



Life in the Middle Ages

Society during the middle ages was organized into a feudal system, which consisted of small communities congregated around a central “Lord.” The owner of all of the land in a country was ultimately the king, but because the king could neither protect nor rule all of his land himself, he divided it up into segments called “fiefs” and awarded fiefs to important nobles, typically barons or bishops, in exchange for their contributions of soldiers and/or money to the king’s armies. The Lords lived in a large house or a castle called the manor. People would gather at the manor for celebrations, or for protection, if necessary. Immediately around the manor was the village, which included the church. Farms, which supplied food to the Lord and to the villagers, were in the outlying areas.

About 90% of the people that lived under the feudal system in the middle ages were peasants, usually called “serfs.” The Lords protected the peasants, and in return the peasants worked for the Lords. Though some peasants were free and practiced trades like carpentry, baking, and blacksmithing, most were little more than slaves. They worked long, hard days, six days a week for not much more than subsistence.

Women worked hard during this period too, and not only at the household tasks that you would expect them to do, like cooking, baking bread, sewing, weaving and spinning. They also hunted for food, fought in battles, and worked as blacksmiths, merchants and apothecaries, midwives, fieldworkers, writers, musicians, dancers or painters. Other women became nuns. Some women were believed to be witches. A famous woman from the middle ages is Joan of Arc, the daughter of a French peasant, who claimed to hear voices instructing her to protect France against the English invasion. Dressed in armor, she led a victorious troop of soldiers against the English in the fifteenth century. But the Middle Ages was rife with ignorance and superstition, and even after her service to her country, Joan of Arc was burned as a witch.

1. What was the benefit of the feudal system to the king?

2. What was life like for the majority of people under the feudal system?