THE MIDDLE AGES

EVERYDAY LIFE
IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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A MEDIEVAL TIMELINE

1st century B.C.	Establishment of Roman Empire
A.D. 3rd century	Germanic tribes begin to invade the Roman Empire
4th century	Roman Empire adopts Christianity
	Roman Empire divides into Eastern and Western Empires
5th century	Western Roman Empire collapses
6th century	St. Benedict establishes his rule for monastic life
8th century	Arabs invade Mediterranean Europe
800	Charlemagne is crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the pope
9th–10th centuries	Viking raids in northern Europe
10th century	Emergence of castles and knights
1095–1099	First Crusade captures Jerusalem and establishes the Crusader States
1147–1149	Second Crusade
ca. 1150	Geoffrey of Monmouth writes his *History of the Kings of Britain*, popularizing the legend of King Arthur
1154	Accession of Henry II of England
1163	Work begins on the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris
1170	Murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in England
1180	Accession of Phillip II of France (Phillip Augustus)
1187	Saladin captures Jerusalem from Christians
1189	Accession of Richard I of England (Richard the Lionhearted)
1189–1192	Third Crusade recaptures Acre but fails to take Jerusalem
1199	Accession of King John of England
ca. 1200	Emergence of banks in Italy
	Emergence of the University of Paris
1202–1204	Fourth Crusade
1209–1229	Crusade against the Cathars in southern France
1210	Franciscan Friars founded
1215	Magna Carta signed in England
1216	Accession of Henry III of England
	Fifth Crusade
	Dominican Friars founded
ca. 1225	Genghis Khan's Mongols harry eastern Europe
1226	Accession of Louis IX of France (St. Louis)
1228	Sixth Crusade
ca. 1233	Inquisition founded
1248–1250	Seventh Crusade
ca. 1250	Gold coinage is minted
1270	Eighth Crusade
1271–1295	Marco Polo's journeys
1285	Accession of Phillip IV of France (Phillip the Fair)
1291	Final fall of Crusader States in the Holy Land
ca. 1300–1350	Battles of Courtrai (1302), Bannockburn (1314), Crécy (1346): knights are disastrously overcome by ordinary foot-soldiers
ca. 1325	First use of gunpowder in battle
ca. 1350	Black Death arrives in Europe
1381	Peasants' Revolt in England
ca. 1450	First printed books

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MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

W E ARE INCLINED TODAY TO ROMANTICIZE THE MIDDLE AGES as a time when things were simpler, but in reality medieval society was highly complex. Modern societies are structured by documents and constitutions, and many of their pivotal relationships are defined by abstract institutions like governments and corporations. In the Middle Ages, society was shaped by personal relationships like kinship and patronage; these structures were perpetuated not by abstract institutions but by the personal ties of inheritance. The force of tradition gave these personal relationships some stability, but they were never static. Relationships changed over time in response to changing circumstances, and the actual social structure at any given place and time was an intricate network reflecting a whole history of personal relationships. One peasant might enjoy more rights than his neighbor because one of his forebears had been particularly assertive in his relationship to the manor lord; a baron might be required to provide extra knights for the king's service because his great-grandfather had been a poor negotiator.

The more we study the medieval world, the more complex it becomes. In later chapters of this book we will look at specific settings to see something of the complexity of local conditions, but to understand these settings we need a frame of reference. Medieval society was in many ways profoundly different from our own, and in these first three chapters we will look at some of the general features of the medieval world to help orient the modern reader in this alien territory. These features derive from common factors that gave the diverse manifestations

ILLUSTRATION FROM *LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY*, created between ca. 1412–1440, and one of the best surviving examples of a French Gothic illuminated manuscript. The foreground scene shows peasants sowing fields, with a scarecrow-like archer behind them. In the background stands the Palais du Louvre. At the top of the painting is a calendar for the month of October.

of local life in the medieval world some measure of consistency. Shared historical circumstances and cultural background are the principal unifying factors in this chapter; shared human experiences give shape to Chapter 2; shared technological factors and material circumstances predominate in Chapter 3.

THE FEUDAL HIERARCHY

The Aristocracy

Crucial to any understanding of medieval society is the distinction between aristocrat and commoner, a distinction that reflects both the role of tradition in medieval daily life and the economic realities of medieval society. The Middle Ages inherited from premedieval Europe a cultural association between the free man and the warrior, as well as the tradition of a landowning aristocracy whose role was leadership in war and government. Toward the end of the early Middle Ages, the mounted knight emerged as the predominant force on the battlefield,
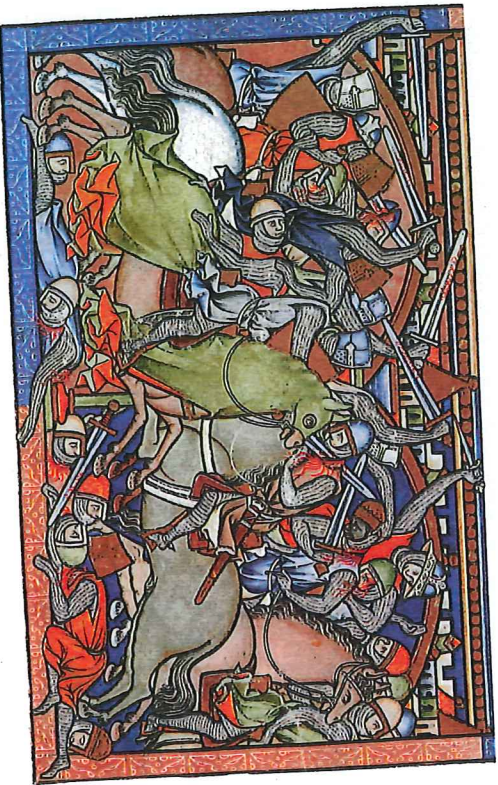
MOUNTED KNIGHTS DURING A CRUSADE. *Illustration from the Morgan Bible, a medieval picture Bible that dates to ca. 1244-1254, and is considered a masterpiece of Gothic art.*

and the class of arms-bearing free men was gradually redivided. Those who served as knights on horseback were assimilated into the aristocracy, often receiving land as a means of supporting their expensive military equipment, and the aristocracy itself came to be seen as society's warrior class. The rest, whose military service was now of minimal importance, lost status, and were increasingly assimilated into the category of the unfree.

The power and distinctive status of the warrior aristocracy were perpetuated by ongoing social realities. As the warrior class, the aristocracy had the power to acquire and hold wealth and its sources, while advances in military technology further concentrated power in their hands. Improved armor raised the cost of military equipment while widening the gulf between the effectiveness of a peasant spearman and a fully equipped warrior. Even more important was the introduction of the stirrup, which made possible a new form of warfare based on the power of the mounted knight. The knight was enormously expensive to train, maintain, and equip, but he was virtually unbeatable on the battlefield until the rise of the longbow and pike in the fourteenth century. The aristocracy had the resources to take advantage of the new technology; and their hold on those resources was reinforced by the technology itself.

Aristocratic status was inherited: again, this reflected the force of tradition as well as the natural inclination of parents to use their resources to benefit their children. Many of the medieval aristocracy had their ancestry among the Germanic warriors who had invaded the Roman Empire during its declining days, taking over the land as their own, and in some cases adopting the positions of the former Roman landlords. Others belonged to families that had entered the aristocracy more recently through some combination of military, political, and economic success. The line between aristocrat and commoner was never so firm that it could not be crossed through prosperity or decline, although the transition usually took more than a single generation.

There was enormous variation in wealth, power, and status among aristocrats. The wealthiest aristocrats in England in the thirteenth century might have an annual income of around £5,000, about five hundred times more than the poorest. At the top were the kings and upper nobility, whose

extensive networks of patronage placed them in authority over large territories and populations, allowing them a major political role at the national and international level. Below them were aristocrats whose authority was more limited, some having only a few other aristocrats under their power, others at an even lower level having authority only over commoners; this last group corresponded to landowning knights. The very lowest tier of the aristocracy were those who had no governmental authority at all, professional warriors of aristocratic families who could only support themselves by taking military service with a greater aristocrat. Such men had significantly less wealth and power than the upper levels of commoners, and vastly less than the upper levels of their own class.

Within its own ranks, the aristocracy was highly stratified. A simple knight who rose through good fortune to join the titled nobility would be regarded as an upstart by other noblemen. Yet relative to society as a whole, the aristocracy shared a common culture and social image that associated the mighty duke with the landless knight rather than with the wealthy merchant. Both duke and knight were officially warriors, born to the role by right of inheritance, and claiming generations of ancestors who had been born to this status before them. Both maintained their elite status by participating in a courtly culture that became increasingly elaborate over the course of the Middle Ages. This culture involved not only the cultivation of martial skills such as swordsmanship and riding, but also an appreciation of arts such as poetry and music, familiarity with courtly pastimes such as hunting and chess, and command of an ever-changing code of fashion and etiquette. Wealthy commoners in search of social status, always latecomers to the world of privilege, were perpetually playing a game whose rules had already been set by the aristocracy.

All in all, the aristocracy of the High Middle Ages probably constituted about 1 percent of the population, but their power and influence were far greater than their actual numbers. In particular, the distinctively medieval institution of feudalism was dominated by the aristocracy, and as the framework of medieval law and government, it shaped the lives even of those who did not participate in it directly.

Feudalism

Feudalism took shape in the vacuum of authority left by the collapse of the Roman Empire in western Europe. The empire in its heyday furnished Europe with a highly developed political and economic infrastructure: roads, coinage, defense, governmental stability. As the empire withdrew from the West, the infrastructure withered, and each locality was obliged to look to its own resources. During the early Middle Ages, society rebuilt itself in response to the new political realities, and new systems of social organization evolved to replace those once provided by Rome. Feudalism emerged as a viable social framework that could function even in a relatively anarchic environment.

The most important factors in the feudal equation were land and military power. The two were closely interdependent, since those who had military power could assert and maintain control over land, while those who controlled land could amass the wealth needed to support military power. The emphasis on land reflected the low yield of agricultural produce to agricultural labor, which required nine-tenths of the population to be engaged in farming. It was also a natural result of the limited infrastructure for industry and trade. Although commerce came to play an increasingly important role in the economy of the High Middle Ages, land remained the greatest and most reliable source of wealth. The importance of military power in feudalism was a response to the weakness of governmental authority. After the collapse of the empire, western Europe could no longer look to the legions of Rome to ward off raids or invasions from without, or to keep the peace within. The advantage lay with those who could amass significant local military forces.

In the absence of centralized governmental authority, people look to personal relationships to bind society together. Feudalism evolved as a hierarchical system of personal relationships in which land and military power were the principal commodities exchanged. An individual with military power to offer gave his services to a feudal lord. The lord in turn secured his subordinate in the possession of the land that financed his military service. The feudal subordinate was called a vassal, and the vassal's land was termed a fee or fief (*feudum* in Latin, which is the source of the term "feudal"). A vassal who held a great deal

of land might in turn grant fiefs to his own feudal tenants, who helped him fulfill his military obligations to his lord. Long-term stability was provided by the principle of heredity, as the feudal relationships between individuals were extended to apply to their heirs.

Feudal landholding lay somewhere between modern tenancy and ownership. The holder was considered the tenant rather than the owner of the holding. In principle, the lord might grant the fief at his will whenever it became empty. In practice, fiefs were treated as permanent and hereditary property; granted by the lord to the heir when the holder died, and only falling empty if there was no heir, or if the holder was forcefully dispossessed. Tenants regularly sold their tenancies, although the lord's permission had to be sought for the transaction. Heritability was advantageous for both lord and vassal, allowing the vassal to pass the property on to his heirs, and providing stability for the lord.

The feudal transaction was more than a bartering of land for military service. The feudal tenant held some measure of legal jurisdiction and political authority over his holding and subtenants. At the same time, his status as a vassal involved more than just military service. The vassal did homage to the lord, symbolizing his status as his lord's man (*homme* in French), owing him generalized loyalty and political support, while the lord in turn promised his patronage.

The king was the supreme feudal power in a kingdom. In theory, he was the owner and ruler of all the land, and delegated his authority to his tenants. In practice, his authority was often subject to challenge from his great lords, who together could wield military power comparable to his own. Not all land

THIS SCENE FROM THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY, *Harold (right), future King of England, swears an oath to William (left), Duke of Normandy, an act similar to a vassal swearing homage to lord. Translated, the Latin text at the top reads There Harold made an oath to Duke William.*

was held from a king or feudal lord. Some was held as inalienable property, called an *allod*. The holder of an allod might owe some form of allegiance to a suzerain (superior feudal lord). Suzerainty was a looser form of overlordship than sovereignty: the vassal owed homage to the lord, but because his feudal holding was not considered dependent on that relationship, homage was harder to enforce. Allods were not a feature of English feudalism, but they existed in France and were common in Germany.

Although historians sometimes speak of "the feudal system," feudalism was far from systematic. It evolved locally in response to local situations, and varied enormously from place to place. If a system can be perceived, it is because of shared circumstances, and because there was a degree of cultural contact and common cultural inheritance. Feudalism was complex, and the details varied greatly. Large landholdings were rarely solid blocks of territory, but scattered patchworks of feudal lands. Military service was commonly for forty days in the year, but it could be longer or shorter. The basic unit of feudal responsibility was the knight's service, the duty to provide a single mounted knight to serve one's lord. The exact number of services owed varied from fief to fief, depending partly on the value of the land, but also on the historical traditions associated with the holding. The distribution of power shifted over time, making new demands possible and old customs unenforceable, and in time these temporary shifts could themselves become established customs.

The Commoners

Feudal society was based on a fundamental distinction between the aristocracy, whose function was military and governmental, and the commoners, the 98 percent of the population whose role it was to labor. Like the aristocracy, commoners inherited their status from their parents. Most were rural workers, living under the manorial system that mirrored many of the structures of the feudal hierarchy. The manor was the smallest unit of feudal landholding, typically a few hundred acres. It was essentially a holding sufficient to support an aristocratic household, including its most important feudal element, the knight. The manor lord parceled out some portion of his land to peasant tenants, keeping the rest in

his own hands as demesne land to be cultivated for his own benefit. Like feudal vassals, the peasants provided service in exchange for their land, in this case labor service that the lord used to cultivate his demesne.

In addition, the lord exercised legal and governmental authority over the manor peasants. The nature of this jurisdiction depended on each peasant's personal status. In general, the medieval commoner was classed as free or unfree.

Like other forms of personal status in the Middle Ages, freedom and unfreedom were inherited. People born of unfree parents were unfree themselves. In mixed unions, the customs varied, but commonly, legitimate children inherited their father's status, illegitimate ones their mother's. Unfree peasants, also called serfs or villeins, were personally subject to their manor lord in a manner that served to guarantee him a stable supply of labor: the serf was obliged to provide certain labor services for the lord (see Chapter 4), and he had to have the lord's permission to move away from the manor.

The institution of serfdom had some of its roots in the older practice of slavery, and the serf's status was in some ways akin to that of a slave. By the High Middle Ages, it was no longer considered appropriate for Christians to own other Christians as slaves, and true slavery persisted only at the margins of Europe where Christians were in contact with non-Christian societies. Serfdom, meanwhile, had been shaped by centuries of customs that tended to ease some of the serf's disadvantages, so that it would be misleading to equate serfdom with slavery. Serfs owed services to their lord, but these were limited by custom. A serf could be bought and sold, but the buyer acquired only the lord's traditional rights over the serf, not complete ownership. A serf's personal property in theory belonged to the lord, but in practice lords only collected traditional rents, fees, and fines from their serfs.

The idea of freedom and unfreedom was part of the shared heritage of medieval European cultures, dating back to ancient times, but its local manifestations in the Middle Ages were complex. There was a wide variety of local traditions and a spectrum of degrees of servitude. Even a free peasant might owe labor services, while not all serfs were subject to the full obligations of serfdom. There was a gray area in the middle where the categories of free and unfree were hard to

apply. In parts of Europe, there were even quasi-aristocratic serfs known to historians as *ministerials*. The ministerials were descended from serfs who had served their lords as soldiers or administrators. Because of their ancestors' prestigious and influential work, their heirs enjoyed a certain aristocratic status that entitled them to hold feudal fiefs and become knights, yet they remained technically unfree. Ministerials were unknown in England, but they existed in France and were common in Germany and the Low Countries; in some parts of Germany, a majority of the knights were of unfree origin.

Although serfs were not necessarily subject to the kinds of social or economic disadvantages that we might expect from their unfree status, they nonetheless perceived serfdom as an undesirable state. Numerous court cases of the period document the efforts of individual peasants to prove that they were not serfs, and resentment of serfdom was a factor in the Peasants' Revolt that erupted in England in 1381, since one of the principal demands of the rebels was the abolition of serfdom. The revolt was unsuccessful, but social and economic trends were already causing serfdom to decline. In the increasingly monetary economy of the High Middle Ages, many lords and serfs agreed to convert labor services into monetary payments. Some serfs were given their freedom outright, or purchased it from their lords. As a result, the unfree portion of the population declined over the course of the Middle Ages. In some places in the mid-eleventh century, serfs may have constituted 90 percent of the peasantry, but by the early fourteenth century, the figure may have been closer to one half.

The feudal and manorial hierarchy were defined by the aristocracy who were its principal beneficiaries. It is less clear how ordinary commoners perceived the social structure, since their perspective is generally missing from the written record. To some degree, they were participants in the feudal structure, yielding labor and taxes to their feudal lords, taking an active part in manorial institutions such as the manor court, and providing officers for the enforcement of the lord's manorial rights. It is far from certain, however, that the official distinctions between aristocrat and commoner or free and unfree were as important to the peasant as they were to his manor lord. Regardless of the serfs' resentment of their status, the distinction between serf and free commoner does not seem to

have played a role in determining social status among commoners, and manorial records are full of small acts of resistance to the lord's authority. In the day-to-day life of the medieval commoner, relationships within the local community probably mattered more than the official feudal hierarchy.

Law and Government

The feudal and manorial structure went hand in hand with government and law. Political and judicial authority followed the contours of the feudal structure, with local manor lords exercising local jurisdiction, regional feudal lords wielding power over wider territories, and kings claiming a sovereign power that reached all levels of society. Generally speaking, law was seen as consisting of a community's traditional customs, and the function of a lord was to uphold those customs, consulting with his subordinates about their nature and applicability in any given situation. A lord also exercised political authority, but he was again expected to consult with his subordinates on matters that traditionally required their advice. In this way feudalism allowed, at least in principle, for the consent of the governed. The local manor lord presided over the manor court, but it was his peasant tenants who constituted the jury that actually ruled on legal disputes. The lord might exert his influence to sway their judgment, but contemporary advice recommended that he leave them to follow their own consciences. Feudal overlords and kings likewise consulted their vassals in their own courts and councils. A lord might invoke prerogative and override the will of his subordinates, but such a course could reap a bitter harvest. An overbearing manor lord might find his peasants recalcitrant and unproductive, and kings who gave no heed to the advice of their great lords ran the risk of an aristocratic rebellion.

On both sides, choices were heavily circumscribed by custom. In principle, a court only adjudicated on the basis of existing tradition, although there was leeway in the interpretation of tradition that allowed for a certain measure of de facto legislation. Similarly, a feudal lord, in principle, exercised only such authority as was traditionally assigned to him and his forebears, although the actual interpretation of how far that authority extended was susceptible to

influence from current circumstances. If a lord was in a strong political position, he and his subordinates might take a generous interpretation of his traditional authority, but if his position was weak, he might find his powers eroded. The exercise of power could also be restricted from above. If a subordinate felt his lord had acted wrongly, he might appeal to the overlord, and kings in particular saw themselves as having a legitimate interest in justice at every level of society.

Punishment was generally determined by traditional expectations. Minor civil infractions commonly incurred a fine. Significant violations of morality, such as dishonesty or promiscuity, might entail some ritual of public humiliation, such as confinement in a pillory or walking in a procession in one's shirt through the streets. Criminal justice tended to be savage, reflecting in part the weakness of law enforcement. Criminals were hard to apprehend in a world with weak central governments and limited means of communication, and the legal system compensated for the rarity of punishment by handling convicted criminals severely: whipping for minor crimes, mutilation for more serious ones, and death for the most grave. Even a thief might be subject to capital punishment. Yet the very severity of the punishments often made it harder to secure convictions from courts that were well aware of the savage penalty a conviction might bring. Terms of imprisonment were not a prominent part of the medieval penal system. Accused criminals might languish in prison for some time awaiting trial, and the convicted might be confined in prison at the pleasure of the offended lord, but long-term incarceration was generally restricted to political prisoners.

THE CHURCH

Medieval political theory commonly divided society into three estates, consisting of the aristocracy, commoners, and clergy. The clergy, unlike the others, was not born into its class, but entered into it as a career, whether by choice or compulsion. Clerics were in large measure drawn from the aristocracy, particularly at the upper levels of church administration, but a clerical career was also one of the few avenues of advancement open to the lower levels of society. Like the aristocracy, the clergy constituted only a tiny fraction of the population, perhaps another 1 percent.

GERMAN ILLUSTRATION FROM 1492, depicting the three estates of medieval society standing before Christ for judgment. The pope of the Roman Catholic Church (left) and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (right) lead their respective estates, while two peasants represent the third.

The clergy was divided into secular and regular clerics. The secular clergy ministered directly to the public at large (in Latin, *secularum*, the temporal world). The most common secular cleric was the parish priest who conducted religious services at the local church for the residents of the area, in some cases with the assistance of a staff of lesser clerics.

Above the parish priest was a vast administrative hierarchy that covered all of Europe. The bishop administered a diocese that was composed of hundreds of parish churches. He was assisted in his duties by a substantial staff of church officers, notably a body of priests called canons who conducted religious services in the cathedral, or episcopal church, and took part in the administration of the diocese. Above the bishop was the archbishop, whose authority might extend over a half-dozen to a dozen dioceses, and at the head of the church as a whole, was the pope. Both archbishops and the pope had large administrative staffs of their own, also drawn from the clergy.

The regular clergy was originally limited to monks, who sought spiritual perfection by withdrawing from the secular world and living communal lives according to a codified rule of organization and conduct (in Latin, *regula*, rule). In time, other clerics became regular clergy by taking on the communal mode of life under a rule, while continuing to interact with the secular world. Many groups of cathedral canons adopted rules, and eventually houses of regular canons were established independent of cathedrals. Regular canons enjoyed the strengths of monastic discipline and organization while still being permitted to interact with the world at large, a combination that made them

extremely useful to both the church and secular society. During the High Middle Ages, there arose new regular orders called mendicants or friars, who also lived communally under a rule, but existed specifically to minister to the secular world. The regular clergy, like the secular, was ultimately subject to the authority of the pope.

The church wielded influence comparable to that of the aristocracy. The importance attached to so small a group reflects the status of religion in medieval society. There was no distinction between church and state, or even between church and community: to be a part of society was to be part of the church. This aspect of medieval society had roots in the premedieval world. The Roman Empire required its subjects to honor the state religion in addition to their own local deities, and among the barbarians religion was closely tied to a tribe's communal identity. Christianity was oriented more toward personal spirituality than were the older pagan religions of Europe, but in becoming the official religion in Europe it also took on the social roles once occupied by paganism.

The medieval church constituted a kind of second social system, sharing governmental authority with the feudal hierarchy, and occasionally coming in conflict with secular lords over disputed rights. Every community and neighborhood was under the auspices of a parish. The church had its own law code, called canon law, and a system of church courts to enforce it, exercising authority over many aspects of people's lives. Marriage and its legal ramifications fell under the jurisdiction of the church, and wills were also solemnized and enforced by church authority. The church was also responsible for what today would be termed moral legislation, including such matters as adultery, fornication, and blasphemy.

Overall, the administrative hierarchy of the church was more orderly than the jumble of feudal relationships. Unlike feudalism, the church was defined by a centralized and, to some degree, planned system of organization, and in many ways it was the heir in the West to the governmental structures of the Roman Empire. Many of the bishops' seats were still located in the administrative cities of the Empire, and the diocese was itself a unit of Roman civil administration.

In Western Europe, the Catholic Church was the only officially permitted form of Christianity. Various non-Catholic sects existed in the West, but lacking official sanction, they had to survive more or less underground. The most widespread of these sects were the Cathars, who believed that God and the Devil were two equal powers in eternal conflict. The Cathars were numerous in southern France, where they actually enjoyed a significant degree of unofficial support from some of the local lords, but their community was always at risk from official Catholicism. In the early thirteenth century, the church declared a crusade against them, with the support of the king of France, who saw an opportunity to strengthen his hold on the south. The independence of Catharism's aristocratic patrons was crushed, and over the next century Catharism declined swiftly in the face of ongoing persecution and conversion by the Catholic authorities. Outside of the West, the Eastern Orthodox Church was the officially established religion in most of eastern Europe. The Orthodox Church differed from Catholicism in many points of tradition, organization, and ceremony, but the doctrines of the two churches were close enough that many continued to hope for a reconciliation long after East and West went their separate ways in the early Middle Ages.

There were also a number of non-Christians in Europe. At the margins of Europe Christians came into contact with other religions: pagan Slavs in the east and Muslims in the south. Relations with non-Christian neighbors were unstable, often in a state of war, and those who were captured on either side were likely to be sold into slavery. Within Christian Europe, Jews were found in many European towns. There was a significant Muslim population in the south, particularly in Spain and southern Italy—parts of Spain remained in Muslim control until the end of the fifteenth century. In a society where church and community were one, these non-Christians were foreigners by definition, tolerated at best, but always at risk in a society where their legal status was precarious. Some medieval Europeans collaborated with non-Christians to make Jewish and Arabic learning accessible in Europe, but at times the same non-Christians were severely persecuted.

While the intermingling of religion and society allowed the church enormous influence over people's lives, their religious culture was not exclusively defined by the church. Most medieval people would have described themselves as Christians,

but their actual interaction with Christian belief was not always orthodox. Popular participation in the official church was more limited than it is for many people today. Church attendance was sporadic, communion was taken only a few times during the year, and the quality of religious education was uneven in a world where even the priest was not necessarily well informed as to the nature of Christian doctrine. At the same time, popular religion reshaped Christianity to suit its own needs. The priest was called upon to provide blessings for salt, butter, and cheese, to bless eggs at Easter and seeds at planting time, to bless a child before its first haircut, to bless a boy before his first shave. People had their own rituals and superstitions that combined elements of Christian practice with traditional folk culture.

WOMEN IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Far older, deeper, and in some ways more elusive than the medieval distinctions of class, was the division between the sexes. Modern scholars sometimes refer to women as the fourth estate of medieval society: the aristocracy, commoners, and clergy all included women, but to some degree these women had more in common with each other than with the men of their own estate. In every case, women were officially seen as standing in a position of subordination to men, and their powers of choice were always circumscribed to a greater or lesser degree by both official social structures and unofficial customs.

The official constraints on women were probably least restrictive among commoners. In a laboring household, women were generally assigned roles pertaining directly to the

ILLUSTRATION FROM *LES TRÈS RICHES HEURES DU DUC DE BERRY*, created between ca. 1412–1440. In this scene, which takes places on the River Seine across from the palace in Paris, two women reap hay in the foreground while other peasants farm land in the background.

home itself, while the man engaged in more external work. A woman's domestic responsibilities included maintaining the house, preparing food, mending clothes, and raising children. She also contributed directly to provisioning the household by raising poultry, dairying, and tending the garden; she might also engage in moneymaking labor within the home, such as spinning and brewing. Among the peasantry, it was quite common for women to take part in field labor during harvest time, and there is evidence that women were hired for a wide variety of agricultural work. In the towns, some trades were closed to women, others might be acquired by a woman from her father or husband, and some were principally occupied by female workers (see Chapter 7). An advocate of monastic life for women around the year 1200 offered this vivid, albeit biased, vignette of the pressures of a woman's domestic life:

When she comes in the house, the wife hears her child screaming, sees the cat at the bacon, and the dog gnawing her hides; her biscuit is burning on the stone, and her calf is sucking up her milk; the crock is boiling over into the fire, and the husband is scolding.[1]

As one moves up the social scale, the pressure to earn a living decreases, and the preoccupation with proper social roles grows accordingly. An aristocratic woman might enjoy more power because of her social station, but she was at the same time more limited by the constraints of her class. An aristocratic wife, like her commoner counterpart, might have particular responsibility for running the household, and during her husband's absence might even administer the family estates. However, she would not normally participate in the aristocratic work of warfare or government. One of the standard courtly skills of the aristocratic woman was needlework, an extremely time-consuming activity whose prominence in the lady's routine suggests that she had an excess of idle hours to fill.

Women's participation in the clergy was the most restricted of all. Women could not become priests, so they were cut off from a large part of the activity of the church. The only clerical route open to women was in the regular clergy, living the monastic life as nuns, or, from the thirteenth century onward, joining

one of the female orders associated with the mendicants. The life of such women, like that of the monks, was restricted by the rules of their order, which for women tended to be even more restrictive than for men. Yet women in the cloister might achieve a level of education not usually available to women at the time, and they were free from direct and constant male authority to a degree uncommon in medieval society in general.

Across the social spectrum, women were officially viewed as secondary people who were expected to be in a position of subordination: a girl to her father, a laboring woman to her employer, a wife to her husband. Even a widow, who in some parts of Europe enjoyed a certain measure of liberty, reverted in others to the authority of her original kinsmen. Yet the official view is not the whole story. As in later centuries, women who were restricted by the official order of things found unofficial alternatives. Aristocratic women, denied a role in government, manipulated the terms of their society by setting the tone of the aristocracy's cultural life. The twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen, who could never perform the sacraments by which the priest mediated between man and God, became a mystic, and communed with God directly. Here, as in other aspects of medieval society, the version of history that finds its way into the written record is often created from the official point of view. The thirteenth-century regulations of the poulterers of Paris declare sententiously that "The man is not under the lordship of the woman, but the woman is under the lordship of the man"; but another hand has added in the margin, "Not always."[2]