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## La servitude dans les pays de la Méditerranée occidentale chrétienne au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au-delà : déclinante ou renouvelée?

Monique Bourin et Paul Freedman

On behalf of myself, Monique Bourin and the participants in this meeting, I should like to thank the École Française de Rome most sincerely for its willingness to sponsor the present exploration of medieval servitude. We are grateful to the École's Director, M. André Vauchez, and to Director of Medieval Studies, M. François Bougard for their role in making this colloquium and discussion possible. We also acknowledge with gratitude the support given by the Laboratoire de médiévistique occidentale de Paris, a collaboration between the Université de Paris I and the CNRS.

We are honored that the École chose our topic as one of the last events of the outgoing millennium (counting according to the popular rather than scientifically accurate method). It can probably be said of many academic topics but certainly for the theme of servitude the coincidence of the date, coming as it does in 1999, affords an opportunity to survey where we are conceptually after, if not one thousand, at least the last hundred years of research. This is particularly appropriate because about a century ago a number of important studies of medieval peasant society appeared (notably those of Paul Vinogradoff for England, Henri See for France and Eduardo de Hinojosa for Catalonia), that depicted agrarian societies dominated by the institution of serfdom.<sup>i</sup> The ties binding a servile rural class to the seigneurie was never thought to have been absolutely universal: it seemed more characteristic of northern than Mediterranean Europe, and did not mean the extinction of freer forms of land tenure, but serfdom was nevertheless considered the rule against which other social conditions on the land formed exceptions. A condition in which agricultural labor was neither enslaved nor free seemed the general pattern in rural medieval Europe.

The intervening century has seen a loss of belief in the universality of serfdom and a loss of confidence that servile status is of great importance in determining social and economic conditions. Marc Bloch, arguably the greatest medieval historian of the twentieth century, was "tormented," as Robert Boutruche remarked, by the problems of elucidating what defined servile condition and how it was manifested across the varied geography of medieval Europe.<sup>ii</sup> In a number of studies Bloch attempted to go beyond the law collections and commentaries previously relied on. He investigated the institution within the seigneurial regime, as part of feudal society with a set of bonds at once similar to and yet less

flexible and increasingly degraded than noble vassalage.<sup>iii</sup> Defining feudal society as a social regime rather than as an unsystematic disorder or anarchy, Bloch bequeathed to the generation that succeeded him after the Second World War a basis for exploring regional diversity, material conditions, and the interaction of mental attitudes and social practice. What was not utilized in this legacy was Bloch's worrying at the problem of serfdom, questions on the order of what defined serfs in practice, who was affected by such definitions, the chronology of serfdom in relation to slavery and free tenure, and how it was entered upon and exited. These problems which had so exercised Marc Bloch would be largely ignored in the second half of the twentieth century.

The reasons for this neglect differ with the diverse historiographical traditions, especially between students of medieval England and France. In England, where the Middle Ages had seen the elaboration of an apparently well-defined status of villeinage, the disenchantment with legal sources as evidence for actual social conditions was instrumental in drawing attention away from status. Added to this was a revaluation of the nature of English rural communities that de-emphasized the impress of the seigneurial regime and exalted the autonomy of the village, an approach common among the different Anglophone lands. The so-called Toronto School, comprising the students of Father Ambrose Raftis, drew from the examination of manor court rolls, a picture of a rather distant and not especially exploitative lordship, a peasantry divided more by wealth and local office-holding than by status: a world in which economic position (how much land one disposed of) outweighed abstract considerations defined by arbitrary and sociologically inaccurate laws.<sup>iv</sup>

In France there was also a turning away from legal evidence. Bloch stood in an ambiguous position in this regard, emphasizing the local, geographical and archival evidence but without eschewing juridical texts. Bloch remained intent on defining specific feudal dues as indices of servitude, searching for a level of abstraction and generalization afforded by legal forms that transcended local practice.

The regional studies inaugurated by Georges Duby's thesis on the Mâconnais described the workings of lordship (in particular the seigneurie banale) and the extraction of wealth from peasant labor. Because the seigneurie banale affected all peasants, it appeared to render legal distinctions of status less meaningful than they had been during an earlier era of authoritative royal governance. Duby himself pointed to the importance of change over time as opposed merely to geographical distribution in a brief article on serfdom in Forez and the Mâconnais, but during most of his career his interests were directed more towards a general theory of the seigneurie than to the peasantry or an analysis of terms that had fascinated Marc Bloch (colliberti, or chevage) that now seemed arbitrary verbal categories more than social facts.<sup>v</sup>

In the detailed regional studies of France and the local manorial studies of England, the servile peasantry either appeared to be less as a percentage of the population than what had been assumed by earlier generations of social historians, or servile condition seemed to make very little difference in the lives of agriculturalists. Factors such as size of tenement, family and inheritance customs, habitat, and demography seemed much more important than legal condition. While maintaining a social historical agenda and methodology, the organizers of this colloquium hope to restore an awareness of the significance of legal learning and the construction of

taxonomies and definitions in the history of servitude, a process whose prescriptive (as opposed to descriptive) significance has been underestimated. We hope to examine society but also the legal and ideological patterns of society and their mutual interaction.

That some notion of the importance of servile condition survived during the last forty years or so is due to the work of Pierre Bonnassie. It is fitting at this gathering to pay tribute to Professor Bonnassie's accomplishment of which we are all the beneficiaries. In 1990 Bonnassie noted that Marc Bloch's work on serfdom was under-appreciated and identified both the material and mental conditions and imagery of servitude as subjects raised by Bloch and insufficiently understood or explored by his successors.<sup>vi</sup> Bonnassie's thesis on Catalonia in the ninth to twelfth century showed how one society experienced the sudden overthrow of a tradition of governmental authority and the distinction between public and private power. The assertion of a new military class there involved not only the defiance of comital jurisdiction but the subjugation of a formerly allodial peasantry. The period after 1100 would see the development of a peculiarly harsh form of serfdom which had the distinctions of leaving a clear historical record, of succeeding a period of freedom, and of ultimately ending in an exceptional (i.e. successful) peasant revolt.<sup>vii</sup>

The paradox here is that a Mediterranean region, Catalonia, should emerge as a model better of seigneurial power and of peasant servitude in preference to the less clear-cut image offered by what had formerly been regarded as "the classic lands of feudalism" between the Seine and Loire. The Mediterranean regions have become the basis for our conception of other aspects of seigneurial power, notably incastellamento, the planned or forced concentration of

population which Pierre Toubert first described for Latium and which has been extended to many other regions.<sup>viii</sup>

In several articles written subsequent to his thesis, Pierre Bonnassie emphasized the significance of servile condition both before and after the upheavals of the eleventh century. He thus linked the persistence of slavery to the shift towards a regime in which peasant obtained usufruct of particular tenements but were placed in a new form of dependence on an often absent, not-always-efficient, but nevertheless exacting lord.<sup>ix</sup> This raises another of the questions we want to discuss during our meeting and, one hopes, in the future: the relationship between medieval slavery and serfdom. If the postwar period saw a general turning away from the topic of serfdom, it also brought about an important revaluation of medieval slavery which flourished especially in the Mediterranean during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries as the notable studies of Charles Verlinden and Henri Bresc have shown.<sup>x</sup> What was the relationship between these two systems of exploitation chronologically as well as in those lands such as Catalonia and Croatia where they existed simultaneously?

In organizing this meeting Monique Bourin and I acted out of a conviction that the time is right for thinking again about serfdom both in connection to slavery and in comparison with other forms of land tenure. No one is going to restore the assumptions of the past that serfdom was a universal condition, nor do we seek to resurrect the unquestioned authority of legal codes or treatises as measures of social reality. Nevertheless we might build on the detailed studies of European regions as well as an appreciation of the motivations and mental experience of peasants who, in those lands where it affected them, did in fact resent and resist servile status. Servitude was an issue in late-medieval revolts

from England to Swabia; from Hungary to Catalonia. It was never particularly strong in certain regions such as the west of France, waned in influence in others such as Languedoc, and strengthened even beyond the Middle Ages in much of eastern Europe. We hope the various investigations presented here will give not only a comparative geography but identify points in common that might lead to a general idea of what serfdom was, how it was administered and enforced, and how it was experienced by those it affected.

We limit our work here to the Mediterranean regions in keeping both with the mission of the *École Française de Rome* and as a place to begin. We should not forget or ignore, however, the important work done on both the material and mental impress of serfdom in the North, for example by Christopher Dyer for England<sup>xi</sup>, or by Peter Blickle, Claudia Ulbrich and Peter Bierbrauer for German-speaking lands.<sup>xii</sup> For the late Middle Ages and the early modern period the contrasting patterns of tenure in eastern and western Europe become critical to the development of a unified economy.<sup>xiii</sup> Finally the connections between medieval slavery and the growth and reorientation of the slave trade that accompanied the exploration and exploitation of the New World are starting to command attention.<sup>xiv</sup> At some future date we would like to see a conference that would integrate geographical as well as chronological variation of servitude in keeping with Georges Duby's observations made in 1953.<sup>xv</sup>

For the time being our theme is Mediterranean serfdom and slavery particularly during the central period of the Middle Ages, an otherwise well-researched period that has not commanded attention in this regard because it lies between the feudal revolution of the eleventh century and the upheavals (including peasant wars) of the late Middle Ages. Was the twelfth to fourteenth centuries a period of the decline of

serfdom or of its renewed strength? The question cannot be divorced from how we define serfdom in relation both to free tenure and to slavery. This in turn is related to our overall picture of the feudal regime and seigneurial exploitation (prelevement seigneurial)-- how serfdom fit with other aspects of agrarian social organization. These three factors inform, at least as background conditions, what we hope to discuss here: first, the decline or extension of servitude in the central Middle Ages; second, the nature of serfdom (in relation to other forms of land tenure and to slavery); and finally, serfdom in relation to feudal society, as an aspect of the seigneurial economy. The first of these factors is of course included in the title of this conference and describes what might be considered a central historiographic mystery of the general question of servitude: was the central medieval period an era of progressive liberation and the withering away of serfdom into no more than a vestige, or did it see a "second serfdom" in which previously free peasants were more closely tied to lords through legal definitions, the movement of the frontier or the collaboration of state authorities with the interests of a land-owning aristocracy? That such a basic question can be posed as a subject of debate shows how far we are from an agreed-upon overall picture of serfdom.

Answers to this problem have focused on geography (that some places experienced a hardening and others a decline of serfdom), on global evolution (that in general servitude waned over time, for example), and over problems of definition (seigneurie banale versus seigneurie foncière or how important servile status was). Acknowledging both geographical and chronological variation (and after all, our papers devised for this meeting are oriented in this fashion), can we nevertheless come up with some statements of wider validity about the twelfth to fourteenth centuries?



The second factor is more clearly one of definition: what do we mean by serfdom and in particular, how important was it in practice as opposed to legal theory? This question has been posed most dramatically for medieval England. Many historians have argued that this was a near-meaningless designation in terms of the practical experience of tenants, that villeins often had better holdings than non-villeins, and that English peasants, so far from being constrained by servitude, were essentially independent entrepreneurs, not really peasants at all (let alone serfs). Again I want to echo Pierre Bonnassie's call to rediscover the "essence profonde" of servitude which preoccupied Marc Bloch-- the interior characteristics of serfdom, its indignities, rather than focusing either on legal "indices" of serfdom or an excessively reductionist economic model of material considerations.

Also under this rubric of definitions that we take into account are the differences and similarities between two forms of bondage, slavery and serfdom. The symbolic world of the latter borrows significantly from the language of degradation and dehumanization of the former. Problems of definition thus include not only an understanding of different systems of economic production and social exploitation but the overlapping aspects of representation and imagination: the unfree depicted as animals, instruments, savages or natural subordinates and the necessity constantly to repeat and refashion this discourse of debasement (particularly significant with regard to serfs who are less easily marginalized than slaves). In connection with slavery and serfdom we also have chronological and geographical problems. The Mediterranean was a world of extraordinary slaving activity and commerce in the high and late Middle Ages. This calls into question the uniqueness of New World slavery and the despoliation of

Africa to feed the appetite of the Americas. It also further confuses what had seemed to be an elegant formulation of modes of production based on the succession of a slave-based ancient economy by a feudal regime characterized by serfdom, succeeded in turn by capitalism in which the periphery was characterized by serfdom (Eastern Europe) or slavery (the New World) while the center no longer required bonded labor.<sup>xvi</sup>

The supposition of a socio-economic "world system" in the modern world brings us to the last factor: the relationship between systems of exploitation and social systems and changes. We may not come to an agreement about how much serfdom was integral to feudal society, nor indeed whether we can speak univocally about what feudal society consists of, but clearly in exploring the significance of unfree rural labor in the Middle Ages we are looking at it in terms of a seigneurial regime of exploitation whose dynamic was conditioned by a host of long-term factors such as population growth, availability of land, urbanization, changes in the world economy. The growth and decline of serfdom are also, however, related to less global and impersonal factors: the role of state authority, the response of lords to demographic and economic factors, and above all the opinions, options and actions of peasants themselves.

As historians examining a distant period we are naturally concerned with measuring and evaluating such data as we can assemble, but in doing so we should not completely ignore the agency and thought-world of the people we study. We want to examine lordship and servitude but in reassessing the importance of serfdom to the elaboration and maintenance of the seigneurie, we must regard the servile populations of the Middle Ages as completely helpless or inarticulate.

In welcoming you to this conference and in thanking you most warmly for your participation and the work it has

involved, I invite you to consider the nature and evolution of servitude whether or not the themes and rubrics I have outlined prove useful. At some future date perhaps we will be able to expand our geographical as well as chronological range. For the moment we can at least hope that the twentieth century closes with an indication of a renewed interest among medievalists in servitude, a central feature of medieval society, law, economy and mentalities.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i.</sup>.. P. Vinogradoff, Villeinage in England: Essays in English Mediaeval History, Oxford, 1892; H. Seeé, Les classes rurales et le régime domaniale en France au moyen âge, Paris, 1901; E. de Hinojosa, El régimen señorial y la cuestión agraria en Cataluña durante la Edad Media, Madrid, 1902.
- <sup>ii.</sup>.. R. Boutruche, Seigneurie et féodalité, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1968-1970, vol. 2, p. 74. On Marc Bloch and the problem of serfdom see P. Bonnassie, Marc Bloch, historien de la servitude: réflexions sur le concept de 'classe servile' in Marc Bloch aujourd'hui. Histoire comparée et sciences sociales, Paris, 1990, p. 363-387.
- <sup>iii.</sup>.. Bloch's articles on serfdom, collected in the posthumous volume Mélanges historiques, vol. 1, Paris, 1963, include Comment et pourquoi finit l'esclavage antique, The Rise of Dependent Cultivation and Seigneurial Institutions, and Liberté et servitude personnelles au moyen âge, particulièrement en France: contribution à une étude des classes. See also articles in the recent collection Bloch's work on the peasantry, La terre et le paysan, Paris, 1999; and his Rois et serfs: un chapitre d'histoire capétienne, Paris, 1920; repr. Geneva, 1976.
- <sup>iv.</sup>.. On the Toronto School see Z. Razi, The Toronto School's Reconstitution of Medieval Peasant Society: A Critical View in Past & Present, 85, 1979, p. 141-157; K. Wrightson, Medieval Villagers in Perspective in Peasant Studies, 7, 1978, p. 203-217.
- <sup>v.</sup>.. G. Duby, Géographie ou chronologie de servage? Notes sur les servi en Forez et en Mâconnais du Xe au XIIe siècle in Hommage à Lucien Febvre, vol. 1, Paris, 1953, p. 147-153. I have discussed changes in Duby's approaches to rural history and servitude in an article entitled Georges Duby and the Medieval Peasants in a volume of contributions by United States historians on Duby and his historiographic legacy, edited by Amy Livingstone and Linda Mitchell (forthcoming).
- <sup>vi.</sup>.. Bonnassie, Marc Bloch, historien de la servitude.
- <sup>vii.</sup>.. P. Bonnassie, La Catalogne du milieu du Xe à la fin du XIe siècle: croissance et mutations d'une société, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1975-6). On the relation between slavery and serfdom in relation to the establishment of feudal society in the eleventh century see Bonnassie, Survie et extinction du régime esclavagiste dans l'occident du haut moyen âge (IV-XI s.) in Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, 28, 1985, p. 307-343; and his D'une servitude à l'autre in La France de l'An mil, ed. Robert Delort, Paris, 1990, p. 125-141.
- <sup>viii.</sup>.. P. Toubert, Les structures du Latium médiéval: Le Latium méridional et la Sabine du IXe siècle à la fin du XIIe siècle, 2 vols., Rome, 1973; "L'incastellamento": Actes des rencontres de Gérone (26-

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27 novembre 1992) et de Rome (5-7 mai 1994), ed. M. Barceló and P. Toubert, Rome, 1998.

<sup>ix.</sup> .. P. Bonnassie, D'une servitude à l'autre (op. cit.); Survie et extinction du régime esclavagiste (op. cit.); Du Rhône à la Galice: genèse et modalités du régime féodal in Structures féodales et féodalisme dans l'Occident méditerranéen (Xe-XIIIe siècles) (Colloque internationale organisé par le Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et l'École Française de Rome), Rome, 1980, p. 17-56.

<sup>x.</sup> .. C. Verlinden, L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale, 2 vols., Bruges, 1955-1977; H. Bresc, L'esclave dans le monde méditerranéen des XIVe et XVe siècles: problèmes politiques, religieux et moreaux in XIII Congrès d'histoire de la Corona d'Aragó (Palma de Mallorca, 27 septembre-1 octobre 1987, vol. 1, p. 89-102.

<sup>xi.</sup> .. C. Dyer, Memories of Freedom: Attitudes Towards Serfdom in England, 1200-1350 in Serfdom and Slavery: Studies in Legal Bondage, ed. M. L. Bush, London and New York, 1996, p. 277-295.

<sup>xii.</sup> .. P. Blickle, Agrarkrise und Leibeigenschaft im spätmittelalterlichen deutschen Südwesten in Studien zur geschichtlichen Bedeutung des deutschen Bauernstandes, ed. P. Blickle, Stuttgart, 1989, p. 19-35; idem, Freiheit und Gerechtigkeit: Ethische Fragen der Deutschen an die Theologen der Reformation in Lutherjahrbuch, 62, 1995, p. 83-103; C. Ulbrich, Leibherrschaft am Oberrhein im Spätmittelalter, Göttingen, 1979; P. Bierbrauer, Das Göttliche Recht und die naturrechtliche Tradition in Bauer, Reich und Reformation: Festschrift für Günther Franz zum 80. Geburtstag am 23. Mai 1982, ed. P. Blickle, Stuttgart, 1982, p. 210-234.

<sup>xiii.</sup> .. On this subject see R. Brenner, Agrarian Structure and economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe in Past & Present, 70, 1976, p. 30-75. This is reprinted along with a number of critical comments in The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe, ed. T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin, Cambridge, 1985. See also Brenner's more recent thoughts on serfdom, The Rises and Declines of Serfdom in Medieval and Early Modern Europe in Serfdom and Slavery (cit. note 11), p. 247-276.

<sup>xiv.</sup> .. An issue already raised in the classic study of D. B. Davis, The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture, Ithaca, 1966, and more recently by R. Blackburn, The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery in The William and Mary Quarterly, 54, 1997, p. 65-102 and J. Sweet, The Iberian Roots of American Racist Thought in the same issue of the same journal, p. 143-166. A forthcoming book by Steven A. Epstein, Speaking of Slavery: Ten Centuries of Italian Dialogue, considers the social reality and representation of slavery both within Europe and in colonial settings.

<sup>xv.</sup> .. See above, note 5.

<sup>xvi.</sup> .. I. Wallerstein, The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agricultur

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and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, New York, 1976. It is also worth referring again to the articles in Serfdom and Slavery (cit. note 11), especially those by Brenner (cit. note 13) and M. L. Bush, Serfdom in Medieval and Modern Europe: A Comparison (p. 199-224).