

L E S S O N 2

# Daily Life in Feudal Europe

THINKING  
FOCUS

*How did the feudal system affect the everyday lives of people in Europe?*

Key Terms

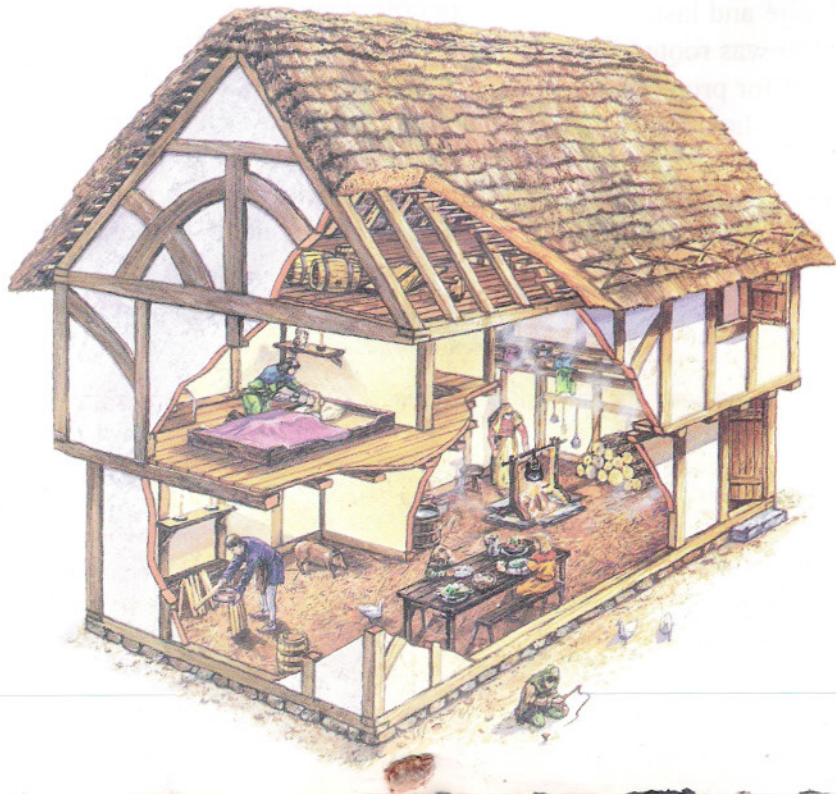
- homage
- manor
- serf
- guild

► *This cutaway view shows the home of a medieval family and their animals. What would you find most uncomfortable about living in this home?*

**H**is hood full of holes  
with the hair sticking  
through,  
His clumsy knobbed shoes cob-  
bled over so thickly,  
Though his toes started out as  
he trod on the ground . . .  
Two miserable mittens made  
out of old rags, . . .  
He wading in mud almost up  
to his ankles,  
And before him four oxen, so  
weary and feeble  
One could reckon their ribs, so  
rueful were they.

This description of a medieval peasant is from the poem *Piers the Plowman*, which was written in the late 1300s in England by William Langland. The harsh conditions endured by peasants like the one Langland described in his poem had not improved at all for hundreds of years.

In 1066, the rulers of England changed, but the lives of English peasants remained the same. In the hierarchy of William the Conqueror's feudalism, peasants were at the bottom.



## The Feudal System

After the victory at the blood-soaked field of Hastings went to William the Conqueror, life in England changed for many. William planned to rule in peace, using the system of feudalism that was already in place in France.

If you think of feudal society as a house with many rooms, then loyalty was the set of beams that held it up. Vassals paid **homage**, or showed honor, to their lords. The word homage comes from the French word for “man.” The vassal was to be the lord’s man in body, mind, and spirit.

When an oath of fealty was sworn between a king and a lord or between a lord and a knight, the bond of loyalty was formalized in a ceremony. The vassal knelt before his lord. Placing his hands between the lord’s hands, he swore to serve his lord in loyalty and love. Then the vassal and his lord kissed, and the lord gave his vassal a clod of earth symbolizing the fief that the vassal would use. When a vassal died, a lord went through the ceremony with the vassal’s oldest son.

In 1066, feudalism was not fully developed in England. William and his Norman lords set about to change all that. William ordered a survey to be taken of the ownership of every bit of land in England. The results of the survey were written in *The Great Domesday Book*, which became a valuable source of information for the king’s tax agents. Then William distributed the land as fiefs to his Norman followers. ■

■ *Why was loyalty important in the feudal system?*

▼ *These ivory chess pieces from the 1100s show three different classes of medieval society: a knight, a queen, and a member of the clergy—a bishop.*



## Life in the Country

William and his Norman lords built fortified castles on their fiefs all over the island kingdom of England. By 1100, several hundred castles had been built throughout the countryside. These Norman fortresses helped to shape the lives of

the kings, lords, and knights who made up English nobility.

### Nobles

For the lord of a fief, a castle might be home. For others who lived on his land, it was both a

► This painting from *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc du Berry* shows a rich feast held inside a castle. A lord and his guests, who are other nobles and clergy, are in the foreground. What can you see in the far background?

center for feudal life and a place of safety during battle. Castle walls were three feet thick. They were built to withstand blows from battering rams and flaming missiles launched from enemy catapults. Windows were mere slits through which the archers could shoot their arrows. A Norman castle was usually a tower built at the top of a hill and surrounded by a deep trench, or moat.

The Norman castle was built for



## UNDERSTANDING HIERARCHY

**T**he knight made an oath of fealty to the lord of the manor. The lord swore to be faithful to the more important lord who had granted him his fief. The hierarchy of the feudal society extended from the humblest peasant all the way up to the king.

### Hierarchy as Ranking

A hierarchy is a system by which persons or things are ranked one above another. A group of equals, such as the members of a sports team, cannot be considered a hierarchy.

The meritocracy that

Emperor Wen developed in China was a hierarchy with the emperor at the top. Beneath him stood courtiers, administrators, and clerks. Each group, from the administrators up through the emperor, had greater powers than the group below it.

### Other Hierarchies

Hierarchies define where people stand in relationship to each other and define their rights and responsibilities. Most workplaces such as offices and factories are hierarchies, with a boss or president

over several rankings of supervisors and workers. Medieval city dwellers and guild members had their own hierarchies.

Slaves were at the bottom of medieval society. They were usually captives of war or kidnap victims. Slavery continued throughout Europe in spite of the teachings of the Church. Gradually, over the centuries most slaves became **serfs**. While slaves could be sold or given away, serfs were required to stay on and work on a piece of land for anyone who owned the land.

## Becoming a Medieval Knight

### Page

- Serving in household
- Learning swordplay
- Playing chess and other strategy games
- Hunting with hawks and falcons
- Learning code of courtesy expected of knight

Age 7

### Squire

- Acting as personal servant to knight
- Learning jousting
- Assisting knight in battle
- Taking charge of prisoners captured in battle

Age 13–14

### Knight

- Serving lords as warriors
- Overseeing land as vassals
- Taking part in tournaments

Age 18–22

security, not for comfort. The lord and lady of the castle usually slept behind a curtain in the main dining hall. Also sleeping in the hall might be a small mob of knights, guests, servants, and dogs. The floor was covered with herbs to keep down the smell of bones and other refuse. On a winter morning, inhabitants would wash by plunging their arms through ice-crusting water in a bucket.

Life in a castle was far from glamorous, and few who lived there were the courteous knights and ladies of legend. A knight was often the landless younger son of a lord's vassal. The lord provided the knight with food, lodging, armor, and a horse in exchange for his services. But between wars the castle's knights fought among themselves or bullied the servants unless the lord of the castle kept an eye on them.

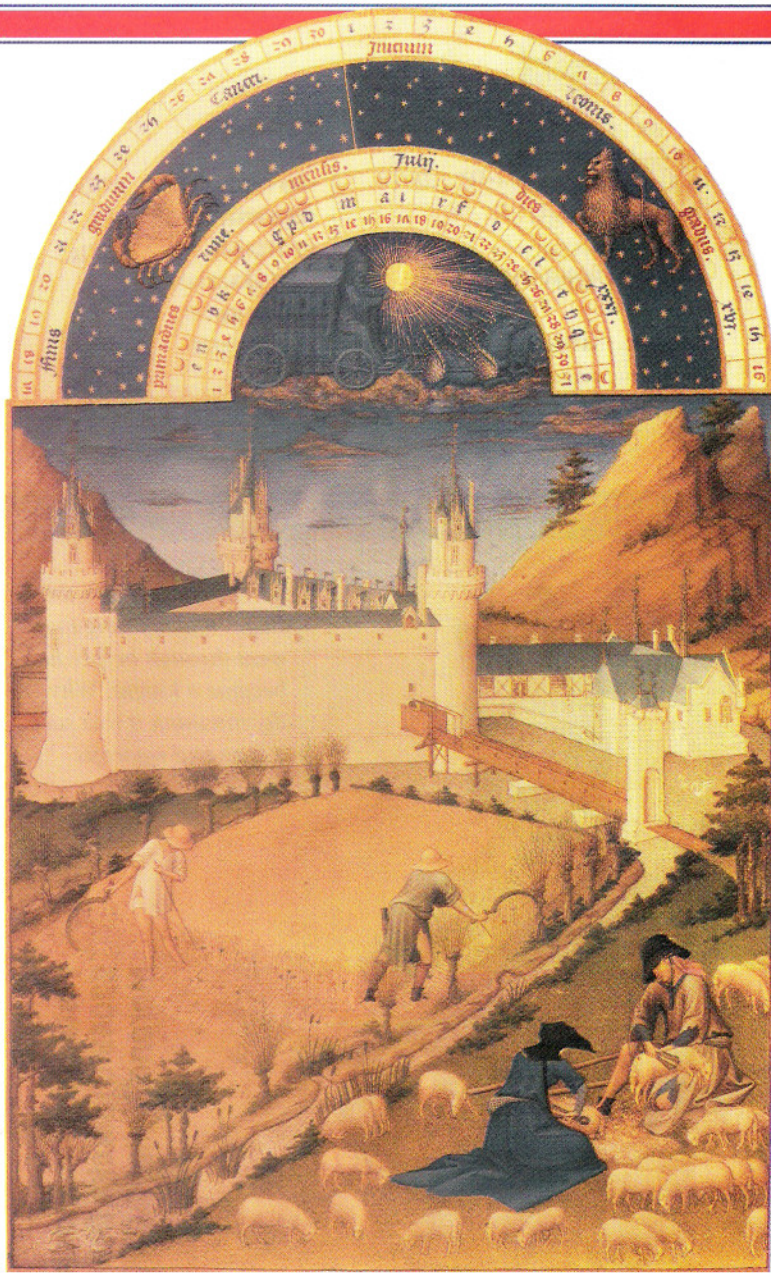
The lady of the castle usually had very little power, except over female servants. Medieval women were supposed to be subject to their husbands and fathers, just as vassals were subject to their lords. However, most of the daily life of the castle was within women's domain. Besides cooking and cleaning, women also managed the making of clothing and medical



▲ The chart shows the stages that a young man went through before he became a knight. Why do you think it was such a long and rigorous process?

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◀ This woman of the 1300s wears clothing such as that worn by ladies of English or French castles.



▲ In this miniature painting, peasants are shearing sheep and harvesting grain in fields surrounding a castle. Does this picture of peasant life differ from the images conveyed in *Piers the Plowman* on this page and on page 262?

care for everyone in the castle. When their husbands were at war, women took over the **manor**, the castle and entire estate.

Some noblewomen controlled fiefs or became abbesses, who ruled over convents and convent lands. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a Christian woman raised in a convent, had religious visions. She wrote books, founded convents, and preached throughout Germany. She wrote religious music and poetry. She was also a physician and pharmacologist.

## Peasants

The lord's castle might be a cold, drafty fortress. But as you can see in the picture on page 262, even a well-off medieval family lived with its animals.

In the early Middle Ages, farming methods improved in Northern Europe and England. See A Closer Look on page 267 for additional information on advances in medieval farming. But farming was still hard, and both men and women were bound to the plots of land that they tilled for their lords. Some were so poor that they would not even have owned the scrawny oxen described by William Langland. Instead they would borrow oxen from their lord or a neighbor.

The peasant woman produced food and clothing for her own household. William Langland wrote of peasant women's work in *Piers the Plowman*:

What they save from  
 their spinning they  
 spend on house rent,  
 on milk and oatmeal to make  
 porridge  
 to fill their children when they  
 cry for food.  
 They themselves suffer the  
 sting of hunger  
 and of winter misery, rising at  
 night  
 to rock the cradle in its  
 cramped corner,  
 to card and comb wool, to  
 mend and wash,  
 to scrub and wind yarn, to  
 weave rushlights.  
 It's painful to read or to write  
 verses  
 on the hard lives of women  
 who live in hovels. . . .

# Medieval Farming

*The cycle of changing seasons brought an endless round of work to peasant families. But improvements like the wheelbarrow, horseshoes, and new crops slowly began to soften their harsh lives.*

**Protecting horses' feet** from wear and injury, better horseshoes allowed these strong animals to pull metal-tipped plows. Plowing deeper meant farmers could get at the richest soil, grow more crops, and store food for lean times.

**Month by month**, this page from a 15th-century French "book of hours" shows the activities of the farm year. Read it left to right and top to bottom. In the January snow, peasants cut the winter wheat they had sowed in September. October found the peasant crushing grapes for wine by foot.



**Not the same old bean and pea soup!** New plants like cabbage, parsley and leeks added flavor and nutrition to the boring peasant diet.



► Here Pope Urban II blesses a church at Cluny in the 1000s. The monastery at Cluny in France was established in 910, and was a leader of the reform movement within the church. By the late 1000s, there were about 200 monasteries administered by the center at Cluny.



### Clergy

Society in the Middle Ages was described by Alfred the Great as consisting of “men of prayer, men of war, and men of work.” Perhaps the men and women “of prayer” had the most comfortable lives of any in the Middle Ages.

The influence of the clergy—from pope, archbishops, and bishops to priests, monks, and nuns—extended to every part of medieval life. Most medieval manors included a small church. From baptism to marriage to burial, the ceremonies of the

church guided the lives of medieval men and women.

Also, people at this time saw life on earth as a brief preparation for the eternal life to come. They believed only a few would spend eternity in heaven. Many sinners, people believed, would spend eternity in the flames of hell.

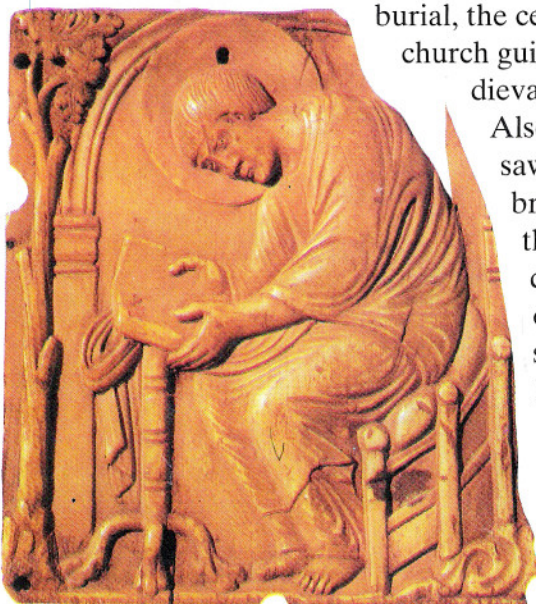
The power to condemn or to forgive sinners made the church a considerable force in medieval society. Many people entered the clergy because of their deeply held beliefs. Others, however, joined the church to acquire status and influence.

Thousands of monks, nuns, and servants also lived and worked in large stone structures. A monastery was a complex community with many different buildings—granaries, breweries, bakeries with huge ovens, wineries, and the abbey church and library.

Inside the library, monks hunched over tall desks and copied manuscripts in beautiful handwriting, or drew illustrations. With the same devotion and care, monks and nuns of the Middle Ages also taught children, fed the poor, cared for the sick, and provided shelter to travelers. Most of the clergy worked long hours and reaped few earthly rewards. Their devotion to the church mirrored a vassal’s dedication to his lord. ■

■ *How did each class help to keep a feudal manor running?*

▼ *A monk in his study is shown here on an ivory book cover from the Middle Ages.*



## Life in the Town

Not all people lived in feudal manors or monasteries. Peasants seeking freedom, younger sons of nobles seeking a fortune, scholars seeking new ideas, and freed serfs left the country manor for towns.

### The Growth of Towns

The walls that rose around a medieval town enclosed a jumble. Narrow, crowded streets turned in on each other. Rough wooden houses shoved up against each other, hardly leaving enough space for light to filter through.

After the Western Roman Empire fell, towns had almost disappeared from Europe. The population of Rome, which remained the largest city in Europe, fell from about one million to only a few thousand.

But in the 1000s, trade and town life began to revive. Linen from Italy, woven wool from Flanders, leather from Spain, and other products were traded in towns in Europe and in countries beyond Europe. And the craftspeople who made these products found ways to control their own trades.

### Guilds

Shoemakers, blacksmiths, tailors, weavers, and bakers banded together with others of their trade to form guilds. A **guild** was a union of people who practiced a trade. Guilds for each trade limited the number of people they accepted.

A boy who wanted to work at a trade began as an apprentice. He served a guild member for several years until he mastered basic skills. Then he became a journeyman, or

skilled worker. A journeyman received pay for his work. Eventually, if he became skilled enough, he would produce a masterpiece and present it for admission into the guild. Only an expert at his trade was allowed to join a guild.

Christian law, unlike Roman law, put women under the control of their fathers and husbands. Women were responsible for the home, children, and most of the trade goods they produced there, such as textiles or foods. Some, however, were merchants or shopkeepers. A craftswoman might be admitted to a guild if her husband was a member. In Paris and Cologne, embroiderers formed all-female guilds.

Many European Jews also lived in towns because they were not allowed to own land. However, they were not allowed to join guilds, either. Many Jews were therefore merchants. Some were moneylenders, the only trade forbidden to Christians.

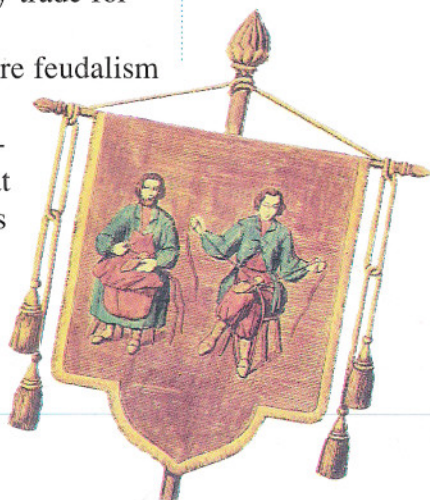
The town was where feudalism began to die. Powered by trade, the new commercial way of life that developed in the towns looked beyond the simpler and closed world of manor and village. ■



▲ The carpenter in this French painting from the late Middle Ages probably belonged to a carpenter's guild.

■ Describe the new social order that evolved in medieval towns.

▼ This banner was proudly displayed by the boot and shoemaker's guild of a town in Belgium.





## The Forces of Change



▲ This copy of the Magna Carta is one of four in England. No one is sure which is the original.

■ How did the Magna Carta pave the way for a new social system in England?

Eventually, the feudal monarchy that was established in England by William the Conqueror would also change. After William's death in 1087, the followers he had rewarded with feudal fiefs grew more and more powerful. Their wealth was increased by payments they demanded from towns that grew up on land within their control. Over several generations, the feudal lords' power and wealth grew substantially.

When King John took the throne in 1199, the most powerful landowners had become increasingly outspoken. Then John led England into losing wars and ever-higher levels of taxation. In 1204, John lost all of his lands in the north of France, thus angering those of his vassals who held fiefs in that region.

Also, because of a disagreement between John and the pope, the churches shut their doors to the people of England. Many lords renounced allegiance to John, and a small band of them cornered him in

a meadow outside London. In June of 1215, after days of argument, they forced him to affix the royal seal to an amazing medieval document—the *Magna Carta*, or great charter. You can read excerpts from the *Magna Carta* on page 504.

The *Magna Carta* focused on the rights of nobles. It acknowledged the rights of the lords and prevented a king from taking those rights away. It also contained the following condition:

**N**o free man shall be taken or imprisoned or dispossessed, or outlawed, or banished, or in any way destroyed, nor will we go upon him, nor send upon him, except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

By subjecting the king to the rule of law, the *Magna Carta* became the basis for future reforms. Our own Bill of Rights and the concept of “due process of law” grew out of the *Magna Carta*.

The signing of the *Magna Carta* signaled the beginning of feudalism's decline. The ideas of personal freedom and liberty were now firmly planted. ■

### REVIEW

1. **FOCUS** How did the feudal system affect the everyday lives of people in Europe?
2. **CONNECT** How did the Battle of Hastings contribute to the rise of feudalism in England?
3. **BELIEF SYSTEMS** In what ways did the relationship between the clergy and the church resemble the relationship between vassals and their lords?
4. **SOCIAL SYSTEMS** Compare and contrast the life of an apprentice with the life of a serf on a manor.
5. **CRITICAL THINKING** In your opinion, which was the most important class or group of people in feudal times? Why?
6. **WRITING ACTIVITY** The *Magna Carta* guaranteed lords certain rights under laws that even a king had to obey. Think about the elements of respect and consideration that go into running a contented household. Then draw up a household *Magna Carta* to share with the class.