

**MEDIEVAL LORDSHIP:  
THE SHEPHERD, THE TYRANT, AND THE POLITICIAN**

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November 2, 2015

Many historians, such as William E. Lunt and Joseph R. Strayer, have viewed feudalism as a political or governmental organization, distilling it down to its simplest definition.<sup>1</sup> In his article, “Medieval Lordship,” Thomas N. Bisson notes the historiographical struggle to define feudalism, exacerbated by the refusal of historians to define the concepts of “government” and “state.” Bisson contends that one must first understand the history of lordship in order to understand the “unicorn” that feudalism has become in historiographic debates. According to Bisson, historians have often confused “government” with “the personal exercise of power” in discussions of feudalism and lordship.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Bisson contends that the key to understanding medieval government rests in the study of the history of lordship.

In his analysis of medieval lordship, Bisson differentiates between lordship and feudalism, as well as between lordship and kingship. He also compares biblical lordship, derived from man’s creation in the image of God, to violent forms of lordship perpetrated by power-hungry castle owners against nearby peasants. His analysis also takes into account the passage of time, and the social, economic, and political forces that affected the development of lordship throughout the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages. Overall, Bisson’s work seems to trace the history of lordship through a series of phases – what this essay will identify as the shepherd phase, the tyrant phase, and the politician phase. These phases overlapped, and each phase existed in some form or another throughout the Middle Ages. However, each phase seems to have had its own zenith, more or less sequentially. An obvious caveat of this phase approach is that any attempt to organize the development of lordship in this way risks oversimplifying the complex historical developments that occurred during the Middle Ages. It goes without saying

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas N. Bisson, “Medieval Lordship,” *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (October, 1995): 743, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2865342> (accessed October 30, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 744.

that lordship developed in different ways during different time periods. However, Bisson's analysis of lordship does generally show the ebb and flow of biblically derived lordship, the the violent lordship associated with the proliferation of castles, and the more politically minded form of political lordship that emerged by the dawn of the Later Middle Ages.

The term "lord," as used within the context of medieval feudalism, is rooted in the theological understanding of humanity's relationship with God the Father and in humanity's parallel to it, the father-dominated household.<sup>3</sup> In this way, lordship derived both from the Bible and from the Roman paterfamilial dynamic. Just as God has dominion over his creation, humans, made in the image and likeness of God, have some degree of dominion over each other. According to Bisson, the preferable form of humanity's dominion over other humans is the familial "friend" form, but the umbrella of lordship also came to encompass such ideas as political dominance and slavery.<sup>4</sup> This view of lordship was entrenched in Europe during the Early Middle Ages.

Religious leaders performed their lordly duties acting in place of Christ, the Good Shepherd, as the shepherd of their own congregations and monasteries. This form of lordship encouraged humble service and collective submission as a means of fulfilling Jesus' command to "Love thy neighbor."<sup>5</sup> This clerical form of lordship, at least in its ideal form, was an almost inverse form of lordship. Bisson notes Gregory the Great's title "servant of the servants of God" to illustrate the focus on servitude as a form of lordship.<sup>6</sup> Gregory was a shepherd who served his sheep. Certainly, not all members of the clergy were good shepherds all the time, but the clergy's

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 746.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 22:39.

<sup>6</sup> Bisson, 747.

efforts throughout the Middle Ages show an overall dedication to lordship worthy of the use of the word “Lord.”

Good shepherd lordship clashed with the rising number of lay lordships that developed during the ninth and tenth centuries. These lay lordships were less about shepherding and more about personal gain. According to Bisson, lay lordships expanded at the expense of public obligations, creating a system of vassalage and landed wealth.<sup>7</sup> This power-focused form of lordship drew the ire of the clerical shepherds, who felt that these new lords placed human avarice above service to fellow humans and to God. Noting the remarks of Bishop Rather of Verona, Bisson describes the rise of lesser lay lords and castellans as “increasingly addicted to self-promotion and violence.”<sup>8</sup>

For the shepherds, lordship was derived from the biblical parables, in which lords were portrayed as stewards who confirmed their power in the image of God. Contrarily, for the lay lords and castellans, lordship was derived from power over others, not service to others. This is perhaps illustrated in oath of fealty ceremonies. In one version of the ceremony, a vassal knelt before his lord as if in a position of prayer. The lord then placed his hands on the vassal’s hands and squeezed them together. The lord thus showed his dominance over his vassal in both a symbolic and a physical way. Bisson notes Peter the Chanter’s contention that the vassals in such ceremonies would kneel before tyrants as willingly as before anyone else.<sup>9</sup> Lay lordship was thus not a means of shepherding, but a means of tyrannical rule through castles, knights, and fiefs.

The explosion of castle building during the tenth and eleventh centuries, sometimes known as the “feudal revolution,” brought about a version of lordship that turned peasants into

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 748.

virtual slaves. Anyone with a castle and the means to defend it could create his own noble standing through might. According to David Whitton, lords thus engaged in a veritable arms race with their neighbors, collecting increasing numbers of fierce knights and building ever more impressive and impregnable castles.<sup>10</sup> This clashed with the old aristocracy and with shepherds like Bishop Rather. The tyrannical lords became a “harsh liability” to the old regime as these new lords sought to build their reputation through military exploits, such as the early crusades.<sup>11</sup> Riding the coattails of powerful kings such as Richard the Lionheart and Frederick Barbarossa, untitled lesser lords hoped to elevate their status and perhaps legitimize their power. Meanwhile, titled lords such as Richard and Frederick used the early crusades to exert lordship by virtue of their title and office.<sup>12</sup>

Titled lords initially lacked the resources to keep the untitled tyrannical lords in check, allowing the lesser lords to violently dominate the local level. However, the titled lords, such as kings, dukes, and counts, had their own agendas and sought to exercise their own form of lordship. While still tyrannical, titled lords often emphasized their nobility through princely activities such as hunting and feasting rather than through force and violence.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, titled lords began to exert lordship by virtue of their noble status at the expense of the untitled lords.

There were other attempts to check the violence of the untitled lay lords, some more successful than others. Some of these attempts came from the lords themselves. To illustrate this, Bisson quotes Ansold of Maule, who admonished his son by stating, “Treat your men with the loyalty you owe them, and dominated them not as a tyrant but as a mild protector... Never

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<sup>10</sup> David Whitton, “The Society of Northern Europe in the High Middle Ages, 900-1200,” in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 118-119.

<sup>11</sup> Bisson, 749.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 750.

plunder others... Keep what is rightfully yours, and never seize others' property by violence or invasion."<sup>14</sup> Ansold's statement of restraint was likely a faint whisper amidst the castle construction of his time.

Perhaps more effective was the Peace of God movement, the Church's attempt to curb violence against itself, against vulnerable members of the community, and between members of the nobility.<sup>15</sup> Clerics hoped to shepherd their flocks away from violence using biblical examples of lordship found in the parables. Ironically, as Bisson notes, interpretation of the biblical parables could just as easily encourage the violence that gripped the tyrant phase of lordship. According to Bisson, the parables represented patrimonial service as accountable, encouraging the appointment of officers to act on behalf of the lord.<sup>16</sup> These officers included sheriffs, vicars, knights, and other officials who were sent out to "collect and command." Unfortunately, the very people the lords chose as "companions in lordship," meaning that they had a share and something to gain through cooperation with the lord, were men with violent natures. This created a cycle of violence that hampered the progress of the Peace of God movement. Lords continued to exert their influence over their subjects, whether unilaterally by powers of justice and command, or through the use of their officers.

Bisson points to the "convergence of lordship and nobility" as an important change, along with the Peace of God movement, that helped transition lordship out of the cycle of violence that gripped the period of castle proliferation.<sup>17</sup> Bisson contends that that assimilation of nobility to lordship helped empower dynastic monarchy at the expense of the lesser lords. Perhaps the Black

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<sup>14</sup> Bisson, 751.

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Morris, "Northern Europe Invades the Mediterranean, 900-1200," in *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, ed. George Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 184.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 752.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 754.

Death also had a hand in this as well. Bisson explains that the “crisis of service” caused by the Black Death prompted peasants and servants to demand higher wages for their work.<sup>18</sup> Peasant revolts undoubtedly created major headaches for castellans and other untitled lesser lords, who were no doubt already reeling from the loss of tax revenue caused by the drop in population and productivity. Egalitarian ideas, Bisson notes, became widespread and threatened the power of the tyrannical lords. Bisson uses Wat Tyler’s peasant revolt of 1381 to illustrate how the peasantry failed to overthrow the yoke of lordship, stating, “the cause had been hopeless because virtually no one could *conceive* of a nonlordly order of power.”<sup>19</sup> That being said, a transition from tyrannical lordship to political lordship was underway.

Like the Magna Carta of 1215, Wat Tyler’s revolt in 1381 showed that tyrannical lordship would not dominate Europe forever. Lordship changed “as do all such things,” most notably in its infrastructure.<sup>20</sup> Because of the convergence of lordship and nobility, and because of the change in the mindset of the peasantry toward lords, lordship through law replaced lordship through brute force. Lordship in the form of “government” slowly replaced lordship merely in the form of dominance. Lords used their office to exercise powers of justice, finance, and war through their graciousness in a way that became more political than tyrannical. According to Bisson, the office of lord ceased to be theoretical and became functional.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he contends that the will of the lords had been “tamed,” making the lord’s will negotiable, i.e. politicized.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 755.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 756.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 757.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 758.

The effects of this great change from tyrannical to political lordship allowed the great titled lords to dominate their domains in a way not possible during height of tyrannical lordship during the so-called feudal revolution. The power of the titled lords extended down to the masses. While this diluted the power of the greater lords, Bisson contends that the power of the lesser lords was broken as a result, forcing the lesser lords to become more dependent on the greater lords. The net result was an overall increase in the power of the greater lords, a power they wielded through their grace or mercy and because of their perceived greatness.<sup>23</sup> Thus, these politicized lords resembled shepherds. While the clergy exercised lordship in the image of God, leading the people with the help of God's grace, the greater lords exercised lordship through their mercy and because of political necessity. According to Bisson, "the peoples of medieval Europe served, feared, and (sometimes) loved their lords" as a result.<sup>24</sup>

Bisson's analysis clearly shows that lordship took different forms throughout the Middle Ages. Lords were shepherds, tyrants, and politicians at different times and in different circumstances. Most lords likely exhibited all three characteristics, although one characteristic may have dominated at a given place and time. The point is that lordship was anything but monolithic, and its changes over time and space reflected the social changes in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. The most important point, perhaps, is that lordship eventually transitioned away from the simple exercise of power to actual government.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; Bisson refers specifically to the situation in England here; however, his use of the quote from Jean de Joinville indicates that the transformation of lordship was more widespread.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 759.

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