

# MEDIEVAL LIFE AND CUSTOM

## THE MANOR

Throughout medieval Europe, large fiefs were divided into parcels of land called manors. Each manor had farming lands, woodlands, common pasture, and at least one village. Almost completely self-sufficient, the manor usually provided enough food for everyone who lived on it. The manor village had a church, a mill, a blacksmith's shop, and a tannery. Each manor also had the skilled people needed to do most jobs, from thatching a roof to fletching an arrow.

The manor village was almost always located by a river or stream, from which the villagers drew water. The stream also powered the mill to

grind grain for bread, and along the river banks were hay fields that provided winter feed for livestock. People gathered firewood in common woodlands. Other forests were set aside for the lord's hunting parties.

The lord of the manor always kept some land on the manor for his own use and personal profit. Called the **demesne**, this land consisted of the gardens and orchards around the manor house and some strips of land in the manor fields. All the rest of the manor fields belonged to freeholders or were for the use of serfs. Some lords took a personal interest in the work of their estates but most had managers, called **bailiffs**, to look after day-to-day affairs and to keep the peace.

**self-sufficient:**  
independent

**thatching:** using special grass to make roofs for buildings

**fletching:** fitting feathers on arrows

**demesne:** lands set aside for the lord of a manor

**bailiff:** the person who collected rents and supervised serfs and freeholders on a manor

### DID YOU KNOW?

"Demesne" is pronounced "di-mane," like the English word "domain." Can you see a similarity in meaning also?

During medieval times, self-sufficiency was absolutely necessary. Manors had to grow enough food on the manor lands to feed the community all year.

To encourage their lands to produce sufficient quantities of food year after year, medieval farmers fertilized their fields by allowing the farm animals to roam freely on the crop fields after the crops were harvested. Animal manure is an excellent natural fertilizer used by farmers all over the world.

By the eleventh century, manor farmers had developed a three-field system of crop rotation to increase their harvest. For each field, they grew cereal one year and a nitrogen-generating crop the second. (Adding nitrogen to soil ensures healthy, vigorous plant growth.) In the third year, the field was left **fallow**: no crops were planted, and weeds were ploughed under twice. This loosened the soil, controlled plant diseases, and

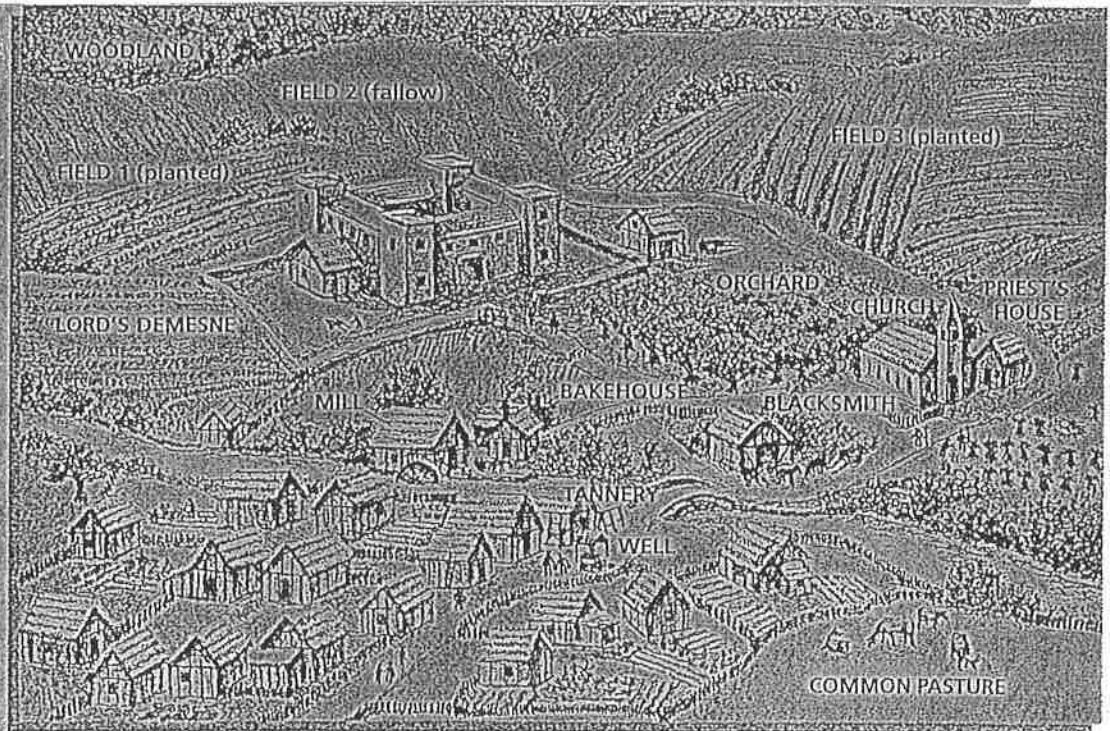
killed weeds. With three fields, the farmers could always have two fields producing crops while the third lay fallow. They thereby struck a **sustainable** balance between maintaining the productivity of their fields and planting enough crops to feed the local population.

All farming communities face the challenge of growing enough food for everyone. Various communities find different solutions. For example, the Pima, a

Central American Aboriginal people, developed many kinds of maize (corn) suited to various weather conditions and soil types. One type of corn ripened quickly. The Pima would plant this variety if spring came very late. In this way, the Pima could get the most out of every growing season, no matter the weather.

**fallow:** ploughed and left unseeded

**sustainable:** can keep going, year after year, without deteriorating



## ORDINARY PEOPLE

**wattle and daub:** woven sticks covered with clay or mud

**vermin:** lice, fleas, and bedbugs

**louse:** a small, wingless insect that lives and feeds on mammals, including human beings

The serfs and freeholders on a manor provided all the labour but had the lowest standard of living. The serfs were considered part of the property of the estate and were not free to come and go as they pleased. All serfs had to donate two or three days of work each week to ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting the lord's demesne. Although they could not own land, most serfs had the right to farm a particular strip of land within the manor fields. On the satellite image on page 44 you can see how farms were divided into strips so that each serf would have easy access to water on the river. The rights to strips were passed on within families from generation to generation. Serfs turned over a percentage of the produce they grew to the lord of the manor. They were allowed to sell any produce left over after they had fed their families and paid their lord.

Most serfs also had small vegetable and herb gardens. Many owned a few cows, some sheep, a horse or two, a few pigs, and some chickens or ducks. The average male serf consumed about 5000 calories every day, mostly in the form of bread (2 kilograms each day) and beer. They also ate herring, onions, leeks, cheese, fruit, peas, and eggs. Besides beer, they drank the milk of cows, sheep, and goats. Most of the manure from these animals would go on the serf's own strip of land or garden plot.

Freeholders, unlike serfs, actually owned their land. They paid money to the lord but did not have to work on the lord's demesne. These free farmers also had the right to leave the village or the farm whenever they pleased.

## Village Homes

The serfs and freeholders, and the few tradespeople such as the blacksmith and candle maker, all lived in the manor village. The villagers built their houses from wood or wattle and daub, and roofed them with thatch. The floor of a typical house was packed dirt. There was a place for a fire, with a hole in the roof to let out the smoke, but no chimney. The houses were quite small, just 9 or 10 metres long by 3 or 4 metres wide. The whole family, usually about five or six people, shared one dirty room, often with some of their farm animals and enough vermin to make a louse comb a common possession.

Plumbing and electricity were non-existent. Most people had only a few pieces of furniture: a stool or two, some wooden boxes, a rough bench, and a homemade table. They slept on low beds heaped with straw. In the Middle Ages, feather mattresses were very rare. Even great lords and ladies slept on straw mattresses.

## Work and Cooperation

Men and women worked hard in the Middle Ages, and even young children had to do their share. Babies went to the fields with their mothers, and children quickly learned how to do farm work. The whole family helped with planting and harvesting. Children of serfs and freeholders did not go to school.

For a woman living in a medieval village, a great deal of time was taken up just keeping her family fed and clothed. She wove cloth, made clothes, brewed beer, baked bread, cooked meals, preserved food for winter, and cared for the children. Grandparents were seldom available to help with child care because most people died young. Women also gathered firewood, and hay and cornstalks for the farm animals. The

collected nuts, berries, and herbs, which they used both to flavour food and to cure sicknesses. Many women also kept a kitchen garden next to the house.

Most of a medieval man's time was taken up with farm work: ploughing, planting, weeding, and harvesting, all without benefit of modern machinery. If he was a serf,

not only did he work on his own piece of land, he also worked on the lord's demesne.

Men and women alike worked from sunrise to sunset. On larger jobs, they usually worked with their neighbours, partly because the laws of the manor required that people work together for ploughing and harvesting.

pullet: young chicken

green cheese: unripe cheese

curds: cottage cheese

collop: slice of meat

dung: manure

drought: a long period without rain

Lammas: August 1, a feast to celebrate the first wheat harvest

## Piers the Ploughman: A Peasant's Diet



The medieval English poet William Langland movingly describes the poverty of a ploughman named Piers, who worked as hard as he could but still had difficulty feeding his family. In winter, many poor peasants like Piers went hungry.

Following the example of the *Beowulf* poet, Langland uses alliteration. This means that in each line of poetry two or three words start with the same letter or sound. Which initial letter is repeated in the first line? The third? The others?

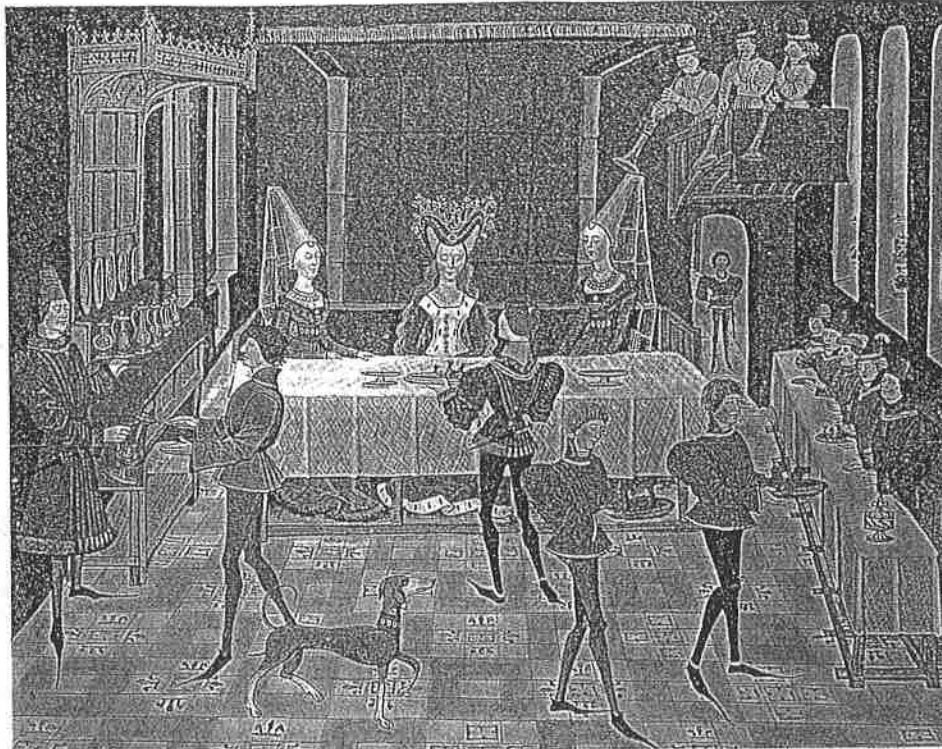
"I have no penny," quoth Piers, "pullets for to buy,  
Neither geese nor young pigs, but two green cheeses,  
A few curds and cream and an oaten cake,  
And two loaves of beans and bran baked for my children.  
And yet I say, by my soul I have no salt bacon,  
Nor any cook, by Christ, collops for to make.  
But I have parsley and leeks, and many cabbage plants,  
And also a cow and a calf, and a cart mare too  
To draw afield the dung while the drought lasts.  
And by these means we must make do until Lammas tide."



### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Make a list of all the foods and livestock that Piers has and a list of those he does not have. Analyze your list and the poem to decide if Piers lacks variety, quantity, or balance in his diet. Explain.
2. How do you think farming technology, refrigeration technology, and transportation technology—or their absence—influenced Piers' diet?





**Figure 2-4** Servants wait on nobles at a wedding feast. How did the lifestyle of the nobles differ from that of their servants?

**falcon:** a bird of prey

**troubadour:** a medieval singer who wrote and sang poems about chivalry and love

**obligation:** duty

## LORD AND LADY OF THE MANOR

### The Manor House

Compared with the typical villager, the lord and lady of the manor lived very well. They occupied the largest, best house on the manor and were attended by a whole team of servants. Most manor houses had several rooms, including a large hall where the lord would look after the affairs of the manor and entertain guests. The walls were draped with elaborate tapestries to keep out the cold, and every room had furniture: a small table, some wooden chests, a few good chairs, maybe even a book or two—all very expensive items. Servants laid fresh rushes on the stone floor several times a year.

By modern standards, these houses were not comfortable. There was no running water, toilets, or central heating, and rooms were drafty and cold. Further, people had

very little privacy. Servants slept near the bed of their lord and lady. Medieval people were used to these conditions and didn't complain. They spent much of their time outdoors anyway.

### The Privileges

The nobles lived as well as they could, with the help of their many servants. Then, as now, people loved to possess costly, rare things, which they kept as status symbols. Lords liked to own fine hunting falcons, beautiful horses, expensive furniture, and big houses. Both men and women hunted for recreation. Singers, called **troubadours**, and other entertainers occasionally

visited the manor and performed for the lord and lady.

### The Obligations

Although the lord of the manor had a great deal of power over his serfs and freeholders, he was also a tenant himself and had certain **obligations**. In return for the manor, the tenant-in-chief expected a pay-back. If the lord failed to live up to his end of the bargain, perhaps by not sending the required number of knights to fight for the tenant-in-chief, he could lose the manor.

One of the duties of all nobles was to marry and have children. If a lord died childless, then his tenant-in-chief could take back the manor. Parents usually arranged the marriages of their children, finding a partner with as much land as possible. Young men and women were rarely asked who they would like to marry. Noble marriages were much more about land and power than about romance. The good of the family was considered more important than an individual's wants or needs.

## A Woman's Rights

As boys and girls grew up, the boys' rights increased dramatically, whereas the rights of girls did not. Before marriage, a girl's father controlled her life; after marriage, her husband did. Women who expected to inherit property were often treated like prizes to be won in the feudal age. Because the tenant-in-chief expected military service in return for land, he might take back the estates of an unmarried heiress, so she would try to marry

before that happened. Orphans such as Maid Marion in the Robin Hood story became wards of the ruler, who selected a husband for them. Once married, a woman's property came completely under her husband's control.

Medieval women who had never been married had few legal rights. Widows, however, kept their rights, their property, and their freedom. Many rich widows absolutely refused to remarry, even when pressured by the king to do so.

**ward:** an orphan who is put in another person's care until he or she becomes an adult

### LINK-UP

## Women and the Right to Own Property

Land was the most precious commodity in feudal times. The more land one owned, the more powerful one became. Therefore, a noble would always leave his land to his eldest son. In this way, the family's power was not divided and lessened. In modern England, titles and ancestral homes still go to the eldest son.

Similarly, in other civilizations, such as ancient India and Greece, women could not own land. In some African countries, for example, farmland has been passed on from father to son through many generations. A daughter would never inherit land because her family would not want her to take the land out of the family group when she married and went to live with her husband's family. By tradition, a woman had the right to

farm her husband's land and to live in the couple's family home, especially as she did the farming, cooking, and home care. But if her husband were to die, her son would inherit her husband's land, not the woman or her daughter.

Not all civilizations followed the same rules. In ancient Babylonia, nearly 4000 years ago, King Hammurabi wrote a single code of law for everyone in his empire. Under his rule, women could own property, buy and

sell land, and even lend and borrow money. In ancient Egypt, women could own, buy, and sell property, run a business, and testify in court.



Figure 2-5 Many women the world over farm land owned by their husbands.

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. In societies all over the world, in the past as well as today, men keep control of the land. What are the benefits of this system? What are the drawbacks? To whom?
2. Does modern Canada differentiate between the rights of men and women? Brainstorm various ways that women have been and are still treated unfairly. Do some research to find out when one unfair practice came to an end in Canada. Why does unequal treatment still occur?