

THE MIDDLE AGES

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THE LIFE OF A NOBLE



The seal of King Edward IV of England. Knights and nobles often used seals like this. They carried symbols from the coat of arms, or other signs to identify the person using the seal, to leave a wax impression on important documents.

Noblewomen like these were brought up to command large households. They had to oversee the cooks and servants, and help nurse those who were ill. In time of war they might have to help defend the castle.



In the Middle Ages the nobility had great powers. They were the most important group in society. Many nobles were wealthy, and led lives of considerable luxury. But the Middle Ages was also a time of lawlessness and violence when many wars were fought.

POWER AND WEALTH

It was very difficult for kings and queens to rule without the support of their nobles. There were two important reasons for this. Firstly, they needed a force of fighting men to call on if their power was threatened. Secondly, because there were few roads and travel was difficult, it was hard for a ruler to make his or her power felt in distant parts of the kingdom.

The king arranged his journeys very carefully, and gave everyone notice of the days on which he would travel, with the number of days and names of the villages in which he would stay.

Walter Map



It was unusual for even the wealthiest nobles to be able to read or write during the Middle Ages, so they were sometimes entertained by poets and other writers reading aloud from their work.

FIEFS AND SERVICE

Rulers gave large estates all over the kingdom to their vassals (supporters). People at the time described these estates as “fiefs.” When a man was given a fief, he received much power over the people who lived on it. But he also had to make special promises in return. He had to support the ruler and come to fight, bringing his own supporters, when the ruler needed him. The ruler told his vassals how many soldiers they must provide, and insisted that they were only to bring knights—the best soldiers of the time.

A LIFE OF TRAVEL

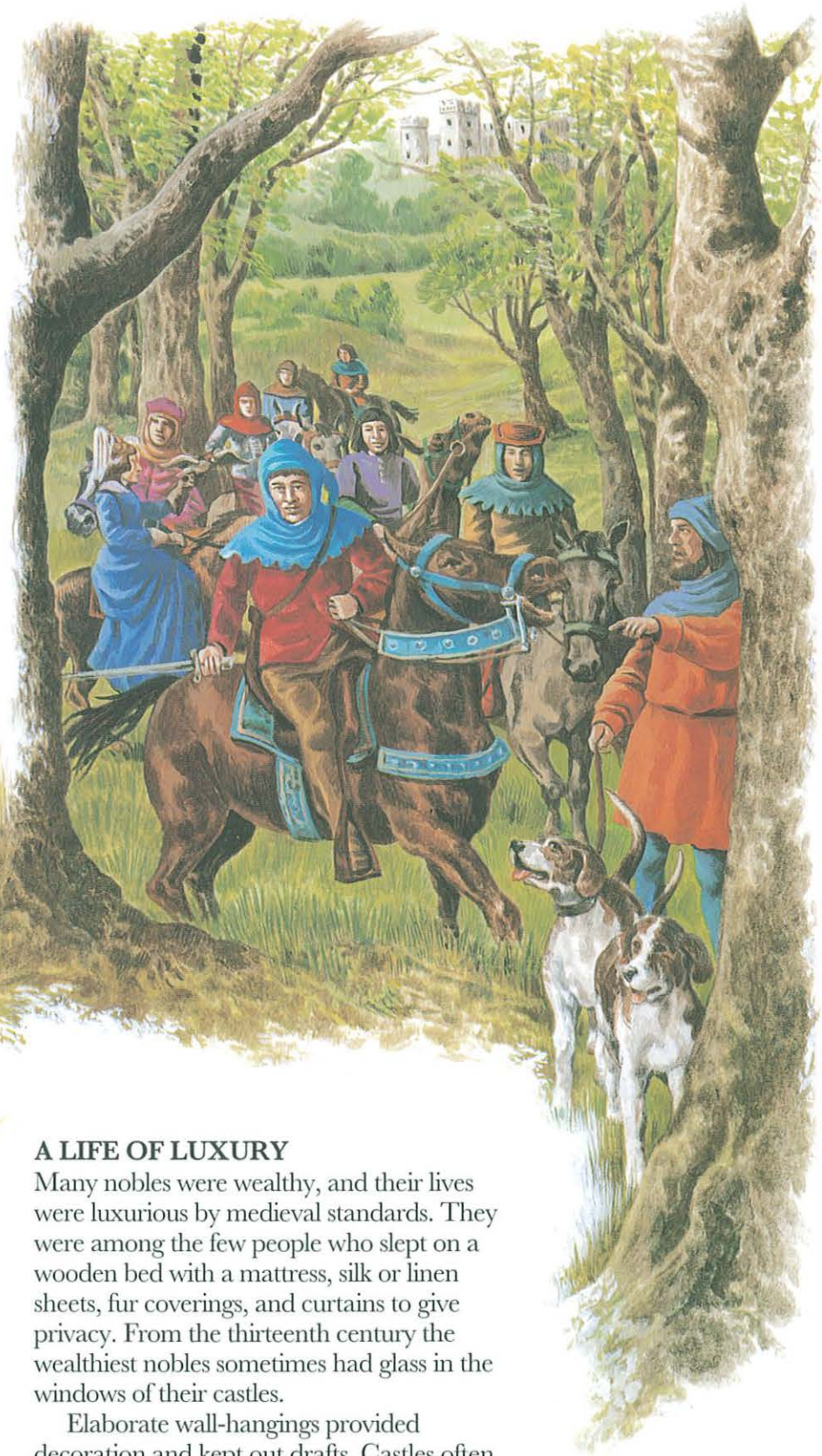
Because many lords had fiefs scattered over a large area, much of their time was spent traveling from one fief to another. These journeys were undertaken to make sure that the people who lived on their land were loyal to them. The journeys also had another, very practical, purpose—the nobles stayed at each part of their estates for long enough to consume the stores of food each estate had produced! Even the king led a life of travel like this. One writer who lived in the twelfth century, named Walter Map, described how King Henry I of England traveled around his kingdom, and the organization that this involved. The arrangements were made well in advance, and the whole household, with horses and hounds, official documents, tapestries, carpets, and tableware, was packed up and moved on.

A LIFE OF WARFARE

Noblemen fought as knights. Much of their time was spent in activities like hunting, or fighting in tournaments that were good practice for war. War brought wealth to many noblemen. In the Hundred Years War, fought between England and France, ransoms and lands taken from the French brought wealth to many English noblemen.

The nobles also acted as advisers to kings and queens. But disagreements broke out, sometimes leading to armed rebellion. This happened in many places. In England in the fourteenth century the Earl of Lancaster challenged King Edward II. His supporters fought the king and were defeated.

The noble and his family lived in a castle. Many medieval castles survive as ruins, including Krak des Chevaliers in Syria, Chateau Gaillard in France, and Chepstow in Wales. Castles were military strongholds designed to give maximum security. Only in the fourteenth century did the nobility begin to build homes that were designed for a more peaceful way of life.



A LIFE OF LUXURY

Many nobles were wealthy, and their lives were luxurious by medieval standards. They were among the few people who slept on a wooden bed with a mattress, silk or linen sheets, fur coverings, and curtains to give privacy. From the thirteenth century the wealthiest nobles sometimes had glass in the windows of their castles.

Elaborate wall-hangings provided decoration and kept out drafts. Castles often had paintings on the walls. King Henry III of England, who lived in the thirteenth century, was especially fond of paintings like these. The use of tapestry coverings for the floor spread from places like Spain to other countries in the fourteenth century.

Hunting was one of the most popular pastimes for nobles. In this illustration a deer is chased by riders with great hounds.

