

## Social Structure

### Medieval Europe

Medieval Europeans believed that every person was equal in the eyes of God, but in reality society was viewed as a hierarchy, with some people on the top and most on the bottom. Each person, no matter what their place on the social structure, had certain duties that were the responsibility of their position in life. In general, people did not question their standing or responsibilities. Although the feudal system did lack freedom and opportunity for most people, it did create stability and security at a time when life was generally violent and uncertain.

### Renaissance Europe

As they studied, humanists came to admire classical culture, but also adopted many Greek and Roman beliefs. For example, humanists found the classical idea of finding fulfillment in daily life more appealing than the medieval belief that people should expect little comfort from life on earth. Humanists also embraced the Greek and Roman belief that each individual has dignity and worth. Humanists also renewed the Greek ideal of the perfect person – someone who successfully participates in a variety of activities: politics, sports, art, literature, and music.

#### Level 1 Questions to answer:

1. How was society in medieval Europe actually structured?
2. What was a negative consequence of the feudal system?
3. What was a positive consequence of the feudal system?
4. What classical ideas did humanists adopt?
5. Who was the ideal person in Renaissance society?

#### Level 2 Question

- How did life change between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance?

The decline of the government of Rome in the 400s AD led the church to assume many political and social tasks as well. During this time, the bishop of Rome, now called the pope, became the strongest political leader in Western Europe. The pope claimed spiritual authority over all Christians, basing this claim on the belief that Peter (one of the followers of Jesus), who was Rome's first bishop, had been chosen by Jesus to lead the Christian church.

During the Medieval Ages, the Catholic Church helped to govern Western Europe. Local lords began to control many church offices and lands, contrary to church tradition. They often appointed relatives as bishops or other local religious leaders, instead of giving these offices to the most qualified people. Furthermore, as religious leaders and monasteries grew wealthier, many church officials became increasingly careless about carrying out their religious duties.

In the past, the Catholic Church had been an important part of the feudal system. During the Renaissance the demands of society shifted and became based on money instead of the feudal system of relationships. The church had a difficult time adjusting to this new way of thinking. For example, the local priests and monks had long served as the religious teachers of the peasants, but as the merchant (middle) class began to grow, the priests found that they knew very little about the needs of this new class of people.

The prestige of the church was also hurt as some church leaders violated the religious laws they were entrusted to uphold and lived no differently than the secular merchants and political figures. In addition, the new kings quickly realized that they did not need the support of the church to remain in power.

Level 1 Questions to answer:

1. Why did the pope claim to be in charge of all Christians?
2. What were three problems in the Catholic Church during the Medieval Age?
3. How did society change during the Renaissance?
4. What are three reasons the Catholic Church struggled to remain in control during the Renaissance?

Level 2 Question

- How did the church change between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance?

During the Middle Ages, people generally had a limited understanding of church rituals. Masses were said in Latin, a language few people understood. Also, many priests were poorly educated and did not preach effectively. Few worshippers could read or write. What the average person learned about the Christian faith came from the statues, paintings, and later the stained glass windows that adorned most medieval churches.

Although monks and nuns lived apart from society, they played a crucial role in medieval intellectual and social life. Since few people could read or write, the clergy preserved ancient religious works and the classical writings.

Monasteries and convents provided schools for young people, hospitals for the sick, food for the needy, and guest houses for weary travelers. They taught peasants carpentry and weaving and made improvements in agriculture that they passed on to others.

To help others gain fulfillment and achieve the Greek ideal, humanists opened schools to teach subjects related to the study of humanity – history, philosophy, Latin and Greek. These schools soon became so popular that humanists began to replace the clergy as teachers of the sons of wealthy merchants and artisans.

Humanism also inspired new forms of writing – in particular, writing about the daily life and feelings of people.

Humanism affected literature in another significant respect. Some humanists broke free of the tradition of writing in Latin, the language of the clergy. By writing in the languages of everyday speech, like English, German or Italian, humanists provided literature that was accessible to more people and inspired regional pride in those who read it.

Level 1 Questions to answer:

1. Why did people have difficulty learning about Christianity in the Medieval Ages?
2. What did monasteries and convents provide for Medieval people?
3. How did people learn during the Renaissance?
4. How did humanists make literature more accessible to Renaissance people?

Level 2 Question

- How did the education and language change between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance?

## Medieval Europe

## Focus on the Government

## Renaissance Europe

Over time, European nobles assumed many of the powers usually held by government; raising armies, dispensing justice, and in some cases even minting coins. In return, the nobles swore an oath of loyalty and pledged military support to the king. Lords who had been granted land were allowed to pass their land on to their heirs. In return, these nobles were to provide knights, or mounted warriors, for the royal army.

In theory, feudal relationships were like a pyramid. The king was at the top. In the middle were various ranks of lords. Each lord was a vassal – a noble who served a lord of the next higher rank. At the bottom were the knights. The vassal agreed to serve in the lord's court, to provide food and lodging when the lord came visiting, and to contribute funds when the lord's son became a knight or when his oldest daughter married. Vassals also pledged to pay ransom in the event of the lord's capture in battle.

During the Renaissance, wars occurred so often that some city-states felt it necessary to turn over all political authority to a single powerful leader to restore peace.

While dealing with internal unrest, city-states also fought with each other in territorial disputes. But the prosperous merchants and bankers, unlike the nobility they had replaced, did not want to fight in these battles. Since military service would interfere with conducting business and trade, the leaders chose to hire permanent soldiers instead of using volunteer citizens.

Hiring soldiers made wars very costly. To avoid this expense, leaders began to seek territorial gain through negotiated agreements instead of wars, and worked out an agreement among all the city-states that no one city-state should be allowed enough power to threaten the others. During the 1500s other European states adopted similar agreements with one another and also began to practice diplomacy.

### Level 1 Questions to answer:

1. What governmental responsibilities did nobles have in the Medieval Ages?
2. What were the responsibilities of vassal lords to their king?
3. Who became leaders of city-states during the Renaissance?
4. Why did the new leaders of the city-states try to negotiate instead of fighting wars during the Renaissance?

### Level 2 Question

- How did the government change between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance?