Peasants

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. Peasants supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Their labor freed noblemen and knights to spend their time preparing for war or fighting.

During medieval times, peasants were legally classified as free or serf. These categories had to do with the amount of service owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord. Un-free peasants, or serfs, farmed the lord’s fields and could not leave the lord’s manor. In return for their labor, they received their own small plot of land to farm. Even if a peasant was free, they rarely left their manor.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock (farm animals). But every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths (metalworkers), and other skilled workers. Peasant women worked in the fields when they were needed. They also cared for their children, their homes, and livestock.

Fortunately a few agricultural improvements were discovered during the Middle Ages. The first was the development of a heavier plow. This new plow made deeper cuts in the ground and pushed soil sideways, making farming easier and faster. Less time in the fields, leads to better methods of planting. The three-field system was developed which greatly increased crop production. In this system, one-third of fields are left fallow, or unused, for the year in order to preserve nutrients in the soil. Despite these advancements, peasants were still under a lot of strain from their lords.

Along with the work they performed, peasants and serfs might owe the lord numerous taxes. There was a yearly payment called “head money,” at a fixed amount per person. The lord could demand a tax, known as tallage, whenever he needed money. When a woman married, she, her father, or her husband had to pay a fee called a tithe, worth one-tenth of their income. Peasants were also required to grind their grain at the lord’s mill (the only mill on the manor). As payment, the miller kept portions of the grain for the lord and for himself. Lords could keep any amount they wanted. Peasants found this practice so hateful that some of them hid small hand mills in their houses. If a peasant was found with a hand mill, they would be criminally charged.
Most peasants lived in small, simple houses of one or two rooms. A typical house was made of woven strips of wood covered with straw or mud. Peasants had little furniture or other possessions. There was a hearth fire in the middle of the main room, but often there was no chimney, so it was dark and smoky inside. An entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals.

Peasants ate vegetables, meat such as pork, and dark, coarse bread made of wheat mixed with rye or oatmeal. Almost no one ate beef or chicken. During the winter, they ate pork or fish that had been preserved in salt. Herbs were used widely, to improve flavor and reduce saltiness, or to disguise the taste of meat that was no longer fresh. Despite the hardships they endured, peasants and serfs accepted their lot in life as part of the Church’s teachings. They, like most Christians during the Middle Ages, believed that God determined a person’s place in society.
Activity 7 Peasants

33. What were the responsibilities of peasants in the feudal system?

34. What is the difference between a free peasant and a serf?

35. What is the difference between a serf and a slave?

36. What were two improvements in farming that occurred in the Middle Ages? Describe their impact on the peasants.

1.

2.

37. Draw your own interpretation of the three-field system.

38. Describe the types of taxes that peasants would pay to their lords.

39. Why did most peasants accept their role within the feudal system?

Use the provided sources (Life of a Serf) to complete the following question. Cite specific details from the document.

40. What were some of the difficulties or challenges of being a peasant or serf?
Life of A Serf

To cheer up their children who chafe for their food
And they themselves suffer surely much hunger
And woe in the violence with waking at nights
And rising to rock an often restless cradle
Both to card and to comb, to clout and to wash,
To rub and to reel yarn, rushes to peel.
So tis pity to proclaim or in poetry to show
The woe of these women who work in such cottages:
And of many other men who much woe suffer.
Crippled with hunger and with thirst, they keep up appearances.
And are abashed for to beg, and will not be blazoned
What they need form their neighbors at noon and at evensong.
This I know full well, for the world has taught me,
How churls and afflicted who have many children.
And have no coin but their craft to clothe and to keep them. (Spielvogel)