

## Document Packet: “Manorialism”

### Document #1

Historians agree that the decline of the money economy in the late Roman Empire gave rise to *manorialism* and that the revival of a money economy caused its demise (decline) . . . under the manorial system a landed aristocracy controlled most of the land along with the economic, political, and legal privileges that came with such authority. The mass of the inhabitants of early medieval Europe were un-free peasants, tightly bound to the soil and to their lord's will. Though students of manorialism have long been careful to make a distinction between manorialism and feudalism, the systems are often confused and are lumped together under the term feudalism. Feudalism . . . was the political and military system which came into practice some four centuries after manorialism and which was superimposed(added to/laid over) upon it. All the men involved in feudalism were free and were generally aristocrats bound to each other by highly honorable and mutual obligations. The feudal knight followed the honorable profession of fighting; the peasant followed the unhonorable occupation of working the soil so that his master could eat.

**SECONDARY SOURCE:** Bryce Lyon, *The Middle Ages in Recent Historical Thought*, 8.

### Document #2

The manor contained some forest, some land used for pasture and haying, and some cultivated land. Part of the cultivated land was reserved for the use of the lord, and the rest of it was divided among the peasants.

The cultivated land of the manor was divided into hundreds of small strips, usually an acre or half an acre in size. Each peasant was assigned a number of small strips scattered over the manor. This method of dividing the land gave each peasant a portion both of the good land and the poor, but it cost him much time in going from one bit of land to another. Other farming practices were equally inefficient. The use of fertilizer and crop rotation was not understood. Each season all the cultivated land on the manor was divided into three fields, one being sown to winter crops such as wheat or rye, one to spring crops such as oats or barley, and the third being left idle that year so that it might recover its fertility. The crops yielded little even in good years. Farm animals were small and unproductive because of poor care and poor breeding. Farm implements were few and clumsy....

Medieval peasants lived in villages, which were built near the castle if the manor had one. The small thatch-roofed, one-roomed houses were grouped about an open space (the “green”), or on both sides of a single narrow street. The important buildings were the parish church, a mill, and possibly a blacksmith's shop. The population of a village might be from about one hundred to several hundred persons.

**SOURCE:** *Feudal Institutions as Revealed in the Assizes of Romania*. Translated by Peter W. Topping. University of Pennsylvania, 1949, 92.

## Document #3

### Rural Poverty

"I have no penny," quoth Piers, "pullets {chicken feed} for to buy,  
Neither geese nor young pigs, but two green cheeses,  
A few curds and cream and an oaten cake,  
And two loaves of beans and bran baked for my children.  
And yet I say, by my soul I have no salt bacon,  
Nor any eggs, by Christ, collops {a small slice of meat} for to make.  
But I have parsley and leeks, and many cabbage plants,  
And also a cow and a calf, and a cart mare too  
To draw afield the dung while the drought lasts.  
And by these means we must make do until Lammas tide.  
And by then, I hope, to have harvest in my croft,  
And then may I dress your dinner, as dearly I wish."  
All the poor people then fetched their peascods,  
Beans and baked apples they brought in their laps,  
Chibolles {greens} and chevrils and many ripe cherries,  
And proffered Piers this present wherewith to please Hunger.  
Then poor folk for fear fed Hunger eagerly  
With green leeks and peas to poison Hunger they thought.  
Until, when it neared harvest new corn came to market.  
Then folks became fain and fed Hunger with the best,  
With good ale, as Glutton taught, and made Hunger to sleep.  
Then would Waster not work but wandered about,  
Nor no beggar eat bread that had beans within  
But craved the best of white bread, or at least of clean white.  
And no halfpenny ale in no wise would he drink  
But the best and the brownest for sale in the borough.  
Laborers that have no land to live on but their hands  
Deign not to dine today on worts a night old.  
No penny ale may please them, and no piece of bacon,  
Unless it be fresh flesh or fish fried or baked,  
And that hot or hotter against chilling of their maw.  
And if he be not dearly hired, then will he chide,  
And wait the time that he became a workman.

### The Peasant's Cottage

Three things there are that make a man by their strength  
To flee his own house, as Holy Writ {law} shows.  
The one is a wicked wife who will not be corrected,  
Her husband flees from her, for fear of her tongue.  
And if his house be unroofed and rain falls on his bed,  
He seeks and he seeks until he sleeps dry.  
And when smoke and smoldering smite in his sight,  
It does him worse than his wife or wet to sleep.  
For smoke and smoldering smite in his eyes,  
Until he is blear-eyed of blind, and hoarse in the throat,  
Coughing and cursing that Christ gives them sorrow,  
Who should bring better wood, or blow till it burns.

### The Peasant's Cares

The most needy are our neighbors, if we notice right well,  
As prisoners in pits and poor folk in cottages,  
Charged with their children, and chief lords rent,  
What by spinning they save, they spend it in house-hire,  
Both in milk and in meal to make a mess of porridge.  
To cheer up their children who chafe for their food,  
And they themselves suffer surely much hunger  
And woe in the winter, with waking at nights  
And rising to rock an oft restless cradle,  
Both to card and to comb, to clout and to wash,  
To rub and to reel year, rushes to peel,  
So 'tis pity to proclaim or in poetry to show  
The woe of these women who work in such cottages;  
And of many other men who much woe suffer,  
Cripples with hunger and with thirst, they keep up appearances,  
And are abashed for to beg, and will not be blazoned  
What they need from their neighbors, at noon and at evensong.  
This I know full well, for the world has taught me,  
How churls are afflicted who have many children,  
And have no coin but their craft to clothe and to keep them,  
And fill many to feed and few pence to do it.  
With bread and penny-ale that is less than a pittance,  
Cold flesh and cold fish, instead of roast venison;  
And on Fridays and feast days a farthing's worth of mussels  
Would be a feast for such folk, or else a few cockles,  
'Twere a charity to help those that bear such charges,  
And comfort such cottagers, the cripples and blind.

**SOURCE:** Excerpts from the English poem, *Piers Plowman*, written by a London priest, William Langland in 1362.

## Document #4

How did the three-field system work, as compared with the older . . . two-field rotation? Under the two-field plan, about half the land was planted with winter grain while the other half was left fallow. The next year the two fields simply exchanged functions.

Under the three-field plan, the arable land was divided roughly into thirds. One section was planted in the autumn with winter wheat or rye. The following spring, the second field was planted with oats, barley, peas, chickpeas, lentils, or broad beans. The third field was left fallow. The next year the first field was planted to summer crops; the second field was left fallow; the third field was put to winter grains.

In the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries there were only three plowings for the entire three-year cycle: winter field in October or November; summer field in March or whenever the ground was beginning to warm.; fallow towards the end of June. Thus in this earlier period a manor of 600 acres under the two-field system would plow 600 acres for 300 acres in crops, whereas the same 600 acres under the three-field system would have 400 acres under crops for the same plowing, or an increase of one-third.

By the twelfth century at the latest, it had been found profitable both in the two- and three-field systems to plow the fallow twice in order to keep down weeds and to improve fertility. This change increased the advantage of the triennial rotation even further. Peasants handling 600 acres under the two-field plan, and plowing the fallow twice, would plow annually  $300 + 600 = 900$  acres for 300 in crops. Managing 600 acres on the three-field system, again with double plowing of the fallow, they would plow annually only  $200 + 200 + 400 = 800$  acres for 400 acres in crops. In terms of 600 acres, the increase of production in adopting the new rotation would still be only one-third. But since the change involved 100 acres less of annual plowing, 75 acres (plowed as  $25 + 25 = 50$ ) might be added without additional labor, if such land could be secured by reclamation. The same peasants would thus be cultivating not 600 but 675 acres (450 in crops), and their production advantage over the two-field rotation would be 50%. The spread of the triennial system thus gave a major impulse to clearing land: forests fell; swamps were drained; dikes stole polders (pieces of dry land) from the sea.

The new plan of rotation, then, had several advantages. First, as has just been said, it increased the area which a peasant could cultivate by one-eighth and it pushed up his productivity by one-half. Second, the new plan distributed the labor of plowing, sowing and harvesting more evenly over the year, and thus increased efficiency. Third, it much reduced the chance of famine by diversifying crops and subjecting them to different conditions of germination, growth, and harvest. But fourth, and perhaps most important, the spring planting, which was the essence of the new rotation, stepped up the production of certain crops which had particular significance.

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One of the significant crops Professor White is referring to in his last sentence is oats for horses. Elsewhere in his book, *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, White explains why oats and horses were so important. In ancient times, most of the heavy plowing work on farms was done by oxen. Plodding oxen are much slower and less efficient than horses provided that horses can be harnessed to a plow in a way which allows them to make full use of their pulling power. The ancients failed to develop a proper horse collar. In ancient times, the harder the horse pulled, the more the collar pressed against its upper chest and windpipe, cutting down on its oxygen supply. Put simply; in ancient times plow horses could not pull hard and breathe deeply at the same time.

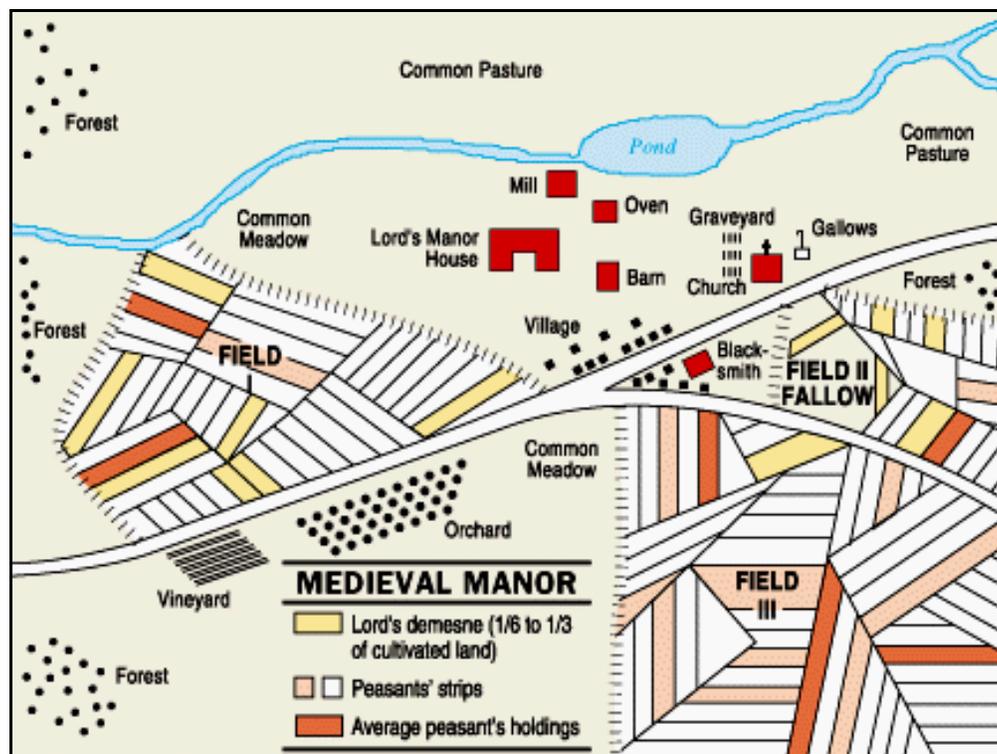
One of the most important inventions of the Middle Ages was a new style horse collar. It fit over

the horse's shoulders. When the animal pulled a heavy plow, the collar did not press against its chest and windpipe. The new horse collar was a big part of the medieval revolution in agriculture. Another medieval innovation was a new type of plow, the cutting edge of which turned the earth more easily and efficiently. All over Europe, when oxen were replaced by horses, when the three-field system replaced the two-field system, and when the improved plow came into general use, agricultural productivity shot up and starvation was greatly reduced. This enabled new towns to spring up and old ones to grow much larger.

In these towns, other technological advances occurred which took the Middle Ages far beyond the ancients. Upon the humble but firm foundation of an innovative agriculture, the civilization of the High Middle Ages was built.

**SECONDARY SOURCE:** "The Three-Field System," an excerpt from *Medieval Technology and Social Change* by Lynn White, Jr.

## Document #5



## Document #6

A reading of most secondary texts leads to the conclusion that many teachers are still explaining manorialism upon the basis of what was known and said around the middle of the nineteenth century. The classic and now trite (used too much) description of the peasant village with its three-field system is all too familiar. What is not familiar to enough teachers is the new picture of manorialism that has been emerging during the past half century. From the utilization of new records, from an increased knowledge of medieval technology, from intensive topographical and cartographical study, from aerial photography, from place-name study, and from the application of sociological and anthropological methods has arisen a new concept of manorialism. . The system prevailing in much of northern Europe consisted of a nucleated village (a concentration of huts for the peasants) encircled by the arable fields in which were scattered the strips of the peasants. Another arrangement found in the poorer parts of France, England, and the Mediterranean area was the hamlet system. This consisted of a compact farm cultivated by one peasant and his family who customarily lived in an isolated house on the land. When the land became exhausted, other land was appropriated and cultivated; this . . . technique is known as "in-field" and "out-field" exploitation .One can still justifiably teach that Europe was characterized by the three- and two-field systems with field rotation and cooperative labor, that fields were open, and that the classic nucleated village prevailed in northwestern Europe. But within the framework of this generalization one must acknowledge the large number of field variations and the untypical villages and hamlets.

**SECONDARY SOURCE:** Bryce Lyon, *The Middle Ages in Recent Historical Thought*, 7-9.