

# The medieval world order

If you would like to know how economic life worked during the Middle Ages, you have to look at the social substructures. This picture-tour will show the most important social groups in relation to the question what their income was based on. The timeframe of this picture-tour will be the turn of the late Early Middle Ages to the High Middle Ages, namely the time between 1000 and 1100 AD.

## 01

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## Men without weapons

Let us go back to the year 1000. Imagine a Europe that is mostly covered in impenetrable primeval forest. Amongst an endless, wild covert of trees, you can see individual islands, islands of culture, where peasants are tilling their fields and pasturing their livestock. These peasants make up the largest part of the population. And this largest part was probably close to 95% at the time. These peasants at the end of the Early Middle Ages are leading hard lives and not just because the work is strenuous. Every homestead is independent and produces everything the residents need. They cannot make great demands because their crops are not growing properly. If the peasant sowed one seed, he will harvest three – if he is lucky. If hail or coldness destroys the harvest, everyone stays hungry. But that is not the only threat to our peasant. He does not own weapons and he is defenceless to anyone with a sword or a lance.



Knights raiding a village. The peasants are helpless. Bayeux Tapestry, 11 cent.

## 02

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## Männer mit Waffen

Those who bear iron weapons are the rulers in these old times. The peasant can either let himself be robbed and plundered, maybe even killed, or he can seek protection by another powerful man with weapons. As a return service, his patron also exploits him, but he does so according to strict rules. The peasant gives him a part of his harvest. He also works in the fields of his patron for a set amount of days. He has his crops ground in his patron's mill and pays milling fees for it. If the householder dies, his successor gives the best piece of livestock he owns, to his patron. Be it weddings or lawsuits, the peasant always gives his patron a certain share. And patrons are imaginative when it comes to inventing reasons for charges, because powerful patrons can never get enough.



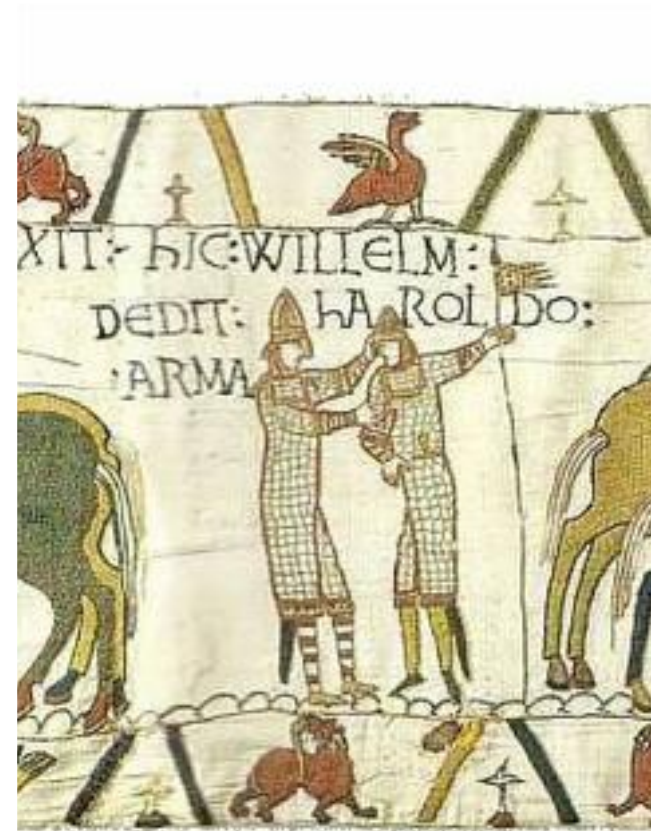
Knights raiding a village. Those who bear weapons take what they want. Bayeux Tapestry, 11 cent.

## 03

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## Of mighty lords and noble knights

After all, a patron has obligations, too. No one stands alone. Everyone is part of a big network of allegiances. Our patron has got his fief from another patron, his overlord. This scene from the Bayeux Tapestry show us for example how William, who would later become William the Conqueror, hands the weapons over to Harold. He does this as a sign for making him his liegeman. In the event of war, a liegeman has to render military assistance with all his liegemen, for a clearly determined amount of time. In times of peace he has to accompany his lord to festive events and thus enhance his prestige. An overlord's power increases with the number of liegemen he has. But it is quite expensive just to equip one knight. And every overlord is responsible for his liegemen's equipment and livelihood. Most of the time, he acquits himself of this duty by giving them a piece of land as fief.



William passes weapons to Harold which makes Harold a liege of William. Bayeux Tapestry, 11th cent.

## 04

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## Five oxen for a warhorse

At the end of the Early Middle Ages, a sturdy riding horse, strong enough to carry a knight in his armour, costs 25 to 50 sous in central France. A peasant's ox on the other hand is only worth about 10 sous. A armour costs approximately 100 sous. This would be enough to buy a farm. It has been estimated that it took 150 hectares to nourish a knight. That is roughly 1.5 square kilometres of land. No wonder armies from the Early Middle Ages are relatively small. A medium-sized county provides the king with 150 to 200 men.



Horses are the knights' pride, and cattle the means of a farmer's existence. Bayeux Tapestry, 11th cent.

## 05

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The kings

At the top of the feudal pyramid you will find the king. He is the preserver of inner peace. To this end, he has the highest jurisdiction and the right to build palaces and fortresses. Theoretically, he is the one who appoints dukes, counts and margraves, although hereditary rights severely restrict him. It is only the king who can mint coins or give this privilege to someone else. He decides who is allowed to found a market town and take tolls on their territory. If anyone wants to take money instead of crops, they have to collaborate with the king. After all, he is in control of all sources of revenue: He receives duties for the salt production. The Jews pay him for their protection. He is the owner of all metals underground. And that is not all.



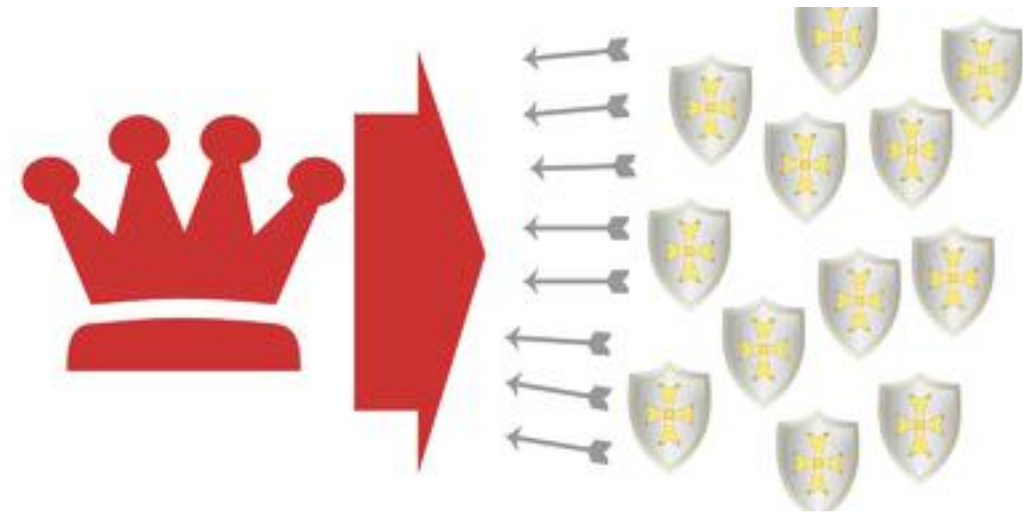
King Harold enthroned. Bayeux Tapestry, 11th cent.

## 06

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## King versus overlords

But royal power only goes as far as the king can execute it. That is why there is a fundamental conflict of interests in every kingdom: The king tries to reinforce his power over all overlords. The overlords try to weaken the king's power in order to use his lack of control to increase their own influence. If they do not want to start wars and feuds, they have to make compromises and establish rules. The coexistence of subjects and subordinates is mostly documented by customary right, but often it is also fixed in written form.



King versus overlords. Graphic: Björn Schöpe.

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# The power of documents

This does not only apply to the king and the nobility. Every village, every farm has its own individual privileges, duties and rights. Nothing is standardised and hardly anything is documented in written form. Every lord judges at his own discretion and the people's habits. If anyone wants to assert himself, he has to know all of these customs or take notice of them. The Book of Winchester is such a documentation of a medieval evaluation of the situation. Here we can see the page dedicated to the property situation in Bedfordshire. It goes back to an order by William the Conqueror in 1085. He had conquered the kingdom of England in 1066 and was now sending his delegates to make lists of every property and its rights and duties. Thus he had created the foundation of a tax collection system, which people deemed fair. They thought so because everyone was able to maintain the rights and duties they had attained in the past. The cadaster has gone down in history as the Domesday Book. William's contemporaries thought that the content of this book was so definite and reliable that it would apply until doomsday.



Book of Winchester. 11th cent.



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## Of real and fake documents

Documents and indexes become the base of the Christian society. They account for the conferment of rights and privileges even generations later. And if anyone does not have a document to testify a right they have had from time immemorial, they deem it appropriate to use a fake one. After all, the forged document only attests to the truth. The truth however could be heavily debated during the Early Middle Ages. A good example would be the Donation of Constantine, whose central scene is depicted on this fresco from the year 1246 exactly as it is described in the Golden Legend: Constantine had supposedly got leprosy. Silvester healed him through baptism and had thus received the city of Rome and the rule over the Western Empire as a gift. As a sign of this donation, the kneeling Constantine is giving the tiara to the enthroned pope, as this depiction shows. The pope however did not have a certificate for this legendary donation. Consequently it was forged at the papal court during the 9th century and used as the decisive argument in the fight between emperor and pope for the power over the believers.



The kneeling Constantine passes the tiara to the Pope. Fresco from Santi Quattro Coronati, Rome, 1247.

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# The significance of writing

This shows that writing vests someone with a special power. In a world of illiterates, it is only those who can write, who are capable of creating legally binding reality and record it for the future. And who can write? Only those, who have learned it at monastery schools. At the beginning of the High Middle Ages, priests and monks had the monopoly of education. This is a crucial part of their power and they use it to start reshaping the world.



A monk writing on a secular lord's service. Illumination, 1478-1480.

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## A reform with consequences

How should the world be designed? Should armour-bearers continued to hold the power to rob peasants and churches? Or was there an alternative? The Burgundian Benedictine monastery Cluny finds a new answer to these questions. One should already implement the kingdom of God in this world. The church and especially the monasteries become the nucleus of this concept, and as representatives of God's kingdom, they subdue the world. Their weapon is the power over the afterlife. Only those who implement the commandments of the church will be granted admission to the realm of the Blessed. As emissaries of God, the clergy cannot be subject to a worldly ruler. The times, when an emperor could just appoint or unseat a pope whenever he wanted, are over. Now the church claims the right to dethrone ungodly rulers.



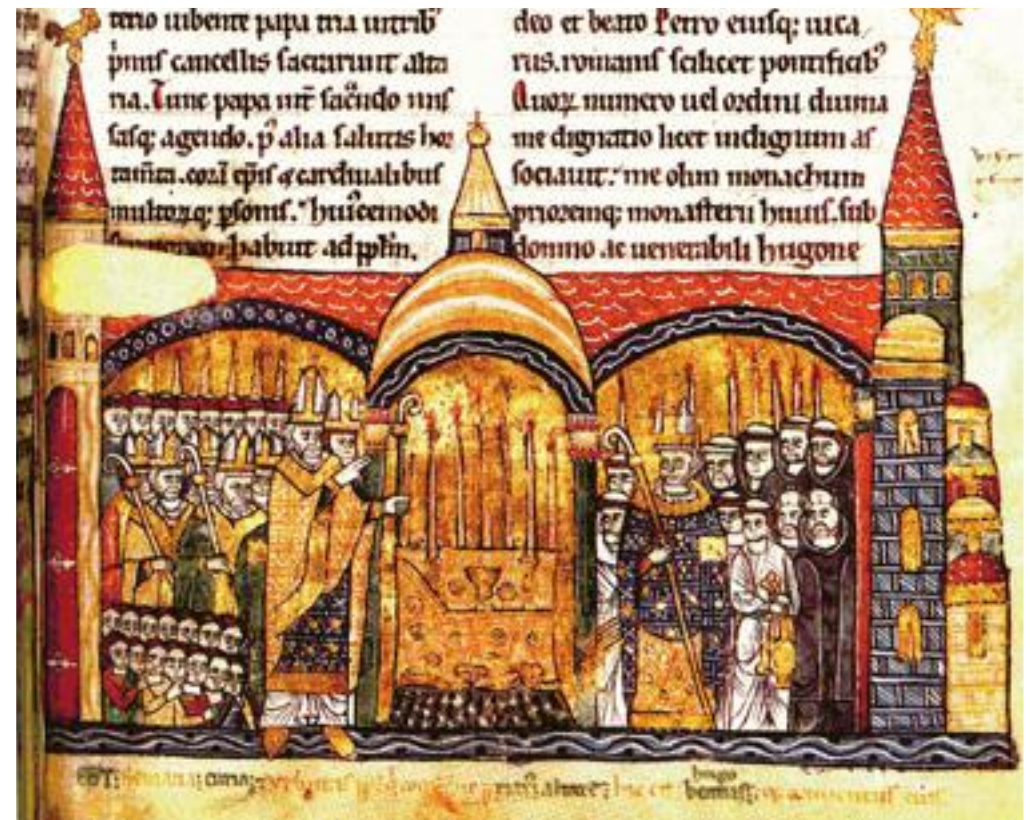
The Last Judgement: Emperor and Pope will be condemned, too, if they sin against divine law. Fresco, Stadtkirche Hall. Photo: KW.

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## The second power

Certainly the church also strives for power – for the benefit of humanity, of course. The church plunders their peasants, too and takes a tithe and more. But they do not do it to build fortresses. The priests celebrate the mass to plead for God's protection of Christianity. For this, they need precious fabrics in order to dress appropriately and shining gems to duly keep the Blessed Sacrament. They celebrate the mystery of resurrection with fragrant frankincense and pure beeswax candles. All of this lavish reverence, used to exalt God, is financed by the work of the peasants, who are cultivating the lands of the monasteries, the dioceses.



Urban II. consecrates the newly built church of Cluny. Contemporary illumination.

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The churches need peace in order to serve God. The nobility needs war in order to gain power. The peasant is being exploited by both the church and the nobility, to finance their exclusive livelihood. How does one unite these three estates in a godly, eternal system of fair cooperation? During the middle of the 11th century, Gerard of Florennes, bishop to the French city of Cambrai, was the first one to formulate the idea of a Christian world order, shaped by the three estates with their separate duties. Adalbero of Laon phrases his ideas quite poignantly in his song for King Robert: 'Tripartite is the House of God: the first pray, the second fight and the third labour.'



The medieval world order in the 'Pronostacio' of the astrologer Johannes Lichtenberger, 1488.

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## The Treuga Dei – or how does the unarmed rule the armed?

The new world order has a place for all three estates. Armour-bearers too find their task in this system. They are supposed to protect the unarmed. The clerical idea of the peace of God spreads from the Auvergne. It threatens everyone who robs defenceless people like clergymen, peasants, poor people and women, with excommunication. Churches, graveyards, streets and bridges are taboo for feuds, too. From Thursday until Sunday, as well as during Lent and Advent, any warfare is forbidden. More and more noblemen confirm this priestly concept, known as peace of God or Treuga Dei. They want to earn their place in heaven by taking their task as a Christian knight seriously.



Christian knights defend a poor man without weapons. Illumination, 15th cent.

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## Does this solve all problems?

Did peasants, priests and aristocrats live happily ever after with the peace of God? Of course not. There were many problems left to solve. To what extent the crusades were an attempt to solve the problem? You will find out in our next picture tour.



Peter the Hermit leads a group of believers to Jerusalem. Illumination, ca. 1270.