

# How Did the Social Structure During the Middle Ages Reflect the Worldview of the Time?

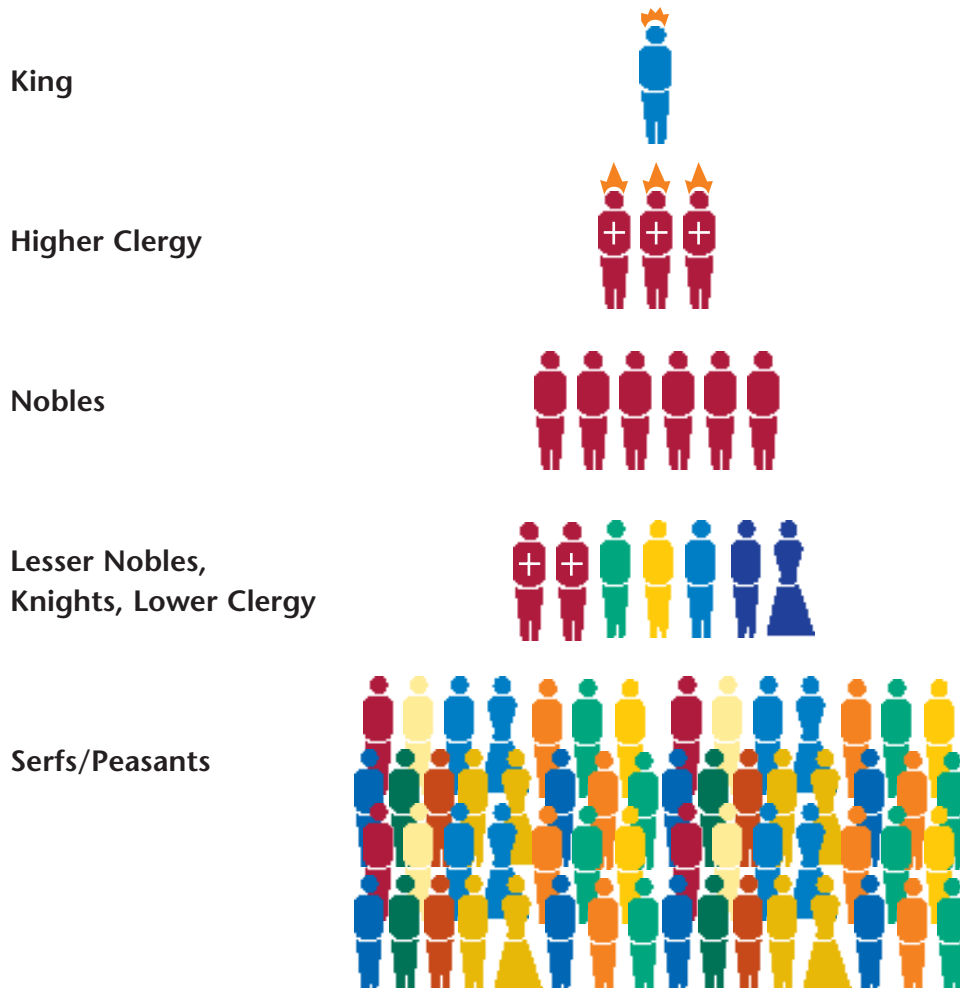
After the fall of the Roman Empire, the **feudal system** developed in much of Europe. In this system, monarchs often granted land to important nobles in return for their military support. In other cases, powerful landholding nobles were persuaded through **diplomacy** to form **alliances** and give support to a central monarch. The nobles promised to provide the monarch with soldiers and supplies in times of war, as well as support through taxes. They often subdivided their lands to lesser nobles or knights. Most of the common people were serfs — peasants were the property of their lords and worked the land for them. They were allowed to have their own houses but could not move to any other place. They had to give part of their crops and other products to the nobles who, in turn, sent much of it to the king and queen. The serfs also served as soldiers in time of war. In return, the nobles offered them protection from invaders.

**feudal system:** a political-economic-social system of landholding, in place in much of Europe in the Middle Ages. Class structure and roles were very rigid.

**diplomacy:** the skill or tact in handling negotiations, especially in government

**alliance:** a formal agreement to cooperate

**hierarchical:** based on classes of status or authority ranked one above the other



The social system in the feudal system was a **hierarchical** class structure. The monarch was the most powerful. The higher priests and clergy, who often owned land and serfs, had status and power just above that of the powerful nobles. Knights and lesser nobles, along with the lower clergy, were next in the hierarchy. The serfs, although making up the majority of the population (often 90% or more) had the least power and were at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

*Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, a book of hours, Limbourg brothers, 1412–1416. There are no photographs of the Renaissance, but information can be found from paintings and drawings. These drawings come from a book of hours owned by a French Duke — Jean, Duc de Berry. Books of hours were beautifully illustrated books of prayers for certain hours during the day. These were expensive and spectacular works of art, so ownership was generally limited to royalty, nobility, and the wealthy. The illustration on the left shows a peasant using an ox-drawn plough; in the background, peasants tend vines, herd sheep, and prepare to sow grain. On the right, the Duc de Berry is shown in a lavish blue robe, with ladies and attendants. In the background, boatmen net fish in a pond, and the château and its garden can be seen. What do these pages tell you about the lives of nobles and peasants? Might you guess about differences in their worldviews?

The identities of the serfs were tied to their lord. Their children would automatically be serfs at birth — moving outside a person’s class was never a thought. A person’s ability to change from the social class they were born into was not a part of the medieval worldview within the rigid social and government structures of the feudal system. The religious worldview also played a part in people’s acceptance of the way things were, as people believed their situation was God’s will and His will was not to be questioned.

Society was largely divided between the rich and the poor. Nobles and lords lived in huge castles or fortified manor houses. The servants who worked in the castle at jobs such as cooking, cleaning, or making weapons, also lived in the castle. Outside the castle walls, the serfs or peasants lived in huts.



### REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. If you were a member of the family of serfs who lived in the small hut, what would be your daily concerns? How might you describe your identity — who you are, what you value, where you see yourself belonging? How do you think a family member living in the manor house would answer the same questions? How do you think the perspectives would differ? Would the worldviews of serfs and nobles have similarities?
2. How does the story of Fibonacci show that one individual can have a huge impact on a society?