

The Age of Castles

A castle was the fortified residence of a king or a baron, built to keep its occupants safe from enemy attack. Although a castle was a stronghold, with towering walls, watchtowers, and heavily fortified doors, it was also an administrative center and a home, and its occupants could live there in comfort and style.

Castle development

The earliest castles appeared in the 9th and 10th centuries, at first as one part of France, Germany, and northern Italy. Most were earth ramparts, or walls, surrounded by a ditch and a timber fence.



Early castle

Key facts

- Stone and timber castles were built in the 10th and 11th centuries.
- The tower was an earth mound, topped by a wooden tower. The body was a courtyard, surrounded by a ditch and a timber fence.
- By the 12th century, stone towers (called donjons, or keeps) were built of stone.
- In the 13th century, the keep was usually surrounded by a stone "curtain wall."
- From the mid-14th century, people built concentric castles, with rings of stone walls, one inside the other.

Castle people

The household of a large castle could easily contain as many people as a village. As well as the lord and his family, there were officials, soldiers, and a host of servants and craftsmen.

Key facts

- The lands around a command were called the manor.
- Manorial tenants included the cook, miller, baker, and others who helped prepare the meals, handworkers, and spinners (who spun wool).
- Other tenants included sheep keepers, gardeners, and grocers.
- The castle's garden was made up of longhuts and fenced gardens.
- Other craftsmen included carpenters, blacksmiths, and armors.



Attack and defense

Castles were built to be defended, with strong walls and doors. They also needed plenty of storage space for food and a deep well for water, to withstand a long siege if surrounded by enemy soldiers.

Key facts

Castle structures could:

- shoot arrows
- burn invaders over the walls with catapults and other weapons
- slide walls with rollers
- break down walls and doors with battering rams
- try to undermine walls by tunneling beneath them
- use wind to shoot stones or fire



Trebuchet

Castle defenses could:

- shoot arrows
- burn invaders over the walls with catapults
- push away scaling ladders with hooked poles
- burn invaders or catch the invaders off-battering rams
- dig countermines to break into tunnels
- mine together to make their own

Running a Manor

During the Middle Ages, more than ninety percent of the population lived and worked on manors. A manor usually consisted of the lord's house or castle, a village, a church, and the surrounding countryside. The lord and lady of the manor oversaw the running of the estate and the household, but they also had plenty of free time for leisure activities, such as hunting and hawking.

The peasants

The peasants, also known as villeins or serfs, lived in the village. The peasants worked for their lord, who let them have a piece of land for themselves in return for their labor on the manor.

Key facts

- Peasants along with their land, animals, houses, tools, and clothes belonged to their lord and could not leave the manor without permission.
- A vill could become free only by saving enough money to buy a plot of land.
- Life was hard—many peasants lived no longer than 25 years.



Peasant's house

Manor officials

The lord appointed officials to help him run the manor. The most important was the steward, who was a well-paid, powerful figure in the district. His second-in-command was the bailiff.



Key facts

- The steward supervised the daily work, kept accounts of the manor's money, and acted as a judge at the manor court if the lord was away.
- The bailiff allowed peasants and lord skilled craftsmen to repair buildings and tools.
- The bailiff was assisted by the manor's peasant clerks by the other villages.

Manor life

Without machines, all farm work was done by hand, using simple tools. Crops were grown around the village in two or three big fields. Peasants were allowed some land in each field, so the good and bad soil was shared equally between them.



Peasant plowing a field

Key facts

- The peasants lived and farmed their own plots, or strips, of land, but worked together on large jobs such as plowing and hay-making.
- If the harvest was poor, the whole village starved.
- Most peasants had one water mill, owned by the lord, used to grind grain into flour.
- The peasants had to give some of their grain to the lord in exchange for using the mill.
- On some manors, villages might also have to pay to take bread to the lord's oven, and use his wine press for their grapes.
- Every fall, the lord allowed the villeins to let their pigs feed on waste in the peasant woods, in a custom called pannage.

Peasant with his pig in the lord's woods

Eyewitness Workbooks Medieval Life

Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord



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