

# Medieval society


Medieval society was divided into three main classes of people. These classes were:

- the commoners, also known as peasants or **serfs**
- the **nobility**
- the Church, also known as the **clergy**.

Most people were commoners. Commoners were also known as peasants or serfs. Commoners did the majority of the physical work during the Middle Ages. Serfs were bound to work on their lord's land and were not allowed to leave without permission.

The nobility were much wealthier than commoners. Nobles owned land and were considered very important. The role of the nobility was to protect the commoners, especially as the commoners did not have any weapons to protect themselves.

Then there were the people of the Church, also called the clergy. The **Catholic Church** was very powerful during the Middle Ages. The Church influenced kings and made many of the laws.

-  **1** The word bank, right, is filled with people from each of the three main social groups. Place each word in the correct column. If you are not sure what a word means, look it up in a dictionary or ask your teacher for help.

### Word bank

farmer  
queen  
blacksmith  
lord  
duchess  
king  
cook  
priest  
prince  
knight  
duke  
bishop  
pope  
monk  
baroness  
squire  
builder  
shepherd  
peasant  
earl

Commoners	Nobility	Church


# Feudalism

Medieval kings were not always as wealthy or as powerful as they wanted to be. Also, because it was hard to travel between cities, they often found it difficult to control entire countries. **Feudalism** was developed to help kings maintain control. This is how feudalism worked:

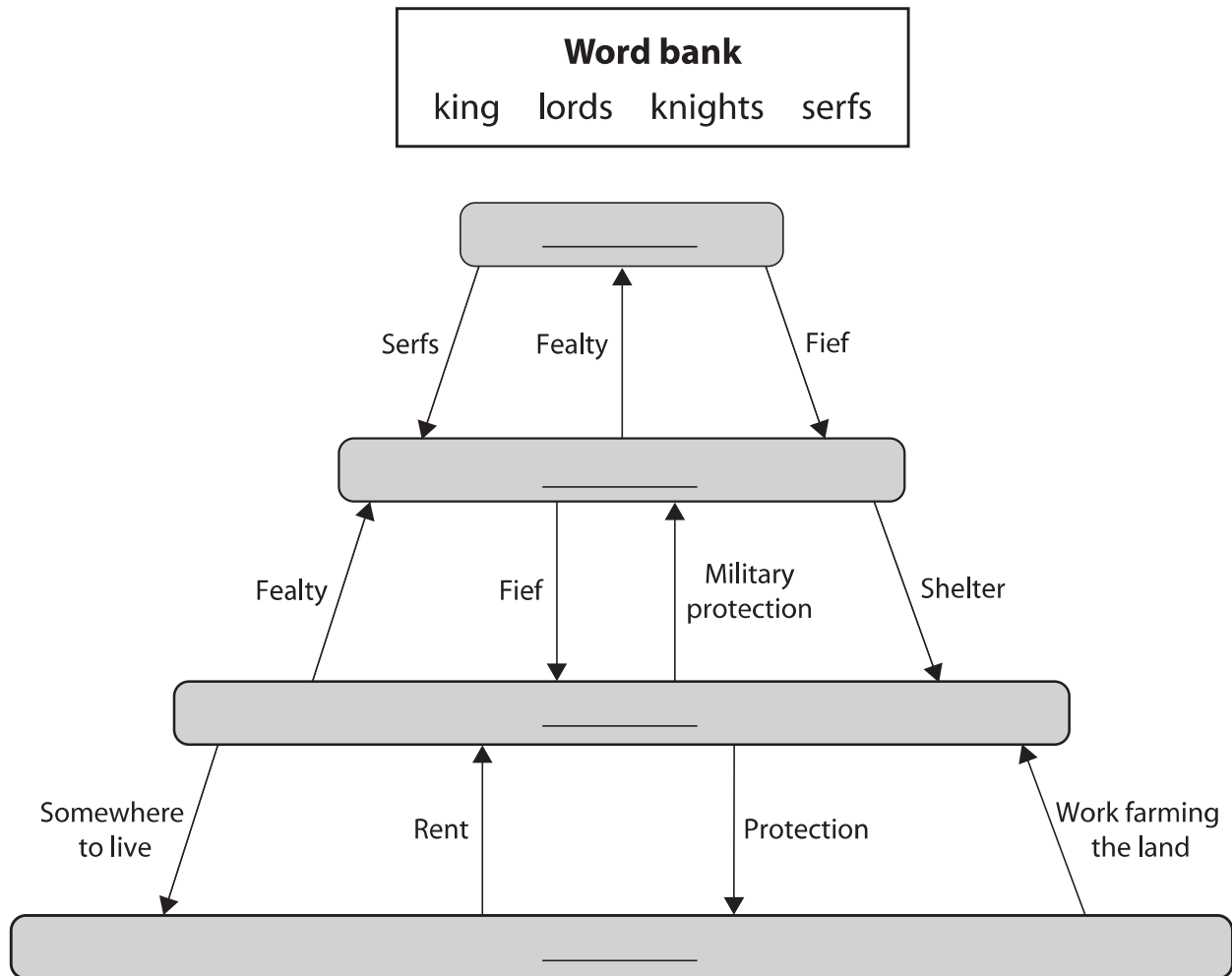
- The king would divide his land into big plots called **fiefs**. He would give some of these fiefs to nobles he knew he could trust. In return for the land, the nobles would promise to serve the king. This was known as swearing **fealty** (loyalty and support) to the king.
- The fiefs held by the nobles were enormous. The nobles would sometimes divide their fiefs into smaller fiefs and give some of these to lesser nobles.
- A noble who owned or leased (rented) land was known as a **lord**. The land was known as a **manor**.
- A lord of a manor would also give some land to **knights**. In return for the land, the knights would promise to fight to protect the king if needed. They also had to protect the lord of the manor.
- At the bottom of the feudal system were the **serfs** (or peasants). Serfs were poor. They were allowed to live on the land but they had to work so that they could produce food for themselves, as well as for the knights and the lord of the manor. Serfs had no rights. They could not leave the manor without the lord's permission.



## Fealty in action

 Read the Resource sheet 'Feudalism'. One of the most important things about feudalism was the idea of fealty. Fealty was a promise of loyalty and support.

- 1 Below is a flowchart showing how fealty and the feudal system worked. Fill in the blanks using the words in the word bank.



- 2 Name one benefit the lords received from the feudal system.

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- 3 Name one disadvantage of the feudal system for serfs.

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# A day in the life of a serf

My name is Aldred and I am a **serf**. My life is hard and my days are long. I am awake just before the sun is up. I eat porridge and water for breakfast, then I am out working by 7 a.m.

I am a farmer. I plough the fields and sow crops such as wheat, barley, oats and rye. I also grow vegetables such as cabbage and turnips. It is hard work ploughing the fields. The plough is heavy and the ground is hard.

In the middle of the day, the sun is strong and hot. At that time I have a break and eat a small amount of food. I then work through until sunset.

After I have cleaned the plough and other tools, I go home. My house is made of wood and held together with mud called **daub**. It is small and simple. It has a dirt floor and only one room.



I eat cabbage, carrots and barley for dinner, with some bread. By 10 p.m. I am asleep.

I grow enough food for my family and myself. I also have to give some of my food and money to my lord.



How does your life compare to Aldred's life? In your workbook, write down your daily routine. Include things like the time you wake up, the things you do during the day, the foods you eat and at what times, what you do during the evening and what time you go to bed.

1 Write three differences between your daily routine and Aldred's routine.

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2 Write three similarities between your daily routine and Aldred's routine.

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## The Peasants' Revolt of 1381

-  **1** Fill in the blanks with a suitable **synonym** from the word bank. A synonym is a word that has the same meaning as another word. For example, 'huge' is a synonym of 'large'.

Medieval peasants had a hard ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) life. To make matters worse, a lot of their hard-earned money ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) was used to pay **taxes** to the king, rent to the lord and **tithes** (a type of tax) to the Catholic Church.

Taxes were a major burden on peasants in medieval England. Many were expensive and unfair ( \_\_\_\_\_ ). Paying them caused many peasants **hardship** ( \_\_\_\_\_ ), but if they didn't pay they would be fined or punished.

In the 1340s, the **Black Death** swept through Europe. It was a serious disease ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) that spread quickly and killed millions of people. As a result, there weren't enough people to do all the work. Peasants started asking for better wages ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) and working conditions. The English king didn't like this. He passed a law that prevented ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) peasants from earning more money than they had earned before the Black Death had come along.

By 1381, the English peasants had had enough and they refused to pay yet another tax. They marched in **protest**, first in their villages and then towards the big cities and London. They demanded ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) that **serfdom** be abolished ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) and that unfair taxes come to an end.

Most of the protesters were well behaved. A small group, however, became violent ( \_\_\_\_\_ ). They stormed the Tower of London and killed some people, as well as destroying some buildings. Many of the protestors were also killed.

In the end, the Peasants' Revolt was seen as a failure. It did, however, raise ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) awareness about how difficult and unfair life was for peasants.

### Word bank

income  
pay  
unjust  
difficult  
suffering  
illness  
increase  
stopped  
aggressive  
eliminated  
insisted