

A People's History of Modern Europe

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CHAPTER ONE

“The King’s in His Castle ... All’s Right with the World”: The Collapse of the Middle Ages

For about a thousand years after the collapse of the Roman Empire¹ (the artificial date usually given is AD 476), Western Europe became decentralized and chaotic, struggling to reclaim some organizational structure in a more localized manner under what we may call the feudal system.² This period is commonly referred to as the Middle Ages. Unlike the Roman governments before, this was a time when Europe had little centralized political authority. Laws, customs, even interpretations of Christianity might vary from place to place. Everywhere, the feudal period was a confusing socioeconomic soup made up from three main ingredients: Roman traditions, Christian beliefs and the customs of the Germanic tribal immigrants (barbarian invaders, if you must) who had settled in Western Europe.

The relative weight of each ingredient differed widely (and often wildly) from place to place. Still, there were some markedly regional tendencies. The Roman traditions were strongest in Italy, while those parts of Europe only lightly touched by the Romans were more prey to non-Roman, Germanic traditions. In places that had never been part of the Roman world, like Scandinavia, both Roman traditions and the veneer of Christianity could be spread rather thin. The Roman Catholic Church was formally accepted throughout Western Europe but, in practice, the clergy’s actual influence depended on the local strength of bishops and how much attention the region received from the Papal establishment in Rome.

Unlike the Roman Empire with its centralized government, feudal Europe was a decentralized world where local rulers were lords, in fact as well as in name. Particularly in the early Middle Ages, the will of the local barons was primary and the power of kings nominal outside their immediate holdings. It was a society crudely divided into three estates: those who fought (the warrior nobility), those who prayed (the churchmen),³ and those who worked (the vast majority of the population—mainly serfs who were tied

to the land and a minority of free peasants.) This was a world quite different from the days of the Roman Empire. There were few cities and most were small, weak places in the early centuries. Once-mighty Rome, which during the third century boasted a population of over a million, fell during the Dark Ages. Its permanent population dwindled to around 50,000, and this persisted until around the eleventh century. At the same time, Paris was little more than a collection of shacks by the side of the River Seine.

Science, medicine and literacy were markedly less common, at least during the so-called “Dark Ages,” or about the first five hundred years of the feudal period, than during Roman rule. While concrete had been an accepted building material in the Roman Empire, the formula was lost and not rediscovered until the Renaissance. Book production during the length of the fifteenth century had reached 4,999,161 for Western Europe, while in the entire seventh century the area produced only 10,639 volumes with none recorded for Central Europe, Bohemia, Germany, Austria—almost half were from Italy.⁴ Of course, things were not necessarily “dark” for the common people of the time. Most continued to be born, live, love, farm and die more or less as their ancestors had. If their life was very hard, so had it been for their ancestors. Most historians no longer like to use the term “Dark Ages” with its judgmental connotations. This early period of feudalism was given this label because it suffered, in scholar’s minds at least, in comparison to the glories of Rome. Moreover, historians who are so wedded to written sources find it frustrating that at least until the ninth century AD there was little written documentation to work with. As one prominent French historian has proclaimed in frustration, “We are victims of our sources!”⁵ He went on to argue that if “a century is mute, as was the case from the fifth century to the eighth century and also of the tenth century, it has a bad reputation and we call it ‘black’—the Dark Ages, as the English say.”⁶

Before turning to the focus of this work—the common people—a look at the two dominant classes of nobles and church officials is useful. The nobility was a warrior class who enjoyed a military monopoly of force. They may have claimed God’s blessing but the bottom line was they had the best land, with most of it protected by professional killers (knights). These knights possessed armor, swords, lances, trained war horses and so on. A peasant farmer with a club or sharp knife was seldom a match for one of these professionals. While the local baron provided the peasantry with protection in the event of invasion, it was in reality more often protection against the very knights sworn to protect them. Try to imagine a society

with little effective central government, where power and wealth went to those who had the arms and the will to seize and keep the land.

The warrior elite was made up of those who had once been little better than local thugs. Over time, however, they began to develop rituals and ideology (known as “chivalry”) that allowed them to see themselves as part of a God-ordained aristocracy. Still, their status was based on naked force. When not at war, they trained for war. When not training directly for warfare, they relaxed by engaging in sports. To the nobles, most sports meant killing something ... hunting deer or boar, using trained birds of prey to kill other birds. They sometimes entertained themselves and even the commoners by torturing bears, chaining them to a fixed place and then setting dogs on the luckless creature. It is important to remember that the nobles thought little more, sometimes less, of the peasantry than the animals they hunted.

Even should an average European have thought to resist this secular oppression, and as time went on more and more did just that, they would face another obstacle: the Church. By the Middle Ages, Christianity had already become institutionalized as the tool of power and the powerful.⁷ Anyone who dared rebel against the status quo risked death not just in this world but also a sentence to hell in the next; any revolt against secular lords was condemned as an attack on Christ himself. The common people were told constantly that there was but one path to Paradise ... and that was through complete, unquestioning obedience to God’s instrument on earth—Holy Mother Church.

This is far from saying that the Church was an entirely religious or spiritual organization. The Church helped organize countless aspects of society and the economy that in more recent times have become the province of government or corporations. This included caring for those of the population who were lepers, organizing popular fairs and entertainments, acting as a diplomatic service between feuding warlords, providing what education there was and preserving ancient knowledge, as monks copied manuscripts by hand in their monasteries. In more populated urban enclaves, the Church, while fiercely condemning prostitution, took responsibility for organizing the female sex workers into houses (frequently Church-owned); when advancing age reduced the women’s market value, it was the Church who found them a retirement position in a religious community or as a clerical house servant.⁸ Of course, if, as was often the case, the male clients of these houses felt compelled to atone for their sins by donating to the Church, so much the better.

Despite the official imposition of celibacy on the clergy, priests and other male clerics often entered into relations equated by the Church with fornication. As one recent study noted, “long-term stable sexual relationships between clerics and women remained common across Europe during the Middle Ages.”⁹ Many unmarried women were forced to turn to domestic work and “the servants of priests could easily have found themselves coerced into sexual relations.”¹⁰ Still, the relation between clerics and the women they slept with remains complex. Laywomen typically depended on their lovers for food and shelter while nuns retained “their own social networks and living situations within their religious houses during the relationships.”¹¹ Even if the evidence suggests there were seldom truly happy endings for women involved with male clerics, their experiences were much more diverse than scholars may have thought.¹² Given the common practice of priests taking women as partners, sanctioned or not, it is hardly surprising that Reformation leader Martin Luther would so quickly decide to allow his clergy to marry.¹³

Of course, we can never know how much the common people believed what the Church preached to them, although the amount of sincere belief no doubt varied greatly from one time to another. Yet we know that long before the Reformation, there were people interpreting Christianity in a manner far different than Rome's. The Catholic Church had a name for these dissenting believers: heretics. A heretic was one who challenged the practices and the dogma of the Church, and were thought to be a danger to Christian unity and the power of the high clergy. The institution dedicated to dealing with these heretics was called the Inquisition. The first medieval Inquisition began in 1184 and was directed against a group known as the Cathars who were predominantly situated in southern France.¹⁴ While members of this group regarded themselves as good Christians, the Church most decidedly did not. At first, the Pope's emphasis was on peaceful conversion, but this was a failure in all but a few isolated cases.

Having tired of persuasion, the Papal establishment ordered a full-scale crusade against the said-to-be spiritually wayward Cathars. For over two decades at the beginning of the thirteenth century, armed forces under the direction of the papal appointed representative waged unrelenting and cruel war against the so-called “heretics.” The fighting that took place inevitably included unspeakable massacres where little effort was made to distinguish between Cathar and faithful Catholic. Asked how to tell heretic from loyal child of the Church, the papal legate is reported to have said, “Kill them all, the Lord will recognize his own.”¹⁵ Along with mass slaughter running into the tens of thousands, many taken prisoner were blinded or otherwise

mutilated. It may have taken decades, but the organized Cathar heresy was finally destroyed, at least on the surface. It lingered on for a century and some of their views would reappear in changed form in future protests against Rome. The Cathars were a case study in how difficult it was for even the most powerful institutions to rid themselves of firmly held beliefs among the average Europeans.

There is evidence, however, that Cathars may not have been so much advocates of some toxic theology but were, rather, radical Catholics who demanded more reform than the Roman Catholic Church was interested in undertaking. Charges of falling into eastern dualistic error were leveled at the heretics as needed, a handy excuse and a doctrinal error outlined in the theology textbooks used at the great school of Paris¹⁶ How much more convenient it was to charge political opponents demanding radical reform of Church institutions with spiritual crimes, than to actually confront their political critique of the powers that be.¹⁷ Brutal, fierce, savage physical force proved more useful in defeating critics than reasoned debate.

However, the Cathars’ treatment at the hands of the Church did not prevent other heresies from arising out of popular opposition to the Church and the feudal order. Sometimes these were massive movements, that prefigured the Reformation. But often, the Inquisition hunted down isolated groups and individuals who were thought to have strayed from the one path to salvation. In truth, the Inquisition may be seen as a tool to target those who thought differently or were viewed as a threat to the feudal lords. In many cases, such as that of Joan of Arc who was tried and executed by her English enemies, the charge of heresy was convenient politically. At times, inquisitors enriched themselves with the confiscated property of those they condemned.

Enriching themselves was something beyond most ordinary Europeans. What was life like for the common people? By occupation, they were artisans, blacksmiths, merchants, musicians, but most of all, they were peasants. Members of the farming class and ignorant of nearly everything but agriculture, something like 75 percent of the peasants were serfs bound to the land. Not slaves but not quite free either, the serf was bound by an elaborate set of obligations to the lord and master. The lord owned the land and for his generosity rarely demanded more than three days a week unpaid labor, and as much as 25 percent in other taxes, along with periodical forced donations for, or participation in, wars.¹⁸ Of course, the Church demanded its dime as well (10 percent). Even the few more fortunate city dwellers had little influence or security. As economist Adam Smith commented in the eighteenth century, during “the barbarous times of feudal anarchy,

merchants, like all the other inhabitants of burghs, were considered so little better than emancipated bondsmen, whose persons were despised, and whose gains were envied.”¹⁹

The life of the common people was not only harsh, it might appear even shocking to contemporary eyes. As many as one woman in ten died in childbirth²⁰ while 25–30 percent of babies arrived stillborn.²¹ Even children born healthy spent the first five years of life prey to serious and often deadly diseases. While it is difficult to calculate the survival rate of children, the fact that in Europe's cemeteries a fifth of those interned seem to have been under the age of seven suggests a fearful toll.²² There is also the often-ignored issue of sexual exploitation. One need not agree with Laura Betzig, who argues that of every 100,000 people living today over 99,000 carry genes from ancient rulers,²³ to admit to widespread sexual predation on the common people. In the feudal period, peasants were subject to *jus primae noctis*, or the right of the lord of the manor to have intercourse with a peasant bride on her wedding night. How often or widespread this right of the first night was practiced is a matter of considerable debate, as *jus primae noctis* could be waived for a cash payment. What remains clear is that this custom was symbolic of the feudal lord's power over his serfs.²⁴

The medieval diet was clearly determined by social class. For the peasants, i.e. the vast majority of the population, grains like wheat, rye, oats, or barley made up most of their meals. Although relatively healthy by modern standards, fluctuations in food supply and poor harvests frequently caused bleak times of malnourishment.²⁵ The common diet left much to be desired, as it was based heavily on carbohydrates that accounted for up to 80 percent of daily calorie intake; people typically ingested up to 2 kilos of bread daily.²⁶ Despite the image sometimes projected by Hollywood movies, ordinary Europeans ate little meat. As one study found, the bulk of their diet was

... made up of cereals. Boiled pottage on the basis of grain or pulses, supplemented with vegetables, was a ubiquitous dish. Although meat was available to peasants and labourers, it was consumed in much smaller quantities and probably less quality cuts than by the elites.²⁷

The reason for the lack of meat in an environment that would appear to offer so many edible mammals was neither religious nor ethical. While everything was consumed, even dogs, many protein sources, like deer and fish, were often officially off limits to the commoners. As one author noted, the average people of this time “could not fish in the village brook or kill

the deer that devoured his crops. Poaching was regarded as one of the most heinous crimes”²⁸

There is certainly truth in the popular idea that the nobles prosecuted poachers in order to keep the game and fish for themselves and their households. However, there was another darker/political purpose. By making poaching a serious, even capital, offense, the feudal lords had a lever of social control. At one time, they might turn a blind eye to the never really eliminated peasant poaching, while at another they could use the crime as an excuse to lawfully teach their “inferiors” a lesson. There is evidence for this theory in the fact that Sweden, where there was more than enough game to satisfy both lord and commoner, had anti-poaching laws as rigorous as other areas of Europe. Hunting, for the nobles, was not just about sport and food; it was about displaying authority and power.²⁹

This was a system that endured for centuries and imposed its will on generations of Europeans. How did it begin to come apart? First, remember how it came into being during the chaos and invasions of the late Roman Empire in the West. If oppression was the price one paid to be protected from invaders, what justified the same system of political, social and economic suppression when the external threat receded? Once external invasions became rare, the warrior elite often turned on their own common people. The peasantry found themselves pawns in various petty local conflicts between rival lords. The only good thing to come out of this situation was a modest revival in trade, if only in weapons and food for soldiers on campaign. This modest upturn in trade helped merchants and bankers, but few others.

It might be useful to remember at this point that, as befits a system so decentralized, the actual end of feudalism varied greatly from place to place, both in terms of timing and method. The biggest gap was between Western and Eastern Europe. The eastern portion of what had been the Roman Empire had never experienced the number of invasions that plagued the West. Eastern Europe retained more of the old traditions of the Greco-Roman world. In contrast, absolutism in the West led to an “increase in the general rights of private property.”³⁰ The end result was a series of very different outcomes. Many monarchies in the West, most notably the English (1640s) and French (1780s), were overthrown by bourgeois revolutions from below, as Italy (1860s) and Germany (1870s) were transformed by bourgeois revolutions from above. Meanwhile, to the east, the mighty Russian Empire was able to limp into the twentieth century and not be overthrown until the revolutions of 1917.³¹

Space will not allow a full discussion of the differences between Western and Eastern Europe, but one historical difference is each region's relationship to the nearly two hundred years of on again/off again assaults on Islamic rule in the Near East or Holy Land, known as the Crusades. As the invasions declined in number in the West, the Eastern Roman Empire (now known as the Byzantine Empire) came under attack by a newly insurgent religion: Islam. Islam had arisen from the margins of the known Christian world, the Arabian Desert, to become a major force in the area. The followers of the Prophet Mohammed battered the Christian areas of North Africa and West Asia. This was no mere military conquest on the part of Islam, as Christians freely converted en masse to a religion that appeared to lack the corrupt, parasitic priesthood and strange theological doctrines that merely confused the average believer. For example, the Prophet Mohammed said there was only one God, not a three-in-one trinity. Moreover, this God was the same one that the Christians had worshipped. While Christianity confounded the commoner with obscure theological formations, Islam offered clarity in its belief system.

Although Jerusalem and the Holy Land had been under the control of Islam for over four centuries, on November 27, 1095 Pope Urban II proclaimed a holy crusade³³ against the Islamic peoples in the Holy Land. Labeling the Muslims a despised and base race that worships demons, the Pope urged everyone, including robbers, to join in the fight against the "pagans." All who died fighting Islam were promised forgiveness of their sins and thus a place in heaven. Pope Urban II said that this was not merely the will of the Church but that Christ himself commanded it.³⁴ The Church's motivations were multiple. As clearly stated, one goal was to help the beleaguered Byzantine Empire as part of a diplomatic offense to re-unite Roman Catholic and Greek Christians under the authority of the Papacy. At the same time, Urban II thought that by propping up the Eastern Christians, Western Europe would be spared from further assault by an expanding Islam. Yet Rome had other reasons for organizing an invasion of the Near East. The Church had long tired of the seemingly endless, petty and pointless fighting between various barons over what the nobles said were affairs of honor, which were at heart really attempts to expand their land holdings.

If the Crusades were intended to put Jerusalem and the Holy Land under Christian control for eternity, they were a failure. While unsuccessful in either this regard or fundamentally helping the Byzantines, the almost two hundred years of on again/off again invasions had a profound effect within the Roman Catholic world. The Crusades, as the popes had hoped, caused

the most troublesome and warlike Europeans to “take the cross,” with the result that many were killed in their battle with Islam. At worst, these destabilizing warriors were kept out of Europe for a number of years. This facilitated the rise of strong central monarchies, particularly in France and England, which imposed something resembling order on the territories under their (previously nominal) control. Many feudal lords became bankrupt from their ruinous assault on the Holy Land. This situation stimulated the growth of businessmen, those whom some call the “bourgeoisie,” others call “middle class”—mainly merchants and moneylenders—who gained from the loans and sale of supplies to the heaven-bent crusaders. Some serfs were released from their feudal obligations in return for participation in a crusade, while others were able to renegotiate the terms of their servitude as cash-strapped warriors left their manors to surrogates, often wives or brothers, and trotted off towards the Near East. Of course, it would be a mistake to think only of men when discussing the Crusades or the Middle Ages. Recent scholarship has shown that women had far more influence than traditionally noted by historians.³⁵ This is a theme that will reappear throughout this book.

Another impact came from those tens of thousands of Europeans who managed to survive participation in a crusade and return home. Those who returned typically returned changed. In the East, they had come in contact with a more advanced society. Islamic society had superior medical and scientific knowledge, and had even preserved much from the ancient Greco-Roman world. For people who had previously seldom left their village or at most traveled a few days’ walk from their homes, being on a crusade, no matter how militarily disastrous it may have been, was a transformative experience. The things they experienced, witnessed and brought back would spread by word of mouth among all the people of Western Europe. The claim of various popes that Christ would guarantee the recovery of the Holy Land increasingly sounded hollow, as the brief Christian victory in the First Crusade was followed by failure upon failure. By overselling the certainty of victory over Islam, the popes had inadvertently undermined the Church’s claims to infallibility.

The papacy’s desire to reunite Christianity and strengthen the Byzantine Empire was not only unsuccessful, but the Crusades, most notably the Fourth Crusade, made matters worse. The insular crusaders had taken a strong dislike to the Greek-speaking Christians of the East from the time of the First Crusade. In 1204, the Fourth Crusade, originally sent to attack Jerusalem, sacked Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire. As one historian tells the story, for three days, the crusaders

... murdered, raped, looted and destroyed on a scale which even the ancient Vandals and Goths would have found unbelievable ... [they] destroyed indiscriminately, halting to refresh themselves with wine, violation of nuns and murder of Orthodox clerics.³⁶

This appalling carnage solidified, rather than overcame, the schism in Christianity, just as it weakened, rather than strengthened, the Byzantine Empire.

Still, the seeds of change that the Crusades planted were not, in and of themselves, enough to transform feudal Europe. The system still survived on the basis of the nobles' control of agriculture, a military monopoly for the warrior elite, as well as their own belief in themselves³⁷ and, of course, the intellectual/spiritual power of the Roman Catholic Church. Both feudal lord and Pope would take a further battering in the fourteenth century as the overlapping impact of the Hundred Years War and the Black Death shook medieval society to its core.

The so-called "Hundred Years War" was fought mainly between France and England from 1337 until 1453 (obviously more than a hundred years in length, it should be noted that this war was actually a series of conflicts interspersed with periods of uneasy peace). This series of wars was witness to the end of the feudal ruling classes' complete military monopoly. Heavily armored knights mounted on specially trained warhorses proved to be less than invincible to peasants using the longbow. Cannons saw general use during this period and even in their early crude incarnation, respected neither the knight's armor nor the lord's castle walls. By the end of the conflict, it was clear that there was little long-term military future for the highly trained knight, while the nobility would see their political power increasingly eroded.³⁸ As noted previously, one can only imagine the despair and self-doubt that the success of Joan of Arc must have engendered among the feudal lords.³⁹ Joan was a peasant woman who claimed to have divine orders to save France. Thousands of the common people seem to have believed her. The defeats of the French feudal lords at the hands of the English were such that many thought she had been sent by God. This caused the would-be French king to deploy her, in the hope of inspiring his troops and rallying the common people. She proved to be difficult to control, so there was some relief among the French ruling class when Joan was taken into English custody. After all, neither women nor commoners were meant to be great generals. The English, when they captured Joan, had her condemned as a witch and burned, since only the powers of the devil could explain her successes against their male noble-led army.