they became more _____.

DOWN

- 1. Theater was at its peak during this time. (two words)
- 2. Short religious scenes presented together became known as _____.