

## Western European Social Structure –Postclassical Period

**Overview** The period of time covered by the Western European Middle Ages is vast, over a millennium by any account, and the societies at play in that period vary greatly from one another. However there is a normative tenor to the social organizations of the period, itself rooted in the inheritance from the Roman Empire, the overwhelmingly agricultural demands of daily life, and the distinctive blend of the Catholic Church with aristocratic values.

**The three estates** By a broad, and often repeated formula, mediaeval Western European society functioned around three ‘estates,’ or broad social conditions: the clergy, the warriors, the laborers; ‘those who fight, those who pray, those who work.’ The large omission from this group, which is otherwise intact, is the nobility: for European societies were consistently monarchical, depending on *father-kings* to make and enact the laws, *queens*--not infrequently the power behind the monarch, *princes*--forever jostling for the succession, *princesses*--bait for profitable foreign alliances and land consolidations, and a gaggle of aristocrats, self-interested advisors and ministers forever on the look-out for the good of the kingdom and the good of number one.

**Labor** Ninety percent of both the populations and the GNP of mediaeval states was based on agriculture. Mechanization was on the rise--with ploughs, horse collars, horse shoes, and three field planting experiments--yet human labor was the overwhelming fact of life on the feudal estates of mediaeval Europe. It is customary to divide the providers of that labor into three groups of peasantry: freemen, serfs, and slaves. *Freemen* possessed some land, but worked for the feudal lord under whose sponsorship they owned their land. *Serfs* were landless servants of manorial lords. *Slaves*, less free than serfs, were simply possessions of the lords of the manor, to be disposed of at will.

**The clergy** The clergy were the active priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, which from the early centuries of the post classical era, as early as the third century C.E. in Rome, had acquired power and high administrative influence within the Roman Empire. The clergy, from Cardinals and Bishops of the Church to the humblest monks and nuns, were charged with the spiritual welfare of their people, and enjoined by Saint Paul to ‘pray ceaselessly.’

**The fighters** The clergy were deputed to pray for the community, the laborers to feed the community, and the warriors--among whom the horse riding knights were the symbol of mediaeval prowess and protectiveness--were expected to defend the community. There was, of course, a long story to be told, of the development of military skills throughout the Middle Ages, but no other sector of the military won the supreme symbolic attention reserved for the cavalry riding nobility constituting the institution of *chivalry*, from its intimate association with the culture of the *horse, cheval* in French. From 1170-1220 dates the high period of Chivalry, promoted by Church concerns for moral improvement, fine ladies’ longing for finer relations between the sexes, and the nobility’s general interest in fine poetry and song, which were products of Chivalry and the cult of woman.

### Readings

Backman, Clifford, *The Worlds of Mediaeval Europe*, Oxford, 2003.

Smith, Julia, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History, 500-1000*, Oxford, 2005.

### Discussion questions

On the whole, would you consider the Mediaeval class structure mobile and flexible? Or stiff and unyielding? Who was able to move up the social ladder--and under what circumstances?

How were slaves acquired in the Middle Ages? Were there regulations, say from the Church, about ‘proper treatment of slaves’?

How were ordinary knights converted into ‘chivalric gentlemen’? What kinds of efforts did courtly ladies make, to ‘civilize their men’?