Mysteries of the Middle Ages: And the Beginning of the Modern World (Hinges of History)

Thomas Cahill
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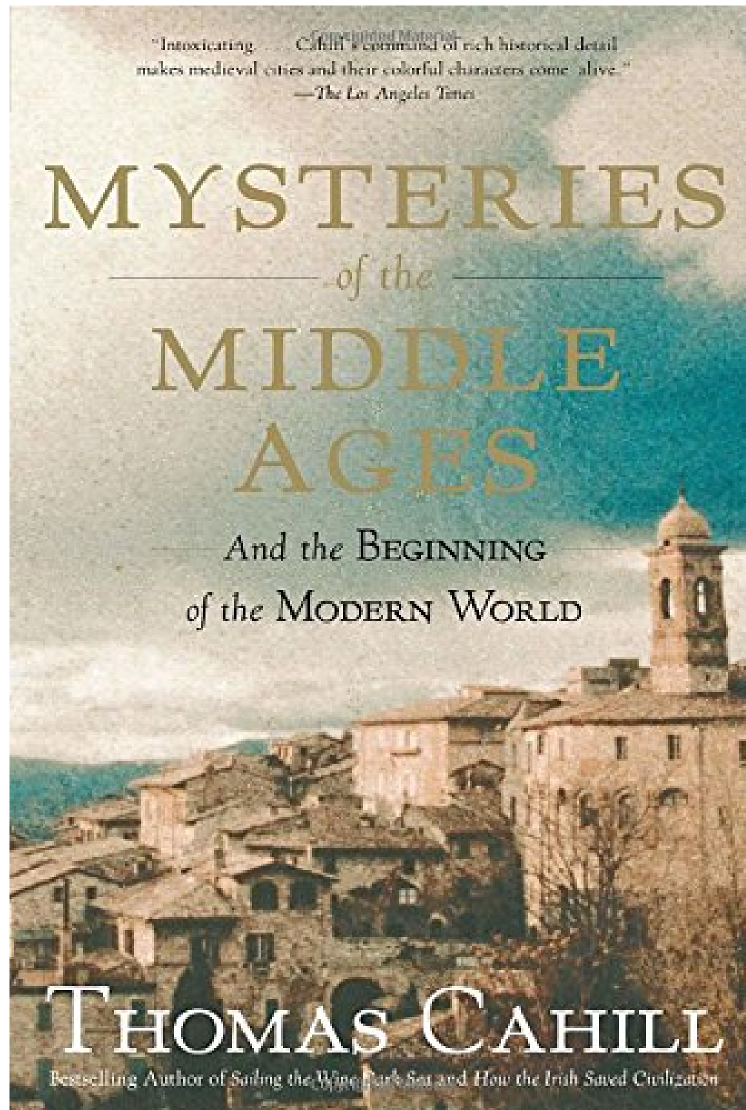

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Thomas Cahill : Mysteries of the Middle Ages: And the Beginning of the Modern World (Hinges of History) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Mysteries of the Middle Ages: And the Beginning of the Modern World (Hinges of History):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. and I recommend them to all students of historyBy Sharon in ColoradoNot finished with this yet I admit, but I've read most of his other books in this series. Well written and

thought out, unique point of view (if you haven't read "How the Irish Saved Civilization" you need to start with that one, his initial writing in the series) . Professor Cahill's books have introduced me to new ideas, forgotten history, and I recommend them to all students of history. These aren't textbook dry books that are hard to slog through, he keeps the reader interested and I think they would spark a love of history even in those who think they don't like the subject!2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Beautiful Presentation, but no MysteriesBy Asher GabbayThomas Cahill is an academic best known for his "Hinges of History" series. I read the four previous books in the series and written reviews about two of them: "How the Irish Saved Civilization", "The Gifts of the Jews". The fifth book in the series is about the "Mysteries of the Middle Ages". Cahill takes a different approach in this book. Whilst the first four books centered around one topic (Irish clergy in the Middle Ages, the Jews' contribution to mankind, Jesus and the Ancient Greeks), in this book Cahill picks a few "over arching" themes that, in his mind, define the Middle Ages and writes about them from the perspective of one major city. So Alexandria is used to describe Reason; Bingen and Chartres to describe the worship of the Virgin Mary; Florence - poetry; Ravenna - politics; and so on. The book is also different from the previous ones in its beautiful layout and the images and illustrations that adorn every page. Whilst I don't think Cahill has unearthed any "mysteries" in this book, he deserves credit for the presentation and popular (sometimes too popular) style of writing.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The books in this series are a joy to read.By SandraYThe books in this series are a joy to read. Cahill really knows how to write history and make it compelling. I have read all of the books and enjoyed everyone.

From the bestselling author of How the Irish Saved Civilization, a fascinating look at how medieval thinkers created the origins of modern intellectual movements.After the long period of decline known as the Dark Ages, medieval Europe experienced a rebirth of scholarship, art, literature, philosophy, and science and began to develop a vision of Western society that remains at the heart of Western civilization today, from the entry of women into professions that had long been closed to them to the early investigations into alchemy that would form the basis of experimental science. On visits to the great cities of Europe-monumental Rome; the intellectually explosive Paris of Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas; the hotbed of scientific study that was Oxford; and the incomparable Florence of Dante and Giotto-acclaimed historian Thomas Cahill brilliantly captures the spirit of experimentation, the colorful pageantry, and the passionate pursuit of knowledge that built the foundations for the modern world.

Intoxicating. . . . Cahill's command of rich historical detail makes medieval cities and their colorful characters come to alive.The Los Angeles TimesCahill offers a fascinating portrayal of the intellectual richness that foreshadows the coming Renaissance. . . . [He] deftly focuses on key locations and major figures that form the foundations of Renaissance and Modern thought in feminism, science, and art. Rocky Mountain News[Cahill] succeeds roundly in bringing his own gift of enticing readers to the study of the past, describing the development and definition of the medieval worldview, as well as he has ever done. New York Daily NewsAbout the AuthorThomas Cahill's appealing approach to distant history has won the attention of millions of readers in North America and beyond. Cahill is the author of four previous volumes in the Hinges of History series: How the Irish Saved Civilization, The Gifts of the Jews, Desire of the Everlasting Hills, and Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea. They have been bestsellers, not only in the United States but also in countries ranging from Italy to Brazil. He and his wife, Susan, also a writer, divide their time between New York and Rome.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.OneBingen and Chartres, Gardens EnclosedThe Cult of the Virgin and Its ConsequencesIn the first decade of the twelfth century, a little girl from the Rhineland town of Bermersheim, near Mainz, was offered by her parents as a sacrifice to God. Her name was Hildegard; her parents were Hildebert and Mechthild, a pious knight and his pious, well-born wife. Hildegard was eight years old when she was left for life with an anchorite named Jutta von Sponheim, who lived alone in a cell attached to the abbey church of Saint Disibod. (Disibod was a whimsical Irish monk-bishop of the seventh century who, disappointed at the lack of response to his preaching by his own countrymen, traveled to the Rhineland, became a protg of the English Saint Boniface, evangelist to the Germans, and founded Disibodenberg, where he seems to have been rather more successful than hed been in his native land.) Not only does Hildegards story embody many of the cultural currents that reached their ebb in her time or soon after; this outwardly obedient daughter, her childhood cut so cruelly short, was destined to become one of the most important women of her age.Using a living child as a religious oblation was no Christian invention. Greeks and Romans had ancient traditions of chaste priestesses and Vestal Virgins; and in the oldest records of both pagans and Jews we find evidence of set-asides, human offerings devoted to a divinity. In the earliest archeological records, these offerings are literal human sacrifices, such as the bog burials of Scandinavia. Jewish tradition yields such offerings in surprising numbers, starting with Abrahams willingness to sacrifice his only son and continuing through Joshuas command to his troops to devote the people of Canaan to God under the curse of destructionthat is,to execute them. In later times, prisoners of war were no longer slain outright, but firstborn males still had to be consecrated to the Lord and then redeemed by an animal sacrifice that was substituted for them, as happens to the newborn Jesus in the second chapter of Lukes Gospel. There is even a further echo of Jewish tradition in the offering of Hildebert and Mechthild, for Hildegard was their tenth childand a tenth of ones

wealth, the tithe of the Hebrews, was consecrated to God.But none of these grand historical precedents would have impressed an eight-year-old, who must have spent many a lonely, creepy night tucked away in Juttas sparsely appointed little hut. Anchorites are no longer an everyday occurrenceI have met only one in my life, and she was nutty as a fruitcakebut in the twelfth century they could be encountered in the neighborhood of many a monastery and even within the close of an urban cathedral. The word anchorite derives from a Greek verb meaning to withdraw; and we may best think of them as hermits who lived not in obscure caves but in association with a religious community. Your typical anchorite, though not necessarily a formal member of such a community, was nonetheless part and parcel of its sacred landscape, so much so that she (or he) would normally reside in a small room built into the wall of an abbey church or cathedral, a room with a view, so to speaka slit or screened window that allowed the anchorite to attend church services but not so large as to make her visible to the merely curious.The liturgy for the consecration of an anchorite was actually a funeral liturgy, for it was deemed that she was dying to the world and to herself. She was spoken of as already dead and with God in heaven. Her cell was called frankly her burial chamber, and, dressed in her shroud, she was directed to sing a verse from Psalm 132: This is my resting place forever, here shall I dwell for I have chosen it. The ceremony, attended gregariously by family, friends, and monastic benefactors, must strike us as a ghoulish sort of celebration, often ending with the ritual interment of the anchorite in her cell, from which it was expected that she would never again emerge. Brick was cemented on brick till the doorway to the cell was blocked and only the slit was left, enough for food and other necessities to be passed to her. If the ceremony did not conclude with an immuring, it concluded with a permanently locked door. But because this period is characterized by such variation in custom from one locality to another, we cannot be certain what was done in Hildegards case, nor whether the growing girl was permanently locked away in thecustomary single room. We do possess one odd detail that may bespeak a certain mitigation: at least one servant was locked in along with the anchorites. Jutta and Hildegard were, after all, noblewomen and so could not be expected to manage even their much-reduced needs by themselves. The idea was to serve God by permanent prayerful retreat from the world. However bizarre this may sound to modern ears, we probably all know a few people whose apartness (or even madness) might be better served if such a socially approved role were still available. Though often represented as a period of repression, heavy with superstition, the Middle Ages offeredat least in religious rolesmore options than are now allowed. I doubt that a frail suppliant, plainly dressed and with a distracted air, approaching a bishop today to say that God had instructed her to build a cell into the wall of his cathedral and to carve in that wall a small window from which she could hear mass, as well as the canonical hours, would receive a warm response. But in the Middle Ages such social oddities were welcomed and assigned a place of honor. While the rest of us went about our worried lives, they prayed for us continually, speaking always to God on our behalf.The masters of the Middle Ages had, of course, another, less public motive for honoring anchorites. The batlike monks of the Prologue who terrorized the citizens of Alexandria might have been politically useful to the patriarch, but as time went on such mobs, vociferous, usually illiterate, became a religious plague. They could not be appeased by compromise; they were rabble-rousing extremists, unswervingly certain of their rectitude. Their implacable attitudes gave bishops, as well as other public men in charge of social order, terrible headaches. How were they to be quieted? By being brought under the bishops control, by being made subject to his rules and approval.Every monkish mob was incited by a leader, often a desert hermit cherished for his holy ability to live apart from society, eating locusts, whipping his body, gifted with extravagant visions. The word monk derives, in fact, from the Greek word monos, meaning alone, lonely, solitary. In the rudimentary beginnings of monastic life, all monks were hermits, and only gradually did they unite in loose association with one another. Bishops began to invite the most influential solitaries to take up more conventional habitats, closer to human society and more readily subject to episcopal pressure. Monks and nuns, monachi and monachae, were made to write constitutions by which their communities were to be governed. In time, such constitutions came to be submitted to a bishop for his approval.In the West, Saint Benedict, Italian founder of the Benedictines, became in the early sixth century the great constitutionalist, his Rule the standard by which all subsequent monasticism was judged. The monks life was utterly subject to his dictum Ora et labora (Pray and work). No rabble-rousing, please. Let anarchy be not so much as mentioned among us. In time, obedience, tranquility, and constructive employmentbuilding, farming, herbal medicine, relief for the poor, succor for the sick, hospitality to wayfarers, manuscript copying, and (in the case of a gifted few) original writingnot vision, came to rule the Christian West. The Benedictines, in addition to vows of obedience, chastity, and community of goods, took a vow of stability, which meant they could not leave the monastery grounds without their abbots permission. Even prayer was measured out at appointed hours. No moment of the monks day or night belonged exclusively to him. The bishops, whothanks to the barbarianshad quite enough on their plates, required such a church, where everyone, even a visionary hermit, could be counted on to play an assigned role and to stay within prescribed limits.No one had done so much to spread the fame of Saint Benedict as Gregory the Great, who was himself a Benedictine monk and had written Benedicts Life. By Hildegards day, even an abbey like Disibodenberg, originally a foundation of Celtic spontaneity, had submitted to the Rule of Saint Benedict. In the abbey church, the monks sang the canonical hoursaas did all Benedictines from Britain to Bohemiaand from a lancet opening in the choir wall a single female voice united with theirs in chant. One day, a pure childs voice joined in, inflecting the Latin words precisely,

ascending gloriously and certainly to the subtle rhythm of the music. In their choir stalls the monks shivered with emotion: it was the voice of the child anchorite, the noble Hildegard.We know little of what went on in Juttas cell, but we know the results. Under the older womans tutelage, the child learned to read the Book of Psalms in Latin and to sing the psalms of the monastic hours, the churchs Divine Office, while accompanying herself on the expressive ten-string psaltery, a sort of dulcimer plucked by hand.Throughout her life Hildegards Latin remained odd, at moments an almost private language. But her grasp of the principles of musicology was remarkable, eventually impelling her to compose her own chants, unusual in sound and singular in subject matter.Beyond the Book of Psalms, Hildegards adult writingsa substantial survivalshow evidence of reading so wide as to rival and even surpass that of the most accomplished scholars of her time. She makes reference to the other books of the Bible, especially the Prophets,to the usual biblical commentaries, to liturgical texts, to the Benedictine Rule, and to the Western fathersJerome, Augustine, Gregory, and Bede. Her Plotinian Platonism probably came to her by way of the ninth-century Irish philosopher John Scotus Eriugena, whose sermons and ruminations were standard texts, and she seems to have read reforming contemporaries, such as Hugh of Saint Victor and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as earlier Christian classics, such as the Shepherd of Hermas and Adsos On the Antichrist. Some have speculated that there are hints in her writings of such Carolingianb authors as Isidore of Seville, Rabanus Maurus, Paschasius Radbertus, and Notker of Saint Gall; and there are strong suggestions that she had access to Greek (and perhaps to Arabic) medical works and even to arcane rabbinical treatises. This, for an age in which books were scarce and precious, is an astounding catalogue, a library available to few men and to (so far as we can tell) no other woman. The library must have belonged not to Jutta, who could hardly have accommodated it in her hut, but to the liberally lending monks of Disibodenberg. What went on in Juttas cell was a lifetime reading program.But what of the eight-year-old who was made to live in such unnatural confinement and who survived the rigorous reading programand even flourished because of it? Does anything of heranything personal, peculiar, intimateremain in the historical record? To answer these questions we must step back a bit and consider more widely the currents of twelfth-century life, not nearly as open as ours to personal preference and psychological insight.Life spans had not increased since the classical centuries; indeed, they had dipped dramatically during the terrifying uncertainties of the barbarian influx and were only nowin the new economic and cultural stability of twelfth-century Europebeginning to approach the best Greco-Roman levels. An eight-year-old, even a child of privilege such as Hildegard, was not as young in the eyes of her parents as she would be in ours. At the same age, her lesser-born male contemporaries were preparing for apprenticeships in the homes of strangersmillers, bakers, chandlers, glaziers, fullers, coopers, wainwrights, and suchand many of her female contemporaries, already betrothed, were beginning to contemplate their coming roles as matrons of households. Hildegard was thought quite old enough to make a lifetime commitment.But should we assume that Hildebert and Mechthild forced their daughter into an anchorites life? In Scivias, the book by which she is best known, Hildegard would counsel parents on the utter necessity of obtaining their childs consent before offering him as an oblation. If you offer a child to Me, says the voice of Jesus, and that offering is against his will because you have not sought his consent to it, you have not acted rightly; you have offered a ram. How? If someone offers a ram at My altar without binding its horns strongly with ropes, the ram will certainly run away. So also if a father or mother offer their child, who is the ram, to My service, but do not honor his will, which is his horns, by assiduous care or supplication or entreaty or diligent exhortation, which are the ropes that bind him, since by all these the child should be brought to consent in good will; not having been proved by these tests, he will certainly run away, physically or mentally, unless God guards him by miracle.And if you, O human, confine that child with such great strictness of bodily discipline that he cannot free himself from the pressure of his wills repugnance, he will come before Me [at the Last Judgment] arid and fruitless in body and soul because of the captivity unjustly inflicted on him without his consent. Then I will say to you, O human who has bound him:I had a green field in My power. Did I give it to you, O human, that you might make it put forth whatever fruit you wished? And if you sow sand in it, can you make it grow into fruit? No. For you do not give the dew, or send forth the rain, or confer fresh moisture, or draw warmth out of the burning sun, all of which are necessary to produce good fruit. So too, you can sow a word in human ears, but into his heart, which is My field, you cannot pour the dew of compunction, or the rain of tears, or the moisture of devotion, or the warmth of the Holy Spirit, through all of which the fruit of holiness must grow.And how did you dare so rashly to touch one dedicated and sanctified to Me in baptism, that without his will you handed him over to bear My yoke in strict captivity; so that he became neither dry nor green, not dying to the world or living in the world? Why have you so oppressed him that he can do neither? If I comfort him by miracle so that he may remain in the spiritual life, that is not for humans to look into; for I want his parents not to sin in his oblation, offering him to Me without his will.From the Hardcover edition.