

Emblem of the
Virgin Mary

Eyewitness MEDIEVAL LIFE



Medieval badge
of Christ

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Trestle table

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A peasant's life



Statue of a French peasant, c. 1500

ACCORDING TO THE LAW, medieval peasants did not belong to themselves. Everything, including their land, their animals, their homes, their clothes, and even their food, belonged to the lord of the manor (p. 14). **Known as serfs or villeins, peasants were bound to work for their lord, who allowed them to farm their own piece of land in return.** Their lives were ones of almost constant toil. Most struggled to produce enough food to feed their families as well as to fulfill their duties to the lord. Forbidden from leaving the manor without permission, **the only way for a peasant to gain freedom was by saving enough money to buy a plot of land, or by marrying a free person.**



Simple spoons can be cut from horn

Shepherd's horn pipe

DAILY GRIND

Peasants worked hard every day except Sundays and holy days, in blazing sun, rain, or snow. Combined with a poor diet, it wasn't surprising that many European peasants in 1300 lived no longer than 25 years.



Tired peasant wipes the sweat from his brow

DO IT YOURSELF

Peasants made some of their own tools and utensils, although skilled craftsmen produced their pottery, leatherwork, and iron. Besides wood and leather, the most important material was horn from cattle or sheep. Light and strong, it did not absorb flavors like wood and did not require great energy to shape (p. 16). Horn spoons were easy to clean, according to one writer: "With a little licking they will always be kept as clean as a die."



THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

After the Black Death (pp. 60–61), there was a shortage of labor in 14th-century Europe. The peasants had to work harder than ever, and in England they also had to pay an extra tax. In 1381, the English peasants rose in rebellion. Led by Wat Tyler, they marched on London, where they murdered the archbishop. When they met the king, Richard II (1367–1400), he agreed to end the new tax, but Wat Tyler was killed in a quarrel. The peasant mob swiftly disbanded and went home. The French Jacquerie revolt of 1358 ended much more bloodily when armored knights slaughtered several thousand rebels.



Straw hat to protect the head on hot days

Cheap pewter badge for good luck

Felt hat decorated with a cockerel feather and a "fleur-de-lis" badge

Brown woolen jacket lined with linen

Blue woolen doublet fastened with "points"

Linen shirt

Linen underpants, or braes

Leather flask, or costrel, for carrying ale into the fields

Peasants working with their hose rolled up

Woolen "split" hose can be rolled down for working



PEASANT COTTAGE

Most peasants lived in simple homes like this reconstructed 13th-century cottage. The walls are made from local flint, but they were more often made from wattle and daub – woven strips of wood covered with a mixture of dung, straw, and clay. Inside, the floor was bare, trampled earth. Most cottages had only one or two rooms, which contained basic furniture such as a trestle table and bench, a chest for clothes, and straw mattresses to sleep on. There was a stone hearth in the center of the main room, but no chimney, so it must have been very dark and smoky.

PLAIN CLOTHES

These are the kind of clothes that would have been worn by a peasant in the 1440s. Clothes, like tools, were mostly homemade from local materials. Peasant women spent much of their time spinning wool into coarse thread, which was then woven into cloth and made into garments. Sheepskin cloaks were worn in winter to keep out the cold and rain, and wooden pattens (p. 23) could be put on over leather boots in muddy conditions. Although outer clothes were never washed, linen underwear was laundered regularly. People's clothes generally smelled of wood smoke, which had a deodorizing effect!

Leather working boots

Tied to the soil

Wooden pitchfork for lifting hay and wheat sheaves

IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE, more than 90 percent of the population lived and worked on the land. Farming was a full-time job, since methods were ancient and not very efficient. The crop-growing areas around a village were usually divided into three big fields. Peasants were allotted some land in each so that good and bad soil was shared out equally. They hoed and harvested their own strips, or plots, but worked together on big jobs such as plowing and hay-making. A failed harvest could mean starvation for the whole village.

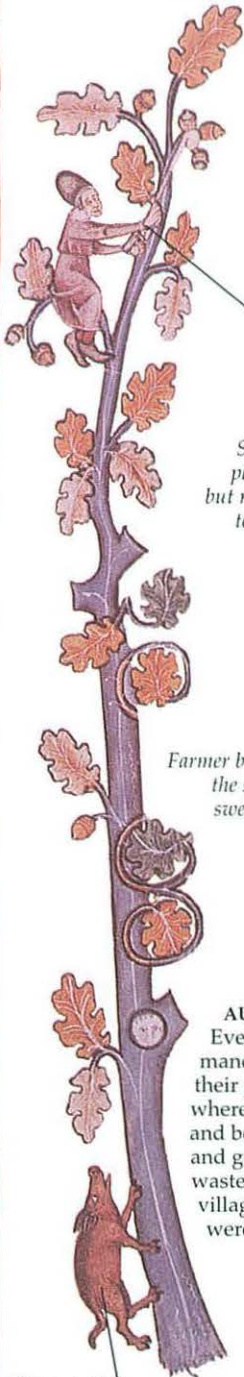


HARVEST-TIME

In late summer, women and children worked alongside the men to bring in the harvest. They cut the wheat with sickles, grasping each clump firmly so that the grains wouldn't shake loose. The wheat was then tied in sheaves, or bundles, set in stooks, or shocks, in the field to ripen, loaded onto a cart, and taken to the barn. Once the harvest was in, the wheat was threshed – beaten with a flail, or hinged stick, to loosen the grains from the ears.

SOWING THE SEED

In the "three-field system," two fields were sown with crops in one year while the third was left fallow, or empty, so it could recover its strength. One field was sown with wheat in winter, and the next spring, the second was sown with rye, barley, or oats. Seeds were broadcast, or scattered, by hand.



Man knocking acorns out of an oak tree for his pigs

Seeds fell in the plowed furrows, but many were lost to hungry birds

Farmer broadcasts the seeds in a sweeping arc

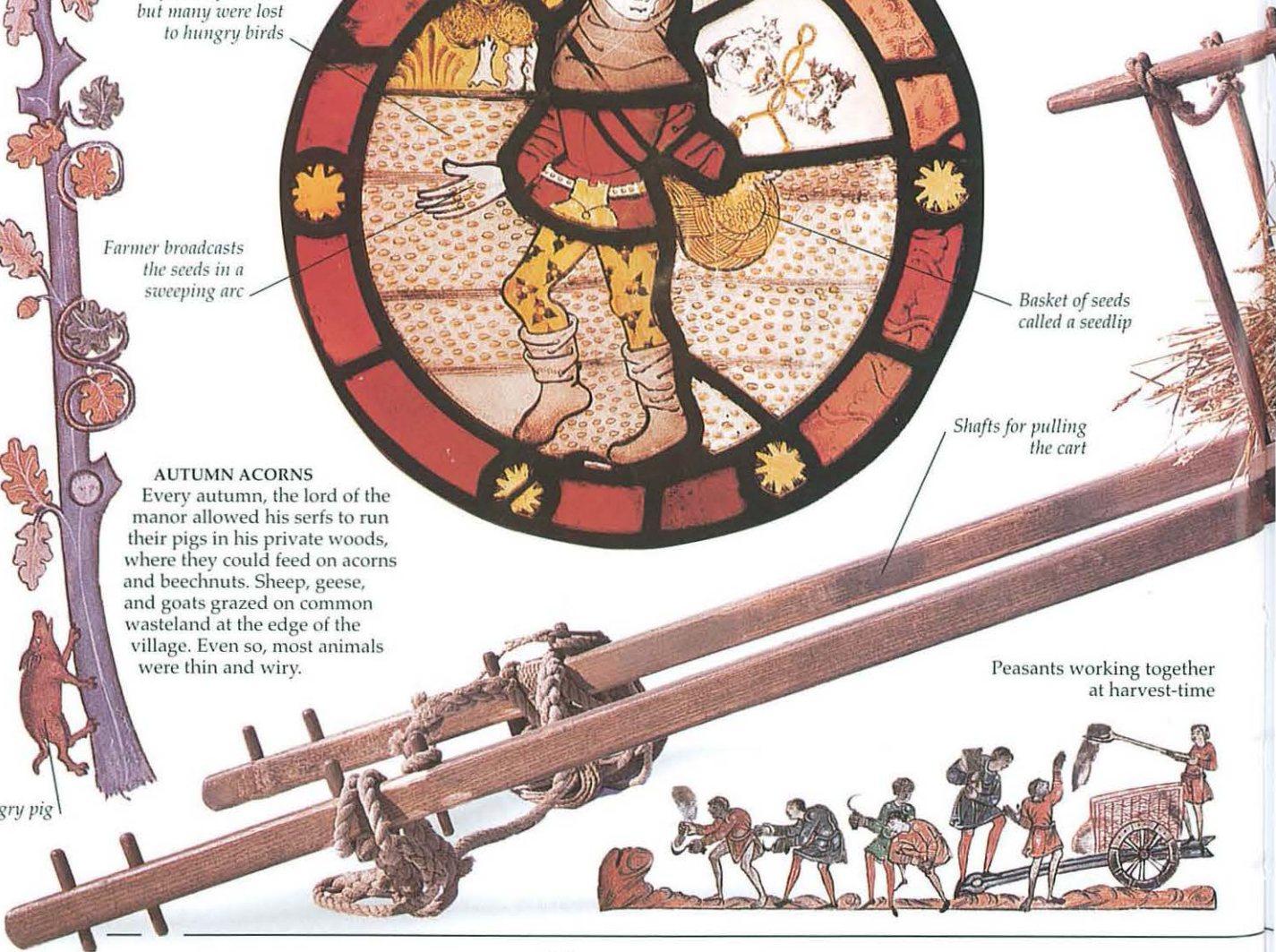
AUTUMN ACORNS
Every autumn, the lord of the manor allowed his serfs to run their pigs in his private woods, where they could feed on acorns and beechnuts. Sheep, geese, and goats grazed on common wasteland at the edge of the village. Even so, most animals were thin and wiry.

Hungry pig



Basket of seeds called a seedlip

Shafts for pulling the cart



Peasants working together at harvest-time





SHEAR PROFIT

Sheep shearing was the most important spring job in hilly regions of medieval Europe. Wool fetched high prices, and its trade became one of the richest industries of the Middle Ages.



TITHE BARN

This huge 13th-century barn was used to store tithes. Villagers had to give the local priest a tithe, or tenth, of everything they produced, from crops and firewood to eggs and flour. Tithes made some churches very wealthy – and very unpopular.



MANUAL LABOR

With no machines, all farm work was done by hand using simple tools like these. Most jobs involved back-breaking labor, from breaking clods (lumps of soil) to hoeing young crops.

Billhook for maintaining hedges

Sickle for harvesting crops

Threshed wheat stalks, or straw



Rear gate is tied to keep the straw from falling out

Rim of wooden wheel is clad with six iron strakes for extra strength

Large wheels allow the cart to ride over big bumps and ruts

CARTED OFF

Medieval peasants would have transported their wheat, straw, and hay in carts like this.

Straw (the leftover stalks from the harvest) was used for numerous purposes, from thatching roofs to making mattresses. Hay was another important crop. Along with wheat straw and dried beans, it provided the only winter feed for farm animals. Even then, there was rarely enough for all, and most cattle, pigs, and goats had to be killed in late autumn. Every peasant had a share in the village's hay meadow, and hay-making was a communal task.