

SECTION 1

THE WAY OF LIFE IN
MEDIEVAL EUROPE

SAMPLE



In early medieval Europe (c.590–c.1500 CE), most people lived in small farming villages surrounding a castle or a **manor**. People living in these villages were **peasants** – in fact, ninety per cent of Europe’s population was made up of peasants. These poor farmers grew crops and raised livestock but did not profit from their hard work. This was because of **feudalism**.

Feudalism is a way of organising society into a **hierarchy** of importance and **entitlement**. A feudal society is based on the exchange of one service (such as farming) for another (such as protection). Though the people at the top of feudal society had greater wealth and privileges, they had responsibilities to people beneath them – thus, feudalism was based on **mutual obligations**.

In a feudal society, the ruling king or queen (the **monarch**) owned all the land.

Next in importance was the **noble** class. Nobles, often called ‘**Lord**’ by those beneath them, were wealthy and high-ranking people who, in return for the right to own land, **pledged** their loyalty to the monarch. Pledging loyalty to the king or queen (called **fidelity** or **homage**) meant promising to fight in wars on behalf of the monarch and pay them a percentage of the **taxes** they collected from their peasant farmers.

Beneath the nobles were **vassals** such as **knights** and low-level nobles and clergy. The vassals pledged their loyalty to the nobles above them, promising to fight and give a percentage of the taxes they collected from their peasants. For their loyalty, they were gifted a **fief** – usually land but sometimes income, a title or protection.

Generally, nobles had a **steward** who helped manage the farm. There was also a **reeve**, who supervised the farm work to ensure it was all completed properly, and the **bailiff**, who helped collect the taxes.

At the bottom of the social order were peasants. They did the most work and had to pay significant taxes to their lord and, in some cases, a **tithe**, equal to one-tenth of their produce, which was given to the local church. While they worked hard, had few rights and had next-to-no way of moving on to a better life, peasants at least had the protection of their lord and somewhere to live. Some peasants, known as **serfs**, were bound to a plot of land and to the landlord, and couldn’t do anything – marry, change jobs or leave the village – without the lord’s permission. Other peasants were ‘free’ and could do as they pleased – though their poverty limited what they could do.

The origins of feudalism are varied. After the collapse of the (Western) **Roman Empire**, the movement of warring tribes across Europe increased; many of these tribes were aggressive and fighting was common. Europe became a violent and unsafe place to live; vulnerable people such as peasants were forced to seek the safety and protection of nobles, and kings no longer had the Roman army to protect them, so they needed to build their armies. Elements of feudalism existed – in the Roman Empire it was common for people to offer free labour for protection from wealthy landowners and in so-called ‘barbarian’ tribes it was common for warriors to be gifted land and other rewards for loyal service. **Christianity** also influenced the rise of feudalism. Christian kings were believed to have a God-given right to rule, giving them the right to own all the land of their kingdom. As Christianity spread across Europe, it helped enforce expected behaviours and beliefs, and ensured people knew their place in the social order.

Medieval society was complex and historians disagree about whether it was a feudal society. It’s important to remember that feudalism is a term used by later historians to describe the structure of medieval society; people from that time did not use the word.

Key points:

- Feudalism is a hierarchy, with the monarch on top and peasants (ninety per cent of the population) on the bottom.
- Feudalism is based on mutual obligation – everyone has something to give and something to take.
- There was little movement between the classes.
- Feudalism is a modern term – it was not used by people at the time.

Learning Intention: To identify the hierarchies in a feudal society

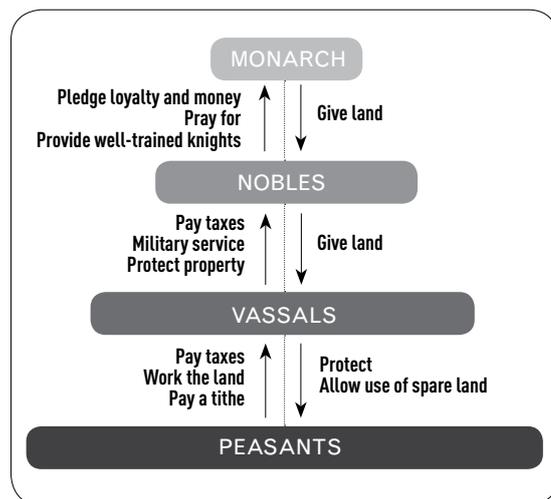
LEVEL 1

Guess which medieval character said which statement by linking the person (right) to the statement (left). The first has been done for you.

I do the work and pay the most taxes. In return, I get protection and a home.	←	Serf
I fight for my lord.	→	Peasant
I own all the land and have the most power.		Lord
I pledge fealty to the king so I can use his land.		Reeve
I am owned by a lord and must do everything he says.		King
I keep an eye on the other peasants for the lord.		Knight

LEVEL 2

Look closely at the diagram showing how medieval society was organised (right) then answer the questions in your workbook.



- Identify three materials or services exchanged in a feudal system.
- Do you think any social groups are more or less powerful than the others? Why do you think this?
- What would have been two advantages and two disadvantages of being a peasant? Explain your choices.

LEVEL 3

Write a dialogue between a king and a peasant. Both characters should explain their position in the feudal hierarchy and the obligations they have to those above or below them. Each character should then argue why they are the most important part of the feudal pyramid. One character should 'win' the argument; it's up to you to decide who should win.

Learning Intention: To understand the origins of feudalism

LEVEL 1

Determine whether the following statements are true or false, then circle the correct response.

- a) After the collapse of the Roman Empire, there was a period of peace and stability in Europe. **TRUE | FALSE**
- b) Christianity influenced how medieval society was structured because it enforced expected behaviour and beliefs. **TRUE | FALSE**
- c) The need for self-defence made feudalism necessary. **TRUE | FALSE**
- d) It was believed that a Christian king's right to rule was 'God's will' but it was not believed that this gave him the right to own all the land of his kingdom. **TRUE | FALSE**

LEVEL 2

Complete the following sentences:

- a) After the Roman Empire fell, Europe became ... _____

- b) In barbarian tribes, it was common for ... _____

- c) Christianity helped to enforce ... _____

LEVEL 3

Debate the following topic in your class or write an essay arguing for or against the statement:

'Feudalism brought order, safety and stability to European society.'

Learning Intention: To assess the positive and negative aspects of feudalism

LEVEL 1

From the list below, highlight items that a peasant receives from their feudal lord. In another colour, highlight the items that they must give to their feudal lord. In one sentence beneath the list, describe what you notice about what a peasant gives versus what they receive.

- | | |
|----------------|----------------------------|
| Protection | Use of spare land |
| Hard labour | Taxes |
| Food and goods | Loyal behaviour |
| Servitude | Fighting (in times of war) |

In this list, I notice that: _____

LEVEL 2

Classify the following statements about feudalism in medieval Europe as a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad. Explain why you've made that choice.

STATEMENT	GOOD, BAD OR NEITHER?	WHY?
A king is born with the right to rule.		
If your parents are serfs, you are born a serf too.		
A lord can sell a serf to another lord if he pleases.		
Everyone in a feudal society gives something and takes something.		

LEVEL 3

Test the idea that 'feudalism is an unfair distribution of power and privilege' by holding a debate in small groups. First, write key arguments for and against the statement. Then, split your group into two: people who will argue for and people who will argue against. Conduct your debate – each group member should have a turn to speak.

ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

What daily life was like in medieval Europe depended on who you were; it especially depended on how rich or poor you were. Generally speaking, people were categorised according to the role they played in society: those who fought, those who prayed and those who worked.

Those who fought	Knight, squire , soldier, page , etc.
Those who prayed	Monk, priest, friar, nun, bishop , etc.
Those who worked	Merchant , carpenter, servant, milller, reeve , sailor, doctor, cook, farmer, etc.

THOSE WHO WORKED

Those who 'worked' were **peasants**, mostly those who worked on farms. Their day began at dawn and finished when the sun went down, with little time off. Daily tasks included ploughing, seed sowing, harvesting and milking. All these jobs were done by hand or with basic tools such as **scythes** and **sickles**. Most of the food and goods they produced went to feed and service **nobles**. Peasants who lived in towns also had hard lives. They worked as servants in the large **manor** houses and castles or perhaps in a trade such as a **milller, mason** or carpenter.

Women worked on the farm too; not only did they complete the same back-breaking labour as the men but they also had to undertake household tasks such as cleaning, cooking and making the family's clothes by hand. Children also worked hard. From an early age, they were expected to help and were out working on the farm as soon as possible. A child was considered an adult from about ten onwards; there was no such thing as a 'teenager.'

Peasants lived in small one- or two-room huts. There was no kitchen, just a fire in the centre of the hut, and furniture was basic. An entire family often slept in the same room; in a peasant's hut you could find as many as twelve people sleeping on the floor of a tiny room, often with their livestock (cows, pigs, etc.) alongside them. Such conditions ensured that illness spread quickly. When sick, peasants were subjected to medieval treatments – such as prayer and surgery conducted by **barbers** – often more deadly than the disease they were supposed to treat.

Peasants ate what was available to them, mainly vegetables and anything they could gather from nature such as berries and nuts – they ate little meat. Bread – if they were lucky enough to have it – was dark and dense, and they brewed their own beer. Food had to be preserved because there were no refrigerators. Many peasants starved to death from lack of food – their lives depended on harvesting enough food to last them all year.

Most peasants, if they were lucky, could expect to live to around forty. Only a few survived beyond this. It was hard to live beyond childhood, with **infectious** disease a common cause of death in babies. Approximately a quarter of babies died before they could reach their first birthday, and less than half made it to ten.

THOSE WHO FOUGHT

Nobles were privileged families that passed their wealth and titles down the generations. Nobles were responsible for training and equipping **knights**, ensuring there was a ready army for their **monarch** should a war erupt.

Nobles lived in castles or large manors. Much of a lord's day was spent learning military strategy, managing his knights, land, finances and peasants, planning social events and engaging in 'sport' such as **hawking** and hunting. The **lady** of the manor engaged in crafts, social engagements and family matters.

Nobles rose early and had their food and clothing prepared by servants. They attended their private **chapel** straight after breakfast. Only the wealthy could afford to bathe regularly – this was called a '**stew**' and involved soaking in hot water scented with oils, flower petals and herbs. Their clothing was custom-made from fine materials by tailors. Nobles could afford large quantities of meat, including swan, peacock and **pheasant**. They also had white bread, soups, pies, tarts, wine and beer; they ate few vegetables.



Knights tended to be members of the lower nobility who trained to fight for their lord and the king. Sometimes they were the younger sons of wealthy nobles; land and title was usually passed to the oldest son, so younger sons had to find other ways to make their mark on the world. In battle, knights rode on horseback and used a range of weapons such as swords, **maces**, axes and **lances**. Their weapons, armour and height made them difficult for foot soldiers to defeat.

A knight's training started at around the age of seven. He would be sent to the household of a lord where he would work as a **page**. He would conduct household tasks and serve his lord; in return he was instructed in **etiquette**, how to ride a horse and combat. When he was about fourteen, the page became a **squire**. He would service a knight and conduct tasks such as carrying the knight's equipment, saddling his horse, dressing the knight in his armour and cleaning his weapons. Around eighteen, a squire became a knight in an official ceremony.

Knights sometimes took part in **jousting** tournaments where they would fight other knights. These popular sporting events were entertainment for the locals but also allowed the knight to continue his training. While these tournaments were for sport, there were many injuries and sometimes deaths.

THOSE WHO PRAYED

Christianity was the main religion in medieval Europe. There are many forms of Christianity but the **Roman Catholic Church** was dominant at the time. The **pope** was the head of the Church and had a great deal of power and influence. Beneath him were the upper levels of the **clergy**: **cardinals**, **archbishops** and **bishops**. Men in these positions had great wealth and power. Below them were the lower levels of the clergy: **monks**, **nuns**, **parish priests** and **friars**.

Almost every village had a church with a parish priest. The priest's job was to perform **mass**, conduct **baptisms** and weddings, and care for the villagers; one of his most important roles was to educate the local children, mostly in religion. He did not have to pay taxes, but he collected the **tithe** on behalf of the Church.

Medieval people sometimes choose to devote their lives to God by becoming either a monk (if they were a man) or a nun (if they were a woman). Monks lived in **monasteries** and nuns lived in **convents** and both took vows of **chastity**, obedience and poverty.

In a monastery, there was a strict roster of daily tasks such as prayer, religious services, manual labour, **transcribing manuscripts** and health care for the surrounding community. There were different types of monks such as Cistercian, Franciscan, Dominican and Benedictine. Each group had different rules. Some were **closed communities** whereas others sent their members all over the place to **convert pagans**.

Key points:

- People were categorised according to the role they played in society: those who fought, those who prayed and those who worked.
- Peasants worked hard; men, women and children all pitched in.
- A peasant's life expectancy was short; they often struggled for enough food.
- Nobles lived privileged lives centred on military, financial and social concerns.
- Knights began their training at an early age.
- Knights were usually members of the lower nobility or younger sons of the upper nobility.
- Christianity was the dominant religion; almost every village and town had a church with a priest.
- Some Christians chose to become a monk or a nun.

Learning Intention: To understand how people were 'grouped'

LEVEL 1

Level 1: Identify whether the following people 'worked,' 'prayed' or 'fought.' Label 'w,' 'p' or 'f.'

Miller	Peasant	Reeve
Nun	Farmer	Bishop
Lord	Knight	Monk
Carpenter	Squire	Bailiff



Medieval artwork showing 'those who prayed, those who fought and those who worked.'

LEVEL 2

Peasants worked very hard. However, they also attended church regularly, lived their lives according to the rules of Christianity and, in times of war, would often fight as foot soldiers in their lord's army. Develop an argument responding to the following question: 'To what extent did those who "worked" also "pray" and "fight"?' Was there any time for "play"?'

LEVEL 3

Develop an alternative set of categories by which to group medieval people (you can use the same people from the table on page 11). List your new categories and provide a definition and three examples for each.

Learning Intention: To identify the daily tasks and responsibilities of different social groups

LEVEL 1

The following is a list of daily tasks and events for a medieval lord. Three of the tasks are false and are not something a lord would do. Read all the tasks carefully and draw a line through the incorrect tasks.

Prepare breakfast

Plough the field

Have a 'stew'

Go hawking

Have a small meal of mainly vegetables

Plan a social event

Help train and equip the knights

Learn about military strategy

LEVEL 2

In the space below, draw a cartoon strip depicting the daily life of a medieval peasant.

LEVEL 3

Research how someone became a medieval knight. Present your findings as a biography or a pretend 'autobiography.' You may choose a real knight that lived, or make one up based on your research. Include your knight's name, date and place of birth, family history, why he became a knight and how he became a knight.

Learning Intention: To explore the health and medical beliefs of medieval people

LEVEL 1

Match the question (left) with the correct answer (right) from the two lists below.

What's one reason disease spread so quickly through a peasant's family?

Because they could not afford to keep the livestock.

Why did peasants have to preserve their food?

Infectious disease.

What was a common cause of infant death?

Because peasant families lived together in one cramped room, often with livestock too.

Why did peasants eat little meat?

Because there was no such thing as a refrigerator.

LEVEL 2

The following is a list of illnesses and their medieval cures. Choose one and research it further (or you can choose one of your own). Write a two-minute TV commercial persuading people to 'buy' this cure. You will need to explain what the cure is, how you use it, why it works and any other relevant information. You can perform this commercial to the class or present it as a short film script.

- a) Headache – trepanning
- b) Insomnia – eat the gall of a castrated pig
- c) Arthritis – wear the skin of a donkey
- d) Asthma – swallow two young frogs



A depiction of 'trepanning,' a treatment for headaches in the Middle Ages

LEVEL 3

Life expectancy in medieval Europe was low, especially for peasants. Using the information provided on page 11 and your research, decide on four key changes a medieval peasant would need to make to increase his or her life expectancy. Explain each of your choices.