



Listening Guide

Episode 2: BC: Before Capitalism

To fully grasp capitalism, it helps to understand the system it replaced – and the most meaningful differences between feudalism and capitalism. We visit the British Isles of the Middle Ages, from about 1100 to the late 1300s, after the Black Death wiped out up to half of Europe's population.

Features of Capitalism

Accumulation and Investment of Capital

SCENE **•ON** RADIO
Season 7: Capitalism

Episode by John Biewen, with co-host Ellen McGirt.
Interviews with Karen Dempsey, Ben Jervis, and Eleanor Janega.

Visit sceneonradio.org/capitalism-educator-resources to access transcripts, the Features of Capitalism explainer, and other resources.

Before You Listen

- When you hear the words “feudalism” or “the Middle Ages,” what comes to mind?
- What do you already know about what life was like for different groups of people in the Middle Ages?

While You Listen

This listening guide divides the podcast into sections. You can listen to all sections or a subset; recommended sections are noted below.

Section	Questions to Consider
Section 1 When I Say “Capitalism,” What Comes to Mind? 0:00-5:12 Recommended	• The episode begins with a series of person-on-the-street interviews. ▪ What do you notice about respondents’ perspectives of capitalism? ▪ Which perspectives are similar to and different from your own? • According to John and Ellen, capitalism is connected to – you guessed it! – capital! How do they define this term? • What do John and Ellen reveal about where, when, and how capitalism got its start?
Section 2 Feudalism in England 5:13-9:18 Recommended	Capitalism developed after the breakdown of feudalism, the economic system that was dominant in the Middle Ages (also known as the medieval period). Feudal society is often represented as a triangle. As you listen to this section, draw a triangle to take notes about the structure of feudal society. • At the top, label the group with the most wealth and power. • In the middle, label groups with some wealth and power. • At the bottom, label groups with the least wealth and power. • Add brief notes describing the roles each group held in feudal society.

Section 3 Life for Peasants in Rural England 9:19-20:35 Recommended	• According to scholars at the Cosmeston Medieval Village, what was daily life like for a rural peasant? Use details from the podcast to describe a typical day from morning to night. • What were the main challenges rural peasants faced? • What forms of security or stability did peasant life provide that might surprise people today? • John summarizes scholar Karen Dempsey's perspective on life in the middle ages versus life today: "Change happens. And change means trade-offs." ▪ What does this mean? ▪ According to Dempsey, in what ways is our world better off today than in medieval, pre-capitalist times? What have we gained? ▪ What does Dempsey suggest that we have or may have lost with the forward march of time?
Section 4 Life for Peasants in London 20:36-27:02	• What was medieval London like before the Black Death? How did people living in the city earn a living and meet their basic needs? • Historian Eleanor Janega notes that medieval cities "represented the same thing that cities do now, which is opportunity." What kinds of opportunities motivated peasants to move to London from smaller villages?
Section 5 The Peasants' Revolt 27:03-35:25	• What events or conditions led to the Peasants' Revolt? • What demands did the peasants make, and how successful were they? • Why do you think John and Ellen included the information about peasants rising up against wealthier classes? How does knowing about these uprisings add to our understanding of the shift from feudalism to capitalism?
Section 6 Unpacking the Episode 35:26-47:04 Recommended	• John and Ellen began the episode by defining the term "capital." Why is this term important in the shift from feudalism to capitalism? • Capitalism is often associated with wealth inequality and working for a wage to provide for yourself. To what extent were these also elements of feudal society?

After You Listen

- What is one moment or quote from the episode that stands out to you? It might be something that surprised you, challenged or confirmed your thinking, or prompted a new understanding.
- Read the **Accumulation and Investment of Capital** entry in the **Features of Capitalism explainer**. How does it affect your understanding of the differences between feudalism and capitalism?