

Life in a Medieval City

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How would it actually be like to live in a Medieval city? To fix idea, as the two amateur historians do, let us say that the year is 1250 and that the city is Troyes in northern France.

Nowadays, Troyes is a small town by the Seine, some distance east of Paris and situated in the province of Champagne. It still maintains some of its old medieval buildings, and more to the point the street plan of its old center is more or less intact since its heydays. In the 13th century, Troyes was an impenetrable walled city with a flourishing market, and with an importance almost rivaling that of Paris, until it lost its eminence and faded out at the end of that century.

Now, in history you learn a lot of politics and the antics of kings. Wars are important, and battles faithfully recorded. Those were traumatic events in the lives of people, and there is no wonder why they are so well documented. In addition to that there was famines and pestilences, which also tend to make their way into recorded history and part of the grand narrative that we all imbibe. But there is also the life from a less exalted point of view. The kind that is neglected in the big story, but which there is a real hunger for among the laymen. Part of it can in the best of worlds be satisfied through historical fiction, but fiction is often written with more regard for drama and excitement and less for accuracy.

The authors approach the matter systematically. How would it be in a home? It differs tremendously of course, whether you are a wealthy burger or on the edge of society. The reader of course tends to identify with the wealthy burger and learns that life as such were frugal, even among the well-to-do. There were not much furniture, a marital bed was a hefty investment¹. More appallingly though was the lack of hygiene, and the absence of what is needed for its maintenance which we now take for granted. People lived in squalor and refuse of any kind was unceremoniously dumped into the streets, or disposed of into the river or canal. Sharing a meal with your guests meant sharing not only the food but also utensils as well, if not using your hands. Most modern people would probably be aghast, but on the other hand you quickly get used to most things. Compared to what people still to this day put up with in the Third World it would not be remarkable. In fact much of the fascination of exotic travel to primitive societies today no doubt is to be found in the sense of making a time-travel as well.

How would it be to be a housewife? Of course if you are one, you have servants, as people still do in the Third World. Still it would be hard work, getting up early to get food from the market, and the intermittent thing from the local store. Much of what we now take for granted food-wise, such as potatoes and pasta, were unknown at the time. Potatoes would not appear until the discovery of the New World, and pasta would be

¹ One is reminded of Shakespeare and the bed of his wife Ann Hathaway some three hundred years later.

brought by Marco Polo from China, and take some time before it diffused up north. In matters of diet people tend to be conservative, often for good reasons. However, there was a plentitude of herbs, often cultivated at home, and spices were common as luxuries, their provenance for most people held in total mystery. In a society not based on consumerism, much of the daily implements had to be manufactured at home. This made for busy lives, and some would say, rather satisfying ones. While women may have had limited political power in the big world outside, although there always were individual and spectacular exceptions, they tended to be masters of the house, where the men usually had to bow to their will. This is hardly remarkable. Power usually comes with familiarity, and those who are engaged in running a home, also tend to call the shots.

Now the worst part of being a woman, until fairly recently in history, was pregnancy and childbirth. Giving a child is a rather painful experience to human females compared to many other animals, and not only painful but in many cases dangerous. When things go well, there is no real problem, but whenever complications arise and some kind of intervention is called for, the lying-in woman is at the mercy of incompetence. Dying in childbirth or from the complications arising from it, was never unusual. On the other hand dying from disease was also not, so it might not have been seen as that remarkable.

Usually what prevents people from having a too romantic view of the past in general and the medieval age in particular is the poor medical service. Average life-expectancies were short and the prospects of living out your proper time in general bleak, just as they still are in the Third World today, although medical expertise does exist there if not always readily available. In medieval times there was nothing at all available. Medical men having nothing to offer but comfort and reassurance. This did not prevent them from enjoying a lot of prestige and self-satisfaction as to their expertise. Quacks, where frowned upon back then as well as now, although from an objective point of view there was little if anything that distinguished the medical establishment from the independent operator as far as actual expertise. But of course, then as now, the education of doctors were demanding and time-consuming, which provided part of the esteem they enjoyed. The trouble was that there was not much with which to fill those years of study, the art of healing probably having not progressed very much from Antiquity. In fact one can even argue, that the medieval doctor probably knew less than Galen and Hippocrates, their teaching having not yet travelled through the Arabian detour. With little to study in the allotted time, it may not be so surprising that irrelevancies such as astrology played a large part, along with mysterious concoctions inspired more by magic than reasoning. In short people always have a very pressing need for doctors and medical advice and intervention, so the institution of the medical service were in place hundreds of years before it could be filled with any content. And to an extent, maybe not so readily cherished, this is still true today. The best bet of living a long life is to stay healthy, which is a consequence of individual responsibility, strength of constitution and a considerable piece of luck. In fact what makes people in the West live so long today is mostly due to better sanitary conditions and a steady supply of food keeping the immune system on its toes. Most people do not require crucial medical attention until the end of their lives, and then it often turns out to be ineffective, as indicated by the timing. The human species has a genetic disposition to a certain age, and that disposition has not changed during its evolutionary history. It is not that people aged

earlier, or that they age prematurely in the Third World today, as many commentators unthinkingly assume. The low expectations is still mostly due to high infant mortality. Even in a medieval city in the 13th century you could in principle get to be a centenarian, although it was not that common. On the other hand looking at the people you encounter in history a fair amount lived into their eighties and nineties. There are indications that people way before the agrarian revolution, lived longer and healthier, no doubt because living in accordance with the way they had evolved. Congestion of people led to sanitary implosions and exploding contagious diseases. Thus many people who today die from heart attacks in their forties and fifties, may possibly have lived longer, if not necessarily happier, in medieval Troyes. So in short keep your fingers crossed, and if you get sick, call for the priest not the doctor. The rich suffered more from medical incompetence than the poor, for the obvious reasons that they could afford to seek it. Having disposed of this black chapter, we can turn to other, jollier parts.

A large part of the skilled artisans were organized in guilds. This was done away with in the 19th century, and seen as obsolete and an impediment to competition and the ever vigilant strivings for efficiency. Of course it had its advantages. The guild provided social and economic security to its members. It also fostered a tradition of pride and standards. It has survived into the modern age in academia, and maybe there is time to reintroduce it. Of course its abolishment has led to more efficient ways of production, but also shoddier products, made not out of love but for greed. A similar tendency is also nowadays at large in the academic world.

Small business being one thing, big business is something quite other. The modern spirit found its vanguard among the early capitalists of the medieval era. The abstraction of exchange, not only involving money, but also letters of credit and other kinds of promises. The actual goods which are exchanged become more or less irrelevant to the process as money itself becomes a commodity. Jews, being barred from many other professions and political participation, came to play a large role in money transfers, including lending and borrowing, with its concomitant need of usury. To some extent it has of course contributed to the negative view of the Jew as well as making him more and more indispensable. Otherwise, even if Jews were marked out as alien religionists, in a society so monolithically Christian in a common Catholic faith, they normally seemed not only to have been tolerated but appreciated and accepted. The exceptions, are of course far more dramatic and worthy of notice, and indeed one exception may render a life of normality moot. Anyway, the major force in the commercialization of Western Europe seems to have originated in the banking communities of northern Italy, maybe because of their vicinity to the Orient, many of the fruitful ideas from the alternate Muslim world, being first encountered by the Italians and later diffused. The authors argue that the very success of the fair at Troyes, actually led to their growing obsolete, as we have already remarked, abstract finance make actual movement of goods superfluous.

A very important part of life in a medieval city centered around the church, and for good reasons, what other entertainments were really available? There was of course he service, much of it conducted in Latin incomprehensible to the lay congregation, on the other hand sermons were delivered in the vernacular. But the church was often the only big public building, and for that reason also used for purely secular purposes. The service

at the more important occasions were not seldom enhanced by pageants, which developed into regular dramatic plays, an old Greek tradition which seems to have been broken and independently developed in the medieval age. This secularization of the pageant meant that it moved out of the church, first out on its steps, and then into fairs.

The church stood for education, in fact classically the only means of a life of study and reflection was through a monastery. The clergy needed to replenish itself, and especially since priests were expected to be celibate, talent had to be sought elsewhere and could not be handed down from father to son. This provided for church schools, the more ambitious attached to a cathedral. In fact the church has provided much of the basic instruction until modern times. Now at the time of action of this book, universities started to establish themselves around Europe, in Oxbridge and Paris as well as in Bologna. Students started to appear, like the journeymen before them, on the move, communicating in the lingua franca of Latin. Some pursued theological studies, others medical (whatever that meant) and the rest went for the law. This being the avenues of financial opportunity open to the non-gentry. Often a rowdy crowd they made up, probably in general less interested in the art of study than in professional advancement. When it came to real knowledge, be it of nature and its laws, one better look outside the university, because of its arcane erudition. A tendency that is once again noticeable. How much of university education is not now devoted to verbal histrionics, with disciplines such as gender studies assuming legitimacy.

The most intriguing chapter is on the building of cathedrals. Here real enterprise and ingenuity came to the fore. The subject is rich enough to merit a book by its own, and unfortunately beyond giving some tantalizing glimpses, the authors do not seem to be competent enough to follow up on them and provide more. The building of a cathedral called for mastering real problems of architecture and construction. Who were able to meet those challenges? Probably not people who had spent their time in academic disputations and scholastic speculation. Most likely from the class of artisans. But the problems were not exclusively practical, but also theoretical, not only a question of trial and error but design. The medieval builders and architects improved upon their Roman predecessors. They managed to design more efficient vaults that allowed taller buildings to be fashioned, and there was a race, the one cathedral towering higher than the previous. The style is of course known as the gothic. It used less material to build higher strength, and as a side-effects were supporting structures that invited their own artistic developments. One consequence of the improvement in design was the possibility for more window space. The stained glass window came into its own. Glass had been manufactured since antiquity fashioned out of ash and sand, but the quality was often poor, with lots of bubbles and impurities and a green moldy hue. Staining the glass made the latter irrelevant, and the master window builder emerged. The artist who designed windows made out of smaller stained parts, carefully encased in lead trimmings and artfully put together. When kings build roads, work is laid out for the artisans, and indeed those cathedral projects did involve a lot of people, from the stone cutters, to the sculptors and painters. More than anything else the cathedral is the symbol of the middle ages, their spiritual quest made flesh, and still conscientiously preserved throughout Europe, not as debris but as monuments.

We have talked about the church, about education and universities, but what about intellectual life? Books were produced even before Gutenberg, but in small runs, each

painfully reproduced by copying, thus due to idiosyncratic mistakes each a precious individual. Hence, they were rarities, treasured and carefully kept. Literacy was rare, who would ever have the occasion for serious reading? But still the need to express yourself and have your thoughts disseminated was as great then as now, if harder to realize.

Finally as to civic life and town councils. Medieval society was hierarchal and feudal, and thus in many ways far from our present ideals of democracy. Cities were issued charters by the feudal overlords, and Troyes was no exception. Still when it came to internal affairs the towns run themselves in manners, I would suspect, as representative and democratic as of today. The dangers a town had to face, was of course bad harvests and starvation, pestilence, fire, the wooden houses, clinging to each other being prime combustible material, as the allied realized during the second world war. Then there was war, but a well-fortified town such as Troyes could feel rather safe from being stormed, its large population providing continual vigilance on the ramparts preventing any kind of surprise attack. In fact, during the middle ages, the attackers were at a disadvantage, even if the inevitable arms race produced many an invention. A final calamity at the time was the heavy taxes imposed by sovereigns to finance crusading adventures, but by the 13th century people had started to tire of such exotic expeditions.

As initially claimed, Troy after an illustrious career as a main fair and commercial center began to decline into obscurity. Nowadays not too many know of it, and its name only survives in the denomination of troy ounce in connection with gold.

An appendix is attached to bring the story to the present age. Now Troyes is mostly interesting as a picturesque tourist spot, still maintaining some medieval character.

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