



Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 5: Church,
Town, and Country

Outline:

In this lecture, Dr. Junius Johnson explores what normal life was like for a person in the Middle Ages, as experienced in the country, town, and church.

Country Life

- **Homes**
 - Peasants (i.e. country-dwellers) lived in small homes ordered around a fireplace.
 - From French *paysan*, rural.
 - Houses probably lacked chimneys and had small, paneless windows with wooden shutters for defense and privacy.
 - Interiors were dim due to the lack of natural light and were smoky.
 - The house was not a place to hang out; people were outside as much as possible.
 - Cooking was often done outside over a firepit on nice days.
 - Candles were rare and considered an unneeded luxury.
 - In summer, people would go to bed shortly after dark or enjoy the cool evening and the stars.
 - Winter nights were for sitting around the fire and telling stories.
 - Homes were often painted white or bright colors, reflecting a love for color.
 - Beds were stuffed with straw for comfort.
 - Floors were hard-packed dirt, regularly swept and sometimes covered with straw in winter.
 - Domestic animals might share the house with humans for protection, though a connected covered stall might be used when possible.
- **Clothing**



- Men typically wore a wool tunic belted over trousers, while women wore a wool dress over a wool underskirt.
- A cowl was worn to protect the head from wind and heat.
- Clothing evidence is scarce, mostly based on pictures and descriptions, making it hard to represent the full range of dress accurately.
- **Chores**
 - Household tasks included cooking, cleaning, making clothes, washing clothes, construction, and repair.
 - Washing was done outdoors in a stream or wash basin, with clothes laid out or hung to dry.
 - Stocking the woodpile for winter was a major task, often taking months to complete.
 - Children gathered small sticks, while men chopped and split wood.
 - House repairs due to weather were done quickly in summer and autumn, with proper repairs made in winter.
- **Farming**
 - Farm life was busy, with various tasks throughout the year.
 - Late winter/early spring involved plowing, fertilizing, and sowing seeds by hand.
 - Fertilizer was made from animal and possibly human excrement, managed in a compost pile.
 - Weeding was a constant job shared by men, women, and children.
 - Fruit trees needed pruning; young trees in late spring, mature trees in winter.
 - Children scared birds away from the seeds using drums and bells.
 - Sheep were shorn in summer.
 - Hay harvest in June was crucial for roofs, bedding, fodder, and floor covering in cold climates.
 - Main harvest in August and September involved everyone in the village working long hours.
 - Wheat was cut, bundled, threshed, and winnowed to separate grain from chaff.
 - Finishing the harvest was critical for winter survival and was celebrated with a harvest festival.
 - Egg harvesting was year-round, and berry-picking occurred in summer and autumn.



- Mills powered by animals, water, or wind were used to grind grain into flour.
- Some animals were butchered in November and December, with meat smoked for winter consumption.
- Bread from milled grain was a staple, especially in households with scarce meat.
- Lack of chimneys helped in smoking meat, which was hung from the rafters.
- **Blacksmithing**
 - The blacksmith made essential tools such as plowshares, hammers, tongs, fish-hooks, horseshoes, spades, shovels, hoes, and scythes.
- **Food**
 - Peasants ate mainly what they grew on their farms, with dark rye bread as a year-round staple.
 - Winter provided the most free time for peasants, allowing for projects like repairs, making clothes, and weaving baskets.

City Life

- **Houses**
 - The townhouse developed in 1100 to maximize space within city walls and proximity to customers.
 - Townhouses were narrow, often three or four stories tall, and versatile with attic space.
 - Most were wooden; stone required significant wealth.
 - Houses were often painted in bright colors, serving as a form of address.
 - Inside, walls were covered with plaster or wood paneling, sometimes with linen, embroidery, or tapestries.
 - First-floor floors were stone slabs or tile, upper floors had wood floors with mats made of rushes.
 - Thatched roofs were forbidden due to fire hazards.
 - This regulation was often ignored because thatch was cheaper than clay tiles or shingles.
 - The first floor typically housed the trade shop with shutters for street stalls.
 - The second floor had a solar (living and dining room) and kitchen with a common fireplace.
 - The third floor contained sleeping spaces, with mattresses stuffed with straw, wool, or down (based on wealth).



- Additional floors housed elder children, unmarried female relatives, parents, guests,
 - Apprentices and servants would normally sleep in the attic.
- All land belonged to the king and was part of a lord's fiefdom, rented out for building and living.
- Townhouses were sometimes split, with various floors rented out to different individuals.
- **Economic and Social Structure**
 - A burgher typically worked a trade as there was no space for farming in cities.
 - Cities remained small to be sustained by daily market food supplies.
 - In 1100, London had about 15,000 people.
 - This grew to about 80,000 by 1300.
 - Many towns were feudal-free zones to allow craftsmen to focus on their trades.
 - Common trades included carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors, leatherworkers, bakers, cobblers, brewers, weavers, dyers, bookbinders, painters, masons, embroiderers, candlemakers, bricklayers, coopers, goldsmiths, saddlers, shipwrights, cartwrights, and masons.
 - Women had limited opportunities to work as shopkeepers or pub owners due to domestic responsibilities.
- **Domestic Work**
 - Women managed the household, including buying groceries, emptying chamber pots, and buying household implements.
 - Groceries were bought from the market, which was a large open space for traders.
 - Domestic errands involved trips to various craftsmen for household needs.
 - Clothes required mending and laundry was done at local water sources, fostering social interactions among women.
 - Children helped with errands and played freely until old enough (6 or 7) for more responsibilities.
- **City Structure and Guilds**
 - Cities were divided into quarters for different trades, with undesirable trades (eg. tanners and leatherworkers) placed on the edges.
 - Trades needing water access were placed near rivers or water sources.



- Some trades were intermixed for convenience.
- Guilds regulated trades, set standards, and conducted inspections.
- Guildmasters held significant power, often becoming city mayors.
- **Food Supply**
 - Burghers relied on food brought from farms outside the city.
 - Regular access to meat was available through city butchers.
 - Cellars could store food and sometimes contained iceboxes, though not year-round.

The Church

- **City Priest**
 - The church in the city served as a church, school, and hospital all in one.
 - The city priest attended to a variety of needs, including presiding over funerals, weddings, and services on Sundays and holy days.
 - The role was multifaceted and demanding, requiring the priest to be involved in numerous community activities.
- **Country Parson**
 - The country priest often had a large, dispersed area of responsibility, necessitating frequent travel.
 - Due to the distance between communities, the priest might only lead worship in a community once a month.
 - In his absence, the dead were buried as needed, with funerals held later.
 - Marriages could be conducted without the priest present and then blessed upon his next visit.
 - This was probably not common though.
 - Some communities relied on nearby monasteries for priestly duties, providing a more consistent religious presence.
 - In this sense, the monastery acted like a “feudal lord.”
 - Serfs could be attached to the monastery.
- **Conclusion**
 - City life might seem preferable because it resembles modern life, but it had significant drawbacks, including smell, filth, noise and cycles of plague.
 - Preference for city or country life depended on various factors, similar to choices made today.