

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-11255-0 - From Slavery to Feudalism in South-Western Europe

Pierre Bonnassie

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This book is first and foremost an extended examination and discussion of the enslavement of men and women by others of their society, and in particular of the means and causes of the gradual end of slavery in early medieval Europe between 500 and 1200. Drawing upon a very wide range of primary archival sources, Professor Bonnassie places new findings about subjection, servitude and lordship in relation to the prevailing understanding of social history which has developed since the work of Marc Bloch. The author explains how slavery long persisted in southern France and Spain, as part of a public order that also sheltered free peasants, giving way in the tenth and eleventh centuries to a new regime of harsh lordships that mark the beginnings of feudalism. He shows that feudalism in south-western Europe was no less significant than in northern European lands.

In his introduction to the book Professor T. N. Bisson writes ‘The achievements of this book are enhanced by two virtues not always joined in historians: analytical clarity and imaginative sympathy . . . A work of humane and powerful scholarship well conveyed in this translation, this book will be widely read and pondered.’

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### *From Slavery to Feudalism in South-Western Europe*

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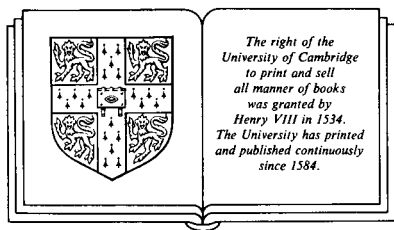
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# *From Slavery to Feudalism in South- Western Europe*

PIERRE BONNASSIE

*translated by* JEAN BIRRELL



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## *Foreword*

The studies gathered in this volume are changing our ideas about medieval social history. With the lone exception of Georges Duby, no one since Marc Bloch has done so much as Pierre Bonnassie to clarify big questions relating to the persistence and transformation of pre-millennial societies in France. When and how did ancient slavery end? When and how did agrarian labour assume the diverse forms of subjection commonly (and vaguely) labelled 'serfdom' by historians? How were such changes related to economic growth, to the restructuring of social power, and to the cultures and initiatives of peasants? These were questions about the history of people in the mass and they evoked equally capacious theoretical issues concerning the nature and stages of pre-industrial societies.

Such matters were not neglected by previous historians, least of all by Bloch, but their researches had not led to secure results. Everyone complained about the documents, too few (it was said) and too elitist to illuminate the scorned and voiceless many. It hardly helped to read the proliferating regional monographs, which seemed on the matter of serfdom to stress peculiarities at the expense of wider uniformities (and whose conclusions have to this day defied cogent summation). To build theories of feudalism on historical work was to build houses of cards. Non-Marxist historians themselves were in disagreement over the chronology of vassalage and feudal tenures. Nevertheless, a methodological milestone had been passed. It turned out that the only scholars for whom the questions given above held no terrors were those favoured few whose chosen regions were well documented for the tenth and early eleventh centuries. For Georges Duby working on the Mâconnais, for Pierre Toubert (Latium), for J.-P. Poly (Provence, though here less satisfactorily) the veil could be lifted on those obscure generations to reveal a profound rupture in social

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order and power. It became reasonable to suppose that the experience of these regions was not exceptional

Nowhere was this finding so spectacularly confirmed than for Catalonia. In his *thèse d'état* (1973; published 1975–6), Pierre Bonnassie exploited an incomparably rich documentation to show how an ancient public order persisted in the eastern Pyrenees down to the year 1000, how it was then threatened by heightened ambitions and economic growth, and how it collapsed in a paroxysm of competitive violence (1020–60) attended by the multiplication of castles, warriors, and fiefs. And Professor Bonnassie had only to fix on the social consequences of this evolution to see, for the first time anywhere, the starkly total – and brutal – transformation of a society of free peasant proprietors and slaves, its property protected by Visigothic law in public courts, into a new regime of peasant subjection to the oppressive lordships of castellans and knights bent on seizing whatever was left of public powers. ‘From slavery to feudalism’: it was a compelling demonstration for Catalonia.

Could the demonstration be replicated or generalised for neighbouring regions? Not easily, it seemed, whether for lack of evidence or lack of research. Yet to our good fortune Professor Bonnassie undertook such a study in two remarkable articles that form the coherent nucleus of this book. The first (in historical order) may well be the best study of medieval slavery (of any length) ever published; while the second is a pathbreaking essay on the chronology of militant feudalising in Spain (and Portugal) and southern France. These chapters (1 and 3 below), ranging backwards and forward in time, suggest that the crisis of the early eleventh century was indeed widespread, the sign of a seachange in medieval social structures. But there is caution here as well as forceful originality. Professor Bonnassie makes no claim that his conclusions apply generally north of the Massif Central, so that his work raises, amongst others, the question whether meridional structures of militant lordship conformed to some more profoundly cultural divide between North and South after (or persisting after) the year 1000. In other studies, the author provides a fine survey of Visigothic Spain (chapter 2); compensates for the paucity of Occitanian evidence by wringing the singular testimony of the *Liber miraculorum Sancte Fidis* on the violent regime of castles (chapter 4); shows how the documentary forms of *convenientia* and *sacramentale* illustrate the categorical originality of



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the new Catalanian structures of alliance and commendation in the eleventh century (chapter 6); surveys the dynamics of feudalising in Catalonia down to 1150 (or beyond) with fine attention to the problems of class formation and enfranchisement (chapters 5, 7); and in highly resourceful essays on the status and economic (and political!) initiatives of peasants in Catalonia and early Capetian France, challenges us to think differently about the toilers so inexpressly represented in the unsympathetic records of their masters (chapters 8–10). The valuable collaboration of Pierre Guichard in chapter 8 will not be overlooked. In chapter 10 a reflective review of the historical problem of servility not only underscores the reaffirmed need to think of post-millennial peasants as the successors of agrarian slaves, but fittingly evokes the abiding intelligence with which Marc Bloch broached the problematic of medieval slavery.

The feudalism Professor Bonnassie has recreated quite demolishes the old orthodoxy that depicted Mediterranean feudalisms as pale copies of northern ones. No regime of fiefs known to medieval Europe was so characteristic and original or so socially pervasive as that of Catalonia and much of Occitania by 1100. The evidence here adduced will be useful to historians of class formation, seigneurial exploitation, and peasant resistance; all the more so as this feudalism is no figment of sociological imagination. It was variable in incidence and chronology in ways yet to be explored; its discoverer has mapped out the heartlands for us while pointing helpfully to promising new directions of research.

The achievements of this book are enhanced by two virtues not always joined in historians: analytical clarity and imaginative sympathy. If Professor Bonnassie has improved our grasp of the larger history of slavery, servility, and economic change, it is because he has held insistently to his guiding questions no matter how thick the underbrush. And if his peasants seem more active, seem angrier, than those habitually portrayed (even caricatured) in our sources, it is because (one may feel) he has put himself in peasant shoes – and read between the lines. A work of humane and powerful scholarship well conveyed in this translation, this book will be widely read and pondered.

T. N. BISSON

## Abbreviations

AC:	Arxiu Capítular
ACA:	Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Barcelona
AHN:	Archivo Historico Nacional, Madrid
BN:	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
RB I, RB II etc:	Ramon Berenguer I, II etc
BR I:	Berenguer Ramon I
CPC:	<i>Cartas de población y franquicia de Cataluña</i> , ed. J. M. Font Ruis, 2 vols. (in 3 parts) (Madrid, Barcelona, 1969–83)
ES:	<i>España sagrada . . .</i> , ed. Henrique Florez et al., 58 vols. (Madrid, 1747–1918)
HGL:	<i>Histoire générale de Languedoc . . .</i> , ed. Claude Devic, J.-J. Vaissete, 16 vols. (Toulouse, 1872–1904)
LFM:	<i>Liber Feudorum Maior</i> , ed. F. Miquel Rosell, 2 vols. (Barcelona, 1945–7)
MGH:	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> (1823 to date)
AA:	<i>Auctores Antiquissimi</i>
SS:	<i>Scriptores</i>
PL:	<i>Patrologiae cursus completus . . . Series latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–66).
Structures féodales:	<i>Structures féodales et féodalisme dans l'Occident méditerranéen (Xe–XIIIe siècles). Bilan et perspectives de recherches . . .</i> (Rome, 1980)
Usatges:	<i>Usatges de Barcelona</i> , ed. R. d'Abadal and F. Valls Taberner (Barcelona, 1913)
Annales:	<i>Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations</i>
Settimane:	<i>Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo</i> (Spoleto)
La Catalogne:	Pierre Bonnassie, <i>La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XLe siècle: croissance et mutations d'une société</i> , 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1976)