

LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL CITY
(FRANCES GIES AND JOSEPH GIES)

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The modern mind is very susceptible to viewing the past as wholly different, and worse, from the present. We have all absorbed narratives of supposed progress that rely on painting the past in the grimmest light possible. But the daily lives of most people were not that different, and not less happy, at any given point in the human past, than they are now. Every person in every age faces challenges and burdens; some change as the ages pass, but challenges and burdens remain. This is not to deny that the material world has, for many, improved greatly, but as is well known, happiness is only very tangentially related to material benefits, and medieval man was, most likely, usually more happy and content than modern man, bound as he was in a sacramental world of meaning.

Joseph and Frances Gies were husband-and-wife historians who together wrote several books describing the nuts and bolts of medieval life. These are of particular value because they were written before the political corruption of the humanities. Since no modern popular history can be trusted as to its accuracy, reading unbiased and unbigoted books such as *Life in a Medieval City* is a treat. The authors talk about the normal lives of normal people, from various walks of life. They do not talk at all about the supposed oppression of LGBTIQCAPGNFNBA people, or, for the old-fashioned, the supposed proto-Marxism of the peasantry. No, we get what average people did in their average lives, which is much more interesting.

I suspect that medieval people, even the uneducated, would not be as terrified or awed by the modern world, or by modern technology, as we like to think. It's important to remember that people in earlier times were just as smart as us—and more clever, because the wrong move was more likely to end in you dying when everyone lived closer to the bone. If you showed a medieval peasant an F-16 screaming through the sky, he might think at first it was a dragon, but my guess is that he wouldn't be nearly as terrified as we think, would be a lot more curious than we think, and if we explained what it was, would grasp the essentials very quickly and sensibly. Far too often I hear repeated the trite Arthur C. Clarke aphorism that any sufficiently advanced technology

is indistinguishable from magic. That's simply not true. I think that any person, from any era, grasps that magic is different from the actions of men. Grasping that is an essential part of a hold on reality, and just because in some times and cultures the boundary was thought porous does not destroy the essential distinction. If aliens showed up with some incredible technology, we would not consider it magic, no matter how advanced. In the same way, if we showed a medieval peasant an iPad and explained it was not magic, but writing with light, he would simply consider it another example of the type of tool used by monks. And if you showed him moving pictures on the same device, my bet is that he would be quite impressed, and might at first consider it magic, but when told the truth, would accept that readily, understanding it as a type of painting. He would not be confused or afraid. Being impressed by new technology is completely distinct from considering it magic. But it suits the modern Enlightenment-addled mind, with a belief in inevitable supposed progress, to think of the past as ignorant and fearful, and so we are subjected to these false stereotypes.

Life in a Medieval City focuses on the French town of Troyes around the year 1250. Its descriptions are drawn from primary sources, either about Troyes itself, or about surrounding towns with similar characteristics. Troyes was one of the famous Champagne market towns, and 1250 was the height of its power and fame, before the Black Death and before the centralization of political control stripped the French medieval towns of much of their autonomy. It was the time of Saint Louis IX, high medieval king (and the subject of an interesting recent study, Andrew Willard Jones's *Before Church and State*). Troyes was rapidly growing, a walled town with about 10,000 people, at a time when Paris had 50,000 and Venice had 100,000 (and Baghdad was dropping from more than a million to close to zero, as the Mongols swept over the Abbasid caliphate, stopped only at Ain Jalut).

From the age of Charlemagne, Western Europe had gradually filled out with people and increased in industry. Towns followed the clearance of land with new technology, an endeavor led by monastic communities, with their corporate, long-range vision. Better agriculture, along with the revival of mining, created the financial wherewithal for a feudalistic society to flourish. The Counts of Champagne, beginning with the uncomplimentarily-named Thibaut the Trickster (d. 975), encouraged

the growth of Troyes as a market town, so that by the thirteenth century it held two fairs, in the summer and winter (the “hot” and “cold” fairs), the summer one of which was the largest of the six fairs of Champagne. Only in the early thirteenth century, though, did Troyes get its own charter, allowing the town specific privileges, which was somewhat late among French cities. As with all such medieval cities, the townsfolk were jealous of their prerogatives, which did not include self-governance, but did include a wide range of customary freedoms and immunities—as with all medieval law, custom was much more important than statute law. Since the merchant class, the burghers, were the lifeblood of the town’s economy, they were keen to avoid war and other disruptions. So was the Count, who relied on the fairs to fund him. Thus, cooperation between the feudal lord and the town was generally close and efficient.

Most of the book is not about politics, though. It is about the daily life of the people. The authors describe a cross-section of society in successive chapters. They describe a burgher’s home, including furniture, table settings, and the like, noting that, again contrary to stereotype, table manners were very important. “Gentlefolk eat slowly, take small bites, do not talk while eating, do not drink with their mouths full.” They describe a housewife’s day; children and childbirth; weddings and funerals; small and big businesses; religion; the building of the cathedral; books; theater; and war and other disasters. Finally, they offer a lengthy description of the organization and running of the Hot Fair, the most important secular annual event in the town, and one tightly organized by the cooperation of Count and burghers, including extensive security protections, guarantees against theft for merchants travelling to the fair, and extensive regulatory controls to prevent cheating by sellers. It is all very interesting, and I did not know, either, that the name for “troy weight” measures, still used for precious metals, came from Troyes and its fair.

A few sections are of particular interest to me. The authors make clear that medieval women were not, contrary to the modern ideologically-driven myth, oppressed. “Women of all classes have rights in property by law and custom. Women can sue and be sued, make wills, make contracts, even plead their own cases in court. Women have been known to appear as their husbands’ attorneys. . . . Universities are closed to women, but they are equally closed to men except those who

are being trained for the clergy, law, or medicine. Among the landed gentry, women are better educated than men. . . . Women work outside the home at an astonishing variety of crafts and professions. . . . The lady of the manor takes charge of the estate while her husband is off to war, Crusade, or pilgrimage, and wives run businesses while their husbands are away." Women did not serve as mid-level officials, because they did not bear weapons, but they often played high political roles, and "occupied positions of power and influence in the Church." Certainly, men and women had broadly different roles, as is natural and dictated by biology (silly fantasies of Viking women warriors, the pushing of which is a big thing nowadays, not to the contrary). But the reality is that here, as always in the West, the relationship of men to women was one of mutual benefit and acknowledged give-and-take, not oppression (a point Jordan Peterson is fond of making, causing his enemies to wail and grind their teeth).

The Jews primarily lived in a ghetto, which was not an inferior accommodation, as we think of it now, but "a separate, privileged community, a foreign colony, not unlike the Christian merchants' colonies in the Levant, or the colonies of Italians and other nationalities in London." The Count's court had to hear civil cases between Jews and Christians, where justice was applied impartially, but the witness of one person of a particular religion had to be corroborated by one of his co-religionists. Attacks on Jews as Jews were rare; the prime threat the Jews faced was from the higher nobility, who extorted Jews when they needed money (a theme of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, which my mother read to me as a child). One form this took was expelling Jews, taking their property, and later letting them return, which had happened to the Jews of Troyes seventy years before, so certainly Jews faced threats not faced by Christians. But in general, relations between average Jews and Christians were amicable; the ideological Jew hatred of the twentieth (and to some extent, the nineteenth) century was far in the future.

Medicine was a rapidly developing science. Hospitals (contrary to the modern propaganda-driven myth, a Christian, not Muslim, invention, first organized for the general public by Saint Basil in the fourth century) were growing rapidly, and again contrary to myth, were focused on medicine, not just prayer. Parish churches treated others in need of care, including those with long-term disabilities, such as the blind

or crippled, as well as foundlings. This was a society that viewed its responsibilities to those less fortunate as the responsibilities of each and all, not as the responsibility of others, much less the government, and therefore a society much less atomized than ours today.

All in all, how was this life for the people in Troyes? They did not ask themselves that question, since navel gazing is a modern sport. They had an integral society, closely bound together, though with the same interpersonal conflicts of any society. They did not suffer the modern problems of alienation and isolation, the *Bowling Alone* problems that modern man faces. They lived under the rule of law, not under despotism or anarchy, as the medieval world is often portrayed in movies. There is a strain of thought, epitomized by James C. Scott (for example, in his recent *Against the Grain*), which holds that very primitive man, hunter-gatherers, were the happiest. Maybe they were, though they accomplished nothing, and I'd take the High Middle Ages over clam-diggers any day. But for an example closer to home, the life of a peasant of Troyes in 1250 wasn't all that different from the life of the Ingalls family in *Little House on the Prairie*. Both worked the land and relied largely on themselves, their family, and their local community. Their life expectancy, their entertainments, and the strength and meaning they derived from their religious belief, were all basically the same. And most of us, reading about the Ingalls family, find their lives appealing, not terrifying. If we were dropped into thirteenth-century Troyes, it might be a culture shock, but I think most of us would soon find our footing and be quite happy.