

Medieval Manor

In the agricultural economy of the post-Carolingian period, landlords and agricultural workers were bound to one another through the manorial system. In the manorial system, local lords presided over an estate on which farmers held individual plots of land and had their own livestock, albeit in small numbers. Manors were fiefs, a grant of something of value from a lord to a vassal, or in this case, land and the rights to rent from those tied to and obliged to work the land. Fiefs were part of the social and political organization of feudalism. In exchange for a fief, a vassal promised loyalty and military service. Those who engaged in this system were members of the nobility and ecclesiastical organization. In other words, they were equals, and with the exception of a king, vassals were also lords. In fact, in many places in Europe where feudalism was found, a number of vassals of the king had claims to larger amounts of land and were more powerful than the king himself. Many lords held multiple manors and traveled from one to another throughout the year. In their absence, they appointed a bailiff, or overseer, to manage operations. Some manors were not held by secular lords, but rather by ecclesiastical institutions, such as a monastery, or by individual members of the clergy, such as a bishop.

In theory, the relationship between laborers and landlords on a manor was reciprocal. In exchange for the protection, the lord provided through his noble and warrior status, large household, and administration of justice. Peasants of mixed status worked their own plots and those of the lord, usually scattered throughout the estate, yielding a percentage of the harvest to the lord. Laborers provided the landlord with a certain number of days each week working the lord's fields and other dues and services throughout the year. The dues were usually a percentage of the harvest. Services included cloth making in the landlord's workshops, operating mills and ovens on the manor, and serving as cooks in the landlord's kitchens. The agricultural tools on the manor were held in common, as were the pastures, meadows, and woodlands surrounding the manor. Modern pictorial reproductions of a typical manor include these features, as well as the manor house, where the lord lived; a marsh; the common pasture; a pond; and autumn and spring planting fields. They also often include a barn, oven, mill, and the village church in a central location.

In addition to being an economic unit, the manor was also a legal community. The landlord acted as judge in the event of conflict, and dues of laborers were sometimes negotiated. The landlord also appointed the parish priest, enforced church attendance and the payment of tithes (a payment to the church), and maintained church buildings. As lords increased rents for use of mills and ovens and demanded more labor in an effort to increase the economic productivity of their manors, the peasants who worked the land staged revolts. Peasant revolts hit their height in the later Middle Ages. The revolts accompanied years of poor harvests, extended wars between monarchs, and natural disasters such as famine and plague.