

Medieval Manorialism

Part A.

Read the following description of the life of a typical medieval peasant. Answer the questions.

The Peasant's World

There were two kinds of peasants on a manor: serfs and freemen. Serfs were legally tied to the land. They could not leave it without the noble's permission. When a manor changed owners, they went along with the property. On the other hand, they could not be evicted. In contrast, freemen were able to move whenever they wished. But they could be thrown off the estate without warning.

Whether freeman or serf, a peasant's life was very hard. Peasants worked from sunrise to sunset, and generally died at about the age of thirty. In addition to farming the noble's land, they had to give the noble a share of whatever they grew on their own land. They had to pay to use the noble's grain mill and baking oven in order to make bread. They had to pay for the use of the noble's wine press. Then there were special taxes, such as a head tax and a property tax. There were work taxes, too. At any time, peasants might be called to clean the castle moat, or bring in firewood, or help fix the fortifications, or cut timber.

A peasant's house was a small, one-room dwelling with a thatched roof and a hard dirt floor. A hole in the roof let out the smoke from the fire. Near the fire was an enormous bed where all the family slept. Food was simple. It consisted mostly of oatmeal, black bread, and such vegetables as onions and cabbages in season. Sometimes peasants raised a few hens or pigs to add to their diet.

The peasants' world was limited. They could neither read nor write. They rarely met anyone they had not known from birth. They lived and died without stepping outside the bounds of their manor. They feared the unknown dangers of the nearby forest, and the robbers that waited to jump on travelers. Besides, there was really no place for a peasant to go.

Yet, life had its brighter moments. Sunday was a day of rest. There were feasts at Christmastime, and singing and dancing on the numerous saints' days. Sports such as wrestling, archery, and soccer were popular. Most important of all were the teachings of the Catholic Church. They provided comfort for the present, and promised a life in heaven after death.¹

1. What are the differences between serfs and freemen?
2. Identify several positive aspects of the peasant's life.
3. Identify several negative aspects of the peasant's life.

¹Bertram Linder, Edwin Selzer, and Barry Berk, *A World History: The Human Panorama* (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1983), 159-60.