The Manorial System - Serfs and Peasants

Common people included bailiffs, craftsmen, peasants, and serfs. We refer to this group collectively as peasants or serfs, but it's important to know that there was a difference between a peasant and a serf.

Serfs were bound to the manor. Almost all the common people were serfs. Serfs were not slaves, they could not be sold. But serfs could not leave the manor without permission. Serfs had to do the job they were assigned or they would be punished. If the land was sold or reassigned, the serfs stayed right where they were. Serfs went with the land. It was illegal for a serf to run away. If they were caught, they would be killed. But if they could run away for a year and a day without being caught, they were free of the land and their feudal obligation. As towns began to reappear after the Crusades, some serfs did escape to the towns, especially those who were craftsmen. Those who stayed at least had the comfort of knowing that if they died, their family would be taken care of. It was understood that a landowner could not throw a serf or his family out, just as it was understood that serfs could not refuse to work.

Peasants were free to leave if they wished. Peasants were different; they did not have to work for the lord. But where would they go? War was everywhere. Peasants worked the land and made the goods in return for protection. Peasants might have a bit of land, a little two-room house, and a tiny vegetable garden of their own. But other than that, their life was just like a serf's.

1. What is the difference between a serf and a peasant?

Jobs: Some serfs were assigned the job of bailiff. Their job was to collect taxes from the common people. Some were craftsmen. Some only made weapons, did carpentry, baked pastries and breads, or made leather goods for the nobility. Most did a little bit of everything. Besides farming, they fixed tools and made their own clothes. Most worked the land and took care of the animals. They worked long hours, and they worked very hard. A few peasants escaped their life by joining the church, but most lived and died on the manor where they were born.

2. What was the job of a bailiff?
**Clothing:** Commoners wore single sheepskin blouses and trousers to the knee. They usually went barefoot or wore wooden clogs. The women’s clothes were the same as men’s except they wore long skirts instead of trousers. Their clothes were dirty and shabby. They rarely took their clothing off. There was a lot of disease. (They were not the only ones who had found cleanliness distasteful. Many members of the nobility did not often take baths.)

**Homes:** Most peasants lived in two-room homes. Serfs lived in one or two-room homes as well. One room held the animals if they were lucky enough to own any. The presence of animals helped to keep them fed and warm. Their furniture might include a table and a stool, perhaps a bed or bags of straw for sleeping. Everybody slept in the same bed. People did not have privacy. An entire family lived in two rooms. Huts did not have fireplaces. People huddled together for warmth.

**Food:** Garden vegetables were plentiful when in season. They had thick soups for dinner and coarse bread. Cows were too valuable to slaughter, cows gave milk. They caught fish if they could and ate pigs on rare occasions.

**Taxes:** Peasants and serfs had to pay taxes to the owner of the land on which they lived. There was a payment due for each service they received. For example, some of the crops they grew belonged to them and some to the lord; that was one way to pay their crop tax. If they baked bread in the lord’s oven, they had to pay for the use of the oven by leaving a loaf of bread for the lord. All peasants had to set aside a number of days each year to provide labor for repair to the castle walls, the roads, or whatever else needed work.

3. Why did serfs have to pay taxes to the lord?

**Church Festivals:** Peasants and serfs looked forward to holidays – it was the only time they had an opportunity to relax and enjoy life. Holidays were all religious in nature. Each holiday included a festival. Medieval festivals offered religious dramas to watch and cheer, along with singing, dancing, wrestling, and archery. It is no wonder that the church held a central place in the daily life of the serfs and peasants, Church related activities were the only times they were allowed to have any fun.

**Religion:** Farmers were kept in their places by the promise of a better life through the church. The only way to get to heaven was to follow the Bible. The Bible at that time was only handwritten in Latin. The only people who could read it to the common people were the parish priests. So if you wanted to get to heaven and find a better life, you had to listen to the priest. If the priest said, “You have to be a farmer,” then guess what? You had to be a farmer or you would not get to heaven. The priest would tell you who you had to marry
and on what date. The priest would decide everything in your life. You had to do what the priest said if you wanted to get to heaven. On one hand, you had to do everything the priest told you to do, or you would not go to heaven. On the other hand, you had to do everything the landowner told you what to do, or you would be severely punished.

4. Why did serfs do everything their parish priest told them to do?

Feudal Obligations: In spite of the hardships of their lives, peasants and serfs seemed content with their lot. For one thing, they knew no other life. And for another, they knew they were critical to the survival of everyone on the manor. Without peasants and serfs to work the land, the land was useless to the lord. Without the protection the lord provided, commoners would die of war or famine. Each of these groups had an obligation to the other. As different as daily life was for the nobility and the common people, the manorial system provided stability and a peaceful way of life in a time of great violence.

5. What feudal obligations did the common people have to the owner of the manor?

6. What feudal obligations did the owner of the manor have to the common people?

7. What did the manorial system provide in a time of great violence?