



## **The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages**

*Robert Fossier, Lydia G. Cochrane (Translator)*

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In *The Axe and the Oath*, one of the world's leading medieval historians presents a compelling picture of daily life in the Middle Ages as it was experienced by ordinary people. Writing for general readers, Robert Fossier vividly describes how these vulnerable people confronted life, from birth to death, including childhood, marriage, work, sex, food, illness, religion, and the natural world. While most histories of the period focus on the ideas and actions of the few who wielded power and stress how different medieval people were from us, Fossier concentrates on the other nine-tenths of humanity in the period and concludes that "medieval man is us.?

Drawing on a broad range of evidence, Fossier describes how medieval men and women encountered, coped with, and understood the basic material facts of their lives. We learn how people related to agriculture, animals, the weather, the forest, and the sea; how they used alcohol and drugs; and how they buried their dead. But *The Axe and the Oath* is about much more than simply the material demands of life. We also learn how ordinary people experienced the social, cultural, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of medieval life, from memory and imagination to writing and the Church. The result is a sweeping new vision of the Middle Ages that will entertain and enlighten readers.

## **The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages Details**

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## From Reader Review The Axe and the Oath: Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages for online ebook

### **h says**

This is a very oddly written book. There's a stilted, archaic feel to the writing, which makes the book seem much older/more dated than the material itself. I actually had some trouble sticking with the material, because the style in which it's presented is so terribly dull. I did quite a bit of skimming. Not sure if the translation is to blame, or if the book is the same in its original form, but definitely not something I'd recommend to a casual reader who just wants a glimpse into ordinary life in the middle ages. Too much to wade through, unfortunately.

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### **Carmen Eicken says**

This book was very interesting, but hard to read. There were many words not commonly used in Oklahoma which required a dictionary. The author is not particularly flattering to Christianity, but not offensive, either. He ends by saying Medieval men and women were the same people as we are today. But, they were surrounded by fear (of animals and of each other and of hell), they could not read, for the most part, and they probably didn't care much about who was king or who was pope. I enjoyed learning about those days, and because of this book, am convinced my ancestors could have been Slavic slaves! Very thought provoking! Glad I read it!

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### **Walt says**

Quite a few people really disliked this book because of the informal writing style. The author is either trying to have a conversation with the reader, or is trying to replicate some of the classical authors like Jacob Burkhardt. Either way, the author made a difficult and unpleasant reading. It is really unusual for Princeton to publish a book so awkwardly written and without references.

The axe and the oath is also a misleading title, and probably comes from the translator. I am not sure what readers expect from the title; but the book tries to relate the everyday thoughts of the Medieval European peasant. Most readers probably do not have high expectations for the thought processes of Medieval peasants. It is even more difficult to reference the thoughts of the peasants. Chroniclers did not care for their opinions. Nobles did not care for their opinions. Consequently, large parts of this book appear to be blabbering. In one instance, Fossier even admits to blabbering. In several places he remarks on his own banal observations. A few other reviews repeat a passage from the introduction that says something to the effect that Medieval peasants were not too dissimilar from ourselves. They slept, pooped, procreated, and worked just like us. Obviously, many readers disagree with Fossier. I think a general consensus would view the Middle Ages as being a brutal and nearly lawless era.

Fossier makes some controversial arguments that further antagonize the reader because he does not offer references or evidence. One of his arguments is that the Middle Ages were not as brutal as often depicted. He does make an allowance for the 14th Century. War, pestilence, famine, and death were everywhere during the era. The kings of England and France fought far more often than just in the 14th Century. Fossier's notion

that peasants just hide in the woods does not consider the elderly, the young, women, and children. Sure, teenagers could flee to the woods. Would they be safe? The sources really do not say.

I think that his most controversial claim comes late in the book when he largely dismisses feudalism. His arm chair scholarship comes to this conclusion by saying nine-tenths of the population had no use for oaths and loyalties. They were instead consumed with the affairs of the parish community, the basic building block (according to Fossier) of the medieval peasant. It is possible that peasants did not care about who owned the land; but feudalism dictated their laws, their enemies, their friends, their taxes, their customs, etc. Evidence really would have helped him. I am reminded of Norman Cantor's controversial assertion regarding the Black Death; but Cantor included a lot of scientific evidence to support him. Fossier relies on his established career and record.

Fossier clearly has a thorough understanding of the Middle Ages. Even the non-academic tone of the book clearly shows his familiarity with the material. He adds in interesting tidbits that assumes readers will appreciate, such as sex and rowdy teenagers. He tries to avoid getting into details; but the details provide the necessary evidence for his claims. His strange fascination with the abbe de jeunesse begs for references since they seem to be peasants and they are entertaining to the readers. Unfortunately, these references died with Fossier in 2012.

Overall, the book is disappointing. The style and lack of references severely weaken the usefulness of the book. Much of the material is banal and meaningless (Fossier's own words). It is one of the slowest going books because of these problems. His controversies only add to the readers' frustrations. Readers are probably better served reading works by Jacques LeGoff, Barbara Tuchman, and Barbara Hanawalt.

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### **Moira says**

This was a good overview of daily medieval life but not the best. I enjoyed the discussions on many new topics. As well, this book centred in Europe which was a nice change from all the English based medieval discourses. I would recommend this book to anyone that is looking for more detail on the lives of the people in those times but I would also recommend that they don't just use this one source for inspiration.

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### **Lucy Pollard-Gott says**

I read this book right after reading "Medieval Civilization" by Jacques Le Goff, who is more or less in the same historical/philosophical school as Fossier. If you haven't read Le Goff, I would read him first. His book is a classic, profound at many points. Fossier's book excels in its conversational tone, and especially in its chapters on how animals fit into human civilization, not exclusively in the Middle Ages. The first two thirds of the book were the strongest, as Fossier gives details of everyday life--food, clothing, living habits, work. The last chapters on spirituality in the Middle Ages seemed rushed and clouded by the author's desire not to reiterate the history of the religious elite. Yet, he did not have as much new to say about the religious life of the ordinary person as, say, Eamon Duffy, in his remarkable book, "Stripping of the Altars."

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## **Sherry says**

I can't say I actually read the whole book. I struggled through the first few chapters, then looked at sections about subjects that interest me. The book was dull, written in a tone that made me feel as if the author somehow did not think much of me as a reader, or really cared much for his subject. He had a "holier-than-thou" approach that put me off, and as he himself said in his introduction, most of the information was taken from others and he was not going to state his sources. As much as I enjoy reading about the Middle Ages, this was a book that I was happy to put aside.

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## **Daniel says**

I cannot believe I wasted £14.95 on this book. I stopped reading at page 5 because I couldn't stand his tone. Fossier is very pretentious and talks down to the reader. He is incredibly misanthropic, and though I was quite willing to hang up my personal views at the door as requested, this text is deeply ideological from the start, so I was not willing to entertain such blatant hypocrisy. He cites no sources, making this text a very expensive paperweight and not much else. With respect to this, there are a lot of assertions made in the first few pages that I can provide sources in opposition to - the fact that he doesn't provide any sources convinces me that this is simply a pp. 384 op-ed by a man so arrogant that he feels a lifetime in academia gives you a Midas touch. Unfortunately Monsieur Fossier, it does not, and to be taken seriously you have to follow the same procedures that everyone else does.

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## **Kate says**

I'm having a hard time with this book so far, I'm glad to find out it's not just me. I can stand a certain amount of dry, academic language, but this one takes it too far. I don't know how much to blame the author, or the translator, but so far it's just not good. The writing sounds like a student trying to seem more knowledgeable than they really are by using a convoluted sentence structure and throwing in particularly obscure vocabulary as often as possible.

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## **Jen Well-Steered says**

What I liked about it: As I've said before, I'm a nerd and a lot of my non-fiction reading choices are made like this: I read a review and think, 'Wow. I don't know much about that subject. And if the Economist/New Yorker/Slate etc. finds this book good enough to give it a positive review, maybe I should give it a try.' I'm also a dilettante: I want to know a few facts about a subject, but it's comparatively rare that I want to dig down deep into a subject. So books that offer a survey of a topic while giving me a few good tidbits to bring up at dinner parties are great. And this one delivers: for example, did you know that people with blood type B are more resistant to the bubonic plague? And for some reason a lot of Hungarians are blood type B? And therefore Hungary escaped the plague relatively unscathed? Also, it is strongly suspected that many medieval female 'authors' such as Heloise of Abelard and Heloise, and Marguerite de Navarre, probably did not write their books, because female literacy rates were appalling, and probably no women were actually taught to write.

What I didn't like about it: This is just a personal preference, but I find it a lot easier to get into a subject, even dilettantishly, if I have a plot line and characters to follow, and this book lacks both.

omnibrowbooks.blogspot.com

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### **Josh says**

Before I started this book, I read a lot of reviews that claimed it was dense, rambling, incoherent, or otherwise incomprehensible. After finishing the book, I'm a little bewildered as to how so many people came to this conclusion. I am certainly no scholar, having only recently become interested in medieval history out of my own natural curiosity. I'm not even that well-educated in a formal sense, having only two years of community college under my belt. Yet, I found the book to be entirely readable. With the exception of a few words requiring a trip to the dictionary, the author's conversational tone and frankness about the subject were quite enjoyable. His task is a very admirable, if exceedingly difficult one; to discern the thoughts, feelings, habits, and environments of people who were themselves illiterate and mostly considered unworthy of comment by the elite of their day. The author makes no secret of the fact that when investigating the lives of these common people, some speculation is necessary. I think, perhaps, these speculative branches of thought are what have turned many readers off. In our schools we are taught to think in a linear, narrative manner. How unfortunate that reality is neither linear nor narrative, and defies understanding by the common public school graduate.

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### **Kara says**

The book reads as a pompous graduate student's final thesis, the student determined to be as dry and boring as possible to impress the dry and boring masters of the universe, those university dons whose lives begin and end with their dry conclusions, and God forbid anyone admit that history can be fun!

Oh no, this is very serious business, and very serious business has no right having a sense of humor or even a sense of being human. And anyone who ever laughed at human foibles that pop up over and over in the time stream, whoever made a joke comparing current presidents with long dead kings, is banned from their world. I mean, obviously, someone can't have a sense of humor and brain, right?

Fossier's voice oozes with contempt for the reader, talking down to all of us as being so dim for not knowing everything he knows. He praises the medieval time period at the expense of the present, constantly ridiculing not only other historians but all modern viewpoints and practices – completely losing all objectivity in the process. He gives a broad view of the Middle Ages – and gives us no sense of the actual people in it, because he is so busy pontificating.

He is, in short, a French history professor. To quote a historical fiction story about modern knight templars:

“French historians suck the life's blood out of history. In the name of socio-economic analysis, they achieve the impossible: *they make sex, war, and murder dull.*”

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### **Anna says**

At first I was rather indifferent not knowing what this book had in store and figuring that I wouldn't be to broken up if it wasn't what I'd hoped. However I found that the more I read the more I enjoyed this book. I found that surprisingly enough it was well organized compared to the books of this genre I somehow manage to pick up. I thought that the writing was interesting enough that it didn't lull me to sleep and it moved at a decent therefore keeping me enticed. When I picked the book up I was slightly ambivalent about the whole "ordinary life" part but was rather surprised when I found it more interesting than the title lead on. In my opinion I thought this was a great book.

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### **Shaie B says**

Highly unreadable. The author writes uses as much obfuscated language as possible.

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### **Kris says**

This book has been translated into English from the original French and so I don't know who to blame, the author or the translator, but it is not written for the every day person to understand and/or enjoy. It is more like someone's published doctoral thesis or else it was written by the person you try to avoid at any social gathering. Dry, dull, useless big words to convey small meanings, and self important are the first thoughts that come to mind when I think of this book. Next time my teenagers get in trouble, I won't take away their cell phones or ipods, I'm going to make them read this book all the way through before they can leave their rooms. They'll be middle-aged and past rebellion by the time they are finished and what a vocab they'll have!

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### **Wendelle So says**

The author uses the results of iconography and archaeology to reconstruct common life and beliefs during the Middle Ages. It is so complete that you can rely on this book if you want to divine how to build a house as the medievals did, or to prepare a table of feast as the medievals did. You learn about their beliefs and perceptions regarding family, nature, and divinity. Furthermore I felt the writing had that same diction as Umberto Eco's, enchanting and fabulist. I stuck with this book half due to the musicality of the author's language.

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