

Back to School, Medieval Peasant Style

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Have you ever wondered how peasant children were educated in the Middle Ages? And if they even went to school? The short answer: most did not, though they still received a training of sorts.

There are many reasons why few children from medieval peasant families attended school. The most obvious is that literacy, especially in Latin, was quite unnecessary for tilling the soil, harvesting vegetables and raising cattle. School attendance might mean that parents had higher aspirations than peasantry for their children, such as a future career in the church or in running a manor. Another reason is that schools were a scarce resource in rural settings compared to urban areas.

Indeed, most schools were located in towns, attached to the seat of the church, or the “grammar schools” that grew in the later Middle Ages. But sending one’s children to a town-based institution implied either a long commute or finding board and lodging in town. These options came at a financial cost that not all peasant families could or wanted to afford.

Formal schooling

One source of education accessible to the least fortunate came from the monasteries. These religious institutions, in the countryside, had a school. While they were first reserved to the young men aspiring to become monks—seats were also available for children from the surrounding areas. But sending a child to school came at a high cost for the peasant families of the countryside.

To remedy the situation, some English monastic schools may have adopted a more open policy for teaching poor peasant children. From the fourteenth century onwards, the school was given money by wealthy individuals to offer financial support for the education of the poor.

Though scant, there is evidence of peasant children being enrolled in local schools. They usually started between the ages of 6 and 8. In England, the evidence comes from the licenses that peasants had to obtain from their lord to be allowed to send their children to school. A lord is the man who owned the manor- an area of land like a small village. In one manor, 17 licenses were granted between 1300 and 1348, roughly one every other year. In another manor, 15 licenses were issued between 1327 and 1348, nearly one per year. After the plague, numbers dropped to one every third year.

When questions arose that a peasant had not secured the lord’s license, the court launched an inquiry. Peter Tyrsi, from the Manor of Wakefield, was investigated in 1286. The manor’s jury wanted to establish if he had or not received permission to “put his sons to book-learning.” Those who failed to request permission were fined. In 1339 for instance, one man was charged 3 denarii (Roman silver coins) for sending his son Geoffrey to school without the lord’s license.

While religious schools provided opportunities for a few, most peasant children received no formal education there. Those who stayed at their parents’ home were expected to work on the farm, learning the skills they would need as adults in just such a setting. Children fed the chickens, harvested vegetables, sowed, fetched firewood and watched their younger siblings.

Children followed their parents around in the manor, learning through observation and experience. A number of rural children also worked alongside their parents in workshops. Children were active members of the English pottery industry. They fetched, carried and trampled clay. They prepared clay balls and made sections of the pots, gradually gaining skills in the craft.

By contributing to the household income children gained valuable knowledge and practice. Improving the skills of farming, crafts or household management mainly took place during one’s teens, when one received greater responsibilities.

Service and Apprenticeship

At around age 12, a number of teenagers were sent away from home to work as servants or apprentices. According to estimates, one in 10 English rural dwellers aged 14 and older worked as a servant. While some rural teenagers remained close to their community to work, many moved to a nearby town or city, where employment in crafts and wealthy households was more common.

Some of these teenage servants were hired to perform household tasks like watching younger children. In the case of agricultural or farming service, male teenagers were expected to plough and female teenagers to milk cows; all should sow, till and harvest, fetch wood and water, and so forth — anything their employer demanded.

Few adolescent servants and apprentices received a salary for their work, but they were lodged, fed and dressed. Service was seen as a form of training, especially in the case of apprentices. Service was a point of entry into future paid work and an early step to marriage, especially for girls whose master was often involved in their endowment.

