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Document Packet: “Medieval Feudal Society”

Question:	▪ How is this author’s portrayal of life in a castle different from some Hollywood productions depicting medieval life?
Document #1	
<p>On the material side the life of the feudal <i>class</i> was rough and uncomfortable. <i>The castles were cold</i> and drafty. If a castle was of wood, you had no fire, and if a stone castle allowed you to have one, you smothered in the smoke. Until the thirteenth century no one except a few great feudal princes had a castle providing more than two rooms. In the hall the lord . . . received his officials and vassals, held his court, and entertained ordinary guests. There the family and retainers ate on tables that at night served as beds for the servants and guests. The chamber was the private abode of the lord and his family. The lord and lady slept in a great bed, their children had smaller beds, and their personal servants slept on the floor. Distinguished visitors were entertained in the chamber. When the lord of the castle wanted a private talk with a guest, they [both] sat on the bed. The lord and his family could have all the food they could eat, but it was limited in variety. Great platters of game, both birds and beasts, were the chief standby, reinforced with bread and vast quantities of wine. They also had plenty of clothing, but the quality was largely limited by the capacity of the servant girls who made it. In short, in the tenth and eleventh centuries the noble had two resources, land and labor. But the labor was magnificently inefficient and by our standards the land was badly tilled. Not until the revival of trade could the feudal class begin to live in anything approaching luxury.</p>	
<p>SECONDARY SOURCE: <i>Life in a Medieval Castle</i>. Sidney Painter, <i>Medieval Society</i>, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1951, pp. 30-31.</p>	

WRITE YOUR ANSWER

Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Why would a knight follow the rules of chivalry? ▪ Why does the author feel that chivalry was “peculiarly applicable to feudal society?” ▪ What does this account tell us about medieval values in general?
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Document #2

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries there grew out of the environment and way of life of the feudal class a system of ethical ideas that we call chivalry: virtues appropriate to the knight or chevalier. . . .

The German warriors had brought with them into the Roman Empire an admiration for the warrior virtues, courage and prowess in battle. They also valued the sound judgment that the feudal age was to call wisdom and fidelity to one's . . . word, later known as loyalty. Respect for these virtues was not a recent acquisition of the Frankish nobles. Their importance among the Germanic peoples can be clearly seen by a reader of the Norse sagas and Anglo-Saxon literature. But they were peculiarly applicable to feudal society. A man whose chief function was fighting had to be brave and effective in battle. Wisdom was a necessary attribute of the successful captain. The whole structure of the feudal system depended on respect for one's oath of homage and fidelity. These were the basic feudal virtues and formed the core of feudal chivalry.

The earliest ethical ideas of the feudal class concerned their chief occupation and were designed to make war more pleasant for its participants. Armor was heavy and extremely hot under the blazing sun. No knight wanted to wear his armor when he was simply riding about, yet no knight was ever entirely safe from sudden attack by an enemy. Hence the idea developed that it was highly improper to attack an unarmed knight. You could ambush your foe, but you did not attack him until he had had time to put on his armor and prepare for battle. Then the chief purpose of feudal warfare was to take prisoners who could be ransomed. In the early days you put your prisoner in chains and dumped him in an unused storage bin under your hall. But this was highly unpleasant for the prisoner and he was likely to be the captor next time. Soon it was the custom to treat a knightly prisoner as an honored guest. The next step was to accept a son or nephew as a hostage while the captive collected his ransom. By the thirteenth century it was usual to release a captured knight on his pledge to return if he could not raise his ransom. The early tournaments were, as has been suggested, merely arranged battles. But the knights who fought in them felt it necessary to rationalize their activity. Hence they soon believed that they fought in tournaments not for amusement or to profit by ransoms but to win glory. As time went on the tournaments were carried over into actual warfare. To Froissart(a Medieval writer) the Hundred Years' War was just a vast series of pleasant and amusing jousts between noble knights whose only purpose was the desire for glory. Perhaps the high point of chivalric behavior was the return of King John of France to prison in England when he found he could not raise his ransom, unless it be the action of a noble lord who hanged one of his infantrymen because he had had the bad taste to kill a knight in battle.

One more virtue of feudal chivalry requires mention: generosity. In most societies men have admired the giver of lavish gifts, and this was a marked trait among the Germans. But this virtue assumed an unusually important place in the feudal code of chivalry. Although the concepts of feudal chivalry sprang from the feudal environment, they were popularized and made universally known by professional storytellers. The evenings dragged heavily in the gloomy castles, and knights and ladies were avid for entertainment. This was supplied by various types of wanderers. There were the tellers of . . . stories, the dancing bears, and dancing girls. But there were also those, who composed and recited long tales in verse, and minstrels who sang the compositions of others. It was through these stories that the ideas of chivalry were spread. The livelihood of the singers and composers depended on the generosity of their patrons. Hence in their stories generosity was inclined to become the chief of all knightly virtues.

SECONDARY SOURCE: *Life in a Medieval Castle.* Sidney Painter, *Medieval Society*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1951, pp. 32-34.

WRITE YOUR ANSWERS HERE:

Questions :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What were some of the problems that medieval “armies” faced while in battle or attempting to organize for one? ▪ Why is the author critical of fighting techniques utilized during the Middle Ages?
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Document #3

The feudal organization of society made every person of noble blood a fighting man, but it cannot be said that it made him a soldier. If he could sit his charger(horse) steadily and handle lance and sword with skill, the horseman of the twelfth or thirteenth century was regarded as a model of military efficiency. That discipline or tactical skill may be as important to an army as mere courage he had no conception. Assembled with difficulty, insubordinate, unable to maneuver, ready to melt away from its standard the moment that its short period of service was over, a feudal force presented an assemblage of un-soldier-like qualities such as have seldom been known to coexist. Primarily intended to defend its own borders from the Magyar (Hungarian Barbarians), the Northman, or the Saracen, the foes who in the tenth century had been a real danger to Christendom, the institution of feudalism was utterly unadapted to take the offensive. When a number of tenants-in-chief had come together, each blindly jealous of his fellows and recognizing no superior but the king - and often even the king was powerless to control his nobles - it would require a leader of uncommon skill to persuade them to institute that hierarchy(order) of command which must be established in every army that is to be something more than an undisciplined mob. . . . The radical vice of insubordination continued to exist. It was always possible that at some critical moment a battle might be precipitated, a formation broken, a plan upset, by the rashness of some petty baron When the hierarchy of command was based on social status rather than on professional experience, the noble who led the largest contingent or held the highest rank felt himself entitled to assume the direction of the battle. The veteran who brought only a few lances to the array could seldom aspire to influencing the movements of his superiors.

When mere courage takes the place of skill and experience, tactics and strategy alike disappear...When the enemy came into sight, nothing could restrain the western knights; the shield was shifted into position, the lance dropped into rest, the spur touched the charger, and line thundered on, regardless of what might be before it. As often as not its career ended in being dashed against a stone wall or tumbled into a canal, in painful floundering in a bog....The enemy who possessed even a rudimentary system of tactics could hardly fail to be successful against such armies. The fight of El Mansura (1250 C.E.) may be taken as a fair specimen of the military customs of the thirteenth century. When the French vanguard saw a fair field before them and the lances of the infidel gleaming among the palm groves, they could not restrain their eagerness. With the Count of Artois at their head, they started off in a headlong charge, in spite of St. Louis' (Louis IX) strict prohibition of an engagement. The Mamelukes (a warlike group of people living in Egypt) retreated, allowed their pursuers to entangle themselves in the streets of a town, and then turned fiercely on them from all sides at once. In a short time the whole "battle" of the Count of Artois was dispersed and cut to pieces. Meanwhile the main body, hearing of the danger of their companions, had ridden off hastily to their aid. However, as each commander took his own route and made what speed he could, the French army arrived upon the field in dozens of small, scattered bodies. These were attacked in detail, and in many cases routed by the Mamelukes. No general battle was fought, but a number of detached and incoherent cavalry combats had all the results of a great defeat. A skirmish and a street fight could overthrow the chivalry of the West, even when it went forth in great strength and was inspired by all the enthusiasm of a Crusade.

SECONDARY SOURCE: *The Knight in Battle.* C. W. C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*, revised and edited by John W. Beeler, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University.

WRITE YOUR ANSWERS HERE: