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LORDS, LADIES, PEASANTS, AND KNIGHTS: CLASS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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The Manor House

In a common scenario, the new vassal received a fief consisting of an estate with a large manor house or small castle. In some cases, especially in medieval England and France, a vassal's castle was comparable in size and quality to that of his overlord. Kings usually claimed (or built) the largest and most splendid castles for themselves, but it was not unusual for some barons, dukes, or other noble vassals to live as well as their royal masters.

Whether it belonged to the king or one of his chief retainers, a medieval European castle was the central focus of life

The great hall of Hedingham Castle, in Essex, England, features an arch spanning twenty-eight feet. In this room, meetings, ceremonies, and banquets took place.

and activity on a typical feudal manor. Inside the castle or manor house, the principal room was the great hall, though it was more often called simply "the hall." (Sometimes people referred to the entire castle or house as a hall.) In the earliest castles, the great hall consisted of a very large chamber with a high ceiling. It contained numerous tables, chairs, and benches, which the servants rearranged as need dictated, as well as tapestries on the walls (partly for decoration, but also to help keep the room warm). The lord of the castle used the hall to transact business, receive guests, and host banquets. In many cases, the hall also doubled as a sort of all-purpose lounging area, where the lord's uncles, cousins, and some of his most loyal retainers slept, ate, and socialized. Later, more sophisticated castles had a more complex great hall that often featured one or more extra stories and chambers located above the main room.

The lord himself and his wife and children slept in separate chambers located in a different part of the residence. There was also a kitchen with food pantries attached, as well as a chapel in which to

Servants scurry to and fro, waiting on the lady of a medieval French manor and her guests. The largest manors had staffs featuring dozens of servants.

pray and meditate, small chambers to house the family's servants, storerooms, and stables and other outbuildings adjoining the main house. In the early twelfth century, a French writer named Lambert of Ardres penned this description of a fairly typical manor house of the time:

The first story was on the ground level, where there were cellars and granaries and great boxes, barrels, casks, and other household utensils. In the story above were the dwelling and common rooms of the residents, including the larders [food storage], pantry [bread room] and buttery

[service area for wine and beer] and the great chamber in which the lord and lady slept. Adjoining this was . . . the dormitory of the ladies in waiting and the children. . . . In the upper story of the house were attic rooms in which on the one side the sons of the lord of the house, when they so desired, and on the other side the daughters, because they were obliged, were accustomed to sleep. In this story also the watchmen and the servants appointed to keep the house slept at various times. High up on the east side of the house, in a convenient place, was the chapel. . . . There were stairs and passages from story to story . . . from room to room, and from the house into the gallery, where they used to entertain themselves with conversation, and again from the gallery into the chapel.[7]

A Manor's Outbuildings

A feudal manor house or castle such as the one Lambert describes was surrounded by smaller structures used by the servants, farmers, and laborers who maintained the estate and did all the menial work. A surviving thirteenth-century document describes some of the buildings immediately joining the main house on an estate in southern England:

Outside of [the] gate are an old house for the servants, a good stable . . . and to the east of the principal building, beyond the smaller stable

An English Country Manor

Throughout most of Europe's medieval era, the lives of the rich and poor contrasted sharply. The great difference is well illustrated in a comparison of the homes of the peasants and the nobles. Most peasants lived in tiny shacks with thatched roofs and dirt floors, while their lords dwelled in magnificent stone manor houses. The following description of an English nobleman's country manor in the year 1397 comes from a surviving local public record of the period:

Extent of the manor of Keevil in the county of Wiltshire, which was [the property] of the Earl of Arundel: Within that manor are a certain hall, a chief chamber, and a little chamber next [to it] with a certain latrine [toilet room] at the back of the same hall, roofed with tiles . . . a certain chapel and a cellar below the chapel . . . a certain chamber called "le warderobe" likewise at the end of the hall, and the entrance thereof is a certain great chamber with a latrine, and below that chamber is a certain pantry and buttery. There is a great kitchen newly repaired.

Miscellaneous Inquisition, quoted in Clair C. Olson and Martin M. Chew, eds. *Chaucer's World.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1948, p. 331.

> ... two barns, one for wheat and one for oats. These buildings are enclosed with a moat, a wall, and a hedge. Also beyond the middle gate is a good barn, and a stable of cows and another for oxen. . . . Also beyond the outer gate is a pigsty.[8]

Beyond these "outbuildings" were fields for crops, orchards, vineyards, pastures for cattle and sheep, and small farmers' huts that were sometimes grouped in tiny villages.

Manorial Workers

Most of the people who used and maintained these outbuildings, fields, pastures, and huts were rural peasants, who made up the bulk of the population of medieval Europe. Their relationship with the lord of the manor (whether a king or a vassal), their obligations to him, and the work they did for him were all parts of what over time came to be known as the manorial system (after the term *manor*). The manorial system propped up and basically made possible the feudal system because the wealthy kings and their well-to-do vassal lords could not have maintained their estates and fiefs without large numbers of cheap, loyal laborers. Without the manorial peasants to grow and harvest the crops, build and maintain the castles, and fight as foot soldiers in the wars waged by the nobles, the feudal system would have collapsed.

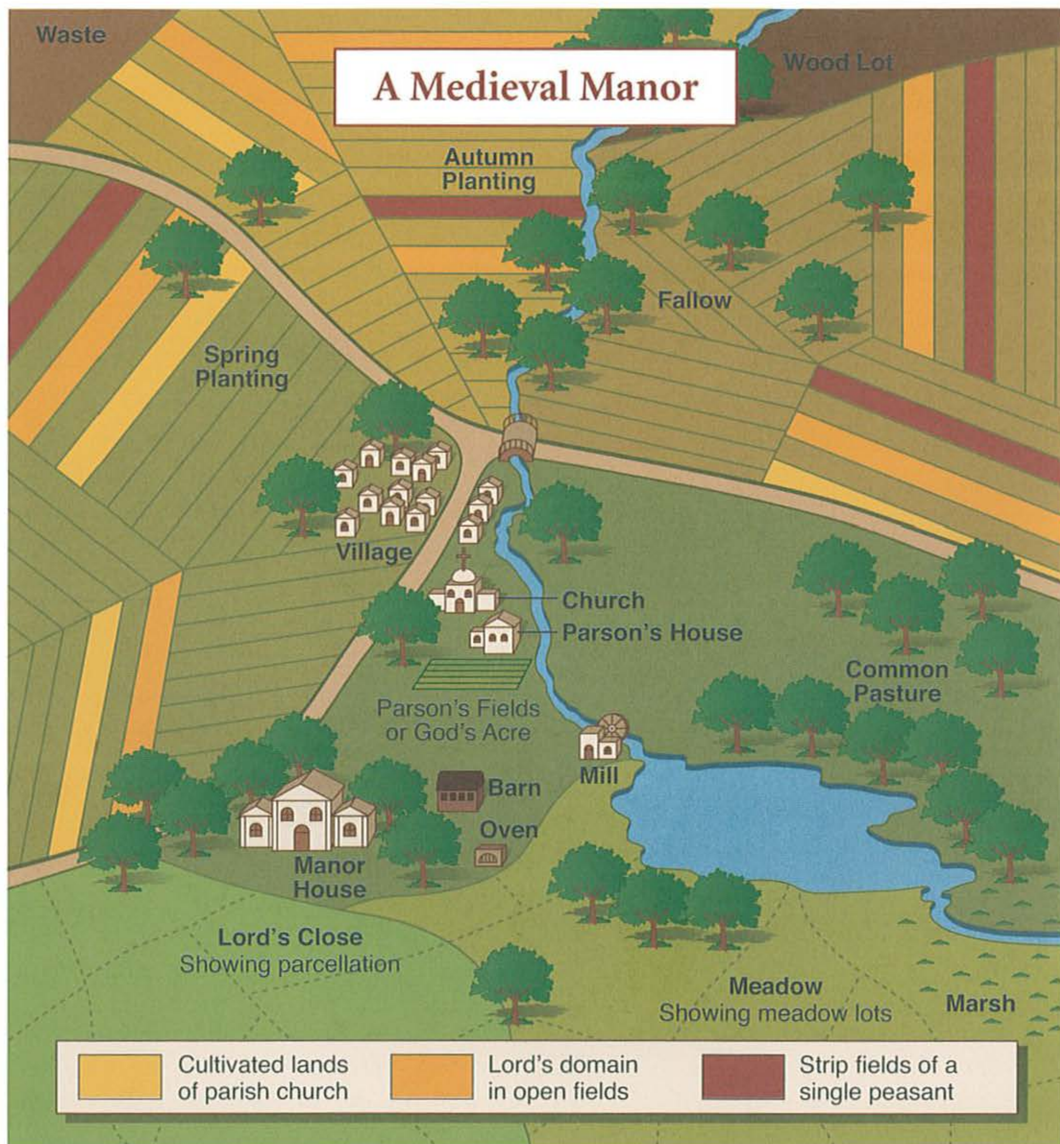
The workers in the manorial system owed allegiance and set obligations to their local lord, just as he owed allegiance and mandatory services to the king or other overlord. In exchange for the local lord's protection, a group of peasants agreed to perform agricultural work or some other form of labor for him for life. Most of the agricultural laborers were serfs, poor workers who were tied to the landed estate on which they toiled. In theory, they were free to leave and try to find work somewhere else. But the reality was that if they did leave, they lost a way to feed themselves and gave up their lord's military and legal protection, as well as the right to draw water from his springs and wells and to gather wood from his forests. Moreover, in an age of poor communication and transportation, there were no guarantees that better work or living conditions were available somewhere else. So most laborers stayed; they and their children, and their children's children, remained dependent manorial workers generation after generation.

These serfs, also called villeins, led difficult and usually monotonous lives. In the fall they planted wheat and rye, in the spring they sowed other grains and various vegetables, and generally in the summer they harvested the crops. The serfs also raised, fed, and when necessary slaughtered the livestock owned by the lord of the manor. They kept some of the food they produced for themselves, but a hefty share automatically went to the lord and his knights or other subvassals.

Some idea of the duties and obligations of such manorial peasants is contained in a passage from a census taken

of manors and their workers in an English district in 1279. The document even preserves the man's name:

> Hugh Miller holds 1 virgate [about 30 acres, or 12 ha] of land in villenage [i.e., serfdom]. . . . Hugh works through the whole year except 1 week at Christmas, 1 week at Easter [and a few other days]. . . . He gives 1 bushel of wheat . . . and 18 sheaves of oats . . . [to his lord]. Likewise he gives 3 hens and 1 cock yearly and 5 eggs at Easter. If he sells a



> brood mare in his courtyard for 10 [shillings] or more, he shall give [a share of the money to his lord].[9]

When workers like Hugh Miller were not busy tending to crops and livestock, they performed numerous lesser but equally demanding chores relating to the maintenance of the manor and manor house.