

❖❖AP European History❖❖

**Summer Homework: Chapter Ten**  
**Life in Christian Europe in the High Middle Ages**

**Bibliography:**

McKay, John P., Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler. "Life in Christian Europe in the High Middle Ages." *A History of Western Society*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 295-325. Print.

**Introduction:**

The High Middle Ages saw most of the population divided into:

- ❖ those who work
- ❖ those who fight
- ❖ those who pray

Those living during this time felt that each of the three classes depended or benefitted from the other classes. These categories, however, do not account for class mobility or the mixing of these groups.

**Questions:**

How did these people actually live?

What were their preoccupations and lifestyles?

To what extent was social mobility possible for them?

**Key Terms:**

villeins  
manumission  
manors  
saints  
relics  
popolani  
sacrament  
Eucharist  
nobility  
ministerials  
rustics  
oblates  
tournament  
joust  
abbess/prioress  
lay brothers

**Chapter Notes:**

Those Who Work

The majority of people living during this time were the peasants, who supported the lords, clergy, and townspeople. While not always mentioned in works from this period, it is believed that peasants were more appreciated than it was originally believed. Peasant lives varied across Europe and there were multiple levels of peasantry.

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During the High Middle Ages, the number of slaves was declining; the Christian Gospels, while not condemning the practice, stated that all of God's children were equal. Saint Paul attempted to instill both masters and slaves with the spirit of charity, which aided in declining the process.

Serfs were different from slaves because they could not be purchased or sold like property and they worked on a lord's land and paid arbitrary levies. Serfs and their families were tied to the lord's land and couldn't buy their own freedoms, as their lord owned their belongings. Money had to be given to a third party, who would then pay for the serf's freedom. This method of manumission was common at this time.

The economic revival of the eleventh century led to the following:

- ❖ more towns
- ❖ increased land productivity
- ❖ the growth of long-distance trade
- ❖ the development of a money economy
- ❖ more serfs buying freedom

Reclamation of wasteland and forestland also led to more free serfs, or at least lessened their obligations on the manor. People also moved to new frontiers because of frequent conflicts and fighting.

As more land was turned into farmland, the conditions of the peasants improved as serfs were eventually able to afford freedom. Peasants who remained in their villages found that landlords, who feared losing more serfs, lessened their duties.

Most peasants lived on estates known as manors, which belonged to the lords. The manor was the center of rural life. They varied widely in size and style and were run in different ways.

The land of the manor was divided into two sections:

- ❖ the demense
  - home farm cultivated for the lord
- ❖ the peasants' land
  - usually larger
  - worked in strips by all peasants

The arable land was divided into three parts; two fields were used while one field was left fallow in order to allow nutrients to be replenished within the soil. Animal manure was also used as fertilizer at this time.

The production of iron increased in the twelfth century and by the thirteenth century was used to strengthen plows. The fourteenth century led to iron pitchforks, spades, and axes.

Plow and harrow were drawn by horses after the development of the horse collar, although the use of horses or oxen in an area was mostly decided by that land's soil type.

The thirteenth century saw an increase in the use of houses to haul carts to the markets and farmers were able to and from the market faster. Opportunities for spending their earnings on goods multiplied.

Despite their new methods and tools, peasants were at the mercy of the weather. Compared to today, the amount of crops produced was low for the following reasons:

- ❖ inadequate soil
- ❖ poor seed selection
- ❖ lack of fertilizer

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Despite this, advancements did improve the amount of crops that were harvested. Grain yields were the highest on large manorial estates and were a good step forward at the time.

People, for the most part, spent their entire lives within a few miles of their villages. This led to a strong sense of family and pride in where they lived and worked.

Many individuals drank quite a bit, due to the dullness of manorial life. This caused accidents or even deaths.

A peasant family consisted of, usually, one of the following:

- ❖ a married couple
- ❖ a couple with children
- ❖ widows or widowers with children

Women worked alongside men in the fields and did similar jobs on manors. They were also servants and some farm wives were able to sell goods at markets. Women also managed the houses.

The sizes of a peasant's home depended on how much land, and thus prosperity, they possessed. Less wealthy peasants lived in clay or wood homes that only had a single room. Most homes had gardens and produce was preserved and stored by the women and children. Women also produced ale, which was drunk in large amounts.

Bread was a major part of a peasant's diet. In some areas cheese and fish were also important. While hunting and trapping were illegal for peasants, these laws were commonly broken. Meat was usually reserved for Christmas meals or for the noble class.

Health care is thought to have improved with time; still, little is known. One woman, Trotula of Salerno wrote about gynecological and obstetrical problems. Most midwives learned through apprenticeship.

Because of the fatality rate, women were afraid of pregnancy. Caesarian sections were used if a mother died during childbirth and the baby could be saved and baptized.

Although most sick people were cared for by family members, the British Isles developed the first hospitals. Patients in hospitals:

- ❖ were segregated by gender
- ❖ wore a common uniform
- ❖ were required to keep periods of silence and attend devotions in the hospital chapel

While those in cities had access to hospitals, those in rural areas relied more on medical lore. Since tradition forbade men from examining female patients, women could practice gynecology and obstetrics.

Christian religion greatly impacted everyday lives and the village church was the center of everyday life. The parish priest was responsible for all religious activities. Although legally under bishop authority, the manorial lord appointed him and financed his education. Parish priests were usually peasants and often worked the fields with other peasants. This enabled them to have a better understanding of what the people needed.

The stone in the church altar contained relics of the saints, who were said to have once lived on earth and thus could relate to people. They were thought to have been able to perform miracles. Peasants would offer the saint gifts, prayers, and loyalty.

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Roman authorities believed that they alone had the right to examine those who were candidates for sainthood; however, popular opinions still led to locals declaring saints. In the Mediterranean, saints were commonly popolani, while France and Germany saw more nobles becoming saints.

From the church porch the priest read to his parishioners orders and messages from royal and ecclesiastical authorities. Royal judges also opened their courts on the church porch. In busy merchant areas, business agreements were made right in the isles of churches.

In the High Middle Ages a new religious understanding came to be. Twelfth century theologians developed a sacramental system. The seven sacraments included:

- ❖ baptism
- ❖ penance
- ❖ Eucharist
- ❖ confirmation
- ❖ matrimony
- ❖ orders
- ❖ extreme unction or anointment of the sick

Sermons and homilies taught that the Eucharist was at the center of the sacramental system. This system, however, did not completely replace the people's devotion to saints.

A criticism of the clergy at this time was that they were not able to explain basic teaching to parishioners. Nevertheless, people understood stories and doctrines from church walls and stained glass windows. The common people's culture was Christianity.

Peasant life was difficult and short, with few living past forty. Because of this, the concept of the afterlife and indulgences were important.

### Those Who Fight

The small nobility class greatly influenced medieval culture and also retained power up until the nineteenth century. The nobility had a special legal status and in return they had certain responsibilities, including:

- ❖ raising and commanding troops
- ❖ holding courts
- ❖ coining money
- ❖ conducting rebellions with outside powers
- ❖ being the lord to those on their lands
- ❖ protecting the weak and poor

They had horses and swords and were encouraged to be chivalrous. All nobles were knights, but all knights weren't noble. Through military success, marriage, or impressive service, poorer knights could become nobles. Germany also had knights who were known as ministerials who could be warriors or managers of a lord's estate.

Nobles' opinions of peasants was somewhat contradictory; on one hand they were seen as dark, dirty, and stupid, but were also seen as being cunning, virtuous, and loved by God.

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Infant death rates were high from medieval practices and natural causes. Other infants were abandoned by their families. Children were abandoned for the following reasons:

- ❖ poverty
- ❖ natural disasters
- ❖ food shortages
- ❖ children were illegitimate
- ❖ children were products of incest
- ❖ an unwanted gender
- ❖ a deformity
- ❖ hopes for a better life for the child
- ❖ didn't want to become parents

Some children were given to religious institutions as oblates, which was seen as a religious act. Children of any background were able to have a career within the church.

Noble families wanted to limit the amount of children who could marry and take over their land, so nobles either gave them to the church or practiced primogeniture. Others married late or used birth control.

Children of aristocratic birth spent the first years of their lives playing. When boys turned seven, they became servants to another family and received formal training in arms. They were trained in the following ways:

- ❖ riding horses
- ❖ wielding swords
- ❖ using lances
- ❖ using bows and arrows
- ❖ caring for armor

Once knighted, a man travelled for a few years, accompanied by a group of friends chosen by the young man's father. Battle experience was gained through tournaments, and these tournaments also gave young men profits.

Girls were usually married by the age of sixteen to a much older man. Because of this, there was a significant age gap between fathers and the rest of their family, and this could cause problems. Fathers would hold onto power over their sons until they succumbed to old age.

When noble males gained property, they became adults. As adult males, they were supposed to protect the churches; this was not always the case, however.

Since status was measured by the size of one's household, nobles tried to get more household retainers. They also borrowed money in order to keep a lavish lifestyle.

Nobles had to fight for their lord or king, and this fighting was limited to about forty days in a year. Vassals acted as guards and had to attend his lord's court.

Nobles, until the thirteenth century, had great control over peasants. The lords were responsible for giving justice to their peasants, which they did to varying degrees.

Women managed the household while their husbands travelled. Women also could have quite a bit of authority and some could buy or transfer property.

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### Those Who Pray

Those in the Middle Ages saw monks as the holders of God's blessing through their chants and prayers. Monasteries produced the educated elite that served kings and monks kept classical culture alive.

Orderic Vitalis was a leading scholar during his time and was not a typical monk. Like other monks, however, the ultimate decision as to whether he was a monk was left up to his parents.

While many children became monks, some men also became monks as adults because of:

- ❖ a direct call from God
- ❖ disgust with the secular world
- ❖ the encouragement of others
- ❖ lack of other opportunities
- ❖ poverty
- ❖ sickness
- ❖ fear of hell

Although monasteries consisted predominately of nobles, the emerging middle class also began to contribute monks.

The founder of a convent's support influenced the status of the convent. Those given large endowments could accept many more women.

The abbess or prioress was usually someone with a higher social standing, since they governed and represented the convent. The life of a typical nun consisted of:

- ❖ religious duties
- ❖ business responsibilities
- ❖ sewing
- ❖ embroidery
- ❖ fine needlework
- ❖ copying manuscripts

Hildegard of Bingen was an oblate to an abbey, where she was given a good education. She founded the convent of Rupertsberg and wrote. She represented the Benedictine ideal of great learning and loyalty to monasticism. Being seen as a wise and intellectual nun, she was quite atypical for her time.

Daily life for both genders focused on the liturgy. Monks spent a lot of income on it, as they saw it as a way to praise and please God. Art was inspired, and monasteries became crucibles of art.

The administration of the abbey's properties took up a lot of time. The usual economic organization was the manor. If a monastery had multiple estates, they were divided into units.

Being aristocrats, choir monks did not work the land. Cellarers were in charge of the peasants or lay brothers. The almoner had to care for and feed the neighborhood. The novice master had a few obligations, including:

- ❖ the Rule
- ❖ the chant
- ❖ the scriptures
- ❖ the traditions of the house

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Several orders forbade the learning of medicine and law but this rule was not strictly followed. Some monks had legal knowledge and some even wrote about medicine.

The Cistercians, whose rules forbade them to get involved with the manorial system, they:

- ❖ built dikes
- ❖ drained swamps
- ❖ created vineyards
- ❖ raised sheep
- ❖ iron and lead mining
- ❖ provided schools and hospitals

The twelfth century saw a worsening economic situation in Benedictine monastic houses. Cluny was a good example of this, as it borrowed money and found itself in debt. The agricultural recession of the fourteenth century reduced the grants given by the lay nobility as well. Slackening of the *Benedictine Rule* and the weakening of community life occurred overall.

### **Summary:**

Peasant life was different depending on an area's manorial customs, climate, and geography, although it is true that most peasants had agricultural obligations to fulfill for their lords. By 1100 knights fought on horseback and were the class with the highest amount of power. Other than fighting, nobles might have also had political, judicial, and economic duties. Monasteries became the cultural centers of Europe at this time as well. Better technology led to more crops and population growth and many changes for those living in the High Middle Ages.