

Peasants

Few voices come down to us in the historical record from the vast majority of the population in medieval Europe, the peasantry. Most of the information we have on the peasantry comes from reconstructing the economic system of manorialism. There were different statuses among the peasants. There were free peasants, who owned their land and subsisted on their own agricultural labor. Free peasants were scattered throughout villages, and although they had to abide by customary law and could appeal to local lords and ecclesiastical authorities to settle conflicts, they were not subject to the will of the local lord in their daily lives and existence. Those peasants who were subject to the will of the local lord were serfs. Serfs had semi-free status. They received their land from a local lord and were not permitted to leave it. Like free peasants, they maintained their own households, but they owed dues and services to the lord of the manor, on whose land they lived. These dues and services mainly consisted of a certain number of days working the lord's fields, a major percentage of the harvest, rents to use the lord's mills and ovens and to maintain their operation, and time laboring in the lord's clothing workshops and kitchens. Dues and services could be increased at the lord's will such as demanding extra labor during harvest time. Yet serfs retained certain rights. They had the right to continue on their land from one generation to the next, usually being required to render some sort of payment to the lord to enact this right. They were also entitled to a percentage of the harvest from their own fields. In addition, they received official protection from the lord from invaders and other local lords, the latter whom would try to usurp the lands of free peasants. Under these circumstances, the guarantee of security and tenure of land could compel free peasants to become serfs of a great landholder. The lowest status among the peasantry was the cottager. Cottagers only had access to the poorest of lands and had no rights to them. They could be kicked off lands at any time and often squatted until they were evicted.

The family was the primary social unit of the peasantry. There was no clean division of labor based on sex among the peasantry. It was the case, however, that peasant women tended to spinning cloth and making it into clothing as well as milling grain and baking it into bread. The strength required to operate the heavy plow meant mostly men operated it. The youngest members of a family tended to weeding and cleaning the fields. All, however, were out at harvest time. Shared tools, including the heavy plow, required a good deal of cooperation. A high level of cooperation was also necessary to coordinate harvesting, especially with the increase in land under cultivation with the shift to the three-field system. In villages, the need for collective decision-making often resulted in the development of village councils. As agricultural developments and technologies helped peasants produce more food and better food with the dietary incorporation of more legumes and beans—which were introduced into the crop rotation of the three-field system to return nitrogen to the soil—the peasant population increased. At the same time, less labor was needed in the fields. These conditions prompted a number of peasants to leave the fields and travel to towns in search of work.