

Medieval economy and society history essay



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The economic and social history of the early Middle Ages provides additional evidence of the similarities among the three early medieval civilizations, while also revealing differences. Overall, the world remained rural, society was hierarchical, and women were excluded from public power. Although broad political frameworks changed, the lives of most people changed rather little. Although the omnipotence of the church during the Middle Ages appears as an imposition on society by modern standards, during medieval times the pervasiveness of Christian ideals was necessary, for these ideals were established early on as the core of society, and medieval civilization could not have continued without them.

Catholicism seeped into every aspect of medieval life, particularly the political and economic systems, so thoroughly establishing its importance that secularity was considered a sin. Since the fall of Rome left Europe without a stable political system, the church was established early as the highest political power. Although the king later gained more authority, he remained inferior to the church. The Church has set up two great lights on earth; the greater light, being the Pope, to rule over souls; the lesser light, being the king, to rule over bodies. Because of the predominance of the church, it held extensive legal power, manifested in rules like the Canon Law, which categorically restricted Christians from certain actions. The threat of excommunication kept people firmly under the Church's power, for if a freeman or noble violates, that is, commits homicide or wounds anyone or is at fault in any manner whatsoever, he shall be expelled from our territory. Not only did the Church exercise great political power, but it also dominated the medieval economy. Even when the need for protection forced it to take

part in the feudal system, the church passed strict regulations concerning the rights of the men bound to protect it, declaring that he shall not give orders to the men of the abbey, nor hold courts of his own, nor take money from peasants. He is not permitted to buy lands of the abbey. Although the level of power held by the Catholic Church during the Dark Ages appears tyrannical by modern standards, this monopoly was a necessary response to the conditions of the time.

The pervasiveness of Christian ideals in medieval society was a necessity, for without these ideals providing a foundation and motivation, there would not have been a society at all. The church supplied religious, political, economic, philosophical, moral, artistic, and educational support to medieval Europe, and without this societal backbone, the Middle Ages would not have produced the art, education system, philosophy, ethics, or political system that served as a basis for ensuing generations. The church had served as the center of society since the dawn of the Middle Ages, and secular life was not possible under the conditions of the time period. Current standards render it impossible to view the prevalence of the medieval church without prejudice; however, modern ideals remain transient, so easily flung into the chasm of history, often to take their foundation and relevance with them.

In the simplest terms, trade is a mechanism for exchanging goods from one person or group to another. There are many such exchange mechanisms. The Roman government, for example, moved large amounts of goods from the center of the empire to the frontiers to supply its armies. Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic governments raised taxes in one place, bought goods in another, and then consumed their purchases someplace else. Tribute and

plunder were also effective exchange mechanisms, as were diplomatic gifts: A caliph, for example, sent Charlemagne an elephant.

The most common exchanges were intensely local, but several major trading networks operated during the early Middle Ages. In the East, Mesopotamia was linked by rivers to the Persian Gulf, East Africa, and southern Asia; by land and sea to Byzantium; and by land and rivers to the Black Sea region, Slavic Europe, and the Baltic. Byzantines traded mainly by sea. The whole Mediterranean was open to them, and from the Black Sea, they received the products of the Danube basin. The Muslim world was fundamentally a land empire that had relatively poor roads and primitive wheeled vehicles, so transport considerations were crucial: A caravan of some five hundred camels could move only one-fourth to one-half the cargo of a normal Byzantine ship.

The West had many trade routes. The Rhone-Saone river system carried goods, as did the land routes through the Alpine passes. The North and Baltic Seas were the hubs of a network that linked the British Isles, the whole of the Frankish north, the Rhineland, Slavic Europe, Byzantium, and the Muslim world. The Danube was also a major highway. The major trade networks intersected at many points. Despite religious and ideological differences, Rome's three heirs regularly traded with one another.

Food and other bulk goods never traveled very far because the cost was prohibitive. Most towns were supplied with foodstuffs by their immediate hinterlands, so the goods that traveled long distances were portable and valuable. Cotton and raw silk were transported to the Mediterranean, where

they were made into cloth in, respectively, Egypt and Byzantium. Paper and pottery were transported around the caliphate. Asian spices and perfumes were avidly sought everywhere. The Byzantines traded in silk cloth, fine ivories, and delicate products of the gold and silversmiths' art, slaves, and naval stores. Byzantium, with its large fleet, usually controlled the Black and Mediterranean Seas. Reduced in prosperity, the empire could no longer dictate trade terms to subject peoples and competed badly with the Muslims. Trade in the West was partly in high-value luxury goods, but mainly in ordinary items, such as plain pottery, raw wool, wool cloth, millstones, weapons, and slaves. Some Anglo-Saxon nuns owned ships and invested in commercial activities to support their convents. Almost all aspects of the cloth industry were in women's hands.

To think of the ancient world is to think of cities, but to think of the medieval world is to envision forests and fields. Actually, 80 to 90 percent of people in antiquity lived in rural settings, and in the early Middle Ages, the percentage was not much higher. What changed was the place occupied by towns in the totality of human life. Fewer government functions were based in towns, cultural life was less bound to the urban environment, and trade in luxuries, which depended on towns, declined.

Towns in the West often survived as focal points of royal or, more often, ecclesiastical administration. A cathedral church required a large corps of administrators. Western towns were everywhere attracting burghs, new settlements of merchants, just outside their centers. Few Western towns were impressive in size or population. Rome may have numbered a million people in the time of Augustus, but only about thirty thousand lived there in

800. Paris had perhaps twenty thousand inhabitants at that time. These were the largest cities by far in Catholic Europe. In the Byzantine East, apart from Constantinople, the empire had a more rural aspect after the Muslims took control of the heavily urbanized regions of Syria, Egypt, and parts of Anatolia in the seventh century. The weakening of the caliphate in the second half of the ninth century was a spur to renewed urban growth in the Byzantine Empire. In provincial cities, population growth and urban reconstruction depended heavily on military conditions: Cities threatened by Arabs or Bulgarians declined.

Agriculture nevertheless remained the most important element in the economy and in the daily lives of most people in all three realms. Farming meant primarily the production of cereal grains, which provided diet staples such as bread, porridge, and beer. Regions tended to specialize in the crops that grew most abundantly in local circumstances. For example, olives and grapes were common in the Mediterranean area, whereas cereals predominated around the Black Sea and in central Gaul. Animal husbandry was always a major part of the rural regime. English sheep provided wool and meat. In Frankish and Byzantine regions, pigs, which were cheap to raise, supplied meat, but for religious reasons, pork was almost absent in the Muslim East. Islam adopted the Jewish prohibition against it.

A key development in the Frankish West was the appearance of a bipartite estate, sometimes called a manor. On a bipartite estate, one part of the land was set aside as demesne and the rest were divided into tenancies. The demesne, consuming from one-quarter to one-half of the total territory of the estate, was exploited directly for the benefit of the landlord. The tenancies

were generally worked by the peasants for their own support. The bipartite estate provided the aristocrats with a livelihood, while freeing them for military and government service. Estates were run in different ways. A landlord might hire laborers to farm his reserve, paying them with money exacted as fees from his tenants. Or he might require the tenants to work a certain number of days per week or weeks per year in his fields. The produce of the estate might be gathered into barns and consumed locally or hauled to local markets. The reserve might be a separate part of the estate, a proportion of common fields, or a percentage of the harvest. The tenants might have individual farms or work in common fields. Although the manor is one of the most familiar aspects of European life throughout the Middle Ages, large estates with dependent tenants also were evolving in the Byzantine and Islamic worlds.

Most of the surviving medieval records were written by elite members of society and reveal little about the middle and lower orders of society. Nevertheless, certain similarities are evident in the social structures of all levels in all three societies. The elites tended to be large landholders, to control dependent populations, and to have access to government offices. There were regional differences, too. Scholars ranked higher in Byzantium and the caliphate than in the West; churchmen, especially bishops, were powerful in Christian societies but had no counterparts in Muslim ones. Literature, surely reflecting social realities, portrays the cultivated Muslim gentleman in the Abbasid period. This social type, marked by learning, good manners, and a taste for finery, does not appear in Byzantium or in the West until the twelfth century.

Women were bound to the same social hierarchies as men. Predictably enough, women had few formal, public roles to play. Their influence, however great, tended to function in the private sphere, rarely revealed to us by sources that stem from the public realm of powerful men. Aristocratic women had opportunities and power that were denied ordinary women. Irene ruled at Byzantium as empress. Frankish and Anglo-Saxon queens were formidable figures in their realms. Carolingian queens managed the landed patrimony of the dynasty dozens of huge estates with tens of thousands of dependents. The combination of a lack of evidence and the rigorous exclusion of women from public life in the Islamic world means that virtually no Muslim women emerge as distinct personalities in the early Middle Ages.

One example of the problems in the evidence concerning women relates to church roles. Women could not hold priestly office, and although deaconesses served at Hagia Sophia in the sixth century, they disappeared soon after and had long before vanished in the West. Religious power could come from personal sanctity as well as holding office. One study of some 2,200 saints from the early Middle Ages finds only about 300 females. It was hard for women to gain recognition as saints. And if a woman became a saint, her holiness was inevitably described either as an extreme ascetic was praised for having the strength and courage of a man or as beautiful, virginal, and domestic in other words, with female stereotypes.

The middling classes show some disparities among the regions. Merchants, for example, often rose through the social ranks to become great aristocrats in Muslim society. Islamic society often evinced great mobility because of its restless, expanding nature and because Islamic ideology rejected distinctions

in the Uma. In Byzantium, traditional Roman prejudices against merchants and moneymaking activities persisted. Thus, rich merchants whose wealth gave them private influence frequently lacked public power and recognition. In the West, merchants were neither numerous nor powerful in the Carolingian period. In some towns, moreover, commerce was in the hands of Jews, always outsiders in a militantly Christian society.

Merchants were not the only people occupying the middle rungs of the social ladder. All three societies, in fact, possessed both central elites and provincial elites. Service at the Carolingian, Byzantine, or Abbasid court counted for more than service in a provincial outpost. It was one thing to be abbot of a great monastery and quite a different thing to preside over a poor, tiny house. The thematic generals in Byzantium were lofty personages; their subordinates held inferior positions. The vassals of a Carolingian king formed a real aristocracy, but vassals were of decidedly lower rank.

Degrees of freedom and local economic and political conditions shaped the lives of peasants. In all three societies, some farmers were personally free and owed no cash or labor services to anyone but the central government. In areas such as Abbasid Iraq, ordinary free farmers led a comfortable life. In the Frankish world, most peasants existed outside the dawning manorial system. They were free, and if they lived in areas of good land and political security, such as the Paris basin, their lives most likely were congenial. Byzantine peasants, though free, often lived in areas of military danger, and in some parts of the Balkans, they eked out a living from poor soils. Highly taxed and perpetually endangered, they may have viewed their freedom as small compensation for their economic and personal insecurity. All peasants

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were alike in their subjection to political forces over which they had no control.

At the bottom of the social scale everywhere were slaves. Christianity did not object to slavery in general but forbade the enslavement of Christians. Islam likewise prohibited Muslims from enslaving other Muslims. Slaves, therefore, tended to be most common in pagan societies Scandinavia, for example or in frontier regions where neighboring pagans could be captured and sold. There were more slaves in the Muslim world than in Byzantium, which had, in turn, more than the West.

The domestic sphere is a difficult realm to enter. In Byzantium and the West, families rarely arranged marriages for more than one or two daughters. Others remained single or entered convents. Women at all social levels tended to pass from the tutelage of their fathers to that of their husbands. In antiquity, a suitor usually paid a fee to his prospective wife's father and then endowed his wife with a "morning gift," money or possessions of her own. Gradually, this practice changed to a system whereby a bride's father paid a dowry to her future husband. Thus, a wife who was cast aside could be left impoverished, for in most places, the law did not permit her to inherit land if she had brothers. Females were such valuable property in the marriage market that rape was an offense not against a girl but against her father. A man could divorce, even kill, his wife for adultery, witchcraft, or grave robbing and then marry again. A woman could usually gain a divorce only for adultery, and she could not remarry. For the vast majority of women, daily life was hedged about with legal limitations and personal indignities.

The importance which the scholastics attached to an extended and widespread production is evidenced by their attitude towards the growth of the population. The fear of overpopulation does not appear to have occurred to the writers of the Middle Ages on the contrary, a rapidly increasing population was considered a great blessing for a country. This attitude towards the question of population did not arise merely from the fact that Europe was very sparsely populated in the Middle Ages, as modern research has proved that the density of population was much greater than is generally supposed.

The mediaeval attitude towards population was founded upon the sanctity of marriage and the respect for human life. The utterances of Aquinas on the subject of matrimony show his keen appreciation of the natural social utility of marriage from the point of view of increasing the population of the world, and of securing that the new generation shall be brought up as good and valuable citizens. While voluntary virginity is recommended as a virtue, it is nevertheless distinctly recognized that the precept of virginity is one which by its very nature can be practiced by only a small proportion of the human race, and that it should only be practiced by those who seek by detachment from earthly pleasures to regard divine things. Aquinas further says that large families' help to increase the power of the State, and deserve well of the commonwealth, and quotes with approbation the Biblical injunction to 'increase and multiply.' Giddies Romans demonstrates at length the advantages of large families in the interests of the family and the future of the nation.

The growth of a healthy population was made possible by the reformation of family life, which was one of the greatest achievements of Christianity in the social sphere. In the early days of the Church the institution of the family had been reconstituted by moderating the harshness of the Roman domestic rule by raising the moorland social position of women, and by reforming the system of testamentary and intestate successions; and the great importance which the early Church attached to the family as the basic unit of social life remained unaltered throughout the Middle Ages.

The Middle Ages were therefore a period when the production of wealth was looked upon as a salutary and honorable vocation. The wonderful artistic monuments of that era, which have survived the intervening centuries of decay and vandalism, are a striking testimony to the perfection of production in a civilization in which work was considered to be but a form of prayer, and the manufacturer was prompted to be, not a drudge, but an artist.

It is important also to draw attention to the fact that the acceptance of the economic teaching of the mediaeval theologians does not necessarily imply acceptance of their teaching on other matters. There is at the present day a growing body of thinking men in every country who are full of admiration for the ethical teaching of Christianity, but are unable or unwilling to believe in the Christian religion. The fact of such unbelief or doubt is no reason for refusing to adopt the Christian code of social justice, which is founded upon reason rather than upon revelation, and which has its roots in Greek philosophy and Roman law rather than in the Bible and the writings of the Fathers. It has been said that Christianity is the only religion which combines religion and ethics in one system of teaching; but although Christian religious

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and ethical teaching are combined in the teaching of the Catholic Church, they are not inseparable. Those who are willing to discuss the adoption of the Socialist ethic, which is not combined with any spiritual dogmas, should not refuse to consider the Christian ethic, which might equally be adopted without subscribing to the Christian dogma.