EUROPEAN SOCIAL HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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Part I : Social Structure

Overview   The period of time covered by the Western European Middle Ages is vast, over a millennium by any account, and the societies at play in that period vary greatly from one another. However there is a normative tenor to the social organizations of the period, itself rooted In the inheritance from the Roman Empire, the overwhelmingly agricultural demands of daily life, and the distinctive blend of the Catholic Church with aristocratic values.

The three estates   By a broad, and often repeated formula, mediaeval Western European society functioned around three 'estates, ' or broad social conditions: the clergy, the warriors, the laborers; 'those who fight, those who pray, those who work.' The large omission from this group, which is otherwise intact, is the nobility: for European societies were consistently monarchical, depending on *father-kings* to make and enact the laws, *queens*--not infrequently the power behind the monarch, *princes*--forever jostling for the succession, *princesses*--bait for profitable foreign alliances and land consolidations, and a gaggle of aristocrats, self-interested advisors and ministers forever on the look-out for the good of the kingdom and the good of number one.

Labor   Ninety percent of both the populations and the GNP of mediaeval states was based on agriculture. Mechanization was on the rise--with ploughs, horse collars, horse shoes, and three field planting experiments--yet human labor was the overwhelming fact of life on the feudal estates of mediaeval Europe. It is customary to divide the providers of that labor into three groups of peasantry: freemen, serfs, and slaves. *Freemen* possessed some land, but worked for the feudal lord under whose sponsorship they owned their land. *Serfs* were landless servants of manorial lords.*Slaves*, less free than serfs, were simply possessions of the lords of the manor, to be disposed of at will.

The clergy   The clergy were the active priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, which from the early centuries of the post classical era, as early as the third century C.E. in Rome, had acquired power and high administrative influence within the Roman Empire. The clergy, from Cardinals and Bishops of the Church to the humblest monks and nuns, were charged with the spiritual welfare of their people, and enjoined by Saint Paul to 'pray ceaselessly.'

The fighters   The clergy were deputed to pray for the community, the laborers to feed the community, and the warriors--among whom the horse riding knights were the symbol of mediaeval prowess and protectiveness--were expected to defend the community. There was, of course, a long story to be told, of the development of military skills throughout the Middle Ages, but no other sector of the military won the supreme symbolic attention reserved for the cavalry riding nobility constituting the institution ofl *chivalry*, from its intimate association with the culture of the *horse, cheval* in French. From 1170-1220 dates the high period of Chivalry, promoted by Church concerns for moral improvement, fine ladies' longing for finer relations between the sexes, and the nobility's general interest in fine poetry and song, which were products of Chivalry and the cult of woman.

Readings

Backman, Clifford, *The Worlds of Mediaeval Europe*, Oxford, *2003.*

Smith, Julia, *Europe after* Rome: *A New Cultural History, 500-1000,* Oxford, 2005.

Discussion questions

On the whole, would you consider the Mediaeval class structure mobile and flexible? Or stiff and unyielding? Who was able to move up the social ladder--and under what circumstances?

How were slaves acquired in the Middle Ages? Were there regulations, say from the Church, about 'proper treatment of slaves'?

How were ordinary knights converted into 'chivalric gentlemen'? What kinds of efforts did courtly ladies make, to 'civilize their men?'

Part II : Gender Relations

Western European Gender Relations – Gender relations

Overview   Opportunities for women in business and the marketplace grew, with the evolution of mediaeval cities and towns, and with the growing diversity of roles to be played in society. Although during the early feudal period we see women (as well as men) constricted largely to basic agricultural work, we see women (a few) growing into distinguished regal and social positions in the urban societies of the later Middle Ages.

The earlier period: the Church   The Catholic Church provided (and tended to define) the higher roles available to women in the earlier Middle Ages. Despite rare exceptions, 'heretical deviations,' the Roman Catholic Church has consistenlty excluded women from the priesthood, and that on scriptural grounds. Furthermore, a decree of 441 C.E. vetoed the possibility of women deaconesses, a significant priest-assistant role reserved for trained men. Within the Church framework, however, there remained significant opportunities not only for nuns--who could take that route out of a life of often heavy agricultural labor--but for administrative roles in the church, including the important role of Abbess, a monastery supervisor who was able, not infrequently, to supervise communities of monks as well as of nuns.

The earlier period: secular roles   The nature of early Feudalism, the years leading up to 800 A.D., dictated the overwhelming social concern with agricultural labor. Though small cities were by this time slowly enlarging, ninety percent of a society's work life went into farming and field work, all of this done with little technological assistance. (We noted, under the entry on Innovation, the important advances made, in the period in question, with heavy ploughs, horse shoes, and horse collars.) Within this agricultural culture women were active participants, regularly busy with such jobs as gleaning, weeding, binding of sheaves, making hay and collecting wood. On a slightly more entrepreneurial level, and with a little luck, the same women might work their ways up into positions as brewers, bakers, or high class spinners.

The higher middle ages (1100-1300)   With the growth of urban life, roles for women--in business, in commercial trade--were increasing. There were, in addition, numerous regional queens, and a toweringly influential patroness like Elinor d'Aquitaine (1120-1204), who opened paths for women writers and artists. Even on the women's labor front there were developments, like the growths of guilds, which in important cases provided women with labor solidarity, and with some protection against the widely prevalent gender inequality.

The late middle ages (1300-1500)   By this mature stage of mediaeval (almost early modern) development, women of great spirituality and intellect surge from the framework of Catholic orthodoxy. Apart from such saintly figures as Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) and Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), there are heroic warriors of faith, like Joan of Arc (1412-1431) and Isabella of Castille (1451-1504), one of the most powerful regents of her time.

Afterstory   With the development of the Christian Middle Ages, woman gain larger and more influential voices, and without question soar above most of their male counterparts, In church or state. But women's history was also evolving on other levels, and in matters of biology, for example, women's nutrition was improving--with increased access to sources of nutritional iron, and the opening of trade routes to such comestibles as salted herring, rabbit, and a wide variety of nutritional grains.

Readings

Farmer, Sharon, *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages,* Minneapolis, 2001.

Erler, Mary; Kowaleski, Maryanne, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca, 2003.

Discussion questions

Were women, on the whole, better off in the Middle Ages or in Greco-Roman antiquity? Narrow your response by picking a specific time period from each culture.

How much social and economic upward mobility did the aspiring woman have in the Later Middle Ages?

How free were women, in the Middle Ages, to pick and (if necessary) divorce their spouses? Pick a time period on which to concentrate.