

# The Middle Ages: The Lords and the Serfs

## Words to Know

**clergy** people trained or ordained for religious work

**estate** a large piece of land with a large home on it

**feudalism** the political and military system of Europe during the Middle Ages; the system of exchanging land for services

**homage** a pledge of loyalty; a promise to serve, made to kings and lords during the Middle Ages

**jousts** fights with lances between two knights on horseback

**knights** high-ranking soldiers of the Middle Ages who received their titles from a noble

**manor** the lands belonging to a medieval lord, including farmland, a village, and the home of the owner

**medieval** belonging to the Middle Ages

**nobles** people of high social rank

**serfs** people legally tied to the land; farm workers who are almost slaves

**vassals** nobles who receive land from a king in return for their loyalty and service

## Look for the answers as you read:

1. What was medieval life like for the lord of a manor?
2. What was medieval life like for a serf?
3. What were the three classes in a feudal society?
4. How did a boy become a knight?
5. What role did religion play in feudal life?
6. What was "the Black Death"?

**W**hen the Roman Empire fell, most people in Europe moved from the cities to the country. The splendor of the great cities faded. After a time, some towns no longer existed. Trade all but disappeared. People no longer used money. Education and learning became less and less important. Only in the church was there an effort to continue the reading and writing of Latin. The church also saved the writings of many ancient thinkers.

Life was now organized under a new system called **feudalism**. A king ruled a whole country. He divided the land among important men, or **nobles**. These nobles were called **vassals** of the king. In exchange for land, the nobles paid **homage** to the king. This meant that they promised to serve the king. They swore to fight for him and protect him.

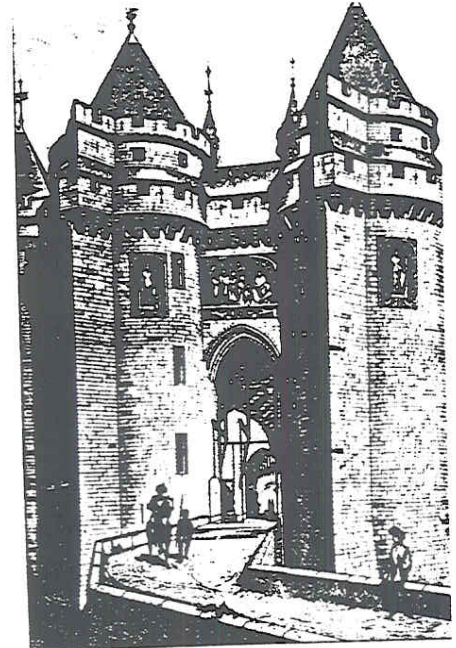
A noble, or lord, lived in a huge castle or **manor house** on a country **estate**. The estate included a small village and fields for growing crops. **Freemen** and **serfs** lived on the feudal estate. They depended on the ruling noble and his land for their living.

The manor fields were divided into strips of land. **Freemen** were allowed to buy and farm their own strips. But they had to pay the lord of the manor a part of their crops. Also, they had to promise to fight for the lord. A noble always had to worry about attacks by neighboring estates.

The **serfs** did not own their own land. They worked for the lord of the manor, farming his land. **Serfs** were tied to the land on which they were born. They could not leave the estate, even if they wanted to.

The **serfs** provided every service for the manor lord. They grew his food and gathered his wood. They took care of his lands and his castle. In the feudal system, each class owed loyalty and service to the class just above it.

## The Feudal System

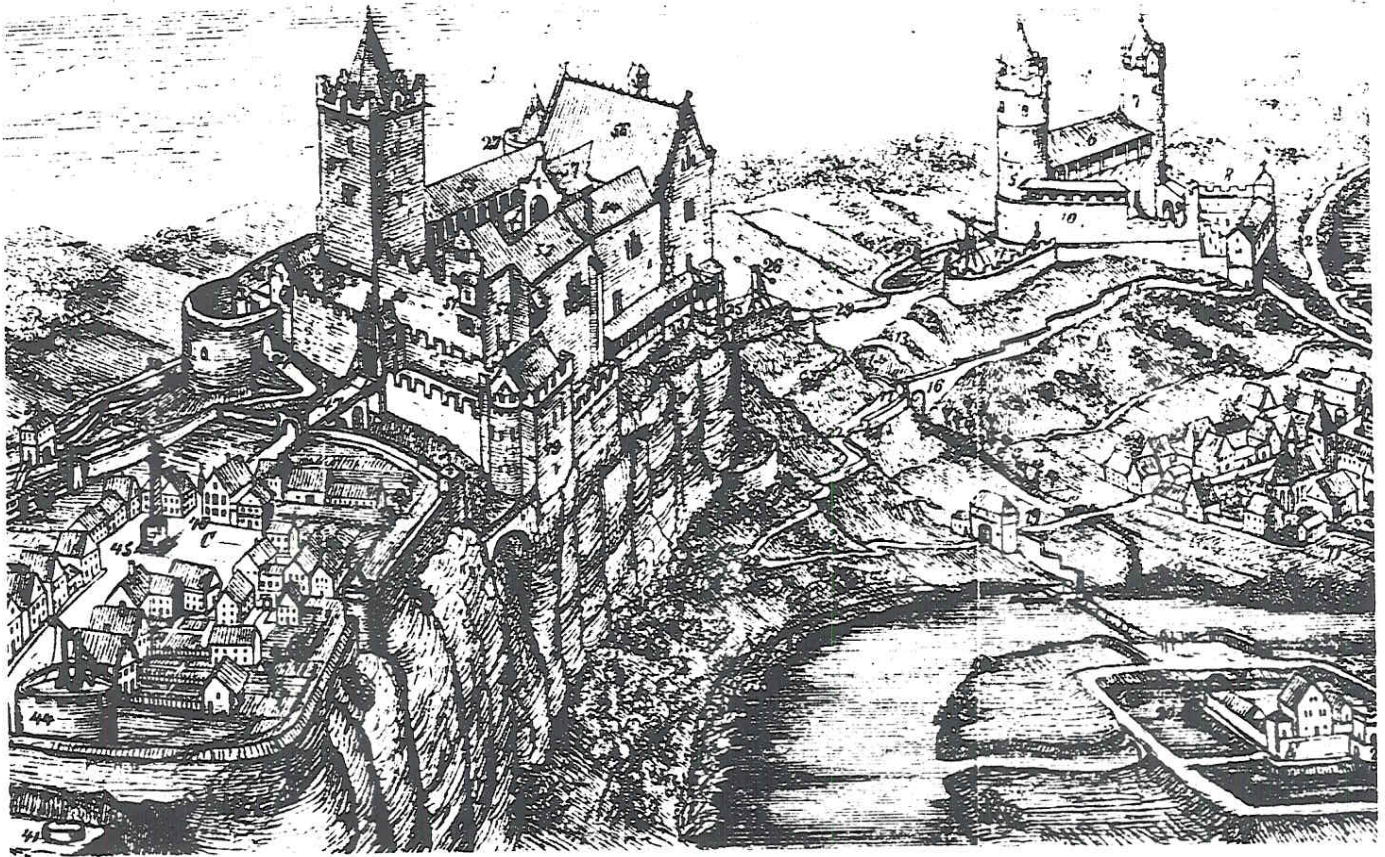


*A medieval castle*

**V**ery little trade went on under the feudal system. Each feudal estate had its own village and met its own needs. Each village had a blacksmith to make tools and weapons. Each village had a miller who ground grain into flour. The **serfs** had to use the services of the manor. And they had to pay whatever price was asked for these services.

The nobles and their families lived in great houses made of stone. The **medieval** manor houses were real castles. But they were still very cold and often gloomy. They had no glass in the windows. They had no running water. They were dimly lit by burning torches made of twigs. The damp, shadowy castles were really cold fortresses. There the noble families could be safe from enemies.

## Life on a Feudal Estate



*A feudal manor*

Many of the manor lords had several manors. They lived part of the year at one and part of the year at another. The lords chose managers to oversee the land when they were away.

While the noble family lived in the castle, the villagers lived in small, smoky huts. They ate from wooden bowls and sat on backless, three-legged stools. They could not read or write. Their only contacts from outside the manor came when the village held a fair. Then merchants from around the countryside might bring their wares.

A manor lord could treat his serfs however he pleased. "Between you and your serf there is no judge but God," was a medieval saying. No laws protected the people from their lords' treatment.

## Men of the Church

**M**edieval society was a Christian society. Higher officials in the church were nobles much as the lords of the manors were. Large pieces of land were often given to the **clergy**. The highest-ranking clergymen were as wealthy and powerful as the most important lords.

Men who wished to devote their lives to serving God lived in monasteries. There they spent their days studying, praying, and taking part in religious services.

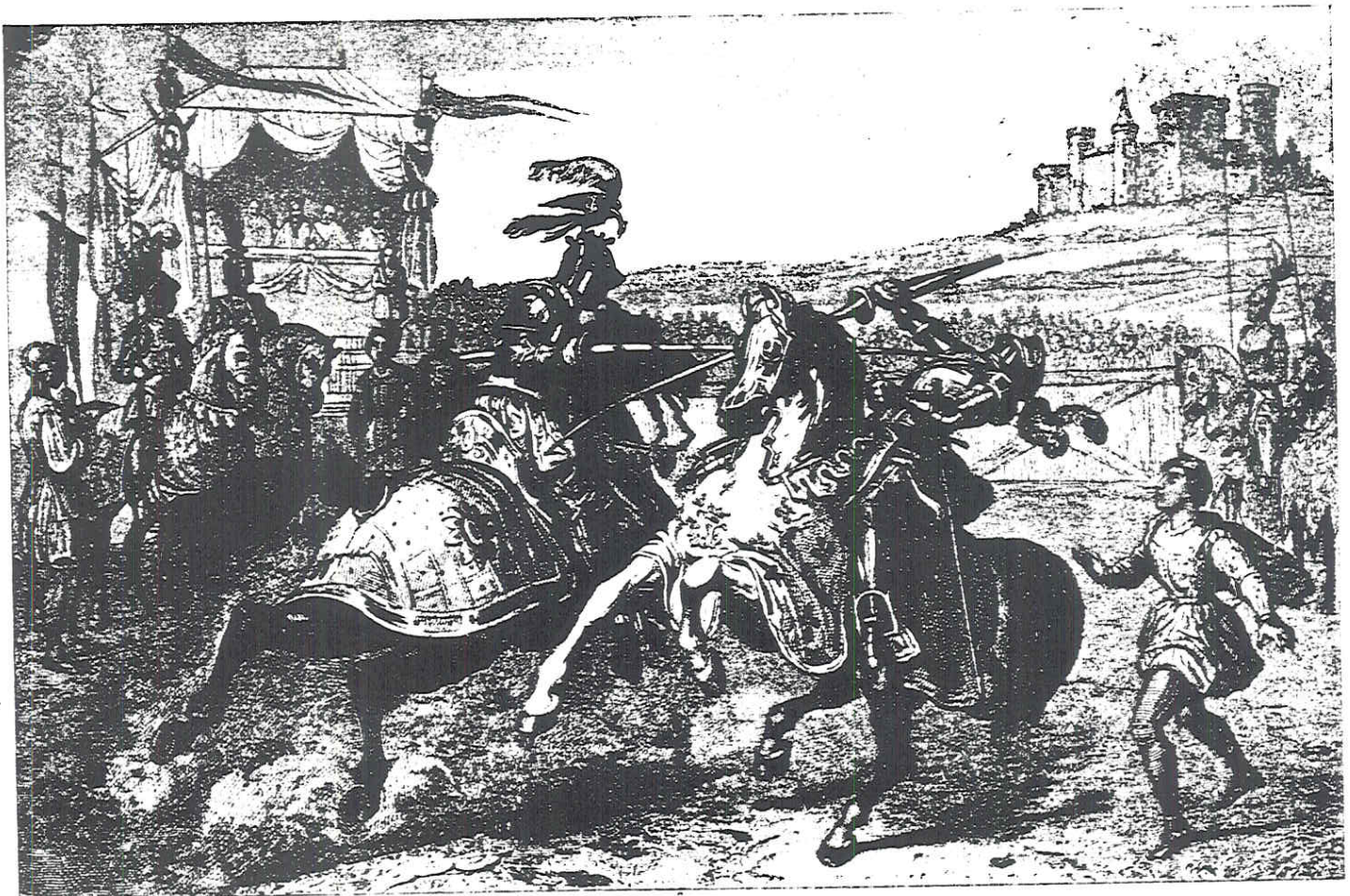
**E**xcept for the church leaders, every important man in the feudal society was a fighting man. Even the kings were warriors. The estates fought each other. There were bands of robbers to be controlled. Tribes of people from other parts of the country often came looking for new lands.

So men were trained to fight. Warriors of the noble class were known as **knights**. Knights fought to defend their own manors. And they fought for their king as they had promised to. They also fought to protect Christianity from the Moslem threat.

Being a knight was a costly business. Armor and weapons were elaborate and expensive. The serfs had to work very hard to pay for their lord's fancy armor, many horses, and fine weapons. If a boy wanted to grow up to be a knight, he began training at age seven. He started out as a page. He learned to fight and to have the proper knightly manners.

The next step in becoming a knight was acting as a squire. A squire served a knight. He helped the knight with his armor and weapons. And the squire rode with his knight into battle. When he was 21, a worthy squire was "knighted" by a nobleman. The young squire became a knight when a sword was tapped on his shoulder.

## Knights



*Jousting knights*

Knighthood was both a military and a religious honor. A young man spent the night before he was knighted in a church. There he kept watch over his armor, as he knelt and prayed. He thought about the honor he was about to receive.

Knights kept their fighting skills ready by entering tournaments, or jousts. Two knights on horseback would fight each other with long lances. Their goal was to knock the other knight off his horse. The winner's honor was not only for himself. It was also for his favorite "lady" whose ribbon he wore into battle.

## A Hard Life!

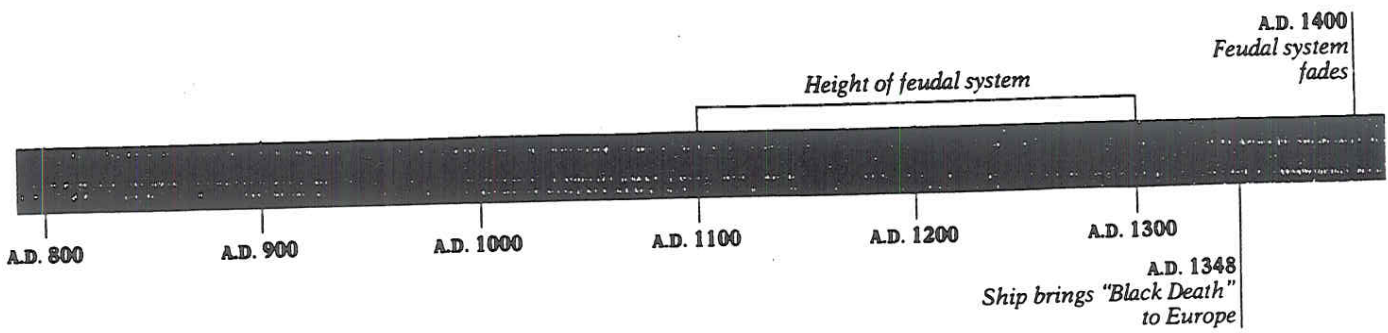
**T**he feudal way of life was most widespread during the 1100s and 1200s. Life on a feudal manor was hard. There were floods and years of bad crops. There were always battles to fight. And there were plagues.

In A.D. 1348 a ship from the East docked at an Italian port. Some sick sailors came ashore. They brought with them a terrible plague. This disease became known as the Black Death. It got its name because it caused spots of blood to turn black under the skin. Little was known about medicine during the Middle Ages. There were few doctors. Villages were not very clean. Nobles and serfs alike fell sick. One-fourth of the entire population of Europe finally died from the Black Death.

Feudal society lasted for almost 700 years. But by A.D. 1400 the great manors had almost disappeared. Trade had picked up. Money had come back into use. Nobles no longer received land for services. People moved back to the towns.

New methods of warfare were being developed. Gunpowder and new weapons such as cannons were now available. And foot soldiers were being used more effectively. Because of these changes, knights were no longer useful.

But for hundreds of years, the picture of life in Europe had been the feudal manor. It was a world where everyone fit into one of three classes: nobles, clergy, or workers. "Some fight," a medieval bishop wrote. "Others pray. And others work."



### *Points to Remember*

- ◆ During the Middle Ages people lived under the feudal system.
- ◆ In return for land, nobles paid homage to their king.
- ◆ Medieval manors included a manor house, a village, and fields.
- ◆ Serfs worked the land for the lord of the manor.
- ◆ Knights were warriors of the noble class.
- ◆ Medieval society was divided into three classes: the nobles, the clergy, and the workers.

### *Think About It!*

1. Describe a medieval castle.
2. Could a serf leave his lord's manor if he wanted to?
3. How did a person become a knight?
4. Name three ways in which feudal life was hard.