

Archers, Alchemists, and 98 Other Medieval Jobs You Might Have Loved or Loathed



by Priscilla Galloway
art by Martha Newbigging

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To my chief educational consultants, my daughter Noël and her spouse Wayne, with love. —P.G.

To my true blue, Almerinda—M.N.

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Introduction

This book is about some of the jobs you might do if you went back to live in Europe in the Middle Ages.

You probably already know a few things about the Middle Ages, about knights and castles, Robin Hood and Maid Marian, good King Richard and bad King John. Films, TV, and stories show those times as full of thrilling adventures. Sherwood Forest seems like the best kind of summer camp, with archery and horseback riding and dinner around the campfire, and nobody making you mind your manners. It seldom rains in Sherwood, and never snows. The outlaws are the good guys, and they always defeat the wicked sheriff and his men.



But films and TV, even when the makers do their best to get it right, don't tell you much about how people really lived. And they cover only a short period of time. The Middle Ages went on for about a thousand years, from 450 to 1450–1500 CE. That's 10 times 100 years—or 100 times 10 years. (How long have you been alive?) A thousand years is a long, long time. If you divide that thousand years in half, this book is about jobs in Europe in the second half, from 1000 to 1500 CE.

There's plenty this book does *not* tell you about the Middle Ages. This is lucky, because a book that big would be too long to read. You'd have to take out a bank loan to buy it and hire a truck to drive it home. Instead, this book will give you a chance to explore 100 different jobs you might have loved or hated all those centuries ago.

What happened when?

The Roman Empire was kaput, finished, done. Vandals burned the ancient city of Rome, and Europe sank into the first half of the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages. Why “dark”? Partly because a lot of things people knew in earlier times were lost or forgotten. Libraries and other records were destroyed; learned people couldn’t get jobs so they did other things and learning disappeared. In the succeeding centuries, kings ruled, Vikings invaded, people lived and died. There wasn’t one big country anymore, but a lot of little ones that kept changing.



Lifetime of Muhammad, founder of Islam, born in Mecca.

About 450 CE

570–632

711 CE



Moorish conquest of Spain (led by caliphs from Arab lands). Arab countries had preserved records from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Muslim scholars used the old knowledge and built on it. The resulting Islamic culture influenced the rest of Europe from this base in Spain as well as, later, through the crusades. During the next 700 years, however, Christians gradually reconquered Spain—in time for Queen Isabella to give ships and money to Christopher Columbus in 1492.

Now, fast
forward out
of the Dark
Ages to...



Norman Conquest. Duke William of Normandy (now part of France) beat King Harold of England when one of William's archers landed an arrow in Harold's eye. French became the high-class language in England. English was now low-class.



King John of England was forced to sign *Magna Carta*, the "Great Charter." The barons wanted to make sure the king couldn't slap taxes on them whenever he wanted, or make up excuses to behead them and seize their lands. The barons were looking after themselves, but they looked after us at the same time, because many rights that you have today started with *Magna Carta* in 1215: "No freeman shall be taken and imprisoned or disseised [dispossessed] or exiled or in any way destroyed . . . except by the lawful judgment of his peers and by the law of the land."

1066

1096

1215

First Crusade. Other crusades followed for almost 200 years. These were religious wars. Muslims ruled Jerusalem, and European Christians wanted it. This was holy land for both religions, and they kept fighting over it.



Downside: Many people were killed and wounded; poverty and high taxes resulted because kings and countries spent too much on war.

Upside: European crusaders took new knowledge home, and doctors, mathematicians, and architects in Europe used it in new ways.





Little Ice Age. Colder weather, shorter growing seasons; millions of hungry people. The colder weather lasted longer than the end of the Middle Ages.

1300–1700

1348–1350

The Plague, also called the Black Death; millions of dead people and dead rats; billions of dead fleas. There weren't enough peasants in Europe to farm all the land. This meant better lives for the peasants who were left, since the landowners needed them.



1492

Columbus sailed to America.
End of the Middle Ages.



Of course, it wasn't really so neat. The Middle Ages didn't end all at once, but 1492 is a handy date to remember.

Many other things happened in the thousand years of the Middle Ages. You can fit them into the big picture when you learn about them.

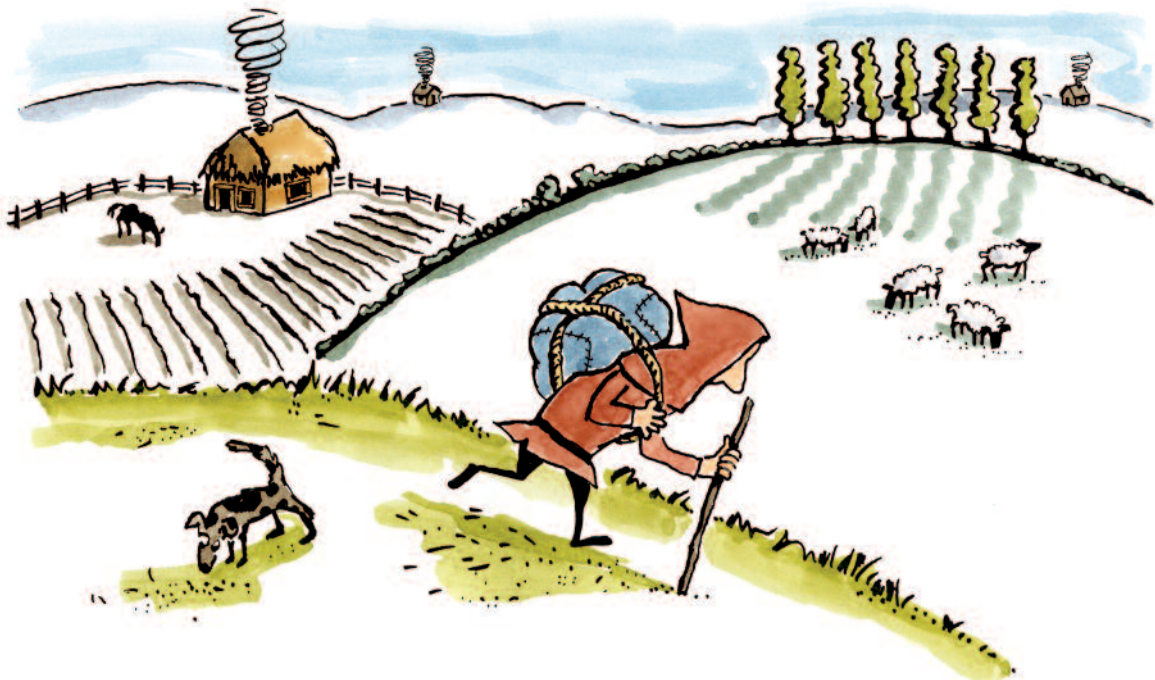
How many people lived there?

We don't know exactly how many people lived in Europe in the Middle Ages, but there weren't nearly as many as today.

Populations grew twice, three times, or even four times as big between 1000 and 1300 CE. In the next 200 years, however, 1300 to 1500, the number of people living in Europe hardly changed at all. Why? (Hint: Look at the timeline to see what happened in 1348–50.)

A thousand years ago, the same number of people lived in the British Isles as live today in Vancouver or Houston. Five hundred years ago, the whole population of Britain was only a little bigger than that of present-day Toronto or Los Angeles. Today, more people live in New York and Tokyo than in the whole of Europe a thousand years ago. In 1300, about 35,000 people lived in London; London is 200 times bigger today.

By our standards, even the biggest places in the Middle Ages were small. Your classroom has more people in it than some villages did then. You can see there would be more open space, more forests and wild lands in those days. Most people lived in the country. Only one out of every 20 people lived in cities and towns.



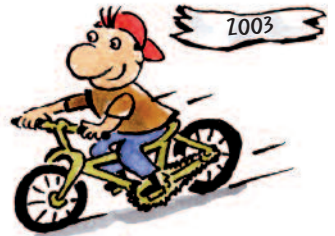
How was life different then?

Your life in the Middle Ages would have been very different from your life today. The smells would have turned your stomach; you'd have to survive without orange juice, cereal, soft drinks, or fast food; and you would long in vain for a flush toilet, a shower, or a shampoo.

But the biggest difference between life today and life in the Middle Ages wasn't something you could grasp with your senses. If you could go back to live in those times, even if your language and clothes were right, even if you were ready for the food, smells, and sanitation, even if you knew everything you needed for the job you'd chosen, you would keep saying and doing things wrong, because of one basic difference between now and then.

The way we think today, you are important; so is everyone else. In the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, in the Constitution of the United States, individual rights and freedoms come first. In the United Kingdom, *Magna Carta* laid the foundation for similar rights and freedoms, and British common law has extended them over the centuries. One person has the same rights and freedoms as another. Our social organization and laws are mostly based on this belief. Even the worst criminals have rights.

In the Middle Ages, the underlying belief was the other way around. The whole structure was far more important than any individual. From king to peasant, you had your place in the world. Your rights and freedoms depended on your place, and your place depended on birth, not on ability. Compared to our world, your rights and freedoms were very limited, even if you were a king. People in those days probably didn't live up to their beliefs any better than we do today, but you could not expect to win an argument based on an idea of your own rights. The student had no right to disagree with the teacher, or the apprentice with the master—or the child with his or her parents, even if the child was right and the adults were wrong. Rebellion brought swift punishment.



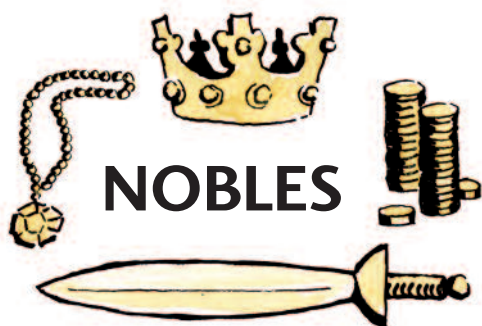
Everybody in their place

In the Middle Ages, Christians believed that God put people where they belonged, so you should not try to change your place in society. Of course, some people did try. If you succeeded, that was part of God's plan; if you failed, you were punished, sometimes cruelly.

Keeping everybody in place involved a chain of command—the feudal system. Everybody owed “homage and fealty” to somebody above: the peasant to the lord of the manor (maybe a knight), the knight to his lord (maybe a baron), the baron or baroness to their lord (maybe a king), and the king to God, who was Lord of all. When you made your oath of homage and fealty, you entered into an agreement with your lord; by accepting it, he made an agreement with you. The details of these agreements varied widely, but in one way or another you promised to be faithful to your lord and to provide certain services, usually including military service, though a woman might give money instead. Your lord promised to respect his agreement with you, including your rights as his vassal over land or estates he might have granted.

There were four main groups of people in the Middle Ages. People in every group had their duties.



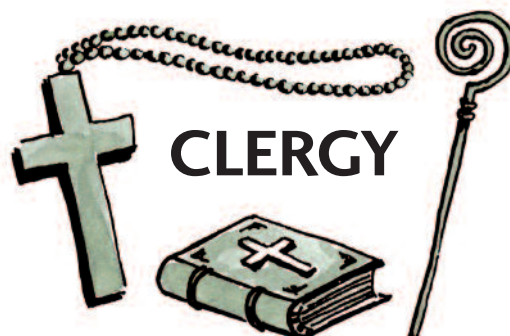


NOBLES



If you were born to noble parents, you were noble. If you were born a peasant, you were a peasant. A noble could not be a peasant, and a peasant could not be a noble, and that was that. Some members of the clergy were noble; others were not. Within the Church, however, if you were smart and lucky, you might gain power and recognition and be treated like a noble even if you weren't one.

The nobility had their work: to govern others and dispense justice, providing an orderly and safe life on their lands; to look like nobles and live like nobles; to go to war when called by their lords, with whatever support they had sworn to bring, such as a specific number of knights and other fighting men with arms and armor according to their rank.



CLERGY

The clergy and other Church people had their work: to care for human souls. Christians in the Middle Ages believed that you would be punished forever if you did wrong and did not repent and receive forgiveness before you died. There were lots of other rules about what you could and could not do; Church courts dispensed justice too.





SPECIALISTS

In castles, abbeys, and towns, some people developed special skills, such as armorer, illuminator, baker, goldsmith, or furrier. Some specialized in medicine or law; still others became manufacturers and merchants. These people also found their places in the



orderly world. Many of them owned or worked for businesses in towns. Their ideals were honesty and excellence, not high profits. However, some of them did become rich and powerful. Although they were not noble, they and their families sometimes lived better than many of the poorer nobility.

People didn't always live up to the ideal. Some nobles spent their time and money looking like nobles and living like nobles without protecting their people. A noble lord's idea of justice might be to hang anybody who disagreed with him. Clergy did not always care for human souls. Merchants sometimes charged high prices for shoddy goods. Peasants could not always grow enough food, and they were usually the ones who went hungry.



PEASANTS

Peasants were at the bottom of the social scale. They had their work: to farm the land, producing food for everybody; to work or fight for their lord; to pay fees and taxes to their lord, and a tithe to the Church. With all this work to do—and no time for play—a peasant's life was very hard.

