

Life in a Medieval Castle

A Look Beyond the Myths



Lesson Overview

Many people imagine medieval castles as places of luxury, comfort, and constant feasting. Movies and video games often show castles as glamorous homes for kings and queens. In reality, **life in a medieval castle was often uncomfortable, crowded, noisy, and difficult**, even for nobles.

This lesson explores what daily life was really like for **lords, ladies, servants, soldiers, and children** who lived in or around medieval castles.

Historical Source Credit

This lesson is **adapted and simplified** from:

“Life in a Medieval Castle”

© 1997–2005 **Lise Hull**, Castle Learning Center

(Used for educational purposes)

Life Inside the Castle

Living Conditions

Castles were made of stone, which kept them cool in summer—but **cold and damp most of the year**. There was **no central heating**. Only the lord and his family usually enjoyed fireplaces, thick blankets, and tapestries to block drafts.

- Servants and soldiers slept in towers or shared rooms
- Many slept fully clothed to stay warm
- Privacy was rare, even for nobles

Bathing was difficult. Water had to be heated and carried in wooden tubs. Toilets, called **garderobes**, were often stone seats built into the castle walls—cold, windy, and uncomfortable.

A Typical Day in a Castle

Morning

- The day began at **sunrise**, often announced by a guard's trumpet
- Servants woke first to light fires, cook food, and clean
- Breakfast was small—usually bread and drink

The lord and lady washed using basins of water and then attended **morning mass** in the chapel.

The Lord's Role

The lord was more than just a noble—he was the **manager and ruler of the castle and surrounding lands**.

His responsibilities included:

- Collecting taxes and rent
- Settling legal disputes
- Managing land and workers
- Providing protection

When the lord was away, the **steward (seneschal)** ran the castle. This was a powerful and important position requiring organization and trust.

The Lady of the Castle

Noble women had responsibilities too. The lady:

- Managed servants and household supplies
- Oversaw food preparation and clothing production
- Supervised education of young boys (pages)
- Spent time weaving, sewing, and managing domestic life

She was supported by ladies-in-waiting and chambermaids but was still expected to work daily.

Education, Soldiers, and Training

Children and Training

- Boys became **pages at age 7**, learning manners, reading, religion, and music
- At **14**, they became **squires**, training under knights
- At **21**, they could become knights

Castle Defense

Castles were military centers. The **garrison** included:

- Knights and squires
- Archers and crossbowmen
- Guards and watchmen

Each had a specific role in defending the castle.

Work, Noise, and Smells

Castles were busy places:

- Blacksmiths hammered metal
- Animals lived nearby
- Craftsmen made shoes, armor, barrels, and tools
- Fires burned constantly

It was loud, crowded, and often unpleasant—but necessary for survival.

Food and Meals

The main meal, **dinner**, was eaten between **10 a.m. and noon**.

Castle meals might include:

- Meat (pork or beef)
- Vegetables (beans, peas)
- Fruit (apples, pears)

Wealthy castles also enjoyed rare foods like sugar, rice, almonds, or raisins. Meals often included **music and entertainment**.

Peasants ate simpler meals—mostly bread, vegetables, and occasional meat.

Leisure and Holidays

Despite hard work, people still found time for:

- Festivals and holidays
- Music and storytelling
- Games and social gatherings

Life was difficult, but people valued moments of joy and community.

Discussion & Written Response Questions

(Answer in complete sentences.)

1. How was life in a medieval castle **different from how movies usually show it**?
2. In what ways did the **lord depend on his servants**, and how did servants depend on the lord?
3. How was the life of a **noble woman** different from that of a peasant woman?
4. Compare the **food eaten in castles** to the food eaten by peasants.
5. Even though their lives were different, what are **three things lords and peasants had in common**?

Optional Extension Activity

“A Day in the Castle” Journal

Have students write a one-page diary entry from the perspective of:

- A servant
- A squire
- The lady of the castle
- A castle guard

They must describe:

- Living conditions
- Daily tasks
- Food
- One challenge they faced that day

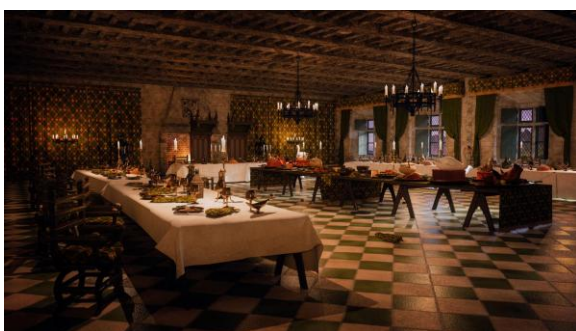
If you'd like, I can:

- Turn this into a **one-page handout**
- Create a **Google Classroom-ready version**
- Add **vocabulary terms** and a **quiz**
- Adapt it for **middle school vs. high school**

followed by a **student-friendly comparison table**.

Food in the Middle Ages: Lord vs. Peasant

Food was one of the clearest signs of social class during the Middle Ages. What you ate depended heavily on **wealth, status, and access to land**. While everyone needed food to survive, **lords and peasants ate very different diets**.



Why Food Was Different

- Lords controlled land, animals, and trade
- Peasants worked the land but kept only a small share of what they produced
- Meat, sugar, and spices were expensive and rare
- Most peasants lived on what they could grow themselves

Comparison Table: Medieval Diets

Category	Food of a Lord or Noble	Food of a Peasant
Main Foods	Beef, pork, venison, poultry	Bread, pottage (thick soup)
Meat	Eaten often, sometimes daily	Rare; usually only on holidays
Bread	White bread made from wheat	Dark bread made from barley or rye
Vegetables	Beans, peas, onions, herbs	Beans, peas, cabbage, onions
Fruit	Apples, pears, berries, dried fruits	Seasonal fruit when available
Spices & Sugar	Rare spices, honey, sugar	Almost never used
Drinks	Wine, ale	Ale, water (when safe)
Meals	Large meals with many courses	Small, simple meals
Entertainment	Music, stories, minstrels	None during meals

Key Takeaways for Students

- **Food showed social status** in medieval society
 - Lords ate for comfort and display, especially during feasts
 - Peasants ate mainly to survive, not for enjoyment
 - Both groups relied heavily on **bread and vegetables**
-

Quick Check (Optional Exit Ticket)

Have students answer one of the following in 2–3 sentences:

- Why was meat considered a luxury during the Middle Ages?
- Which medieval diet would be healthier? Why?
- How does food today show differences in wealth or status?