

= Medieval household =

The medieval household was , like modern households , the center of family life for all classes of European society . Yet in contrast to the household of today , it consisted of many more individuals than the nuclear family . From the household of the king to the humblest peasant dwelling , more or less distant relatives and varying numbers of servants and dependents would cohabit with the master of the house and his immediate family . The structure of the medieval household was largely dissolved by the advent of privacy in early modern Europe .

Variations were of course great , over an entire continent and a time span of about 1000 years . Yet it is still possible to speak of a classical model of the medieval household , particularly as it evolved in Carolingian France and from there spread over great parts of Europe .

= = Aristocratic households = =

= = = Historical background = = =

Neither Greek nor Latin had a word corresponding to modern @-@ day " family " . The Latin familia must be translated to " household " rather than " family " . The aristocratic household of ancient Rome was similar to that of medieval Europe , in that it consisted ? in addition to the paterfamilias , his wife and children ? of a number of clients (clientes) , or dependents of the lord who would attend upon him , counsel him and receive rewards . Where it differed from its medieval equivalent was in the use of slaves rather than paid servants for the performance of menial tasks . Another difference was that , due to the relative security and peacefulness within the borders of the Roman Empire , there was little need for fortification . The aristocratic household of medieval Europe , on the other hand , was as much a military as a socio @-@ economic unit , and from the 9th century onwards the ideal residence was the castle .

= = = Composition = = =

As a result of the military nature of the medieval noble household , its composition was predominately male . Towards the end of the medieval period the ratio levelled out somewhat , but at an earlier date the feminine element of the household consisted only of the lady and her daughters , their attendants , and perhaps a few domestics to perform particular tasks such as washing . Many of the male servants were purely military personnel ; there would be a gatekeeper , as well as various numbers of knights and esquires to garrison the castle as a military unit . Yet many of these would also serve other functions , and there would be servants entirely devoted to domestic tasks . At the lower level , these were simply local men recruited from the localities . The higher level positions ? in particular those attending on the lord ? were often filled by men of rank : sons of the lord 's relatives , or his retainers .

The presence of servants of noble birth imposed a social hierarchy on the household that went parallel to the hierarchy dictated by function . This second hierarchy had at its top the steward (alternatively seneschal or majordomo) , who had the overriding responsibility for the domestic affairs of the household . Taking care of the personal wellbeing of the lord and his family were the Chamberlain , who was responsible for the chamber or private living @-@ quarters , and the Master of the Wardrobe , who had the main responsibility for clothing and other domestic items . Of roughly equal authority as the steward was the marshal . This officer had the militarily vital responsibility for the stables and horses of the household (the " marshalsea ") , and was also in charge of discipline . The marshal , and other higher @-@ ranking servants , would have assistants helping them perform their tasks . These ? called valet de chambres , grooms or pages , ranking from top to bottom in that order ? were most often young boys , although in the larger royal courts the valet de chambres included both young noble courtiers , and often artists , musicians and other specialists who might be of international repute . Assigning these the office of valet was a way of regularising

their position within the household .

One of the most important functions of the medieval household was the procurement , storage and preparation of food . This consisted both in feeding the occupants of the residence on a daily basis , and in preparing larger feasts for guests , to maintain the status of the lord . The kitchen was divided into a pantry (for bread , cheese and napery) and a buttery (for wine , ale and beer) . These offices were headed by a pantler and a butler respectively . Depending on the size and wealth of the household , these offices would then be subdivided further . The following is a list of some of the offices one could expect to find in a large medieval aristocratic or royal household :

In addition to these offices there was a need for servants to take care of the hunting animals . The master huntsman , or the veneur , held a central position in greater noble households . Likewise , the master falconer was a high @-@ ranking officer , often of noble birth himself . There were spiritual needs to be cared for , and a chapel was a natural part of every large household . These household chapels would be staffed by varying numbers of clerics . The chaplains , confessors and almoners could serve in administrative capacities as well as the religious ones .

= = = Noble households = = =

The households of medieval kings were in many ways simply aristocratic households on a larger scale : as the Burgundian court chronicler Georges Chastellain observed of the splendidly ordered court of the dukes of Burgundy , " after the deeds and exploits of war , which are claims to glory , the household is the first thing that strikes the eye , and which it is , therefore , most necessary to conduct and arrange well . " In some ways though , they were essentially different . One major difference was the way in which royal household officials were largely responsible for the governance of the realm , as well as the administration of the household . The 11th century Capetian kings of France , for instance , " ruled through royal officers who were in many respects indistinguishable from their household officers . " These officers ? primarily the seneschal , constable , butler , chamberlain and chancellor ? would naturally gain extensive powers , and could exploit this power for social advancement . One example of this is the Carolingians of France , who rose from the position of royal stewards ? the Mayors of the Palace ? to become kings in their own right . It was the father of Charlemagne , Pepin the Short , who gained control of government from the enfeebled Merovingian king Childeric III . Another example can be found in the royal House of Stuart in Scotland , whose family name bore witness to their background of service .

Eventually the central positions of the royal household became little else than honorary titles bestowed upon the greatest families , and not necessarily even dependent on attendance at court . In Flanders , by the thirteenth century , the offices of constable , butler , steward and chamberlain had become the hereditary right of certain high noble families , and held no political significance .

Finally , the royal household differed from most noble households in the size of their military element . If a king was able to muster a substantial force of household knights , this would reduce his dependence on the military service of his subjects . This was the case with Richard II of England , whose one @-@ sided dependence on his household knights ? mostly recruited from the county of Cheshire ? made him unpopular with his nobility and eventually contributed to his downfall .

In England , the semi @-@ royal household of Edward of Carnarvon , later Edward I when Prince of Wales , is the earliest for which detailed knowledge can be obtained from sources .

= = = Itineration = = =

The medieval aristocratic household was not fixed to one location , but could be more or less permanently on the move . Greater nobles would have estates scattered over large geographical areas , and to maintain proper control of all their possessions it was important to physically inspect the localities on a regular basis . As the master of the horses , travel was the responsibility of the marshal . Everything in the noble household was designed for travel , so that the lord could enjoy the same luxury wherever he went .

Particularly for kings , itineration was a vital part of governance , and in many cases kings would

rely on the hospitality of their subjects for maintenance while on the road . This could be a costly affair for the localities visited ; there was not only the large royal household to cater for , but also the entire royal administration . It was only towards the end of the medieval period , when means of communication improved , that households , both noble and royal , became more permanently attached to one residence .

= = = Regional variations = = =

The aristocratic society centered on the castle originated , as much of medieval culture in general , in Carolingian France , and from there spread over most of Western Europe . In other parts of Europe , the situation was different . On the northern and western fringes of the continent , society was kin @-@ based rather than feudal , and households were organised correspondingly . In Ireland , the basis for social organisation was the " sept " , a clan that could comprise as many as 250 households , or 1250 individuals , all somehow related . In Viking @-@ age Scandinavia , housing arrangements were more humble than those of contemporary France or England , but also here the greater lords would own grand halls wherein they might entertain large numbers of guests . In the Byzantine Empire , slaves were employed until the end of the Empire , as were eunuchs . Little is known of the living arrangements of the Byzantines , as very few buildings remain . From historical and architectural evidence it is known that , even though castles were rare , the wealthy lived in palaces of varying magnitude , with chapels and gardens , and rich decorations of mosaics and frescoes .

= = Common households = =

= = = Rural = = =

The households of medieval peasant families were naturally smaller than those of the aristocracy , and as such resembled modern households more . The patterns of marriage fluctuated greatly over the course of the Middle Ages . Even though most of the available evidence concerns the higher classes , and the source material for southern Europe is richer than for the rest , it is still possible to make some rough generalisations . It seems clear that the average age of marriage during the Early Middle Ages was comparatively high , in the early twenties , and quite equal for men and women . The reason for this can be found in traditions brought forward from the Germanic tribes , but equally in the fact that habitation was confined to small areas , a factor that enforced restrictions on population growth . As more land was won for cultivation , this trend changed . During the High and Late Middle Ages , women were increasingly married away in their teens , leading to higher birth rates . While women would be married once they reached reproductive age , men had to possess independent means of sustenance ? to be able to provide for a family ? before entering into marriage . For this reason , the average age of marriage for men remained high , in the mid- to late twenties .

Even though peasant households were significantly smaller than aristocratic ones , the wealthiest of these would also employ servants . Service was a natural part of the cycle of life , and it was common for young people to spend some years away from home in the service of another household . This way they would learn the skills needed later in life , and at the same time earn a wage . This was particularly useful for girls , who could put the earnings towards their dowry .

The houses of medieval peasants were of poor quality compared to modern houses . The floor was normally of earth , and there was very little ventilation or sources of light in the form of windows . In addition to the human inhabitants , a number of livestock animals would also reside in the house . Towards the end of the medieval period , however , conditions generally improved . Peasant houses became larger in size , and it became more common to have two rooms , and even a second floor .

= = = Urban = = =

The medieval world was a much less urban society than either the Roman Empire or the modern world . The fall of the Roman Empire had caused a catastrophic de @-@ population of the towns and cities that had existed within the Empire . Between the 10th and 12th centuries , however , a revival of the European city occurred , with an increase in the urbanisation of society .

The practice of sending children away to act as servants was even more common in towns than in the countryside . The inhabitants of towns largely made their livelihood as merchants or artisans , and this activity was strictly controlled by guilds . The members of these guilds would in turn employ young people ? primarily boys ? as apprentices , to learn the craft and later take a position as guild members themselves . These apprentices made up part of the household ? or " family " ? as much as the children of the master .

= = Later perspectives = =

Towards the end of the Middle Ages , the functions and composition of households started to change . This was due primarily to two factors . First of all , the introduction of gunpowder to the field of warfare rendered the castle a less effective defence , and did away with the military function of the household . The result was a household more focused on comfort and luxury , and with a significantly larger proportion of women .

The second factor that brought about change was the early modern ascendancy of the individual , and focus on privacy . Already in the later Middle Ages castles had begun to incorporate an increasing number of private chambers , for the use both of the lord and of his servants . Once the castle was discarded to the benefit of palaces or stately homes , this tendency was reinforced . This did not mean an end to the employment of domestic servants , or even in all cases a reduction in household staff . What it did mean , however , was a realignment whereby the family ? in a genealogical sense ? became the cornerstone of the household .