Serfs and Peasants Text 1: “The Peasant's Life”

About nine-tenths of the people were peasants—farmers or village laborers. A peasant village housed perhaps 10 to 60 families. Each family lived in a simple hut made of wood or wicker daubed with mud and thatched with straw or rushes. Layers of straw or reeds covered the floor; often the peasants’ home included their pigs, chickens, and other animals. The bed was a pile of dried leaves or straw, and they used skins of animals for cover. A cooking fire of peat or wood burned day and night in a clearing on the dirt floor. The smoke seeped out through a hole in the roof or the open half of a two-piece door. The only furniture was a plank table on trestles, a few stools, perhaps a chest, and probably a loom for the women to make their own cloth. Every hut had a vegetable patch.

Only a very small number of the peasants were free, independent farmers who paid a fixed rent for their land. The vast majority were serfs, who lived in a condition of dependent servitude. A serf and his descendants were legally bound to work on a specific plot of land and were subject to the will of the lord who owned that land. (Unlike slaves, however, they could not be bought and sold.) Serfs typically farmed the land in order to feed themselves and their families. They also had to work to support their lord. They gave about half their time to work in his fields, to cut timber, haul water, and spin and weave cloth for him and his family, to repair his buildings, and to wait upon his household. In war, the men had to fight at his side. Besides providing labor, serfs had to pay taxes to their lord in money or produce. They also had to give a tithe to the church—every 10th egg, sheaf of wheat, lamb, chicken, and all other animals.

Peasants suffered from famines. Plagues depleted the livestock. Frosts, floods, and droughts destroyed the crops. Bursts of warfare ravaged the countryside as the lords burned each other’s fields and harvests.

The peasants’ lot was hard, but most historians consider it little worse than that of peasants today. Because of the many holidays, or holy days, in the Middle Ages, peasants actually labored only about 260 days a year. They spent their holidays in church festivals, watching wandering troupes of jongleurs (jugglers, acrobats, storytellers, and musicians), journeying to mystery or miracle plays, or engaging in wrestling, bowling, cockfights, apple bobs, or dancing.

“Middle Ages.” Britannica Student Encyclopedia. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online Library Edition, 2013. Web. 20 Aug. 2013.

<http://library.eb.com/kids/comptons/article-9275833>.

Serfs and Peasants Text 1: “The Peasant's Life”

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| **Serfs and Peasants Text 1: “The Peasant’s Life” Glossary** |
| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| daubed | covered or smeared with a thick layer of something sticky |
| trestles | frames to support a piece of wood  |
| servitude | the state of being owned by a master |
| descendants | children, and their children, and their children |
| tithe | a one-tenth contribution to a religious organization |
| famines | periods when food is scarce |

Serfs and Peasants Text 2: “Peasants”

The peasants had few rights and were almost completely at the mercy of their lords. A peasant family worked together to farm both the lord’s fields and their own. Peasants also performed whatever other tasks the lord demanded, such as cutting wood, storing grain, or repairing roads and bridges.

Peasants had to pay many kinds of rents and taxes. They had to bring grain to the lord’s mill to be ground, bake bread in the lord’s oven, and take grapes to the lord’s wine press. Each of these services meant another payment to the lord. Money was scarce, so the peasants usually paid in wheat, oats, eggs, or poultry from their own land.

Peasants lived in crude huts and slept on bags filled with straw. They ate black bread, eggs, poultry, and such vegetables as cabbage and turnips. Rarely could they afford meat. They could not hunt or fish because game on the manor belonged to the lord.

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Serfs and Peasants Text 2: “Peasants”

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| **Serfs and Peasants Text 2: “Peasants” Glossary** |
| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| scarce | lacking; not enough |
| crude | basic |

Serfs and Peasants Text 3: “Blast to the Past”

You Think YOU Have It Tough? Here's a Light Take on What Life Was Like a Thousand Years Ago, When Donkey Milk Was the Drink Du Jour.

Let's say you're 12 years old. You wake up at daybreak to a rooster's crow, jump into your woolen sack tunic and leggings, and grab a quick breakfast of donkey milk. Stepping outside, you help your father harness the oxen to furrow the earth on your family farm with an iron wheel.

Leading the oxen, you and dad plow, and plow, and plow some more until your mom calls you both in for a dinner of vegetable gruel and hard bread.

Such was the life of an ordinary 12-year-old living in Western Europe in the year 1001. So as we enter the 21st century, take a look back and see what a difference 365,000 days make!

**TOILET HOLES AND MOSS T.P.**

In the year 1001, the average kid's house was located on a small plot of land often owned by a wealthy lord. The floor was covered with straw that was crawling with insects. In the summer, the rank odor of sheep, cow, and horse dung dominated the home. It didn't help that farm animals such as pigs lived inside the house!

The bathroom was the pits--literally. It was a hole dug outside near the back of the house, and moss, grass, and leaves were used as toilet paper. No one actually took a bath there. Streams and ponds served as bathtubs during warm weather. During winter, water for bathing was heated over the fire.

**DO YOU DROOL FOR GRUEL?**

Kids often dined on hard bread baked the week earlier and vegetable porridge, a soupy, oatmeal-like concoction. Forks weren't popular for another 600 years, so everyone chowed down with their hands.

Chicken and beef were luxuries, so kids ate pickled pork. On special occasions, mom would make a tasty sausage treat. Its main ingredient: pig's blood.

But lucky medieval kids didn't have to eat spinach, broccoli, and brussels sprouts. Those veggies wouldn't appear in Europe for several hundred years. On the menu instead were peas, beans, and cabbage.

Serfs and Peasants Text 3: “Blast to the Past”

**LET'S TOSS AROUND THE OLD PIG BLADDER**

Sports-minded peasant boys played their own version of football with an inflated pig bladder. Girls engaged in footraces.

The medieval versions of TV, CDs, and Internet entertainment were storytelling and singing. Adults told kids tales of heroic warriors slaying dragons to protect villagers.

**IF YOU CAN READ THIS, YOU'RE TOO MODERN**

Kids didn't go to school, so most people never learned to read or write. Instead, they memorized and recited long, complicated folk poems taught by their elders.

Though poems taught kids about history and culture, other bits of information may have been better left UNTAUGHT, like the idea that infection was caused by evil spirits firing invisible darts at the body. Of course, you couldn't blame the adults--with little scientific knowledge, medieval folks explained things the only way they knew how.

**HOME SHOPPING NETWORK**

Shopping malls? They're a distant dream. So mom made woolen tunics for kids to wear all year long.

Medieval villagers may not have had much by today's standards, but most people didn't think about stealing. There were no prisons, so wealthy thieves and murderers could pay a fine to get out of trouble. The alternative for the rest? Whipping, branding, head-shaving, or hanging to death.

**TOUCH A DEAD MAN'S TOOTH AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING**

Almost all families lived in villages, often near dense forests full of firewood and berries. And though wild animals and outlaws lurked in the forest, the villagers hid there from pillaging Vikings. Without a police force, villagers were on their own.

Villagers were also without doctors and dentists, but they didn't worry too much. For a toothache, they could be "cured" by touching the tooth of a dead man. (If it didn't work, the live person's tooth could always be pulled.) And using the boiled-down fat of a recently dead criminal would cure just about any ailment.

Serfs and Peasants Text 3: “Blast to the Past”

**HITCHED BY 14, HISTORY BY 40**

By her early teens, a girl from the noble class was married, often to a much older man.

A peasant girl didn't get hitched until she was older. But if she were still single by her mid-20s, she could always become a spinning wheel operator. (Guess where the word "spinster" comes from!) Then she'd have time for a nice long career--if she were lucky enough to live to 40!

Yep, life was short back in the year 1001. But who says it wasn't sweet, as well? After all, a strong sense of family and hardly any crime are things we could all use a little more of.

And of course, no school or spinach would be nice, too!

Smith, Michael N. "Blast to the Past." *National Geographic World*. Feb. 2001: 16-18. *SIRS Discoverer.* Web. 18 Feb. 2014.

**Serfs and Peasants Text 3: “Blast to the Past”**

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| **Serfs and Peasants Text 3: “Blast to the Past” Glossary** |
| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| du jour | of the day (French) |
| furrow | making trenches in the ground |
| gruel | a thin liquid of oatmeal or another grain boiled in milk or water |
| rank | very unpleasant |
| chowed down | ate |
| pillaging | rob |

Lords and Ladies Text 1: “Castle Life”

Supported by the labor and taxes of the peasants, the lord and his wife would seem to have had a comfortable life. In many ways they did, even though they lacked many of the comforts of modern society.

The lords owned large self-sufficient estates called manors, which included the land worked by the serfs. The manor houses, where the lords lived, were often protected with defensive works. About the 12th century these palisaded, fortified manorial dwellings began to give way to stone castles. Some of these, with their great outer walls and courtyard buildings, covered perhaps 15 acres and were built for defensive warfare.

At dawn the watchman atop the donjon (main tower) blew a blast on his bugle to awaken the castle. After breakfast the nobles attended mass in the castle chapel. The lord then took up his business. He might first have heard the report of an estate manager. If a discontented or ill-treated serf had fled, doubtless the lord would order retainers to bring him back—for serfs were bound to the lord unless they could evade him for a year and a day. The lord would also hear the petty offenses of peasants and fine the culprits or perhaps sentence them to a day in the pillory (a wooden frame that secured a person’s head and arms, causing physical discomfort and exposing the person to public ridicule and abuse). Serious deeds, such as poaching or murder, were legal matters for the local court or royal “circuit” court. (See below “Crime and Punishment.”)

The lady of the castle, or chatelaine, had many duties. She inspected the work of her large staff of servants. She saw that her spinners, weavers, and embroiderers furnished clothes for the castle and rich vestments for the clergy. She and her ladies also helped to train the pages, well-born boys who came to live in the castle at the age of seven. For seven years pages were schooled in religion, music, dancing, riding, hunting, and some reading, writing, and arithmetic. At the age of 14 they became squires.

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Lords and Ladies Text 1: “Castle Life”

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| **Lords and Ladies Text 1: “Castle Life” Glossary** |
| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| self-sufficient | provide for themselves without needing help from others |
| palisaded | surrounded by a fence or wall made from wooden stakes |
| vestments | clothes worn by people in the church |

Lords and Ladies Text 2: “The Lords”

A lord’s life centered around fighting. He believed that the only honorable way to live was as a professional warrior. The lords and their knights, wearing heavy armor and riding huge war horses, fought with lances or heavy swords.

The behavior of all fighting men gradually came to be governed by a system called chivalry. Chivalry required that a man earn knighthood through long and difficult training. A knight was supposed to be courageous in battle, fight according to certain rules, keep his promises, and defend the church. Chivalry also included rules for gentlemanly conduct toward women. In peacetime, a lord and his knights entertained themselves by practicing for war. They took part in jousts (combat between two armed knights) and tournaments (combat between two groups of knights).

The lord lived in a manor house or a castle. Early castles were simple forts surrounded by fences of tree trunks. Later castles were mighty fortresses of stone. In the great hall of the castle, the lord and his knights ate, drank, played games, and gambled at the firesides.

Women were not allowed to be knights and could not participate directly in feudal government. The lord’s wife, called a lady, was trained to sew, spin, and weave. When the lord was away, at war or performing his feudal responsibilities, the lady was in charge of managing and defending the estate. She was also in charge of children in the household. But she had few rights. Decisions about whom a woman married, and what happened to her if she was widowed, were mainly in the hands of the men in her family or her feudal overlord.

"Middle Ages." World Book Online InfoFinder. World Book, 2013. Web. 21 Aug. 2013.

Lords and Ladies Text 3: “Daily Life of a Noble Lord in the Middle Ages”

Middle Ages feudalism was based on the exchange of land for military service. King William the Conqueror used the concept of feudalism to reward his Norman supporters with English lands for their help in the conquest of England. Daily life of nobles and lords during the Middle Ages centered around their castles or manors or fighting for the king during times of war. The daily life of nobles can be described as follows:

* The daily life of nobles started at dawn.
* Mass would be heard, and prayers would be made.
* The first meal of the day was breakfast.
* Lords and nobles would attend to business matters in relation to their land. Reports would be heard regarding estate crops, harvests and supplies. Finances—rents, taxes, customs and dues. The lord would also be expected to exercise his judicial powers over his vassals and peasants.
* Complaints and disputes regarding tenants would be settled, permission to marry, etc.
* The daily life of the nobles would include political discussions and decisions.
* As the medieval period progressed, the culture changed, becoming more refined and elegant. Time was spent on the arts—poetry, music, etc.
* Weapons practice
* Midmorning prayers and a meal
* In the afternoon, the daily life of nobles turned to hunting, hawking or inspecting the estate.
* Evening prayer and then supper in the hall of the castle or manor house
* After supper there might be some entertainment—music, dancing, jugglers, acrobats, jesters, etc.
* The time for bed was dictated by the time the lord or noble retired.
* Bedtime prayers

So ended the daily life of a noble during the Middle Ages.

Alchin, Linda. “Daily Life of a Noble Lord in the Middle Ages.” Middle Ages. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Sept. 2013.

http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/daily-life-noble-lord-middle-ages.htm

Lords and Ladies Text 3: “Daily Life of a Noble Lord in the Middle Ages”

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| **Lords and Ladies Text 4: “Daily Life of a Noble Lord in the Middle Ages” Glossary** |
| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| judicial powers | powers of law and justice |