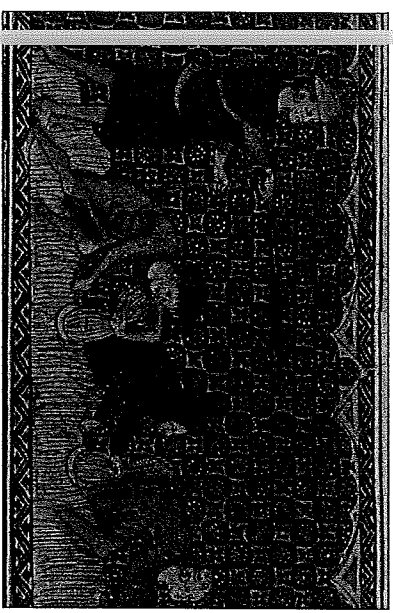


raised. Whenever peasants rose in revolt, they sought these documents—sometimes to burn them and sometimes in the hope that they guaranteed privileges unjustly denied. Cecilia and her neighbors were somewhat insulated from the signorial power of parchment and ink. More often than not, supervision and recording in Brigstock was of the tenants' own making. Since they were usually able to lease Brigstock manor themselves, they selected, directed, and paid the clerks who recorded the business of court meetings and the accounts.

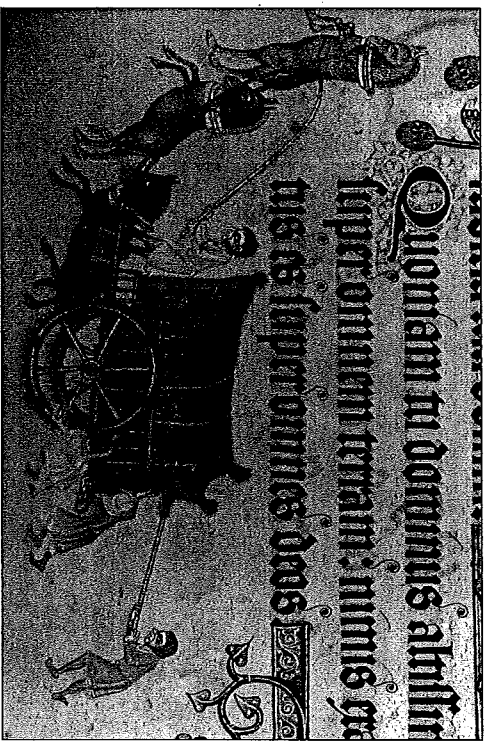
Perhaps the most important, many medieval peasants were personally unfree in ways that the Penitaders and other tenants of Brigstock were not. A free peasant was able to emigrate, work, marry, and take grievances to the king's court; a serf was restricted in all these respects. There were many intermediate categories between freedom and serfdom, and to complicate matters even more, the distinctions were applied to land as well as people (so that a free woman might hold land for which the labor services of serfdom were due). By Cecilia's time, serfdom meant less than it once had, but it was still onerous enough that peasants sought to evade or escape it whenever possible.

Serfs differed from free peasants in three important ways. First, serfs were "tied to the land," and if they wished to marry someone on another manor or move elsewhere, they had to get permission to do so. Many serfs never moved away from the manors of their birth. Of those who did, some left surreptitiously, but most paid a small annual fee (called *chevage*) to live legally off the manor. They paid the fee, doubtless grudgingly, because it thereby assured not only that they could return for visits but also that no one else, especially their parents, would suffer for their unauthorized absence. This was a heavy burden, but the second burden was worse: serfs had to pay some of the

boon-work during harvest. As a reeve directs, men reap the demesne. Peasants deeply resented boon-work, because it took them away from their own fields at a particularly critical time of the year.



Boonwork, i.e. A medieval life, 15th c., Chapter 3 Lords, Ladies, and Peasants 33



Carting. Three men push a cart while the driver urges on the horses. Carting was part of the manorial labor required from serfs, and it was dangerous work. Men often died under the wheels of carts or the hooves of horses.

their rent in labor. Many had to do week-work on demesne lands, usually a day or two each week spent plowing, sowing, weeding, or doing whatever the reeve said needed to be done; almost all had to do boon-works during harvest, that is, they had to undertake special work harvesting crops on the demesne (in compensation for their extra work during harvest, serfs often got food and ale); and some others were also obliged to perform other petty services, such as carting or carrying goods at certain times to certain places.

Third, serfs often had to pay a variety of small fines and fees, which were expensive, irritating, and, in some cases, humiliating. Many manors required serfs to use manorial services—mills, winepresses, ovens—whose profits went, of course, into the hands of the lord or lady. Often peasants tried to avoid these expenses (for example, by using handmills to grind their own grain or seeking out millers who charged cheap prices), but many lords and ladies obstructed these money-saving strategies by insisting that their serfs had to patronize their mills, winepresses, and ovens. Another small fee was the *leywrite*, due from any young women, and sometimes young men, who were sexually active before marriage. Marriage itself could be costly; unfree women often had to pay *merchet*, due for permission to marry. Most manors also required that a *heriot* be paid whenever a tenant died. Traditionally, the heriot was the most valuable animal of the dead tenant, but this was often converted to a cash amount. Finally, on many manors, lords and ladies enjoyed the right of *tallage*, the right to levy an arbitrary tax on serfs. Heriot and

tallag sprang from the same fundamental principle: the notion that all of a serf's property, movable goods as well as tenancies, ultimately belonged to the lord. Everything a serf possessed—cash, furniture, clothing, pots, bedding, sheep, pigs, goats, and land—was held "at the will of" the manorial lord or lady.

These obligations of serfdom were costly and demeaning. Of them all, serfs especially resented obligatory work, for days spent laboring on the demesne were days lost from work on their own tenancies. They also strongly resented the uncertainty of their obligations. A lord or lady might levy tallage in one year and not the next, or might convert labor services into cash payments in one year and insist on their performance in the next; these legitimate but arbitrary actions introduced a maddening instability into peasant budgets. Whatever they could, serfs aggressively and persistently sought freedom. They tried to avoid paying servile fees such as merchet or tallage; they pursued their freedom; they went to court to claim free descent and especially in the decades that followed the Black Death of 1347-9, they rebelled against the manorial regime.

Distinctions between free and unfree readily captured modern imaginations, and it would certainly be a mistake to underestimate serfdom. But it would also be a mistake to make too much of distinctions between free peasants and serfs. After all, free peasants had obligations too. They had to pay their rents, render deference to their "social betters," answer charges in manorial courts, and sometimes even take by business to manorial mills or other facilities. Moreover, although distinctions between free and unfree were important, they did not mean as much by 1300 as they had in the past. It helped a bit that some obligations of serfs were set by custom and could not be changed for the worse. Whatever a serf's parents had done, he or she also had to do—but no more. In fact, custom sometimes protected serfs from market forces. In the late thirteenth century, as population pressure made land scarce and more valuable, rents on free lands were readily raised to new highs, but in serf lands stayed at their old, customary levels. Serfs were similarly protected by rules found on many manors, against the subdivision of unfree tenements. Free tenants so often divided their lands between sons that after a few generations, many free tenants held small, even tiny, properties. Serfs, sometimes required to keep tenancies intact by lords or ladies who wanted easy-collect rents, had to provide for noninheriting children in other ways. As a result, some serfs numbered among the prosperous few who held thirty or more acres, while many free tenants possessed holdings that were too small to support their households. In other words, serfdom was an undesirable state, but it would be wrong to equate serfdom with poverty and degradation. By Cecilia's time, free and unfree peasants regularly intermarried, held each other's lands, and otherwise intermingled. Although freedom and serfdom still determined various rents and obligations, the lines were so blurred and confused that they had fairly weak social meaning. In most villages by 1300, it mattered more whether you held thirty acres or five acres than whether you were free or unfree.

In any case, distinctions of free and unfree were even less relevant to the people of Brigstock. Like many other manors in royal forests, Brigstock was part of the ancient demesne, defined as the manors held directly by William the Conqueror at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086. Long before Cecilia's birth, tenants of the ancient demesne had come to enjoy a special legal status, different from either free peasants or serfs: lawyers called them "privileged remnants of the ancient demesne." Cecilia and her fellow tenants had to tolerate a few vestigial remnants of serfdom: they had to pay various small annual fees; they had to provide minimal labor services (especially boon-works at harvest); their tenancies had to pass through the bailiff's hands whenever sold, transferred, or inherited; and they had, in a few restricted instances, to pay merchet and heriot. But the tenants of Brigstock and other ancient demesne manors had privileges unknown to other peasants, either free or serf: they did not have to pay tolls or customs anywhere in England; they could not be obliged to attend county courts; and they were able to use royal writs to bring their cases to court (this meant that they could use the power of the king to resolve disputes, especially property disputes, in their favor). Cecilia's status, then, exemplifies the blurring between free and unfree that was so common by her time. Neither a freewoman nor a serf, she tolerated a few servile obligations but also enjoyed other exceptional privileges.

The most startling manifestation of Brigstock's unusual manorial status was the leasing of the manor by its tenants. Under this arrangement, the people of Brigstock managed their own manor. They took profits off the demesne by cultivating it or renting it out; they convened the court and made sure that its fines were paid; they collected all rents and fees. From these profits, they paid the lease of the manor, and as long as they paid the lease on time, they were left alone until the lease expired. The privilege of leasing their manor was dearly bought by the tenants of Brigstock. In 1270, they purchased a ten-year lease at a one-time cost of more than £13, promising further that they would pay an extra 30 shillings per year beyond the manor's set value. In 1318, the tenants offered the king £50 each year to lease directly from him, but he refused and instead, probably as a favor, offered the lease to Margery de Farendraught for about £13 a year. The tenants then promised to pay £46 annually to sublease the manor from her. Dearly bought, the privilege of managing their own manorial regime must have been much valued by the people of Brigstock.

Why was this privilege so highly valued? After all, when the tenants held the lease or sublease of Brigstock manor, they were not free of the rents, fines, fees, and services they had owed to Eleanor of Provence when her officers administered the manor directly. These obligations were as necessary as ever, for they generated the income needed to pay the lease. Yet, as the tenants of Brigstock charged themselves to raise the money for their lease, they gained two tangible benefits. First, they gained some dignity. Like townspeople who were often fiercely proud of the charters whereby they acquired some rights of self-government, the people of Brigstock rightly valued the privilege of managing