



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1986 Volume III: Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development of Urban Life,  
1250-1700

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## **Medieval Life: Squires, Maidens and Peasants**

Curriculum Unit 86.03.03  
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As the mist cleared, horse and rider emerged from the forest. Moving into the early morning sun, the light gleamed from the silver edges of the shield. The metalclad pair rode slowly to the top of a rise and halted. Sensing danger, the rider swung the lance downward into fighting position. A hawk circled overhead watching the knight in the meadow; a yellow scarf drifted back from the armored arm. . . .

If there is an historic period that can capture the students' imagination, it is the era of knights, fair ladies, kings and castles. For many, the Middle Ages is a makebelieve world filled with adventure and lore, a time when men were heroic and princesses rich and fair. The above description portrays the romanticized image of the Middle Ages and although it is tempting to treat the period through kings and vassals solely, we should not forget the greater part of medieval society, the silent majority.

Knights and wizards aside, the period of the Middle Ages should include the story of people living and working in a world outside the castle, of people isolated yet connected by a religious faith that threads from the Roman world into this century. Along with the tales of nobles and knights, the story of the manorial peasant should be revealed. This will balance the sense of romanticism that literature may portray with historic reality concerning all segments of medieval society.

The Middle Ages is treated as the time between history's great divisions of human development; textbooks, after relating the foundations of earlier cultures, tend to rush into the modern period where human history is told in terms of nations. This unit is intended to supplement the textbook material covered in the seventh grade Social Studies class concerning the Middle Ages.

In this unit, students will:

1. learn how medieval society was organized and learn of the training for knighthood.
2. examine a castle's elements, the living conditions and the place of children and women.
3. become aware of the manorial system and how peasants lived on the medieval manor.

Because it is difficult to present such a large historical period in a limited time frame, this unit is designed to cover three major concepts—feudalism, the castle, and the manor. For each concept, there is introductory information and a fictional story that relates to the human element with followup questions. Information that follows each story can be used for continued discussion; as well, there is an activity to reinforce student learning. Thus, after the basic textual material is introduced, students can focus on the lifestyles of notable groups of the period. The material can be taught in a fourday block depending on the class and on whether the activity sheets are assigned for homework. A fifth day may be used for testing, extended discussion, or for writing assignments dealing with comparisons of students' lives to that of medieval living. Otherwise the topics may be integrated into the textbook coverage and used in the order that the instructor determines.

To sharpen the focus and increase interest, the four "tales", which can be duplicated, give students an opportunity to meet medieval figures, youth to youth. First, from a knight's squire, they might learn the steps to knighthood and of the ideals of chivalry. In a second story, surveying the estate from the castle tower, a lord's young daughter reflects upon living in the castle and how her early years of training were preparation for a forthcoming, arranged marriage. Next students can step back into the life of a peasant living on a manor and learn of the duties and routine of a thirteen year old serf. lastly, the story of a young apprentice working as a servant in the master's household gives us an understanding of the requirements of learning a craft. These vignettes will play against the background information provided by the teacher and lead into related topics and activities.

## Introduction

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Any period of history is "modern" to the people who are living at the time. To the kings and serfs of the Middle Ages, their period was modern because they were living it. For us, it seems so long ago; an age remembered in textbooks, museums, and in the ruins of castles. Yet their past is our past. We are all human and share the same desires, hopes and needs. It is our human nature that links us whatever period of history that we study. The manners and customs may change from age to age, but the human connection remains. It is the human element that we must touch in order to fully understand the past.

The Medieval period and its civilization did not appear all at once but developed slowly during the decline of the Roman Empire. The people attracted to the Roman world were too primitive to adopt the Roman way of life, to inexperienced to maintain education, and did not master the Roman system of law and government. As a result, Western Civilization, during the years from 500 to 1000, grew poorer both in the progress of ideas and things. Only two Roman legacies continued into the Middle Ages—a common Catholic faith and the Latin language. The language would bond literate people despite the variety of political divisions and emerging national languages. The common faith would give comfort to all people because, in this period of turmoil, it fostered hope as the way to God and salvation.

As life in Western Europe's communities became isolated, trade declined, roads and cities decayed, and a unified authority was shattered. Yet from this period of confusion, a new type of civilization would grow and reach its crest during the 12th and 13th centuries. In time, society would develop to the point that it would be ready to begin a new, "modern" chapter in human history with the age of discovery and exploration. Yet the Middle Ages is not to be viewed as a transitional period; it made new beginnings that can be traced up to the present and helped shape our modern world. The Middle Ages is more than a period between; it is part of the continuum of human development.

## **Feudalism . . . .Part One.**

Without the Roman legions and a central authority to protect communities, people had to depend upon themselves for military defense. They looked to the largest landowner or the physically strongest among them to organize and lead them against invaders. In return, the people pledged to such protectors obedience, services and/or payments. Over the centuries grew the manorial or feudal system. Power became centralized in a feudal lord who ruled the subjects living on his estates. In the manor house or castle, the lord was served by his peasants and supported by his knights.

Feudalism thus evolved as a system or organization in Medieval society. It was based on an exchange of loyalty and service for protection and land. Feudalism could be divided into two kinds. Economic feudalism refers to the relationship between a lord and his free peasants, serfs and slaves. In return for his protection and the right to work the lands, the peasants performed services and paid fees. The lord became lawgiver, judge, and defender. The second kind, political feudalism, was the relationship among the nobles and the king. The king was God's vassal, and every other man was another man's vassal. Christianity emphasized that loyalty and service be given to God, and the church portrayed Christ as the embodiment of both. Christ was regarded "as a young warrior, hastening to do combat with evil through his death of the Cross" according to John B. Morall (in *The Medieval Imprint* , p.96.) Feudalism's emphasis on loyalty and service just paralleled the values of the Christian Church.

A man became a vassal by kneeling before the lord and placing his hands between those of his superior; he would swear fealty to the lord as long as he lived. At this investiture, the vassal received a written charter or a staff or even a clod of dirt as a symbol of the land (fief) that was being given to him. Sometimes he was given the right to collect a toll on a road or bridge. The lord promised to protect the fief and to administer justice to his vassal and family. Vassalage obliged a man to pay his lord a regular fee and to follow his lord in war. A vassal might have more than one lord but his first allegiance was to his first (ledge) lord. Even bishops and abbots might be vassals and lead their own vassals into battle.

As time passed, lords came to make alliances with each other to insure the safety of their landholdings. A lesser lord, whose lands were held in fief, would become a vassal of a greater lord, placing himself under the protection of the overlord and agree to perform certain services and give military support. More powerful lords had many vassals to maintain their power. This system of personal loyalties became the basis of the form of government called feudalism, a term from the Latin "feudum" or grant of land. In its early development, feudalism was essentially a system of private local government, but during the tenth century, as a method of governing, it could be defined as a regulated system of private war. Feudalism developed a formal hierarchy with the king at the top. Below him were the "tenantsinchief", vassals who held their lands by a direct grant from the king. These lords, in time, divided their estates among lesser vassals. At the bottom were the individual knights who may have had only one estate and no vassals. The hierarchy was in constant struggle over power as stronger lords sought territories from weaker lords. Townsmen were excluded from the hierarchy; as a 12th century sermon noted, "God made knights, clergy, and laborers, but the devil made burghers and usurers".

Feudalism had begun in France, spread to England, and then to the rest of western Europe during the 11th century. It reached its highest development in France. The Scandinavian countries never fully developed the system; in Russia the impact was smaller than in the West, and in Italy it had a short life. Changing needs in Europe brought new relationships. But throughout the Middle Ages, feudalism established customs that remained long after the system, based upon mutual protection, ceased to serve a useful purpose. Some feudal lords, by political skill or military conquest, would gain control over larger domains. After the 11th century,

royal domains were no longer parceled out but were consolidated, and new modes of social organization began to appear. As the king's power increased, they could enforce stricter obedience on all the people within their realms. Thus by the end of the Middle Ages, powerful kingdoms were established throughout Europe.

## **The Squire's Tale**

Across the hot, dusty courtyard, the figure appeared tall and menacing.

Except for the heavy breathing of the horse and his pounding heart, there was the silence of death. He could feel the eyes of the onlookers as he urged his horse forward into battle.

As the horse reached a full gallop, the squire steadied his lance on the target. Nearer they charged. With murderous intent, the lance struck with a crushing force—hurling the enemy to the ground.

Turning the horse, the rider looked at the faces of the onlookers for approval. He felt satisfied with his show of skill; it had been developed by long hours of practice. Many strawfilled dummies had fallen under his lance. He was the best of the squires in mock combat and none of the other would-be warriors could defeat him with sword and shield. Filled with confidence in his ability, he was anxious for real battle.

Another boy took his horse, mounted and rode off to tilt with a new imaginary enemy.

Tired, the squire sat to watch the practice session. How long had it been since his father had sent him to the neighbor's castle? Since he had left his home, eleven years had passed. At first the separation had been hard and the work unexciting, but his preparation for knighthood had begun when he learned to walk. His father had told him that a person could no more be born a priest or a guild master. As a son of a lord, it would be necessary for him to earn knighthood through years of difficult training. He had felt special. Only the sons of noblemen could be trained; only nobles could afford the expense. Knighthood was his fate.

At the age of seven, he had arrived at the castle; there, as a page or "varlet" (little vassal), as he was called, he learned proper manners, waited on the ladies, served at mealtime, and took care of the armor and horses. As he grew and became stronger, he had learned to ride and to fight. He learned quickly and by the age of fourteen, he could handle a lance and sword on horseback. At fifteen, he had become a squire, a "shieldbearer" for a knight and learned to control a war horse and to use the other weapons. Once he went with his knight into battle leading the extra horse. He remembered the sounds of battle and how excited he had become. He had hoped for an opportunity to prove his bravery and become a "knight-of-the-sword". But the enemy fled too quickly and he returned once again to his training in the castle, serving his knight and enjoying the hunting in the forest. Now, almost nineteen, he dreamed of the day that he would be knighted by the lord; it would be a ceremony by which he would enter adulthood.

It would begin with the ritual bath and then a night of prayer before the church altar on which his sword would lay. As a firm believer in the Christian faith, he knew that God's help would be needed in the struggle against the devil and his temptations. In the morning, the priest would bless his weapon. Then dressed in full armor, he would kneel before the lord to receive his dubbing into knighthood. "Conduct yourself as a true knight," were the words that he would hear as the flat side of the sword would slap against his neck. He would swear an oath to defend the Church, fight only for his lord, and honor the code of chivalry.

In his imagination, he saw himself clad in gleaming armor under which would be a coat of heavy links of iron. With his iron glove, he held his shield, on which was painted his family's coat-of-arms. With dagger, sword and lance, he would be ready to serve God and king, defend the realm, and protect the innocent.



training and the expensive armor. Thus the qualities of early chivalry were originally connected to fighting. Bravery, even to the point of absolute recklessness, was expected of the true knight. The slightest insult was to be avenged and no knight could afford any suspicion of cowardice or treachery. Honor required that he never fail his lord or avoid a challenge. In battle, the true knight disdained all tricks and engaged the enemy as an equal. He would not strike an unarmed or unprepared foe. If defeated or captured, he expected honorable treatment until he was ransomed. A knight was rarely killed in battle due to his protective armor and to the fact that a live knight was more valuable for ransom than a dead one. While chivalry emphasized loyalty and truthfulness, it accepted war as a fact of life.

The battle trumpet sounded the theme of the secular Middle Ages. War was a normal condition. Knights made private war against knights, coalitions of lords fought other lords, lords against kings, and often churchmen fought on both sides. Knights kept themselves in training for war by mock combats which were often violent and fatal. They practiced their skills in tournaments which were imitation battles. Sometimes they fought in enclosures before an audience. Other times teams of knights would participate in battles covering the countryside. The object was not to kill one another but to capture the opponent. Jousts and tournaments were held to celebrate holidays and important events in the life of a noble family. Jousts were tests of a knight's strength and endurance. Mounted knights rode full speed at each other; the object was to unseat the other by striking his shield with the force of the lance. Sometimes legal disputes would be settled after the contestants had asked God to grant victory to the righteous. If fighting was a knight's main occupation, the tournament was his favorite amusement along with hunting deer or wild boar and falconry.

By the fourteenth century, knights in armor no longer provided the most efficient fighting force. Armor was made obsolete by the development of firearms. The new age of warfare allowed the striking down of the bravest knight from a distance. The knights' military importance declined as a result. As well, Eugene F. Rice, Jr. in *The Foundation of Early Modern Europe* states that "gunpower hastened the decay of chivalry", (p. 16); no longer were knights able to fight according to personal code of honor. The feudal nobles could only continue to maintain their chivalrous traditions through tournaments and ceremonies. The glamour of knighthood was translated into the song and story of heroic and virtuous men. The legacy of chivalry as a code of behavior would become the idea for good manners in polite society and translate into the concept of the gentleman.

Loyalty and service connected the people of the Middle Ages, from king, through the Church lords, to the lowest serf. The feudal system structured early medieval society to deal in orderly fashion with its main activities fighting, farming and praying.

### ***The Castle . . . .Part Two***

The art of fortification had its beginnings at the dawn of history. It was natural to build some type of structure for protection and security. Because of continuous conflicts, civilization learned from each other and improved their defenses. Roman fortifications were a credit to the inventive and engineering skills of their builders. But it is in the Middle Ages that the castle, as a fortress, became identified with a period of history. The medieval castle became the symbol for Europe during this period, and by the twelfth century there were as many as 10,000 in Germany alone. In general, medieval castles developed according to available material, different climates, and society's characteristics in various parts of Europe. For the purpose of this unit, castles will be presented in a universal way without consideration to their individual architecture.

From the fifth century into the tenth, Europeans were primarily engaged in repairing existing Roman fortifications or building similar ones and repairing city walls. During the ninth century, private castles began

to appear in response to the introduction of the feudal system and to a slackening of barbarian raids. These early fortifications were known as “motte and bailey”. They consisted of a mound (motte), 10 to 100 feet in height by 100 to 300 feet in diameter. The outer wall (bailey) was a stockade of stakes which stood at the edge of a moat or ditch; a gatehouse protected the entrance, which was across a drawbridge. A wooden, square tower known as the keep or donjon was built on the mound, and if attacked, the people from nearby could seek safety within the wall of stockade and tower.

Wooden towers gave way to stone because of the fire hazard, and their shape became rounded in order to deflect batteringrams. The stone walls of the keep were thick and strengthened by buttresses; the keep might be two to four stories high with the floors connected by spiral stairways. Inside the keep were the hall, living chambers, kitchen and a chapel. A well was dug inside so that water was available during sieges and would be safe from poisoning by enemies.

Later castles built in the 12th and 13th centuries were more complex; as a result of the crusades, Europeans were introduced to more elaborate construction. These great stone, turreted castles were impregnable fortresses and became a symbol of a man’s refuge against the world. They further distinguished the nobles from the other classes; it set them apart physically, commanding the landscape as the lord commanded his vassals.

The castles continued to serve their defensive purpose with inner and outer circles of walls forming a concentric design. Towers were placed at intervals and watched over every section of walls. Entrance was by a drawbridge and through portcullis or heavy oak and iron gate. Inside the gate was a large open area before the keep in which the household people lived. Nearby were the kitchen, chapel, stables, rooms for guests, barracks, and craft shops of smiths and carpenters. Food was stored so that the inhabitants could hold out against attack. With its own crops, livestock, ovens, even a wine press, the castle was selfsufficient and could survive for many months against siege. Fireplaces were found in a number of rooms and their flues conducted the smoke through the walls and out loopholes on the outside or to chimneys on the roof. Latrines were placed in the outer walls; they consisted of a slab of stone with a hole cut in it. Natural light came from windows, small and barred near the ground level but larger higher up the keep walls. A lord’s castle was certainly not luxurious; its rooms were often dark and drafty.

Comfort was not the purpose of castles; they were designed to resist direct attack and to withstand a siege. During time of war, the castle became the crowded home for soldiers, servants, and peasants seeking protection. Even the lord and the lady of the place would be fortunate if they had a private room. Privacy was not something people had during the Middle Ages. Especially in time of siege, the people would have to sleep anywhere including the tables in the great hall and in the kitchen.

Usually at the castle’s base was a village where peasants lived and from which they could run into the castle for protection during wars and raids. This damp, almost windowless structure was home for the lord, his family, servants, and officials such as the chamberlain, who ran the housekeeping, and the marshal, who was in charge of the stables. For the lord, homelife consisted of managing the land, hunting and fishing for recreation, and holding court. Wandering minstrels and musicians would provide entertainment, and peddlers would stop at the gates to sell gloves, buckles and other items. Travelers might seek food and shelter, and bring news of the world beyond the village.

By the end of the 13th century, castle construction had grown beyond the single tower protected by an outer wall and moat. The castle was a structure that combined many bastions, which commanded all the parts of the fortress, and contained a variety of sections that could be defended separately. The castle could only be

captured by a slow method of starvation. However, by the fifteenth century, artillery fire, from a safe distance, had developed and now proved the walled defenses useless. From then on, the castle became more of a palatial residence, as is implied by the word “chateau”.

## The Fair Maiden

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She found herself, more and more, wandering along the castle’s walls that connected its tall towers. Except for the lookouts, she was alone and she used the silence to think and to dream.

The lord’s young daughter looked out over the farmland; the serfs were returning to their houses after plowing. As it was springtime, they were working hard to get the soil ready for planting. She was glad that her father was the lord of the castle so that she didn’t have to toil in the fields; she knew from the servant girls that it was backbreaking work, endless and dirty. The breeze smelled sweet to her; the days were getting longer, warmer, and soon the land would be green again.

She thought back to this morning. She had been alone in her sleeping chamber looking through the iron grills which protected her windows. The room was small and from the single window, came the only light which brightened the plastered stone walls. Her bed was a platform built high against the wall; the bed’s thick coverings gave her the only warmth at night now because as it was spring, the fireplace was no longer lit. The straw on the wooden floor was broken and dusty, but soon it would be replaced with fresh straw and dried herbs to make it smell nice. She couldn’t wait until summer when the servants added mint leaves to the straw. A table and chair for doing lessons, a wooden chest for her clothes and a painted wall hanging were the only other things in her room. The knock at the door made her jump; her mother entered.

The Lady wore a long, green linen shift and a furlined tunic over a snugfitting blouse with wide sleeves. The look on her mother’s face told her that the decision had been made. Her mother said that the marriage ceremony would take place after the harvest next fall and when the fees paid by the serfs had been collected. They would be used to increase her dowry which would be given to her new husband and lord.

It seemed so sudden; in a few months, she would be leaving her home. She would become the Lady of a castle herself. She would be responsible for overseeing the household, supervising the young girls’ training in cooking, weaving cloth, and embroidering, and raising the children. Tears came to her eyes at the thought of leaving her brothers and sisters; she was twelve years of age. But her mother reminded her that a woman’s main duty was marriage, and her’s had been arranged by her father over two years ago. The marriage would strengthen both families economically and give them more influence with the king. This was the role that she had been prepared for since birth. Her mother told her not to worry; she was a fair maiden, with a noble upbringing, her dowry was sizable and God would watch over her.

Now, from the tower wall, she saw a flock of birds circle and disappear behind the woods. The birds’ singing reminded her of the laughter at the feasts in the castle’s great hall and their gliding looked like the dancing she always enjoyed when the traveling minstrels performed at the festivities. Often the music played on the horns and lutes made her imagine herself as the lord’s lady, noble and beautiful. She was educated, had musical talent and knew a number of crafts; she would be in charge of the castle and its estates when her husband was traveling, and she would raise the children to be strong and good Christian nobles. Her influence would be great. And soon she would be what she had dreamed.





cloister as nuns.

The position of women improved during the Middle Ages due to the church's influence on chivalry. Medieval religious devotion to the Mother of Christ also helped to raise the status of women. There is no doubt that women had influence in the family and the community. When the lord was away, his lady was in charge; she supervised the training of young girls living in the castle and had to know about cooking, spinning, embroidering and medicine. The development of towns also had an effect upon the status of women. Daughters often learned their fathers' craft along with their brothers. In the towns, many women received an education and, some qualified for the professions or creative arts. More and more, women came to be regarded as individuals.

There was no place for childhood in the medieval world; children were considered small adults. The literature of the period deals with war and quests, male stories of knights and lords, and not with children or family. Children were a result of the duty of procreation and the necessity to breed laborers. Loyalty, for king, God, and religion, was the substitute for family attachments; even the guild system with its control over economic and political life caused the family to be second in importance. Children were prepared at an early age to fulfill their adult role in society as noble, serf, wife or craftsman. Medieval clothing did not even distinguish child from adult. The clothing differences that did exist were related to social standing. From birth, children were regarded as small adults in dress, in work and in play.

When the child was able to live without mother or nanny, he belonged to the adult world. At about the age of seven, male and female children were put out to service in the houses of people for seven or nine years. As servants they performed menial tasks such as waiting tables, making beds and helping in the kitchen; at the same time, they learned manners and practical skills. *The Babees Book* of 1475, concerning medieval manners for the young, cites some rules for table manners:

Stand before the lord until he bids you sit, and be always ready to serve him with clean hands.

Do not hang your head over your dish, or in any way drink with full mouth.

If you eat with another turn the nicest pieces to him and do not go picking out the finest and largest for yourself.

When you have done, look they that you rise up without laughter, or joking, or boisterous word and go to your lord's table, and there stand, and pass not from him until grace be said and brought to an end.

Then some of you should go for water, some hold the cloth, and some pour water upon his hands. (pp4Ð8)

"All education was carried out by means of apprenticeship. . . . They were sent to another house, with or without a contract, to live and start their life there, or to learn the good manners of a knight, or a trade, or even to go to school and learn Latin." (According to Philippe Aries in his work, *Centuries of Childhood* , p.366.) The separation from the family did not mean that the parents did not care for their children. In the medieval family the unit was a moral and social one rather than a sentimental unit. The family shared the common experiences of daily living, not just from close physical quarters, but from communal working, praying, and playing together. Family ties remained strong under the leadership of the male parent whose duty was to provide for the family. Parents were interested and attempted to insure a place for their children in society with the knowledge of a craft or in a marriage by arrangement for possible freedom from serfdom. Early separation cut across class lines; poor people's children spent time away from home just as a noble's child

would serve as a page in another castle.

### **The Manor . . . .Part Three**

It must be remembered that the majority of people in the Middle Ages were peasants who lived on rural estates called manors. By the tenth century, most of northern Europe had been divided into manors which were ruled by lords and worked by peasants. These great estates were fortified farming communities that a lord would govern and from which he would collect the income. Each manor usually had one or two tiny villages near its castle or manorhouse. Each village might have a priest and a chapel which was the center of religious and social life. The bells of the churches, which could be heard for miles, marked the daily life, tolling for matins and vespers, announcing war, fire, or feast day.

The manor was the smallest unit of feudal government. The land was divided into fields for crops, meadows for grazing animals, and woodland. Farming methods were primitive; an oxdrawn plow was used, and crop rotation was practiced.

One field was used for spring planting, another for fall crops, and a third was left fallow or unplanted for a year. The fallow piece was planted in the spring. The next year it was planted in the fall, and the third year it was allowed to remain unplanted. Wheat was planted one year and rye the next. With this crude system of crop rotation, the soil slowly deteriorated, and famines were not uncommon. The threefield system encouraged people to cooperate in planting and harvesting because they did not own a complete set of farm tools and the plows and wagons had to be shared. The system did discourage ambitious peasants from planting new crops or trying new methods. The lord of the manor had very little interest in increasing production since there was no market nearby the estate until towns developed in the later Middle Ages.

One of the technological advances during the Middle Ages was the “heavy plow”, which eliminated crossfield plowing. Usually it had wheels and because of its weight needed to be pulled by a large team of oxen. This requirement meant that the peasants, who did not own the needed six or eight, would pool the oxen to plow cooperatively. The new heavy plow “was an agricultural engine which substituted animal power for human energy and time.” (Lynn White, Jr. *Medieval Technology and Change* , p. 43.) With the use of the horseshoe and improved harnesses, plow horses, where they were available, replaced oxen. Thus, the speed of plowing increased, labor was saved, productivity increased, and the horse increased the range over which crops could be transported.

The land which belonged to the lord was sometimes located all in one place and was called the “close”. On some manors the land was scattered in strips among the peasant’s strips. One of the duties owed by peasants was to work a certain number of days on the lord’s land and to give him the crops from it. They also had to pay fees to the lord out of their own property, for example, a percentage of their grain harvest or a number of chickens or young pigs. For every right the peasant had, he had obligations to the lord. Usually a third of the land was reserved for the lord’s use and the peasant was required to work about three days a week on it. From the work on their own land, they were expected to share the crops with the lord as well. The lord would also share in fish caught on the manor. The lord benefited from his processing monopolies; some of the grain that was milled into flour, grapes crushed, beer brewed in his vats or bear baked in his ovens, became the property of the lord or a fee was paid for use of the equipment. A bailiff, appointed by the lord, supervised the peasants’ work on the manor. Peasants were expected to pay tithes equal to one tenth of their products to the church for its support. The lord often received a share of that according to his influence.

Three different groups of peasants might live on the manor. Slaves, who could be bought and sold, existed,

but their number declined after the early Middle Ages. Serfs, who could neither leave the manor nor be forced to go, made up the majority of peasants. Freeman, who owned small pieces of land and could move about freely, were a small portion of the society until the rise of towns. Although the contrast in status and living conditions between lord and peasant was great, each had certain rights according to the custom of the manner. The lord needed grain for the castle's storehouse, and any unjust treatment might result in a decline in production. Also a runaway serf was hard to replace. Justice had to be enforced in open court. A peasant could not refuse to work, and the lord could not evict him, so they respected each other's rights.

### **The Peasant's Lot**

"Something new! What could it be?" he wondered. Today he was impatient to get to the field. His father had said that he would see something new and that it would make his work faster. His life was not all work, but the work was hard. At the age of thirteen, work was what he knew most about, and it was only broken by the celebration of frequent religious holidays.

The sun had only appeared a short time before, but it shined brightly on the peasants' cottages in the village. The smoke from the early morning fires drifted skyward; some of it came out of chimneys, but most escaped from holes in the thatched roofs.

Standing in front of his family's hut, he wished that his younger brother would hurry. His father had already left. Today it would be a long walk to the fields north of the manor house. This day was the first, of three days each week, that the peasants had to work in the fields owned by the lord of the manor. After that service, his family would begin plowing its own plots of land, which were scattered across the lord's estate. Getting up at dawn didn't bother him anymore, but the walk today would be hot as the sun rose higher. "What was keeping his brother?" he thought.

His brother ran up to him and with an important tone of voice said, "Let's go! What are you waiting for?" Off they started on the fourmile walk to the field. "I know what it is. I know what father said that we would see," his brother said and began to run.

"No you don't. He wouldn't tell just you," the older brother yelled after him. The words, "Yes, he did," came drifting back.

Quickly he caught up to his brother and grabbed him by the neck. "What do you know?" he demanded.

Turning and twisting to break the grip proved unsuccessful; he was held firmly by his brother's strong hand. "I'll tell! I'll tell, let go!" The younger brother told him that the crops were all grown; some wizard or giant from the forest had made them grow by magic and there would be no need to plow and plant this season.

"Wizard!" he shouted. "Wizards only cause trouble; they would only make our work harder. Father didn't tell you that!" The younger brother just smiled and ran on again.

In silence, they passed the sheep grazing in the meadow and crossed over the bridge that the villagers had just repaired. The huts of the village stopped after the river; from here there was just farmland and forest. He wished that by some magic the plowing could be done more easily. The old plow worked well when the soil was dry and loose. But when the ground was wet and hard, the wooden blade would break very often. The plow was just a large digging stick dragged by a pair of oxen and since it only scratched the soil, the field had to be plowed twice.

As they reached the field, he could see that no plowing had started yet. Seeing his father among a group of men and boys that were gathered in a circle, he hurried towards them. Pushing into the crowd, he saw what held their attention; it was a new kind of plow. It looked heavy and had an iron blade, like a knife.

The lord's bailiff, or overseer of the peasants' work on the manor, was instructing the group. "This knife will cut the soil first and the other blade, a plowshare, will then dig into the soil. Attached to the plowshare is a moldboard which will turn the soil over, leaving a ridge and a furrow or tiny valley. When it rains, the water will run down the furrow and keep the young plants from rotting. Because this plow is so heavy, it will need six to eight oxen to pull it even with the wheels on it".

The bailiff explained that another plow was being made in the manor's workshop. The villagers could share it for their own plowing—at a fee, of course—and pool their oxen because no peasant owned more than two oxen.

"Well it wasn't the work of a wizard", he thought, "but it would make their labor faster." "Hitch up the oxen," his father said to him, "there's work to be done".

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After reading the story, answer the questions below. Choose the best answer from the choices given.

1. How often did the peasants work in the lord's fields?
  - a. every day
  - b. three days a week
  - c. when needed
  - d. five days a week
2. The new plow had which of the following?
  - a. a furrow
  - b. a wooden blade
  - c. an iron blade
  - d. a seat to sit on
3. Nothing was growing in the fields because?
  - a. nothing was planted
  - b. it was winter
  - c. the wizard had failed
  - d. the old plow was broken
4. In the story, the "bailiff" is a person who. . . ?
  - a. is the lord of the manor
  - b. directs the work of others
  - c. is in charge of prisoners
  - d. makes plows
5. Which of the following is not true?
  - a. the peasants believed in wizards
  - b. the peasants lived in a village

- c. the peasants' work was not easy
- d. the peasants rode to the fields

## **The Peasants' Life**

Most peasants were “jacks of all trades”; besides farming, they fixed their tools and made their own clothes and shoes. There were some who specialized, such as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters, tanners, and bakers. Most worked the land, but some peasants were shepherds. All worked from the necessity to survive; the workday was long, but everyday activities were varied, and numerous holidays existed for recreation.

Recurring famines and epidemics of disease were common. Peasant living was primitive. Clothes were shabby and seldom taken off, which contributed to skin and related ailments. The neglect of personal cleanliness was shared by the nobility in their distaste for taking baths. The peasants wore cloth or sheepskin blouses and trousers with a knee-length mantle. Usually they were barefoot or wore wooden clogs. Women's clothes were the same as the men's except that skirts were worn instead of trousers.

The average peasant lived in a cottage that was constructed of mudplastered branches and straw (cob) or of stone or wood, depending on the area, with a roof of thatch. Two rooms with dirt floors served their needs. During the winter the animals were kept at one end of the allpurpose room which helped to keep everyone warm. The average peasant owned few furnishings, and the household utensils were made out of wood. Furnishings might include stools, a trestle table, and a chest to hold clothes. In the second room or bedroom, bags of straws would be used for sleeping, or a wooden couch with a straw mattress large enough for the whole family. Privacy was hardly known during the Middle Ages; people of all classes shared their living space and their resources. A wellto do peasant might own a bedstead and a number of iron pots. The main dish at mealtime was a thick soup or porridge with black bread and dairy products. Garden vegetables were plentiful when in season, and homemade wine and beer were available. Meat was scarce since cattle were too valuable to slaughter; pigs and fish were more plentiful.

A serf had no political rights; he was bound to the soil. A peasant who could escape might locate in a town which offered opportunities for the skilled craftsman. If he remained free, for a year and a day, freedom from the manor was his. Other peasants escaped their burdens by taking up a career in the Church. The hard daily life was balanced for those who remained on the land by the security of the land and work, coupled with knowing that the children would be cared for if anything happened to their parents. A serf was valuable to the landowner primarily because of the work he could do and the fees that he could pay. Contact with the world beyond the manor's village was only through wandering peddlers, beggars and friars.

Besides working on the lord's land, usually three days a week, the peasants were expected to do repair work around the manor on roads and bridges. They were excused from military service except in time of siege. They paid taxes in the form of products or in coin when it became common. Fees were collected by the lord on a number of occasions, such as when a daughter married off of the manor, when a son inherited his father's land, or when peasants used the lord's oven, winepress, or mill. There were fees paid for marriages, at death and, of course, to the Church.

The peasants' lot was cast in the medieval world; they were simply the work force. Their medieval name, “villein,” became our word “villain’,. As the Middle Ages wore on, the most intelligent, ambitious, or luckiest peasants became the craftsmen, traders, and merchants of the early towns.

## ***The Changing Medieval World . . . . Conclusion***

The castle and the manor were all the average peasant knew; they were his world. From one generation to another, the castle and manor provided the most important measure of order and safety in the medieval world. After the ninth century the decline of commerce leveled off; slowly the population began to grow and there was an increase of wealth. As more and more of the European forests were cleared for farming and sheep herding, agriculture could support a larger population. Food production increased in Europe due to the use of more iron tools, shovels and hoes, and the draining of swampland. As the amount of food increased so did the population, from about 16 million in 1000 A.D. to 40 million by 1400. The steady supply of grain, meat, and wool promoted increased trade and a greater opportunity for men to specialize in different kinds of work.

By the eleventh century, Italian towns were opening new trade routes with the Middle East, and along the North Sea in the province of Flanders, the number of weavers and merchants multiplied. Scandinavian merchants were sailing south to Flemish markets to exchange furs and hunting hawks for cloth, and English traders came to sell tin. By the twelfth century, commerce and industry began to revive the economic life of Europe. Craftsmen, at first, had traveled from manor to manor practicing their trades; now they found it better to settle in one place where goods could be produced and traded for food. Merchants and adventurers brought into Europe commodities such as silks, rugs, perfumes, spices, and tapestries along with other items for which they had traded furs, leather, grain and timber to the people of the Middle East. Towns that began to operate as centers of exchange drew more artisans; “town air makes free” was the saying that attracted still others from the manors. The market city developed and “wealth rather than birth thus became the main basis of class distinction, the foundation of power and prestige” Robert S. Lopez (in “The Crossroads Within the Wall”, p. 34.) With the renewal of trade, banking and industry developed. As the number of towns grew and trade continued to expand, town governments rivaled the power of the nobility.

The last story provides an opportunity to investigate the shift of medieval development from the manor to the rise of towns and their new opportunities. An organization of tradesmen, the guild system, beginning after the eleventh century, developed a system of price, weights and measures, set standards for workmanship and materials, and determined the steps to craft mastery. The 13th to 15th centuries were the peak period of guild influence, which encompassed the economic, political, and social lives of townspeople. But as trade and industry continued to expand, the guild’s economic dominance declined and was hastened by rising political and social expectations.

During the Middle Ages, Europeans had evolved from a relative primitive existence to a point where their interests began to extend beyond their daily existence. The unity, once provided only by Christendom, now was challenged by diversity with the rise of nations, different cultures and even within Christianity. The personal relationships to feudal lords was broken down with the development of towns. The medieval person began to think of himself as an individual rather than a member of a church, social class, community or guild. The feudal world had provided a certain order and social structure, but by the end of the Middle Ages, it was the individual who was looking toward new horizons. As part of Renaissance history, a new sense of order would emerge where humans became the measure of all things.

### **The Master’s Apprentice**

My Brother, You must come. Run away and join me.

I know that it has been months since I wrote to you, but I have been thinking of you. Remember that morning, last year, and how anxious you were to get to the field and to see father’s surprise. Everyone was excited

about the new plow and you were the first to try it out. I was jealous! But that night father told me that I would be leaving our village. “A new life,” he said “a new future would be mine in the town.”

He was right; the town is so . . .different from the manor. There is so much going on, so many shops, large guild halls, churches and many people—craftsmen, traders, merchants, teachers, lawyers, such a variety of activity and business.

Let me tell you of my dream. A shop! Someday I dream that I will have my own shop. Last night I was out making a delivery for the master and the bell in the town hall rang out the curfew; it was nine o’clock. When curfew sounds, the fires in each house’s fireplace have to be covered with ashes. The danger of fire is great because the wooden houses are crowded together, and a spark could ignite a roof and spread quickly, rooftop to rooftop.

I was running over the unpaved street, jumping the muddy puddles in the narrow streets because I was anxious to return to the shop and get to sleep after the jewelry had been delivered. “Someday, I’ll have an apprentice to run errands for me,” I thought as I turned off Candlewick Street. Looking up I saw the sign on my master’s shop; it is a unicorn—a horse with a single long horn—the symbol for the goldsmith’s craft, like the one I will have someday. I reached the door and knocked; soon it opened.

“Where have you been?” was the greeting I got from the old man. “Did you make the delivery? Where is the receipt?”

I held out the paper, which he snatched from my hand and examined carefully in the candle light. The goldsmith folded it and turned to bolt the door. “Put out the candle and go to bed,” he said. Then he went to the back of the small shop and into his house, closing the door that separates them.

I extinguished the candle and climbed onto the shelf under the counter which serves as my bed. It was late and I had to be awake early, before sunrise, to get water from the town well and then light the morning fire for the master’s family. I had learned from the other apprentices, whom I met each morning at the well, that some of them had their own room in the attic, over their shop. But my master has a large family and not many rooms.

It has been a year since father signed the contract with the master requiring me to be an apprentice for seven years. I won’t get any wages but have been given a bed, food and clothes. For the many chores I do for the master, he will teach me the methods of the craft which are only known to the guild masters. I am eleven years old now, but I am determined to learn the goldsmith’s skills and secrets. I was tired but happy; I know that someday I will be a master goldsmith and have my own shop. I drifted into a deep sleep and dreamed. . .

The little hammer tapped the soft gold causing it to take the shape that I saw in my mind. I just had to bend the wings back slightly and the golden butterfly would be finished.

The years after my apprentice ones had been long; as a journeyman, I traveled from town to town working for different goldsmiths. I practiced hard making jewelry and fine objects out of gold. I learned much from many masters and gained the needed experience in my craft. This is what a journeyman is supposed to do.

Now, at age twentythree, I was passing the last test—making a masterpiece in the presence of a judge from the goldsmith’s guild. If my work was satisfactory, I would become a guild member—be a master goldsmith—and open my own shop! The room was still as the judge inspected the butterfly closely.





3. Knight
4. Vassal
5. Tournament
6. Feudalism
7. Page
8. Squire
9. Dubbing
10. Chivalry
11. Shield
12. Lord

### Statements

- A. A slap on the neck.
- B. Long weapons used by knights.
- C. Young boy beginning knight's training.
- D. Receives land, pledges loyalty
- E. Relationship between lord and vassal.
- F. Knight's side training.
- G. Contest between knights.
- H. Rules that knights follow.
- I. Warrior in the Middle Ages.

A B C

D E F

G H I

The magic number is \_\_\_\_\_.

## Activity Two. . . A Dream Castle

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**Directions** Choose your own colors and color in the castle; each of the parts below should have a different color and be coded.

*(figure available in print form)*

Moat—a deep ditch filled with water.

Donjon—main tower or keep of the castle.

Outer Wall—walls surrounding the castle.

Battlement—low walls with open spaces.

Great Hall—connected to the donjon.

Chapel—a place for religious service and prayer.

Gatehouse—a fortification that guarded the entrance.

Draw in: the drawbridge—a bridge across the moat.

the portcullis—iron bars at the gateway.

### Activity Three. . . A Peasant's Puzzle

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*(figure available in print form)*

*Across*

1. Another name for a peasant.
2. A person who lived on the lord's land and farmed.
3. An activity of collecting the crops.
4. A part of the plow which turned over the soil.
5. A place where the peasants lived.
6. A large estate owned by a lord.

*Down*

1. A small valley cut in the ground by a plow.
2. A person who travels about selling things.
3. A place where animals graze.
4. A person who directs the peasant's work.
5. A person who was not bound to work the land.
6. A material used to cover the roofs of houses.

Use the following puzzle solutions

Thatch Peasant Moldboard Peddler  
Furrow Harvest Serf Freeman  
Manor Village Bailiff Meadow

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