

Primary and Secondary Sources on Nobles' Privileges in Medieval Europe

In medieval Europe, there were distinct classes—nobles, knights, and serfs. The life of the nobles was vastly different from the life of the serfs. While the serfs and free peasants labored for long hours, the nobles had time to engage in recreational activities and to create an extravagant lifestyle for themselves. In addition to fishing, falconry, tournaments, and feasts, the most popular activity among the nobles was hunting, in which both men and women participated. Nobles also enjoyed lavish feasts and fine clothing.

- ““There is a passion for **hunting** something, deeply implanted in the human beast,’ wrote Dickens in *Oliver Twist*. Surely, the passion has seldom been stronger than it was in medieval England, when hunting occupied the minds and bodies of people across the whole of society.” (CE, p. 133)
- “The hunters—kings or noblemen—usually go on horseback, sometimes with attendants on foot. They track or pursue their prey with **bows, arrows, swords, and dogs**, greyhounds sometimes being specified. Their objects are preeminently deer, boars, and hares.” (CE, p. 139)
- Hunting was organized and followed strict rules, like the careful process of carving the carcasses of hunted animals. Hunting was emphasized as a sport of gentle and proper people, and hunters were expected to display **sportsmanship** by respecting the traditional customs.
- “The **nobility** were able to take pleasure in the natural world, or at least in the tamed wilderness of the parks. Hunting, whether for deer or for smaller game, was not just a means of acquiring meat. The enjoyment and the ritual and even mystical aspects of hunting can be seen in the anonymous author of Gawain’s description of the lord ‘beside himself with delight.’” (CME, p. 8)
- “Hunting, even more than fighting, must rank as a genuine sign of a way of life appropriate to nobility in Francia....It was an important component of the **preparation of young nobles for their later duties**, especially in royal service.

It needed skill in riding, in handling weapons, as well as personal courage.”
(TMN, p. 119)

- “The presence of **women on hunts** is recorded as early as the time of Charlemagne, and many noblewomen became proficient in falconry and hawking. In medieval art the lady with a hawk on her fist, a sign of nobility, is a well known convention.”
(DMA, p. 357)
- Here sat the lady of the castle and her maidens, daughters of other noble families who had come to her to **learn housewifery** just as their brothers had come to her husband to learn to become knights. These young girls were taught to manage a household, to sew and embroider, to card wool, spin, and weave. They learned to say the prayers of the church, to sing, and to play the harp or viol. A little of astronomy too, they learned, enough at least to name a few of the constellations; possibly a little of reading and writing, and more than a little of hunting...enough of surgery and medicine and nursing to care for a wounded knight...they played checkers, chess and backgammon...they had their pet birds, magpies, larks, and sometimes popinjays (parrots)...they liked to go on picnics and to dance.
(WKWB, pp. 98–99)
- “Arguing in favor of **falconry**, a noble lady affirms that birds are cleaner and more beautiful than dogs and that one may carry them anywhere, whereas dogs are a nuisance because they are always chewing what they are not supposed to. The falcon is small but stouthearted; it can overcome large birds. It can also hunt over water. Finally, there is nothing more thrilling than to watch a sparrow hawk stoop on its prey from a great height, then return to its lady’s fist.” (DMA, p. 360)
- “**Castles** also catered for the medieval passion for hunting, as centres from which the lord could ride out and indulge his love of the chase in nearby forests, chases [privately owned, unenclosed game preserves], and parks.” (LMT, p. 25)
- “**Fishponds** were often found attached to castles, moated manors, and monasteries. During the thirteenth century, royal ponds were producing large quantities of fish for the king’s table and for stocking the ponds of favoured subjects....Pike was the most popular fish, but eels, tench, bream, and natch were all common.” (LMT, p. 48)
- “**Food and drink** formed a major item in the expenditure of the upper classes. At the highest social level the provisioning [supplying] of the household could cost about a third of total income.” (SRI, p. 191)

- “All nobles should **eat together**, partly in the interests of economy (to prevent corruption or theft), and partly to reinforce the social solidarity of a group bound to the lord by ties of loyalty and service, and in turn rewarded with a generous provision of good things.” (SRI, p. 192)
- “Those with large holdings could eat wheat bread and drink ale every day, and even expect regular supplies of meat.” (SRI, p. 216)
- Laws dictated that only nobles could wear certain clothes, such as those made from special materials like valuable furs, silk, velvet, cloth of gold, or garments adorned with precious stones.
- “The aristocracy...**dressed expensively and fantastically**. The young people, their slenderness emphasized by long and graceful gothic lines, their hair carefully arranged, could hardly help looking handsome. They wore jewelled brooches. They sang and danced and made up poems and jousted. Their hunting parties resembled a pageant. Their architectural setting has never been surpassed.” (MMW, p. 10)