

A Serf's Life



Life on a manor was constant work for a serf and his family. The entire family would rise at dawn, eat a breakfast of crusts of bread, and work on their lord's lands. Planting and harvesting crops, as well as tending livestock, were typical jobs for serfs. Children performed simple tasks and were given more responsible chores as they matured. Serfs would work until sunset, then they walked back to their huts and ate a simple meal of bread and vegetables or meat. They went to bed early to get a good night's sleep before doing the same back-breaking work the following day. The only days off from work were the sacred or holy

days celebrated by the Catholic Church. The word "holiday" comes from the Middle Ages and even today means a day off from work.

Serf children did not attend school. Most serfs never learned how to read. They learned about the world by listening to tales told by itinerant storytellers.

Serfs were allowed to live on a lord's manor and work the land to feed their families. In return, the lord demanded rent of his serfs, which was usually paid in produce such as vegetables, grains, or dairy products.

Even though he was little more than a slave, a serf had rights. If he ran away from his lord and lived in the city for a year and a day, he became a free man. If a lord sold his lands, the serfs were guaranteed the right to keep working the land for the new lord.

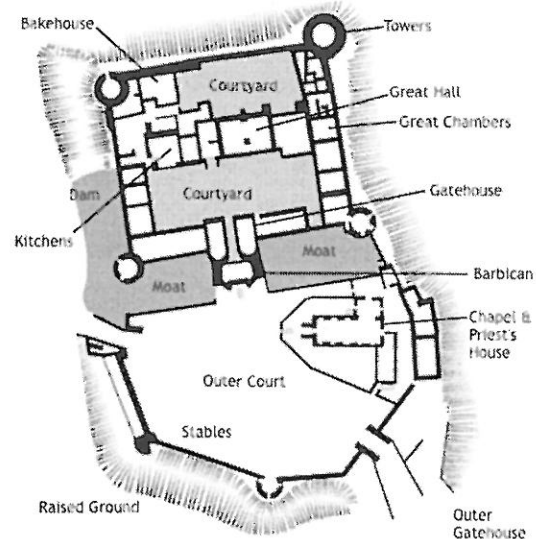
Castles in the Middle Ages



When castles were built hundreds of years ago, they had two basic purposes. First, they provided shelter and living space for those within. Second, and more importantly, they were designed to keep people out – the enemy. By surrounding themselves with strong walls, people inside the castle felt safe and were free to do as they wished without fear. They had created a stronghold that was much better than a locked door. Safety was very important while comfort within the castle was not a priority.

The number of castles in Europe shows how widespread the need for defense was during the Middle Ages, or from about A.D. 500 to 1400. Castles were also a sign of power and success. Kings and rulers desired them, but so did landowners who wanted to show their wealth and power in the regions where they lived. Royal castles belonged to the king. He would build a castle for political reasons such as demonstrating strength and authority. The king built castles to defend important places both on the edge of his kingdom and within it. Nobles also had castles as well. He built it on his fief, the land granted to him by the king.

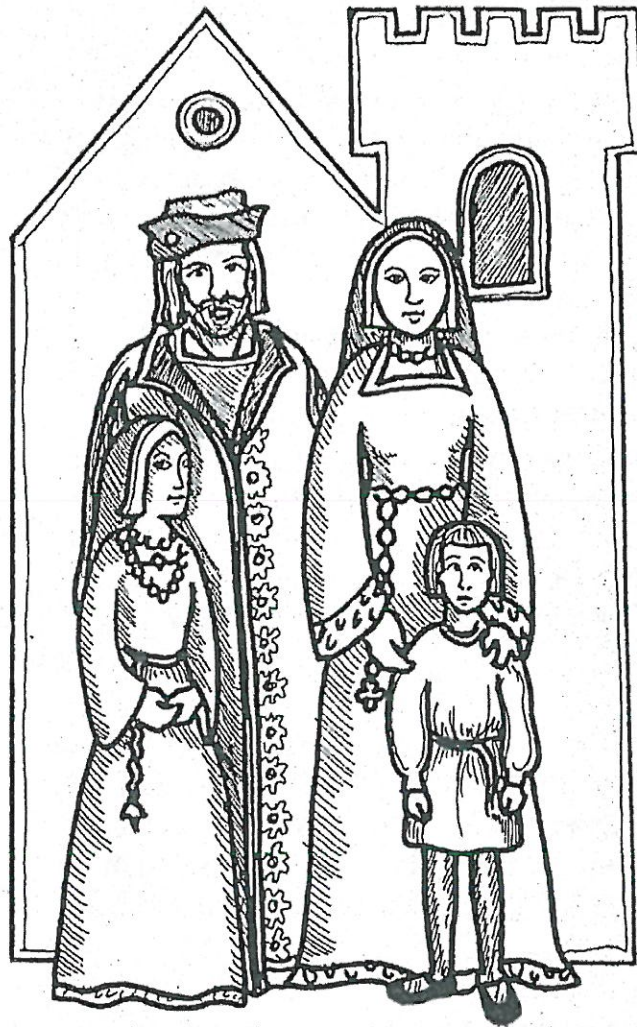
Because castles were built for safety and not for comfort, they were cold, drafty places. Those who lived in castles had little privacy. There were few rooms and many people to house. The king or noble ate in public in the great hall. This is also where he conducted any business or greeted visitors. In the evenings he would be entertained there. Those living in a castle led very active lives and didn't have much time for leisure activities, but in the evenings they might play chess, checkers, or dice, or be entertained with songs or stories that were accompanied by stringed instruments such as a harp.



A Noble's Life

Many a serf envied the life of the nobility. The lord of the manor spent his days either watching over his lands or fighting in wars. All male nobles were knights, and they believed that their honor and self-worth depended upon their skill as a warrior. During peacetime, a lord and his knights would practice for wars with tournaments and jousts.

The lord's wife, or lady, was trained to oversee the household servants. She could also spin, sew, and weave. She was expected to care for the sick and wounded. The lady of the manor was respected, but she usually could not read and had few rights. If she did not have at least one male child, the lord could choose to end the marriage.



Boys of the nobility started their military training at age six when they were sent to a neighboring castle to become a page. Early in life, girls were taught handicrafts and dancing. When a girl was old enough to marry, her father would offer her hand in marriage and a dowry to any knight who would agree to marry her. No child could be married without the lord's consent. When a girl married, all lands she inherited from her family would become the property of her husband.

Education

Although today everyone goes to school during childhood, during the Middle Ages usually only boys studied with tutors. If a girl had a wealthy father who allowed her to learn how to read and write from a tutor with her brother, she was lucky. Educating girls was considered a waste of time and money.

During the Middle Ages, three kinds of schools existed for young boys to attend: song schools, monastery schools, and grammar schools—all run by priests and monks. The university took only the brightest students who wanted to be doctors of theology, law, or medicine.



At song school, a boy learned how to read and sing songs and hymns taught by the village priest. Boys only went to song school if they wanted to sing in the choir at church.

Some boys went to monastery schools at monasteries which were run by monks who taught their lessons in Latin. Boys learned to read and write, do arithmetic, and study geometry. Boys who attended monastery schools usually became monks.

In grammar school, a boy learned to read and write Latin grammar. Since books were expensive and scarce, only the teachers owned books. Students memorized information and recited their lessons out loud. Discipline was very strict. If a student did not know his lessons, he knew that he would get a beating.

Trade Fairs

The Crusades had created an interesting effect on Europe during the Middle Ages. They generated a curiosity in people to travel to distant lands and increased the desire for Middle Eastern goods. This interest in foreign culture led to increased trade throughout Europe, as well as the Middle East.

The first fairs were held as celebrations of church holy days. Food, music, dancing, and sporting contests were all part of the festivities at the fair. In time, fairs became centers for trade. People traveled great distances to attend fairs and purchase goods such as silks, fine wools, and exotic spices from foreign countries. In addition to providing an opportunity to exchange goods, trade fairs were also places for the exchange of news and ideas.



Wealthy merchants displayed their goods in shops lining the streets of the town. Some set up their displays under tents or market stalls. Still others sold their wares from stands or wagons in the streets. Musicians, dancers, and comedians entertained weary buyers.

In the early Middle Ages, most people bartered for goods instead of using money. As trade increased, merchants exchanged coins for products because coins were easier to carry. However, a wealthy merchant was a target for thieves, so a banking system was set up in Europe for people to deposit their money and keep it safe. The Knights Templars were known as "The Bankers of Europe."

A Knight's Life

Knights were heavily armored soldiers who rode on horseback. Only the wealthy people could afford to be a knight. They needed expensive armor, weapons, and a powerful horse. It was the duty of a knight to learn how to fight. This was an extremely violent era in European history so knights would be expected to guard a castle and support his lord in warfare.



Boys typically became knights by becoming an apprentice to a knight and earning the title through training. When a boy, or more likely his parents, decided that he wanted to become a knight, he would go to live in the household of a knight when he was 7 years old. Around the age of 15, the boy would become a squire. As a squire, the young man would have a new set of tasks. He would take care of the knight's horses, clean his armor and weapons, and accompany the knight to the battlefield. If a squire had proven his bravery and skill, he would become a knight at the age of 21.

When not in battle, knights needed to practice their skills. One way to do this was through tournaments and jousting. Tournaments were pretend battles between groups of knights. When a town held a tournament they would invite knights from other areas. Jousting was a popular competition among knights. A joust was where two knights would charge each other and try to knock the other off their horse with a lance. The winners were heroes and won prizes.

Knights were expected to behave a certain way. This was called the Code of Chivalry. The ideal knight would be humble, loyal, fair, Christian, and have good manners.

Here are some of the main codes which knights tried to live by:

- *To follow the church
- *To serve and defend the king or noble
- *To help widows and orphans
- *To protect women and the weak
- *To be generous and honest

Many knights took vows that they would maintain the code. Not all knights followed the code, especially when it came to dealing with people of the lower classes.