

# Social Status

## Nobles (Vassals)

In the Middle Ages, there was a definite structure in society. You were born into a class of people and generally stayed in that class for your entire life. Working hard did not change your status. Your clothing, food, marriage, homes, etc., were determined for you. After the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, the knights, the clergy (religious people), the tradesmen, and the peasants.

During the Roman Empire, the people were ruled by a government that had a civil system. One of the duties of this government was to protect the people. When the empire collapsed, there was a king, but there was no formal organization to keep the people safe. The nobles filled this role. In turn for service to the nobles, either through farming the land or doing duties the nobles prescribed, the peasant people were given protection. The nobles offered this protection through the use of knights, who most often were the sons of the nobles.

### Clothing

- Clothes were made of silk, velvet, and damask.
- Bright colors were worn.
- Fur was used for linings or trimming.
- Linen or silk was used for undergarments. In the winter, women wore undergarments of fur to keep warm. Undergarments were covered by a gown. Women also wore high headdresses shaped like hearts, butterflies, etc.
- Men wore trousers covered by long coats called tunics.
- Both men and women wore jewelry. Stone cutting had not yet been invented, so whole gemstones were used. Rings and pins were the most popular items.
- Fancy clothes were a status symbol. Laws were passed that forbade peasants from wearing fancy clothes, which they couldn't afford anyway.

### Food

- Nobles ate rich and fancy food prepared by the servants. Many spices were used to make the food tasty.
- People did not have forks, spoons, or even cups. Only a knife was used to cut meat or bread. When nobles wanted a drink, the servants brought them a container that was used by everyone.
- Flat pieces of dry bread called trenchers were used to hold the food and were shared by several people. The more important you were, the fewer the number of people who shared your trencher.

### Childhood

- Having babies in the Middle Ages was dangerous for both the mothers and the babies. About 20 percent of women and 5 percent of babies died during childbirth. An additional 10 percent to 12 percent died during the first month. Healthy children were highly valued during this time.

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# Nobles (Vassals) *(continued)*

- Most families wanted sons to carry on the family name. Having a daughter meant that a dowry was paid to the groom at marriage, so having female children cost more money. Because having healthy children was so difficult, most parents were happy about any birth.
- If the child survived, he or she was baptized and cared for at home by the mother and by nurses until about age 7.
- There were plenty of toys and games. Medieval children had dolls, spinning tops, rattles, hobby horses, blocks, balls, whistles, and puppets. Little girls had glass jewelry for dress-up, while little boys played with wooden soldiers, whips, toy horses, and wooden swords.
- Royal children learned a few manners, a little reading, writing, and dancing.
- At age 7, boys were sent to another castle to begin learning to become a knight. If they were unsuited for this, they were sent to a monastery to become a monk.
- At age 7, girls were sent to another castle to learn to become a lady. They learned how to manage a household, care for children, weave, sew, play an instrument, dance, and sing.

## **Marriage**

- Marriages were never based on love. They were arranged by the parents and often involved land issues and strategic bonds.
- Girls as young as age 12 were married to anyone who met the requirements of the girl's parents. Grooms could be from 20 years to 50 years old.

- A man was the head of the household and the wife was his property—to be treated in any way he wanted.
- Men were allowed to divorce their wives, but women were not allowed to divorce their husbands.

## **Homes**

- Within the castle was a building called the keep where the nobleman and his family lived.
- The castle consisted of a great hall that served as an office, dining room, and dance hall.
- The upper floors contained bedrooms for the lord and his family.
- Nobles' families had sitting rooms called solars where the family gathered to play games and listen to music.
- There were stables and a large kitchen, both of which were staffed by servants.
- Castles were generally quite smoky. A central fire area with a hole in the roof was standard. Perhaps some carpets, called tapestries, hung on the walls, but the floors were often dirt covered with dried grass and reeds, or were made of stone. Dogs generally were allowed to go anywhere. By today's standards, we would find the cleanliness to be very poor.

## **Recreation**

- Men spent much time with hunting and falconry. Men were hired to capture and train hawks.
- Knights gathered for "jousting" tournaments.
- Women sewed, took care of children, and ran the estate.

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## Knights

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The easiest way to become a knight was to be the son of a noble. At about age 7, the sons were taken to a different castle to be trained as a page. They spent their time becoming strong, riding horses, and mastering the use of weapons. They learned how to read, write, and speak Latin and French. They also learned about dancing and the rules of chivalry (the set of rules for honorable behavior).

At about age 16, the page became a squire whose duties were to work for a knight. He dressed the knight, served his meal, tended his horse, and cleaned his weapons. Squires also practiced wearing heavy armor and using weapons. At about age 20, if the squire was worthy, he was made a knight in a “dubbing” ceremony. In the ceremony, the knight-to-be knelt before the lord of the manor. He was touched on each shoulder with a sword and proclaimed a knight.

### Clothing

- Under their armor, the knights wore padding to ease the pain of wearing such heavy metal.
  - In the early years, knights wore chain mail. These were metal chains linked together. It took about five years to make body armor out of mail. The covering for their chests and arms weighed between 20 and 30 pounds and sometimes had up to 200,000 rings. In the later years, knights wore full metal armor.
  - The helmets that knights wore had eyeholes (usually slits in the metal) and breathing holes so the knights could get sufficient air.
  - Shields were made of wood or metal and generally had the knight's family seal shown on it to help identify him.
- The sword was the major weapon of the knight and weighed about 2½ to 3 pounds. It was worn on his left side and fastened around his waist.
  - The other weapons that a knight used were a knife (worn on the right side) and a lance (a long spear used while on horseback). Metal axes, battle hammers, and maces (a long metal or wooden pole with a heavy end used for clubbing an opponent) were introduced when armor became too strong to penetrate with a sword.
  - Knights often appeared in tournaments or jousts. They sat on a horse and carried a lance with a blunt end. They went face-to-face with another knight to try and knock him off his horse. This was done as practice for real warfare.

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# Knights *(continued)*

## Homes

- Knights often traveled the world; however, because they were noblemen, they had a castle that they considered home.
- The castle was a private fortress protected by the knights.
- The nobles' families lived within the part of the castle called the keep. The upper floors were for the bedrooms of the lord and his family.
- The lower floors were where the visiting knights stayed, generally in a very large room.
- Castles were generally quite smoky. A central fire area with a hole in the roof was standard. Perhaps some carpets, called tapestries, hung on the walls, but the floors were often dirt covered with dried grass and reeds, or were made of stone. Dogs generally were allowed to go anywhere. By today's standards, we would find the cleanliness to be very poor.

## Chivalry

- Late in the Middle Ages, knights began to follow the practice of chivalry. The ideal knight was chivalrous when he possessed these virtues and qualities:
  - Live to serve his king and his country
  - Avoid lying, cheating, or torture
  - Believe in justice for all
  - Respect women
  - Avenge wrongs

*Courtesy of Western Reserve Public Media, Kent, Ohio*

# Social Status

## Peasants/Serfs

In the Middle Ages, there was a definite structure in society. You were born into a class of people and generally stayed in that class for your entire life. Working hard did not change your status. Your clothing, food, marriage, homes, etc., were determined for you. After the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, the knights, the clergy (religious people), the tradesmen, and the peasants.

For peasants, life was hard. They worked long hours every day just to ensure that their family had a roof over their head and food to eat. If your parents were peasants, you probably would be a peasant as well. Most of the peasants were farmers, but some were tradesmen, such as millers or tavern owners. The farmers leased their land and also paid taxes to the lord and to the king. Most farmers were not free, but rather were serfs. They were required to stay with the land and had to work several days a week for the lord of the manor. There were some free peasants, but most did not leave their lord.

### Clothing

- Because they were poor, their clothing was usually rough wool or linen. The women wove the fabric and made the clothes. Peasants generally had only one set of clothing and it almost never was washed.
- Men wore tunics and long stockings.
- Women wore long dresses and stockings made of wool.
- Some peasants wore underwear made of linen, which was washed “regularly.”
- The most common colors for peasant clothing were brown, red, or gray.
- Both men and women wore clogs made of thick leather.
- In cold weather, both men and women wore cloaks made of sheepskin or wool. They also wore wool hats and mittens.
- Children basically dressed in the same style as the adults.

### Food

- Peasants generally lived off the land. Their diet basically consisted of bread, porridge, vegetables, and some meat.
- The main crops were corn, wheat, and beans.
- Near their homes, peasants had little gardens that contained lettuce, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, beets, and other vegetables. They also might have fruit and nut trees.
- If the peasant was wealthy enough to have cows or goats, the family would have cheese and milk.
- Many peasants died when the weather was too wet or too dry. If their crops didn't grow, they didn't have food to eat.

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# Peasants/Serfs *(continued)*

## Homes

- Peasants lived in towns on the lord's manor.
- Houses were constructed of stone or of branches covered with mud and straw.
- The roofs were thatched.
- There were generally two rooms in the home.
- The rooms had dirt floors and a few furnishings in the common room, such as stools, tables, chairs, and chests.
- The second room contained the beds for the whole family.
- Often in the winter, the animals also lived in the common room.
- An open fireplace was in the common room.
- There were small windows without glass.
- Candles were used to light the inside of the house.

## Childhood

- Often, children were named after a close relative or a saint.
- In a peasant household, everyone was needed to work in the fields. Often children as young as age 2 were left alone. Many accidents happened.
- Peasant children were poor and did not have many toys.
- Children did not go to school or have tutors, so few knew how to read.

## Marriage

- Virtually all marriages were arranged by the parents.
- Peasants generally married people from their own village.
- Men were the head of the household and the wife was his property—to be treated in any way he wanted.
- Men were allowed to divorce their wives, but women were not allowed to divorce their husbands.
- Adultery and divorce were less common among the peasants.

## Religion

- Religion was very important to the peasants.
- They believed that faith could take them to a world that was certainly easier than the one in which they lived.
- Peasants generally observed the Sabbath and celebrated church holidays.