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978-0-521-09106-0 - The Medieval Scene: An Informal Introduction to the Middle Ages

G. G. Coulton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Chaos and Reconstruction

WE cannot understand the medieval mind unless we put ourselves first at the starting-point of medieval society. For convenience, let us here include the so-called Dark Ages and define the Middle Ages as the period which begins with the break-up of the Roman Empire and ends with the Reformation. No hard and fast line can be drawn at either end. To begin with, stable government still survived in some parts of Europe for many generations after the barbarian invasions had broken it down elsewhere. Again, Luther's preaching brought parts of Germany in 1517 to a more definite religious revolution than that of the so-called Reformation Parliament of England in 1530. Again, the Renaissance had begun to influence Italian thought in 1350 more than it influenced French thought in 1450 or English in 1500. The earlier half, the Dark Ages, may be reckoned from 400 to 1000; the next five centuries form the Middle Ages in a more special sense, *le haut moyen âge*, as French historians call it.

Here we must treat the two continuously, as, of course, they were continuous; and if, for brevity's sake, we must often generalise epigrammatically, therefore it must be borne steadily in mind that no un-

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qualified distinction between medieval thought on the one hand, and ancient or modern thought on the other, can be exactly true. We can only say that, in general, certain lines of thought do particularly characterise one or other of these three periods.

The barbarians who overran the Roman Empire had been, as a rule, strongly individualistic. The Northern tribes were mostly forest-dwellers, who lived mainly by hunting and fishing and rearing cattle, and of whom only the most civilised had reached the stage of settled agriculture. With them, the village was the main political unit; they recognised more vaguely a large agglomeration answering roughly to the modern county; only at times of great crisis was the individual called upon to recognise his duty towards the whole tribe or nation. Again, the Mongol invaders from the East were more individualistic still; certain differences of rank were vaguely recognised; but the Mongol's boast was, "We have no King and we want none; among us every man is King". Still, the invaders had outgrown this extreme individualism to some extent, even before they broke in upon the Empire; indeed, unless they had learned already, by that time, to strike with something of the force of a united nation, and even with the force of different nationalities bound together for the moment by one fixed purpose, they could never have broken the Roman armies. The earliest and most civilised of these invaders, the Goths, recognised very clearly the value of a superior civilisation. They did not aspire to break down the Roman

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machine, or to replace it by social machinery of their own, but, at first, merely to make for themselves a place in this great civilisation; and, even later, when their military successes had been greatest, they tried to keep as much of the old system as they felt themselves able to work. The highly developed imperial system of taxation and finance was too complicated for them, so that there were no State taxes in the Western Empire for six or seven centuries, until the Crusades again imposed more constructive methods upon the governments; for six or seven centuries rulers had to live and work upon the income of their own royal estates, upon the forced services which they could demand from their subjects in military service, in building of fortifications and of bridges, and upon such booty as they could gain in war. This, as much as anything else, contributed to make war a normal condition of medieval society.

Meanwhile, however, a new civilisation was growing up among the ruins of the old. This was the feudal system—or, as some would cynically call it, want of system. Cynically, I say, for that seems to ignore the essential fact that, however unsystematic feudalism may have been in comparison with the highly developed bureaucracy of the Roman Empire—the too highly developed bureaucracy, most people would say—yet it was systematic as compared with the very primitive way in which the invaders had lived among their native forests and morasses. We may say, roughly, that feudalism was a natural fusion between such new

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Teutonic elements and such ancient Roman elements as were best suited to coalesce with each other. Already, before the invasions, Roman society had begun in some ways to disintegrate; at the same time, Teutonic society was crystallising into something far more civilised than it had been; this made coalition easier when the time came for a conquering Teutonic population to settle down with a conquered population of Roman traditions.

The bond in feudalism was double, economic and personal. As I have said before, one man was not only owner of another's land, but also master of his person. The tendency in this direction, during the later generations of the Empire, was mainly due to the extent to which the laborious and steady middle classes, the backbone of society, were being exploited. State taxation was elaborate; in some ways it was most ingenious and efficient; but it gradually evolved a great injustice. The great man could often shirk his full burden by bribery or intimidation; the smallest men escaped because it would not have paid to press them; thus the main burden fell upon the peasant-farmers. These men were compelled, in increasing numbers, to shelter themselves under the protection of the nearest great landowner. The great man said, naturally enough: "I can protect my own land, but not other men's. Give me your land and you shall have it back at a small rent". Thus there grew up what the law recognised as *precarial* tenure; tenure under which the tiller of the soil had rights as against other men, but none as against

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the great man to whom the land had been yielded. We may often see something analogous in modern society. A minister or a philanthropic lay-worker starts a boys' cricket or football club. He goes to the owner of a building-plot that is still vacant, and gets provisional leave for his boys to play there. Those boys and their director have rights as against all other comers, but none whatever as against the owner, who can at any moment withdraw his permission.

Again, Teutonic society had recognised very definitely a personal tie, quite apart from family ties or State ties, between man and man. Young men would attach themselves to some great warrior, to eat at his table and to fight his battles, and this "companionship" as it was called—"vassalage", as we should call it—was recognised as a tie even stronger than that of son to father, or of subject to sovereign. Roman society, also, from very early times, had recognised voluntary ties of this kind, under the title of *patrocinium*, or patronage. If those customs were already vigorous on both sides of the frontier before the invasion, we may easily see how the invasions would have consecrated and developed them. Now, far more than before, the small man needed help, and was willing almost to sell his soul for help, and the great man was able to make a very profitable bargain.

Thus grew up a state of society which lasted for many centuries, and which was at its fullest development about the time of the Norman invasion of England, among those Western Franks, those inhabi-

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tants of what we now call France, from whom the Normans had learned most of their own civilisation. It was a great advantage for England that feudalism was thus introduced among us in a more systematic and orderly form than it assumed in some other parts of Europe.

Under the Feudal System, therefore, society was organised very differently from what it had been under the Roman Empire, or from what it is now. Whatever might be the theory, in fact a man's immediate obedience was to his landlord. He might have only one landlord, for the royal estates were considerable, and on those estates the peasant owed homage to the king alone. But, on the other hand, he might have half-a-dozen landlords, in various degrees of proximity. If his immediate landlord was the lord of the manor—the local squire, to put it into modern terms—then that squire might be the direct tenant of the king; but, on the other hand, this squire might hold his lands under some other squire, and he under some other, and he under some count or baron or bishop or abbot, so that there were many steps between the actual tiller of the soil and the central government. But the man's immediate loyalty was due to his immediate landlord; he might have many lords but he had only one *liege* lord, the man from whom he held directly. Thus came about the strange paradox, that the peasant owed closer loyalty to his squire than to his king. Nearly all quarrels were settled in the squire's court, the court of the manor; it is true that if a serf were actually

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killed or maimed, there was a possible appeal to the king's court; otherwise the man and his master must fight it out for themselves. The Roman Empire had been highly centralised; the Middle Ages were strongly decentralised.

Meanwhile, however, a great central power was growing up. During the decay of the Roman Empire—for decay had definitely set in before that final catastrophe of barbarian invasions—during that decay, then, one thing had been growing stronger, and that was the Christian religion. There may be many different ways of explaining the fact; but it is a fact, as undeniable as any other in history, that this belief in a crucified carpenter and in continued communion with Him through sacraments which He instituted, has taken more men out of themselves, and taken them further out of themselves, than any other event in the world's records, not even excepting Buddhism. The Imperial government had feared and hated this new sect, as a state within the State. But the new religion grew under persecution; and at last Constantine, seeing that he could not stamp it out, chose it for his ally. It became the State Church, while all other creeds were tolerated, if at all, only as superstitions. But presently other creeds were no longer tolerated, and the Church, from being a persecuted sect pleading for mercy, became a powerful organisation, in the face of which others pleaded too often in vain. Before the Empire broke up, this Church had already grown to maturity and vigour. Its organisation, its dress, and even some

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of its ceremonies were modelled on those of the Empire; it had imitated on a great scale as the Salvation Army has imitated on a smaller scale. It amassed rich endowments, but a very large proportion of these were employed upon charitable or spiritual purposes. Even the barbarians, in their better moments, respected the Church. Therefore, while the civil magistrates were swept away by the invasions, the bishop and the priest remained, as a rule, at their posts. The Church had taken the mould of the Empire, as a hermit-crab takes the mould of its shell; and by about A.D. 700 it may be said that the Roman Church is almost all that remains of the Roman Empire; for, from generation to generation, the Bishop of Rome had gradually obtained a supremacy, more or less definitely recognised, over all other bishops. Thus, in a very real sense, practical form had been given to that theory of the City of God which St Augustine had worked out while the City of Man, the Empire, was visibly going to pieces. That ideal, to which we must come back in a later chapter, dominated nearly all of the thought of the Middle Ages, though not so much of the practice.

The Middle Ages started with certain advantages here, and certain disadvantages. The advantages were mainly two: they started to a great extent with a clean slate; and behind them they had the driving force of the new religion, Christianity. Gibbon would not have counted these as advantages; it is plain that to his mind the coming of Christianity was the first and most fatal

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of the barbarian victories. He sneers at the boast of the early Christian father Tertullian (*c.* A.D. 220) that a Christian mechanic is ready with answers to questions which had puzzled the wisest heads of antiquity. From one point of view this contempt is justified; but from a wider outlook we must count it a real gain for civilisation that the artisan should seriously concern himself at all with these questions, and that he should find an answer which, on the whole, had a definite ethical value. Society in the Roman Empire had grown more and more lifeless. Originality had decayed in literature and in art. The citizen had surrendered many of his political liberties; he was content to commit the defence of the Empire to hired barbarians; the laborious and thrifty middle classes were being crushed out of existence by a system of taxation which threw the heaviest burden upon the willing horse. In the midst of this indifference or decay one thing grew steadily—the new religion.

It had already lost some of its early characteristics by A.D. 400. Its acceptance as the State religion had brought weakness as well as strength; but it still retained much of that force and originality which had marked Christian society as the one thing which would not fit into conventional Roman civilisation; the one thing which claimed a right of making cleavages everywhere in a society which relied for its stability upon a horizontal structure of caste distinctions; the thing which claimed an even stricter allegiance than State loyalty; the thing, therefore, which was marked for

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persecution in an otherwise tolerant world. All medieval thought is characterised, nominally at least, by the conviction that each man has a soul to save, and that, therefore, salvation is the main end of every human being, not a distant ideal, but the most practical duty that is set before us all.

This revolutionary seed was sown in a soil fresh ploughed by political and social revolution; or, perhaps, it would be a more exact metaphor to say, in fields swept by a great deluge, and left barren for the moment, but rich in virgin soil. This became, in the long run, the second medieval advantage, lamentable as it was at first. The eastern half of the Roman Empire kept its political and social constitution comparatively intact for centuries, and did scarcely more than mark time all that while. The western half was wrecked, but emerged with a vitality which, when once the Dark Ages were passed, soon carried it ahead, even in those arts in which the Greeks had excelled.

Let us now go back to face the disadvantages. These, again, may be distinguished into two; the moral and the material. The latter needs no special emphasis here; the chaos of the Western world is well known. But morally, while Christianity embodied much of the best of ancient thought, it was also alloyed with a great deal of baser metal.

The main threads, before Christ, may be reckoned as four. These were: first, philosophy, containing a great deal of moral teaching, but mainly academic, and failing to touch the ordinary man; secondly, State