



Life on a Manor

Life in the Middle Ages centered around the manor, or large estate, of a feudal lord. The wealthier lords lived in large castles. But most lived in manor houses. The size of a lord's manor house depended on his wealth.

Clustered around or near the castle or manor house were the huts and shops of the serfs and freemen who worked for the lord. Together with a chapel and a mill, these structures made up a small village. Beyond the village were the lord's fields, pasture land, and woods for hunting. Most manors in the Middle Ages were laid out in this fashion.



This vellum artwork shows serfs at work on a medieval manor.

Because some sources estimate that 90 percent of Europe's population during feudal times was made up of peasants, they are the focal point of this packet. While the lord and his family in their castle or manor house enjoyed all the comforts associated with their position, the peasant and his family struggled just to survive.

There were two types of peasants: freedmen and serfs. Freedmen had higher status because they were not bound to anyone, but their lives were nearly as hard as serfs' lives. With bandits and invaders roaming the countryside, looting and killing at will, peasants had no way of defending themselves. Thus, many entered into contracts with powerful lords. In return for the right to seek safety inside the walls of the lord's castle or manor house in times of trouble, many peasants agreed that they (and their descendants) would become serfs and work the fields of their protectors. They also agreed to give their lords

a certain percentage of the crops they grew on the land they rented as tenant farmers, as well as some of the livestock they raised.

But serfs were not slaves. They had certain rights that slaves never enjoyed. One was the right to strips of land on which they met their needs for food, clothing, and shelter. After meeting their own needs and the amount due the lord, they could sell the rest. Another was a guarantee that they could not be sold separately from the land they were bound to. Serfs were as much a part of a lord's land as were all the buildings and fields. If a lord sold his estate to another lord, the serfs quite naturally went along as part of the deal.





Throughout the feudal period, farmers used the three-field method of farming. One field was planted in autumn, usually in wheat or rye. A second field was planted in spring, this time either in barley for making beer (water was often unfit to drink in those days) or in beans, peas, and oats. A third field was left fallow, or unplanted. The purpose of the latter was to preserve the fertility of the soil. Each year a different field was left fallow. It was plowed but not planted.

The serfs' strips of land were spread throughout these three fields. Some serfs owned only a small amount of land, but others possessed as much as 30 acres. Serfs were usually free to work their own fields three days a week. The rest of the week, except for Sunday, was given over to the lord's land. On his own strips, the serf could grow fresh vegetables or whatever he wished. But he was required to give a certain portion of his harvest to his lord. The lord also received a portion of the serf's chickens, pigs, and livestock.

The serf's duties extended beyond the lord's fields. He might have to run errands for his lord's lady, and he certainly had to have his grain ground in the lord's mill—for a fee. The same held true for the lord's oven for baking and his winepress for turning grapes into wine. The serf had to cut his firewood and hay on the lord's land and give a portion to his lord. In times of extra work, such as building, planting, or harvesting, the serf could be called on to haul stone, plow, sow, and harvest.

There is more. The serf's agreement with his lord required him to give extra on feast days. For example, at Christmas, he might have to give one of his best fowl, on Palm Sunday to come forward with a sheep, and on Easter with five eggs. Serfs hardly ever had a minute to rest. Even so, Sundays, feast days, and perhaps a week at Easter and Christmas were holidays. On these days, he gathered with fellow serfs and their families for sports and other activities. (These and other amusements are covered later in the packet.)

Serfs' wives and daughters also worked hard. When not laboring in the fields alongside the menfolk, they helped out in the manor house. They spun cloth and made clothing. They baked bread and brewed beer. These tasks were in addition to those they were expected to perform in their own huts.

At the end of the serf's long workday, he retired to his humble hut. The typical hut was built of wood and had one or two rooms, with rushes covering the dirt floor, and a thatched roof. If it had windows at all, they were only slits covered with oiled cloths. In the center was a hearth for cooking and heat. With no chimney, smoke went out a hole in the roof. More than one hut went





up in flames because of this not-too-satisfactory arrangement. Because the thatched roofs of the huts were easily set on fire, cooking was often done outside when the weather was good.

Serfs produced their own food, which was just as plain as the quarters in which they lived. They ate a diet of black bread and vegetables such as cabbage, carrots, and onions. They also had dairy products and some pork. Water was usually unsafe to drink, so they drank mostly ale. They had no sugar, no potatoes, no tea, and no coffee. They did have salt, but only in limited amounts. They seldom ate meat.



Contrary to what some people might believe, the short life expectancy of the average serf (some thirty years) probably had little to do with diet. Black bread is chock-full of vitamins and nutrients, and no one ever died early from eating cabbage and garden vegetables. And, from what we now know about nutrition and health, serfs were better off not eating a lot of meat. Their short lives were probably due to hard work and the total absence of hygiene and sanitation. The latter gave rise to diseases that took the lives of many on the manor—serf and lord alike.

Men of all ranks wore tunics, with the length of the tunic and the brightness of its colors signifying rank. Serfs wore a short woolen or sheepskin tunic and trousers that were held secure by either knee-high stockings or leggings of thin leather. The tunic had sleeves and slipped over the head like a sweatshirt. The serf also wore either a belt or a piece of rope that kept the tunic in place around the waist. He completed his attire with leather boots. In winter he

added an animal skin cloak and woolen gloves and hat. The serf's wife dressed similarly but for a skirt in place of trousers.

Daughters dressed like their mothers, and sons dressed like their fathers. Many years would pass before the clothing of children ceased to be smaller versions of those of their parents.

After a week of hard work, the serf and his family looked forward to Sunday. Sundays and feast days were days of rest and amusement. Serfs got



This detail from a twelfth-century illuminated manuscript shows peasants using scythes to cut hay.



together and sang, danced, and played games. One game that was popular among boisterous young men was an early kind of soccer between two towns, called mob football. It was played in the streets, and, considering the amount of ale the players had drunk beforehand, tended to get a little rough. Broken bones and gouged eyes were commonplace, and sometimes players were killed. The game became so rough that church officials outlawed it in some places.

But it mattered little if football was banned. There were other sporting activities to keep roughnecks occupied. They wrestled, had weight-lifting contests, and engaged in anything that afforded them competition. To the hard-working serf, Sundays and feast days were a time to “let off steam.”

Occasionally a serf who could no longer endure conditions on the manor would run away. To do so was chancy at best. In the early part of the feudal era when few towns existed, there was really no place to run. In addition, life outside the manor was dangerous, and a runaway serf ran the risk of being killed. There was also the certainty that if he was captured and returned to his lord, he would be subjected to the cruelest of punishments.



When more towns began to appear in the thirteenth century, rulers declared that any serf who ran away and hid for a year and a day was said to be a free person. Many serfs gained their independence in this manner. Others became free when their lords were killed on crusades to the Holy Land. And even more were able to buy their freedom when the Black Death, a terrible disease that raged through Europe, killed one-third of the continent’s population. With the labor force so reduced, serfs were able to bargain for their freedom or at least for more rights in return for working the land.

An early form of football, which was played in the streets. Players were often seriously injured and sometimes killed.

