

Medieval peasants probably enjoyed their holiday festivities more than you do

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Winter in a peasant village, painted by the Limbourg brothers and published in the medieval illuminated manuscript 'Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry.'

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When people think of the European Middle Ages, it often brings to mind grinding poverty, superstition and darkness. But the reality of the 1,000-year period from 500 to 1500 was much more complex. This is especially true when considering the peasants, who made up about 90% of the population.

For all their hard work, peasants had a fair amount of downtime. Add up Sundays and the many holidays, and about one-third of the year was free of intensive work. Celebrations were frequent and centered around religious holidays like Easter, Pentecost and saints' days.

But the longest and most festive of these holidays was Christmas.

As a professor of medieval history, I can assure you the popular belief that the lives of peasants were little more than misery is a misconception. They enjoyed rich social lives – maybe richer than ours – ate well, celebrated frequently and had families not unlike our own. For them, holiday festivities didn't begin with Christmas Eve and end with New Year's.

The party was just getting started.

Daily life in a peasant village

A peasant was not simply a low-class or poor person. Rather, a peasant was a subsistence farmer who owed their lords a portion of the food they grew. They also provided labor, which might include bridge-building or farming the lord's land.

In return, a lord provided his peasants with protection from bandits or invaders. They also provided justice via a court system and punished people for theft, murder and other crimes. Typically, the lord lived in the village or nearby.

Peasants lived in the countryside, in villages that ranged from a few houses to several hundred. The villages had communal ovens, wells, flour mills, brewers or pubs, and blacksmiths. The houses were clustered in the center of the village along a dirt street and surrounded by farmland.



A 14th-century thatched cottage in what is now West Sussex, England.

David C. Tomlinson/The Image Bank via Getty Images

By today's standards, a peasant's house was small – in England, the average was around 700 square feet (65 square meters). Houses might be made of turf, wood, stone or “waddle-and-daub,” a construction very similar to lathe and plaster, with beamed roofs covered in straw. Houses had front doors, and some had back doors. Windows were covered with shutters and, rarely, glass. Aside from the fireplace, only the Sun, Moon or an oil lamp or candle provided light.

Strange sleep habits and sex without privacy

The day was dictated by seasons and sunlight. Most people rose at dawn or a bit before; men went out to their fields soon after to grow grains like wheat and barley. Women worked in the home and yard, taking care of children, animals and vegetable gardens, along with the spinning, sewing and cooking. Peasants didn't have clocks, so a recipe might recommend cooking something for the time it took to say the Lord's Prayer three times.

Around midday, people usually took a break and ate their largest meal – often a soup or stew. The foods they ate could include lamb and beef, along with cheese, cabbage, onions, leeks, turnips and fava beans. Fish, in particular freshwater fish, were also popular. Every meal included bread.

Beer and wine were major components of the meal. By our standards, peasants drank a lot, although the alcohol content of the beer and wine was lower than today's versions. They often napped before returning to work. In the evening, they ate a light meal, perhaps only bread, and socialized for a while.

They went to bed within a few hours of darkness, so how long they slept depended on the season. On average, they slept about eight hours, but not consecutively. They awoke after a “first sleep” and prayed, had sex or chatted with neighbors for somewhere between half an hour and two hours, then returned to sleep for another four hours or so.

Peasants did not have privacy as we think of it; everyone often slept in one big room. Parents made love with one another as their children slept nearby. Married couples shared a bed, and one of their younger children might sleep with them, though infants had cradles. Older children likely slept two to a bed.



15th-century peasants in France celebrate May Day.

Hulton Archives via Getty Images



A musician entertains a group of peasant farmers.

duncan1890/DigitalVision Vectors via Getty Images

Dreaming of a medieval Christmas

Life certainly wasn't easy. But the stretches of time for rest and leisure were enviable.

Today, many people start thinking about Christmas after Thanksgiving, and any sort of holiday spirit fizzles by early January.

In the Middle Ages, this would have been unheard of.

Advent – the period of anticipation and fasting that precedes Christmas – began with the Feast of St. Martin.

Back then, it took place 40 days before Christmas; today, it's the fourth Sunday before it. During this period, Western Christians observed a fast; while less strict than the one for Lent, it restricted meat and dairy products to certain days of the week. These protocols not only symbolized absence and longing, but they also helped stretch out the food supply after the end of the harvest and before meats were fully cured.

Christmas itself was known for feasting and drunkenness – and it lasted nearly six weeks.

Dec. 25 was followed by the 12 Days of Christmas, ending with the Epiphany on Jan. 6, which commemorates the visit of the Magi to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Gifts, often in the form of food or money, were exchanged, though this was more commonly done on New Year's Day. Game birds, ham, mince pies and spiced wines were popular fare, with spices thought to help warm the body.

Though Christmas officially celebrates the birth of Jesus, it was clearly associated with pre-Christian celebrations that emphasized the winter solstice and the return of light and life. This meant that bonfires, yule logs and evergreen decorations were part of the festivities. According to tradition, St. Francis of Assisi created the first nativity scene in 1223.

Christmas ended slowly, with the first Monday after Epiphany being called “Plough Monday” because it marked the return to agricultural work. The full end of the season came on Feb. 2 – called Candlemas – which coincides with the older pagan holiday of Imbolc. On this day, candles were blessed for use in the coming year, and any decorations left up were thought to be at risk of becoming infested with goblins.

Many people today gripe about the stresses of the holidays: buying presents, traveling, cooking, cleaning and bouncing from one obligation to the next. There’s a short window to get it all done: Christmas Day is the only day many workplaces are required to give off.

Meanwhile, I’ll be dreaming of a medieval Christmas.

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