

Nobles

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.

During the Roman Empire, the people were ruled by a government that had a civil system. One of the duties of this government was to protect the people. When the empire collapsed, there was a king, but there was no formal organization to keep the people safe. The nobles filled this role. In turn for service to the nobles, either through farming the land or doing duties the nobles prescribed, the peasant people were given protection. The nobles offered this protection through the use of knights, who most often were the sons of the nobles

Clothing

- Clothes were made of silk, velvet and damask.
- Bright colors were worn.
- Fur was used for linings or trimming.
- Linen or silk was used for undergarments. In the winter, women wore undergarments of fur to keep warm. Undergarments were covered by a gown. Women also wore high headdresses shaped like hearts, butterflies, etc.
- Men wore trousers covered by long coats called tunics.
- Both men and women wore jewelry. Stone cutting had not yet been invented, so whole gemstones were used. Rings and pins were the most popular items.
- Fancy clothes were a status symbol. Laws were passed that forbade peasants from wearing fancy clothes, which they couldn't afford anyway.

Food

- Nobles ate rich and fancy food prepared by the servants. Many spices were used to make the food tasty.
- People did not have forks, spoons or even cups. Only a knife was used to cut meat or bread. When nobles wanted a drink, the servants brought them a container that was used by everyone.
- Flat pieces of dry bread called trenchers were used to hold the food and were shared by several people. The more important you were, the fewer the number of people who shared your trencher.

Childhood

- Having babies in the Middle Ages was dangerous for both the mothers and the babies. About 20 percent of women and 5 percent of babies died during childbirth. An additional 10 percent to 12 percent died during the first month. Healthy children were highly valued during this time.
- Most families wanted sons to carry on the family name. Having a daughter meant that a dowry was paid to the groom at marriage, so having female children cost more money. Because having healthy children was so difficult, most parents were happy about any birth.
- If the child survived, he or she was baptized and cared for at home by the mother and by nurses until about age 7.
- There were plenty of toys and games. Medieval children had dolls, spinning tops, rattles, hobby horses, blocks, balls, whistles and puppets. Little girls had glass jewelry for dress-up, while little boys played with wooden soldiers, whips, toy horses and wooden swords.
- Royal children learned a few manners, a little reading, writing and dancing.
- At age 7, boys were sent to another castle to begin learning to become a knight. If they were unsuited for this, they were sent to a monastery to become a monk.
- At age 7, girls were sent to another castle to learn to become a lady. They learned how to manage a household, care for children, weave, sew, play an instrument, dance and sing.

Marriage

- Marriages were never based on love. They were arranged by the parents and often involved land issues and strategic bonds.
- Girls as young as age 12 were married to anyone who met the requirements of the girl's parents. Grooms could be from 20 years to 50 years old.
- A man was 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.

Homes

- Within the castle was a building called the keep where the nobleman and his family lived.
- The castle consisted of a great hall that served as an office, dining room and dance hall.
- The upper floors contained bedrooms for the lord and his family.
- Nobles' families had sitting rooms called solars where the family gathered to play games and listen to music.
- There were stables and a large kitchen, both of which were staffed by servants.
- Castles were generally quite smoky. A central fire area with a hole in the roof was standard. Perhaps some carpets, called tapestries, hung on the walls, but the floors were often dirt-covered with dried grass and reeds, or were made of stone. Dogs generally were allowed to go anywhere. By today's standards, we would find the cleanliness to be very bad.

Recreation

- Men spent much time with hunting and falconry. Men were hired to capture and train hawks.
- Knights gathered for "jousting" tournaments.
- Women sewed, took care of children and ran the estate.