

Peasant communities

Order and disorder in peasant communities c. 1290 to 1500

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This project explores how peasant communities governed their own affairs, what areas of conflict and disagreement existed in these communities, and how peasants resolved their disputes.

The main sources for my study are manorial court rolls of a selected group of manors, and as these sources were created principally for the benefit of local lords, the nature of the sources themselves are quite an interesting object of study. - what do and what do they not tell us about? Can we still detect the peasant 'voice' as it were in these rather hostile sources? To what extent is the manor as a seigniorial institution an artificial imposition upon the communal village structures for the enforcement of order?

Of particular interest to me is the impact of the various social and demographic changes peasant communities underwent across this period. So how did the arrival of the Black Death affect peasant communities, how did social dynamics change as a consequence to the plague and did the nature of disputes and disagreements change as a consequence. For example, as the Black Death caused great upheaval in peasant landholding and tenure, at least initially, did this mean that peasants were more likely to argue about inheritance after 1349, or was the reverse the case, as more land was available, did disputes over land become rarer?

The main part of my research focuses on questions concerning the nature of disputes between peasants and how conflict was resolved. How and when violence was used and under which circumstances, and what type of violence it was. We can find all sorts of confrontations in manor court rolls, from simple litigation, to cases of individuals hiring others to beat up a third party. Between these two we can find cases of theft, defamation breaking of boundaries and drunken brawls, what interests me is the social context of these cases as well as their gender context. So how many women brought cases into the court? How many women were victims of assaults, and how many were perpetrators of petty violence? How was order enforced in village communities, and above all, whose order was it, in other words, did standards and expectations of order differ and clash between lords and peasants?