

Facts and Figures about the German Middle Ages

The Middle Ages in Germany lasted from about 800 until 1500 and saw a lot of changes in political leadership and geographical ownership. During the 9th century the Great Frankish Empire split into west and east, the precursors of France and Germany which can be seen as the beginning of Germany.

A distinct German culture, though, didn't develop until much later because it took a while for the people speaking Old High German, Deutsch meaning as the people speak—versus the Latin-speaking scholar—to consider themselves different from the medieval French speaking ones. While the borders to the west were thus established quite early, the eastern borders did not become firm until World War II. Therefore, to this day, German is spoken in many eastern block regions.

Estimated literacy rates around 1500 were about ten percent for males and one percent for females.

Who Ruled—Monarch or Pope

Until the late 19th century, Germany consisted of a loose association of territorial states that made up the Holy Roman Empire. While kings were considered the unequivocal rulers, a quarrel with King Henry IV led to the disintegration between the absolute power of the German Emperor and the Catholic Church. As of the 11th century the Pope and Emperor were considered equals, resulting in earls and dukes competing with the Catholic Church for control of land, people and taxes.

Contrary to what you may have heard, few people in the Middle Ages believed the earth was flat. Even the Catholic Church had come to the conclusion that earth was a globe.

The End of the Middle Ages

By the end of the late Middle Ages, Germany and much of Europe had endured plagues, famine and political wrangling of the wealthy and powerful. The Church and monarchies, princes and lords were at war, peasants at their wits end. Cultural and technological advances happened, scholars delved increasingly into the sciences.

Torture

Torture in the Middle Ages was not considered punishment, but was used primarily to find the truth and to *force* confessions. Here are a few methods:

➤ **Whipping**

Tied to a pole or bench, the accused was whipped on the back with a leather strap or rod, leaving terrible scars.

➤ **Breast Pulling**

Often used with women, this either hot or cold iron tool was used to tear off a woman's breast. For men the same tool was used to rip off genitals. This torture method was never authenticated.

➤ **Iron Maiden**

When the accused was slow to confess, he was placed into an iron mould that contained iron spikes.

The mould could be tightened so that the spikes would penetrate the poor soul's body parts. This torture method was never authenticated.

➤ **Drowning**

Drowning was used to torture as well execute. The accused's hands and feet were tied with ropes and thrown in the water. Sometimes he was placed into a cage and then submerged. After spending time under water the prisoner was asked to confess. He often drowned accidentally.

➤ **Garotte, Choke Screw**

Used for torture and executions, the choke screw was applied to the prisoner's neck. While the accused stood bound to a pole, the executioner would tighten an iron screw or sometimes a rope, to choke the victim until he stopped breathing.

➤ **Judaswiede**

The prisoner was placed naked on a kind of chair whose seat consisted of pyramid-shaped metal or wood. The tip of the pyramid was forced into the prisoner's anus, causing excruciating pain and life-threatening injuries. To increase its effectiveness the prisoner could be lifted with a rope and dropped on top of the pyramid.

➤ **Mouth Pear**

The mouth pear was a pear-shaped metal contraption with a winding mechanism. The mouth pear was inserted in the victim's mouth and expanded. It was capable of breaking jaws.

➤ **Mouth Barrier**

For effective humiliation, the accused was fitted with a mouth barrier. With it he couldn't close his mouth or speak, causing saliva to run out freely. Since drooling was considered shameful, this was an effective, yet pretty harmless method. In some cases, the barrier was used to infuse liquids, such as the Sweden drink.

➤ **Pole Hanging**

A simple yet effective method of torture was the hanging of prisoners from a rope. The accused's hands were tied behind his back and he was then suspended in the air. This caused serious pain and fainting, dislocated shoulders. To increase its effect, weights were attached to the prisoner's feet. This torture led to death within hours.

➤ **Sweden Drink**

The accused was forced to swallow large amounts of water, often mixed with urine and manure, causing excruciating pain, chemical burns and bacterial infections.

➤ **Spanish Spider**

Iron clamps were attached to the victim's sensitive areas such as the breasts or the inside of the thighs. Ropes were then attached to the clamps and the victim was suspended. In many cases the skin would tear and the poor soul would crash to the ground.

➤ **Rack**

The defendant was placed on a bench, his arms and feet tied with ropes. The ropes would then be pulled tight with a winch until the person's arms and legs would dislocate. In extreme cases muscles

and ligaments would tear away from the bones.

➤ **Burning**

Used for torture and executions, the victim was bound to a pole and surrounded by burning brushwood. Either the person would confess or he'd burn to death. Burning was often used to execute perceived witches.

➤ **Maiming**

Often applied for thieves, the defendant's hands, feet, nose, tongue or ears would be cut off. In some cases the eyes were burned out.

Executioner

Executioners who also did double duty as torture artists were despised among villagers and led a solitary life. If they went for a drink at the pub they would sit alone at a separate table, their drink cup often chained to the wall as a cruel joke. Executioners lived isolated at the outskirts of the city.

Living in the Middle Ages

➤ **Beds**

Mattresses were filled with straw or leaves. One slept under linen sheets, animal furs or linen sacks filled with dried leaves. Children slept together in one bed. Castle guests and servants slept on straw mattresses in the barn.

➤ **Food and Drink**

What you ate highly depended on your status. For peasants bread was considered the most important food. Not the white stuff we eat in the U.S. but a coarse whole grain bread from rye, oats and barley. Wheat was considered too valuable and only eaten by wealthier merchants and the aristocracy. Nobody ate potatoes because they didn't get imported from South America until the 16th century.

Few peasants ever saw meat. They grew a few vegetables and mostly ate gruel and basic soups. Only the rich hunted because they owned all forests. Farmers, skilled workers and merchants who were typically better off also ate pork, goats, sheep and chicken.

➤ **The Lord's Table**

Lords, who wanted to impress their guests, imported ingwer, saphron and other exotic spices and used them in large quantities in their dishes. Often meat was shredded, pulped and reshaped, then colored with spices. Today we would be unable to eat what was served in the Middle Ages.

➤ **The National Drink**

It is small wonder that Germany's beer is so good. They've had a thousand years of experience. Considered the national drink, beer was typically produced in cloisters, and until the purity laws came in effect made from all sorts of grains. First mention of Germany's purity law was in 1516 in Bavaria. Nobody drank water because it was often contaminated.

Wine had been brought to Germany by the Romans and was often produced and enjoyed. If the wine was tart, spices and honey were used to make it more palatable. Mead or honey wine was also

produced and enjoyed. All three drinks were consumed daily, the side effect of drunkenness considered healthy.

➤ **Lighting**

Life happened from dawn until dusk and with the seasons. The poor rose and slept with the light. In castles, pine chips were hung in iron rings along the walls. Tallow candles served as spot lights because wax candles were expensive.

➤ **Travel**

In the Middle Ages travel was much more cumbersome and dangerous. While peasants had neither the means nor the need to travel, merchants and other well off people had to take precautions. Robbers lurked in the woods and pounced on anyone who looked like he had coin. This forced people of means to dress up like paupers and carry nothing of value. Others formed travel groups to stave off attacks, requiring long detours.

In some areas one could hire guards to provide protection. These were often so expensive and untrustworthy because the pocket guard (Taschengeleit) was paid in advance and on occasion simply disappeared. Bad weather and political unrest posed additional hazards that could spring up unexpectedly.

➤ **Castle Living or Where is the Bathroom**

Many lords owned several castles and moved their entire households regularly from one to the other. This was not because they were bored or wanted to enjoy different places, but because the stink of their "heimlich Gemach," the secret chamber, became so great that the smell drove them away.

Bathrooms were located near the chimneys to take advantage of the heat. Bathrooms had a stone plate with a hole, sometimes covered with a comfortable wooden seat. In some cases, there was room for several people.

The toilet holes, one per floor, were installed in the outer wall, so that waste would fall into a pit. Because this area was never cleaned, the stink soon enveloped the entire castle.

➤ **Castle Building**

Since the 11th century more than 10,000 castles were built in Germany. Though considered the right of the king alone, he could pass this right to his wealthy underlings. Lords, earls and also many bishops built castles.

➤ **A Woman's Life in the Castle**

Women led a rather quiet life, concentrating their efforts on running the household, reading and teaching the bible to their offspring.

➤ **Kemenate**

The word Kemenate stems from the latin word caminus, fireplace. Women lived and slept in the Kemenate, the women's chamber that was one of the few rooms with a fireplace and considered more comfortable than the remaining castle.

➤ **Wakeup Calls**

Large castles had an alarmer, a person who climbed the tower and blew a trumpet to wake the castle's inhabitants.

➤ **Second Homes**

Tired of freezing in their drafty castles, many lords built additional residences in cities and countryside, using their burgs for parties.

➤ **Bathing**

Because wood was expensive, baths were rarely taken and only reserved for the very wealthy. Some of the better off "washed" a bit here and there. People were truly clean only twice: at birth and after death.

German Knighthood

The German Knights Order was founded by merchants from Bremen and Lübeck and the German knights in Jerusalem in 1191 during the third crusade. They chose white coats and a black cross, the opposite colors of the Knights of St. John.

In the beginning German knights assumed the laws of the Knights of St. John and even took care of the ill and injured. This didn't last long and they soon engaged fulltime in military activities.

Romantic Knights or Not

After the crusades in the 13th and 14th century, stories of Spanish and Italian knights told of brave deeds, fighting with dragons and the slaying of giants. All this gallantry was meant to impress the knight's chosen lady who most likely sent the knight into the world to show his bravery. Knights had to earn the right to worship their lady, which often took many years.

The French developed a reputation for agility and finesse with the sword. They also acted more refined than their German neighbors, though German knights maintained the higher reputation for loyalty, bravery and faith.

When at home, knights were highly regarded despite their generous indulgence in wine and food.

The Art of War

➤ **Timing**

Since knights took care of the land, managed farmers and harvests, they tended to wait until after harvest were complete to engage in wars and feuds. To stay fit, knights organized regular jousts, which also served to show off one's prowess. Taking place on holidays, these tourneys were only accessible to the nobility. With harvests complete, knights hunted, not so much for pleasure but to increase food supplies.

Maintenance of equipment played a large role and a knight spent many hours cleaning, polishing and testing his gear.

➤ **Practicing War**

In order to handle fighting in full armor, with bulky shield and longsword, knights practiced combat many hours. Training began when a boy turned seven. A lord's son would begin his apprenticeship

at the castle of a family friend. At the age of 14, the boy progressed to become page.

Herbs and Midwives

Women who knew about the power of herbs and helped their fellow women with childbirth, love potions and ailments were often denounced by the church as witches.

Knowledge was supposed to be firmly in the hands of the Church and women who knew too much were seen as threats to the clergy as well as some of the newly developing sciences.

Witches

Witch hunts took place in Europe between 1300 and 1750. In Germany an estimated 25,000 people died, 9,000 of them in southern Germany. 80 percent of the executed were women.

➤ **Marks of a Witch**

If a woman had red hair she was often considered a witch because the general public considered the color red a sign of the devil. Witches also had light skin because they were active at night, especially during full moon. Mysterious and less likable animals such as black cats, spiders and ravens were often connected with witches. Owls also belonged to this group because they are nocturnal.

➤ **Arrest**

After the arrest a person accused of witchcraft was stripped naked and shaved to break their magical powers. Before throwing her into the witches tower or basement, the accused was inspected for telltale moles and other skin blemishes.

➤ **Conviction**

To force a confession, witches were tortured and tested. While it was considered bad form to receive a confession during torture, the victim was put in a separate room. Threatening additional torture the accused often admitted to outrageous crimes. A death sentence was the norm and while the judge often promised a "gentler" execution by hanging or sword, promises to witches were nonbinding. As a result most women accused of being a witch were burned at the stake to free their soul. If a convicted witch named another person of interest, this person was almost certainly arrested, tortured and executed as well.

Testing for Witchcraft

Dubious tests were used to determine if a woman was a witch.

➤ **Water Test**

After tying the accused's feet and hands, she was thrown in the water. If a person swam on top she was considered a witch because water only accepted "innocent" people. If she sank she was considered guiltless but often drowned.

➤ **Weight Test**

Since witches could fly they had to be lighter than regular people. So she could not hide additional weights in her clothing the accused witch was weighed in her shirt. If she weighed less than a certain norm she was convicted.

➤ **Burn Test**

A fire test was another God's judgment. The accused was forced to hold a searing hot piece of coal in her hands or walk across a bed of coals. If she showed blisters after a few days she was guilty because God wouldn't allow an innocent person to develop such wounds.

➤ **Needle Test**

If a needle poked into a witch mark, i.e. a mole, didn't bleed, the person was a witch. Supposedly needles still exist that were used for this test. If pressed on the skin, the needle tip slips back into the hollow shaft.

Witch or Saint

Whether a person would become witch or saint was pretty much dependent on coincidence and luck. A poor peasant girl with special knowledge was most certainly going to go down as a witch. If the same girl grew up in a cloister, her knowledge could potentially lead to sainthood.

Jeanne D'Arc was used by the Catholic Church, then denounced as a witch and burned. She was declared innocent some twenty-five years after her execution, sainthood didn't follow until the 20th century.

A list of crimes from a witch trial listed things like

- Learned witchcraft from her mother 30 years ago
- Danced with the devil
- Eating a devilish dinner
- Killed more than nine with her devilish potions, two of her own children
- Bewitched 24 people including her mother
- Received payment from the devil several times
- Killed eight livestock with her potions
- Conjured hair on several people's bodies
- Dedicated herself to the devil with her blood.

Children

Children were considered adults once they reached their seventh birthday. Boys with noble backgrounds trained to become knights with a fourteen-year apprenticeship, their lives centered around the care of their knight, the training in sword-fighting and accompanying their masters on feuds and trips.

Girls remained behind, studied languages, music, reading and writing. They were typically better educated than boys.

About half of all children died before they were six. A German saying says it all: "Many children, many coffins." Peasant children grew up supporting parents and helping to earn enough food to survive.

Games

Both children and adults loved playing backgammon (Tricktrack) and chess. Kids of lords played a type of soccer, a stuffed pig's bladder was carried with hands and feet into a goal.

Prostitution

The term prostitute and prostitution didn't appear in literature until the 16th century. Of course, love could be bought during the Middle Ages, either on the fly or in the designated women homes. "Public women" as they were called were considered part of a healthy society.

Many churchmen believed that tolerating brothels was necessary, while others tried to eradicate public women by offering marriage with respected citizens and spots in cloisters. As of the 15th century, prostitution was officially branded as "against nature."

Public women had few rights, could not become citizens nor chose a husband. They were often abused by hoards of youngsters and cruel customers. Many lived in slavery. The women wore colored ribbons, shoes or veils to mark them publicly. Just like lepers they were forbidden to touch food.

Illness

Illnesses were considered punishment from God or the works of the devil. People tended to think that they'd done something to "deserve" getting sick. In most cases medical treatment was unknown. If a person was lucky, he knew a witch to help with herbal concoctions.

➤ St. Anthony's Fire

Ergotism, commonly called St. Anthony's Fire, was caused by a dark fungus on grains, especially rye. When a person ate diseased grain, i.e. in the form of bread, he'd develop severe burning sensations in the limbs, migraines, hallucinations and nausea. Ergotism affects the heart and kidneys, causes veins and arteries to shrink and limbs to necrotize. Many patients died. The monks of St. Anthony devoted themselves to treating this illness by opening hundreds of hospitals. They used herbal applications to increase circulation. Washing and drinking alcohol were useless. The cause for ergotism was not found until the 17th century.

➤ Leprosy

Leprosy causes nerves to die so that the victim no longer feels pain. Injuries, heat and cold are less likely to be noticed which leads to risk of infection. In addition, blood grows thicker which clogs veins and arteries.

Leprosy by itself does not cause body parts to fall off. Rather the infections cause necrotization. The illness was spread through intimate contact and spreading of fluids.

During the Middle Ages, lords and dukes sent lepers to war to scare their enemies and get rid of the sick they were afraid of. Doctors were helpless and unable to treat leprosy.

Once a person became ill, the pastor read mass and handed the patient a change of clothes, gloves and some food. He then accompanied the leper outside the city walls to the house of the dying.

➤ Pocks

Smallpox caused huge epidemics and killed millions. The illness begins in throat and nose and moves through the blood stream into the body, causing fever and seizures. Not to be confused with chickenpox, small pox cover the skin and are extremely painful. Often patients died alone and from hunger. Every 10th child died of pox, causing some parents to consider their child as part of the family after they turned ten.

➤ **Plague**

In the 14th century, the plague (black pest) killed one third of Europeans, 25 million people, within six years (1347-1353). In Germany the plague arrived in 1349.

Ships were forced to wait in port for 40 days to make sure the pest wasn't on board. Quarantine, 40 days, from the French stems from this time. Unfortunately, infected acrobatic rats climbed across the ship's ropes and delivered the illness into the port cities.

The plague killed more people than any other disease. People believed that constellations, changes in air and poisonous fumes were responsible for getting sick. They also blamed foreigners, cripples and vagabonds. Jews were accused to have poisoned the wells. That they fell ill just the same as other people didn't matter.

Doctors had no treatments and gave strange advice. People were supposed to lock their doors, open windows only to the north, avoid sleeping during the day and hard work. If somebody survived an epidemic he was in God's favor. If he died, God had shown just punishment.

The plague is transmitted through the fleas of rats. When an infected rat died, the blood-hungry fleas jumped ship to a human body. Within hours the affected develops fever and painful pustules on neck, armpits and groin. The skin turns bluish-black, thus called the black death.

An infected person quickly spread the disease to others through coughing and sneezing or simply touching a person's clothes, especially in the tight and unhygienic conditions of villages and cities.

Castle or Burg

The English language has only one word for "castle." In German, "Burg" is used to describe the earlier castles that were used primarily for defense and representation. Burgs can be found in strategically important locations. Medieval castles were typically Burgs. They were less sophisticated and once the canon was invented, castle owners were at a huge disadvantage.

Castles were built later (after the Middle Ages) and served primarily as living spaces for often large families and wait staff. Depending on his wealth, a lord could own various castles, one to hunt, a summer and winter residence. With the end of the monarchy in the early 20th century, castles were no longer needed.

German Castles

The first German castles were built around the 10th century. Erected on an artificial mound, they consisted of a wooden tower, the keep surrounded by a moat. At the bottom of the mound sat assorted outbuildings where castle workers and their livestock lived. This area was surrounded by a wooden fence and a second moat.

With time and more money, lords replaced wood with stone. The building of a castle was an ongoing project, sometimes taking decades to complete.

A German castle's keep, typically a large square tower, was not used for everyday living. Though a status symbol it served as a safe place during attacks. The living area upstairs was only reachable by a ladder. On the main floor, guards kept watch while the basement was used for storage. Below it was

the dungeon, a terrible dark and dank hole where few survived.

The palas, the main living area was a different building with the women's chambers (Kemenate), the knight's or great hall, a kitchen and various storage areas. The knight's hall was typically thousands of square feet large and the pride of the castle. It was often painted with murals and crests and decorated with wall hangings and carpets during celebrations. The great hall was used for all meals, celebrations and at night, for the men, as sleeping quarters.

The castle towers had narrow openings for arrows as well as machicolation holes to pour hot oil or pitch on the attackers.

Castles always had a chapel which a devoted Christian knight visited daily. To provide adequate water, wells had to be drilled hundreds of feet into the bedrock. In addition, rainwater was collected in cisterns.