

The Monarch (King or Queen)

The Monarch was at the top of the feudal society. They were feudal rulers who were expected to provide protection for their vassals. Many people in the Middle Ages believed in the “Divine Right of Kings”, or that God had given the Kings the right to rule. This led to a belief that Kings were very powerful and inspired by God. Some Kings were more powerful than others. Nobles (Lords) pledged their loyalty to the King but the King could not rule without the help and loyalty of the Lords. This means that Kings could be overthrown if they did not maintain a good relationship with the Nobles. Kings had to rely on their vassals to collect taxes and provide knights and foot soldiers for the protection of their Kingdom.



Lords and Ladies

Lords and Ladies pledged their loyalty to the King but they were in charge of governing their Manor and the lands surrounding it. Lords had the responsibility of managing and defending his land and the people who worked it. The lord appointed officials to make sure Peasants and Serfs carried out their duties. Lords often acted as judges in Manor courts. Lords had the power to fine and punish those who had broken the law. In times of war Lords fought for the King and supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

Ladies had many responsibilities on the Manor in the Middle Ages. They were noblewomen who were responsible to overseeing their household. Some household had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunter, and knights-in-training called pages and squire, who assisted the knights. There were also cook, servants, artist, crafts people and many others.

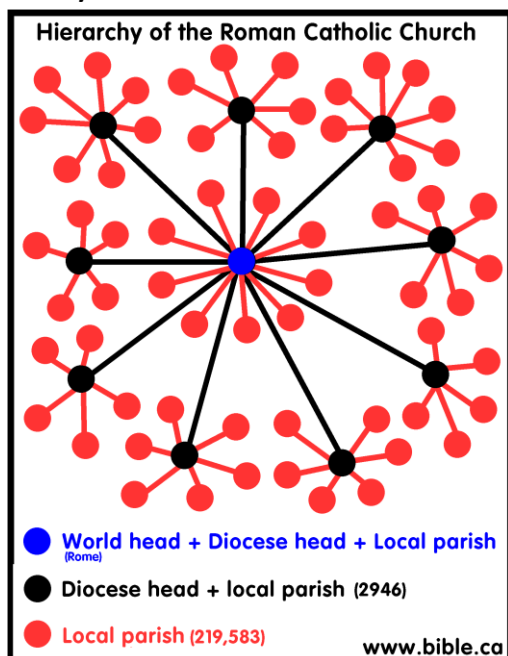
Although nobles and monarch had the most privileged life in the Middle Ages, their lives were not always easy or comfortable. Lit only by candles and warmed by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings and people only bathe once a week, if that. Clothes were not washed daily and diseases affected all people, regardless of wealth or social status.



Leaders of the Church

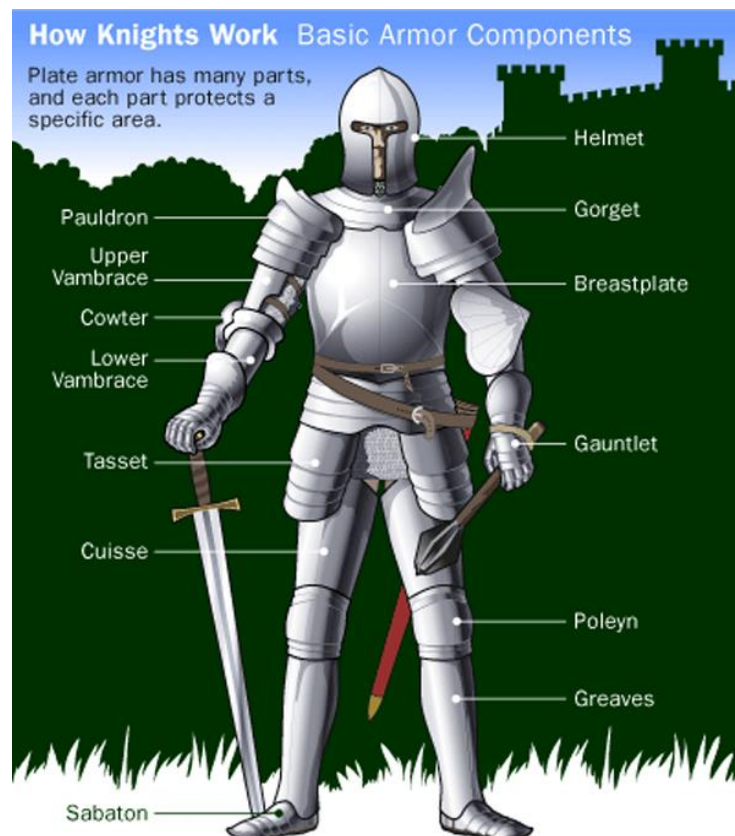
Over time, church leaders in Western Europe developed an organization that was modeled on the structure of the old Roman government. By the High Middle Ages, they had created a system in which all members of the clergy (the body of people, such as priests, who perform the sacred functions of the church) had a rank. The Pope, who was the bishop of Rome, was the supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church. He was assisted and counseled by high-ranking clergy men called cardinals. Cardinals were appointed by the Pope and ranked just below him in the church hierarchy. Archbishops came next. They oversaw large or important areas called archdioceses. Below them were bishops, who governed areas called diocese from great cathedrals. Within each diocese, local communities called parishes were served by priests. Each parish had its own church building.

Leaders of the Church were powerful members of the Feudal society. They counseled the Kings, Lords, and Knights. They provided spiritual guidance for the people of the Middle Ages and were often the only members of the communities who could read or write.



Knights

The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. When he was older he went to live and train at the Castle of a Lord or King. After many years of devotion, religious, and warrior training the knight would kneel before his lord in a ceremony and be knighted. The Lord would draw his sword, touch the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knight him. The responsibilities of a knight varied. Being a knight was more than a profession, it was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called chivalry (a medieval knight's code of ideal behavior, including bravery, loyalty, and respect for women). Knights were expected to be loyal to their church and their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. They participated in jousting tournaments and wore heavy suits of armor. Knights were obligated to fight for their Lord and king.



Merchants and Artisans/Craftsmen

Merchants were generally traveling throughout the world gathering exotic commodities (goods) for the people in the Middle Ages. People that could afford it lived in the towns and cities of the Middle Ages. In the towns and cities merchants set up shops to sell their goods. They sold items such as, cloth, glass, and silk. Much larger than the town markets were merchant fairs. These fairs would attract merchants from many countries. A town might hold a merchant fair a couple of times a year. The goods for sale at large fairs came from all over Europe and the East. Some merchants were able to become wealthy and live a comfortable life. Merchant guild came to dominate the business life of towns and cities.

Artisans/Craftsmen were skilled workers. Their crafts could range from being an artist to a blacksmith. It took many years of training and being an apprentice (a person who works for an expert in a trade or craft in return for training) to become a skilled artisan or craftsmen. Their people sold their goods in their villages or lived in the towns and cities. Many Artisans/Craftsmen made a good living and had a comfortable life.



Free Peasants and Serfs

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. They supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Peasants were legally classified as free or unfree. These categories had to do with how much service was owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord.

Serfs were unfree peasants who farmed the lord's fields and could not leave the lord's estate. In return for their labor, they received a small plot of land of their own to farm. Serfs also owed the lord numerous taxes. The lord could demand a tax that could be paid in money, goods, or labor.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock. But every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths, and other skilled workers. Most peasants lived in small houses of one or two rooms. Peasants had little furniture or other possessions. The entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals. Peasant life was difficult and many peasants died of starvation and disease.

