

The Middle Ages

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The Middle Ages

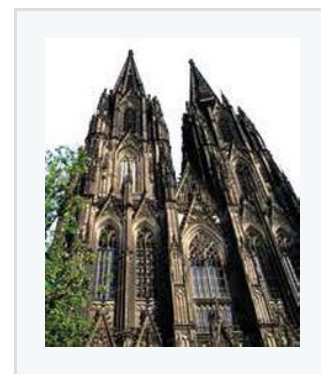
This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

If you know anything about knights, castles, or Robin Hood, then you already know something about the Middle Ages in Europe. *The Middle Ages* may seem to be an unusual name for a historical period—especially one that lasted for more than 1,000 years. People in the Middle Ages did not know they were in the middle of anything. They thought they were modern—just as you and I do today. In fact, *the Middle Ages* was not a phrase used by the people who lived during that time period. It is a term modern historians use today to refer to that time period between ancient and modern times.

Life in the Middle Ages was not the same as it is now. For one thing, people who lived back then probably thought about time differently. Many people measured time by the rising and setting of the sun and the passing of the seasons. For this reason, life likely had a slower, steadier pace.

In addition, there was a strong desire to honor God that appeared to transcend time. As a result, people undertook impressive, long-term projects such as building magnificent cathedrals that took centuries to complete.

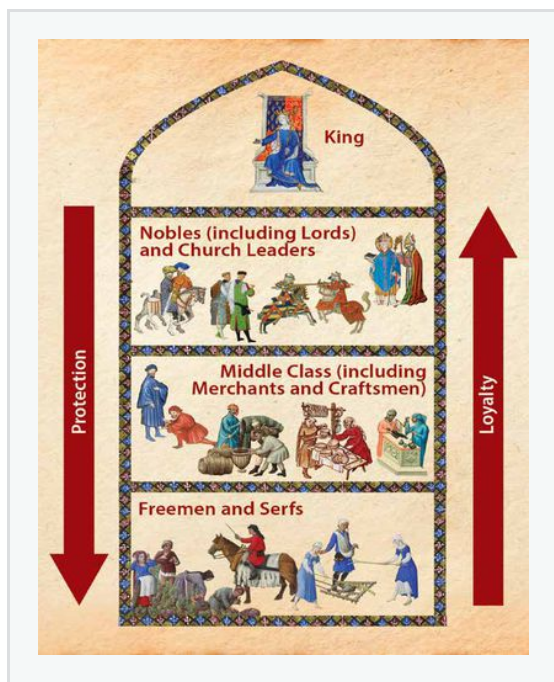
Language and location helped shape people's lives, too. Because travel was so difficult, many people didn't do it. Generally, only rich, educated people in Europe traveled. Almost everyone else stayed close to home. Although Latin was the language of both the Church and government, only select members of society could understand that language. Most people lived an isolated existence. They did not travel far from home. As a result, most people communicated using the language, or dialect, spoken in the place of their birth. As strange as it may seem to us, in certain parts of Europe villagers from places just 30 miles apart could not easily understand each other. For this reason, most people during the Middle Ages were concerned with the affairs of their village, what they owed the local lord in the way of payment, and how to ensure their place in heaven.



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Cologne Cathedral took 632 years to complete.

There was another force that had a huge impact on western European society during the Middle Ages. This force came in the form of a deadly disease. The disease, called the Black Death or plague, certainly made its mark upon medieval Europe. This dreadful plague first appeared in the

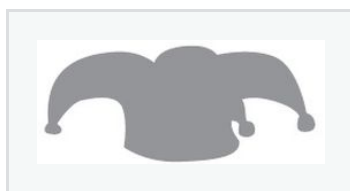


Although this diagram does not include every aspect of medieval feudal society, it does show the people with the most power at the top, and the people with the least power at the bottom.

500s. In the second half of the 1300s it swept through Europe once again. Spread by infected fleas that lived on rodents, the Black Death probably killed one-third of the population of western Europe.



Despite conflicts and hardships, this period in history was also a time when people created impressive and inspiring architecture. Great castles and churches began to adorn the landscape. Kings, queens, and noblemen held jousts, and court jesters entertained noble families.



Life on a Manor

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

If you lived during the Middle Ages, your life followed one of a few set paths. If you were the child of a king and a queen or a lord and a lady, you lived a privileged life. You had enough food to eat and clothes to wear. You lived in a relatively nice house. You had servants, too. You may have been one of the few who learned to read and write. You even learned to ride a horse. If you were a boy, you learned to become a skilled swordsman. Privileged girls may have learned to embroider, to dance, and to play a musical instrument. Occasionally girls, too, learned to read. As a privileged child, you likely grew up to become a king or a queen, or a lord or a lady, yourself.



Privileged family in the Middle Ages

But most people in the Middle Ages were not privileged. In the early Middle Ages, nearly everyone in Europe worked on the land. Most farmworkers were called serfs. Serfs grew the food and tended to the livestock, or animals that fed the people. Some had more freedom than others and were called freemen. Serfs were at the bottom of the social order and had the least amount of power.

Serfs usually spent their entire lives working on a landowner's or lord's estate. In return for the work they did, the lord allowed serfs to use some of the land to grow their own food. The lord lived in his castle or manor house. He owned all the land around his home and often the nearby towns and villages, too. The lord also controlled the lives of most of the people who worked for him.

In the Middle Ages, serfs worked on farmland that was divided into strips. The serfs spent about half of their time working for the lord. The rest of the time, they worked on the strips of land where their own crops were grown.

Most serfs lived in small, simple houses in or near a village. Their houses were made from wood and mud. The roofs were thatched, meaning they were made from rushes, or straw. They usually had just one room. Serfs slept on straw beds. Inside each house was a small fireplace for cooking. Smoke from the fire escaped through a hole in the roof.

The lord increased his wealth in many different ways. In addition to working the farmland for the lord, serfs paid taxes to the lord in the form of money, crops, and livestock. Sometimes the lord ran a mill and even charged his serfs a fee to grind their grain into flour.



Serfs worked on the land throughout the year.

caught poaching were severely punished.

Some farmworkers were freemen. Freemen were not under the same strict control of the lord. If a serf ran away from his home, and managed to live for a year and a day in a town without being found, he could become a freeman, too.



Life as a Boy Serf in the Middle Ages

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During the Middle Ages in Europe, people lived in the manor system. Most people were farmworkers, called serfs. They worked the land and tended to the livestock for a single Lord, or landowner.

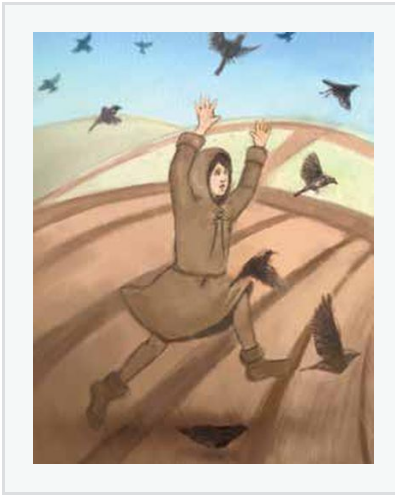
What would your life be like if you were a boy serf in the Middle Ages? Here is a taste:

From an early age, you work a full day. You wake up just before sunrise and go to sleep when it is dark. For breakfast, you have rye bread and water, or perhaps watery ale. Even before the sun is fully risen, and regardless of the weather, you begin your work on the land. In springtime, you are busy plowing and planting seeds. You assist in the delivery of baby lambs and calves. At midday, you walk home for a simple meal of rye bread and maybe a small piece of cheese. After lunch, you return to work, cutting logs for the lord's fire.



Boy serf plowing fields

In the summer months, you tend to the crops you planted in the spring. You keep the hungry birds and insects away from the growing crops.



Boy serf chasing birds away from crops

Autumn, the time to harvest crops, is perhaps the busiest time of all. You help your mother and sisters pick fruits and berries, which they preserve and store for the winter. Using a simple tool called a scythe, you harvest grain crops such as wheat, oats, rye, and barley. You help store the grain. A good harvest makes everyone, especially the lord, very happy. It means there is food to eat during the winter months. A good harvest is a time of celebration for all.



Boy serf harvesting grain

Nevertheless, you have to get used to having less food to eat in the wintertime, and to feeling hungry and cold more often than not. At times, your parents find it difficult to make ends meet. Even if ice and snow lay upon the frozen earth, you still have jobs to do.

You have to feed and care for the livestock. You repair fences and barns. All the while, you continue

to work on your family's strips of land. Each evening as the sun is setting, you return home quite exhausted. You end your day with a meal called pottage that your mother or sisters have prepared. Pottage is a vegetable stew with grain and a tiny piece of meat or fish in it. After a good night's sleep, you will wake up and do it all again!



Serf family eating a meal together

Soldiers in the Middle Ages

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Whether rich or poor, young men in the Middle Ages learned how to use a weapon of some kind. Rivalries between nobles, wars with other nations, even violence between neighbors required that they be able to fight. When a lord needed to raise an army, he turned to those he governed.

In the Middle Ages, ordinary foot soldiers were trained to fight with an axe and a long spear called a pike. Others were trained to be skillful archers and crossbowmen. Some foot soldiers might have worn chainmail, an early form of metal armor, but most had padded coats and carried daggers. However, the most esteemed soldiers were knights.

Knights were soldiers who fought on horseback, and sometimes on foot, for their lord. If you wanted to be a knight, you had to be able to afford horses and armor. You also had to find someone willing to train you. Because it was very expensive to become a knight, these mounted warriors were usually sons of wealthy, influential members of society.



Crossbowman and pikeman



Knight in suit of armor riding armored horse

Being a knight was one way of making a fortune. If you were involved in successful battles and wars, you might receive money or land as payment for your services. Sometimes a king might also reward you with a title. Having a title usually meant that you were an influential member of society. Knights also made money by looting and by holding certain people for ransom.

Cold, Dark, and Gloomy: Medieval Castles

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

During the Middle Ages, many kings and nobles lived in castles. Castles provided the inhabitants, or people who lived there, with a certain amount of protection from the enemy. They were also fairly safe places to store weapons and food supplies. The first castles were wooden forts. Later, people built stronger castles made of stone.



Modern reconstruction of wooden castle



Stone castle in France

Castle walls sometimes enclosed a series of small buildings, like a little town. The castle had a water supply within the walls. Residents also needed a good supply of food inside so they could withstand a siege. For added protection, some castles were surrounded by moats. The moat was a deep trench, often filled with water.

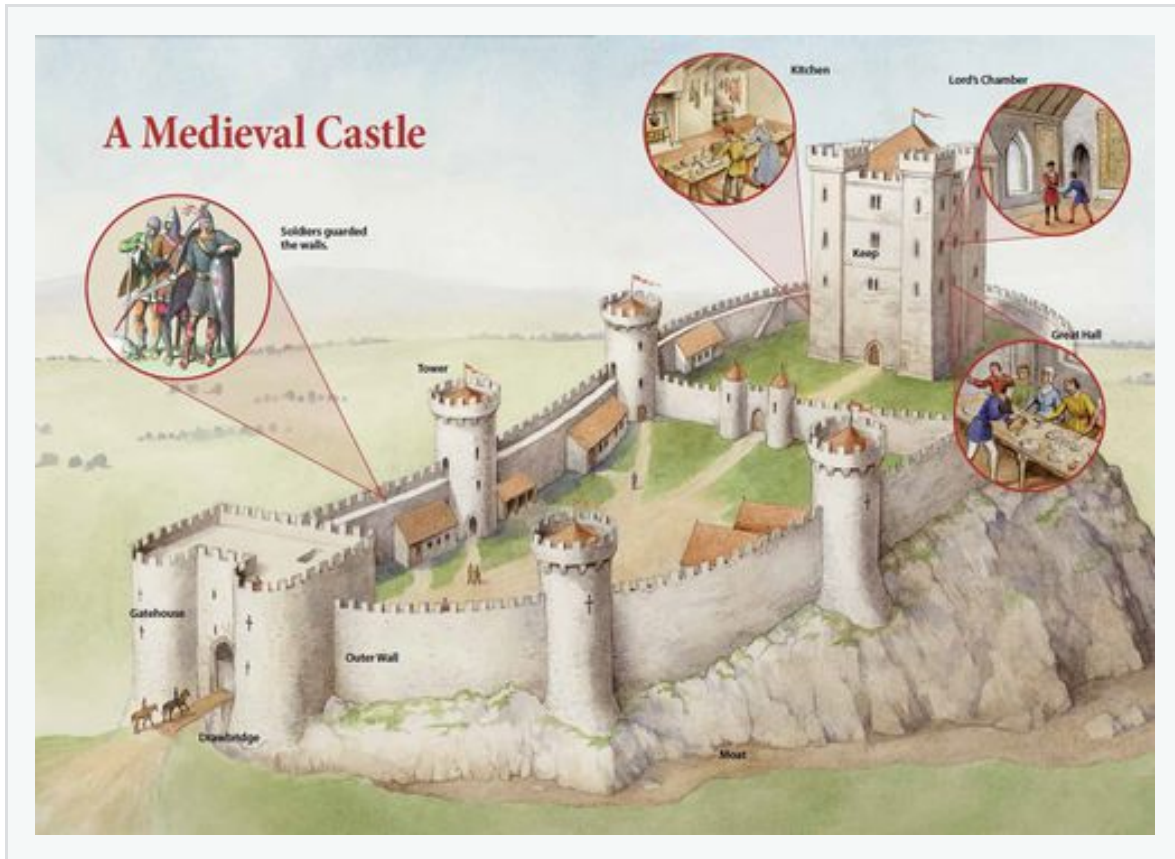


Castle in England with moat

Sometimes there was a drawbridge that could be raised or lowered. Over time, castles became more

elaborate with interior courtyards, living quarters for soldiers, and stables.

By today's standards, life in a castle was not very pleasant. Castles were cold and gloomy. They were designed for protection, not comfort. Most castles had only a few rooms. There was typically a Great Hall, a kitchen, and two or three private chambers, or rooms, for the lord and his family. There was no bathroom, just a tiny alcove that jutted out of the castle wall. The contents of the toilet emptied into the moat or a pit directly below. Can you imagine the smell?



The Great Hall was where family members and their guests gathered. Meals were served in the Great Hall. Entertainers performed there, and guests and even servants slept there. Buckets of hot coals or fireplaces provided the fire needed for heat and cooking. Small windows and candles offered little light.



A castle's Great Hall had many uses.

Traveling storytellers, minstrels, and troupes of actors often visited a castle. Quite often, jesters lived in the castle, ready to perform whenever requested. Noble children and adults in the Middle Ages enjoyed music and dancing. They played outdoor sports as well. Tennis, croquet, and bowling all began as lawn games during this period in history.



Medieval musicians

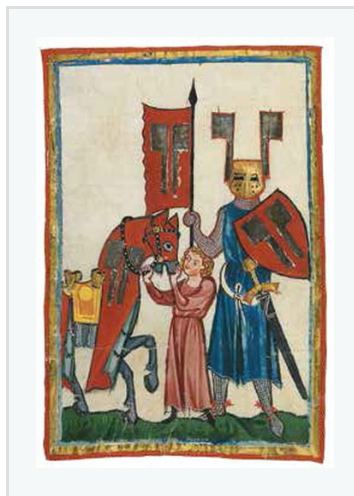
Knight Life

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Knights were well-respected soldiers during the Middle Ages. To learn more about knights, read on!

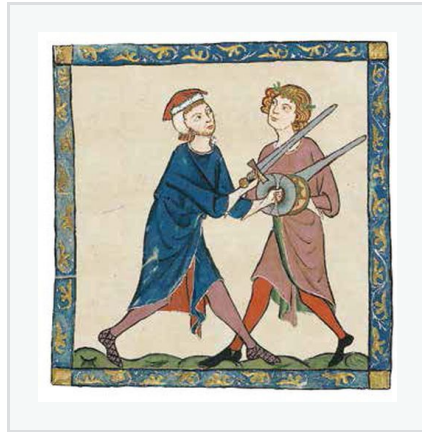
How Would You Have Become a Knight?

Your training to become a knight begins at a young age. You leave home to live with a family friend or relative who has agreed to train you. In the first several years of your training, you help to dress and to serve the lord. You are known as a page. During these early years as an aspiring knight, you probably learn to use a sword, to ride a horse, and to wield a lance, or long wooden pole with a metal tip. Later, when you are ready to learn more challenging skills, you become a squire.



Young boy training to be a knight

Although you are still a servant, as a squire you are now responsible for grooming and saddling the lord's horses. You are also responsible for cleaning and polishing his armor. You learn how to fight while riding a horse. You learn to use other weapons, including a heavier lance. This part of your training lasts for several years.



Squires learned to fight with swords.

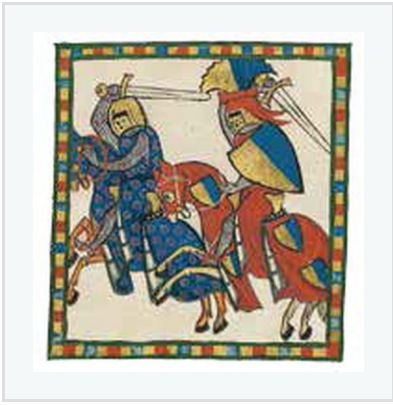
If you are a successful squire, you might be knighted by the lord. In what is called the dubbing ceremony, the lord taps you on the shoulder with the flat part of his sword. Then, a priest might bless you with a prayer.



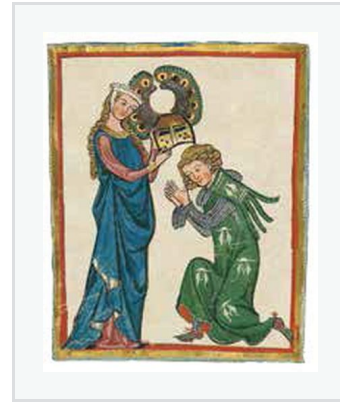
King knighting a squire

The Way of the Knight

In France in the 1100s and 1200s, certain expectations about how knights should behave in society were developed. The term *chivalry*, which refers to a warrior horseman or knight, became the term used to describe these expectations. These ideas of chivalry spread to other European countries. Knights were expected to serve their lord. They were required to honor and protect the Church and weaker members of society. They were also expected to treat other knights captured in battle as honored guests until a ransom was received. Sometimes it took months before a captured knight's family paid up. Once payment was received, the captured knight was free to go home.



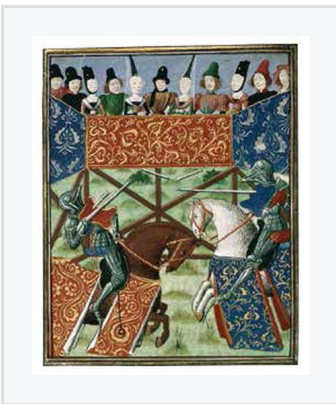
Knights were supposed to be brave in battle.



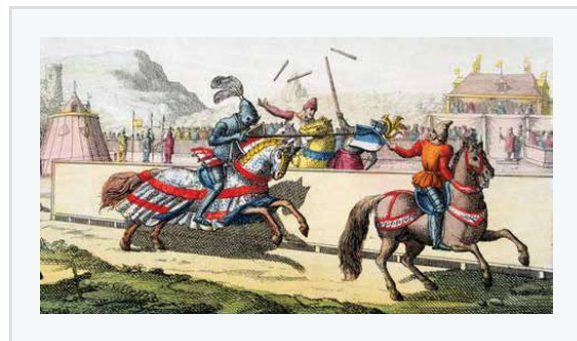
A knight was expected to guard and protect weaker members of society.

Charge!

Knights could prove their strength and abilities by taking part in jousting matches. Jousting matches were mock, or pretend, battles between two or more knights. Knights rode horses, wore full armor, and carried weapons called lances. Those who took part in jousts did so to gain respect and possibly a generous prize. For the privileged, attending the jousting matches was considered to be a day of excitement and entertainment. It was very much like watching a football or baseball game today. When the joust began, the knights charged at each other. With the aid of a lance, each knight attempted to knock his opponent off his horse.



Jousting was a popular sport.



Knights competing in a joust