Filmskript zur Sendung „Walls, Wells and Wickedness"
Sendereihe: Urban Life in the Late Middle Ages
Stammnummer: 4682996

planet schule

0:43
What happened in medieval towns when a murder or some other crime was committed?

Title: Walls, Wells and Wickedness

0:58
If the wrongdoer could be identified, he was arrested by the police – the so-called bailiffs – and thrown in jail for further investigation.

1:09
Then the case was brought before the town court. Members of the town council formed the court, headed by the burgomaster. Representatives of the citizenry –called lay magistrates – also had their say in the verdict. A judge presided over the trial.

1:29
The proceedings were recorded by a clerk of the court. In the course of deciding on the verdict and the sentence, the court had the statements made by the accused read out in public.

1:43
Medieval criminals were usually sentenced to corporal punishment. Less serious offenders were put in the pillory and exposed to public mockery.

1:55
Murderers were broken on the wheel. First all their bones were broken, one after the other, then their bodies were attached to the wheel and left to rot.

2:06
Another form of corporal punishment was the strappado. The criminal, weights attached to his feet, was hoisted up and suddenly dropped, thus dislocating all the joints in his body.

2:17
Capital punishment was lawful.
It was carried out in public as a warning to others.

2:23
Here we see two adulterers impaled on stakes...

2:27
And here two counterfeiters boiled in oil.

2:33
Women who had abandoned their children were drowned; blasphemers and thieves suffered the same fate.

2:43
The sentence for repeated theft and various other crimes was hanging or public decapitation.

2:55
Sometimes sentences were more lenient. Here we see the criminal and his victim shaking hands after agreeing on some form of restitution.

Filmskript zur Sendung „Walls, Wells and Wickedness"
Sendereihe: Urban Life in the Late Middle Ages
Stammnummer: 4682996

3:08
The city hall in Basel. This was where the councilmen of the city assembled. They were not only magistrates but responsible for all issues affecting public life. Being a councilman was an honorary post, so only members of rich merchant families and wealthy craftsmen could afford to hold office.

3:30
Women were not allowed on the council.

3:40
The councilmen were not elected by popular vote but by other members of the council. They chose the burgomaster from among their number.

3:52
The council laid down the laws of the town, which were the basis for the rights and obligations of the citizens.

4:01
All council decisions were modelled on the Christian idea of redemption. Accordingly, the ceiling of the assembly hall is adorned by a likeness of the Virgin Mary.

4:15
The town laws were supplemented by a host of individual byelaws, laying down rules for everything from markets to begging. As of the 14th century, new council regulations were recorded by a clerk and later copied out by hand in his office. The town clerk was the first full-time civil servant. He carefully checked every copy.

4:39
The most important regulations had to do with taxes, which were the main source of town revenue.

4:48
The tax system was based on good faith, meaning that the citizens themselves decided how much tax they should pay. They estimated their assets and worked out how much they could afford to contribute.
Of course not everyone was honest about this. The council did its best to keep tax evasion to a minimum by keeping very precise accounts.
5:10
As most citizens had hardly any property, they paid only a fraction of the total tax revenues. The lion's share came from the few citizens belonging to the wealthy upper classes.

5:26
Taxes were paid in many different coins. The tax collector used a counting board to convert these different coins into one single currency.

5:41
The money was used for the benefit of the population.
One example was the water supply. The council invested in the construction of wells and water mains.

5:52

Filmskript zur Sendung „Walls, Wells and Wickedness"
Sendereihe: Urban Life in the Late Middle Ages
Stammnummer: 4682996

Normally, medieval water pipes were tree-trunks with a hole bored through them lengthways. These wooden pipes lasted about 20 years, then they started rotting and splitting and had to be replaced. Therefore a very precise well-map was made of the mains system and all the wells connected to it. This is the well-map of the city of Basel. Unfolded to its full length it is over seven yards long. The map was drawn by an urban civil servant, the well-master. It was his job to make sure that the wooden pipes did not leak or get clogged.

6:32
Rich citizens, convents and monasteries had their own link-ups to the mains system. If they wanted a well of their own, they had to apply to the council for permission. The permit stipulated how large the aperture of the well pipe should be and how much water flowed through it every day.

6:55
Freiburg cathedral has a private well of this kind inside the building.

7:09
The urban water supply was also extensively used for commercial purposes, for example by laundries, bathhouses, stone-cutters, mills and craftsmen. In all these cases, the use of the water was subject to specific urban regulations.

7:25
For example, anyone in Freiburg who wanted to take water from the town canal had to be a member of a special water-drawing community. The community still exists today and its members pay a fee for the use of this artificial watercourse.

7:43
The Freiburg councilmen set up a system of canals branching off from the river Dreisam to supply the town with industrial water. These are the so-called "streamlets", *Bächle".* In the Middle Ages, the streamlets were used for washing clothes and crockery and for putting out fires.
But they also served as sewers.

8:05
Especially at night, the council permitted the citizens to throw rubbish, dirt and household waste into the streamlets, which conveniently washed it out of the town.

8:19
But lots of dirt and rubbish got stuck in the conduits, preventing the waste water from flowing away on its own. The result was unhygienic conditions in the streets of the town. Paving was almost unknown.

8:36
Rain transformed the streets into a swamp, and the stench was disgusting.

8:44
Household waste and dung piled up around the houses.

8:48
Human excrement and urine were frequently tipped onto the streets. That was why the toilets – called latrines – were situated in alcoves on the outer walls of the houses.

Filmskript zur Sendung „Walls, Wells and Wickedness"
Sendereihe: Urban Life in the Late Middle Ages
Stammnummer: 4682996

9:05
But there were also internal latrines from which the excrement was evacuated into a cesspit. When the pit was full, it was closed off. The content then gradually changed into valuable humus, much as in today's composting facilities.

9:23
But excrement and urine from the outside latrines soiled the streets and attracted rats and vermin.
In the years 1348 to 1351, these unhygienic conditions took their toll.
Rats transmitted plague germs to the population and disaster was inevitable.

9:50
The population of Europe was reduced by about a third.

9:58
People with the plague developed black swellings full of pus all over their bodies. For this reason, the plague was called the "black death".
The councillors were powerless to halt the disease. Public order, indeed public life in general, broke down completely.

10:31
The towers on the walls of a medieval town defined the area in which its laws were valid. These towers were designed to protect the inhabitants from outside attack.

10:43
With their gates and towers, the walls were the indication of the citizens' determination to defend their town.

10:57
The town walls were manned by guards paid for their services by the council. They were equipped with armour and weapons. From their elevated position, the tower guards had the best view of the surrounding countryside, so they could sound the alarm immediately if enemy forces were in the offing.

11:15
The gates were the only access to the town. The guards challenged all those who appeared at the gates; undesirable elements were turned away. In the event of an enemy attack, the gates could be bolted on the inside.

11:38
Fighting was not left to the town guards alone. Every citizen had to swear an oath before the council to defend the town.

11:51
The guilds were responsible for repelling attackers. Each guild was allotted a stretch of the town walls to defend.

12:01
Here we see the tailors' guild setting out to man the walls.
Arms, ammunition and engines of war like this one were kept in a town arsenal called the armoury.

12:13

Filmskript zur Sendung „Walls, Wells and Wickedness"
Sendereihe: Urban Life in the Late Middle Ages
Stammnummer: 4682996

The citizens did everything they could to keep the assailants out. They hurled stones down on them and poured boiling water or pitch onto their heads, while the attackers attempted to break down the town walls with battering rams and catapults.

12:29
Hand-to-hand fighting was frequent.

12:36
Often enough, the invading army was too powerful to resist.

12:47
Once a town was taken, there was little mercy to be expected. Houses and storehouses were plundered and destroyed.

12:59
The invaders took hardly any captives. They killed many of the inhabitants on the spot and raped the women.

13:15
The loot they seized was taken outside the walls and the houses were burned down. The conquest of a medieval town normally meant the end of its independent status.