





AILY LIFE

Feudalism

Feudalism was a form of society that was prevalent in the High Middle Ages. It had been in use in a basic form in some areas of continental Europe as far back as the time of Charles Martel (see pages 14–15), who was instrumental in developing the system.

William the Conqueror was responsible for bringing feudalism to England (see pages 115–119), as the system was an ideal way to rule a conquered land; it would also have been the method of organization that he was used to as the Normans lived in a feudal society.

The feudal system worked on a very simple premise – the granting of land for services. The ruler of the territory, such as a king or a lord, would own all the land. He would keep a proportion of the land for himself and would grant parcels of land to vassals. In return, the vassal would perform services, often of a military nature, for the ruler. To become a vassal, the recipient of the land would have to swear a sacred oath of fealty and pay homage to the ruler granting the land. Should the oath of fealty ever be broken, it was considered a terrible crime.

Vassals were sometimes granted huge amounts of land, as in England under William I, and in return they would be responsible for a large military obligation. To fulfil this obligation they would split the land up into “knight’s fees”, or fiefs, and grant them to lower vassals, again in return for military service. This pyramid system meant that the

king would have a large body of men obliged to fight for him when the need arose. From the twelfth century the holders of fiefs could pay scutage, a monetary sum, instead of having to render the military service owed.

Under the feudal system, as well as providing a stipulated number of men to fight for him, vassals would have other obligations to their lord or king. They would have to swear loyalty to him and provide him with a place to stay and provisions should he visit. Often there were other obligations as well, such as attendance at the lord’s court or the obligation to pay ransom should the lord be taken prisoner. Vassals could even have to contribute to the cost of the wedding of their lord’s daughter or to the cost of other important events.

In a feudal society the system of reciprocal grants and obligations went lower than the ruling classes and affected the peasants as well. Fiefs were frequently called manors and would often consist of a manor house or castle, fields, pastures, woods and at least one village, which might contain a church. These manors were organized using a system that has come to be called manorialism, which was very similar in structure to the feudal system. Some of the land would be granted out to freemen in return for rent or service. The rest of the land would be held by the lord. Most manors would have had peasants tied to them under the condition called serfdom. In return for protection and land that

OPPOSITE Though the vast majority of the population in the early Middle Ages worked the land, in later centuries opportunities of employment were opening up in the fast-growing towns and cities.

BELOW The life of the peasant was hard. However, there was some respite in the form of holy days (holidays) when there would be entertainment and dancing and rest.

they could use for their own subsistence, the serfs were obliged to work for the lord, often on his land, for a certain number of days of each year. They were also obliged to pay certain dues, which would often be paid in produce rather than money.

Although there would be some free peasants working for the lord, the majority would be bonded to the land and every aspect of their lives would be ruled by the lord. They were considered unfree and were not allowed to leave the land without permission. They also needed the lord's permission to marry and had to make payment to the lord upon their marriage. Should ownership of the manor change, the peasant were still not allowed to leave the manor, but simply worked for the new lord.

During the Late Middle Ages feudalism began to decline. There are many reasons for this decline,

including the fact that economies were becoming more money- than land-based. Also, the Black Death massively reduced the population of Europe, leaving fewer peasants to labour on the land, making them more valuable. Other factors were the increase in travel and trade and centralized governments. However, the one reason that stands out is the rise of the standing army. During the later Middle Ages there was an increase in the number of mercenaries available for hire and many kings chose these professional soldiers instead of relying on their vassals. Eventually, it became necessary for kings to employ professional, trained soldiers to combat the threat of mercenaries hired by their enemies, thus negating the need for the military service rendered under the feudal system.



RIGHT The midwife played an important role during childbirth. She would rub the expectant mother's stomach with oils and give encouragement. Should a birth not go well, the midwife could do a number of things such as trying to turn the baby in the womb or breaking the mother's waters.



Women in the Middle Ages

Though women did not partake in military service the life of a woman in the middle ages was not an easy one. Although the quality of life for the Middle Ages woman could differ dramatically depending on her situation and class, all women were generally seen as inferior to men and many restrictions were placed upon them. Should a girl survive her birth and infancy, no mean feat in the Middle Ages, then she was destined for an adult life befitting her class. A young noblewoman's lot was often that of a pawn, used by the men in her life to either secure wealth or political position.

Women could be betrothed at a very young age, sometimes even at birth. Adulthood started early; girls were considered of marriageable age at 12 and many noblewomen were married by 14, though the marriage

would not be regarded as legal until consummated and it could be annulled before then if necessary. Women would have very little say in the choice of their husband and most marriages were motivated by greed, politics or status. Although women could legally inherit property and wealth, this was usually controlled by the men in their life – either their father or, if he were dead, a guardian. Being the guardian of a wealthy woman was a much sought-after position because the guardian had control over the woman's fortune until she married and he was therefore in a position to choose her husband. Although some noblewomen, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Empress Matilda, came to have great power in their own right, this was a rare occurrence.



ABOVE Although most women of the Middle Ages had little power, there were exceptions. Eleanor of Aquitaine, shown here with her daughter-in-law Isabella of Angoulême, was not only Queen of England but Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right and active in the running of her vast estates.

Once married, the wife of a lord would settle into a life ruled by him. Everything she had was his and she could do little without his consent. Should he die, she was entitled to her dower, or share of his estate. However, she would become a ward of court and usually be married again, securing her wealth for another man.

The noblewoman did however play a significant role in the running of her home. While the lord was away, she would run the castle or manor and estate, making the necessary legal and financial decisions. She was also responsible for looking after the comfort and entertainment of guests and overseeing the household servants and provisions. She had many responsibilities and was also expected to look fine, with her appearance matching her status.

Should a woman of the upper classes not marry, then the only other acceptable option open to her was to enter a convent. Life as a nun in the convent would be one of work, prayer and study. However, not all who entered the convent became nuns. There are many instances of convents being used as medieval boarding houses for widows and others.

The lot of the peasant woman was vastly different from that of the noblewoman. A peasant girl would

marry later in life, usually in her late teens or early twenties, and often had a say in her choice of husband. She married later because she would often work until marriage and marriage would leave her family without a worker. Once married, the peasant woman would do chores with her husband – for example, tilling the fields, planting or harvesting. She could also do paid work, such as labouring or washing, for others. Although often doing the same work as a man, a woman would be paid significantly less.

She would also be responsible for the care of the children, upkeep of the house and all that entailed, making and mending clothes, tending the vegetable patch and cooking the food over an open fire. Life was hard and life expectancy was short.

Between the noblewomen and the peasants there were the middle-class women – the burghers' wives and daughters. These free townswomen would run their household and, along with their servants, would be responsible for all household chores, which would include obtaining provisions, cooking, cleaning and tending the garden. They would also often work alongside their husband or father in their trade. If they were widowed, then the women could run a business left to them by their husbands as long as the relevant guild allowed it.

No matter of what their station in life, most women in the Middle Ages had one thing in common – childbirth. One of the main reasons for marriage was to produce children and women were expected to have numerous children because infant mortality was high. As was usually the case in the Middle Ages, a wealthy woman had more chance of survival than a poor woman, thanks to better cleanliness in the lying-in room where the birth took place, better diet and better care and equipment. There was no effective pain relief that could be used during childbirth and the risk of complications was great, childbirth being the most common cause of death for young women. Most births would be overseen by a midwife, no matter what the rank of the mother. Apart from a male physician in wealthier households, men were banned from the lying-in room. It would be a hot place with a roaring fire to heat water and sometimes many women, including the mother's friends and relatives, would be present. Should the birth go well, the



ABOVE The huge 14th-century tithe barn at Great Coxwell in Oxfordshire, England, would have been used to store crops received as tithes from the tenants of the monastic grange on which it was sited. The grange was controlled by the Cistercian monks of Beaulieu Abby in Hampshire.

midwife would cut the umbilical cord, wash and swaddle the baby. Should the birth not go well, the child would be baptized immediately, sometimes by the midwife who was given special dispensation to perform this rite. If the mother died during childbirth, then the midwife would often perform a caesarean section and take the baby out so that it could be baptized. Should both the child and mother survive, then childbirth was a time of great joy and celebration.

The Church in Daily Life

Being baptized introduced the child to another important aspect of life in the Middle Ages – the Church. In the Middle Ages the Church and religion played a huge role in almost every aspect of life in Christian Europe. A terror of going to hell was instilled into people at a young age and they would be encouraged to obey the teachings of the Church to secure their place in heaven.

Most peasants would belong to a parish, which could include just their village or a number of villages. Every year, they would pay the parish a tax called a tithe, which amounted to ten per cent of their income. The tithe would often be paid at the parish's tithe barn and many

would only be able to pay it in kind by supplying grain or animals in place of coin. For the poor peasants, this was a substantial burden to bear, but most paid the tithe even if it would lead to great hardship.

A parish would be presided over by a parish priest and all tithes would go to him, usually to be split between his own pocket and the church. In the early years, the priest was generally appointed by the Lord of the manor and housed by the Lord. However, in the later Middle Ages the lord would grant the priest the parish as a "living". Some priests would have more than one living and would pay another to take over the duties in the parish in which they did not reside. The revenues from the parish would still go to the original holder of the living. The man actually fulfilling the role of parish priest would often be of a lower rank, whereas the priest who had the living was often the younger son of a nobleman.

Priests would not earn money just from the tithe, but from other sources as well. The living would come with land called a "glebe", which the priest could work himself or rent out to gain revenue. He was also paid for his services since donations were made for such things as baptisms and weddings. There were also other minor



ABOVE A priest conducts a marriage, from *Decrees of Gratian*, a 13th-century French manuscript. Though there are many similarities between modern Christian weddings and those of the Middle Ages, there is one significant difference – weddings in the Middle Ages took place at the door of the church with the participants entering after they were married.

payments such as the soul-scot, a gift given at funerals, and plow-alms, which were payments made to the Church for every use of a plough between certain dates.

The priest would often be the only educated man in a parish and, as such, would be responsible for record-keeping and the religious education of parishioners. His advice could be sought on other subjects such as morality and legal issues. This said, sometimes in smaller parishes the clergyman in residence would be uneducated and so unable to perform this service. He could also be very poor, as in the more impoverished parishes income would be small and if he was not the holder of the living, the priest would receive just a small proportion of what was paid to the Church by the parishioners.

Many castles and manor houses had their own private chapels and a chaplain would be employed to serve the lord and his family. The chaplain would say mass for the household and perform weddings, christenings and funerals for the family. He would also travel with them, if required, seeing to their religious needs while away from home. Again, especially in the Early Middle Ages, the chaplain would often be the only literate member of the household so, among his other duties, he would undertake the record-keeping for the dwelling and educate the children.

Monasteries and convents also played their part in the life of the general populace. They provided food and shelter to travellers and pilgrims, an essential service, as in earlier centuries inns were scarce. They educated the young boys who were destined to enter the priesthood as well as the sons of nobles. Monasteries and convents were charitable institutions, giving food and alms to the poor. In most there would be someone, or a few people, well-versed in herbs and medicines. Also, they provided hospitals for the sick who were brought to the door.

The influence of religion was apparent in the daily lives of all medieval Christians. When they were born they were baptized, they attended mass on Sunday, they were confirmed, married by the priest, took communion, did penance and were buried in holy ground. While, of course, not everyone followed the rules of the Church, the majority did try.

Employment

Although much of the medieval rural population would have been peasants tied to the land, a substantial number of people, especially in towns, were employed in other ways.

In the High and Late Middle Ages, from the eleventh century until the fifteenth century, new towns were being created and existing ones were expanding. With this expansion came trade. Merchants, who once peddled their wares from place to place, often settled in one town and ran their business from there, as did a large number of craftsmen. However, individual tradesmen were at risk of exploitation from whoever owned the land on which the town was built and escalating taxes could be crippling. In a response to this, guilds were formed in most towns.

RIGHT During the Middle Ages, sermons were not solely heard in churches. Friars would also preach in the open air. This way they could address many more people than would fit in a church. This image from 1494 *L'ordinaire des Crestiens* depicts a priest preaching in the open in front of a small chapel.



Guilds were responsible for protecting the interests of their members, making sure that prices were fixed at a certain level and that workmanship was of a good standard. There were two kinds: the merchant guild and the craft guild. The former was for merchants who bought and sold wares and the latter for the craftsmen who made such items as candles, clothes and jewellery.

Guilds would eventually control all aspects of trade in most towns and, by the thirteenth century, the majority of the most powerful men in a town, including the mayor, would be guild members. They regulated all commercial activity and presided over every trader in the town, all of whom had to live by their rules. Outsiders wishing to trade would be charged a fee or even stopped from trading altogether. Anyone who broke guild rules was

fined; transgressions included shoddy workmanship and practising a trade without being a member of the guild.

The craft guilds were slightly different from the merchant guilds because there was one guild for each craft rather than one overarching guild covering all craftsmen. There was a large number of different craft guilds because practically every craft had a guild. These included guilds for goldsmiths, dyers, masons, bakers, barbers, saddlers, farriers, vintners and wheelwrights, as well as many others. A woman could become a member of a guild if she was the widow of a guild member and had worked in the craft with him, which she invariably would have done because most craft businesses were family affairs.

These craft guilds regulated aspects such as the price and quality of items produced. They also controlled who joined the guild and who moved up to the next level within the hierarchy. There were three levels within the guild – apprentice, journeyman and master. An apprentice would work with a master for at least five years, sometimes up to nine, learning his craft. He would not be paid, but would have bed, board and clothes provided by the master. Once the apprenticeship was over, the apprentice would become a journeyman, which meant that he could work for a master and earn a wage. If the journeyman could prove a high level of skill, he could eventually rise to the level of master and have his own workshop and apprentices. However, it was very difficult to rise to the level of master in the close community of the guild.

Of course, there were other jobs in the towns and cities as well, but they were not as respectable as those undertaken by the guild members. At the bottom of town society there would be people such as the gravediggers, hangmen, prostitutes, tinkers and rag-sellers.

Outside the towns, there was employment in the castles and manor houses of the nobility as well as on the land. The number of people employed would depend on the size of the dwelling and the wealth of the lord. The richest in the land would employ hundreds of people in a variety of different roles. In a very wealthy household a majordomo or steward would be employed to oversee all of the domestic side of life in the house, and his counterpart looking after the stables was the marshal. Other high-ranking servants were the chamberlain who looked after lord's chambers and the master of the



wardrobe who was responsible for clothing. The high-ranking servants would be assisted by pages, grooms and valets if necessary. Other servants would be employed to do a wide variety of other tasks for the household. These servants could include a cook who, often assisted by scullions, was responsible for preparing the food; a butler who was in charge of the buttery where the drinks such as ale were stored; a herald who would make announcements to the public on behalf of the king or a noble; and a baker who was responsible for baking the bread for the household.

There could also be many people employed outside the manor house. These included, among many others, the blacksmiths who shod horses and maintained armour; carpenters who made furniture and repaired

broken woodwork; and porters who looked after the castle entrance, controlling all who went in and out.

Food in the Middle Ages

The medieval diet varied dramatically depending on class. The nobility had a diverse diet while peasants had to subsist on much sparser fare.

One main staple for all was cereal. The nobility ate wheat, which needed well-fertilized fields to grow, while the poorer peasants ate barley and rye. For the rich, the wheat would be made into white bread called manchet, whereas the poor had instead thick, coarse rye and barley bread.

Pottage was another staple of the medieval diet. It was a soup-stew made from oats or barley and often included vegetables such as peas, beans, cabbage or leeks, and

ABOVE In the Middle Ages, masons were highly skilled workers responsible for building many of the ornate and awe-inspiring churches, cathedrals and castles that can still be seen today.

RIGHT Skilled medieval craftsmen, including jewellers – shown here in a 15th-jeweller's shop – would belong to craft guilds that strictly regulated professions.



herbs. The wealthy would eat thick pottage containing meat or fish and a variety of vegetables, herbs and spices. However, the poor would have a thinner version which rarely included meat and was made with vegetables and herbs that they had grown. Most peasants would have a pot of pottage constantly on the fire or in the hot ashes and it was often eaten daily.

Some of the lower classes would have access to fruit, perhaps from an apple or pear tree on their land. Fruit was usually cooked: some believed that raw fruit could

make them ill. They would also gather nuts and berries in local forests as vital supplements to their diet.

Some wealthier peasants would have a cow or a few sheep and so had milk, cheese and butter. However, many households had just a few chickens and perhaps a pig for meat because they were cheap to feed and could run free, eating scraps. Although there would have been a number of animals such as deer, boars and hares on local land and in the forests, these belonged to the lord of the manor and to kill one was a punishable offence. Fish was



ABOVE The nobility would have a much better diet than the peasantry with rich dishes and a greater variety of food. During feasts, the arrival of each elaborate course might be accompanied by the sound of trumpets and performers, such as jugglers and dancers, would entertain the diners.

also sometimes available from rivers or the sea, though rivers were often owned by a lord and permission was needed to fish. Scarcity of meat meant the peasants' diet lacked protein and a number of other vitamins and minerals, which led to ill health.

Peasants were mainly self-sufficient, so when there had been a bad harvest or crops were ruined because of bad weather they went hungry, and the pottage pot would include anything they could find, from acorns to leaves. Sometimes, as happened in northern Europe in the early fourteenth century, bad weather would cause such widespread crop failure that famine would ensue, leading to the deaths of thousands (see pages 61–62).

The diet of the wealthy was very different. They would have an abundance of food with great variety.

They would eat meat and fish with rich sauces and vegetables. A dish that would also often be served was frumenty, a thick pottage which could include meat, milk or eggs and sometimes spices, such as cinnamon or saffron, and sugar. There would be many flavours since herbs and spices would be used along with wine and vinegar. Imported goods such as almonds, dates and figs would also be eaten. Sweets made from fruits from the orchard or woods would be plentiful, as would honey from their bees.

Religion played a very important part in the medieval diet and eating meat was banned on certain days of the week and during Lent. During these times, fish could be eaten instead. The Church also called for days of fasting.



The rich would often drink wine, which would be bought by the barrel and placed in jugs on the table. Their servants, however, drank ale or beer, which were the main drinks for the lower classes because water was often too dirty to drink. Ale was made from water, malt or barley and yeast while beer included hops.

Food preservation was essential, as little food grew in winter. Meat and fish were salted, either by burying them in salt or soaking them in salt water. Before they were eaten, the meat and fish were soaked and rinsed several times to try to remove the salty taste. Fruit, meat and grains were dried by leaving them out in the sun in warm climes. Fish was also smoked to preserve it, as were some meats. Pickling using vinegar or brine was also a favoured method of preservation.

The diet of those in the Mediterranean and Middle East differed somewhat from that of the northern Europeans. However, as in Europe, grains, especially wheat, were dietary staples. Spices and olive oil were much used in cooking. As pork was forbidden by Islam, the main sources of meat were sheep and goats. Sugar was imported from India in the mid-eighth century and became very popular. Also popular were oranges, lemons and other citrus fruits, which provided much needed vitamin C. Sweets made out of ingredients including almonds, dates, honey and sugar were also common. At the start of the Middle Ages wine was still a popular drink. However, with the rise of Islam, tea became the more favoured beverage.

ABOVE Peasants would eat lunch in the fields where they worked. At home, a pot of pottage would often be a permanent fixture above the fire.