Chapter 19 Medieval Europe
(A.D. 500 - 1475)

The Geography of Europe and
Feudalism and the Rise of Towns

Part 1: Geography of Europe

Guiding Question: How did geography shape life in Europe after the fall of Rome?

During the 400s, Germanic groups invaded the Western Roman Empire. In a.d. 476, these groups overthrew the last emperor in Rome and brought the Empire to an end. Europe then entered a new era called the Middle Ages, or medieval times. This was a 1,000-year period between ancient and modern times. During the Middle Ages, Western Europe was divided into many kingdoms, and Catholic Christianity strongly influenced society.

Physical geography shaped Europe's development. The continent of Europe is a huge peninsula, with many smaller peninsulas branching out from it. As a result, most land in Europe lies within 300 miles (483 km) of a seacoast. This encouraged trade and helped the European economy to grow.
Rivers and Seas

Rivers also played an important role in Europe's growth. Major rivers, such as the Rhine, Danube, Seine, and Po, flow from inland mountains into the oceans and seas surrounding the continent. These rivers are navigable, or wide and deep enough for ships to use. People and goods can sail easily from inland areas to the open sea and, from there, to other parts of the world.

Europe's seas and rivers provided protection as well as possibilities for trade. The English Channel, for example, separated the islands of Britain and Ireland from the rest of Europe. As a result, these people were far enough away to be largely safe from the many wars fought on Europe's mainland. They were able to develop their own governments and societies. In mainland Europe, wide rivers like the Rhine also kept groups of people separated. Because of this separation and isolation, many different cultures developed.

Europe also has many mountain ranges. In the southwest, the Pyrenees isolated what is now Spain and Portugal from the rest of Europe. In the middle of the continent, the Alps separated Italy from central Europe. The Carpathians cut off what is now Ukraine and Russia from southeast Europe. The mountains, like the rivers, made it difficult for one group to control all of Europe and encouraged the growth of independent territories.

Part 1 Progress Check Explaining Why were rivers important to the peoples of Europe?
Part 2: The Feudal Order

Guiding Question: How did Europeans try to bring order to their society after the fall of Charlemagne’s empire?

After the fall of Charlemagne’s empire, strong governments collapsed in Western Europe. Kings lost much of their power. Local land-owning nobles became increasingly important in political affairs. They raised armies. They also collected taxes and imposed laws on the people living on their lands.

When invaders swept through Europe, people turned to the nobles for protection. Nobles governed and protected the people in return for services, such as fighting in a noble’s army or farming the land. This led to a new political and social order known as feudalism (FYOO • duh • LIH • zuhm).

By 1000, Europe’s kingdoms were divided into hundreds of feudal territories. Most of these territories were small. A noble’s castle was the center of each territory.

Lords, Vassals, and Knights

Feudalism was based on ties of loyalty and duty among members of the nobility. Nobles were both lords and vassals. A lord was a high-ranking noble who had power over others. A vassal (VA • suhl) was a lower-ranking noble who served a lord. In return, the lord protected the vassal.

The tie binding a lord and his vassal was declared in a public ceremony. The vassal took an oath and placed his hands between those of his lord. Then the vassal swore:

Sir, I enter your homage [service] and faith and become your man by mouth and hands [that is, by taking the oath and placing his hands between those of the lord], and I swear and promise to keep faith and loyalty to you against all others."

—from A Source Book for Medieval History, 1905

A vassal helped his lord in battle. In exchange for the vassal’s military service, a lord gave his vassal land. The property granted to a vassal was known as a fief (FEEF).

Many lower-ranking vassals were known as knights (NYTS). They were armed warriors who fought on horseback. In early medieval times, warriors in Western Europe mostly fought on foot. In the 700s, knights began to use a foot piece called
a stirrup. Stirrups allowed an armored warrior to sit on a horse and attack while he held a lance, or long, heavy spear.

Nobles and Knights in Medieval Society

During the Middle Ages, nobles were the most powerful people in Europe. Great lords had more land and wealth than ordinary knights. Yet, a shared belief in the feudal order united lords and knights in defending their society.

Knights followed the code of chivalry (SHIH • vuhl • ree). These rules stated that a knight was to be brave and obey his lord. A knight was also required to respect women of noble birth, honor the Church, and help people. Many of today's ideas about manners come from the code of chivalry.

Knights trained for war by fighting one another in tournaments, or special contests. The most popular event was the joust. Two knights on horseback carrying lances galloped toward each other and tried to knock each other off.

Nobles were often at war and away from their castles. In their absence, their wives or daughters ran the estates.

The castle was at the center of the estate. Every castle had two parts. The first was a motte (MAHT), or steep-sided hill. The second part was the bailey, an open space next to the motte. Both parts were encircled by high walls. The castle keep, its central building, was constructed on the motte.

In the basement of the keep, tools and food were stored. On the ground floor were kitchens and stables. Above these was a great hall. The lord held court and met visitors here.

Part 2 Progress Check: Identifying
What were the rules of behavior that knights followed?
Part 3: The Medieval Manor

Guiding Question: How did most Europeans live and work during the Middle Ages?

Nobles, knights, and peasants (or farmers) depended on the land for everything they needed. The lands of a fief consisted of manors. A manor was a farming community that a noble ran and peasants worked. It usually consisted of the noble's castle, the surrounding fields, and a peasant village.

Two Groups of Peasants

During the Middle Ages, the vast number of Europeans were peasants living and working on manors. There were two groups of peasants—freemen and serfs. Freemen paid the noble for the right to farm the land. They worked only on their own land and had rights under the law. They moved wherever and whenever they wished.

Most peasants, however, were serfs (SUHRFS). Serfs and their descendants were tied to the manor. They could not own property, move to another area, or marry without the noble's permission. Serfs were not enslaved, however. Nobles could not sell them or take away the land they farmed to support themselves. Nobles were also expected to protect their serfs.

Serfs worked long hours in the fields and did many services for the nobles. They spent three days of the week working the noble's land and the rest of the week farming their own. However, they had to give part of their own crops to the noble. They also had to pay him for the use of the village's mill, bread oven, and winepress.

It was not easy for serfs to gain their freedom. One way was to escape to the towns. If a serf was not caught and remained in a town for more than a year, he or she was considered free. By the end of the Middle Ages, serfs in many areas were allowed to buy their freedom.
The Lives of the Peasants

Peasants—both freemen and serfs—lived in villages clustered around an open area called a village green. Their homes were simple cottages. The poorest peasants lived in a single room.

Peasants worked year round. In late winter and spring, they planted crops of beans, peas, barley, and oats. In early summer, they weeded fields and sheared sheep. In late summer, they harvested grain. They also slaughtered livestock and salted the meat for winter storage. Many peasants tended small vegetable gardens.

During times of leisure, peasant life centered on the church and the village green. Peasants took a break from work and went to church on Sunday and Catholic feast days. Certain feast days were celebrated with singing and dancing on the green. Peasant men took part in sports such as wrestling and archery.

Besides working in the fields, peasant women raised children and prepared the family's food. They made dark, heavy bread, which peasants ate with vegetables, milk, nuts, and fruits. They also ate eggs and meat, washed down with ale.

Improvements in Farming

Manors usually produced only enough food to support the peasants and the lord's household. However, over time, Europeans developed new ways to increase the number of crops they could grow, as well as how much the crops produced.

One major improvement was a heavy wheeled plow with an iron blade. The new plow made deeper cuts in the dense clay soil. The heavier plow meant peasant farmers spent less time in the fields. The horse collar was another important invention. The collar enabled a horse to pull a plow. Horses could pull plows faster than oxen could. This
invention made it possible for peasants to produce more
food.

Water and wind power also became important during the
Middle Ages. Europe's rivers provided power for water mills
to grind grain into flour. In places without rivers, windmills
could be used for grinding grain, pumping water, and sawing
wood.

Another improvement in agriculture was crop rotation.
Peasants used three fields rather than two to keep the soil
fertile. One field was planted in the fall, a second one in
springtime, and the third field was left unplanted. With this
system, only one-third of the land was left unused at a time,
rather than one-half. More crops could be grown as a result.
As food production increased, the population of Europe
grew.

**Part 3 Progress Check: Comparing and Contrasting**

How did the lives of freemen and serfs differ?

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**Part 4: The Growth of Towns and Cities**

*Guiding Question: How did increased trade change life in medieval Europe?*

When the Roman Empire collapsed, trade throughout
Europe sharply declined. Bridges and roads fell into ruin.
Law and order largely disappeared. Most people spent their
entire lives in the farming villages where they were born.
They knew very little about the rest of the world.
By 1100, feudalism had made Europe safer. Nobles repaired roads, arrested bandits, and enforced the law. Meanwhile, new technology enabled people to produce more food and goods. Europe’s population grew for the first time since the fall of Rome.

Peasants began to make cloth and metal products. Nobles also sought luxury items, such as sugar, spices, silks, and dyes. These goods came from the East.

**Wealthy Trading Centers**

As Europe's trade increased, towns grew larger. Several cities became wealthy from trade. The cities of Venice (VEH • nuhs), Pisa, and Genoa in Italy built fleets of trading ships. They became major trading centers. By 1200, these Italian cities controlled the profitable Mediterranean trade with the Byzantine Empire.

Meanwhile, Flanders—a region that is today part of Belgium—became a center of trade on Europe’s northern coast. Towns in Flanders, such as Bruges and Ghent, were known for wool. Merchants from all over Western Europe traveled to these towns to trade their goods for woolen cloth.

Trade fairs were established in northern France. At these fairs, northern European merchants bartered their products. They traded furs, tin, honey, and wool for swords and cloth from northern Italy and silks, sugar, and spices from Asia.

As trade increased, merchants demanded payment in gold and silver coins. People again began using money to buy goods. Some merchants set up banks.

**Government in Cities**

The rise of trade and cities created a new middle class in medieval Europe. People in the middle class had some wealth as a result of their roles as merchants, bankers, or artisans. They became important leaders in the cities.

Eventually, medieval towns began to set up their own governments. Only males were considered citizens. In many cities, the citizens elected the members of a city council. These elected officials served as lawmakers and judges.
Under the feudal system, towns were often part of the territory belonging to a noble. As a result, nobles tried to control town affairs. Townspeople, however, disliked owing taxes and services to nobles. They wanted freedom to make their own laws. As their wealth increased, townspeople forced nobles to grant them basic rights. These included the right to buy and sell property and the freedom from having to serve in the army.

What Did Guilds Do?

Trade encouraged townspeople to produce many different kinds of products. Craftspeople organized guilds, or business groups. Each craft had its own guild.

Guilds controlled business and trade in a town. The guild set the price for a product or service. Guilds also set and enforced standards of quality for products.

In addition, guilds decided who could join a trade. An apprentice, or trainee, learned a trade from a master artisan who provided room and board but no wages. After completing this training, the apprentice became a journeyman who worked under a master for a daily wage.

Life in a Medieval City

Medieval cities were surrounded by stone walls. Inside the walls, stone public buildings and wooden houses were jammed close together. Candles and fireplaces were used for light and heat.

Towns could be unhealthy places. Wood and coal fires in people’s homes and shops filled the air with ashes and smoke. Sewers were open, and there was little concern for cleanliness.

City women kept house, cared for children, and managed the family’s money. Wives often helped their husbands in their trade, sometimes carrying on the trade after their husbands’ deaths.

Part 4 Progress Check: Analyzing How did guilds affect the way medieval townspeople made a living?