7.12: Daily Life in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empires

In both Western Europe and Byzantium, the vast majority of the population was made up of farmers. In Western Europe, some of these were what we call dependent farmers, living on the lands of aristocrats and giving over much of their surplus to their landlords. But in many villages, the majority of farmers might live on their own land and even enjoy a form of self-government. Although some slavery existed—especially in zones of conflict like the Mediterranean—compared to the days when vast estates had been worked by unfree labor (see Chapter Six), the workers on the estates of the Frankish aristocracy or those free and independent farmers enjoyed greater freedom than had their Roman counterparts. But their life was precarious. Crop yields were low, at ratios of around 3:1—meaning only giving back about three times as much as was planted—and the average Carolingian farmer frequently did not get adequate calories.

So too did most of the population of the Byzantine Empire live in small villages, living at a subsistence level, and selling what rare surplus they had. Byzantium, like its Western European counterpart, was fundamentally rural.

The nobles of Western Europe were generally part of a warrior aristocracy. These aristocrats often outfitted and equipped themselves based on the wealth of their lands. Their values were those of service to their king and loyalty and bravery in battle. Nobles would often not live on their lands but follow the royal court, which would itself travel from place to place rather than having a fixed location. Battle may have been frequent, but until Charlemagne, the scale of battle was often small, with armies numbering a few hundred at most.

Along with its warrior aristocracy, gender roles in the Frankish kingdom—like those of the Roman Empire that came before it—reflected a patriarchal society. The Christian religion generally taught that wives were to submit to their husbands, and the men who wrote much of the religious texts often thought of women in terms of weakness and temptations to sexual sin. “You,” an early Christian writer had exclaimed of women, “are the devil’s gateway…you are the first deserter of the divine law…you destroyed so easily God’s image, man…”⁴ The warlike values of the aristocracy
meant that aristocratic women were relegated to a supporting role, to the management of the household. Both Roman
and Germanic law placed women in subordination to their fathers and then, when married, to their husbands.

That said, women did enjoy certain rights. Although legally inferior to men in Roman Law (practiced in the Byzantine
Empire and often among those peoples who were subjects of the Germanic aristocracies), a wife maintained the right to
any property she brought into a marriage. Women often played a strong economic role in peasant life, and, as with their
aristocratic counterparts, peasant women often managed the household even if men performed tasks such as plowing
and the like. And the Church gave women a fair degree of autonomy in certain circumstances. We often read of women
choosing to become nuns, to take vows of celibacy, against the desires of their families for them to marry. These
women, if they framed their choices in terms of Christian devotion, could often count on institutional support in their life
choices. Although monasticism was usually limited to noblewomen, women who became nuns often had access to an
education. Certain noblewomen who became abbesses could even become powerful political actors in their own right,
as did Gertrude of Nivelles (c. 621 – 659), abbess of the monastery of Nivelles in what is today Belgium.

4 Tertullian, On the Apparel of Women, 1:1