

Enrich: Feudalism (6-5.1)

Directions: Read the article and complete the activity below.

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LIFE OF A PEASANT



The Peasant's Home

The homes were very poor by our standards. Many were just one-room huts, maybe 20 feet by 14 feet. The walls were made of **wattle** (woven branches) covered with **daub** (mixture of clay, dung and straw that used animal hair to bind it together). There were holes for windows and a hole for the door. The floor was just the earth on which the house was built. A fire stood on a lump of stone in the center of the room, and often there was no chimney, so smoke just curled round the room. These poor cottages disappeared centuries ago, each probably only lasted for about 20 years. Water came from a nearby stream and a pit in the garden was used for a toilet.

Possessions

A peasant was said to own 'nothing but his own stomach' and was his master's possession. There was hardly anything inside the home: a few farming tools, cooking pots and bowls and perhaps a table and some stools. Better-off peasants might have a spare pair of clothes, but many did not. They might sleep on bags of straw in the same clothes they wore by day. At night, they shared their floor with the animals. Sleep, smoke and animals' breath all went together - along with the smell of rotting food and manure. The animals were the family's most valuable possession, their fleas were not, but the hut was ideal for fleas to breed. That goes for lice, too. People could clean their hair with oatmeal, if they could spare it, but often didn't bother. As people sat gossiping in the evening, they picked the lice from each other's hair. (They cleaned their teeth, if at all, with hazel twigs.)

Contents

Peasants were completely under the power of the lord of the manor. In return for their land they had to give him part of their crops and undertake labor service (work without pay on the lord's land). They also had to do other jobs such as weeding, hay-making, ditching and repairing the mills. They had to attend the manorial court. If they did not, they were fined. They also had to serve on the jury if chosen. They were not allowed to leave the manor without the lord's permission.

Taxes

All the villagers had to use the lord's mills for grinding their corn into flour. They paid for this either with money or by giving the lord some of their corn. If they were caught using a hand-mill of their own, they were punished in the **manorial court** (*the manor's court*). He also had to pay the lord before brewing ale, baking bread, gathering wood or selling animals. He could not fish or hunt except on the common land. A peasant also had to pay a **merchet** (**tax so his daughter could marry**), and supply free food when the lord's steward arrived to

collect the crops. When a peasant died, the lord took a **heriot** (*tax, which included his animals, clothes, pots and possessions*) and the Church took a **mortuary** (*death tax*).

Women's Lives

Medieval manuscripts tell us little about women's lives. Yet women played an important role in village life. Married women led lives which were probably harder than the men's. They were expected to help their husbands in the farming, they cleaned the house, cooked and made clothes and brought up the children. A woman might walk up to 19 miles just doing a day's spinning. Many women brewed their own ale (beer), but they could only sell it once it had been tested by the ale tasters and at a price set by the lord.

ACTIVITY

Draw the various ways in which a peasant's life was controlled.