

Peasants

In the Middle Ages, there was a definite structure in society. You were born into a class of people and generally stayed in that class for your entire life. Working hard did not change your status. Your clothing, food, marriage, homes, etc., were determined for you. After the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, the knights, the clergy (religious people), the tradesmen and the peasants.

For peasants, life was hard. They worked long hours every day just to ensure that their family had a roof over their head and food to eat. If your parents were peasants, you probably would be a peasant as well. Most of the peasants were farmers, but some were tradesmen, such as millers or tavern owners. The farmers leased their land and also paid taxes to the lord and to the king. Most farmers were not free, but rather were serfs. They were required to stay with the land and had to work several days a week for the lord of the manor. There were some free peasants, but most did not leave their lord.

Clothing

- Because they were poor, their clothing was usually rough wool or linen. The women wove the fabric and made the clothes. Peasants generally had only one set of clothing and it almost never was washed.
- Men wore tunics and long stockings.
- Women wore long dresses and stockings made of wool.
- Some peasants wore underwear made of linen, which was washed "regularly."
- The most common colors for peasant clothing were brown, red or gray.
- Both men and women wore clogs made of thick leather.
- In cold weather, both men and women wore cloaks made of sheepskin or wool. They also wore wool hats and mittens.
- Children basically dressed in the same style as the adults.

Food

- Peasants generally lived off the land. Their diet basically consisted of bread, porridge, vegetables and some meat.
- The main crops were corn, wheat and beans.
- Near their homes, peasants had little gardens that contained lettuce, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, beets and other vegetables. They also might have fruit and nut trees.
- If the peasant was wealthy enough to have cows or goats, the family would have cheese and milk.
- Many peasants died when the weather was too wet or too dry. If their crops didn't grow, they didn't have food to eat.

Homes

- Peasants lived in towns on the lord's manor.
- Houses were constructed of stone or of branches covered with mud and straw. The roofs were thatched.
- There were generally two rooms in the home.
- The rooms had dirt floors and a few furnishings in the common room, such as stools, tables, chairs and chests.
- The second room contained the beds for the whole family.
- Often in the winter, the animals also lived in the common room.
- An open fireplace was in the common room.
- There were small windows without glass.
- Candles were used to light the inside of the house.

Childhood

- Often, children were named after a close relative or a saint.
- In a peasant household, everyone was needed to work in the fields. Often children as young as age 2 were left alone. Many accidents happened.
- Peasant children were poor and did not have many toys.
- Children did not go to school or have tutors, so few knew how to read.

Marriage

- Virtually all marriages were arranged by the parents.
- Peasants generally married people from their own village.
- Men were the head of the household and the wife was his property – to be treated in any way he wanted.
- Men were allowed to divorce their wives, but women were not allowed to divorce their husbands.
- Adultery and divorce were less common among the peasants.

Religion

- Religion was very important to the peasants.
- They believed that faith could take them to a world that was certainly easier than the one in which they lived.
- Peasants generally observed the Sabbath and celebrated church holidays.