

4 social classes, 10 centuries and 400 million people

The Middle Ages

from a new perspective

One Year in the Life of a Serf

What was it like to be a serf in the Middle Ages?

Interview with a townsman

Was it better in the town?

Lordship in the Middle Ages

The institution of vassalage

A Trip to the Church

Being a priest: curse or blessing?

The population of the Middle Ages

Plagues, famines, and barbarians

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Lordship in the Middle Ages

What was their wealth based upon?
What is a vassal?

One Year in the Life of a Serf

The medieval world from the perspective of the poor.



A Trip to the Church

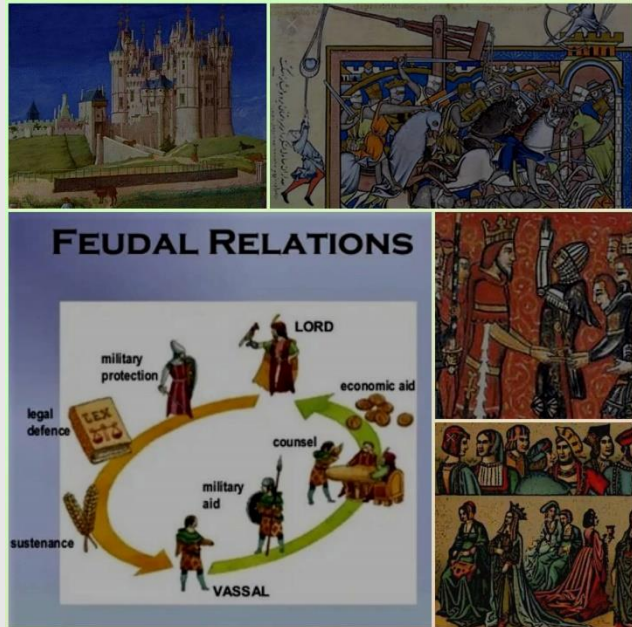
Saviours or scammers? The medieval clergy.

Interview with a townsman

A unique, inside look into city conditions, and the economy.

Lordship in the Middle Ages

These days, lands are also used as a currency since they weren't hereditary. You can earn these by doing noble deeds, like fighting in a war faithfully or even marriage. Instead of banks, some landlords give lands to people who deserve them. Noblemen usually have a private army, and sometimes they are in a higher-ranked nobleman's military. In this case, they are called vassals. If they don't intend to go to war to earn lands, they can also give soldiers from their army instead. However, the people who choose to serve in the military have to take the oath of fealty.



The vassals have to swear on the Bible to be loyal to their lord. This oath is a code of behavior for the knights called chivalry. Usually, noblemen are trained as knights by the age of 21. They start their training as pages at the age of 7. Being a nobleman also means wealth and a better living environment since these people used to live in castles in exchange for their services.

A Trip to the Church

In this little composition, I will tell you about my road trip to one of the parishes in Europe.

During my stay, I spent quite a few days with the priests and churchmen. I learned a lot from them, like their backstories. They told me that they belonged to the lower clergy and they came from humbler backgrounds, and they were poorly

educated. I also went to the mass, but unfortunately, I couldn't understand a lot because it was performed in Latin. I asked some people at the church that how was the mass. They told me that they didn't understand a word because they didn't speak Latin, but they participated anyways. They wanted to gain salvation, so they had



to participate in the Sacraments. The Sacraments were a set of steps that are thought to be signs of divine grace. I was told that divine grace was divine life dispensed to people. The priest friends of mine told me that they had to go because one bishop has ordered them to appear at the church because he wanted to talk with them. On that same day, I happened to meet with the Vicar of St. Peter. I started to talk with him because I knew that he was the head of the Church. No one

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was above him and some people thought that Christ made him his representative before he had gone to Heaven. He does not prove nor denied this belief. After my talk with the Vicar of St. Peter, I continued to go on my merry way. I stumbled upon a sad man. It turned out that he was excommunicated, so he could not attend Church services, couldn't marry, or get helped by others. I spent a few hours talking with him and he got to this point but I don't want to bother you with all that.

Overall I really enjoyed my trip and I met a lot of great people during it. I hope you enjoyed this little article.

One Year in the Life of a Serf

In 1995 a piece of writing was uncovered in modern Germany, written by a priest in the Middle Ages. This priest was determined to record the way of everyday life in his time, for later generations to marvel at. He asked a serf called Hans, to tell him every week, how his week was, so that he could write it down. This went on for a year. This is how we know about this story.

At the start of the year there really isn't much to do. At around the end of January, we usually hold the annual plot lottery. This year I got one of the worst plots of them all, miles worse than the land I had last year. Of course, this year it is the Western lands, that are left as grazing fields. It is a shame, since the part that I got, had the performance in the Western plot last year. I mean honestly, that is just my luck.



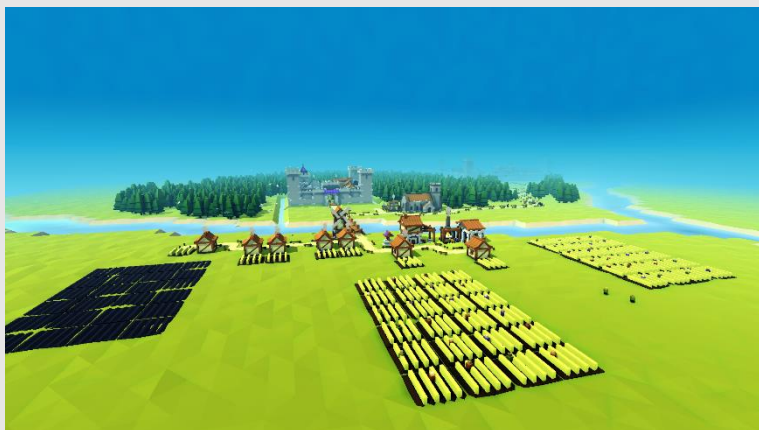
In February it was decided that we are going to produce wheat. It was hardly a surprise since we decided to grow wheat in 9 out of the last 10 years. I'm starting to get fed up with it, especially, but as long as we have food it is fine. At the end of February, we started ploughing, using the heavy plough I acquired from the smith 2 years ago. I had to search for the harness for quite a while, but when I found it, I put it on my trusty horse, and got to work.

In early March, after we were finished with the cultivation of our plot, we started sowing. Sowing is I think the easiest part of agriculture by far, and even the kids join us sometimes.

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Otherwise, all the spring is about caring for the newly sowed land. This year has been unusually dry, so we had to irrigate more than usual, which was a bit tiresome.

During this time, I went to church almost every other day, praying for a good harvest. In June it was starting to show, that since the weather hasn't been exactly great this year, we won't have a great harvest. Fortunately, our landlord, noticed this as well, and decreased our taxes to compensate for our bad harvest. At the end of June, we started the harvest. It took us a week to harvest our landlord's lands, and a further week to harvest our lands, and the results were as bad as expected. Fortunately, our own garden had good results, so in early July I prepared, and went on a journey into the town, to sell that I've managed to grow in my garden. I have to say that I found the town just awful. The smell in the town is even worse, than



in my own house. The streets are gross, and the people look worse, than even us serfs. Anyway, I managed to sell all of my crops, that I brought with me, and

I even managed to buy a brand-new axe. My old axe was quite worn, and I had trouble chopping up the deadwood. After coming home from the town, it was refreshing to smell the fresh air in the countryside.

In August we ploughed the land again, and we essentially were finished with all of the agricultural work for the year. In September I worked on repairing the roof, since it took some damage, since I last worked on it. I paid the tithe, and the seigneurial taxes as well. At the end of November food supply started to run thin, and we were at the edge of starvation. Fortunately, our landlord decided to help us out once more,

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and gave some of his surplus food to us, to avoid a famine. At the end of the year, we gave our thanks to our lord, by giving him some humble presents, and looked forward to a new year, hopefully better, than the last.

An Interview with a townsman

Good afternoon! My name is Wilhelm, and I would like to ask some questions about your life and experiences in this market town, if you're free.

Good afternoon! Yes, I happened to be on my break, so I can answer your questions.

Thank you, then shall we begin? Firstly, how should I call you?

My name is Alan Clineg.

What's your occupation Clineg?

I'm the guild master of the guild called "Boots Ingot".



I'm really curious, can you tell us how a guild operates? Are there any regulations in them? How can I become a member?

Of course, it's not a secret. There are 2 important regulations in the guilds. One is to prevent outside traders doing



business in the town and the other is to prevent competition among the members and everyone should make the same amount of money.

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It's not easy to become a member, but it's worth it. At first you will be an apprentice for 2 to 7 years. During that time, you will receive minimal or no pay, and your work is to learn from the guild master and help in the shop. Then you will become a journeyman. It means that, for a year you will be a day-labourer in a foreign country. If you feel that you are ready you can take the exam to become a master. The exam is to simply present a handmade masterpiece to the guild's governors.

I'm amazed how much work and time is put in becoming a master. I heard on my way here that the towns have developed in the places of fairs. Is it true?

Yes, it is. Fairs developed, because merchants often set up guarded places, where they stored their goods. Later they joined hands and set up communes. They didn't want to become serfs, so they fought for privileges. As they became wealthier, they made a contract with the landlord. It stated the annual tax and independence of the commune.

How does a town look like? What are the important parts?

The marketplace, main square, town hall, church, inner city wall, outer wall. It has narrow, dark, not paved streets. It's smelly and there are many rats, which gives rise to many diseases.

One of the last questions is, the following: why did you move into a town? And why did you choose a town under the supervision of a landlord?

It was mainly, because I and some of my merchant acquaintances used to gather near the riverbanks and when later a town formed there, we thought it was practical. Of course, the other reason is that living in a town has many advantages. A town has its own self-government, they have their own laws, council, you can marry whoever you want,

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manage your property to your liking, appoint our own priests and the last and the most important reason is that the tax is paid in lump sum. Which means we have to pay tax to the landlord only once a year. It also provides safety. I have chosen a town under the supervision of the landlord, because we get privileges from the Lord based on our agreement.

I assume that as a guild leader you are a patrician, what rights do you have?

We have citizenship, so we can vote and elect the mayor. We also have a house in the town, which is ours and not rented.

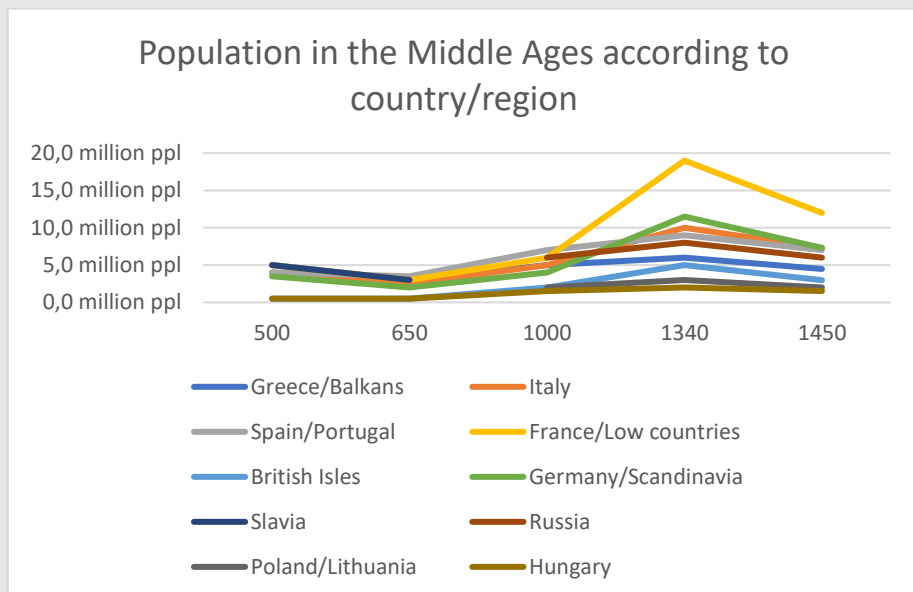
Thank you for your answers and patience. I wish you the best. Goodbye.

Wish you too. Goodbye

The population in the Middle Ages

In the period between 500 and 650, the statistics show a decrease in population, thanks to a volcanic eruption in the tropics or Iceland (historians are not sure where), which resulted in crop failure and widespread famine. There was also the so-called Plague of Justinian, from 541 to 549, which was the first significant outbreak of the bubonic plague in Afro-Eurasia.

Even though

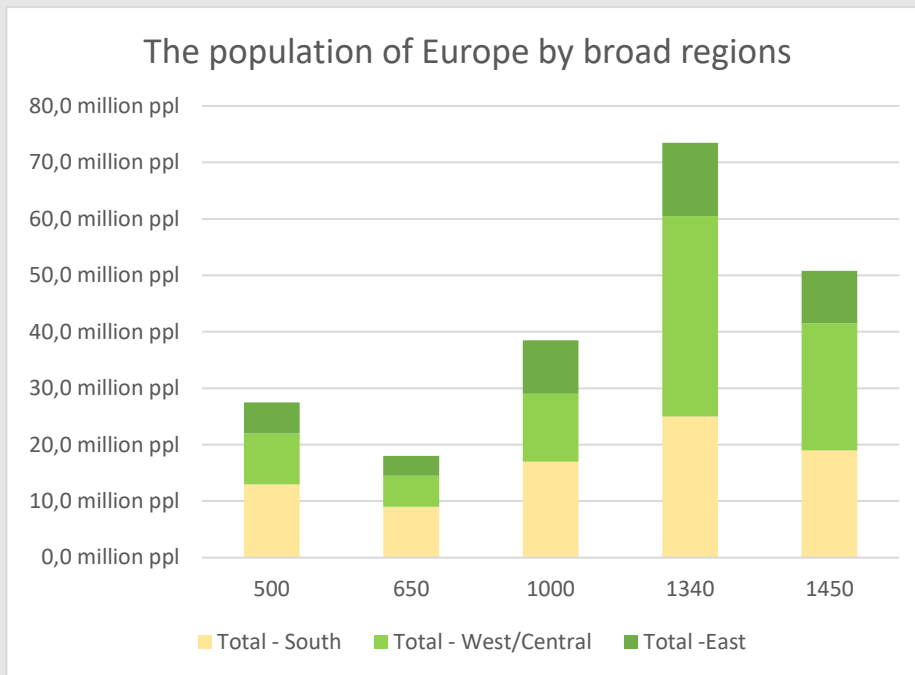


the collapse of the Hunnic Empire, the pillaging of Europe by barbaric tribes was in full swing. That also contributed to the population decline.

From 650 to 1000, there happened to be a warmer period, better harvests, and more food. Eventually, more food led to more people, so the population increased.

Between 1000 and 1340, the population increased because the warm period continued, from the period before. Agricultural advancements like the widespread use of heavy ploughs, and breast collar harnesses, increased the agricultural capabilities. Despite this, the people of Europe didn't grow to the level it should have because of the Great Famine, which was between 1315-17. It was caused by bad weather in the

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spring of 1315 and led to the deaths of a significant portion of the population of Europe. We can see a massive decrease in population

between 1340 and 1450. This decrease happened because of the Black Death, the second major plague pandemic in Afro-Eurasia, which started in 1346 and lasted until 1353. It was the fatal pandemic in human history, with a death toll of up to 200 million people. This event overshadows any other changes to population numbers.

Contributors:

Lordship in the Middle Ages – Oláh-Puskás Réka

A Trip to the Church – Naár Tamás

One Year in the Life of a Serf – Kurják Szabolcs

Interview with a townsman – Fabrinczius Maja

Population of the Middle Ages – Oláh-Puskás Réka, Naár Tamás, Fabrinczius Maja, Kurják Szabolcs

Map – Kurják Szabolcs

Images – Oláh-Puskás Réka, Naár Tamás, Fabrinczius Maja, Kurják Szabolcs

Diagrams – Fabrinczius Maja, Kurják Szabolcs

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One year in the Life of a Serf

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