

Life in the Middle Ages: Recreation

People of the Medieval period, like those before and since, looked for ways to enjoy themselves. For upper-class men, the great entertainments were hunting and hawking. They would ride through fields and forests chasing deer or boars. Hawking was a sport that had developed in Asia and then spread to Rome. Hawks were trained to bring down hares, pigeons, and herons. Women sometimes accompanied men on these hawking trips.

The work of a knight was war, and preparing for war involved hours of practice with weapons, which was not much fun. The tournament was invented to make practice more enjoyable. The contests were with swords and lances, and knights who participated came as representatives of noble families or a region. The competitors and their supporters met in a field on the appointed day, and the fight continued until one had defeated the other. These contests were dangerous for the participants, but they could be profitable. The winner received the horse and arms of the loser.

Jugglers and jesters performed for the wealthy. The jesters were made up in ridiculous costumes and gave witty answers to questions. For their efforts, they received food, lodging, and small donations.

Even for the peasant, there were some activities that brought pleasure. The lord gave dinners for his vassals on certain feast days, at planting time, and when the harvest was complete. Feast days were joyous occasions for the peasants. They gathered at the church for physical contests: wrestling and jumping matches, shooting with bow and arrow, and tugs of war. Plays were performed; they were supposed to be religious, but some got so obscene that the church barred them from the churchyard.

Poaching was also a dangerous peasant sport. The forests were only to be used by the lord for hunting, but peasants in need of food or just wanting the thrill of illegal hunting sometimes went in search of game. If caught, the poacher's foot was cut off.

The poor in cities also had festival days where they had fun at the expense of their betters. The Feast of Fools was celebrated in London with a woman of bad reputation being seated on the bishop's throne in the cathedral. The soles of old shoes were burned instead of incense. A town idiot was given a robe and crown to wear and placed on a throne. He was honored as if he were king for the day by the lower classes. No effort was made to stop these little displays of disrespect; it was recognized as a way to let the poor blow off steam.

Plays were popular and educational. They were used by the church to instruct the public, most of which could not read. There were three types of plays: stories from the Bible (mystery plays), those about saints (miracle plays), and plays where the characters represented certain virtues and vices (morality plays). The stage was often a box, and the play lasted 10 to 20 minutes. Guilds often paid the cost of production and performed the plays.



Tournaments were designed for entertainment and practice purposes, but they could be just as dangerous as real combat.

Name _____

Directions: Answer the questions, then circle and number and underline where you found your answers.

CHALLENGES

1. What were hawks trained to do?
2. How did tournaments come into existence?
3. How could entering a tournament become profitable?
4. Who were the comedians of the Middle Ages?
5. What were three occasions when the noble fed his peasants?
6. What were some physical events that took place on feast days?
7. Why were plays no longer allowed at some churches on feast days?
8. What was the punishment for poaching?
9. What was used as a substitute for incense on the Feast of Fools?
10. What was the subject of miracle plays?

1066—The Battle of Hastings

The year 1066 is one of the most famous dates in history. It was in the spring of that year a French duke, William of Normandy, began his preparation for the conquest of England. Because William was a cousin of a former king of England and because he was married to an English noblewoman, Matilda of Flanders, he felt he had a just claim to the English throne. When September came, William felt his troops were ready. In crowded longboats filled with men, horses, and armor, the Normans crossed the channel and landed on the shores of England.

King Harold, leader of the English, had been alerted by his scouts weeks beforehand. He gathered his troops and took his position at the top of a hill, near a twisted apple tree. From there he commanded his men to build a defense of tree trunks and branches. From the top of the hill, he flew his standards, one a dragon and the other the gold embroidered figure of a fighting man. His army, which consisted of row after row of warriors armed with double-edged axes, settled themselves on the hillside.

William also had scouts, and they were eagerly waiting for him when he landed to inform him of Harold's position. Duke William rested his men several weeks until he was sure they were ready before advancing toward the English. Early on October 14th William ordered his troops forward. When the Norman troops were about a mile away in their march to do battle, they stopped to put on their coats of mail and make their final preparations. The Normans, who were used to fighting on horseback, called themselves chevaliers, from the French word *cheval*, meaning horse. The chevaliers were their main striking force composed of knights and other men called sergeants, who were soldiers on horseback. They also had foot soldiers armed with bows and arrows to protect the men on horseback. The English did not battle on horseback; their forces were composed mainly of foot soldiers armed with spears and axes.

The battle took place on October 14, 1066. William and his Norman knights charged bravely up the hill. King Harold's men struck back with heavy blows against them and their horses. Wielding their large double-edged axes, Harold's forces turned back the Norman attacks again and again. Casualties were so heavy it was written that the hill was slick from blood, but both sides fought on. Two of Harold's brothers were slain; still he ordered his men to hold their ground. Exhausted as they were, the Saxons found courage in their standards flying in the wind and their king urging them on. Leading his men, King Harold was suddenly struck in the face by an arrow. The wound put out his eye and he fell to the ground in pain. Shortly thereafter, the disheartened English began to break ranks and flee into the surrounding woods. The Normans soon broke through their lines and Harold was slain. The dragon and the fighting man were cut down. Without their leader, their standards, their hope, the rest of the Saxons ran for their lives. The Battle of Hastings was over; the Normans had won.

William was crowned King of England on Christmas Day in Westminster Abbey. He spent much of his remaining life crushing revolts against him and waging military campaigns. William the Conqueror, as he became known, died in 1087 at the age of fifty near Mantes, France. He died as he had spent much of his life, fighting, but unlike King Harold, not from the wound of an arrow or the blow of an ax; William was killed when his horse fell and crushed him.

1. After the Battle of Hastings the women of Bayeux (pronounced buy-you), France, embroidered a piece of linen cloth over two hundred feet long and about twenty inches wide. This tapestry gives us a detailed description of the battle, arms, costumes and manners of the Normans. The information for the tapestry was supplied by the returning Norman knights. Research the Bayeux tapestry and sketch a scene from it.
2. In 1066 the Battle of Hastings was a stunning victory for the French soldiers on horseback. In 1346 English soldiers proved that they could withstand the charge of chevaliers at the Battle of Crecy (pronounced Cray-see). Research the Battle of Crecy and contrast it to the Battle of Hastings. Tell about the new weapon introduced at Crecy and its effect on armor.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. What was the original name of Paris, and what did the name mean in English?
2. What did the Romans do that helped Paris become so important later?
3. What was the Roman name for London?
4. Why was the "bourg" important to town dwellers?
5. How did river cities protect themselves from attack?
6. Where did the wealthy residents live?
7. What would you expect to find in the middle of the city?
8. Where did the poor live?
9. Why were new walls built?
10. What happened to the old walls?



Medieval streets were crowded with houses, merchants' stalls, people, and animals.

Cities Grow in Size and Influence

In our society, cities are "where the action is;" they are centers of business, industry, government, professional sports, and the news media. Our view of cities is a different than it was in the Middle Ages. After the Roman Empire fell, there was little need for cities, but when trade began to pick up around 1000 A.D., they began to grow. Medieval cities were far smaller than ours, both in space and population, and were of little importance to most people of that time.

Many cities of the Middle Ages owed much to the Roman era. Paris, for example, had long been inhabited by a tribe called the Parisii and went by the name of Lutetia (Mudtown). The Romans made it part of their road network that tied it to Lyon, Marseilles, and other key points in France. London's history went back to Celtic times, but the Romans called it Londinium. The old Roman town was destroyed by a fire in 1087, but it was quickly rebuilt and became the political center of England. Others were "new" cities. When Kaiserschloss Castle was built in 1050, the town of Nuremberg grew up around it.

Medieval cities all grew up around a castle (called a *bourg*), where residents could escape in case of attack. The lord who built the castle was glad to have these people around because they could supply him with soldiers in case of war, and whatever they owned could be taxed. As the population grew and became wealthier, the people built walls around the city to protect their property from outside attack. Cities were built near rivers, so drawbridges were built that could be raised in case of war.

These were the Middle Ages, and like everyone else, the residents of the cities were vassals under the rule and protection of the king or a powerful lord. Like other vassals, they had to pay their dues in service. What was different was that the people in cities might tax themselves to pay for the privilege of not having to work the lord's land or fight in his wars. If the city was vassal to a king, he usually did not interfere with the details of the lives of its residents, as long as they paid their taxes. The residents could choose their own leaders and make their own rules.

In the center of the city was the marketplace, the ruler's palace, and the cathedral. The city was divided into districts (often 12 districts, to honor the 12 apostles). The pattern was generally circular. In the middle were the homes of the wealthy merchants and local nobility. Near the middle were work shops, churches, and schools. At the outer edge were the huts of the poor.

Space was in short supply within the city's walls; this caused the streets to be narrow and buildings to be five and six stories tall. After it got too crowded, cities built new walls. Sometimes the old walls were torn down, but in other cases the old walls were kept, dividing towns into districts that separated the classes from each other.

Life in the Middle Ages: the Cities

Ages: the Cities

As trade began to revive at the end of the 11th century, towns which had been dormant began to develop a new enthusiasm and larger population. There were many reasons peasants might want to move to the city. They could be more free. A person living in a city for a year and a day was free from any previous feudal obligation. They could own land and either rent or sell it. They could learn a trade and possibly even become a leader. Since nearly all cities were located near the walls of a burgh (fort), those who led the local community were known as burghesses (English), bourgeois (French), or burghers (German). Many burghesses were from lower-class families, but had become successful in the city.

The upper class in cities lived well. They had large homes with many rooms, glass windows, and carpets on the floor. Their ambitions made them want to marry their daughters off to nobles, so there would be titles of nobility in the family and added prestige. The old aristocracy looked down on burghers and insultingly called them *nouveaux riches* (new rich).

Guilds in the city played an important part. The tailors in the city, for example, formed a guild and blocked anyone who was not a member from selling clothing. Thus, customers received better quality clothes but paid higher prices for clothing because guild merchants could charge more than they might have otherwise. Guild members did not do all the work; they hired others to work for them. The tailors gave cloth to seamstresses to turn into clothes and paid them by the piece. In Florence (Italy), there were seven important guilds and about 15 minor guilds.

Cities were centers of trade as well as production. Part of the business was with local customers, but part of it involved bringing in goods from distant places and sending them on to other trading centers. The Italian cities like Genoa, Venice, and Florence developed large navies and drove competitors off of the Mediterranean Sea.

Along with the growth of cities, came serious problems with overcrowding and sanitation. Medieval cities were filthy. Human inhabitants shared space with rats, fleas, pigs, horses, and oxen. Italian cities were the first to begin to pave streets, but the streets in other cities were either dust or mud. Cities did not have garbage collectors, and people dumped their waste products out their windows. Men walked next to the street to protect the women from garbage dumped out of upper windows. Polluted well water caused epidemics that wiped out whole sections of cities. The rich had room, but the poor lived in overcrowded huts. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in the crowded cities, and when health conditions got too bad, the whole city might move to a new location.

Travelers often criticized cities they visited. Rome was noted for crime, bad food, scorpions, and mosquitoes. A Frenchman warned friends to avoid London because of its degenerates, gambling, belly dancers, and beggars. Despite their problems, cities were an alternative to life as a peasant in the country.



Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. How long did a person have to live in a city before he was free of all feudal obligations?
2. Why were city dwellers called "burghesses" or "bourgeois"?
3. What was meant by *nouveaux riches*?
4. What were guilds?
5. Why was guild membership important?
6. How many guilds were there in Venice?
7. Why did Italian cities build navies?
8. Why did men walk next to the street?
9. What happened when a city became too unhealthy?
10. What city was noted for its crime, bad food, and mosquitoes?

Life in the Middle Ages: Literature

What people think about is what they write about. In the Middle Ages, with the emphasis on war, chivalry, and religion, those were the topics for literature. Since so few could read, it is not surprising that best sellers were in short supply. Most of what was recorded were old legends that people felt might be lost unless they were written down. The old Celtic legends of King Arthur, the French tales of Roland; the German stories of Nibelungs, and Norse legends about Beowulf and Vikings were finally put in written form.

Beowulf was one of the earliest stories to be written in English, but the legend was brought to England by the invading Vikings. In *Beowulf*, the hero kills a monster named Grendel, then he has to fight Grendel's mother who is seeking revenge. In the end, Beowulf dies from wounds he receives in a battle with a dragon. The story brings out the admired qualities of loyalty and courage.

The same qualities show up in *The Song of Roland*, which is based on an incident in the Battle of Roncevalles. Roland, the nephew of Charlemagne, faces 100,000 Saracens with his small army, but refuses to ask for help from his uncle. After all of his men have been killed and he is wounded, he blows his magic horn, and his uncle returns to find him dead.

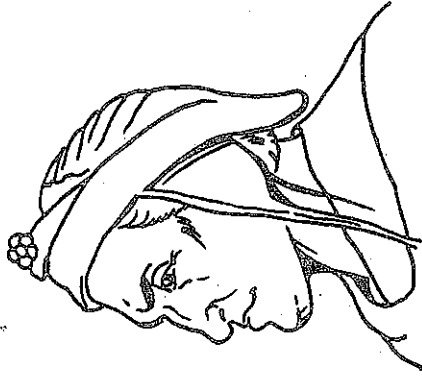
The *Nibelungs* were German "children of the mist" who owned a golden treasure. The plot centers around King Siegfried (who has killed a dragon) and his love for Kriemhild. To win her, he helps her brother win Brunhild, who has vowed she will not marry any man who has not defeated her in combat. The story is long and complicated and features battles and love.

The Norse tales of Viking heroes were written during the 1200s and are known as *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Some of these stories are short, but others are as long as novels.

Geoffrey Chaucer was the greatest English writer of the Middle Ages. His best-known work is *Canterbury Tales*, a story centered around 29 travelers on their way to London who stop at an inn. They decide that to pass the time, each will tell two stories on their way to the city and two on their way home. Chaucer never finished his tales, but gave a useful description of the people of 14th century England. In the tale *Romance of the Rose*, the lover is helped or hurt along the way by such characters as Fair Welcome, Evil-Tongue, and Jealousy.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* was also written in the 1300s, and its story begins with Dante lost in a deep forest. There he meets the Roman poet, Virgil, who helps him find his way through hell, then purgatory. For his journey through heaven to the throne of God, his guide is Beatrice.

In 1455, the Gutenberg Bible was published at Mainz, Germany, on a printing press. William Caxton set up the first printing press in England about 20 years later. Earlier printers had concentrated on books in Latin, but Caxton published books in English. After that, books on subjects interesting to scholars were available, but popular writing was also published. The spread of books and knowledge would speed the process of change.



Dante Alighieri, author of the *Divine Comedy*

Name: _____

Date: _____

Mr. Anderson's Questions on Literature

Answer questions. For #1-7, underline and write the circled number next to each sentence in which you find the answer.

1. One of the earliest stories written in English is Beowulf. What three creatures does the Viking Beowulf have to fight? _____
2. In *The Song of Roland*, Roland is the nephew of what great emperor? _____
3. Who does Virgil the Roman poet lead through Hell in the book *The Divine Comedy*? _____
4. Who is the main character in the German story *The Nibelungs* and what has he killed? _____
5. What was Geoffrey Chaucer's most popular book? _____
How many people tell stories in that book? _____
6. The name of the stories of Viking heroes written in the 1200s is the _____
7. Where was the Gutenberg Bible first produced? _____
When did that happen? _____
8. Have you ever heard of the legends of King Arthur? Tell me something you remember about them. _____
9. Why are there so few medieval stories left? What do you think we today can only find a small amount of them? _____
10. What happened to books when the printing press was invented? Why was it important that Caxton published books in English? _____

WRITE THESE YEARS AND A SUMMARY OF THE EVENT IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER ON YOUR OWN PAGE.

- 1482 - Leonardo Da Vinci paints "The Last Supper".
- 1347 - The Black Death begins in Europe. This horrible disease would kill around half of the people in Europe.
- 1189 - Richard I, Richard the Lionheart, becomes King of England.
- 1215 - King John of England signs the Magna Carta. This document gave the people some rights and said the king was not above the law.
- 570 - Muhammad, prophet of Islam is born.
- 835 - Vikings from the Scandinavian lands (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) begin to invade northern Europe. They would continue until 1042.
- 1492 - Columbus sails for a united Christian Spain and finds a route to the Americas.
- 800 - Charlemagne, King of the Franks, is crowned Holy Roman Emperor. Charlemagne united much of Western Europe and is considered the father of both the French and the German Monarchies.
- 476 - The fall of the Roman Empire. Rome had ruled much of Europe. Now much of the land would fall into confusion as local kings and rulers tried to grab power. This is the start of the Dark Ages or the Middle Ages.
- 1337 - The Hundred Years' War begins between England and France for control of the French throne.
- 481 - Clovis becomes King of the Franks. Clovis united most of the Frankish tribes that were part of Roman Province of Gaul.
- 1444 - German inventor Johannes Gutenberg invents the printing press. This will signal the start of the Renaissance.
- 1271 - Marco Polo leaves on his famous journey to explore Asia.
- 1206 - The Mongol Empire is founded by Genghis Khan.
- 896 - Alfred the Great, King of England, turns back the Viking invaders.
- 1096 - Start of the First Crusade. The Crusades began as wars between the Christian knights and the Muslims over the Holy Land. There would be several Crusades over the next many centuries.
- 732 - Battle of Tours. The Franks defeat the Muslims turning back Islam from Europe.
- 1453 - The Ottoman Empire captures the city of Constantinople. This signals the end of the Eastern Roman Empire also known as Byzantium.
- 1431 - French heroine Joan of Arc is executed by England at the age of 19.
- 1066 - William of Normandy, a French Duke, conquers England in the Battle of Hastings. He became King of England and changed the country forever.