

The Lives of Medieval Peasants

The lives of peasants throughout medieval Europe were extremely difficult. Although the specific characteristics of peasant life varied based on region, in general, medieval peasants lived in an agrarian society. Feudalism defined the social structure of medieval Europe from roughly the tenth century to the fifteenth century, situating peasants on the lowest rung of the social ladder. Under feudalism, peasants lived in a state of serfdom, a condition that essentially turned them into rural slaves. The rigid and cruel medieval system of law and order that accompanied feudalism succeeded as a tool for social control and largely prevented peasant resistance or rebellion. Feudalism declined steadily throughout the medieval period and was nearly extinct in Western Europe by the Renaissance. This was due in part to the demographic catastrophe in Europe that occurred as a result of the Black Death and the increasing indignation among peasants regarding increasingly severe tax policies.

Peasants lived in unhygienic and disease-ridden environments. Their water supply was typically filthy, as it was also where people deposited waste. Most peasants bathed once or twice throughout their entire lifetime. Peasants lived in small houses, which were also filled with bugs and disease. It was traditional to bring farm animals into the house every night to protect them from being stolen or from wandering off. The Catholic Church exercised extreme power over peasant life and influenced the foundations of peasant culture and society. Although the church was often oppressive in its stringent tax requirements, it also sanctioned several festivities throughout the year where peasants enjoyed festivals and celebrations.

Feudalism

The feudal system functioned throughout medieval Europe as a form of social, political, and economic organization. The major tenets of feudalism in many ways defined the medieval period. Its basic structure resembled a small kingdom. The traditional construction of the feudal society involved the relationship between lords, vassals, and the peasantry. The lord, roughly defined as a nobleman, owned a large piece of land (comparable to an average present-day county). He would then grant parcels of land (called *fiefs*) to vassals. The vassal, or lord of the manor, would then divide up his land further and allow peasants to live on it in exchange for their labor. This relationship formed the basic principles of *manorialism*, a major component of feudalism. Serfdom emerged during this time as well, as the condition of bondage of peasants under manorialism specifically, and feudalism more broadly. By the time of the Black Death (1348–1350) serfdom was already in decline in most parts of Western Europe and was nearly extinct by the time of the Renaissance. However, following the Renaissance, it saw a new emergence in Central and Eastern Europe.

The peasantry was divided into several categories and distinctions. Freeman, the smallest proportion of European peasants, lived as rent-paying tenant farmers, owed relatively little to the lord, and enjoyed a higher degree of independence and security. The most common type of serf or peasant was a *villein*. A variety of villeins lived throughout medieval Europe, but generally they rented small homes and were

subject to more legal restrictions than freemen. They enjoyed more rights than the lowest level of peasants (such as bordars or cottagers) but still spent a portion of their time working on the lord's land.

Classic feudalism is typically linked with medieval England. Following his victory at the Battle of Hastings (1066), William the Conqueror, or William I, introduced the feudal system to England as a way to control the country. It remained in practice for the next several centuries. Twenty years after the Battle of Hastings, William I designed a system to gather and organize information on individual landholdings and taxes owed throughout the country. This system of recordkeeping prevented individuals from disputing any tax claims. This came to be referred to as the Domesday Book, and it provides scholars today with a rare catalog of medieval demography, as well as a snapshot of medieval England's financial, social, and religious condition.

Peasant Culture and Religion

The everyday lives of medieval peasants were extremely harsh and taxing. The majority of peasants worked as farmers, and their lives were primarily dictated by the growing seasons. Peasants typically lived in small dwellings referred to as *cruck houses*, which comprised a wooden frame plastered with a mixture of mud, straw, and manure. The roofs were thatched and the floors were typically lined with straw. These houses would have had very little insulation and would have been incredibly cold in the winter and hot in the summer. There would have been minimal furniture in a cruck house—families would cook, eat, live, and sleep in the same room on mattresses filled with straw (as well as fleas and lice). Peasants used the same water supply for cooking, cleaning, and dumping waste, leading to contaminated water and widespread disease. Many peasant children died during their infancy from disease, and those who survived endured an incredibly difficult and labor-intensive upbringing. Children were expected to help in any way possible around the house until they were considered old enough to work in the fields with their parents.

Although the life of a peasant was incredibly exhausting and grueling, there was a vibrant tradition of pageants and festivals that reflected a rich medieval-peasant folk culture. The Catholic Church overwhelmingly shaped medieval peasant culture. A primary example of this can be seen with Carnival, an enormous festival that occurred every year on the days leading up to Lent. Public celebrations, parades and overindulgence in food and drink marked the highlights of Carnival in places throughout Western Europe, particularly in Catholic Italy, Spain, and France. Other festivals and celebrations occurred throughout the year, commemorating particular saints or seasons. These pageants were typically a combination of religious and local customs.

The Catholic Church wielded extreme power and influence during the medieval period, shaping the social, cultural, and political fabric of peasant life in Europe. Additionally, the church played an important role in determining a peasant's economic fate. Although the church itself was exempt from paying taxes, peasants were responsible for paying approximately ten percent of their earnings (either in cash or goods) in taxes to the church—known as *tithes*. The church threatened that the failure to pay tithes would result in the damnation of one's soul. Tithes are merely one

example of several that lead to the church's substantial fortune. They were also used by figures of the Protestant Reformation, in the early sixteenth century, as an example of the Catholic Church's ostentatious and lavish conduct.

Medieval Law

The system of law and order throughout medieval Europe reflected the extremely strict and rigid social structure of the period. Those in authority used fear and the threat of severe punishment as a tool with which to control the peasantry, who overwhelmingly outnumbered them. In medieval England, for example, an individual accused of committing an offense faced one of three trials by ordeal:

1. Ordeal by fire: The person accused of committing a crime was forced to hold a scalding hot iron bar and walk with it three or four paces. His burnt hands were then bandaged for three days, after which he returned to the court, where the bandages were removed. If the wounds were clearly healing, the accused would be considered innocent, and if the wounds had remained the same, the accused was found guilty.

2. Ordeal by water: The person accused was tied up by his arms and legs and thrown into the water. If he sank he was considered innocent, and if he floated he was deemed guilty.

3. Ordeal by combat: This ordeal was typically used by noblemen accused of committing a crime. The accuser would fight the accused and the winner was considered to be in the right, while the loser, if fortunate enough to survive, was considered in the wrong.

After 1215, the trial by ordeal was replaced by a trial by jury. The jury consisted of twelve men to be selected by the local villagers. The jury would collect evidence and decide the fate of the accused and what punishment he ought to face. Many peasants disliked trial by jury, as they feared that it fostered feelings of revenge among their neighbors and fellow villagers.

Peasants' Revolt

The brutality of the medieval system of law and order succeeded in preventing many large-scale uprisings. Throughout the late medieval period there were only a small number of peasant revolts that broke out in Europe. One of the more famous uprisings occurred in England during the late fourteenth century. Known as the Peasants' Revolt, or the Great Rising of 1381, it represents the most extreme and well-documented rebellion in medieval Europe. There were several factors leading to this popular revolt:

1. Many peasants were forced to work a few days every week on church land for free. This angered many people who would otherwise have spent that time working their own land in order to pay taxes and feed their families.

2. The Black Death (1348–1350) took an enormous toll on European life and, as a result, on the European work force. In the years following the Black Death, Europe experienced a severe labor shortage. As a result, it became relatively common for lords to entice their peasants to continue working their land by paying them money, and/or by

giving them their freedom if they would remain on the manor. Decades after the Black Death, instances of rollbacks to the previous state of bondage began to frighten many peasants, who feared that their newfound freedom would be revoked.

3. In 1380, in order to raise money to help finance England's latest war with France, King Richard II introduced a poll tax. Peasants were already burdened with paying a tax on their land and tithes to the church, which drained nearly all of their earnings in cash or goods. This new additional tax proved to be more than most could bear.

During the summer of 1381, a group of peasants in Essex drove a tax collector—who had come to inquire about the failure of many to pay the newly enforced poll tax—out of the village. After successfully fighting off soldiers who arrived a month later to restore royal authority, a small army of peasants marched on London, captured the Tower of London, executed the archbishop of Canterbury and the king's treasurer, and burned several government buildings. King Richard II met with the peasant rebels, led by Wat Tyler, and promised to concede to their demands. This did not satisfy all members of the rebellion, and many continued to wreak havoc throughout London. King Richard II met with leaders from the movement a second time, at which point the lord mayor killed Wat Tyler. This, coupled with the king's reassurance that he would help the peasants, led to the dissolution of the rebellion. King Richard II failed to follow through on nearly all of his promises, with the exception of revoking the poll tax. Ultimately, however, the Peasants' Revolt is considered to be a major turning point in the decline of serfdom in medieval England.

Summary:

- Overall, the life of a medieval peasant was extremely rough. Most peasants spent the majority of their lives farming and trying to make enough money or produce enough goods to support their families.
- Peasant society and culture was shaped by a strict observance of the tenets of the Catholic Church. While peasants did enjoy festivals and pageants throughout the year, reflecting a unique folk culture, their daily lives were filled with laborious work, disease, and social repression.
- Medieval society was dictated by the principles of feudalism, which positioned peasants in the bottom ranks of society. Feudalism forced peasants to be indebted to the lord who owned the land on which they farmed, and essentially forced them into a condition of bondage.
- There were several ways in which those in power attempted to control the behavior and lives of the peasantry. The overarching social structure of manorialism and serfdom provided the foundation for such control, while the extremely harsh design of medieval law successfully prevented the majority of peasants from rebelling.
- Peasants were also subject to tremendously onerous taxation. From sources such as the Domesday Book we know that peasants were expected to pay high taxes for the land on which they worked, in addition to other temporary taxes such as a poll tax.

- In addition to their financial responsibilities to their lords, peasants were expected to pay taxes to the Catholic Church in the form of tithes, which equaled ten percent of their earnings in cash or goods. Many peasants were also forced to spend time during the week working on church land for free.
- The abuses of the church, along with the labor shortage that resulted from the Black Death, helped lead to a gradual decline in serfdom throughout Western Europe. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 reflected the anger and frustration many peasants felt as a result of their mistreatment by their lords and the church. Although the status of peasants would improve very slowly following the medieval period, the peasantry in Western Europe experienced the abolishment of serfdom much earlier than their Central and Eastern European counterparts.