CHAPTER 8 - MEDIEVAL SOCIETY:
HIERARCHIES, TOWNS, UNIVERSITIES AND FAMILIES (1000-1300)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter describes the society of the High Middle Ages, the rise of merchants and towns, the growth of universities, and the intellectual life of the high Middle Ages. Four basic social groups were distinguished in the Middle Ages: nobility, clergy, peasantry and townsman. Noblemen lived off the labor of others; war was their sole occupation and in peacetime, they liked hunting and tournaments. Set codes of social conduct developed in noble circles; the advent of courtesy was in part an effort to reform public philandering. Noblemen formed a broad social spectrum, from minor vassals to mighty barons. After the fourteenth century, several factors (population losses, changes in military tactics and the alliance of wealthy towns with the king) forced the landed nobility into a steep economic and political decline.

There were two basic types of clergy: the regular (monks and nuns who lived in cloisters) and the secular (those who worked directly among the laity), who formed a vast hierarchy. New religious orders (Canons regular, Carthusians, Cistercians, Praemonstratensians) were created as a result of the Gregorian reform. The clergy, which formed a large percentage of the population, lived on the labor of others. Due to the popular reverence for its role as mediator between God and man, the clergy obtained special immunities which townsman came to resent. After the fifteenth century, governments subjected them to the basic responsibilities of citizenship.

The largest and lowest social group was the agrarian peasantry. There were both servile and free manors. Two basic changes occurred in the evolution of the manor: 1) as the lords parcelled out their land to new tenants, manors became hopelessly fragmented and family farms replaced manorial units; 2) the revival of trade and towns made possible the translation of feudal dues into money payments, giving tenants greater freedom. When a declining nobility tried to increase taxes and restrict migration into the city, armed revolts broke out which, although brutally crushed, stand as testimony to the breakup of medieval society.

By modern comparison, most medieval towns were but small villages. In the eleventh century the term bourgeois first appeared to designate the new merchant groups which formed communities in old Roman towns. These men were suspect within traditional medieval society and advocated a strong central government which would eliminate arbitrary tolls and tariffs that hampered trade. The resulting conflict with the landed nobility led towns to form independent communes and ally with kings. Merchant guilds appeared in the eleventh century and craft guilds in the twelfth.

A renaissance of ancient knowledge in the twelfth century (thanks to Spanish Muslim scholars) contributed to the rise of universities. At first the university was no more than a group of individuals united by common self-interest and for mutual protection. The university was simply a program of study that gave the student license to teach others. Before the emergence of universities, the liberal arts had been taught in cathedral and monastery schools, of which the most famous were at Chartres and Rheims. The most important universities specialized in particular disciplines such as law or theology and were located at Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge and Heidelberg.

The textual finds of the twelfth century included all of Aristotle's logic, as well as Ptolemy and Euclid and many Latin classics. The "summa," a summary of all that was known about a topic, was an especially important contribution of the time. Logic and dialectic, however, soon became more important than the other arts, and formed the basis of Scholastic study. Some scholars, notably John of Salisbury and Bernard of Clairvaux, rejected Scholasticism as heartless and presumptuous. They believed that grammar and eloquence were more useful for the church.

Scholastic thinkers quarreled over two basic problems: the proper relation of theology and philosophy, and whether or not universal concepts existed apart from the human mind. Aristotelian logic especially seemed to some critics a moral threat to biblical and traditional study. The second problem involved a discussion of how one knows anything: The realists believed that words such as "man" or "chair" referred to realities which have extra-mental existence. Moderate realists, like Thomas Aquinas, believed that universals only existed within individual things; one came to know individual things by truly isolating their intrinsic universal features. Nominalists such as William of Ockham argued that universal concepts were "names" which existed only in the human mind. The revolutionary character of nominalism lay in its threat to the hierarchical order of God, man and nature. Ockham found no evidence for God beyond faith. Ockhamists viewed the church in a modest secular role and for that reason, as well as for alleged skepticism, extreme nominalists were condemned in the fourteenth century.

This chapter also includes a section on medieval women. The authors emphasize that the image of women as either subjugated housewives or confined nuns is misleading. Actually, the majority of medieval women were neither. On the one hand, women were dominated by males in almost every aspect of life and were expected to be obedient to husbands whose duty it was to protect and discipline them. On the other hand, women were protected in Germanic law and defended by the church as spiritual equals to males. The vast majority of women were respected and loved by their husbands perhaps because they worked so closely with them in various occupations. Women played a prominent and creative role in workaday medieval society. This chapter's Art & the West focuses on Illuminated Manuscripts: The Luttrell Psalter.
KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The Rise of Towns: Feudal society during the High Middle Ages showed signs of collapsing as more serfs left the land for the lure of the city. Louis IX, in fact, abolished serfdom in France. England and France were moving toward centralized monarchies and the transformation from a feudal society to a nation-state more dependent upon the wealth and products of its cities had begun. The major exception to this political transformation is Germany which, thanks in large measure to the disastrous reign of Frederick II, remained a bastion of decentralized local rule.

2. The Challenge of the Bourgeoisie: The western commercial revival resulting from the crusades repopulated old cities and gave birth to new industries. Traders themselves formed a new distinctive social class. They came not from landed nobility, but from poor adventurers. The new rich broke into the aristocracy, and towns became a major force in the breakup of medieval society. Generally, towns and kings allied against the great feudal lords (England was the exception). As kings were able to hire mercenary soldiers, the noble cavalry became militarily obsolete. And as towns and industries attracted serfs from the farms, the nobility gradually lost its once all-powerful economic base.

3. Scholasticism: The Scholastic emphasis upon logic and dialectic and the contributions of arguments pro and con on particular issues was not only controversial at the time, but would be attacked in the future by humanists who put little stock in the "mindless exercises" of the Scholastics and longed to enlarge the boundaries of learning.

SUGGESTED FILMS

Medieval Guilds. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 21 min.

The Medieval Manor. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 22 min.

Medieval Knights. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 22 min.

The Medieval Mind. Humanities series. 26 min.

The Middle Ages. International Film Bureau. 31 min.


Medieval Times: Role of the Church. Coronet. 14 min.

Art and Architecture: Lesson II. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.

Chartres Cathedral. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.

Art of the Middle Ages. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.

Romanesque Painters (1000-1200). Roland Films. 11 min.


Magna Carta. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 34 min.

Becket. Teaching Film Custodians. 32 min.

Chaucer and the Medieval Period. Coronet. 14 min.

Civilization III: Romance and Reality. Time-Life. 52 min.