

by an extended kinship network scattered through many houses in Brigstock, Stanton, and beyond. For Cecilia, kinship was always important, but its meaning in her life was constantly changing.

Moreover, while kin were important to Cecilia, so too were the people with whom she lived, whether they were kin or not. Indeed, in Cecilia's time, the Latin word *familia* and the Middle English word *famille* meant a household, not a group of related people. Three things made the household—a group of people who lived together, worked together, and ate together—a central part of peasant life in the Middle Ages. First, households were a basic unit of social organization. When the king's officers arrived in Brigstock to collect food for the army or to levy taxes, they took food and taxes from households; when the vicar collected tithes, he proceeded household by household through the parish; when tenants had to agree on when and what to plant in each of the common fields, they met together as heads of households. Second, households were hierarchical places. Every household had a head (most often, a father and husband) who exercised clear authority over everyone. This authority was recognized from without as well as within, for heads of households were often brought to public account for the actions of the dependents. Richard Everard understood this when he complained in 131 about Robert Penifader and Cecilia taking hay from his fields; he addressed his legal complaint to Robert because Cecilia, who was then a dependent in her father's household, was Robert's responsibility. Third, households were intimate places. People who lived in the same household shared many fundamental things, whether they were kin or not: they used the same bedchamber and ate the same food; they sweated in the same fields and worked over the same sickly lambs; they hungered together in bad times and feasted together in good; and by the time Cecilia was grown up, they also locked the door of their house against intruders. When Cecilia shared a household with someone, she shared the intimacy of day-to-day life and, at least in the short term, a common fate. Households, which often included non-kin and almost invariably excluded some kin, were probably as important as kinship in the daily life of the people of Brigstock.

KIN AND HOUSEHOLD IN CHILDHOOD

The household of Cecilia's childhood was about twice the usual size. Her mother Alice gave birth to at least eight children and raised six to full adulthood. Most mothers had fewer children, buried more of them in early graves, and saw only three reach maturity. In another respect, however, Cecilia's household was likely to have been typical. Like many other households in Brigstock, it was a *nuclear family household*, consisting primarily of parents and their children. Peasants elsewhere lived in different sorts of households: *Stem families*, households that contained three generations (grandparents, parents, and children), were also common among the peasants of medieval Europe. In some places, especially southern France and Italy, other peasants

Penifader, 5, A medieval life 1999.



A family scene, around the hearth. The mother on the left juggles a toddler while she also stirs the pot. The child on the right uses a bellows to heat up the fire.

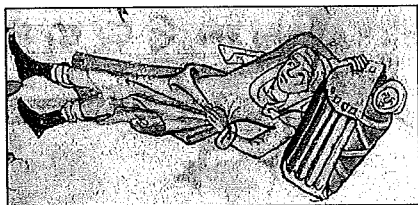
lived in *frères* households containing two or more married brothers with their wives and children. In most English villages, however, smaller households were the norm, and most were formed around a nuclear core of husband, wife, and children. Low life-expectancies partly accounted for the nuclear structure of households; since most people died in their 40s, few lived long as grandparents.¹ Housing and settlement patterns also contributed; houses could be built relatively quickly and cheaply, so it was easy to accommodate any grandparent who lived to a great age in a separate house elsewhere in the farmyard or village.

We do not know whether the Penifaders brought servants into their household, but it would not have been unusual if they had. (Servants, like underage children, were rarely mentioned in the Brigstock court. For this reason, we cannot be certain about the presence of servants in the Penifader household, nor can we know whether Cecilia ever worked as a servant.) Whenever the Penifaders needed an extra pair of hands, they had two options: they could hire a laborer to work by the day or task, or they could employ a servant for a year, offering room and board as well as some further reward (in cash or clothing) at the year's end. Laborers were often hired to help at harvest or other especially busy times of year; servants were hired, usually beginning in the late autumn, whenever a household needed help on a long-term basis. Servants were common in Brigstock and elsewhere; in one well-documented village not far from Brigstock, more than a third of households contained a servant.

Most servants were adolescents, learning new skills and earning a bit of money with the hope of someday holding land of their own and perhaps marrying. Associated with youthfulness rather than poverty, service was not demeaning. Poorer households tended to send more children into service, but most servants found that their employers were not much better off than their families.

¹Although most people died in their 40s, Brigstock and Stanton were not entirely bereft of older people. About 1 of every 10 adults lived beyond the age of 50, and some of these lived into their 70s.

A woman carrying a swaddled child in a cradle. Swaddling kept infants warm and out of harm's way.



parents.² Both young men and young women worked as servants, and they worked like everyone else in the household, doing whatever needed to be done. Servants in the Penfader household would have shared its general life, sleeping and eating alongside Cecilia and her siblings, and accepting, like all the Penfader children, the authority of Robert and Alice Penfader. While living in the Penfader household, a servant had a stake in its success; a bad harvest or poor lambing meant a troubled household in which to finish the service contract. The main distinction, therefore, between servants and children came from the link between kinship and inheritance; unlike Cecilia, a servant of the Penfaders could not expect to inherit land or goods from the household. Yet, because inheritance customs favored some children over others, Cecilia could not be confident of inheritance either, and some servants did obtain bequests from their employers. In 1339, for example, Hugh and Emma Talbot of Brigstock arranged for their servant Agnes Waleys to inherit their house and farmyard. Agnes was not related to the Talbots by either blood or marriage, but she had lived with them for at least five years as a valued member of their household. Even in inheritance, then, the gap between children and servants could be a small one.

The practice of sending adolescents to live and work in the households of others was spread through all social levels of medieval society. Among the landowning elite, children were also sent away when they reached their teenage years. Some went to monasteries to begin their training as monks or nuns; some were married young and sent to the households of their new spouses. Parents and many others went to the households, castles, and palaces of family friends where they learned important skills and established social contacts. Some historians have argued that these practices suggest a lack of parental love, but it is just as likely that parental love prompted the practice. By sending adolescents away and encouraging their early independence, medieval parents accomplished two things: they helped their children get a good start in life, and they also somewhat lessened the likelihood of conflict with their adolescent children.

In short, the cramped and smoky house of Cecilia's childhood contained her father (the head of household), her mother, her siblings, and perhaps a servant or two. More than likely, she had other kin nearby (perhaps a grandparent or some uncles, aunts, or cousins), but if so, they lived elsewhere in Brigstock. Cecilia also saw her household expand in some times and shrink in others. Sometimes her parents might have earned extra cash by taking in a lodger or might have provided housing for laborers at the harvest. At other times, her siblings left home either to seek their fortunes elsewhere (as William did in 1308) or to settle in separate houses (as Christina did after she married in 1317). The size and shape of Cecilia's household varied with time, but like most households in Brigstock, it looks surprisingly familiar, with its nuclear core of parents and children, to modern eyes.

Today, it is possible to touch medieval timbers blackened by the smoky houses of peasants like the Penfaders. But there are no archaeological remains, and precious few remains of any other sort, that can reveal whether these houses were filled with love and affection as well as smoke. It is tempting to dismiss medieval parents as unloving and cruel. For example, medieval parents readily beat their children with sticks and boxed their ears. Robert and Alice Penfader would have thought themselves negligent if they had not so chastised Cecilia when she misbehaved, and, indeed, all adults were ready to beat any bad child. For another example, medieval parents put their children to work at young ages. By the age of four, Cecilia would have begun to mangle work with play by watching animals, supervising younger children, and taking on small domestic chores. By the age of eight, when she was old enough to work without supervision, she probably took on a wide variety of simple tasks. In the house and farmyard, she might have helped with cooking, gardening, cheese making, or brewing. In the fields, she weeded, goaded plow-teams, and waved hungry birds away from ripening grain. In the pastures, she guarded sheep against predators, herded them home, and made sure they did not feast in a neighbor's garden. In the woods, she picked nuts and berries, searched out herbs, and collected fallen wood. When we think of a small Cecilia, beaten by her parents and busied by work at so young an age, it is hard to imagine that there could have been much love in the Penfader household.

But the evidence suggests otherwise. To begin with, Cecilia must have been carefully tended as an infant. If her parents had neglected her, she would surely have numbered among the 20 percent of infants who never reached their first birthdays. Most of these children died from diseases that no parent's love could cure, but neglect could quickly hasten healthy infants into their graves. As a toddler, she was also closely watched, probably by her mother or older siblings. Unwatched children tended to knock over pots of boiling water, fall into ditches, or tumble down wells—all deadly accidents that brought on caretakers the censure of neighbors and friends. Clearly, then, medieval parents had to attend closely to their children; if they failed to do so, death or injury was a likely result. By this measure, the Penfaders, with the excellent survival rate of their offspring, seem to have been loving parents.