

## Chapter 1

# Medieval Man in a Medieval World

For three long centuries . . . society enjoyed what may be considered the richest, most fruitful, most harmonious epoch in all the history of Europe, an epoch which may be likened to spring after the barbarian winter.

—*Henri Daniel-Rops*<sup>1</sup>

Catholic historian Warren H. Carroll (1932–2011) termed the centuries covered in this book the “Glory of Christendom.”<sup>2</sup> While medieval man might not have known he was living in the “Middle Ages,” he understood the reality of the term *Christendom*. The popes were the primary users of the term and expanded its definition through the centuries. Pope John VIII (r. 872–882) utilized the word *Christianitas* to signify the common interests of all Christians in the temporal sphere. Usually Christendom meant a spiritual reality inhabited by all baptized Christians and not a specific geographic area, although Pope St. Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) used it to mean the temporal territory inhabited by Christians. Bl. Urban II (r. 1088–1099) centered the meaning of Christendom on the unity of believers motivated by a common goal for the good of Christ and the Church. The ultimate definition of Christendom came from Innocent III (r. 1198–1216), who used the word to describe the true society of Christian states girded by the precepts of the Gospel and supremely ruled by the Vicar of Christ, the Roman pontiff.<sup>3</sup>

Secular and ecclesial authorities were separate in Christendom but theoretically united for common temporal interests and spiritually focused on assisting each citizen to attain eternal life. The reality was, however, far from the theory. Although there were monarchs who viewed themselves as protectors of the Church, there were also secular rulers who sought to control the Church and use it for their own political agendas. The tension between Church and state in Christendom is one of the main characters in the story of the Church during the Middle Ages. Although there was no Christendom without the Church, the reverse was not true as the Church was distinct from Christendom. Occasionally, popes forgot or ignored that distinction, and the result was times of great distress and discomfort for the Bride of Christ.

## The Medieval Worldview

No study of the Middle Ages can occur without recognition of the worldview of those who lived during its years. Those who are quick to view the past from a position of supposed superiority come to erroneous conclusions. Understanding historical events from a contemporary perspective provides greater insight into why people made the decisions they did and allows a more accurate representation and understanding of their choices. Today, people often struggle to comprehend the Middle Ages, not only because of false narratives perpetuated by the media (nearly every movie set in the Middle Ages portrays life as brutish, dirty, and depressing), but also because the medieval worldview is vastly different from—even incompatible with—our modern or postmodern perspective. This is most clearly seen in the two principles on which medieval society was centered: hierarchy and faith.

Medieval society was hierarchical, which, by its nature, is unequal and authoritative. Democracy as a form of societal government was nonexistent. Modern industrialization and its concomitant aspects were not present; medieval society was rooted in the land and centered on agricultural work. Medieval people recognized and accepted class stratification and its

authoritative nature, which was enforced through violent means at times but mostly through societal norms and values.<sup>4</sup> At the top of medieval society was the king. The Englishman John of Salisbury (1115/20–1180), a student of the famous medieval thinker Peter Abelard and secretary to the martyr St. Thomas Becket, illustrated the medieval view of kings in his twelfth-century work *Policraticus*: “The place of the head in the body of the commonwealth is filled by the prince, who is subject only to God and to those who exercise His office and represent Him on earth, even as in the human body the head is quickened and governed by the soul.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite his lofty position, the medieval king did not exercise absolute control over all aspects of his realm. He is best described as an overlord of other lords. There were medieval monarchs who tried to acquire absolute power, but other nobles and the Church frequently checked their plans. Indeed, the thirteenth-century author of the German document *Schwabenspiegel* aptly described medieval mentality concerning hierarchical authority: “We should serve our lords for they protect us; if they do not protect us, justice does not oblige us to serve them.”<sup>6</sup> Despite the nonabsolute power exercised by kings, they were accorded special authority and responsibilities.

Medieval man was a thoroughly religious being, and the key to understanding the medieval world lies with the Catholic faith. The Church and its sacraments imbued all aspects of medieval society. The Catholic faith provided medieval society with a common way of life, a common purpose, and unity. The centrality of the Catholic faith in the medieval world is illustrated by the story of the vicious warrior who was confronted by a bishop for his sins. The warrior cried out, “Give me absolution or I’ll kill you.” The stalwart bishop offered his neck to the man and said, “Strike!” Dumbfounded by the resolute manner of the cleric, the soldier hesitated and then replied, “No. I don’t like you well enough to send you straight to heaven!”<sup>7</sup> Despite his sins, the warrior recognized he needed absolution from the Church as the instrument of mercy and salvation in the world. Additionally, he believed in martyrdom and the reality of eternity. This story is not to suggest that the medieval world was full of saintliness and

harmony (although those elements were definitely present in it). Human sinfulness and conflict were as present then as they are now. Still, the story is emblematic of the value medieval people placed on the Catholic Church and its teachings. The faith unified European medieval society in a way that is incomprehensible to us, and that partly explains the persistence of myths and misconceptions about this time period.

## Feudalism

Just as the term *Middle Ages* is debated among medieval historians, the term *feudalism* and its meaning have been the subject of intense discussion within the scholarly community.<sup>8</sup> The standard historical narrative posits that as the Carolingian political structures (in what is today France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, and parts of Germany) ended in the middle tenth century, a new political system cemented in the acquisition and control of land emerged. Most of us know this new political system as feudalism, which was not a term used in the medieval period but rather a construct used by Renaissance Italian jurists in the sixteenth century to describe customary laws of property. Feudalism “denotes the grant of income-producing property (usually land), known as the benefice or fief, by the lord and protector in return for the promise of oath of fealty by the vassal.”<sup>9</sup>

The invasions and attacks of Islamic, Magyar, and Viking warriors spawned the need for protection, as the standard narrative posits, which was granted at the price of “subordination, subjection, and dependence.”<sup>10</sup> Society divided into those who needed protection and those who provided it. Certain warriors controlled large areas of land, and in order to administer them properly, they parceled land to other warriors in exchange for military aid, counsel and advice, and a percentage of the fruits of the property. Feudalism was not a perfect system, nor was it uniformly practiced throughout Christendom (in fact, it was not practiced at all in some places).<sup>11</sup>

The central element of feudal society was the oath that was given in a ceremony initially known as commendation and then as homage. Medieval society was rooted in personal relationships; the oath bound one man

to another. The most important relationship was between a lord (grantor of the benefice or fief) and vassal (grantee). Generally, the vassal owed military service (before the twelfth century, this was true only in England), which amounted to forty days annually, in exchange for the fief and the lord's protection. Some historians argue not that medieval people were focused on this commonly portrayed "lord and vassal" relationship but rather that they functioned through multiple types of relationships, such as "ruler and subject, patron and client, landlord and tenant, employer and employed, commander and soldier."<sup>12</sup>

The medieval world was a primarily agricultural society, so land was the main commodity. Superiors provided land to subordinates in exchange for fealty, rents, and labor. The granting of fiefs began when the Church provided lands to noblemen as a means to protect Church property. A nobleman holding ecclesial land was responsible for its protection and upkeep. Initially, fiefs were held for life and not hereditary; they became inheritable over time. Although the modern academic community debates the utility of the terms *feudalism*, *fief*, and *vassal*, they are useful constructs when specifically defined and applied to the appropriate areas of Europe to explain the societal and political structures in place in medieval Christendom.<sup>13</sup>

## The Three Orders of Medieval Society

Class-stratified medieval Europe consisted of "those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked."<sup>14</sup> Medieval man knew his place in the world and usually did not seek to upset the well-established societal order. Movement between the classes was usually limited, but not within the Church. The Catholic Church provided a place of opportunity for those who demonstrated tenacity and skill despite their class background. It was possible for the son of a serf or an artisan to rise to the highest offices in the Church.

## Nobles and Knights

The nobility comprised those who had the means to purchase weapons, the time to train with them, and the willingness to use them. Nobles had the ability to buy, train, and use weapons because they lived off the work of other people. Noblemen were expected to follow a code of honor, known as chivalry, which was rooted in Christian behavior such as Mass attendance, penitential practices, just conduct in war, and the protection of widows, orphans, and the Church.

A distinctive element of noble life, which was tied to the notions of chivalry, involved the idea of courtly love and the role of the troubadour. Marriage for the nobility was a political and economic decision more than a romantic or personal one. The decision of whom to marry was often at the discretion of not the bride or groom but rather their parents. Although some noble marriages were successful with both parties remaining faithful, extramarital affairs were very common. Noble courtly love expressed in the vernacular, usually in the form of poems, became an outlet for the strict confines of noble marriage. The object of courtly love was usually a married woman, whom the nobleman adored and to whom he professed his undying love. These popular poems were performed in noble courts by troubadours (from the French *trouver*, “to find”), usually knights (although some were clerics and from the middle class) who expressed the stories of courtly love through song. The first known troubadour was the knight Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1071–1127).

The Western knight appears in history in the ninth and tenth centuries, reaches his zenith in the eleventh through the thirteen centuries, and declines beginning in the fourteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The process of becoming a knight began at the age of fourteen when noble boys became squires and assisted knights in their daily activities. When the boy had apprenticed for years and was ready to take on the responsibilities of knighthood, a ceremony was conducted. The young man took an oath to embody the chivalric values and was handed his sword, which had been blessed by a cleric with a special prayer:

Hear, O Lord, our petitions and bless with thy majestic hand this sword wherewith thy servant desires to be girt, so that he may be enabled both to defend churches, widows, orphans, and all servants of God against the cruelty of pagans, and also to strike fear into the hearts of traitors.<sup>16</sup>

Originally, any knight could make someone else a knight, but in the early twelfth century, knighthood was closed to anyone not related to a knight (in the areas of Europe outside England).

When not engaged in active war, knights trained for war by participating in tournaments. Actual medieval tournaments were very different from the reenactments at modern-day *Medieval Times* restaurants and fairs. They were large-scale, multiday events encompassing wide areas of territory involving, at times, hundreds of knights. Tournaments were nasty, bloody affairs with “few rules and no referees.”<sup>17</sup> Injury and death were common outcomes, and as such, the Church in the twelfth century banned participation in tournaments at the local councils of Clermont (1130) and Reims (1131), and at the ecumenical council of Second Lateran (1139).<sup>18</sup> Despite the Church’s ban, however, tournaments remained popular events and provided a meaningful training opportunity for knights, whose primary function in medieval society was ensuring peace through readiness and training in martial skills.

## Castles

The limited competency of medieval government led to the creation of strongholds that served as homes for the nobility, centers of estate administration, and protection from invasions and armed attacks. The castle served the military purposes of defense and functioned as a base from which to conduct military operations in the surrounding countryside. The first castles in the early tenth century were known as “motte-and-bailey” constructions. They consisted of a wooden (and later stone) keep (nobleman’s house) on a raised mound of dirt (motte) with an enclosed courtyard (bailey) protected by a ditch or wooden palisade. Toward the

end of the tenth century, castle construction switched to stone, which provided stronger protection from attack and was far less vulnerable to fire than wood. Castles were originally rectangular in shape, but that design allowed sappers to destroy the corners easily (round towers at the end of walls were much more difficult to undermine). Castles were expensive to build and maintain and required extensive manpower for defense as well as for everyday use. A castle household consisted of military personnel, such as knights, men-at-arms, watchmen, and guards, as well as the domestic staff of servants.

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*Up Close and Personal:*

ABBOT SUGER OF ST. DENIS  
(CA. 1081–1151)

Abbot Suger was the son of a serf and yet rose to occupy the most powerful nonroyal position in the kingdom of France. He was an ambitious man who desired to bolster the power of the French king and glorify God through the beautification and enrichment of the royal abbey of St. Denis. Suger studied at the abbey school with the future Louis VI, “the Fat” (r. 1108–1137), and they became lifelong friends. He was also an advisor to Louis VII (r. 1137–1180) and served as regent during the king’s absence while participating in the Second Crusade (1147–1149). Despite his resistance to the king’s crusade expedition, Suger faithfully governed the realm in Louis’s absence and was rewarded for his actions when Louis named him “Father of the Country.”

Suger became abbot at St. Denis in 1122 and held the position nearly thirty years before his death. He initiated a monastic reform at the abbey spurred by a reprimand from St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard chastised Suger for his lax and worldly focus and behavior by telling him to “live as a monk serving God as

minister of his king, rather than as a minister who, by chance, happened to be a Benedictine" (quoted in Daniel-Rops, *Cathedral and Crusade*, 96–97). As part of the reform, Suger undertook a major renovation of the abbey church at St. Denis and wrote a book (*On the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*) detailing the construction efforts. In one humorous story, Suger recounts how his builders said that trees tall enough to provide the length he wanted for the roof did not exist. Suger decided to take the skeptical carpenters into the woods, wherein he found twelve trees of the required length and ordered them cut and hauled to the building site. Suger was consumed with beauty and considered it an earthly reflection of God. His architectural revolution at St. Denis sparked an international building campaign directed to the glory of God for centuries and provides an example of the ingenuity and faithfulness of medieval Christians. Suger was short in stature, but his impact on Western civilization was immense, as his friend Simon Chèvre d'Or remarked in an obituary: "He refused in his smallness, to be a small man" (Simon Chèvre d'Or, quoted in Abbot Suger, *On the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and Its Art Treasures*, 33).

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## The Serf

Knights and the nobility occupied the higher end of medieval society, and at the lower end were peasants who worked the land. These agricultural workers and craftsmen (smiths, carpenters, millers, tanners, etc.) were divided into those who were free and those who were not. A freeman held land without the labor obligation due to a nobleman. They rode horses and carried swords but were not trained in the military arts. Nonfree peasants or serfs (also known as *villeins*) owed service on the lord's land (known as the *demesne*), which usually amounted to two-thirds of their time. Serfs could not leave the land or sell livestock without the lord's

permission and were subject to the payment of fees for various activities. The work was hard and demanding, but medieval society followed the Church calendar, which provided for rest from work on Sundays, holy days, and various saints' feasts.

## The Medieval Village

The foundation of life in medieval Europe was the village. Medieval peasants were well aware of their village's boundaries and related to other people based on their village of residence. The village was a community ordered for agricultural production and centered on a monastery, church, or a manor house (the lord's estate).<sup>19</sup> A typical medieval English village comprised communal space such as the village green, a shared oven for bread, open fields, and public and private buildings. Pigs were the most numerous livestock, along with cows, which were used to breed oxen for the plows, and sheep and goats, which were used primarily for milk and cheese. The staple crops were barley, oats, and rye. Wheat was grown and harvested as the cash crop to pay rents and taxes.<sup>20</sup> Overseeing the lord's estate was the steward (also known as the *seneschal*), who acted as the lord's deputy and inspected the village several times a year to report on its productivity. The day-to-day manager of the estate, acting as the chief law officer and business manager, was the bailiff. The lord entrusted the oversight of the estate to these men and rarely interacted with the villagers. Peasant homes were made of wood and straw and housed both human and animal occupants. Food was sometimes scarce but consisted mostly of grains and cooked fruit; protein consumption was usually insufficient. On days of rest, the peasant enjoyed various forms of recreation, including board games like chess, checkers, backgammon, and rolling dice. Physical activity such as wrestling, swimming, and archery were common pastimes. The most ubiquitous recreation was drinking ale, which was brewed, usually by women, in large quantities. Village life was hard, but there were opportunities to enjoy life. The village provided the majority of medieval people a place of employment, recreation, and relative safety.