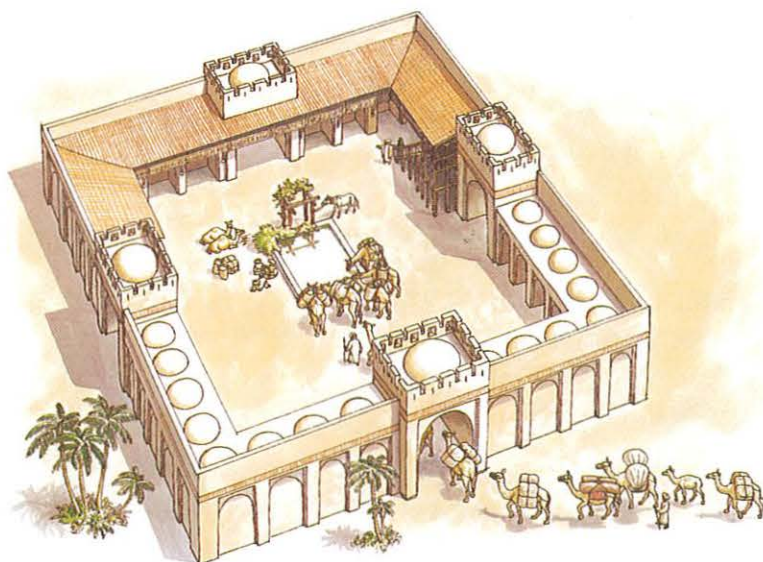


4+

# The Middle Ages

Fiona Macdonald



1993

 Facts On File, New York

# GOVERNMENT, LAW AND LEARNING

The Church acted as an important center of learning during the Middle Ages. Priests, monks and nuns studied and translated religious and philosophical texts; wrote books on religious topics; ran boarding schools for the children of wealthy parents; and acted as advisors to powerful men and women.

**RELIGION AND EDUCATION** Outside the enclosed world of monasteries and nunneries, students and teachers in all the great universities of Europe were enrolled in 'holy orders.' This meant that they had taken the first steps towards becoming a priest.

In fact, few of them took their religious careers any further. They went on, instead, to work as clerks, *scribes* and administrators for governments

throughout Europe. Others became full-time scholars, seeking teaching jobs in schools and colleges, or worked as secretaries and private tutors in noble households.

**THE CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT** Kings and governments in Europe were becoming increasingly professional during the Middle Ages. In the past, rulers had relied on their loyal military commanders and on their household servants to carry out their orders. Now, educated men helped kings, nobles and local lords draft laws, keep accounts, collect taxes, compose important letters, conduct delicate negotiations, and discuss treaties and alliances between friendly nations. Kings also began to summon meetings of noblemen and representatives from the towns and the countryside to help them share the responsibility for decision-making, and to take the blame for unpopular measures such as higher taxes or harsh new laws.

**THE ROLE OF KINGS** Even with all these trained helpers, the personality and intelligence of each king was still tremendously important. He had to be able to understand national and international politics; to cope with the details of day-to-day administration; to know how to give orders that people would obey; and how to choose wise and prudent advisors. Most important of all, he had to win the trust, loyalty and affection of all his subjects. Often, the only way this could be done was by gifts and rewards.

Although the Church taught that kings were appointed by God, and that it was everyone's duty to obey them, a weak or foolish king found it difficult to gain support at home or allies abroad, and lived in constant fear of being overthrown.

King Edward I of England (1239–1307) at a meeting of Parliament. The king is surrounded by his nobles (in

scarlet robes) and by the bishops (wearing pointed hats, called miters).



### The First Universities in Europe

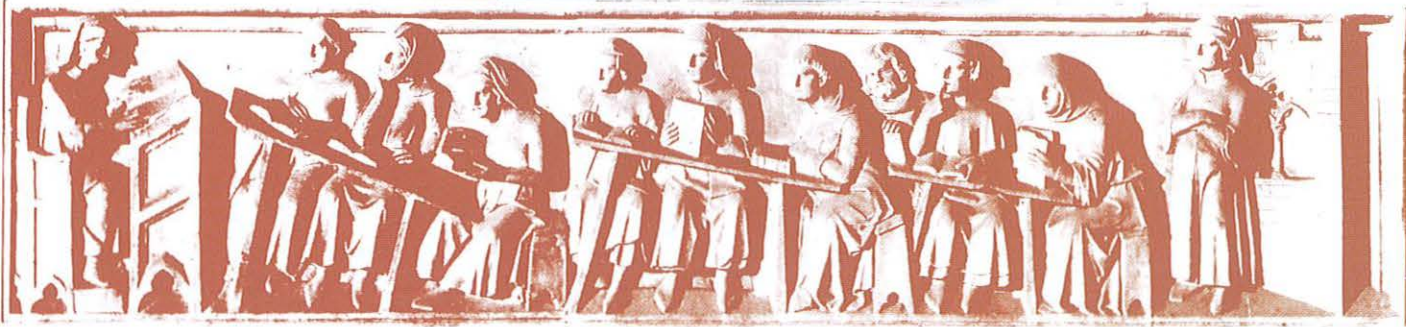


### Medieval Education

Universities were founded throughout Europe in the Middle Ages. The earliest universities were in southern Europe, but by the end of the medieval period they had been established in northern European countries as well. Paris (France) and Bologna (Italy) were probably the most famous and respected universities; students flocked to study there from many lands.

subjects: the *trivium* (which included linguistics, grammar and philosophy); and the *quadrivium*, which included mathematics, music and astronomy. Law and medicine were specialized extras. Most young people in medieval Europe did not go to school, let alone college. Parents taught poor children the practical skills they would need to earn a living; most medieval country people could not read or write, but these skills were sometimes learned by shopkeepers and other tradesmen living in towns.

By present-day standards, medieval universities taught a narrow range of topics: theology, law, medicine, music and philosophy. Students prepared for their degrees by studying two groups of



Fourteenth-century carving from Italy, showing university students and their professor in a classroom. Italian universities were famous for their scholarship in medicine and law.

The most powerful person in any medieval society was the king or prince (or, very rarely a queen) who ruled the country. Kings and princes relied on nobles to help them. They acted as war-leaders, governors of distant regions, and as senior government advisors. They were rewarded by kings with grants of land titles and other honors. Knights were less wealthy and less

powerful than the nobles, but played an important role, originally in war and later in local administration. There was a small, but growing, professional group within medieval society – chiefly composed of lawyers and government administrators. In towns, merchants and shopkeepers prospered. But most men and

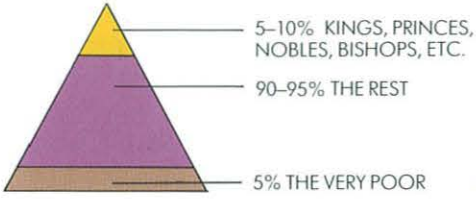
### The Structure of Medieval Society

women living in medieval Europe were poor, by modern standards. They occupied their land in return for money rent paid to the local

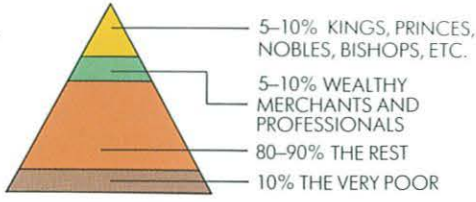
landowner (a knight or noble), or in return for working on the landowner's farm. They also paid taxes – to the Church, to the king, and sometimes

to the local lord. Some of these peasants were free; others were serfs. They 'belonged' to their lord, and could do little without his

permission. People without home, land or families to support them were at the bottom of medieval society. Beggars were a common sight, especially in towns.



Structure of society in 1100



Structure of society in 1450

