Chapter 4: The Three Orders

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Describe two features of early feudal society in France.

Two features of early feudal society in France were as follows.
1. Vassalage and a hierarchy based on land: The king was linked to the big landowners, the nobles, through vassalage. A noble accepted the king as his seigneur (senior) and the two made a mutual promise: the lord would protect the vassal, and the vassal would stay loyal to him. The vows were taken on the Bible in a church, and the vassal received a charter, a staff or even a clod of earth as a symbol of the land given to him. Peasants in turn were vassals of the landowners.
2. The manorial estate and peasant labour: The lord had absolute control over his property, could raise feudal levies, held his own courts and could even coin money. His peasants cultivated his private lands, worked on their own farms and fought as foot-soldiers when needed. In return, the lord gave them military protection. Society was thus organised around land and the lord-peasant relationship.

Q2 How did long-term changes in population levels affect economy and society in Europe?

Population growth and decline both reshaped Europe.
Growth: Europe's population rose from roughly 42 million in 1000 to 62 million around 1200 and 73 million in 1300. Better food, from new ploughs, the three-field system and more cultivated land, meant a longer lifespan. This supported the revival of towns, fairs, trade and a new class of merchants and craftsmen who formed a 'fourth order'. Money-based dealings spread, weakening the personal bonds of feudalism.
Decline: By the fourteenth century, population growth was outstripping resources, which led to famines in 1315-17. The Black Death (1347-50) then killed about 20 per cent of Europe, in places as much as 40 per cent, and the population fell from 73 million in 1300 to 45 million in 1400. Labour became scarce, agricultural prices dropped, and wages rose, in England by as much as 250 per cent. Lords' incomes fell, and their attempts to revive labour-services provoked peasant revolts in Flanders (1323), France (1358) and England (1381). The old feudal relations could not be reimposed.

Q3 Why did knights become a distinct group, and when did they decline?

Rise: From the ninth century, Europe saw frequent localised wars. Amateur peasant-soldiers were not enough, and good cavalry was needed. This raised the importance of knights. Just as lords were linked to the king, knights were linked to lords. The lord gave a knight a fief, a heritable piece of land of 1,000 to 2,000 acres or more with a house, church, watermill and wine-press, cultivated by peasants, and promised to protect it. In exchange, the knight paid his lord a regular fee and promised to fight for him. Knights practised fencing and tactics daily, and minstrels sang of their bravery, which gave them a distinct identity.
Decline: The text does not give an exact date for their decline. It shows that feudal levies lost relevance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the new monarchs dispensed with them and raised professionally trained infantry with guns and siege artillery under their own control. Before the firepower of the kings, the resistance of the aristocracies crumbled.

Q4 What was the function of medieval monasteries?

Monasteries, or abbeys, were religious communities where deeply religious Christians chose to live isolated lives, often far from human habitation. Monks and nuns took vows to remain there for life and to spend their time in prayer, study and manual labour such as farming. Unlike priesthood, this life was open to both men and women, though abbeys were mostly single-sex. Monks and nuns did not marry. Famous examples were St Benedict's monastery in Italy (529) and Cluny in Burgundy (910). Benedictine rules stressed obedience, no private property, and manual labour and sacred reading, since idleness was 'the enemy of the soul'.
Monasteries grew from 10 or 20 members into communities of several hundred, with large buildings, landed estates, schools or colleges and hospitals. They contributed to the arts. Abbess Hildegard, for example, developed community singing of prayers in church. By the fourteenth century, doubts arose about their purpose, and writers like Langland and Chaucer criticised some monks' luxurious lives.

Q5 Imagine and describe a day in the life of a craftsman in a medieval French town.

This is an imagined account, based on the chapter's picture of town life.
Marc rises at dawn in his workshop-home in a French town. He belongs to a guild, the association of his craft, which controls the quality, price and sale of his goods. He works at his craft, perhaps making tools or cloth, while merchants' shops line the roads and the town square fills with buyers. Earlier, craftsmen like him travelled from manor to manor, but now he settles in one place where goods are produced and traded for food. He pays a tax to the lord who owns the town's land, not labour-services, and is free of the lord's control. 'Town air makes free,' people say, and some of his workers are escaped serfs who stayed a year and a day undiscovered.
At midday he may attend a guild-hall meeting with the heads of other guilds. Guards patrol the town walls, innkeepers look after travellers, and musicians play at feasts and civic processions. In the evening he hears the cathedral bells calling people to prayer, and rests after the day's work.

Q6 Compare the conditions of life for a French serf and a Roman slave.

French serf, from the chapter: Serfs cultivated plots that belonged to the lord and gave him much of the produce. They also worked on the land belonging exclusively to the lord, received no wages, and could not leave the estate without his permission. The lord's monopolies compelled them to use his mill, oven and wine-press. The lord decided whom a serf should marry, or gave his blessing on payment of a fee. A serf could, however, gain freedom by staying in a town for a year and a day without being discovered.

Roman slave: The chapter says nothing about Roman slavery, so this part rests on general background knowledge of the Roman Empire rather than the source. A Roman slave was commonly treated as the property of his master, who could buy and sell him, and had no wages or legal rights.

Comparison: Both worked without pay for a master and lacked freedom of movement. A serf was tied to the land and the lord's estate, and kept a plot and a family life under the lord's control. A slave, unlike a serf, was an owned person who could generally be sold apart from land. Serfs could also be freed by escaping to a town, while slaves had no such custom.