



“Tyrants” and “Slaves”

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Introduction

Modern school textbooks seem to show with glee how hard, brutish, evil, filthy, &c. life in the “Dark Ages” of Christendom were. This is, of course, perpetuated by movies, television, and all other mainstream media. Why are the Middle Ages denigrated? Simply, because they were the height of Christian (i.e. Catholic) civilization, the Age of Faith. Therefore, an attack on the Middle Ages is an attack on the Catholic Church. Saying people of that time were barbarous, superstitious, and irrational perpetuates the myth that life in modern times is better, now that the nasty, corrupt, tyrannical Catholic Church is no longer a powerful influence on society. Therefore, I propose, in a series of short articles, to dispel some of the most common myths about the Middle Ages and arm readers with some quick facts.

The most persevering and obdurate myth, or pair of myths, about the Middle Ages concerns the supposed misery of the oppressed inhabitants of that age, excepting the nobility, who were, naturally, the oppressors. It is well accepted in modern educational circles that because the people of the Middle Ages did not have democracy, their rulers were of course brutal tyrants, and because they didn't have capitalism they all lived in squalor and poverty. I do not think I am overstating the case to claim this, since the word “serf” (the most prevalent legal state of mediæval commoners) is listed as a synonym for “slave” in most thesauri.

Now, we do not wish to romanticise the Age of Faith in our defence of it, and therefore must first acknowledge that the people of that time lived a hard life, before disproving the myths that it was universally miserable. We may start by observing that between a.D. 1000 and 1340, the population of Europe grew from 38.5 million to about

73.5 million people -- something which would have been impossible if the average person were half-starved and worked into the ground by his aristocratic taskmaster. But to deal with the myth more thoroughly, we shall first look at how much power the nobility really had, and then on the true conditions of the serfs. In this we shall focus mainly on political realities.

The Nobility

Firstly, we may say, from a broader perspective, the powers of the nobility were in most areas much restricted and limited as compared to governments in the western world today. There was no “Child and Family Services” that could abduct children from parents deemed “unfit” by bureaucrats, no traffic laws, no smoking bans, no strict regulations on how and where one may build his house, &c. Moreover, power was not vested absolutely in a federal government. It is true that power was held by a small group of military leaders, and that in theory, the King did reign supreme and his vassals were merely his delegates, but in practice, he had to rule more by persuasion than by fiat, as the power was rather evenly spread. No one lord had complete authority, as he, by necessity, had to delegate authority to subordinates due to the inadequacies of medieval telecommunications.

This made for an interesting government that was most effective at the local level, and as we'll discuss later, meant peasants actually had a fair amount of self government. No lord had absolute authority because of the need for delegation, and competition among the lords. This meant it was very important to have numerous and loyal vassals -- and the best way was to treat them well, making the feudal system rather self-correcting over the long term. This also meant that the wide dispersal of power resulted in a significant per-

centage of the population playing some meaningful role in government.

Lords could thus not do simply as they pleased (at least not for long). In addition to what has already been mentioned, they were bound strongly by custom and religion, and had their own part to uphold in the pledge of vassalage: the lord kept the breeding stock, established ferries, mills, and ovens, secured the peasants from violence, and gave succour from his storehouses in times of famine. In fact, the Mediæval economy was such that it was in the lord's best interest to treat his peasants well, or at least not to treat them brutally and overtax them. For if he did, his serfs would lack productivity and ultimately die off. Since serfs could not be bought or sold or even kicked off of their land, he would be unable to replace them.

It is also noteworthy that it was much more difficult for the nobility to engage in wars -- the most disastrous thing for any civilian population. Unlike today, where presidents wage wars to spread democracy funded by the public purse, kings had to wage wars out of their own pockets. The military at all levels was supported by economic resources (the lords' income from their lands) rather than taxation and it was up to each lord to defend his territory and rights, not the public purse. This suggests somewhat of a less totalitarian society than one might be led to believe.

The Peasantry

As alluded to earlier, the documentary evidence suggests in regards to peasant life in the Age of Faith, labour and toil, but not dire hardship or poverty. They were tied to the land, it was true, but on the other hand could not be evicted from it as long as they paid their manorial dues, and unlike slaves, they were economically very free and were expected to provide their own sustenance. In fact, not only could a peasant not be evicted, nor could his family, but his descendants were entitled to the land as well, thus making the land he was tied to at the same time a patrimony.

As to the manorial dues, this generally took the form of working the lord's land. This was a considerable task, but not crushing. From looking at village maps, the Lord's demesne land

(which was his alone, and worked by the serfs) accounted for about a quarter of a given village. There were no set number of days that serfs had to work this land, per se, as long as what needed to be done was accomplished. On some manors, the lord's land was all in one large piece. On others, it was dispersed as strips in amongst the serfs' fields which they would work together with their own. The Lord's land took precedence and as such had to be ploughed first, sown first, and harvested first. So the serfs would either band together to plough the lord's demesne (if a larger bloc), then work their own; or plough the lord's strip and continue on to his own land after. Even then, on days devoted to demesne work, the lord was expected to provide meals at his manor for the serfs (and it being in his best interests, he would, unless an exceptionally ornery sort).

Mediæval serfs did not have two weeks' paid vacation. They did, however, have many more Holy Days of Obligation than we do today. The Decretals of Gregory IX (reigned a.D. 1227 - 1241) mention forty-five feast days leading to a total of some eighty-five days when no work could be done and ninety-five days when no court sessions could be held. In some dioceses, this total amounted to over one hundred days without work (nearly one in every three days).

Furthermore, mediæval peasants had, for the most part, a significant degree of freedom and self-government. Although the lord ruled supreme in his lands, he delegated most tasks to the people. The manorial court, for example, while in theory the lord's court, was almost exclusively administered by the people in the vast majority of villages. Self-government went well beyond this, however, and an example may be illustrative: one document from the Abbey of St. Michel, penned in a.D. 957, describes how the villagers (enserved to the abbot), without interference from their lord, laid out the arable village land, apportioned lots, located the village site, marked off the demesne land, and built a market hall.

Conclusion

All of the foregoing gives only the briefest of glimpses into the true conditions of mediæval life as it related to the supposedly "tyrannical" nobility and "enslaved" commoners. We have seen that, as in any time, there was no escaping the cross, but on the whole, the Middle Ages were a time of relative justice and freedom.



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