



CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of Medieval Celebrations

There is no such thing as a “typical” medieval celebration. Celebrations and feasts during the Middle Ages were as different and varied as celebrations during any period of history, including our own. Then, as now, there were two basic types of festivities: public and private. Public festivities generally centered around the village church, both because many public holidays had a strong religious connotation and because the local priest or monks were willing to organize, and sometimes underwrite the cost of events for their parishioners. Private celebrations, with the exception of weddings, to which the entire village would invariably be invited, were normally limited to the households of the nobility and rich merchants. With the exception of the richest households no one had the time or money to waste on such frivolities.

Obviously the differences between celebrations among the village peasantry and those held by the high-and-mighty were significant. What might have seemed an immense and impressive celebration to village peasants would have been an appalling and miserable display to the eyes of the great nobility. Consequently, before

recreating a medieval feast, it’s a good idea to look at how these different levels of society celebrated.

The vast majority of the medieval population were peasants; certainly more than ninety percent of the population worked the land. While some of these peasants had incomes that were comfortable by the standards of the day, and others lived among the sophisticated denizens of cities and towns, peasant life was never grand nor sophisticated.

Most peasants lived in small villages which were owned by the local lord—a nobleman whom they may have never seen—or by a nearby monastic house. The peasants made their livings as sharecroppers, donating a portion of their labor and produce to the landowner to pay their rent and taxes. These villages were seldom more than a cluster of extended families held together by their social and economic isolation. With no means of transportation other than walking, it was a rare occasion when anyone left the village. Most people never traveled more than seven miles from the spot where they were born. Why seven miles? Because that is how far a person could travel on foot and safely return home by

nightfall. Most peasants knew amazingly little about the world beyond their village, except that it was a physically dangerous place to be after dark; there were certainly thieves and murderous brigands out there, and the possibility of demons and monsters lurking in the woods was believed to be very real. In this unimaginably provincial world, everyone in the village knew everyone else and their business. Consequently, when anyone in the village had a reason to celebrate, the entire village joined in.

The backbreaking demands of subsistence farming and the constraints of the feudal system meant that feasts were few and far between. When they did take place, they probably lasted only one day, usually a Sunday, when most work was suspended in observance of the Sabbath. The only way more than one day could be taken off work was if the lord decreed a public holiday, but such occasions were rare. When a feast was planned by and for the villagers, everyone pitched in to make certain the festivities came together and to help guarantee that the day would be as memorable as possible. In most villages, bread and ale were plentiful, as were fish,

chicken, small birds, cheese, stew made of whatever vegetables were locally available and in season, and maybe the occasional pig or sheep, if the occasion was important enough. A cow was too valuable to kill just for a party, and wild game, with the exception of rabbits, was the exclusive property of the nobility.

Other than a church or chapel, there were few, if any, public buildings in a medieval village. Consequently, feasts and celebrations were normally held in the summer so they could take place outdoors. If anyone in the village knew how to play an instrument, he or she might provide music, but this, too, was fairly rare. Communal singing, on the other hand, was common and everyone knew the words to all of the songs; a new song was a rare treat. Most of the songs were either religious in nature or appallingly bawdy. The event being celebrated—and how much ale had been consumed—dictated what sort of song would be sung at any particular point during the day. Once the ale was gone and everyone had sung his song, told his story, or danced his dance—which everyone in the village had probably seen and heard a dozen times before—they all went



A wedding with early-sixteenth-century German Landsknecht costumes illustrates the flamboyance of late medieval clothing.

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home. They had little choice; they had to be up at sunrise, ready to go to work.

At the opposite end of the social spectrum was the world of the royalty, great nobles, archbishops, and bishops. Only on the rarest of occasions did the upper class have to cut their celebrations short because they had to go to work in the morning. In this rarefied society, great feasts, grand celebrations, glorious tournaments, and the presentation of lavish gifts were not only commonplace, they were also an important part of keeping a firm grip on power.

In the medieval world, hard cash, even among the most powerful, was almost nonexistent. Edward the Confessor, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England, reputedly kept the entire royal treasury in a wooden chest under his bed. Society functioned largely on barter, loyalty, feudal duty, and fear of punishment from God or the Crown. The only effective way to display wealth and power was to put up a good front, and hosting great feasts and tournaments was an ideal way of showing off. By bringing together political allies, potential allies, and even the occasional enemy who might be swayed or at least impressed, the nobility could reinforce and display their social and political strength. The more impressive the display, the greater the appearance of power.

Because travel during the Middle Ages was difficult at best, it was a rare occasion when a large number of noblemen and ladies had the opportunity to get together to strike political deals and relax. A gathering of nobles, whether it was for military or purely social purposes, was an opportunity to celebrate and provided an ample excuse for staging grand hunts, colorful jousts, dancing, and lavish feasts.

The guests at noble banquets were seated strictly according to rank and power. The highest-ranking personages, including the host, hostess, the most powerful guests, and the highest-ranking clergy, were seated around a “high table” strategically placed at the front of the great hall where they could be viewed by the assembled company. Chairs were traditionally placed on only one side of the high table so the rest of the room had an unobstructed view of the great and powerful. Some high tables were even placed on a raised platform, or dais, to improve the view of those seated there and to guarantee that the audience could see them. If there were guests of greater rank than the hosts, they would be granted the honor of being seated at the center of the high table. The most honored among the company were provided with massive, high-backed armchairs. Those next in rank would have armchairs with lower

backs, and toward the end of high table were chairs with no arms.

Other tables in the hall were usually arranged in long rows at a ninety-degree angle to the high table, so guests could look down the length of their table toward the high table. Even at these lower tables, seating was all-important; the closer a person was to the high table, the greater his or her rank and status. Those nearest the high table often had small, armless chairs; farther along were individual stools; and finally, at the far end of the hall, were common benches known as bankettes (from which the modern term “banquet” is derived). Beyond the tables was floor seating for musicians, entertainers, tradesmen, personal servants, and a few peasants who might have been invited to the feast as an act of Christian charity.

The food was also distributed according to rank. The best dishes, the greatest number of dishes, and the finest wines went to the high table, which was always served before the rest of the company. This allowed the guests to “ooh” and “aah” at the grandeur enjoyed by those of great rank.

Food was always served in a number of courses, called removes or messes (a term still used in the military). There might be three, four, or even five removes, and each remove was a mini-banquet in itself. The food was grand, gloriously prepared and presented, and seemingly available in endless quantity. The larger the occasion and the more powerful the hosts, the more impressive the spread was likely to be. When England’s King Henry III threw a Christmas banquet in 1246, the shopping list included five thousand chickens, eleven hundred partridges, four hundred hares and rabbits, ten thousand eels, thirty-six swans, fifty-four peacocks, and ninety boars. All of this would have gone to the royal butchers and then to the kitchens, there to be transformed into hundreds of impressive dishes, and finally taken to the tables of the revelers in what was probably a series of at least four or five removes. Because no one could possibly eat the amount of food that flowed through the great hall, guests took small portions so as not to ruin their appetites for the removes yet to come.

Between removes there was entertainment, as well as toasts and speeches by those at the high table. Gifts were exchanged by the host and his most honored guests, and presentations were made to the nobility by those at the lower tables as a sign of gratitude for being invited to such a fine event. The presents were customarily held up for the entire audience to see, and murmurs of appreciation were an expected part of the display. At the end of the meal, there might be some form



The talents of a local recreationist group can add an exciting element of historical authenticity to your medieval event.

of theatrical performance, often of a religious or military nature, and finally, dancing to the accompaniment of court musicians. A lavish feast could go on for most of the day and well into the night. On important state occasions, such as a coronation, a royal marriage, or a visit from a foreign monarch or a cardinal sent as an emissary of the pope, rounds of feasting and reveling could stretch on for days or an entire week.

There were also instances when the nobility hosted feasts for the peasants and villagers who worked on their estates. Unless the lord was unusually generous, such largesse only took place when it was demanded by local custom or specifically decreed by king or church. The celebration of a successful harvest, the birth of a child into the noble household—usually a firstborn male—or the weddings of the lord’s children, particularly the eldest son, all demanded some form of public revelry. On such occasions, the festivities were usually held on the grounds of the lord’s estate, manor house, or castle. The amount of food provided to the populace depended entirely on the wealth and inclination of the lord. Ale and bread were basic requirements. These might be supplemented with cheese and meats, but on some oc-

casions, particularly if the lord was a cheapskate, the villagers were expected to supply themselves with anything beyond bread and ale.

Obviously, you will want to recreate something more impressive than a humble peasant feast, but it is unlikely that many of us can afford to put on a celebration as grand as those hosted by the medieval kings of England and Europe. For our recreated medieval celebrations we will follow in the footsteps of the third major social group in medieval society, the rich merchants and minor nobility, known at the time as “the middling sort.” Like many of us in the modern world, this budding middle class tried hard to emulate the diet, customs, and manners of their social superiors but were constrained by the limitations of their purses. Consequently, the middling sort feasted on elaborate versions of foods they already knew and liked; foods they could be assured their guests would also like. Extra preparation time, a few rare and expensive herbs and spices to punch up the taste, and an impressive presentation guaranteed a warm reception at the table without the risk of overspending or producing a dish so exotic that none of the guests would eat it.

Most of the people in this class had access to a space large enough to accommodate their guests. Wealthy merchants would have rented their local guild hall, and the manor house of the petit nobility would have had a large enough dining hall to accommodate a few dozen guests. Like us, they were more likely to invite friends and business acquaintances they already liked, or wanted to get to know better, than to call in the entire village or potential military allies and their sometimes endless entourage. The middle classes did, however, strive to emulate royalty in the order of seating and strict adherence to social protocol.

No matter what a person's level of society might have been, there were certain holidays that were universally celebrated to whatever extent the individual's finances allowed.

With the advent of spring came three important festivals: Easter, New Year's Day, and May Day. Although Easter was primarily marked by religious observances, and its predecessor, Lent, was a time of fasting and prayer, Easter Sunday was also a time of gift giving among family members and friends at all levels of society. During the Middle Ages the New Year began on March 25, and it not only marked the beginning of spring planting, but was generally accompanied by revelry and tomfoolery even more intense than modern day New Year's celebrations. May Day, and the onset of summer weather, heralded the first trade fairs of the year and officially began the courting season. While young men and women of the peasant classes gathered on village greens to pick through the baubles offered by traveling merchants, dance around the maypole, and



The pageantry of tournament provided thrilling entertainment for royalty and noblemen throughout the Middle Ages.

SCARBOROUGH RENAISSANCE FESTIVAL, WAXAHACHIE, TX

sneak private moments alone, noble households held the first tournaments of the year and connived to marry off their children to families even more powerful than their own.

At the tournaments, young knights and squires had a chance to show off their martial prowess to fair maidens who, in turn, held Courts of Love where they would demand that their potential suitors make appropriately chivalric displays of love and declare their honorable intentions. While young noblemen were busy showing off their skill at arms and professing their love, their fathers struck bargains for politically and financially advantageous marriages.

Following the autumn harvest, most communities held harvest festivals, but these celebrations were obviously restricted to farming villages. The only part played in them by the nobility was the occasional day free from work and the possible donation of a keg of ale or a pig or ox that would be roasted and distributed among lucky villagers.

Last and most important in the medieval calendar of celebrations was Christmas. Not only was the Christmas holiday a celebration of the birth of Jesus, but it took place at an opportune time; during the dead of winter there was very little outside work that could be done, with the exception of feeding whatever animals were being kept over the winter and milking the family cow or nanny goat. This fortuitous combination of circumstances made Christmas an ideal time to gather family and friends for the biggest celebration of the year. Party decorations, as we think of them, did not exist in the Middle Ages, but Christmas was marked by decorating

the great hall or village church with any available evergreen plant, primarily pine, holly, and ivy; otherwise, it was a simple matter of putting out the best of everything you had. When important company was coming, the hosts displayed all their best pewter, silver, and, if they were really rich, gold plate. Heraldic flags and banners were hung from rafters and beams, and among those who could afford them, tapestries were hung on the walls. The idea was not only to make the house look festive, but also to show off the power and wealth of the hosts.

Beyond the specific celebrations mentioned above, most medieval holidays were religious in nature. The modern word holiday is, in fact, a corruption of the words “holy day.” In addition to the requisite church attendance, major religious festivals were celebrated in much the same way as secular holidays, except among the clergy, who frequently used holy days as times of fasting and penance. The vast array of religious holidays that were regularly observed during the Middle Ages makes us wonder how the people got any work done at all. In practice, only the most important religious holidays were universally observed outside the monastic community. Families, villages, towns, and the nobility selected from among the rest to recognize their patron saints and days of particular personal or local significance.

In chapter 3 we provide a list of medieval holidays from which you can choose those that best suit the timetable for your own medieval celebration. In chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 we offer in-depth details for celebrating a medieval Christmas, New Year’s, May Day, and that most important occasion, a wedding.