



Middle Ages | Definition, Time Period & Castle

It is hard to imagine life without the creature comforts on which we have all come to rely. Forget mobile phones and computers; nowadays, we take things like electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing for granted. During the Middle Ages, people survived without things that we might consider to be basic human needs. Let's look at what life was like in the Middle Ages.

Middle Ages Time Period



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The Middle Ages spans one thousand years – from approximately 500 to 1500 – but for most people, little changed during this time. There were two distinct classes during the Middle Ages, and most people were in the lower class. Being born a commoner



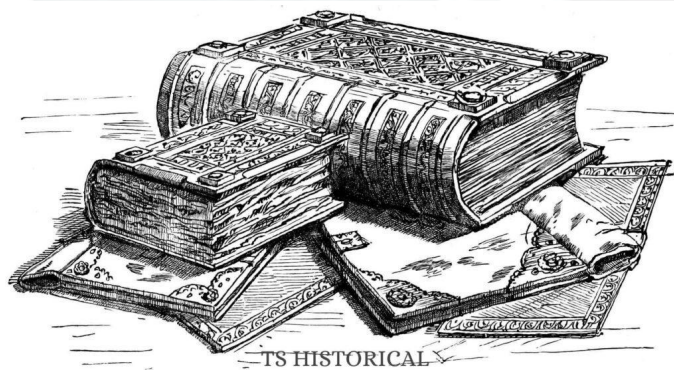
usually meant a life of servitude, but the lower classes were self-sufficient and could feed their families from the land despite severe restrictions.

Food in the Middle Ages came from farms, and although hunting was still prevalent, it became a sport only enjoyed by the upper-class nobles towards the end of this period.

The main staple foods for ordinary people were bread, porridge, fruits, and vegetables. Chickens, cows, and sheep were far more valuable alive as they provided eggs, milk for cheese and butter, and wool for clothing. Farmers grew wheat, barley, and vegetables such as leeks, onions, peas, carrots, turnips, and parsnips. Vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes, and corn did not arrive in Europe until [Europeans](#) voyaged to the Americas.

Despite the common belief that food for Middle Age peasants was bland, a range of herbs and spices were available to flavor meals. Dill, thyme, and coriander were all grown as well as a host of other herbs. Herbs were also for medicinal purposes, and most ordinary people knew the herbs and their uses.

More affluent households had access to more exotic spices such as ginger, pepper, and cinnamon. Salt was a popular commodity in the Middle Ages, as it was used for preserving meats and vegetables and flavoring dishes.



The Domesday Book



The Domesday Book – written in 1086 – holds records of many coastal salt processing sites throughout England. Salt was also an indicator of wealth. The more important people sat “above the salt” and had easy access to the salt cellar during a feast. Salt made it possible for people inland to consume saltwater fish, and freshwater fish was also eaten throughout this period.

Today, few people would consider having a beer for breakfast, but this is how most people would start their day during the Middle Ages! The beer they drank back then was not as alcoholic as the kind we drink today, and the main reason for consuming this beverage was the calorific content. Many people had physical jobs that needed a great deal of energy; the meat was a rare treat, and sugar was not introduced until the 11th Century – and even then, it was a luxury, so beer provided much-needed calories and hydration.

The type of beer they drank was unfiltered and had a similar consistency to porridge! So, no wonder they drank it to supplement their diet rather than as a social lubricant. It is accepted that you need to have a job and earn money to buy food and commodities in modern times.

Back in the Middle Ages, people were self-sufficient. Most people were farmers, farming their lord’s land to maintain their own patch of land from which they supported their families. However, some specialists would sell their services or wares. Most medieval professions are still reflected in people’s surnames.



English surnames of Norman origin



After 1066, the **Normans** introduced **surnames** to **England**. At first, these surnames could be changed at will, but after a while, they stuck. People with the most common surname in the **UK**, **Smith**, are descendants of medieval blacksmiths. Fletchers were people who made arrow fletches – that is, the feather that steadies the arrow in flight.

Thatchers constructed thatch roofs, butchers cut up animals for meat, masons worked with stone, weavers worked on looms or made baskets, wrights made wheels, and tanners made leather.

There were many other professions, including carpenters, merchants, cooks, and goldsmiths. Since children as young as eleven were considered to be adults, many took up the profession of their parents by helping out in the family business. Education in the Middle Ages was reserved for the nobility and the clergy.



Most people could not read or write and had little need for it, although if a peasant could become a monk, he may have a chance to learn to read and write. Girls were excluded from formal education, although in 1322, a wealthy widowed noblewoman named [Elizabeth](#) de Clare took an interest in schooling.

She thought education should be available for the lower classes and paid for many people who lived in her villages to go to school. While it may be hard for us to imagine a world without television, most people in the Middle Ages did not even have books to read. But this does not mean that they did not have any forms of entertainment to occupy their free time.

Although many of the lower classes probably did not get much spare time, the people of the Middle Ages loved a good party. They held festivals, fairs, and carnivals related to the seasons – like May Day – and religious occasions such as Easter.



Peasant Dance

The people of the **Middle Ages** also loved storytelling, singing, music, and dancing. Wandering storytellers and troubadours would travel the country entertaining the rich



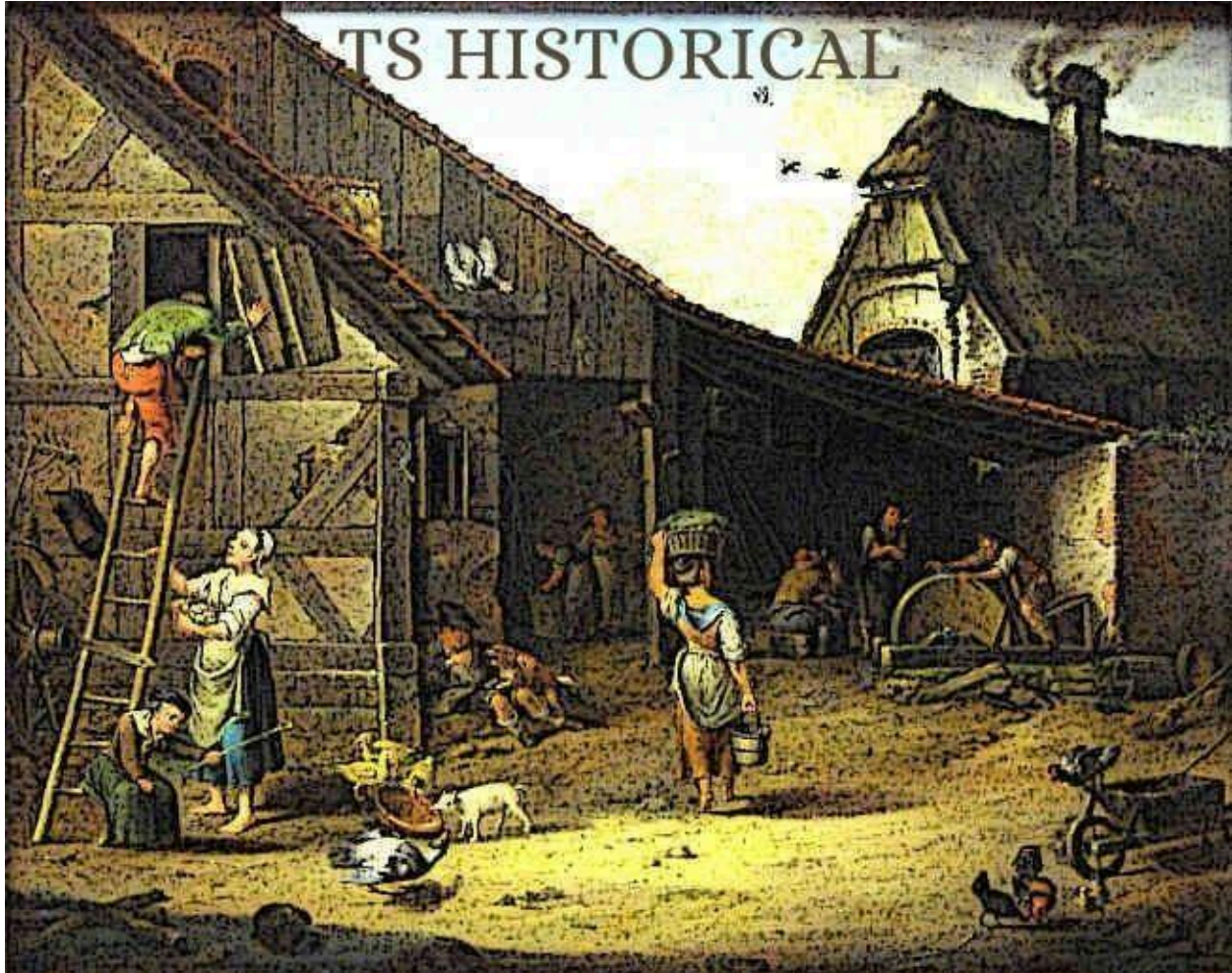
and the poor alike with tales and playing instruments like drums, harps, bagpipes, and fiddles.

The most complex of these medieval instruments was called a hurdy-gurdy, a mechanical string instrument played by turning a crank that rubbed a wheel against strings.

The pitch was changed using a keyboard that pushed wooden wedges against the strings. Games were also prevalent pastimes. Chess was popular amongst the upper class, and everyone enjoyed gambling with dice, cards, and animal racing. Sports and athletic events often occurred during festivals.

These were archery contests, hammer throwing, and jousting. Some areas had a game like an early form of soccer – popular with both men and women. Soccer was so popular that it was banned on several occasions for various reasons.

King Edward II first outlawed it in 1314 as he felt it wasted the valuable energy of his soldiers. Many monarchs disliked soccer and other games as they thought their subjects should spend their time practicing archery to defend the realm. Nevertheless, the game persisted and is still popular in the UK today. Since the invention of the electric light, it's common for us to stay up late, using the evenings for relaxation and entertainment.



Life in Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, people usually went to bed when the sun went down. However, it was also common for people to have a first and second sleep. First sleep usually lasted until after midnight, when it was common for people to get up for an hour or so, say prayers, stoke the fire, straighten the house, or converse.

On a full moon, people would enjoy the extra light to pick herbs when they were freshest, and this practice probably contributed to a lot of folklore and myths of magic.



Nowadays, fashion is fast and disposable, but fabric was a labor-intensive commodity back in the Middle Ages. Outer garments were usually made of wool, while undergarments were made of linen spun from flax fibers.

Despite the introduction of the spinning wheel in the 14th Century, many poor people would have had to hand spin their own thread and yarn to make clothes. This task was predominantly left to the womenfolk, in particular unmarried women. Until recently, an older unmarried woman was still referred to as a “spinster.” Spinning, sewing, and tapestry were primarily reserved for females, but weaving was seen as man’s work.

Huge wooden looms were used to weave fabric manually. Dye was also a hot commodity in the Middle Ages. People were limited in color choice as they only had natural dyes available to them. Most fabrics were left undyed and a natural shade of light brown or grey. Other colors available were brown, green, yellow, red, and blue. Purple dye was highly sought after and mainly used for religious garments. Tyrian purple was the most prized dye and made exclusively from marine snails in **Lebanon**.



City Life in Middle Ages

While it is true that the world was connected by trade during the Middle Ages only a few got to travel further than the village in which they were born. How far you could travel usually depended on your status. Serfs or villeins – or tenant farmers – were the lowest class.

They could not travel or marry without the express permission of their lord. Peasants or freemen were slightly higher in rank and could make decisions for themselves – if they wanted to relocate or travel, they were free to do so. However, traveling alone was often not a safe undertaking.

Maps were not used for navigation, and most people used the old Roman roads to get about. Bandits would frequently stalk these roads, hoping to chance upon a wealthy



unprotected traveler. As a poor person, you would have the opportunity to travel the country, or perhaps even further, if the Lord called you to serve in the army.

However, this would not be an enjoyable experience. Forced to march at speed to meet an enemy on the battlefield would not be how most people would choose to spend their time, especially with family and farmland left at home.

A handy way to travel to far-flung countries was to embark upon a pilgrimage to a holy land as you could receive free food and lodgings at monasteries. A popular destination for medieval pilgrims was Compostela in Spain, and those who had made it there sported the shell-shaped badge awarded to you upon your arrival.

Nobles and clergy were free to travel where they wished and often did so – visiting various estates or religious sites. The best way to travel in the medieval period was to be a merchant or work on a merchant ship. This meant traveling the known world, buying, and trading goods. As most villages were self-sufficient, traded goods were usually exotic spices, wines, jewelry, fine cloth, and other luxury items. But the life of a merchant was not without its dangers.



Large Stone Castle

Thieves often targeted merchant ships and wagons, and the nobility disliked this class of people who could acquire great wealth without being subservient to a lord. When most people imagine life in the Middle Ages, they surely cannot escape the image of a large **stone castle** inhabited by the lord and lady of the land.

Life in a castle was quite different from village life, although it was probably smellier and colder than the small houses lived in by the commoners and their families. Castles did not just house the family of the lord and lady, but a host of soldiers, servants, cooks, gardeners, treasurers, and entertainers.

Castle owners did not just have one castle. They usually had a few and traveled between them at their leisure. Life in a castle was cramped, cold, and distinctly lacking in privacy – they even had communal toilets! Only the lord and lady would enjoy private chambers. These rooms were usually at the top of one of the castle towers above the



great hall, which allowed for a more significant amount of sunlight and warmth from the great hall to heat the room.

As castles were fortresses made of stone with tiny slit windows, they were extremely cold and dark even in the summer. The invention of the fireplace with a chimney in the 11th or 12th Century did a lot to make life in a castle more bearable, but it was still pretty grim. Toilets were merely holes in the wall from which human waste would fall into a cesspool or the moat that surrounded the castle.

Moats were used for defensive purposes and were essentially pools of stagnant water that surrounded the castle. You can imagine how this must have smelled – especially on hot days! Imagine how jealous a lord or lady of a castle would be of your comfy bed and private toilet! Overall, life in the Middle Ages was nowhere near as comfortable as our lives today.

Life was tough for people during this long span of years, and many died before they saw their tenth birthday. If you survived to be older than ten, your average life expectancy was still only around 35 years, although some people did live well into their seventies. Scholars offer several different reasons for the decline of this long period but agree that the feudal system's decline and loss of power by the [Church](#) were significant factors.

Additionally, lords and nobles saw their power fall after the Crusades, as Europeans came to know more advanced civilizations like the [Byzantine Empire](#). Trade grew among countries, giving rise to a money system and the birth of a middle class, and ushered in the Renaissance, thus ending this long, hard millennium.