

Characteristics of the Feudal World

Timeline

The **Middle Ages** or **medieval** time is believed to have started with the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and to have lasted about 1,000 years until about 1450. The beginning of the Middle Ages is called the Dark Ages because the great civilizations of Rome and Greece had been conquered.

The end of the Middle Ages in about 1450 led to the beginning of the Renaissance. The principal features of the Renaissance were that learning became important, the lords and the church were both becoming powerful forces for change, the art world was flourishing with innovations like the development of perspective in painting and there was great advancement in science.

The barbarians were prevalent in most of the European nations of the Middle Ages. Magyars, Mongols and Vikings invaded or raided, but the barbarian invasions were really the transition from the classical to the medieval worlds. The barbarians were not all primitive, nor were they barbarian. The term basically means foreigner. Greeks thought foreigners spoke unintelligibly like barking dogs (bar-bar-bar) — hence the term “barbarian.”

It should be noted that other parts of the world were thriving in this era. North Africa, the Middle East, China, India and other parts of the world were experiencing great changes.

The People

Life was very hard in the Middle Ages. Very few people could read or write. The people thought that fate ruled their existence; therefore, there was little hope for improving their condition.

During the years of the Roman Empire, the poor people were protected by the soldiers of the emperor. When the empire fell, there were no laws protecting them, so they turned to the lords to keep the peace and to act on their behalf. This willingness to be ruled by the lords led to the beginnings of **feudalism**. Some peasants were free, but most became **serfs** to the lord. This meant that they were required to stay with the land and pay very high rent to the lord. The only hope that most people had was their belief that Christianity would make their lives better or at least that life in heaven would be better than life on earth.

The Government

Under the feudal system, everyone but the king had a ruling lord above him to whom he owed loyalty and service in exchange for land and protection. The king awarded land grants, called fiefs, to the nobles and sometimes to the church in return for the use of their soldiers or their influence on the citizens to protect the land.

For safety and for defense, peasants in the Middle Ages formed small communities around a central lord or master. Most people lived on a manor, which consisted of the castle, church, village and surrounding farmland. These manors were isolated, with occasional visits from peddlers, pilgrims on their way to the Crusades, or soldiers from other fiefdoms.

The Family

Family life was governed by the place one held in society. The nobles had the highest status. They possessed the most wealth and land. The clergy could be rich or poor, depending on their title and how much influence they had over the people.

Education

Monks taught boys from wealthy noble families how to read and write Latin. This was important because both

the Bible and the church services used the language. Some boys from wealthy families were tutored privately. Students began learning with the seven liberal arts: Latin grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Girls were not taught to read or to write.

Children of the poor spent their time working the fields and caring for the home. They learned what they needed to know to survive in society.

Slavery

In the Middle Ages, there were people whose lives were governed by their lords. They generally were peasants who were known as serfs. Serfs generally lived in communities that were ruled by the local nobles. They could not leave the manor or even marry without the lord's permission. Serfs did all of the work on the manor farm. They worked in the fields, cared for the animals, built and cared for the buildings, and made the clothing and everything else that required manual labor. Everyone worked: men, women and children. Serfs generally had a small plot of land that was their own. They could use this land to grow crops and sell them. They could buy their own freedom and become free men, but this was a difficult task and most often not accomplished. There were also servants who worked in the manor doing the cooking, cleaning, laundering and other household jobs. Serfs also tended the horses.

Medicine

Medical knowledge was very limited; therefore, health care was generally dominated by myths, folklore and superstition. People believed that bad odors caused disease and that some illnesses were the result of "sins of the soul." Sometimes the church stated that illnesses were punishments from God and that those who were ill were so because they were sinners. The use of leeches for "blood-letting" was also a common practice. Some believed that the moon and stars, as well as their astrology sign, caused some diseases.

Entertainment

Music and art were important in the Middle Ages. Much of this was influenced by the church. People sang with and without instruments. Nobles played games such as chess, checkers and dice. Peasants played more outdoor sports such as hockey, stickball and soccer.

Towns or manors often had festivals that included jesters, who were like clowns in a circus. Tournaments matched knights in jousts and fights. Sports (with few rules) also were played.