

*Of Kith and Kin: Correlations Between the Medieval Family Under Feudalism and the Colonial Family*

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Abstract: The relationship between later European Medieval families alongside early Euro-American families is often ignored, but their individual dynamics represent institutionalized change, and gives insight to socio-economic and cultural shifts. This essay explores the basic structure of Feudal families and how these structures are compared and translated into the initial independent American families. Not only will the essay discuss the “modern” analysis of how the medieval period was defined, but will also map where that definition began to change. These findings can be used broadly to research past the modern–post industrial family–model, and the implications that Feudalism had on early American socio-economic structures, as well as how this has been reflected in several generations of family archetypes.

Major Department: History

There is hardly a better model of social and cultural influence and changes than that of the family. As an ever present entity, the family has been the center of life, and a central provider of stability and support in several aspects such as socialization, cultural identity, economic support, kinship, and education. This paper explores and presents historical findings on the later European medieval family structure with a particular spotlight on the idea of childhood, as well as a focus on the way family changes are reflected in the adolescent model. These changes will be analyzed from a socioeconomic and political standpoint under changes in the Feudal system into the Euro-American Colonial provincial family model. I will compare and connect the ways that both bourgeoisie/aristocratic and peasant families have changed under institutional adjustments, as well as study the ways in which communities shared moral identities in the pre-modern period.

The family reflects the conditions of society, from economics to culture, and serve as the base fundamental unit of major societal changes such as industrialization or new political movements like women's liberation. The medieval family was entirely structured around the Feudal System, a hierarchical political and economic network developed around the ninth century. Feudalism offered a system of security for those working land by earning protection and security in return. Serfs were at the absolute lowest class in the system; they got to occupy land through an agreement with the lord where they must pay rent and give up a percentage of their crop yield. Families had to think of their yield in thirds; a third to the lord, a third to sell for profit, and a third to eat. Most of the time they were forced to sell a majority of their crops, and as a result, were left with little for the family.

Within the family, the eurocentric\ structure is, in some ways, similar to what we see up until the post-industrial nuclear family economy; with a male head of household, the women in

charge of homely affairs, and the children as an economic resource (almost like an employee to a business). But, under feudalism, the lord of the land can almost be seen as the “head of household” and above the father. So, the medieval peasant family works to serve under their lord. Families usually had anywhere up to nine children, with child mortality rates between 30%-50% before the age of two.<sup>1</sup> Modern historians often have trouble accessing the particulars about the medieval family and its makeup; partially because medieval census would account for homes in the community and not for the number of people in each home, leading to inaccurate documentation. For example, children under the age of fourteen were not counted in these population censuses,<sup>2</sup> which is seen in the Domesday Book of 1086 that acts as a recorded result of a land and population survey in England.

The size and composition of medieval households are something that can be roughly estimated and taken into account when studying the community. With these estimations come several different demographic theories about the shift from rural extended<sup>3</sup> households to nuclear, and how economic structures forced a change in the new average home. These theories surround issues for agricultural families, who were most greatly affected by the shift, “nuclear families predominated in pre-industrial societies because high mortality rates decreased the opportunities for kin to co-reside and, as a consequence, placed strict limits on the possibilities for household extension.”<sup>4</sup> Property rights strategies by landlords affected the family size, potential income, and production. To meet the demands of production, the family served as an economic unit, much like the nuclear family. Barbara Hanawalt outlines this model through four different basic parts; “demands on the family economy, assets of the family to meet the demands,

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<sup>1</sup> Hühne-Osterloh, G., and G. Grupe, pp. 247–58.

<sup>2</sup> Laumonier.

<sup>3</sup> Popular pre-industrial family structure of agricultural economy family, that has greater connection with extended family and larger number of kin, unlike the nuclear family.

<sup>4</sup> Emigh, 38.

supplemental economic activities, and strategies to improve the family's economic standing."<sup>5</sup> Demands on the family surrounded the need for basic livelihood and caloric needs, providing for their noble class who owns the land, and taking part in necessary community religious activities. Peasant families under landlords were even encouraged to adopt the extended family structure because of its financial benefits—under the family as an economic unit—more labor force means more income for the landlord. Landlords' influence on family size is clear in the agricultural lower-class family; studies of 15th-century communities in northern Italy have shown that 50%-75% of sharecroppers lived within multiple-family households.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, we can see that the geographical argument comes down to the effects of property rights, which differ by region and have varying economic outcomes, as well as extensions of kinship.

It's important to note that the perception of medieval kinship is different from our modern understanding of it. Lucie Laumonier provides a grammatical Latin lesson that explores the defining medieval confines of family in comparison to our modern ones:

“The English noun ‘family’ comes from the Latin familia, which designated, in classical Latin, the band of slaves attached to a household. By extension, familia signified the household, as in the expression pater familias, used to refer to the head of the house. In the Middle Ages, the noun familia also related to the household – the members of the house, as a moral unit. Strictly speaking, therefore, the medieval familia does not correspond to the modern “family,” a word we employ to talk about our relatives.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.,109.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>7</sup> Laumonier.

By medieval definition, family (*familia*) and parents (*parentes*) were not interchangeable terms; where parents are not defined as the household since the family builds on the basis of kinship, and parents is a term loosely used to define blood relations. The household kinship circle was made up of relatives, those who were blood-related, friends, servants, and more which shows the idea of kinship and family extended beyond blood. An important concept that surrounded the family was the early medieval Roman concept of Pietas, which outlined the practice of devotion to Rome, the Gods, and your family above all. Pietas is a central idea within Rome because of its outline of the ethical, moral, and cultural code that all Romans should follow. It acts as an original Roman virtue of life. This idea of complete devotion to your family is one that is widely seen in the pre-modern family structure; since family was the center of all life and the basis of survival.

Kinship for nobility was a different story, with a heavy reliance on *consanguinei*; a shared common ancestry and lineage, which is often a benefit and trait of the upper social classes.<sup>8</sup> Nobility's kinship was rooted in the alliances and secular laws that framed the family's structure and controlled the validity of one's position in the family. This relates to the idea of *laudatio parentum*, which outlines the complicated rules of gifting land to those within your kinship network. "The lack of a legal, systematized rule outlining what rights individuals kin had to property, combined with a multiplicity of potential claims and rights deriving from the property and its benefits—spiritual and mundane—made alienating land a complex affair and accounts for the frequency of claims and counterclaims apparent in medieval charts."<sup>9</sup> This is a frequently noted issue when studying the medieval family, between both peasant and aristocratic families. Nobility also tended to use an elaborate kinship process from the Church that

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Livingstone, 423.

essentially allowed a “spiritual” kinship bond through baptism and was considered the purest form of bonded kinship, with the absence of original sin.<sup>10</sup>

Under the Feudal system, inheritance strategies of land had a huge impact on family structure and dynamics. There was a responsibility within the family that lies on the children to uphold and continue the family land, “Ideally, daughters were given a dowry or chattels and money, sons were provided with pieces of land or skills of a trade, and one son inherited the family tenement.”<sup>11</sup> This gave the family the ability to keep that same piece of land through generations, even though realistically, the lord could take away that land at any time. Because of the large family size, there were issues with “fair” inheritance and usually disagreements. This became a larger issue during shifts of inheritance strategies put in place by lords that essentially cut down the land smaller and smaller each year. To alleviate this, the family would usually provide other accumulated wealth and goods to the rest of the non-inheriting family such as animals, household items, or smaller bits of land. This was rare since peasant families never really had the excess wealth to pass on other than land, which automatically put the remainder of the family at a disadvantage.

In the medieval world there exists little social concept of childhood and in modern academia is interpreted within the confines of biological stages. There is a blurry line for historians for what they considered to be the division between adolescence and adulthood. Due to the lack of primary sources, such as diaries from peasant families, it may be difficult to know what growing up was like at this time. Most of the glimpses we’re offered are from coroner records. Starting at birth, life is not a guarantee. The dispensability of infancy and the way children were viewed was almost sub-human, at least before being baptized.<sup>12</sup> Through

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<sup>10</sup> Laumonier.

<sup>11</sup> Hanawalt, 68.

<sup>12</sup> Hanawalt, 172.

childhood, known as the most dangerous years of a medieval person's life, causes of death were more often from the absence of family than from disease. Because of the work outside in the fields, the children were either left alone or brought into work. The idea of childrearing was an extremely passive one, which had dangerous effects on the children's livelihood and development. The most commonly seen death from accidents was from drowning or burning, where 32% of children before the age of one died in fire-related accidents. There are also several different accounts of children and infants that were left alone in the home, being mauled by pigs that had wandered into the house. This lack of parental involvement does not mean the parents did not care; in reality, it was extremely frowned upon to leave your children home alone, but many did not have a choice. It is also important to not indulge in the widely accepted idea that medieval parents did not care for their children. Just because death was more common during this time does not mean it was any less emotionally distressing.

Into adolescence, the child only became economically valuable when they were able to contribute to the family; between 8-12, children were more independent and able to do tasks around the house for the family. After reaching the age of 14 and hitting puberty or "*knowliche of manhole he mynnes*,"<sup>13</sup> historians can provide the same narrative of the modern teen as the medieval one; drinking, sibling rivalry, fighting, sex, romance, and the introduction to responsibility. One of these responsibilities was the creation of their future families and upholding the rules of marriage. A 15th-century poem, "Mutatis Mutandis" shows the discouragement the public felt towards adolescence and their keenness on free-choice marriage.<sup>14</sup>

Self-will is taken for reason,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.,189.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.,197.

True love for fancy chooeth  
And no man thinketh shame.

The fact that popular culture—especially literature which was focused on the upper literate class—shows that there were enough free marriages for it to have become a social issue of discussion. The Church even introduced a new agreement of marriage that excluded the need for familial or feudal influence because of the growing numbers of religiously “illegitimate” choice partner marriages. It was a new consensual pact that would consider marriages “canonically valid” if there was consent from both marrying parties.<sup>15</sup> These informal agreements continued the allowance of detachment from family into individual identity, as well as the department from reliance on only arranged marriages for the family’s economic and social benefit.

This reformed the idea of marriage as more than just an institution for strategic political gains and could be based on love. Joan Kelly touches on this idea of romance and love-based relationships in the aristocracy; specifically with the romantic idea of *Courtesy* that was disconnected from marriage. The idea was for knights to devote themselves to a lady and it “supported the institutions of the feudal warrior aristocracy—the lover was supposed to learn how to be faithful and self-sacrificing.”<sup>16</sup> These romances show the “acceptance of extramarital love” in response to the fact children and women were assets in the feudal society.<sup>17</sup> There was even another informal marriage pact where the couple made a promise and agreement to get married and then had sex before a formal consecration; which again emphasizes the idea of a marriage built on sexual or romantic roots based on individual want. This brought up certain issues socially when people became suspicious and troubled over the privatization of the sanctity of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>16</sup> Joan, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 8.

marriage since public marriages acted as, “a safeguard against dubious and bigamy, ” as well as allowing marriages to be more easily concealed.<sup>18</sup>

As discussed earlier, with a changing family economy from agricultural inheritance adjustments, the adolescent now had the ability to make their own choice for their future. Instead of working in a family economy they now had the sole responsibility of themselves and the ability to choose any trade they'd like. This was a huge cultural and social change that introduced the concept of individualism; up until the 11th-century almost no one of any social rank chose their course in life, they are born into what they will do for life, so this was a largely influential change. This detachment from family was difficult for many reasons, and the word *anomie* comes to mind, which describes the idea of coming from a little place to a huge city where you are alone in a sea of strangers. This shift of people coming from working the land and finding new jobs in the cities also creates a shift in the church and education expectations. The Benedictines outlawing of oblation<sup>19</sup> in the 12th-century forced people to call on others for the demand for education; cathedrals are now the centers of intellectual wealth, not monasteries. This created an educational institution outside of religiously exclusive quarters and allowed learning to occur for an average person outside of the family—who was the only source of education—for peasant families. Although, for a while, still locked by class, this shift is the first step in education not only for monks and nuns. These advancements throughout the 12th-century Renaissance helped kickstart the medieval person as an individual and ultimately will have a great impact on the culture in the coming years.

Taking a geographical shift, we can now take a brief look at the Colonial Anglo-American family, which stretches from roughly 1500-1800, with a significant overlap in

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<sup>18</sup> Harding, 18.

<sup>19</sup> The practice of giving children into the Church system, for religious education and as an offering to God.

the timeline between Medieval Europe and Colonial America. With the colonization of the Americas throughout the 1500s, there was the first settlement created in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. The settlements were created for the main purpose of increasing the power of Great Britain with an American land-hold and extraction of raw materials. The colonies acted as an opportunity for a new life, especially after their claimed independence in 1776. The development of North America can largely be thanks to the works of families and especially of adolescents. The changing social structures, adjustments from life in Europe, and overall harsh conditions created extremely difficult conditions and tested the New World.

Around this time, Feudalism was being replaced by state organizations, introducing the notion of private land ownership. This had intense effects on the family dynamics. The father was now the sole and primary head of the household and had complete ownership over resources. Private property created the notion of the European middle class, or the bourgeoisie, which was a class between the serfs and the aristocracy.<sup>20</sup> Although the family economy remained similar in private land, since women and children still had to work in the same gendered roles to help out the family, it still acted as a unit of production. But, under this format, there were even fewer rights for women in inheritance; now that the father had control over the division of land he was able to omit the benefits from women entirely. New World family economies, similar to the medieval economy, differed by location. The northern colonies relied on the family as the primary economic unit while the southern colonies were more based on the individual, because of a plantation and slavery based family economy.. Slaves were used in lieu of the family unit for labor. The family economy saw every member as owing some sort of payment for their education, livelihood, and training.

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<sup>20</sup> Kelly, 10.

The family was unstable in the developing New World because of the difficulties faced by the colonists, like disease and high child mortality rates. Children were treated in a relatively similar style to the medieval child, “Youths in colonial American society lived in an elaborate economy of obligation. What they did had great value. It often kept the family going. Although they had the satisfaction of doing real work and making a difference—experiences that modern teenagers often miss—they were not able to achieve the autonomy that we expect such responsibilities to bring.”<sup>21</sup> There was a lot of worry surrounding the teenagers of the colonies with the worries, especially from John Winthrop, that the New World would change the youth. This became a reality with the introduction of “spirits” or women who acted as recruiters in London in the mid-1600s. They looked to recruit children to work in the New World and often targeted orphans. These spirits allowed teens to have high sexual freedom and individualism, something that’s also similarly reflected in medieval adolescence. The Future of New England was under the colonists’ work, explaining why so much was expected of the colonial child since it sustained the family and the community, as well as a motion to complete God’s plan.

The social phenomenon of the family is one of the historian’s greatest tools for understanding the past in many different spheres; the family is an intersectional study of biology, culture, sociology, as well as the economy. As an institution, the family has proven itself to be an impenetrable function of society, that is the basis of economic function, education, social life, and cultural identity. The medieval family in particular is an essential model, especially when discussing the building blocks of global European influence, including in the modern American family. The medieval family is a friendly reminder that we’re not as detached from the Middle Ages as we think; people still loved, enjoyed life, and laughed. Throughout history, the one, eternal connection, will be the family

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<sup>21</sup> Hine, 59.

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