

0:25

In the Middle Ages, wood was a key resource, both in rural areas and in towns. Most urban houses north of the Alps were made of wood.

Title: Streets, Ghettos and Construction Work

0:43

Houses were built around a structure of wooden beams, hence the name "half-timber" architecture.

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Another essential material was clay, taken from clay-pits outside the town. It was mixed with straw, wattle and dung to strengthen the texture.

1:05

House building was done by craftsmen under the supervision of a clerk of works.

1:10

Normally the menial task of stamping the clay was left to an unskilled day-labourer. The future house-owner and his family often gave a hand as well. But work on the wooden structure had to be done by a master carpenter and his journeymen.

1:28

The builders used wattle and daub to fill in the gaps between the wooden lattice-work.

1:38

When it was dry, the clay infill was whitewashed with lime. Today, buildings in many old towns still testify to the skill of these medieval construction workers.

1:50

But only rich craftsmen and merchants could afford a house of their own.

1:55

In half-timber houses the upper floors are frequently larger than the lower ones. This gave the buildings greater stability and also provided more living space in the upper storeys.

2:10

But it was also one reason why medieval streets were so narrow. Another drawback of half-timber architecture was that wood and dry clay burned very easily.

2:20

With the roofs so close together, fires could spread like lightning. This was a tremendous hazard for medieval towns, hardly any of which were spared the horrors of a major fire at one time or another. The fire-fighters came from the town guilds.

2:35

Armed with buckets and fire-beaters, they did their best to extinguish the blaze – frequently in vain.

Citizens salvaged their belongings and took them outside the town gates. Women and children looked on in helpless despair as the town burnt down.

2:54

New fire-protection regulations stipulated that roofs had to be covered with tiles. From now on, the use of thatch or wooden shingles for roofing was punishable by law.

3:06

Many towns set up tile factories of their own, providing the citizens with roof tiles at affordable prices.

3:13

One tile-maker in present-day Switzerland has started producing tiles of the medieval kind, imitating the techniques used by the monks of St. Urban monastery. They were particularly good at making tiles and sold them far beyond their own territory. The measurements for roof-tiles and cut stones were precisely stipulated.

3:40

The main difficulty in tile-making was building a kiln that could generate the enormous temperatures required.

As time went on, people started building houses entirely of stone.

The walls were stabilised with mortar. For this purpose, the building workers had to learn new skills. Stonemasons were in great demand.

4:05

Once cut into shape, the stones were hoisted by a crane.

4:10

Town councils insisted that all the houses in a street should be the same height. This was not just to prevent fires. It was an attempt to make the appearance of the town more pleasing to the eye.

4:33

Most houses had two floors. The ground floor had a big multi-purpose area used for storage or keeping livestock. Craftsmen had their workshops here.

4:54

The kitchen was situated either in this multi-purpose area or upstairs. The fire in the hearth was the only source of heat. The smoke rose through the ceiling to the attic and preserved the food stored there.

5:16

The parlour with the bed in the upper storey. Frequently several people in the house slept in the same bed.

5:24

Rich citizens had canopied beds that protected them from vermin dropping from the ceiling.

The living-rooms of rich merchants or craftsmen were often decorated with magnificent carved woodwork on the walls called ornamental wainscoting.

5:41

The upper storey of this house was also a location for assemblies of knights and aristocratic banquets.
The knights' coats of arms and crests are preserved for posterity on the walls. The murals were only uncovered a few years ago and have been carefully restored.

6:00

One of the murals is a portrait of Christ in a corner of its own.

6:09

Belief in Christian redemption was a key factor in the lives of medieval citizens. But there was one district in town reserved exclusively for people of a different faith: the Jewish quarter.

6:23

Parts of the Jewish quarter in present-day Speyer have been preserved. The councilmen of the city had decreed that Jews should not be allowed to live next door to Christians. They were to keep to themselves.

6:37

Today, archaeologists have started excavating the buildings in the Jewish quarter, including the walls of the synagogue, the Jewish church.

6:55

Deep down below ground level under the earth were the Jews' ritual baths - called the mikvah. After recovering from illness or after the birth of a child, the Jews would completely immerse themselves in the water three times.

7:14

The council imposed other restriction on the Jews as well.

7:18

They had to pay a special tax for being allowed to live in the town, they were excluded from the town council, and many professions were closed to them.

7:30

Accordingly, many Jews earned their living as traders and money-lenders. Most of them were rich, and many Christian merchants owed them money.
For this reason, and because of their religious rituals, they were regarded with suspicion. With no justification whatsoever, they were frequently suspected of criminal acts. Legend had it that they desecrated the wafers used for Holy Communion and sacrificed Christian children in their services.
Whole Jewish families were persecuted and executed in so-called pogroms.

8:16

The entrance to Strasbourg Cathedral contains a depiction of the alleged superiority of Christianity to the Jewish religion. On the right of the portal, we see the embodiment Judaism. The figure is blind, its head is bowed and it carries a broken lance.

8:34

On the opposite side is the depiction of the Christian faith. With head held high and topped by a ruler's crown, this figure brandishes a cross and seems about to set off on a victorious campaign.

8:47

The religious and secular urban authorities erected impressive churches to give emphatic expression to the rule of Christ on earth.

9:04

But only part of the money for these buildings came from the church or the town council. The citizens made contributions of their own.

In their eyes, the church building belonged to them as much as anyone else.

9:23

Freiburg had no bishop for a long time. The citizens financed the cathedral almost on their own. The guilds were especially generous donors. The model shows how laborious and difficult it was to build a church. In charge of the whole undertaking was the Cathedral Construction Office. It hired skilled building workers who worked for generations to give the building its present appearance.

9:51

The stonemasons and scaffolders of the Cathedral Construction Office specialised in the use of tools for building with stone. Stones, heavy objects and building material were hoisted by cranes and winches.

The medieval equipment can still be admired today.

10:09

This heavy-duty crane was incorporated into the attic of the cathedral and is still in good working order. It was powered by workers running inside a giant wheel like hamsters.

10:34

When the second half of the building was complete, the first half was already in need of repair. In the meantime, the situation has become even more serious. Increasing air pollution causes the red sandstone of the cathedral to decay much more quickly than before.

Badly damaged sculptures and parts of the façade have to be replaced.

10:59

Today this job is still done by the stonemasons and sculptors of Freiburg's Cathedral Construction Office.

11:07

Whole figures are re-created on the basis of plaster casts. The copies are given their correct measurements by the use of a puncturing device. Gradually the red sandstone takes its final shape. Today part of the money for these works still comes from the citizens of Freiburg. Sponsors can apply to shoulder the cost of a new sculpture - a gargoyle, perhaps, or an angel.(11:37)

11:41

In this way, the citizens of Freiburg still contribute to the preservation of their cathedral.

11:51

Urban life in the late Middle Ages largely took place on the street.

11:58

Festivities were also open to the public, including church festivals and weddings.

12:08

The music was provided by travelling players. Further entertainment was provided by acrobats, jugglers and magicians.

12:21

Tournaments in the arenas of the town were a big attraction.
The participants came from far and wide.

12:37

These tournaments were rough-and-tumble contests between two mounted armies equipped with blunt lances and swords.
The chaotic free-for-all was very similar to genuine warfare. It often took hours before one side had won.
On the town shooting range, crossbowmen competed for prizes in marksmanship.

13:04

Festivities also took place at inns. One of them still stands in Kaysersberg in Alsace, near the bridge over the river Weiß. People came here to dance and celebrate. In the 19th century, the public baths of the town were also situated on this spot.

13:23

Bathhouses were popular in the Middle Ages. Bath maids washed the patrons' hair or provided massage. For hours on end people would sit in the warm water conversing with their friends. Good food and music added to the enjoyment.

13:41

Prostitutes also offered their services. Despite all piety, many citizens went to the bathhouse regularly to indulge in more earthly pleasures.