

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?

Medieval Europe

Focus on Education

Renaissance Europe

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?