

# Primary and Secondary Sources on Peasants in Medieval Europe

*Peasants who worked the land of a feudal lord in exchange for protection were called serfs. Although a few peasants were free, most peasants were serfs. Their lives were simple and often uncomfortable. Life revolved around farming the land for the lord. Serfs were allowed to keep very little of what they produced—most went to the lord in exchange for protection. In addition, some of the serf's leftover money or crops was given to the village church. Serfs generally accepted their position in society because the church offered them hope for salvation and a happy life in heaven if they were moral and obedient.*

- A serf's possessions consisted of three or four benches and stools, a trestle table, a chest, one or two iron or brass pots, a little pottery ware, wooden bowls, cups, and spoons, linen towels, wool blankets, iron tools...a reasonably prosperous peasant owned some animals: hens and geese, a few skinny half-wild razor-backed hogs, a cow, perhaps a couple of sheep, and his pair of plow oxen. (LMC, p. 150)
- Houses were built of wattle and daub, that is, of timber framework supporting oak or willow wands covered with a mixture of clay, chopped straw, and cow dung....The roofs were thatched...most of the household ate and slept together in the main room...with an open hearth in the middle and a smoke vent in the roof....The floor, usually of beaten earth, was covered with rushes...part of the family might sleep in a loft reached by ladder and trapdoor...the cattle were housed under the same roof. The kitchen was often in a separate building. (LMC, p. 150)
- The peasants' houses were usually grouped together in two or three streets around the village church...each had a communal well or stream for water, and a windmill to grind corn, and a big brick oven for baking bread...usually these belonged to the lord, who charged the peasants a toll for their use. (MAEL, p. 12)
- For fallowing (letting the fields rest for a year to restore fertility)...the villagers used crop rotation in the...**three-field system**...one field was plowed in the fall and sown with wheat and rye. Each serf planted his own strip of land, all with the same seed.

In the spring, a second field was plowed and sown to oats, peas, beans, barley, and vetches. A third field was left fallow from harvest to harvest. The next year, the field that had been planted with the wheat and rye was planted with the oats, etc.; the fallow field was planted with wheat and rye; and the field that had grown the spring seed was left fallow. (LMC, p. 152)

- The **plowman**...plowed in long narrow strips of “ridge and furrow,” starting just to one side of the center line of his piece of land, plowing the length of the strip, turning at the end and plowing back along the other side, and continuing around...Peas and beans were planted in the furrow (trench), grain on the ridge. (LMC, p. 153)
- Two men operated the plow, the plowman proper grasping the plow handles, or stilts, while his partner drove the **oxen**, walking to their left and shouting commands as he used a whip. (LMC, p. 153)
- **Women serfs** not only worked in the fields alongside the men, but they also generally cared for their husband and children and the household’s needs. They wove clothes out of the fiber of plants and cared for the animals and the garden. Women were also required to wash and repair clothing, make soap and candles, bake bread, and tend to the sick.
- “The tenants (free peasants or serfs who lived on a lord’s land) were obliged to grind their **grain** in the lord’s mill, bake their bread in his oven, press their grapes in his winepress....They had to pay for letting their pigs run in the forest, for cutting wood, and often for catching fish, and for the use of their lord’s weights and measures. They paid him a share of what they raised, and they paid one-tenth of their income to the church besides fees at every baptism, marriage, and death. Even what was left of their produce they were forbidden to sell until the produce of their lord’s land had been sold.” (WKWB, p. 112)
- The peasants helped each other by sharing expensive equipment, such as carts and ploughs, as well as the oxen and horses needed to pull them. At harvest time it was vital that the **whole village work together** to gather the crops quickly, before they were spoiled by rain. If the harvest failed everyone would go **hungry** that winter. (MAEL, p. 12)
- Each **lord of the manor** held a court for his tenants several times a year. They were fined if they did not attend. At the court, the lord’s steward would hear complaints about any tenant who had not paid his rent or done the correct amount of work for

the lord. Questions about the right to inherit land and requests for permission to leave the manor were also discussed at the court. (MAEL, p. 10)

- The men of a medieval village were members of a parish **church** that coincided with the village rather than the manor. The church was usually the only stone building of the village....The parish priest was supported partly by **tithes** (payments from the villagers)—the crop of every tenth acre, partly by offerings on feast days, and partly by...land that belonged to the church that was tilled by tenants. (LMC, p. 163)
- Peasant villages centered around a church, whose preacher was usually a peasant himself who had obtained some education. The church acted as a unifying influence among the peasants, helping to give them a sense of community and offering them some comfort. When serfs did have time off from work, it was to observe and celebrate a Christian holiday.
- Serfs spent most of their life performing difficult labor. The church offered them the hope of **salvation** and the wonderful eternal life in heaven if they did not sin and were obedient. Much of the Christianity preached by the church centered around **obedience**. The relationship between a serf and his lord of the manor was seen as similar to the relationship between man and God—the serf was required to obey his lord and the lord would, in return, protect the serf. Similarly, God would protect individuals who were moral and did what God commanded.
- The Church stressed the idea that “the meek shall inherit the earth.” This provided serfs with the feeling that their lives did have a higher meaning, and that by working hard for their lord they were **doing what God wanted them to do**.