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3. Manorialism

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3. Manorialism

Abstract

Parallel to the military and political system called feudalism, and acting as the foundation, was an economic system known as manorialism. The two systems were distinct and could exist without each other, but they were often linked by the fact that a vassal generally received as a fief, the lordship of one or more small, self-sufficient farming villages called manors. Although the typical manor never existed, and although the manorial system was not found in southern Europe and in the Celtic countries, the general features of this system as it prevailed in the feudal Europe of the eleventh century can be broadly sketched. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, economy, manorialism, vassal, feudalism

Disciplines

Byzantine and Modern Greek | Classics

Comments

This is a part of [Section II: Medieval, Political, and Economic Development: Feudalism and Manorialism](#).

The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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3. Manorialism

[Parallel to the military and political system called feudalism, and acting as the foundation for it, was an economic system known as manorialism. The two systems were distinct and could exist without each other, but they were often linked by the fact that a vassal generally received as a fief the lordship of one or more small, self-sufficient farming villages called manors. Although the typical manor never existed, and although the manorial system was not found in southern Europe and in the Celtic countries, the general features of this system as it prevailed in the feudal Europe of the eleventh century can be broadly sketched]

Way of handling a challenge. communal system.

medieval man had no idea of progress.

manor - didn't raise standard, or produce surplus, but to stave off disaster.

Usually the manor contained the fortified house or castle of the lord. Usually there was a church, since most manors were also parishes. Huddled about these symbols of secular and spiritual authority were the rude huts of the peasants, each with a small vegetable garden and a few fruit trees, while beyond them lay the forests, pastures, meadows, and cleared fields upon which the livelihood of the manor depended.

Like feudalism, manorialism grew up spontaneously to meet certain needs. Even in the Dark Ages, international trade and travel never ceased completely. From time to time a daring peddler would appear with some easily transportable luxury product to tempt the secular and ecclesiastical lords who alone might have some hard cash to spend. Charlemagne received a water-clock and an elephant from the fabled Harun-al-Rashid, Caliph of Baghdad, and occasionally hardy pilgrims made the trip to Rome. Nevertheless, in the year 1000 Europe was largely a closed economy in which each village was relatively self-sufficient. Roads were bad and unsafe. The seas were plagued with pirates and ships were untrustworthy. The central government was unable to maintain order. There were few things to sell, few people to sell to, and little money in circulation. Therefore, new economic forms, as well as new political forms, were created. Peasants sought, or were forced to accept, the protection of a lord. In return, they provided him and his household with food, building materials, cloth, pottery, and the other comparatively simple needs of this "rude mining-camp existence." Generally only a few necessities like salt, and perhaps millstones, were bought outside the manor. What the peasant could not make for himself or his lord was generally done without, or made by the few indispensable craftsmen, the miller and the blacksmith, who themselves were part-time farmers. On most manors the lord had built a gristmill, an oven, a wine-press or a brewhouse, and other similar facilities. The manor was the world of the serf, and therefore of most medieval men. Their life moved in customary ways, its pace set by the weather and the seasons. What changes occurred took place so slowly as to be often imperceptible to contemporaries.

Generally the manor would contain a certain amount of woodland where each peasant had the right to collect firewood (the use of coal was unknown) and to feed a set number of hogs on the acorns, under the eye of the village swineherd. Each peasant also had the right to keep geese, cows, and other stock on the common pasture. Fodder was so scarce that when cold weather came most of the livestock were slaughtered, only a small number being kept for breeding purposes.

The arable land of the manor was generally divided into three large fields. In each the lord, the parish priest, and every peasant household had the right to a share. Every individual's holding (for a peasant, about thirty acres) was further subdivided into a number of long, narrow strips, some of which were located in each of three fields. By thus scattering the holdings, the manor assured every individual of some of each

manorialism is older than feudalism.

*manor was not unpopular in the early middle ages.
sharing of plows, etc.*

grade of land and a portion of each crop. The shape of the strip was dictated by the difficulty of turning the heavy plows, and its size was approximately the amount of land a team of oxen could plow in one day. The three large fields were called open fields because the strips were wastefully separated from each other by unplowed land rather than by fences. When the field was not under cultivation, livestock were let in to feed on the stubble. The three fields were farmed under a system whereby each lay fallow in rotation every third year. Without artificial fertilizers and such plants as alfalfa which restore fertility, this was the only method known to prevent exhaustion of the soil. Lack of fodder meant lack of manure, whose value was little appreciated anyway. Yearly the birds took their toll of seed sown broadcast. Moreover, servile laborers were grudging and ignorant and therefore inefficient. Consequently, the whole system aimed perforce less at producing a surplus for sale than at guaranteeing a subsistence to the village. The profit motive, so characteristic of capitalism, was not a compelling force. In good years the manor could get by; bad years -- the result of a drought or crops burned by raiders -- frequently spelled disaster.

Manorial agriculture was a community affair. Some sort of village court decided what to plant and when to plow and harvest. Since no peasant had enough oxen to pull the heavy plows, neighbors pooled their oxen and labor. Initiative was discouraged, or even forbidden.

Much of the village social and religious life was also communal. The services in the parish church, the feast days of local saints, the celebrations at planting and harvest time, the life of the gentle folk in the manor house and of one's own neighbors -- such limited material supplied what little diversion there was to brighten the peasant's days. The rigors of his life bred a low cunning as useful for survival. His appetites were gross and his mind was incurious. Only these appetites, and a mixture of half-understood Christianity with pagan survivals, gave meaning to his existence. Often, the local saint and the local lord were, so far as he was concerned, God and king.

Primitive though manorialism was, it still represented an achievement of sorts. The invention of the great wheel-plow sometime before the year 1000 meant that heavy soils could be brought under cultivation. Each plow required from four to eight oxen, and the problem of supplying enough fodder was always a pressing one. Thanks to the invention of new types of harness, draft animals were able to pull more weight. About the year 1000 the horse collar was developed, which placed the weight of the pull on the animal's shoulders and also enabled several animals to be hitched in tandem. This increased the amount of work that could be done. Another new source of power was the windmill, unknown to the Romans, which was apparently developed in the Low Countries. Three-field rotation, whatever its disadvantages, was still an advance over the older system in which

*change in technology in relation to economic conditions & social
great plow turned over the dirt, turn clay soils - therefore more land.
villagers owned the plow, so big had to pool their resources.
holdings in long strips*

half, rather than one-third, of the land lay fallow every year. In all these improvements we see faintly what was to become an increasingly obvious characteristic of Western Civilization: the invention of techniques which give man greater control over nature.

Men still worked terribly hard, but now their returns were somewhat greater. Agricultural production was much higher in the year 1200 than in 500 or even in 1000. A larger population could now be fed, and this larger population in its turn brought yet more land under cultivation by felling forests and draining swamps. In time rural Europe began producing a surplus so that a larger urban population could be supported. To the new towns also now drifted some of the excess population no longer needed "down on the farm."

Slavery had gradually disappeared on the early manor, owing partly to its inefficiency and partly to the teachings of the Church. Although there were always some freemen on the manors, their number had declined during the troubles of the Dark Ages when freedom was less desirable than security. Instead, there grew up a new peasant status called serfdom. Serfdom was a subordinate personal relationship like vassalage, but whereas vassalage was honorable, serfdom was a dishonorable, non-free status. The serf's children were popularly and derisively referred to as his "litter" by his betters. The vassal fought and governed; he never farmed. The serf farmed; he never fought or governed. The lord-serf relationship, like that between lord and vassal, was in practice one of reciprocal service. The lord would give the serf protection because a dead serf was unproductive. The serf had a right to use a certain amount of land from which he could not be dispossessed. Finally, owing to the hold of custom on the medieval mind, his obligations to his lord tended to become fixed.

Although these obligations varied from place to place, a general pattern prevailed. The serf could not own personal property. He could not leave the estate. He could not marry outside the manor without purchasing his lord's permission. Some of these provisions obviously aimed at maintaining the manor's labor supply in an age when labor was a valuable commodity. The serf had to work approximately one-third of each week under the direction of the lord's bailiff on the strips of land reserved for the lord's use (generally about one-third of the manorial land). Other work was performed in the lord's household. At plowing, planting, and harvest time the serf was expected to work longer. Since the lord's land and the lord's crops had to be handled first, the peasant's own holding bore the full brunt of the vagaries of the weather. The serf had to use the manorial gristmill, oven, and other facilities, for all of which he had to pay the lord. At specified periods throughout the year the serf had to make payments in kind. In theory he was liable to additional charges whenever the lord pleased. He had to take his disputes to the lord's court and pay for what justice he obtained. When a serf died, his heirs could take over their

inheritance only after giving the lord a payment, generally the best head of livestock. To the Church as his spiritual lord the peasant owed a tithe, originally one-tenth of his annual produce. However devout the peasant might be, this payment occasioned innumerable disputes with the parish priest. Politically the serf did not count. He was not a free man. He could not give evidence or sue a freeman in a royal court. In some places he could not become a priest. He might buy his freedom if he saved enough money, but this was a rare occurrence. However, if the lord treated him unbearably, he could try to run away to lose himself in a town. Or he might slip away to the frontier where labor was scarce and settle on some new manor whose lord, needing labor, would not examine too closely the fugitive's antecedents.

Life for the free peasant on the manor was not notably different from that of the serf. As rent for his holding he usually owed most of the same payments in goods and services. He was subject to the jurisdiction of the same manorial court. However, his obligations were legally fixed; he could own personal property; and he was free to leave the estate.

The world of the medieval peasant is far removed from our own, but his way of life is a part of the history of Western Civilization. Manorialism did provide subsistence during the Dark Ages and beyond, while Western man regrouped his forces. Then it began to decline. It had assumed a static, closed economy with few technological advances. Slowly after about the year 1000, more rapidly after 1300, manorialism began to break up in the face of revived trade and urban life. The process of this break-up, and the economic and social turmoil which accompanied it, was for centuries the most important event in the daily life of countless European peasants. Even in colonial America, the student of history sees a transplanted form of manorialism flourish and then decline in the estates of the patroons in the Hudson River valley and in the haciendas of California. As late as the twentieth century remnants of manorialism -- of communal agriculture, open fields, and servile status -- existed in Russia, Hungary, and elsewhere in eastern Germany, and France still sees traces of long-extinct manors in the villages clustered around the weathered walls of castle and parish church.

*Manors self-sufficient. (not completely) salt, grindstone.
Blacksmith - (farmed also) ^{was} paid in kind.*

All serfs were peasants, but not all peasants were serfs.

Manor just grew because it met certain needs.

resembles Communist system.

Status decides citizenship.

middle age man had no idea of progress.

*No initiative, no place to sell products, hard to get out of status.
Saving off disasters (Providence initiative)
everyone planted, plowed, harvest at the same time.
everyone had an equal chance for good land.*