

# Kings, Knights, and Countrymen

## Teacher Information Day 2 - 4

### **Feudalism - A System of Government (Information for Day 2)**

During this time in history, land meant power. The more land held, the more power the individual had. Because of this desire for land and the power that came with it, the danger of attack was always present. Kings needed knights for fighting and paid for this service by giving the knight a piece of land. This arrangement of land (fief) for protection was the most popular system of government during the middle ages, **feudalism**. This was basically a system of loyalties and protections. It began around 800 AD and began to decline around 1300. Feudalism grew out a need for protection from invasion. During this time, most people lived in fear of attack by Vikings, bandits, or warriors from neighboring kingdoms. Because of this danger, a system grew in which strong people protected weaker ones. In return for this protection, the weaker people gave loyalty, farm labor and military service to their lord.

**The Feudal Ceremony** - This was a public ceremony. The purpose was to exchange a parcel of land for protection. Two men would face each other. The one agreeing to serve would kneel. He placed his hands together, palm-to-palm, and the lord placed his hands over the server's hands. The server then said something like this: "I become your man of the land I hold for you, and for you faithfully will fight. I will support you against all folk saving the faith that I owe to our lord the king." At this time the lord raised the kneeling man and both kissed one another on each cheek to signal their agreement and friendship. This was a legal contract.

**Manor** - The manor was the name given to the land owned or controlled by a lord. Many manors were in the kingdom controlled by one king. Included in the manor were:

- The manor house (or castle) that housed the lord
- Land and homes owned by the knights that had sworn allegiance to the lord.
- Stables and pasture land for the animals owned by the lord or knights
- Homes for the serfs
- Farming land used for growing crops
- A village including a church and homes for the peasants who had sworn allegiance to the lord or knights
- Woodlands surrounding the village

**Church** - Christianity was very strong during this time period. The church held great power over all people (Christendom). Because of this love of and allegiance to their church, kings often made decisions, which were strongly influenced by the church leaders. It was this power of the church that caused people of all classes to go on the Crusades. (See Crusades in the teacher information file attached to the Day 1 lesson plan for this unit.)

## **Nobles - (Information for Day 3)**

**King** - The king, being the largest landholder, was the most powerful person in the feudal system. The government system of feudalism is similar to a pyramid with the king sitting at the top of the pyramid. Everyone else owed loyalty and service to the king. Below the king came nobles.

**Lords** -Each noble gained land from the king in a contract or agreement called a feudal bond. Under this contract, nobles pledged their allegiance to the king in exchange for the grant of land (see the Feudal Ceremony described above). The nobles with the most land were the lords. The amount of land owned gave lords power over others. Lords lived in a manor. His home was the largest in the area. If the lord lived in an area with frequent violent attacks, he might build a castle. Castles served as the protection site for all those who had a contract agreement with the lord. Around his home were the homes of his knights, peasants, and serfs who worked for the lord in exchange for his protection.

Lords commanded an army made of knights who owed him military service in exchange for their land. When the lord made a law, he used this army to enforce the law. However, he could not use this army to stop his knights from fighting with each other or to enforce laws that his knights made for those living on the knight's land.

Lords also were the judges. If his people had an argument with one another, they would bring the argument to the lord to be settled.

**Knights** - The largest group of nobles were the knights. All noble men were required to become knights. Those who were proven too weak were sent to the monastery to become a scholar or monk. Knights were the armored horsemen and warriors that were so important in the protection of the land holdings.

At the age of seven, a noble's son became a **page** and went to the home of a lord for training. He carried messages and waited on the lord's table. He learned to ride, to hunt, and to use small swords. His education included reading, writing, numbers, singing, dancing, strumming the lute, and reverence for God. He learned proper manners from the lord's wife.

At age fourteen, the page became a **squire**. The squire was the servant of the knight of the lord's choosing. He helped the knight put on his armor. He took care of the knight's horse and weapons. In return, the knight taught him advanced fighting skills using a sword, lance, and shield. As a squire grew older, he was expected to follow his master into battle and protect his master if he fell in battle.

The squire became a **knight** around age twenty-one. At this time he pledged his loyalties to his lord. He promised to fight for his lord, defend the Christian Church and protect anyone who needed his help. In a special ceremony, the lord tapped the knight on the shoulders with his sword (see **Knighting Ceremony** below).

Knights were also expected to follow certain rules of honorable behavior. These rules were called the **Code of Chivalry** that said that knights would be brave, honorable, protect the weak, and honor women.

**Knighting Ceremony** - On the night before the knighting ceremony, the squire would take a cleansing bath, fast (not eat), and make a confession at church. He would spend the whole night in the chapel praying to God for his

guidance in his journey as a knight. The next morning, he dressed in white and entered the hall with his sword strung around his neck. The priest would bless the sword and then the squire knelt before his lord (often the knight that had trained him). The lord asked the squire the reasons for wanting to become a knight and if the lord was satisfied with his answers, the squire would be dressed in a new armor and kneel before the lord. The lord would then take a sword and tap the squire on the shoulders three times and make a short speech such as "In the name of God and Saint George, I make thee a knight."

**Armor** - Knights during the Middle Ages wore many different kinds of armor. At first, armor consisted of specially treated leather worn on the legs, chest, and arms. It offered some protection but was no defense against heavy metal swords. Later, armor was made of chain mail, a type of armor made of small loops of iron or steel. A suit of chain mail resembled a long shirt that was slit up for leg movement. Chain mail was a good protection against swords but was very heavy. Armor sometimes weighed as much as 100 pounds and was difficult to put on. Once a knight, with the help of his squire, completed putting on his armor, he was lifted onto his horse by a device similar to a crane. If a heavily armored knight was knocked off his horse in battle, he lay on the ground like a turtle on its back, helpless to turn over or defend himself, thus the need for a squire to accompany his knight into battle.

**Dressing a knight** - First the knight puts on his linen shirt and drawers, which were similar to loose boxer shorts. Over the drawers he wore long woolen hose and arming doublet, which was a shirt with chain mail padding on the arms and chest. Around his neck, he wore a chain mail neck collar. Breast and back plates were strapped onto his chest. More armor was strapped onto his arms, legs, hands, and feet. This armor came in many pieces so that the knight was able to move. The last piece of armor placed on the knight was his helmet. The helmet was very hot, so if the knight was not going into battle immediately, he would hold his helmet by his side. The knight also carried his shield on one arm and his sword in the other.

**Coat of Arms** - The suit of armor made it difficult to distinguish friend from foe on the battlefield so it was important for knights to choose symbols as their marks of identification. Each knight had his own symbol design marked on his shield, tunic (jacket), and cloth covering his horse. This design was known as a coat of arms.

Most people did not know how to read or write so in order to prove whom papers belonged to, it was common to use a seal with a person's coat of arms as a signature or as a way to identify a particular family.

The coat of arms design was a symbol of an event, occupation, or outstanding quality in one's life. A herald (editor) was selected to supervise the selection of colors and symbols so there were no two alike. (Instructions for making a coat of arms are attached in the activity section of this document.)

## **Noble Life**

**Daily activities** - Women in the Middle Ages were treated as helpless beings. They were simply possessions of their fathers or their husbands. Even noble women had

few rights and little control over their lives. When the noble men were at war, women took care of the castle or manor and the lands owned by the noble. They assured that everything ran smoothly. When the men were home, women were busy training the pages in manners and education. Women also spent time planning meals, weaving, doing embroidery, caring for young children, and instructing young girls in how to behave like a lady.

When not at war, the men ran the manor, making sure that the peasants and serfs paid their taxes and were taken care of and supervised. They also supervised the knightly training of the boys under their care. At least once a week, noble men went hunting in the manor forests, usually for deer.

From about age seven, children spent their days in training. Girls were sent to other castles or manors to learn to run a household, care for children, weave, sew, play instruments, dance, sing, and other skills required to be ready for marriage. Many girls married at about age twelve. Boys were learning to become knights (see the description of this process below). Men seldom married before the age of thirty.

Babies were usually sent to live with a caregiver until about the age of two. From age two through seven, children were returned home and cared for by their mothers and the caregivers. They played games and had some toys. Noble children had dolls, spinning tops, rattles, blocks, balls, whistles, and puppets. Little boys played with wooden soldiers, whips, toy horses, and wooden swords.

In the evening, nobles may play chess or checkers.

**Home** - The constant threat of attack caused wealthy nobles to build stone castles to protect themselves and all who have pledged allegiance to them. The central part of the castle was a thick-walled tower called the keep. People could store supplies in the keep and live there for months if necessary. This area was used as a secure area during time of attack and as an area for dancing and feasting during time of peace. The family lived on the upper floors. There were stables, a large kitchen, and servants' quarters within the castle walls. The castle had few windows, and those were very small and glassless. Windows were used to defend the castle, but were small as to not allow entrance by an invader.

A high wall surrounded the keep and courtyard. Outside the wall was a deep ditch of water called a moat. If the castle's defenders wanted to let someone in, they lowered the drawbridge across the moat.

Those nobles that were not wealthy enough to build a castle or did not live in an area that was often attacked lived in a home called a manor house. The homes of the rich had paved floors and sometimes had decorated tiles. Tapestries (large cloth works of art, usually the coat of arms) were hung on the walls, providing not only decoration but also an extra layer of warmth. Many manor houses were larger but not much more comfortable than the cottages of the peasants. They had floors of dirt or dirty straw. Cold wind blew through glassless windows. The home was made of mud and straw plastered over a wood frame. The roof was made of bundles of hay. Inside the house was dark and usually smoky from cooking fires. Unlike the peasants, the nobles owned their home, and the land it was on. All of the area protected by the lord was called his manor, and his home was the manor house.

**Dress** - Most clothing was made of wool spun from the sheep in the manor by the peasants or serfs. Men wore hose and long shirts pulled in at the waist. Women wore long shirt shaped dresses.

A few wealthy nobles enjoyed fine clothes from the east (Japan, China, and Middle East). They dressed in silks, furs, velvet, and cloth embroidered with gold thread. Brighter colors, better materials, and longer shirt or jacket lengths were signs of greater wealth. Noble men wore hose and a jacket. Some men wore long pointy shoes. Wealthy women wore linen or silk undergarments topped by a long flowing gown. In the winter, they wore petticoats of fur. Clothing was often reversible and had detachable sleeves. Women also wore flowing headdresses. Many wore tall, pointed steeples with flowing scarves.

**Food** - All lords had peasants and serfs that tended to their vegetable gardens and livestock. Servants prepared the food. Food was meat, bread, and vegetables. To help disguise the taste of salted or rotten meat and dried vegetables, food was heavily seasoned and mashed together.

Food was served on bread plates. No actual plates or silverware were used. Food was eaten off bread plates that were shared with several other people. One servant held the cup and was signaled to bring the cup to each person as desired. Only a king or the Pope owned their own cup.

**Graphics** - At the end of this file will be several pictures that will help students to visualize the ideas.

## **Commoners - (Information for Day 4)**

Commoners are divided into two groups. Free commoners are peasants. Peasants who became in debt to the nobles became serfs.

**Peasants** - A peasant's life was decided by birth and could not be changed. Peasants were the work force in medieval times. All worked from the necessity to survive as no food or shelter was given. Peasants could not own land since nobles owned all land. Peasants made agreements with nobles in exchange for protection from invaders. According to the agreements, peasants would farm and tend animals for the nobles. In exchange, the nobles would allow the peasants to live in a home in the manor and would protect the peasant and his family. Peasant life was hard. Peasants worked their fields for three days a week, and worked the noble's field three days a week. Peasants were also expected to do repair work around the manor, on roads and bridges. No one was allowed to work on Sunday. All crops from the noble's fields went to the noble. Crops from the peasant's field were divided with one tenth going to the church and another amount going to the noble in payment of taxes. The peasant could have whatever was left. Peasants often starved when there was a poor crop season. Peasants were free to move from manor to manor as their agreements with the nobles allow, but this movement was rare. Most peasants spent their entire life in the same village manor.

**Serfs** - Peasants become serfs by becoming in debt to the noble. This could be because of care given to the peasant, or lack of taxes being paid, for example. Serfs are not free men. They do not belong to nobles, but do belong to the land that is owned by the noble. Serfs can not be given away, sold or in any other way removed from the land. A serf family passes generation after generation working on the land. Serfs have no rights. If the land changes hands through war, serfs still remain with the land. Most peasants were serfs.

**Daily activities** - All commoners (peasants and serfs) work for the nobles from a very early age. Babies are left home alone usually left in their crib or with young siblings during the long day's work. Many babies and young children die from accidents in the home or lack of food. By about three, children were given chores such as feeding the chickens and caring for the babies. Around age seven, children began accompanying parents to the fields where they worked rain or shine, throughout their lives.

**Homes** - Medieval homes were cold, damp, and dark. It was often warmer outside the home. For security purposes, windows, when there were any, were very small openings with wooden shutters that were closed at night or in bad weather. The small size of the windows allowed those inside to see out, but kept outsiders from looking in. They had floors of dirt or dirty straw. Cold wind blew through glassless windows. The home was made of mud and straw plastered over a wood frame. The roof was made of bundles of hay. Inside the house was dark and usually smoky from cooking fires. Most peasants ate, slept, and spent time together in one or two small rooms.

**Dress** - Peasant or serf men wore stockings and tunics. Tunics were long loose shirts that pulled over the head and were worn with a belt. Women wore long dresses under sleeveless tunics. Their clothes were browns, blacks, and grays. Leather boots were worn. The outer clothes were almost never washed, but the linen underwear was washed weekly. The smell of wood smoke that filled the houses also filled the clothes and acted as a deodorant.

Peasant or serf women spun wool into threads that were woven into the cloth for their clothes. All clothing including boots were homemade.

Children dressed like their parents with clothes being passed from child to child.

**Food** - Peasants and serfs raised or grew their own food. Taxes to the lord and the tithe to the church must be paid. Then the peasant could have the food that was left. If this was a poor year for crops or if the livestock died, no food was available. Death by starvation was common. Food was meat, bread, and vegetables. To help disguise the taste of salted or rotten meat and dried vegetables, food was heavily seasoned and mashed together. Food was served on bread plates. No actual plates or silverware or cups were used. Food was eaten off bread plates that were shared with the entire family. Water was drunk from the community dipper.

**Graphics** - At the end of this file will be several pictures that will help students to visualize the ideas.