

European Society in the High Middle Ages

During the high Middle Ages, institutions and lay piety played a growing role in shaping society. First, there was the developing institution of the princely and kingly court. The realm of the court was exclusive to the upper echelon of society: the nobility. A code of behavior appropriate to court life developed through literature addressing manners, dress, and values. This behavior contrasted with the behavior appropriate to the life of the warrior and transformed the knight, who increasingly relied on the court to distinguish him. The knight at court was gentle and displayed the virtues of humility and constancy. He expressed his love and bravery through refinement. The literature celebrating and guiding life at court was highly idealized, intentionally setting courtly life apart from the rustic countryside, while never actually addressing the poverty of those that lived outside of its walls. Second, new political institutions appeared during the high Middle Ages. Seeking broader support for their rule, kings and princes met regularly for counsel with nobles and members of the clergy. By the thirteenth century, these meetings, in which rulers sought advice on political and military matters, grew into formal meetings of councils. These councils, or parliaments, took various shapes and sizes depending on the region. In England, the powerful barons drafted the Magna Carta, or Great Charter, in 1215 to state their right to involvement in certain matters of state and guaranteeing freemen certain liberties. If the king violated any of these liberties, the Charter stated that the barons would come together to overrule the king. In the kingdom of Castile-León, the Spanish *Cortes* included wealthy and influential townsmen with the nobility and ecclesiastical leadership. King Alfonso IV (r. 1188-1230) was the first king of Castile-León to call on the *Cortes* in a formal manner, soliciting their counsel at court, financial and military support, and assent to major political decisions.

In the cities of northern Italy, political institutions and involvement took a slightly different form. Merchants, guildsmen, and craftsmen, the non-noble financial lifeline of city life collectively known as the *popolo*, or the “people,” began demanding a share in the government. At times, their attempts to wrestle governmental dominance away from the urban nobility resulted in a compromise between the *popolo* and the nobles. At other times, the back-and-forth power struggle resulted in a regional strongman coming into a city under the guise of resolving conflict and establishing order. These new lords, or *signori*, established themselves as prime ruler, placing family members and close family friends in positions of power and making alliances with political factions in the city. Slowly, families such as the Este in Ferrara and the Gonzaga in Mantua consolidated political power at their own princely courts, seeing ways to legitimize their rule through public works and the purchasing of imperial titles.

Urban life overall took on a culture of its own in the high Middle Ages. The town and cities of northern Italy and Tuscany, the Germanies, Flanders, and France developed their own policies for dealing with other cities and their relationships with the surrounding countryside. Trade, commerce, and industry dominated urban life. The need for alliances with other areas where these factors dominated led to urban political mobilization and foreign policies. This same political mobilization resulted in the

financing of public works such as town halls, where policies were made, public squares, and churches for the growing population of city dwellers. The new architecture and urban planning helped a town craft its self-image. This self-image was furthered through ceremonies of civic pride. It was also furthered through expressions of piety exclusive to the lay, or non-ecclesiastical, realm. Partially to counter the material wealth some acquired in towns, and partially a reflection of the growing desire for a more personal spirituality and relationship with the divine, townspeople flocked to hear the messages of itinerant preachers. These preachers, mostly from the new Mendicant Orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans, addressed faith in daily life, spoke in the vernacular about how to live according to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the faithful tied themselves in a direct way to the religious orders of these preachers, becoming tertiaries, or third-order members who did not take solemn vows, and carrying out acts of charity and piety in their towns. Groups independent of official religious orders also appeared: confraternities. By and large restricted to men, lay people organized confraternities for prayer and public expressions of piety. There were also other associations that strayed from approved church teachings. These groups preached a return to apostolic practices and poverty to free Christians from materialism, and they emphasized chastity, preaching, the communal life, and moral purity. At times, they out rightly challenged the authority of the Catholic Church and the sacraments. Declared heretics, defining those who went against the teachings of the Church as committing treason to God, the long arm of the Roman Catholic Church instituted inquisitors to examine the beliefs of individuals in these groups. When individuals were found in error of official doctrine and refused to recant, inquisitors handed them over to secular authorities for punishment.