In a text produced at the court of Anglo-Saxon king Alfred, Christian society is described as composed of three orders: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. This image of society became popular in the High Middle Ages, especially among people who worried that the social organization might be breaking down. Such people asserted that the three orders had been established by God and that every person had been assigned a fixed place in the social order.

This three-part model does not fully describe medieval society, however. There were degrees of wealth and status within each group. The model does not take townspeople and the emerging commercial classes (see Chapter 11) into consideration. Its categorization of “those who pray” disregards people who were not Christian, such as Jews, Muslims, and pagans. Those who used the model, generally bishops and other church officials, ignored the fact that each of these groups was made up of both women and men; they spoke only of warriors, monks, and farmers. Despite—or perhaps because of—these limitations, the model of the three orders was a powerful mental construct. We can use it to organize our investigation of life in the High Middle Ages, though we can broaden our categories to include groups and issues that medieval authors did not.
Chapter Preview

- What was village life like in medieval Europe?
- How did religion shape everyday life in medieval Europe?
- What roles did nobles play in medieval society?
- What roles did monks and nuns play in medieval life?
What was village life like in medieval Europe?

Since villagers did not perform what were considered “noble” deeds, the aristocratic monks and clerics who wrote the records that serve as historical sources did not spend time or precious writing materials on the peasantry. When common people were mentioned, it was usually with contempt or in terms of the services and obligations they owed. There were exceptions. In the early twelfth century Honorius (huh-NAWR-ee-uhs), a monk and teacher at the monastery of Autun, wrote: “What do you say about the agricultural classes? Most of them will be saved because they live simply and feed God’s people by means of their sweat.”

Slavery, Serfdom, and Upward Mobility

When discussing the three orders, medieval theologians lumped everyone who worked the land into the category of “those who work,” but in fact there were many levels of peasants ranging from outright slaves to free and very rich farmers. The High Middle Ages was a period of considerable fluidity with significant social mobility, particularly because people’s legal status was based on memory and traditions, not on written documents.

The number of slaves who worked the land declined steadily in the High Middle Ages. Those who remained tended to live with wealthier peasant families or with lords, doing whatever work their masters ordered. Most rural people in western Europe during this period were serfs rather than slaves, though the number of slaves who worked the land declined steadily in the High Middle Ages.
distinction between slave and serf was not always clear. Both lacked freedom and both were subject to the arbitrary will of one person, the lord. Unlike a slave, however, a serf could not be bought and sold like an animal.

Most serfs lived in their own families, not with others, and worked small plots of land; in addition, all serfs were required to perform labor services on a lord’s land, usually three days a week except during the planting or harvest seasons, when it was more. Serfs frequently had to pay arbitrary levies on common occurrences. When a man married, he had to pay his lord a fee. When he died, his son or heir had to pay an inheritance tax to inherit his parcels of land. The precise amounts of tax paid to the lord on these important family occasions depended on local custom and tradition.

Serfdom was a hereditary condition. A person born a serf was likely to die a serf, though many serfs did secure their freedom. The development of a money economy that began in the eleventh century (see Chapter 11) advanced the cause of freedom for serfs more than any other factor. With the advent of a money economy, serfs could save money and use it to buy their freedom.

Another opportunity for increased personal freedom came when lords organized groups of villagers to cut down forests or fill in swamps and marshes between villages to make more land available for farming. Free and serf peasants migrated to these new farmlands, and some went much farther, such as German peasants who migrated eastward into Slavic lands. This type of agricultural advancement frequently improved the peasants’ social and legal condition. A serf could clear a patch of fen or forestland, make it productive, and, through prudent saving, buy more land and eventually purchase freedom. In addition to serfs who migrated to find new opportunities, peasants who remained in the villages of their birth often benefited because landlords, threatened with the loss of serfs, relaxed ancient obligations and duties. While it would be unwise to exaggerate the social impact of the settling of new territories, frontier lands in the High Middle Ages did provide opportunities for upward mobility.

The Manor

Most European peasants, free and serf, lived in family groups in small villages. One or more villages and the land surrounding them made up a manor controlled by a noble lord or a church official such as a bishop, abbot, or abbess. Peasant dwellings were usually clumped together, with the fields stretching out beyond the group of houses. Most villages had a church. In some the lord’s large residence was right next to the small peasant houses, while in others the lord lived in a castle separate from the village (Figure 10.1). Manors controlled by a single lord varied greatly in size;
some contained a number of villages, and some were very small. Regardless of size, the manor was the basic unit of medieval rural organization and the center of rural life.

The arable land of the manor was divided between the lord and the peasantry, with the lord’s portion known as the demesne (dih-MAYN), or home farm. A manor usually held pasture or meadowland for the grazing of cattle, sheep, and sometimes goats. Often the manor had some forestland as well. Forests were valuable resources, providing wood, ash, and resin for a variety of purposes. Forests were also used for feeding pigs, cattle, and domestic animals on nuts, roots, and wild berries. If the manor was intersected by a river, it had a welcome source of fish and eels.

Lords generally appointed officials—termed “bailiffs” in England—from outside the village to oversee the legal and business operations of their manors, collect taxes and fees, and handle disputes. Villages in many parts of Europe also developed institutions of self-government to handle issues such as crop rotation, and they chose additional officials such as constables and ale-tasters without the lord’s interference. Women had no official voice in running the village, but they did buy, sell, and hold land independently and, especially as widows, head households. In areas of Europe where men were gone fishing or foresting for long periods of time, or where men left seasonally or more permanently in search of work elsewhere, women made decisions about the way village affairs were to be run, though they did not set up formal institutions to do this.

Manors do not represent the only form of medieval rural economy. In parts of Germany and the Netherlands and in much of southern France, free independent farmers owned land outright, free of rents and services. Their farms tended to be small and were surrounded by large estates that gradually swallowed them up. In Scandinavia the soil was so poor and the climate so harsh that people tended to live on widely scattered farms rather than in villages, but they still lived in relatively small family groups.

**Work**

The peasants’ work was typically divided according to gender. Men were responsible for clearing new land, plowing, and caring for large animals, and women were responsible for caring for small animals, spinning, and preparing food. Both sexes planted and harvested, though often there were gender-specific tasks within each of these major undertakings.
Once children were able to walk, they helped their parents with the hundreds of chores that had to be done. Small children were set to collecting eggs if the family had chickens, or gathering twigs and sticks for firewood. As they grew older, children had more responsible tasks, such as weeding the family’s vegetable garden, milking the cows, shearing the sheep, cutting wood for fires, and helping with the planting or harvesting.

Medieval farmers employed the **open-field system**, a pattern that differs sharply from modern farming practices. In the open-field system, the arable land of a manor was divided into two or three fields without hedges or fences to mark the individual holdings of the lord, serfs, and freemen. The village as a whole decided what would be planted in each field, rotating the crops according to tradition and need. Some fields would be planted in crops such as wheat, rye, peas, or barley for human consumption, some in oats or other crops for both animals and humans, and some would be left unworked or fallow to allow the soil to rejuvenate. In most areas with open-field agriculture the holdings farmed by any one family did not consist of a whole field but, instead, of strips in many fields. If one strip held by a family yielded little, strips in a different field might be more bountiful. Families worked their own land and the lord’s, but they also cooperated with other families if they needed help, particularly during harvest time. This meant that all shared in any disaster as well as in any large harvest.

Meteorologists think that a slow but steady retreat of polar ice occurred between the ninth and eleventh centuries, and Europe experienced a significant warming trend during the period from 1050 to 1300. The mild winters and dry summers associated with this warming trend helped to increase agricultural output throughout Europe.

The tenth and eleventh centuries also witnessed a number of agricultural improvements, especially in the development of mechanisms that replaced or aided human labor. Mills driven by wind and water power represented significant engineering advancements, dramatically reducing the time and labor required to grind grain. Water mills were also well suited to the process known as fulling—cleansing and beating woven cloth so that tiny fibers filled in the holes between the threads, making the cloth more wind- and water-proof—enabling men and women to full cloth at a much faster rate. In the flat areas of northern Europe, such as Holland, where fast-flowing streams were rare, windmills were more common than water mills.

Women’s productivity in medieval Europe grew because of water and wind power. In the ancient world, slaves had been responsible for grinding the grain for bread; as slavery was replaced by serfdom, grinding became a woman’s task. When water- and wind-driven mills were introduced into an area, women were freed from the task of grinding grain and could turn to other tasks, such as raising animals, working in gardens or vineyards, and raising and preparing flax to make linen. Women could also devote more time to spinning yarn, which was the bottleneck in cloth production, as each weaver needed at least six spinners. Thus wind and water power contributed to the increase in cloth production in medieval Europe.

In the early twelfth century the production of iron increased significantly. Much of this was used for weapons and armor, but it also filled a growing demand in agriculture. Iron was first used for plowshares, and then for pitchforks, spades, and axes. Harrows—cultivating instruments with heavy teeth that broke up and smoothed the soil—began to have iron instead of wooden teeth, making them more effective and less likely to break.

Plows and harrows were increasingly drawn by horses rather than oxen. The development of the padded horse collar led to dramatic improvements. The horse collar meant that the animal could put its entire weight into the task of pulling. The use of horses spread in the twelfth century because their greater speed brought greater efficiency to farming and reduced the amount of human labor involved.

The thirteenth century witnessed a tremendous spurt in the use of horses to haul carts to market. Consequently, goods reached market faster, and peasants had access to more markets. Peasants not only sold vegetables, grain, and animals but they also bought metal.
tools, leather shoes, and other goods. Their opportunities for spending on at least a few nonagricultural goods multiplied.

Increased agricultural output had a profound impact on society, improving Europeans’ health, commerce, industry, and general lifestyle. More food meant that fewer people suffered from hunger and malnourishment on a daily basis, and that devastating famines were rarer. Higher yields brought more food for animals as well as people, and the amount of meat that people ate increased slightly. A better diet had an enormous impact on women’s lives in particular. More food meant increased body fat, which increased fertility, and more meat—which provided iron—meant that women were less anemic and less subject to opportunistic diseases. Improved opportunities also encouraged people to marry somewhat earlier, which meant larger families and further population growth.

**Home Life and Diet**

Life for most people in medieval Europe meant country life. Most people rarely traveled more than twenty-five miles beyond their villages. This way of life did not have entirely unfortunate results. People were closely connected with their family, certain of its support and help in time of trouble. The relative peace and political stabilization allowed people to develop a strong sense of place and a pride in their community.

In western and central Europe, villages were generally made up of small houses for individual families. Households consisted of one married couple, their children (including stepchildren), and perhaps one or two other relatives. The household thus contained primarily a nuclear family. In southern and eastern Europe, extended families were more likely to live in the same household or very near one another.

The size and quality of peasants’ houses varied according to their relative prosperity, and that prosperity usually depended on the amount of land held. Poorer peasants lived in windowless cottages built of wood and clay or wattle (poles interwoven with branches or reeds) and thatched with straw. Such a cottage consisted of one large room that served as the kitchen and living quarters for all. A shed attached to the house provided storage for tools and shelter for animals. Prosperous peasants added rooms, and some wealthy peasants in the early fourteenth century had two-story houses with separate bedrooms for parents and children. For most people, however, living space was cramped, dark, smoky,
and smelly, with animals and people both sharing tight quarters, sometimes with each other.

Every house had a small garden and an outbuilding. Onions, garlic, turnips, and carrots were grown and were stored through the winter in the main room of the dwelling or in the shed attached to it. Preserving and storing foods were the basic responsibilities of the women and children.

The mainstay of the diet for peasants everywhere—and for all other classes—was bread. It was a hard, black substance made of barley, millet, and oats, rarely of expensive wheat flour. Most households did not have ovens, which were expensive to build and posed a fire danger. Thus bread was baked in communal ovens or purchased from households that specialized in bread baking. The main meal was often bread and a thick soup of vegetables and grains eaten around noon. Animals were too valuable to be used for food on a regular basis, but weaker animals were often slaughtered in the fall so that they did not need to be fed through the winter, and their meat was salted and eaten on feast days such as Christmas and Easter.

The diet of people living in an area with access to a river, lake, or stream would be supplemented with fish, which could be preserved by salting. People living close to the sea could gather shellfish. Many places had severe laws against hunting and trapping in the

Making Cloth In this household scene, women in the foreground prepare cloth while men in the background eat a meal. The woman on the left is trimming small threads off with a one-bladed shear, and the one on the right is boiling the cloth to clean and bleach it. Women usually made the clothing for themselves and their families, although the more elaborate clothing worn by nobles was made by professional tailors and seamstresses. (Austrian National Library, Vienna/The Bridgeman Art Library)

Baking Bread Bread and beer or ale were the main manorial products for local consumption. While women dominated the making of ale and beer, men and women cooperated in the making and baking of bread. Most people did not have ovens in their own homes because of the danger of fire, but instead used the communal manorial oven, which, like a modern pizza oven, could bake several loaves at once. (Bibliothèque nationale de France)
forests. Deer, wild boars, and other game were strictly reserved for the king and nobility. These laws were flagrantly violated, however, and stolen rabbits and wild game often found their way to peasants’ tables.

Medieval households were not self-sufficient; they bought cloth, metal, leather goods, and even some food from village market stalls. They also bought and drank large quantities of ale, the universal drink of the common people in northern Europe. Women dominated in the production of ale for the community market.

**Health Care**

Scholars are only beginning to explore questions of medieval health care, and there are still many aspects of public health that we know little about. The steady rise in population between the mid-eleventh and fourteenth centuries, usually attributed to warmer climate, increased food supply, and a reduction of violence with growing political stability, may also be ascribed partly to better health care.

What care existed for the sick? As in the past, the sick everywhere depended above all on the private nursing care of relatives and friends. Beginning in the twelfth century in the British Isles, however, the royal family, the clergy, noble men and women, and newly rich merchants also established institutions to care for the sick or for those who for some reason could not take care of themselves. Within city walls they built hospitals, which were not hospitals in the modern sense, but rather places where those with chronic diseases that were not contagious, poor expectant mothers, the handicapped, people recovering from injuries, foundling children, and mentally retarded or psychologically disturbed children or adults went for care. Outside city walls they built leprosariums or small hospices for people with leprosy and other contagious diseases.

In the twelfth century medical personnel at hospitals were trained on the job, but by the thirteenth century some had studied with the faculties of medicine at Europe’s new universities (see Chapter 11). Outside of hospitals, people suffering from wounds, skin diseases, or broken bones turned to barber-surgeons who were trained in an apprenticeship system. For other internal ailments people used apothecaries—also trained through an apprenticeship system—to suggest and mix drugs. People also relied on men and women who had no official training at all, but who had learned healing techniques from their parents or other older people.

Treatments were often mixtures of herbal remedies, sayings, specific foods, prayers, amulets, and ritual healing activities. Such combinations were also what people prescribed for themselves, for most treatment of illness was handled by home remedies handed down orally or perhaps through a cherished handwritten family herbal, cookbook, or household guide.

**Childbirth and Child Abandonment**

The most dangerous period of life for any person, peasant or noble, was infancy and early childhood. In normal years perhaps as many as one-third of all children died before age five, and this share climbed to more than half in years with plagues, droughts, or famines. Reaching adulthood meant that people had survived the most dangerous part of their lives, and many lived well into their fifties and sixties.

Childbirth was dangerous for mothers as well as for infants. Women developed prayers, rituals, and special sayings to ensure safe and speedy childbirth. Village women helped one another through childbirth, and women who were more capable acquired specialized midwifery skills. In larger towns and cities, such women gradually developed into professional midwives who were paid for their services and who trained younger women as apprentices, just as barber-surgeons and apothecaries trained their male apprentices.
For most women, however, childbirth was handled by female friends and family, not by professionals.

The abandonment of infants and young children was widely practiced throughout the Middle Ages. Parents or guardians left children at a monastery or church, sold them, or legally gave the authority for their upbringing to some other person or institution. Sometimes parents believed that someone of greater means or status might find the child and bring it up in better circumstances than the natal parents could provide. Christian parents gave their children to monasteries as religious acts, donating them to the service of God in the same way they might donate money.

Recent research suggests that abandonment was very common among the poor until about the year 1000. The next three hundred years, which saw great agricultural change and relative prosperity, witnessed a low point in the abandonment of poor children. On the other hand, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the incidence of noble parents giving their younger sons and daughters to religious houses increased dramatically. This resulted from and also reinforced the system of primogeniture, in which estates were passed intact to the eldest son instead of being divided among heirs (Chapter 9). Monasteries provided noble younger sons and daughters with career opportunities, and this also removed them as contenders for family land.

### How did religion shape everyday life in medieval Europe?

Apart from the land, the weather, and local legal and social conditions, religion had the greatest impact on the daily lives of ordinary people in the High Middle Ages. Most people in medieval Europe were Christian, but there were small Jewish communities scattered in many parts of Europe and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, other Mediterranean islands, and southeastern Europe.

### Christian Life in Medieval Villages

For Christians the village church was the center of community life — social, political, and economic, as well as religious — with the parish priest in charge of a host of activities. Standing at the side door of the church, the priest read orders and messages from royal and ecclesiastical authorities to his parishioners gathered outside. The front of the church, with its scenes of the Last Judgment, was the background against which royal judges traveling on circuit disposed of civil and criminal cases. In busy cities, business agreements and commercial exchanges were made in the square in front of the church or even inside the church itself.
Although church law placed the priest under the bishop's authority, the manorial lord appointed the priest. Parish priests were peasants and often were poor. Since they often worked in the fields with the people, they understood the people's labor, needs, and frustrations. The parish priest was also responsible for the upkeep of the church and for taking the lead in providing aid to the poorest of the village.

The center of the Christian religious life was the Mass in which a priest consecrated bread and wine and distributed it to believers, in a re-enactment of Jesus' actions in the Bible. Every Sunday and on holy days, villagers watched and listened to Mass, which was recited in Latin—a language that few commoners could speak or understand. At least once a year they were expected to take part in the ceremony and eat the consecrated bread. This usually happened at Easter, after they had confessed their sins to a priest and been assigned a penance in compensation for them. The feasts that accompanied baptisms, weddings, funerals, and other celebrations were commonly held in the churchyard. Medieval drama originated in the church. Mystery plays, based on biblical episodes, were performed originally in the sanctuary, later in the churchyard, and eventually at stations around the town.

The scripted portions of the Mass were said in Latin, but the priest delivered his weekly sermons in the vernacular. A common complaint was that priests did a poor job of explaining basic Christian teachings to their parishioners. Nevertheless, people grasped the meaning of biblical stories and church doctrines from the paintings on the church walls or, in wealthy parishes, the scenes on stained-glass windows.

Along with attending Mass and confessing their sins, people engaged in rituals heavy with religious symbolism. Scriptural references and proverbs dotted everyone's language. The English *good-bye*, the French *adieu*, and the Spanish *adios* all derive from words meaning “God be with you.” Everyone participated in village processions to honor the saints and ask their protection. The entire calendar was filled with reference to events in the life of Jesus and his disciples, such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. The signs and symbols of Christianity were everywhere, but so, people believed, was the Devil, who lured them to evil deeds.

**Saints and Sacraments**

Along with days marking events in the life of Jesus, the Christian calendar was filled with saints' days. Veneration of the saints had been an important tool of Christian conversion since late antiquity (see Chapter 7), and the cult of the saints was a central feature of popular culture in the Middle Ages. People believed that the saints possessed supernatural powers that enabled them to perform miracles, and the saint became the special property of the locality in which his or her relics rested. Relics such as bones, tears, saliva, articles of clothing, and even the dust from the saint's tomb were enclosed in the church altar. In return for the saint's healing and support, peasants would offer the saint prayers, loyalty, and gifts. (See “Listening to the Past: The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela,” page 272.)

In the later Middle Ages popular hagiographies (ha-gee-AH-gruh-fees)—biographies of saints based on myths, legends, and popular stories—attributed specialized functions to the saints. Saint Elmo (ca. 300), who supposedly had preached unharmed during a thunder and lightning storm, became the patron of sailors. Saint Agatha (third century), whose breasts were torn with shears because she rejected the attentions of a powerful suitor, became the patron of wet nurses, women with breast difficulties, and bell ringers (because of the resemblance of breasts to bells).

How were saints chosen? Since the early days of Christianity, individuals whose exemplary virtue was proved by miracles at their tombs had been venerated by laypeople. Roman authorities insisted that they had the exclusive right to examine the lives and activities of candidates for sainthood in a formal “trial,” but ordinary people continued to
declare people saints. Between 1185 and 1431 only seventy official investigations were held at Rome, but hundreds of new persons across Europe were venerated as saints. Some clergy preached against the veneration of saints’ relics and called it idolatry, but their appeals had little effect. The Virgin Mary, Christ’s mother, was the most important saint. In the eleventh century theologians began to emphasize Mary’s spiritual motherhood of all Christians. Masses specially commemorated her, churches were built in her honor, and hymns and prayers to her multiplied. Villagers listened intently to sermons telling stories about her life and miracles.

Along with the veneration of saints, sacraments were an important part of religious practice in the High Middle Ages. Twelfth-century theologians expanded on Saint Augustine’s understanding of sacraments (see Chapter 7) and created an entire sacramental system. The list of seven sacraments (baptism, penance, the Eucharist, confirmation, marriage, priestly ordination, anointment of the dying) was formally accepted by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Most sacraments had to be dispensed by a priest, although spouses officially administered the sacrament of marriage to each other, and laypeople could baptize a dying infant or anoint a dying person if no priest could be found. Medieval Christians believed that these seven sacraments brought God’s grace, the divine assistance or help needed to lead a good Christian life and to merit salvation. The sacramental system enhanced the authority of priests over people’s lives, but it did not replace strong personal devotion to the saints.

**Muslims and Jews**

The centrality of Christian ceremonies to daily life for most Europeans meant that those who did not participate were clearly marked as outsiders. This included Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula, where Christian rulers were establishing kingdoms in territory won through the reconquista (see Chapter 9). Islam was outlawed in their territories, and some of the Muslims left Spain or were forced out, leaving room for new settlers from elsewhere in Christian Europe. Other Muslims converted. In more isolated villages, people simply continued their Muslim rituals and practices, though they might hide this from the local priest or visiting church or government officials.

Islam was geographically limited in medieval Europe, but by the late tenth century Jews could be found in many areas, often brought in from other parts of Europe as clients of rulers because of their skills as merchants. There were Jewish communities in

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**Statue of St. Anne, the Virgin Mary, and the Christ Child**

Nearly every church had at least one image of the Virgin Mary, the most important figure of Christian devotion in medieval Europe. In this thirteenth-century wooden sculpture, she is shown holding the infant Jesus and is herself sitting on the lap of her mother Anne. Statues such as this reinforced people’s sense that the heavenly family was much like theirs, with grandparents who sometimes played important roles. (Scala/Art Resource, NY)
LISTENING TO THE PAST

The Pilgrim’s Guide to Santiago de Compostela

Making pilgrimages to the shrines of holy persons is a common practice in many religions. A pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, is obligatory for all Muslims. Many Christian shrines contained a body understood to be that of a saint or objects that had been in physical contact with the saint; thus believers perceived shrines as places where Heaven and earth met. A visit to a shrine and veneration of the saint's relics, Christians believed, would lead to the saint's intercession with God. Medieval Christians of all social classes made pilgrimages; even serfs were supposed to be allowed to leave their manor if they wanted to go on a pilgrimage. After Jerusalem and Rome, the shrine of Santiago de Compostela (Saint James at Compostela) in the Iberian Peninsula became the most famous in the Christian world. The shrine was situated in the kingdom of Navarre (nuh-VAHR), a small state in what is now northwestern Spain.

The apostle James is said to have carried Christianity to Spain, then returned to Palestine where he was beheaded, the first apostle martyred. Somehow James's bones were miraculously taken back to Compostela, where they were later discovered, and the first of a series of churches was built on the site. In 1075 Alfonso VI of Castile, one of the most important leaders of the reconquista, began construction of a huge shrine-cathedral at the site of James’s tomb. In the 1300s James himself was linked to the reconquista, as church and state officials promoted the legend that James had begun the expulsion of Muslims from Spain. The fact that the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, lived six centuries after James did not bother those telling the story, and images of “St. James the Moor-slayer” became common.

Pilgrims streamed to the site from all over Europe, particularly as roads were improved and hostels and inns opened along the routes. Once at the shrine, pilgrims were expected to make contributions as large as their means allowed, lest the saint be offended and retaliate with some sort of affliction. Pilgrims’ donations financed the superb Romanesque sculpture at Santiago. In the twelfth century, the church, however, was begun in the year 1116 of the Spanish era [1078 C.E.]. . . . From the time when it was begun up to the present day, this church is renewed by the light of the miracles of the blessed James. In it, indeed, health is given to the sick, sight restored to the blind, the tongue of the mute is loosened, hearing is given to the deaf, soundness of limb is granted to cripples, the possessed are delivered, and what is more, the prayers of the faithful are heard, their vows are accepted, the bonds of sin are broken, heaven is opened to those who knock, consolation is given to the grieving, and all the people of foreign nations, flocking from all parts of the world, come together here in crowds bearing with them gifts of praise to the Lord . . . . After this valley is found the land of Navarre which abounds in bread and wine, milk and cattle.
The Navarrese and Basques [BASKZ; another group that lived in Navarre] are held to be exactly alike in their food, their clothing and their language, but the Basques are held to be of whiter complexion than the Navarrese. The Navarrese wear short black garments extending just down to the knee, like the Scots, and they wear sandals which they call lavarcas made of raw hide with the hair on and are bound around the foot with thongs, covering only the soles of the feet and leaving the upper foot bare. In truth, they wear black woollen hooded and fringed capes, reaching to their elbows, which they call saias. These people, in truth, are repulsively dressed, and they eat and drink repulsively. For in fact all those who dwell in the household of a Navarrese, servant as well as master, maid as well as mistress, are accustomed to eat all their food mixed together from one pot, not with spoons but with their own hands, and they drink with one cup. If you saw them eat you would think them dogs or pigs. If you heard them speak, you would be reminded of the barking of dogs. For their speech is utterly barbarous. . . .

This is a barbarous race unlike all other races in customs and in character, full of malice, swarthy in color, evil of face, depraved, perverse, perfidious, empty of faith and corrupt, libidinous, drunken, experienced in all violence, ferocious and wild, dishonest and reprobate, impious and harsh, cruel and contentious, versed in anything good, well-trained in all vices and iniquities, like the Geats and Saracens in malice. . . . However, they are considered good on the battlefield, bad at assaulting fortresses, regular in giving tithes, accustomed to making offerings for altars. For, each day, when the Navarrese goes to church, he makes God an offering of bread or wine or wheat or some other substance. . . Then comes Galicia [guh-LIH-shee-uh]. . . this is wooded and has rivers

Pilgrim's badge from Santiago de Compostela. Enterprising smiths made metal badges for pilgrims to buy as proof of their journey and piety. The scallop-shell shape shown here became associated with Saint James and eventually with pilgrimages in general. Pilgrims who had visited many shrines would cling from the many badges worn on their hats or capes, sometimes becoming objects of satire just as tourists laden with souvenirs are today. (Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic)

and is well-provided with meadows and excellent orchards, with equally good fruits and very clear springs; there are few cities, towns or cornfields. It is short of wheaten bread and wine, bountiful in rye bread and cider, well-stocked with cattle and horses, milk and honey, ocean fish both gigantic and small, and wealthy in gold, silver, fabrics, and furs of forest animals and other riches, as well as Saracen treasures. The Galicians, in truth, more than all the other uncultivated Spanish peoples, are those who most closely resemble our French race by their manners, but they are alleged to be irascible and very litigious. . .


QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What sorts of miracles does the author describe as happening at the church? How would you compare his description of the miracles with the descriptions of the people?
2. How would you evaluate the author's opinion of the people of Navarre of Galicia? How does he compare these people to his own countrymen, the French?
3. Pilgrimages were in many ways the precursors of modern tourism. How would you compare the two in terms of economic effects and the expectations of the travelers?

services, and often foods, and many of them commemorated specific events from Jewish history, including various times when Jews had been rescued from captivity.

Jews could supply other Jews with goods and services, but rulers and city leaders increasingly restricted their trade with Christians to banking and moneylending. This enhanced Christian resentment, as did the ideology of holy war that accompanied the Crusades (see Chapter 9). Violence against Jews and restrictions on their activities increased
further in much of Europe. Jews were expelled from England and later from France, and many of them went to Muslim and Christian areas of the Iberian Peninsula. The rulers of both faiths initially welcomed them, though restrictions and violence gradually became more common there as well. Jews continued to live in the independent cities of the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, and some migrated eastward into new towns that were being established in Slavic areas.

Rituals of Marriage and Birth

Increasing suspicion and hostility marked relations between religious groups throughout the Middle Ages, but there were also important similarities in the ways Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Europe understood and experienced their religions. In all three traditions, every major life transition was marked by a ceremony that included religious elements.

Christian weddings might be held in the village church or at the church door. A priest's blessing was often sought, though it was not essential to the marriage, for Christian doctrine defined marriage as an agreement between a man and a woman. Muslim weddings were also finalized by a contract between the bride and groom and were often overseen by a wedding official. Jewish weddings were guided by statements in Talmudic law that weddings were complete when the bride had entered the "chuppah," which medieval Jewish authorities interpreted to mean a room in the groom's house.

For spouses of all faiths, the wedding ceremony was followed by a wedding party that often included secular rituals. Some rituals symbolized the "proper" hierarchical relations between the spouses—such as placing the husband's shoe on the bedstead over the couple, symbolizing his authority—or worked to ensure the couple's fertility—such as untying all the knots in the household, for tying knots was one way that people reputed to have magical powers bound up the reproductive power of a man. All this came together in what was often the final event of a wedding, the religious official blessing the couple in their marriage bed, often with family and friends standing around or banging on pans, yelling, or otherwise making as much noise as possible.

The friends and family members had generally been part of the discussions, negotiations, and activities leading up to the marriage. Among serfs the lord's permission was often required, with a special fee paid to obtain this. The involvement of family and friends in choosing one's spouse might lead to conflict, but more often the wishes of the young people and their parents, kin, and community were quite similar: all hoped for marriages that provided economic security, honorable standing, and a good number of healthy children. The best marriages offered companionship, emotional support, and even love, but these were understood to grow out of the marriage, not necessarily precede it. Breaking up a marriage meant breaking up the basic production and consumption unit, which was a very serious matter, so marital dissolution by any means other than the death of one spouse was rare.
Most brides hoped to be pregnant soon after the wedding. Christian women hoping for children said special prayers to the Virgin Mary or her mother Anne. Some wore amulets of amber, bone, or mistletoe, thought to increase fertility. Others repeated charms and verses they had learned from other women, or in desperate cases, went on pilgrimages to make special supplications. Muslim and Jewish women wore small cases with sacred verses or asked for blessings from religious leaders. Women continued these prayers and rituals through pregnancy and childbirth, often combining religious traditions with folk beliefs handed down orally.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all required women to remain separate from the community for a short time after childbirth and often had special ceremonies welcoming them back once this period was over. These rituals often included prayers, such as this one from the Christian ritual of thanksgiving and purification, called churching, which a woman celebrated six weeks after giving birth: “Almighty and everlasting God, who has freed this woman from the danger of bearing a child, consider her to be strengthened from every pollution of the flesh so that with a clean heart and pure mind she may deserve to enter into the bosom of our mother, the church, and make her devoted to Your service.”

Religious ceremonies also welcomed children into the community. Among Christian families, infants were baptized soon after they were born, for without the sacrament of baptism they could not enter Heaven. Thus midwives who delivered children who looked especially weak and sickly often baptized them in an emergency service. In normal baptisms, the women who had assisted the mother in the birth often carried the baby to church, where carefully chosen godparents vowed their support. Godparents were often close friends or relatives, but parents might also choose prominent villagers or even the local lord in the hope that he might later look favorably on the child and provide for him or her in some way.

Within Judaism, a boy was circumcised by a religious official and given his name in a ceremony when he was in his eighth day of life. This *brit milah*, or “covenant of circumcision,” was viewed as a reminder of the covenant between God and Abraham described in Hebrew Scripture. Muslims also circumcised boys in a special ritual, though the timing varied from a few days after birth to adolescence.

### Death and the Afterlife

Death was similarly marked by religious ceremonies. Christians called for a priest to perform the sacrament of extreme unction when they thought the hour of death was near. The priest brought a number of objects and substances regarded as having power over death and the sin related to it. Holy water, holy oil, and a censer with incense all connected to rites that purified and blessed the dying. A crucifix served to remind the dying of Christ’s own agony and the promise of salvation. Most important, the priest gave the dying person a last communion host.

Once the person had died, the body was buried within a day or two. Family and friends joined in a funeral procession; sometimes extra women were hired so that the mourning and wailing were especially loud and intense, a sign of the family’s devotion. The procession carried the body into the church, where there were psalms, prayers, and a funeral Mass, and then to a consecrated space for burial. The wealthy were sometimes buried inside the church—in the walls, under the floor, or under the building itself in a crypt—but most people were buried in the churchyard or a cemetery close by. Priests were hired to say memorial masses on anniversaries of family deaths, especially one week, one month, and one year afterward; large churches had a number of side altars so that many masses could be going on at one time.

Learned theologians increasingly emphasized the idea of purgatory, the place where souls on their way to Heaven went after death to make amends for their earthly sins. Memorial masses, prayers, and donations made in the names of the dead could shorten...
their time in purgatory and hasten their way to Heaven. So could indulgences, those papal grants that relieved a person from earthly penance. Indulgences were initially granted for performing meritorious acts, such as going on a pilgrimage or crusade, but gradually they could be acquired for a small fee. With this, their spiritual benefits became transferable, so they could be purchased to shorten the stay in purgatory of one’s deceased relatives, as well as lessen one’s own penance or time in purgatory. Thus death did not sever family obligations and connections.

The living also had obligations to the dead among Muslims and Jews. In both groups, deceased people were to be buried quickly, and special prayers were to be said by mourners and family members. Muslims fasted on behalf of the dead and maintained a brief period of official mourning. The Qur’an promises an eternal paradise with flowing rivers to “those who believe and do good deeds” (Qur’an, 4:57) and a Hell of eternal torment to those who do not.

Jews observed specified periods of mourning during which the normal activities of daily life were curtailed. Every day for eleven months after a death and every year after that on the anniversary of the death, a son of the deceased was to recite Kaddish, a special prayer of praise and glorification of God. Judaism emphasized life on earth more than an afterlife, so beliefs about what happens to the soul after death were more varied; the very righteous might go directly to a place of spiritual reward, but most souls went first to a place of punishment and purification generally referred to as Gehinnom. After a period that did not exceed twelve months, the soul ascended to the world to come. Those who were completely wicked during their lifetimes might simply go out of existence or continue in an eternal state of remorse.

### What roles did nobles play in medieval society?

The nobility, though a small fraction of the total population, strongly influenced all aspects of medieval culture—political and religious (Chapter 9) and economic, educational, and artistic (Chapter 11). Despite political, scientific, and industrial revolutions, the nobility continued to hold real political and social power in Europe into the nineteenth century. In order to account for this continuing influence, it is important to understand the development of the nobility in the High Middle Ages.

#### Origins and Status of the Nobility

In the early Middle Ages noble status was generally limited to a very few families who either were descended from officials at the Carolingian court or were leading families among Germanic tribes. Beginning in the eleventh century, knights in the service of higher nobles or kings began to claim noble status. The noble class grew larger and more diverse, ranging from poor knights who held tiny pieces of land (or sometimes none at all) to dukes and counts with vast territories.

Originally, most knights focused solely on military skills, but around 1200 a different ideal of knighthood emerged, usually termed chivalry (SHIH-uhl-ree). Chivalry was a code of conduct originally devised by the clergy to transform the crude and brutal behavior of the knightly class. It may have originated in oaths administered to Crusaders in which fighting was declared to have a sacred purpose. Other qualities gradually became part of chivalry: bravery, generosity, honor, graciousness, mercy, and eventually gallantry toward women, what came to be called “courtly love.” (See “Listening to the Past: Courtly Love Poetry,” page 310.) The chivalric ideal created a new standard of masculinity for
Saint Maurice  Some of the individuals who were held up to young men as models of ideal
chivalry were probably real, but their lives were embellished with many stories. One of these was
Saint Maurice (d. 287), a soldier apparently executed by the Romans for refusing to renounce
his Christian faith. He first emerges in the Carolingian period, and later he was held up as a
model knight and declared a patron of the Holy Roman Empire and protector of the imperial
army in wars against the pagan Slavs. His image was used on coins, and his cult was
promoted by the archbishops of Magdeburg, who moved his relics to their cathedral.
Until 1240 he was portrayed as a white man, but after that he was usually represented
as a black man, as in this sandstone statue from Magdeburg Cathedral (ca. 1250).
We have no idea why this change happened. (Courtesy, The Menil Foundation, Houston)

nobles, in which loyalty and honor remained the most important quali-
ties, but graceful dancing and intelligent conversation were not consid-
ered unmanly.

Childhood

For children of aristocratic birth, the years from infancy to around the age
of seven or eight were primarily years of play. At about the age of seven, a
boy of the noble class who was not intended for the church was placed in
the household of one of his father’s friends or relatives. There he became a
servant to the lord and received formal training in arms. He was expected to
serve the lord at the table, to assist him as a private valet, and, as he gained
experience, to care for the lord’s horses and equipment.

Training was in the arts of war. The boy learned to ride and to manage
a horse. He had to be able to wield a sword, hurl a lance, shoot with a
bow and arrow, and care for armor and other equipment. Increasingly,
in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, noble youths learned to read and
write some Latin. Still, literacy among the nobility did not become more
common until the thirteenth century. Formal training was concluded around
the age of twenty-one with the ceremony of knighthood. The custom of knight-
ing, though never universal, seems to have been widespread in France and England but
not in Germany.

Noble girls were also trained in preparation for their future tasks. They were often
taught to read the local language and perhaps some Latin. They learned to write and to
do enough arithmetic to keep household accounts. They also learned music, dancing,
and embroidery and how to ride and hunt, both common noble pursuits. Much of this
took place in the girl’s own home, but, like boys, noble girls were often sent to the homes
of relatives or higher nobles to act as servants or ladies in waiting and to learn how to
run a household.

Youth and Marriage

The ceremony of knighthood was one of the most important in a man’s life, but knight-
hood did not necessarily mean adulthood, power, and responsibility. Sons were com-
pletely dependent on their fathers for support. A young man remained a youth until he
was in a financial position to marry — that is, until his father died. That might not hap-
pen until he was in his late thirties, and marriage at forty was not uncommon. Increas-
ingly, families adopted primogeniture, with property passing to the oldest son. Younger
sons might be forced into the clergy or simply forbidden to marry.

Once knighted, the young man traveled for two to three years. His father selected a
group of friends to accompany, guide, and protect him. The band’s chief pursuit was fight-
ing. They meddled in local conflicts, sometimes departed on crusades, hunted, and did the
tournament. An arena for knights to compete on horseback, giving them valuable battle experience.

The tournament, in which a number of men competed from horseback (in contrast to the joust, which involved only two competitors), gave the young knight experience in pitched battle and a way to show off his masculinity before an audience. Since the horses and equipment of the vanquished were forfeited to the victors, the knight could also gain a reputation and a profit.

Parents often wanted to settle daughters’ futures as soon as possible. Men tended to prefer young brides. A woman in her late twenties or thirties would have fewer years of married fertility, limiting the number of children she could produce and thus threatening the family’s continuation. Therefore, aristocratic girls in the High Middle Ages were married at around the age of sixteen, often to much older men. In the early Middle Ages the custom was for the groom to present a dowry to the bride and her family, but by the late twelfth century the process was reversed because men were in greater demand. Thereafter, the sizes of dowries offered by brides and their families rose higher and higher.

Power and Responsibility

A male member of the nobility became an adult when he came into the possession of his property. He then acquired authority over lands and people. With it went responsibility. In the words of Honorius of Autun:

Soldiers: You are the arm of the Church, because you should defend it against its enemies. Your duty is to aid the oppressed, to restrain yourself from rapine and fornication, to repress those who impugn the Church with evil acts, and to resist those who are rebels against priests. Performing such a service, you will obtain the most splendid of benefices from the greatest of Kings.

Nobles rarely lived up to this ideal, however, and there are countless examples of nobles stealing church lands instead of defending them, tyrannizing the oppressed rather than aiding them, and regularly engaging in “rapine and fornication” rather than resisting them.

The responsibilities of a nobleman in the High Middle Ages depended on the size and extent of his estates, the number of dependents, and his position in his territory relative to others of his class and to the king. As a vassal, he was required to fight for his lord or for the king when called on to do so. By the mid-twelfth century this service was limited to forty days a year in most parts of western Europe. The noble was obliged to attend his lord’s court on important religious or family occasions.

Until the late thirteenth century, when royal authority intervened, a noble in France or England had great power over the people on his estates. He maintained order among them and dispensed justice to them. Holding the manorial court, which punished criminal acts and settled disputes, was one of his gravest obligations. The quality of justice varied widely; some lords were vicious tyrants who exploited and persecuted their peasants and vassals; others were reasonable and evenhanded.

Women played a large and important role in the functioning of the estate. They were responsible for the practical management of the household’s “inner economy” — cooking, brewing, spinning, weaving, caring for yard animals. When the lord was away for long periods, the women frequently managed the herds, barns, granaries, and outlying fields as well. Often the responsibilities of the estate fell to them permanently, as the number of men slain in medieval warfare ran high.

Throughout the High Middle Ages, fighting remained the dominant feature of the noble lifestyle. The church’s preaching and condemnations reduced, but did not stop, violence. Lateness of inheritance, depriving nobles of constructive outlets for their energy, together with the military ethos of their culture, encouraged petty warfare and disorder.
The nobility thus represented a constant source of trouble for the monarchy. In the thirteenth century kings drew on the financial support of the middle classes—that is, urban professionals, small landholders, and merchants—to build the administrative machinery that gradually laid the foundations of strong royal government. The Crusades relieved the rulers of France, England, and the German Empire of some of their most dangerous elements. Complete royal control of the nobility, however, came only in modern times.

### What roles did monks and nuns play in medieval life?

Priests, bishops, monks, and nuns played significant roles in medieval society, both as individuals and as members of institutions. Medieval people believed that monks and nuns performed an important social service when they prayed. Just as the knights protected and defended society with the sword and the peasants provided sustenance through their toil, so the monks and nuns worked to secure God’s blessing for society with their prayers and chants.
Chapter 10

The Life of the People in the

High Middle Ages • 1000–1300

Monastic Revival

In the early Middle Ages many religious houses followed the Benedictine Rule, while others developed their own patterns (see Chapter 7). In the High Middle Ages this diversity became more formalized, and religious orders, groups of monastic houses following a particular rule, were established. Historians term the foundation, strengthening, and reform of religious orders in the High Middle Ages the “monastic revival.” They link it with the simultaneous expansion of papal power (see Chapter 9) because many of the same individuals were important in both.

The best Benedictine monasteries had been centers of learning, copying and preserving manuscripts, maintaining schools, and setting high standards of monastic observance. Charlemagne had encouraged and supported these monastic activities, and the collapse of the Carolingian Empire had disastrous effects.

The Viking, Magyar, and Muslim invaders attacked and ransacked many monasteries across Europe, causing some religious communities to flee and disperse. In the period of political disorder that followed the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire, many religious houses fell under the control and domination of local lords. Powerful laymen appointed themselves or their relatives as abbots, took the lands and goods of monasteries, and spent monastic revenues. The level of spiritual observance and intellectual activity in monasteries and convents declined.

The secular powers who selected church officials compelled them to become vassals. Abbots, bishops, and archbishops thus had military responsibilities. As feudal lords themselves, ecclesiastical officials also had judicial authority over knights and peasants on their lands. The conflict between a church official’s religious duties on the one hand and his judicial and military obligations on the other posed a serious dilemma.

The first sign of reform came in 909, when William the Pious, duke of Aquitaine, established the abbey of Cluny in Burgundy. Duke William declared that the monastery was to be free from any feudal responsibilities to him or any other lord, its members subordinate only to the pope. The monastery at Cluny came to exert vast religious influence and initially held high standards of religious behavior. In the eleventh century Cluny was fortunate in having a series of highly able abbots who ruled for a long time. In a disorderly world, Cluny gradually came to represent stability. Therefore, laypersons placed lands under its custody and monastic priories under its jurisdiction for reform (a priory is a religious house, with generally a smaller number of residents than an abbey, governed by a prior or prioress). In this way, hundreds of monasteries, primarily in France and Spain, came under Cluny’s authority.

Deeply impressed laypeople showered gifts on monasteries with good reputations, such as Cluny and its many daughter houses. But as the monasteries became richer, the lifestyle of the monks grew increasingly luxurious. Monastic observance and spiritual fervor declined. Soon fresh demands for reform were heard, and the result was the founding of new religious orders in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.

The Cistercians (sihs-TUHR-shuhnz) — because of their phenomenal expansion and the great economic, political, and spiritual influence they exerted — are the best representatives of the new reforming spirit. In 1098 a group of monks left the rich abbey of Momes in Burgundy because, in the words of the twelfth-century chronicler-monk William of Malmesbury, “purity could not be preserved in a place where riches and gluttony warred against even the heart that was well inclined.” They founded a new house in the swampy forest of Cîteaux (si-TOH). They planned to avoid all involvement with secular feudal society, and they decided to accept only uncultivated lands far from regular habitation. The early Cistercians determined to keep their services simple and their lives austere.

The first monks at Cîteaux experienced sickness, a dearth of recruits, and terrible privations. But their high ideals made them, in William’s words, “a model for all monks, a mirror for the diligent, and a spur for the indolent.” In 1112 a twenty-three-year-old...
nobleman called Bernard joined the community at Cîteaux. Three years later Bernard was appointed founding abbot of Clairvaux (klahr-VOH) in Champagne. From this position he conducted a vast correspondence, attacked the theological views of Peter Abelard (see Chapter 11), and intervened in the disputed papal election of 1130. He also drafted a constitution for the Knights Templars and urged Christians to go on the Second Crusade. This reforming movement gained impetus. Cîteaux founded 525 new monasteries in the course of the twelfth century, and its influence on European society was profound (Map 10.2).

Map 10.2 Twelfth-Century Cistercian Expansion
The rapid expansion of the Cistercian order in the twelfth century reflects the spiritual piety of the age and its enormous economic vitality.

Analyzing the Map The Cistercians originally intended to live far from existing towns and villages and to not be involved in traditional feudal-manorial society. Does this map suggest they were successful in their aims? (To answer this, you may also want to look at the maps in Chapter 11.)

Connections Compare the main areas of Cistercian commercial production to the trade and manufacturing routes shown on Map 11.2 (page 294). How might the original goals of the Cistercians have been compromised by their economic activities?

To complete this activity online, go to the Online Study Guide at bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.

CHAPTER LOCATOR

What was village life like in medieval Europe?
How did religion shape everyday life in medieval Europe?
What roles did nobles play in medieval society?
What roles did monks and nuns play in medieval life?
Unavoidably, Cistercian success brought wealth, and wealth brought power. By the later twelfth century economic prosperity and political power had begun to compromise the original Cistercian ideals.

**Life in Convents and Monasteries**

Medieval monasteries were religious institutions whose organization and structure fulfilled the social needs of the feudal nobility. The monasteries provided noble boys with education and opportunities for ecclesiastical careers. Although a few men who rose in the ranks of church officials were of humble origins, most were from high-status families. Many had been given to the monastery by their parents. Beginning in the thirteenth century more boys and men from professional and merchant families became monks, seeking to take advantage of the opportunities monasteries offered.

Throughout the Middle Ages social class also defined the kinds of religious life open to women. Kings and nobles usually established convents for their daughters, sisters, aunts, or aging mothers. Entrance was restricted to women of the founder’s class. Like monks, many nuns came into the convent as children, and very often sisters, cousins, aunts, and nieces could all be found in the same place. Thus, though nuns were to some degree cut off from their families because they were cloistered, family relationships were maintained within the convent.

The office of abbess or prioress was the most powerful position a woman could hold in medieval society. (See “Individuals in Society: Hildegard of Bingen,” page 284.) Abbesses were part of the feudal structure in the same way that bishops and abbots were, with manors under their financial and legal control. They appointed tax collectors, bailiffs, judges, and often priests in the territory under their control. Some abbesses in the Holy Roman Empire even had the right to name bishops and send representatives to the imperial assemblies. Abbesses also opened and supported hospitals, orphanages, and schools; they hired builders, sculptors, and painters to construct and decorate residences and churches.

**Convent Life** Life in monasteries and convents involved spiritual and physical labor. In this English prayer book, nuns chant the liturgy from their prayer books while sitting in the wooden choir, a task that both monks and nuns did seven times a day. (HIP/Art Resource, NY)
Monasteries for men were headed by an abbot or prior, who was generally a member of a noble family, often a younger brother in a family with several sons. The main body of monks, known as “choir monks,” were largely of noble or middle-class background, and they did not till the land themselves. Men from peasant families who had been given to the monastery as children or entered through some other means occasionally took vows and became choir monks, but more often they served as lay brothers. They had simpler religious obligations than did the choir monks and did the manual labor essential to running the monastery. In each house one monk, the cellarer — or general financial manager — was responsible for supervising the lay brothers and other peasants who did agricultural labor. In women’s houses, a nun acted as cellarer and was in charge of lay sisters who did the actual physical work. The novice master or novice mistress was responsible for the training of recruits. The efficient operation of a monastic house also required the services of cooks, laundresses, gardeners, seamstresses, mechanics, blacksmiths, pharmacists, and others whose essential work has left, unfortunately, little written trace.

The pattern of life within individual monasteries varied widely from house to house and from region to region. One central activity, however, was performed everywhere. Daily life centered on the liturgy or Divine Office, psalms and other prayers prescribed by Saint Benedict that monks and nuns prayed seven times a day and once during the night. Prayers were offered for peace, rain, good harvests, the civil authorities, and the monks’ families and benefactors. Monastic patrons in turn lavished gifts on the monasteries, which often became very wealthy. Everything connected with prayer was understood as praise of God, so abbeys spent a large percentage of their income on splendid objects to enhance the service, including sacred vessels of embossed silver or gold, altar cloths of the finest silks or velvets, embroideries, and beautiful reliquaries to house the relics of the patron saint.

In some abbeys monks and nuns spent much of their time copying books and manuscripts and then illuminating them, decorating them with human and animal figures or elaborate designs, often painted in bright colors or gold. A few monasteries and convents became centers of learning where talented residents wrote their own works as well as copying those of others.

Monks and nuns also performed social services. Monasteries often ran schools that gave primary education to young boys, while convents took in girls. Abbeys like Saint

**Monk and Nun in Stocks** Monks and nuns were sometimes criticized for immorality, luxurious living, and inattention to their vows. Such criticism was expressed in plays, songs, and also in pictures. This painting shows a monk and nun in stocks, heavy wooden frames with holes for restraining the ankles and sometimes the wrists, used as punishment. A person confined in stocks endured great physical discomfort as well as the shame of public disgrace. The painting is most likely not a realistic scene, but rather part of a satirical criticism of monastic life. (© British Library Board, Roy. 10. f. IV. 187)

**abbot/prior** Head of a monastery for men.
Hildegard of Bingen

THE TENTH CHILD OF A LESSER NOBLE FAMILY, Hildegard (HIHL-duh-gahr’d) (1098–1179) was given as a child to an abbey in the Rhineland when she was eight years old; there she learned Latin and received a good education. She spent most of her life in various women’s religious communities, two of which she founded herself. When she was a child, she began having mystical visions, often of light in the sky, but told few people about them. In middle age, however, her visions became more dramatic: “And it came to pass . . . when I was 42 years and 7 months old, that the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming. . . . and suddenly I understood of the meaning of expositions of the books.”* She wanted the church to approve of her visions and wrote first to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who answered her briefly and dismissively, and then to Pope Eugenius, who encouraged her to write them down. Her first work was Scivias (Know the Ways of the Lord), a record of her mystical visions that incorporates vast theological learning.

Possessed of leadership and administrative talents, Hildegard left her abbey in 1147 to found the convent of Rupertsberg near Bingen. There she produced Physica (On the Physical Elements) and Causa et Curae (Causes and Cures), scientific works on the curative properties of natural elements, poems, a mystery play, and several more works of mysticism. She carried on a huge correspondence with scholars, prelates, and ordinary people. When she was over fifty, she left her community to preach to audiences of clergy and laity. She was the only woman of her time whose opinions on religious matters were considered authoritative by the church.

Hildegard’s visions have been explored by theologians and also by neurologists, who judge that they may have originated in migraine headaches, as she reports many of the same phenomena that migraine sufferers do: auras of light around objects, areas of blindness, feelings of intense doubt and intense euphoria. The interpretations that she develops come from her theological insight and learning, however, not illness. That same insight also emerges in her music, which is what she is best known for today. Eighty of her compositions survive—a huge number for a medieval composer—most of them written to be sung by the nuns in her convent, so they have strong lines for female voices. Many of her songs and chants have been recorded recently by various artists and are available on compact disk, as downloads, and on several Web sites.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS
1. Why do you think Hildegard sought church approval for her visions after keeping them secret for so many years?
2. In what ways is Hildegard’s life representative of nuns’ lives in the High Middle Ages? In what ways were her accomplishments extraordinary?

Albans, situated north of London on a busy thoroughfare, served as hotels and resting places for travelers. Monasteries frequently operated “hospitals” and leprosariums, which provided care and attention to the sick, the aged, and the afflicted—primitive care, it is true, but often all that was available. Monasteries and convents also fed the poor. At the French abbey of Saint-Requier in the eleventh century, for example, 110 persons were given food daily. In short, monasteries and convents performed a variety of social services in an age when there was no “state” and no conception of social welfare as a public responsibility.

**Looking Back Looking Ahead**

The image of European society as divided into three orders—those who fight, those who pray, those who work—was overly simplistic when it was first developed in the ninth century, but it did encompass most of the European population. Movement between those groups was possible. Both noble and peasant children given to monasteries by their parents could become monks and nuns. Members of noble families became abbots and abbesses. Sometimes through service to a lord, a few peasants rose to the rank of knight. It was also true that younger sons of knights could sink to the peasantry if they had too many brothers and were unlucky in war or marriage.

By the eleventh century, though the three-part social model still encompassed most people, growing towns housed increasing numbers of men and women who fit into none of the groups. Townspeople were recruited from all three orders, and the opportunities offered by towns eventually speeded up social and economic change. As they grew, towns replaced monasteries as the primary centers of culture in medieval Europe, with their walls and cathedrals dominating the landscape.

- For a list of suggested readings for this chapter, visit bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.
- For primary sources from this period, see Sources of Western Society, Second Edition.
- For Web sites, images, and documents related to topics in this chapter, see Make History at bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.
### GETTING STARTED
Below are basic terms about this period in the history of Western civilization. Can you identify each term below and explain why it matters? To do this exercise online, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TERMS</th>
<th>WHO (OR WHAT) AND WHEN</th>
<th>WHY IT MATTERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the three orders, p. 262</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open-field system, p. 265</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nobility, p. 276</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>chivalry, p. 276</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tournament, p. 278</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religious orders, p. 280</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cistercians, p. 280</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>abbot/prior, p. 283</td>
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### MOVING BEYOND THE BASICS
The exercise below requires a more advanced understanding of the chapter material. Examine the social structure of medieval Europe by filling in the chart below with descriptions of the medieval peasantry, nobility, and clergy. Describe each group’s characteristics and lifestyle, as well as important developments and trends affecting the group’s composition and status. When you are finished, consider the following questions: How accurate was the medieval model that divided society into those who work, those who fight, and those who pray? How might you modify this model to create a better picture of the reality of medieval life? To do this exercise online, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>LIFESTYLE</th>
<th>DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peasants</td>
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<td>Nobility</td>
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<td>Clergy</td>
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</table>
**Step 3**

**Putting It All Together** Now that you’ve reviewed key elements of the chapter, take a step back and try to see the big picture. Remember to use specific examples from the chapter in your answers. To do this exercise online, go to bedfordstmartins.com/mckaywestunderstanding.

**Village Life**
- How did isolation shape rural life in medieval Europe? What connections did European peasants have to the world beyond the manor?
- How much social mobility was there in medieval Europe? Did social mobility increase or decrease over the course of the High Middle Ages? Why?

**Popular Religion**
- What might explain the popularity of the saints in medieval Europe? In this context, how might social and economic conditions have shaped religious beliefs and practices?
- What role did religious rituals play in major life transitions, such as birth, marriage, and death? What light do such rituals shed on popular religion in medieval Europe?

**The Nobility**
- What role did warfare play in the lifestyle and self-image of the European nobility? What changes in European society might explain the emergence of chivalry in the High Middle Ages?
- What explains the enduring power of the nobility in European society? How did the nobility justify their status?

**Monasteries and Convents**
- Compare and contrast the monastic revival and papal reform movements of the High Middle Ages (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of papal reform). What common problems prompted both movements? What goals did the movements share?
- What was the medieval ideal of the monastic life? Why was this ideal so hard for monasteries to achieve and sustain?

**In Your Own Words** Imagine that you must explain Chapter 10 to someone who hasn’t read it. What would be the most important points to include and why?