

# Archers, Alchemists, and 98 Other Medieval Jobs You Might Have Loved or Loathed



Illustration by R. Durgee Junior High School  
Baldwinsville, New York

by Priscilla Galloway  
art by Martha Newbigging

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## Never an idle moment

In the Middle Ages, there were no factories and very few machines. From nails and needles to castles and cathedrals, everything was made by hand, one at a time. You might go hungry; you might live in a hut; you might be dressed in rags—but if you were able and willing, you would have work.

### What kind of work?

That depended on which group you belonged to (nobles, clergy, specialists, or peasants), and whether you were a boy or a girl, although gender did not always make a difference. Children usually did the same work as their fathers and mothers.

People in the Middle Ages did not have childhoods as people do today; they grew up quickly. A young person's duty was to obey and help his or her parents. Even the hours in your day belonged to someone else, not to you. You began to take your place in the world of work almost as soon as you could toddle. A peasant child of three might keep his baby sister from falling into the cooking fire; a five- or six-year-old could work in the fields. Noble children were often sent to be breast-fed by a peasant mother with a baby of her own, a good job for the mother but a huge responsibility at a time when many babies died. If the foster children lived through the first year or two, they went home to begin their training as nobles.

In the Middle Ages, a boy couldn't expect to grow up with his family. If his family was noble, his parents would usually send him to another noble family when he was about seven years old, to serve as a page. Boys from non-noble families were often sent away as well. If a boy was going to learn a craft or trade, he would become an apprentice. Somebody, usually his father, made a written agreement with the boy's master and paid a fee for the training. The boy could not leave his master's service for the term of the contract, which could last



as long as seven or even ten years. He lived in his master's household, and was supposed to be treated like a child of the family, but frequently became more like a servant or even a slave.

When did children in the Middle Ages learn their reading, writing, and arithmetic? Didn't they go to school? No, they didn't, and they really didn't need to. Most boys and girls in the Middle Ages never learned to read, write, or calculate beyond what they picked up in their training or on the job. Today, in the Information Age, literacy and computer skills are vital, just as skill with a knight's lance, a peasant's hoe, or a weaver's loom were vital then.



Medieval girls sometimes lived apart from their families too. A girl might become a servant in a noble or rich household, although she might stay at home until she married, perhaps in her mid- or late teens. A girl in a noble family would be closely supervised. She might be taught at home, or might go as a lady-in-waiting to another noble family. A noble girl might marry even earlier than a girl from a poor family, since her marriage was usually a kind of merger of lands, titles, and wealth, and the sooner the merger took place, the better. Peasants might marry because they cared for each other; nobles might never meet before their wedding day.