

# Medieval Times

*Medieval* is an adjective used to describe anything pertaining to the Middle Ages. It comes from two Latin words, *medius* and *aevum*, meaning “middle” and “age” respectively. The term “middle age” was first used by some intellectuals of the Renaissance to refer to a period in European history between ancient times and their own period. Although historians disagree as to the exact dates, most agree that the Middle Ages began around 476 AD with the end of the Western Roman Empire and ended about 1000 years later. Some mark the end with the fall of Constantinople in 1453; others with the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492; and still others with the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1520.

The Early Middle Ages – often called the Dark Ages – were, generally speaking, a dangerous period of time. The lack of a central government, along with the constant threat of war and famine, made the weak dependent upon the powerful for protection. A feudal society was the result. It gave those less powerful the assurance that they could depend upon their more powerful neighbours for assistance in their time of need. The most important feature of the feudal system was the granting of a **fief**. A fief, or fee, was the granting of an estate by a lord to his vassal in exchange for homage and service. The vassal, in turn, gave the use of the land to the peasants, who worked the land for him.

Another characteristic of the Middle Ages was the importance of the Church. Because almost everyone in Western Europe belonged to the same Church – the Catholic Church – the Church’s power was great. In fact, this period of time is sometimes called the Age of Faith,

Because the Middle Ages covered such a long time span, there were many changes over the years. An important development was the growth of towns. During the Early Middle Ages, there was little urban life. Many of the towns that had existed during the years of the Roman Empire had disappeared. During the height of the feudal age there were basically three social classes: the clergy, the nobles and the peasants. With the rise in the importance of towns, however, came a fourth class: the burgesses, or townspeople. As this new class gained power, the importance of feudalism and the strength of the nobles began to diminish. Kings often found support among the townspeople, who favoured a more lasting form of government. You might say that the growth of medieval towns marked the first step towards the birth of nations and the formation of a Western Europe similar to the one we know today.

# Chansons de Geste

**Chansons de geste**, meaning songs of deed, were French epic poems – most over one thousand lines – written between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. They dealt with the exploits of Charlemagne and his followers and were a mixture of historical fact and legend. In these chansons, Charlemagne was portrayed as the champion of Christendom in its struggle against the Muslim foe.

The *Chanson de Roland*, written about 1100, is the most famous chanson de geste. Although based upon a historic battle, the Battle of Roncevalles, the event was greatly modified. In reality, what took place at Roncevalles was not much more than a skirmish against the Basques living in Spain. The chanson magnified it into a full-fledged battle and turned the Basques into Muslims, a greater foe.



# Castle Life

The castle was first and foremost a fortress, designed to protect the interests of the lord or king who owned it. But the castle served other functions as well. It provided living quarters for the lord, his family and their servants; barracks for the lord's soldiers; homes for the craftspeople; an office from which to manage the lord's estate; and a court to enforce law and order. In times of danger, the bailey courtyard also provided shelter for the villagers who lived nearby.

In many ways a great castle was very much like a small town. Blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, armourers, spinners, millers and others were there to fill the needs of the castle occupants. Often there were minstrels, troubadours (poet-musicians), jugglers, acrobats and others to entertain the lord, his family and his many guests.

Running a castle was a very big job. When the lord was away from the castle – at another of his castles, at war, on a crusade or seeing to some other business – the lady of the castle was in charge. The lord and lady had a large staff to help them. One of the most important staff members was the chief steward. Although a peasant, he was very powerful; he was overseer of the household and was entrusted with the care and education of the lord's children.



# Above the Salt

Salt was a precious commodity during the Middle Ages. It was placed in beautiful saltcellars and given the place of honour at the lord's table.

Because of its importance, the word "salt" has acquired connotations of great worth. Read each of the following expressions. For each, write an original sentence that conveys the meaning of the expression.

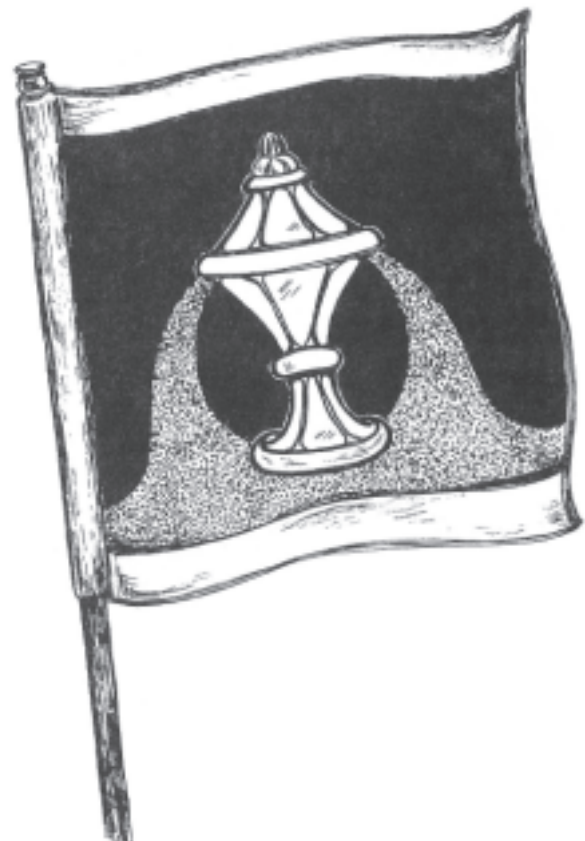
**Salt of the Earth**

**Above the Salt**

**To Salt a Mine**

**Worth One's Salt**

**Salary**



**CHALLENGE:** How is the word 'salary' connected to the word 'salt'?

# A Letter Home

Pretend that you are a squire living at home of your father's lord. Write a letter home describing a typical day. Be sure to include how you feel about it.

