

The Middle Ages Medieval Castles

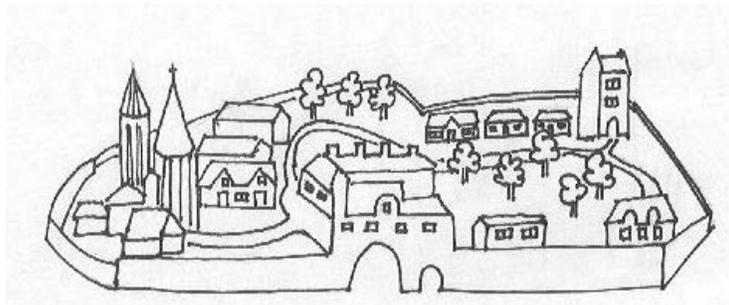


Illustration by Lynn M. Hanousek

Some people **assume**¹ that medieval castles served as homes for the wealthy and powerful. Although this is true, it is not the whole truth. Castles were communities made up of the wealthy owners, nobles, religious leaders, merchants, and farmers. The building itself was only a part of the castle. Thick walls extended around the castle structure and the village that sat next to the castle.

Castles played an important role in **feudalism**.² The word “castle” comes from a Latin word that means **fortress**.³ A castle helped a king or **vassal**⁴ defend the land where the castle stood. It also served as a place to house the king or vassal’s army, weapons, and food. A castle was also the center of local government. Although they were frequently attacked, castles were the safest dwellings of the time. A castle was typically built on the top of a hill to protect the community from **invasions**.⁵ Soldiers on the walls kept a lookout for attacking armies.

Life inside the castle walls was difficult and crowded. There was not much land to build on, so people built houses that were narrow and tall. Many buildings were five or six stories. Streets were also narrow—and dirty. People would throw their garbage and waste out into the streets. Disease spread quickly. At night the streets were dark and unsafe. People would rarely go out after dark without their

¹ **assume** – to suppose that something is true without checking it

² **feudalism** – a political and social system adopted in much of Europe during the Middle Ages

³ **fortress** – a place built to withstand attack

⁴ **vassal** – a person given land and protection by a lord in return for loyalty and military service

⁵ **invasion** – an attack made by a large number of people or things

servants. When they did, they carried torches or candles. Fire was one of the greatest dangers for a medieval town. Most houses were made of wood. Only the wealthy had stone and brick houses. One city in France burned to the ground six times between 1200 and 1255 CE!

Despite the many risks, people lived in castle communities because of the protection that was offered them by the nobles who built the castle and provided military support. Lords and ladies also **benefited**⁶ from the townsfolk who provided food and goods. The castle system was interdependent between the wealthy and the poor. They both needed each other to survive and thrive.

⁶ **benefit** – to receive an advantage or gain from something or someone

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, why were castles built on hills?
 - a. for protection against attacks
 - b. for protection against flooding
 - c. for travelers to see without any trouble
 - d. for improving communication between communities

2. The first paragraph introduces the topic of castles by
 - a. describing how dirty castles were
 - b. defining the word “castle”
 - c. summarizing the threats faced by castle communities
 - d. comparing nobles to farmers

3. Which of the following would probably NOT have been a threat to the safety of someone living in a castle community?
 - a. a month of above-average rainfall
 - b. a candle falling over and setting a house on fire
 - c. getting lost in the streets at night
 - d. soldiers from an enemy kingdom marching toward the castle

4. Read the following sentence: “Although they were frequently attacked, castles were the safest dwellings of the time.”

In the passage, the word **dwellings** means

 - a. caves
 - b. streets
 - c. groups of people
 - d. places to live

5. The main purpose of this passage is to
 - a. convince people that life in the Middle Ages was safe and carefree
 - b. explain how castles were built
 - c. describe what life in and around a medieval castle was like
 - d. show that vassals were not very important to castle communities

6. Why were buildings inside castle walls narrow and tall?

7. Why is describing medieval castles as homes for the wealthy and powerful not “the whole truth”?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

The castle walls were placed _____ the castle in order to protect the community from invading armies.

- a. behind
- b. around
- c. in front of
- d. between

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

In medieval times, people would throw their garbage into the streets.

Who? people

(would) What? _____

When? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** nobles: certain people of high rank or status in society.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____
