

The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages

Robert Fossier

Lydia G. Cochrane, Translator

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“What we call History, considered as giving a record of notable events, or transactions, under names and dates,” said the American pastor, Horace Bushnell, “I conceive to be commonly very much of a fiction.” Our historical records, he pointed out, “gather, under the name of a prominent few, what is really done by nameless multitudes.” In our burial places, the real authors of our civilization are not to be found by looking for “the tall monuments and the titled names” but the humbler monuments of the “multitudes of worthy men and women.”

In *The Axe and the Oath*, Robert Fossier, a professor of history at the Sorbonne in Paris, describes the lives of ordinary people in the Middle Ages, focusing on northern France between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. In his attempts to remove the “distorting prism” of institutions and hierarchies that frequently intervene between “poor everyday man” and the historian, he faces a major hurdle: the written record was composed almost entirely by learned men, most of whom were clerics. Another problem is the neglect which medieval documents have suffered; of the millions of texts in archives, scholars have consulted and used less than a quarter.

Fossier supplements his review of public sources, “written, painted, or sculpted,” with information about private life from archeological excavations, account books, and folklore. Women’s voices, often faint, are heard on occasion through medieval texts such as the *Distaff Gospels*, a compendium of advice about religious, social, and medical matters.

The author follows medieval people in “their lives and daily cares, their material concerns in particular” from birth to death; depicts their encounters with others at work, home, and church; and finds that once superficial differences in economic and social structures are brushed away: “medieval man is us.” The book dispels stereotypes about medieval times: “The ‘Middle Ages’ is not the university, the Cistercians, the Teutonic Hanseatic League, or the statutes of the Arte della Lana, any more than it is the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas or the Cathedral of Amiens.” Fossier calls feudalism “a simple institutional film on the surface of society” that touched only “one or two men out of twenty.”

Emperors, knights, and clergymen have long dominated narratives about the Middle Ages. As a historic picture of the lives of the many who now sleep in “untitled graves,” *The Axe and the Oath* levels the field a little.

KARUNESH TULI (September / October 2010)

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