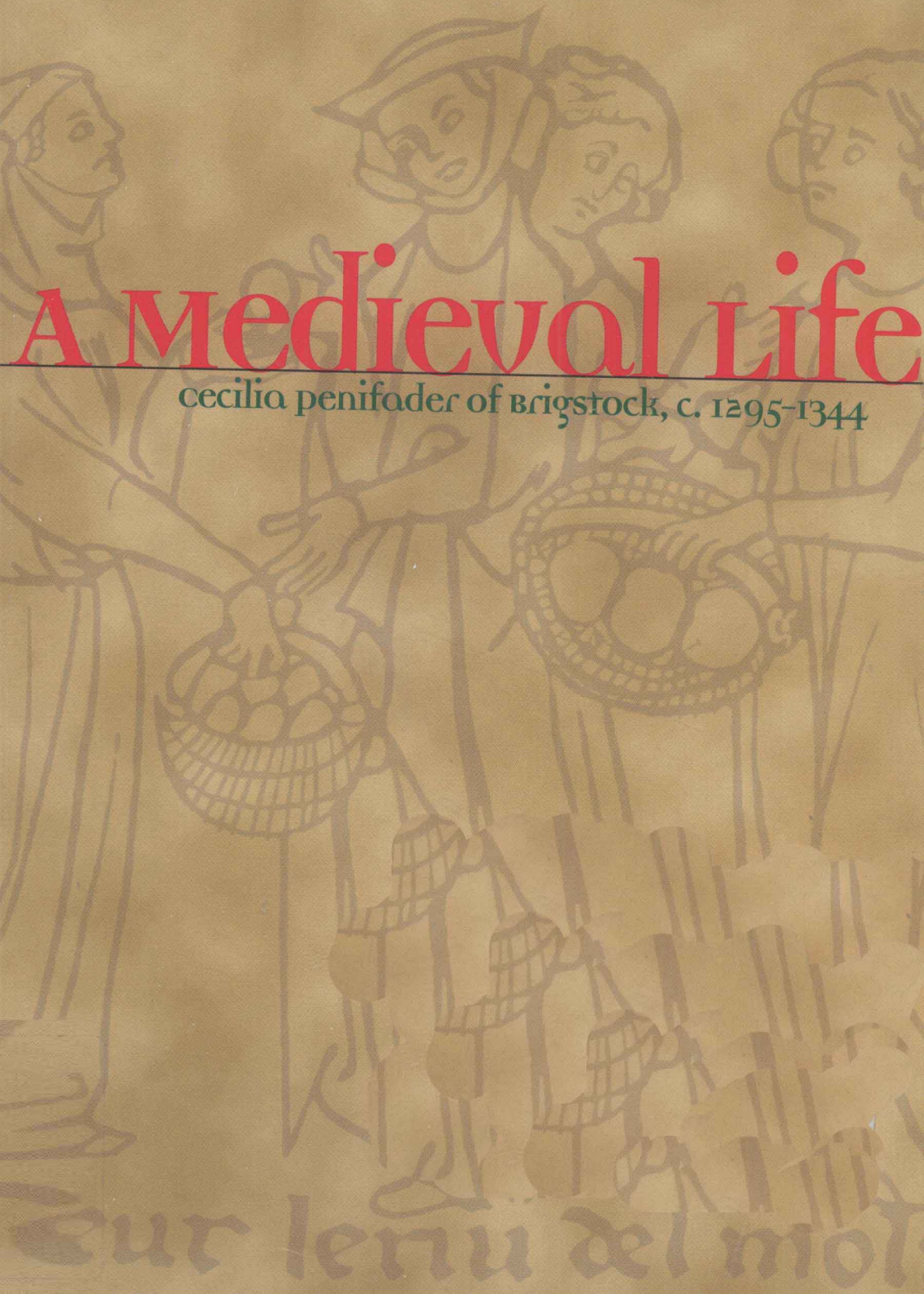


judith M. Bennett

A Medieval Life

cecilia penifader of brigstock, c. 1295-1344



eur lenu del mol

A Medieval Life

Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344

Judith M. Bennett



Boston Burr Ridge, IL Dubuque, IA Madison, WI New York San Francisco St. Louis
Bangkok Bogotá Caracas Lisbon London Madrid
Mexico City Milan New Delhi Seoul Singapore Sydney Taipei Toronto

McGraw-Hill College

A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

A MEDIEVAL LIFE

CECILIA PENIFADER OF BRIGSTOCK, c. 1295-1344

Copyright © 1999 by The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a data base or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

8 9 10 DOC/DOC 0 9 8 7 6 5 4

ISBN 0-07-290331-7

Editorial director: *Jane E. Vaicunas*

Senior sponsoring editor: *Lyn Uhl*

Developmental editor: *Donata Dettbarn*

Senior marketing manager: *Suzanne Daghlian*

Senior project manager: *Marilyn Rothenberger*

Production supervisor: *Sandy Ludovissy*

Freelance design coordinator: *Mary L. Christianson*

Photo research coordinator: *John C. Leland*

Compositor: *Shepherd, Inc.*

Typeface: *10/12 Palatino*

Printer: *R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company/Crawfordsville/IN*

Freelance cover designer: *Elise Lansdon*

Cover image: © *Bibliothèque royale Albert I Bruxelles/folio 59/Brussels, KBR., 1175*

The credits section for this book begins on page 147 and is considered an extension of the copyright page.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bennett, Judith M.

A medieval life-Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344 /

Judith M. Bennett. - 1st ed.

cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-07-290331-7

Brigstock (England)-Biography. 2. Women-England-Brigstock-

-History-Middle Ages, 500-1500. 3. England-Social

conditions-1066-1485. 4. Penifader, Cecilia, ca. 1295-1344.

5. Brigstock (England)-History. I. Title.

DA690.B785B46 1999

942.5'54-dc21

[b]

98-20580

CIP

A Medieval Life

Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295–1344

Acknowledgments

I have benefited greatly from the generous assistance of many people, but I am especially grateful to Sandy Bardsley who gave me a timely reminder of my plans for a study of Cecilia Penifader. In her capacity as a research assistant, Sandy Bardsley responded to an avalanche of requests with enthusiasm and creativity, and as one of those who read the manuscript, she improved it in innumerable ways. Cynthia Herrup, Maryanne Kowaleski, Christopher Whittick, and Merry Wiesner also offered invaluable criticisms of drafts, and Glenn Foard, County Archaeological Officer for the Northamptonshire County Council, answered my many questions both promptly and patiently. I have not taken all of their advice, but *A Medieval Life* is much better for their efforts. Cynthia Herrup endured my fascination with the life and times of Cecilia Penifader with her customary good humor and grace. Leslye Jackson and Amy Mack offered invaluable editorial guidance. I am grateful to Rachel Watson, County Archivist of Northamptonshire, the Duke of Buccleuch KT, and Peter Moyse for their assistance in reproducing photographs of the Brigstock records.

The photographs taken from the Brigstock court rolls on pages 7 and 129 are reproduced with permission of the Duke of Buccleuch, KT. The roll shown on page 7 [item 4] is from the Northamptonshire Record Office, Box 364A, roll 26. The doodle shown on page 129 is taken from Northamptonshire Record Office, Box X365, roll 51. The drawing found on page 18 is derived from a reconstruction found in Maurice Beresford and John Hurst, *Wharram Percy: Deserted Medieval Village* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 40. The plan found on page 20 is derived from an excavation drawing found in Guy Beresford, "Three Medieval Settlements on Dartmoor," *Medieval Archaeology* 23 (1979), pp. 98–158.

I also would like to thank the many reviewers who helped shape this book in many ways. My thanks go to the following people for their assistance: Edward Anson, University of Arkansas at Little Rock; Clifford Backman, Boston University; Daniel F. Callahan, University of Delaware; Jessica Coope, University of Nebraska; Charlotte Goldy, Miami University; Joseph Kicklighter, Auburn University; William Mathews, Potsdam College-SUNY; and Melinda Zook, Purdue University.

vi Acknowledgments

In writing this book, I have been inspired by my niece Nicole Bennett, who was a college student when I first thought of writing this book for college students. As a small way of expressing my gratitude for her cultural guidance and love, I dedicate this book to her.

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.*
—T.S. Eliot
“Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*

Contents

Chapter 1	Introduction	1
	<i>Manors and Manorial Records</i>	3
	<i>Brigstock and Cecilia Penifader</i>	9
	<i>The Plan of the Book</i>	12
Chapter 2	The World Around Her	14
	<i>House and Farmyard</i>	16
	<i>Arable, Pasture, Stream, and Forest</i>	20
	<i>The Wider World</i>	25
Chapter 3	Lords, Ladies, and Peasants	28
	<i>Seignorial Powers</i>	31
	<i>Peasants and Their "Social Betters"</i>	36
Chapter 4	Parish, Belief, Ritual	42
	<i>Peasant Piety</i>	45
	<i>The Parish and Its Clergy</i>	47
	<i>The Ritual Year</i>	54
Chapter 5	Changing Times	61
	<i>The Great Famine, 1315–22</i>	62
	<i>The Wrath of God?</i>	65
	<i>The Aftermath of the Great Famine</i>	68
	<i>The Black Death</i>	70
Chapter 6	Kin and Household	73
	<i>Kin and Household in Childhood</i>	74
	<i>Kin and Household in Adulthood</i>	79
	<i>Kinship and Inheritance</i>	85

<i>Chapter 7</i>	<i>An Economy of Makeshifts</i>	87
	<i>The Household Economy</i>	88
	<i>The Labor Market</i>	91
	<i>The Commodity Market</i>	94
	<i>The Land Market</i>	97
<i>Chapter 8</i>	<i>Community</i>	101
	<i>Managing the Community</i>	103
	<i>Friends and Neighbors</i>	108
	<i>A Loss of Community Spirit?</i>	111
<i>Chapter 9</i>	<i>Women and Men</i>	114
	<i>Gender Rules in Cecilia's World</i>	115
	<i>Gender and Household</i>	121
	<i>Complications</i>	125
<i>Chapter 10</i>	<i>Medieval Peasants, Modern People</i>	128
	<i>Cecilia Penifader in the Middle Ages</i>	130
	<i>Cecilia Penifader in Our Time</i>	133
<i>GLOSSARY</i>		139
<i>INDEX</i>		145

Introduction



Crusaders marching off to reclaim the Holy Land; kings besieging castles with archers and men-at-arms; bishops celebrating masses in new cathedrals; merchants haggling for bargains at fairs and markets. These are the images that usually accompany any mention of the “Middle Ages.” These men and their actions were important parts of medieval life, but they were also atypical. Most medieval people were not knights, kings, churchmen, or merchants. Most (more than nine out of ten) were peasants who eked out hard livings from the land. This book tells the story of one such peasant: Cecilia Penifader who lived on the English **manor** of Brigstock before the Black Death of the mid-fourteenth century.

Cecilia Penifader was born at the end of the thirteenth century; 1297 seems the most likely year. At that time, peasants were just beginning to pass surnames from one generation to the next. Cecilia’s derives from *Pennyfather*, and it suggests that Cecilia’s paternal grandfather or great-grandfather might have been known for his miserly habits. Perhaps the penny-pinching of her ancestors explains, in part, the prosperity of her family. Compared to knights and ladies, Cecilia’s parents were poor peasants, but compared to other peasants, her parents numbered among the well-off. As a result, Cecilia grew up in a better-built cottage and with a better diet than many of her poorer neighbors. She also grew up with more siblings than most: three brothers and four sisters. When she was about twenty years old, Cecilia acquired her first bit of land in Brigstock, and for the next twenty-seven years, the records of Brigstock tell a great deal about how she acquired and used her various meadows and fields. They also reveal that she was known to her family and friends as Cissa (a name that the clerks sometimes used instead of the latinized Cecilia). These same rolls also report that Cecilia sometimes stole grain from her neighbors,

sometimes argued with others, and sometimes owned animals that went astray. She never married, but she lived for about a decade next door to one brother, and she later shared a household for about five years with another brother. When she was about forty-five years old, Cecilia fell ill, and after more than a year of poor health, she died in 1344. Just before her death, she tried to give her landholdings to three young people (including one nephew and one niece), but after long and acrimonious arguments, her sister Christina inherited her properties. This is the bare outline of Cecilia's life, but the medieval archives of Brigstock tell much more.

Like other medieval peasants, Cecilia Penifader left no diaries, letters, or other personal writings. Occasionally a bright and lucky peasant learned to read and write, but most peasants were illiterate. Of the few who gained literacy, almost all were men. The most famous was Robert Grosseteste, born of poor parents about 1168, who escaped his background so thoroughly that he taught at Oxford University and rose to become Bishop of Lincoln. Yet Robert Grosseteste was exceptional. He was so intelligent, some sources say, that his surname began as a nickname—"large head"—for a precociously clever boy.

The three orders: a priest, a knight, and a peasant. Notice how the peasant is tucked into the margins of the scene, with the priest and knight turned toward each other in active conversation.



Still, his cleverness might have come to nothing. If his parents had needed him at home or if his manorial **bailliff** had opposed his education, he might never have left the place of his birth. So the educational success of Robert Grosseteste is the exception that proves the rule. Peasants, usually unable to read or write, have left no direct testimonies about their hopes, their fears, their delights, or their disappointments. Even Robert Grosseteste—who wrote a great deal about matters both philosophical and practical—never thought it worth his while to describe the world of his humble youth.

As a result, we know about peasants and their lives indirectly—from the writings of their social superiors. In the tripartite view of society that was popular by the High Middle Ages, peasants rested at the bottom of **three orders**. As “those who work” (*laboratores*), peasants supported people more privileged—“those who pray” (*oratores*) and “those who fight” (*pugnatores*). Each of these three orders ideally helped the other, with clergy contributing prayers and knights providing protection, but the mutuality of the system was more ideal than real. Also, the three groups were not equal. A peasant might have benefited from the prayers of a nun or from the protection offered by a knight, but a peasant was deemed to do work of lesser value and to be a less worthy person. Born into this unexalted state, a peasant’s lot was to labor for the benefit of others. This was unfortunate for peasants, but fortunate for historians. Because peasants were important economic assets, both “those who pray” and “those who fight” kept careful records of peasant doings; today, we can use these records to reconstruct the life of an ordinary woman who was born more than seven hundred years ago.

MANORS AND MANORIAL RECORDS

Clues about how privileged people regarded peasants can be found in their courtly songs, sarcastic proverbs, nasty jokes, and pious sermons. Knights and ladies were fond of songs known as *pastourelles* that told, among other things, about how easy it was for knights to have sex with peasant women or, failing that, to rape them; monks and students enjoyed jokes that portrayed peasants as ludicrously dumb and foolish; and priests, **friars**, and bishops preached sermons that depicted “those who work” as objects of pity, charity, and disgust. Even *Piers Plowman*, a deeply sympathetic portrayal of rural life written a few decades after Cecilia Penifader’s death, portrayed the peasant’s lot as hard and pitiable. These literary texts are useful for understanding the often astoundingly negative attitudes of elites toward peasants, but they tell little about the peasants themselves. For information about the daily lives of peasants, the most abundant and most useful sources are legal and economic documents that report on the administration of manors.

Manorialism was the economic system whereby peasants supported the landowning elite. On manors, in other words, the working lives of peasants intersected with the financial needs of their social superiors. Manors consisted of land and tenants, and they were common in regions with fertile soils that

rewarded intensive cultivation: southeast and central England, northern France, western Germany, and certain regions of southern Europe, such as the Rhône and Po valleys. The land of the manor belonged to a landowner, the lord (*dominus*) or lady (*domina*) of the manor.¹ Some manorial land—called the *demesne*—was reserved for direct use of the landowner; most was held by peasants who owed various rents and dues for their holdings.

Manorialism first developed in the Early Middle Ages, and manors were originally worked mostly by slaves and other dependent tenants. Some were descendants of the *coloni* who had once worked the villas of the Roman Empire; others had been forced into a dependent state by violence and war; and still others had surrendered themselves into bondage in return for protection. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, slavery was disappearing in most of Europe, thanks to a combination of Church policies, opposition from peasants, and practical concessions on the part of the landowning elite. By Cecilia's time, most manors were worked by **free peasants and serfs** (in England, **villeins**). Freedom or serfdom was determined at birth; if born of parents who were serfs, a boy or girl was bound to serfdom. Serfs were not slaves; they could not be bought and sold at will, and they were protected by custom (that is, they were obliged to serve their manor only in the same ways that their parents had served). But because serfs were obliged not only to stay put but also to supply labor services, they provided landowners with an unusually exploitable work force for the cultivation of the *demesne*. In England in 1300, about half of all peasants were serfs and the other half were free.

As manors developed, they grew more economically complex. In the Early Middle Ages, manors generated profit directly: the crops peasants cultivated in the fields; the goods they produced in manorial workshops; and the rents they paid for the plots they tilled on their own. By 1300, lords and ladies profited from manors in additional ways. First, they took the produce off the *demesne*, and either consumed or sold it. The *demesne*, once cultivated by slaves, was by then usually cultivated by serfs and wage-laborers. Second, they collected rents from peasants who held plots of land from the manor. Tenants paid rent in cash, in kind (perhaps a chicken at Christmas and a few eggs at Easter), and, if serfs, in labor (under the direction of the manorial officers, serfs sowed, weeded, and harvested the *demesne*). Third, lords and ladies profited from legal rights that had accrued to manors over the course of centuries. Tenants had to attend manorial courts, where their small fines and fees produced valuable income; they were often obliged to pay for the use of

¹Roughly 10 percent of manors were held by women at any one time, but this proportion varied a great deal according to time and region. Most manorial ladies were widows, who held manors as part of their **dower**—that is, as part of the properties designated to support a woman if, as often happened, her husband died before her. Widows could use dower lands to support themselves, but they usually could not sell or transfer them; after a widow died, the land went to her husband's heir. In addition to widows, some women held manors as inheritances from their parents or other kin. Inheritance customs varied throughout Europe; in some places, daughters inherited equally with sons, but in most places (including England), women usually inherited only if they had no brothers. If an heiress did acquire a manor, she had more control over it than did a widow, for she could sell or transfer it.

manorial mills, ovens, winepresses, and other such facilities; and they had to pay a variety of small charges when they married, when they traveled, and even when they died.

Free peasants and serfs endured the burdens of manorialism because they had little choice. The economic privileges of “those who pray” and “those who fight” were buttressed by considerable military, political, and social powers. In this regard, manorialism was complemented by the culture and power of the military elite. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, a cohort of warriors had emerged in Europe distinguished by their skill in fighting on horseback, their close ties to one another, their hereditary claims to knightly status, and their control of the land. Historians have since coined the term **feudalism** to describe the culture, relationships, and rules by which these warriors lived, but this word often generates more confusion than clarity.² Certainly, it implies more order, system, and standardization than was the case; the traditions of these warriors varied from place to place and were always changing to suit new circumstances. (Indeed, the adaptability of the feudal elite was an asset almost as important as their military strength.) In the England into which Cecilia was born at the end of the thirteenth century, a small feudal elite, headed by a king, ruled the land. They waged war and negotiated peace; they judged and punished wrongdoers; they decided who could pass through their territories. In short, they governed by virtue of their wealth, aristocratic birth, and military might. Peasants were taught to respect the authority of the feudal elite as natural and good, but respectful demeanor was a practical matter too. Faced with a powerful and arrogant knight, Cecilia—or any other peasant—usually found that deference and obedience were the safest behaviors.

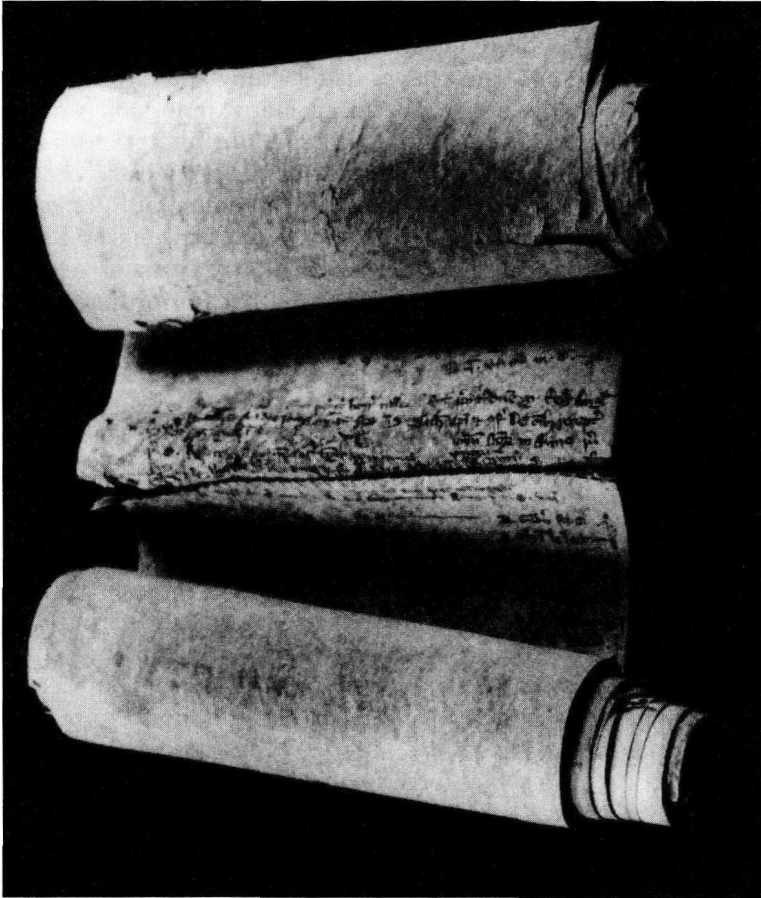
To profit from manors, lords and ladies needed not only to wield power effectively but also to manage their manors efficiently. In the late eighth century, Charlemagne, king of the Franks, had sought to compile detailed lists of royal manors, and in the ninth century, registers of lands, tenants, and income were kept for some ecclesiastical estates. But it was in England in the thirteenth century that the most developed systems of manorial record-keeping developed. There, an array of stewards, bailiffs, reeves, clerks, and other manorial officers supervised manors, and they kept copious records to prove that they were conscientious and honest administrators (and, in some cases, to hide their cheating). These records tell a great deal about the peasants with

²*Feudalism* is a word with two distinctive—and potentially confusing—meanings. Some scholars use it to describe the general economy of the Middle Ages; to them, feudalism is a stage in economic development in which serfs on manors were forced to labor on behalf of a warrior class. This stage is seen as falling between slavery and capitalism. Many students encounter this definition of feudalism—which derives from the writings of Karl Marx—in economics and sociology courses. But most historians use feudalism in the more limited sense employed in this book; that is, to describe the customs and relationships of an elite who governed ordinary people by virtue of their military, political, and social power. Feudalism is a modern word; a medieval person would probably have talked about *vassalage*. For arguments against the concept of feudalism, see E. A. R. Brown, “The Tyranny of a Concept: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe,” *American Historical Review* 79 (1974), 1063–88, and Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (1994).

whom manorial officers dealt on a regular basis. *Custumals* detailed the customs of a manor. In Brigstock, for example, a custumal specified that a sick person who gave away land had to be strong enough to leave his or her house after the gift; if the grantor died without so doing, the transfer was invalid. This rule ensured that no dying persons could be pressured to preempt, on their death-beds, the claims of heirs. *Surveys* and *rentals* listed the tenants of the manor, telling what lands they held and, in the case of rentals, what rents (in cash, kind, or labor) they owed. No such records survive for Brigstock in Cecilia's day, but a rental from 1416—about seventy years after her death—suggests that her family fortunes had plummeted; not a single Penifader was listed among the tenants of the manor. *Account rolls* noted the expenses and profits of a manor, usually for a year starting at Michaelmas (29 September), the traditional end of the harvest season. No complete accounts survive for medieval Brigstock, but, if they did, they might tell about the stipends given to manorial servants or the wages paid to workers hired on a day-basis to do specific tasks. *Court rolls* describe the proceedings of manorial courts, which dealt with a wide variety of contracts, disputes, and petty crimes. These usually met either twice a year or, as in Brigstock, every three weeks.³ When court rolls survive in abundance—as they do for Brigstock in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—they offer unparalleled information about the crime, controversy, and commerce among medieval peasants.

During Cecilia Penifader's lifetime, almost all members of the feudal and ecclesiastical elite in England relied on manors and peasants for some of their support. When kings, queens, barons, ladies, bishops, monks, and nuns sat down to supper, they ate food produced by the labor of serfs on manorial demesnes. When they purchased fine silks from the East, built new houses in stone, or arranged to have wine shipped from Gascony, they spent money accumulated from the rents, fees, and fines of their manorial tenants, free and serf. Yet the manor was not the only point of fiscal intersection between peasants and their social superiors. Monarchs held manors of their own, but they also claimed some authority over *all* peasants within their realms—even those who lived on manors owned by others. In England, the king could tax all peasants, could compel male peasants to join his armies, and could even force peasants to sell him animals or food at set prices. Cecilia Penifader was unfortunate to live in a time of particularly harsh royal exactions, a time when the

³Historians use the term "roll" to describe manorial records because that is exactly what they are; after clerks finished writing their notes on parchment, they rolled them up. Since clerks usually also stitched together many parchment sheets (or *membranes*) to form a single roll, account rolls and court rolls can be very fat. In Brigstock in 1314–15, for example, 13 sheets of parchment (most between 12 and 24 inches long) were joined end-to-end to produce a single roll of more than 19 feet. On this roll, the clerk kept notes for 16 courts held between November 1314 and September 1315. Sometimes it is awkward to read these rolls, but medieval clerks knew what they were doing. Rolled into compact bundles, these rolls could be easily transported and stored. The parchment used in making manorial rolls came from the skins of animals, usually sheep. Parchment was expensive to use, but durable. In the century or so after Cecilia's death, paper became more common in Europe, and in many cases, later records kept on paper have rotted more quickly than earlier ones kept on parchment.



Photograph by Peter Moyse, A.R.P.S.

The Brigstock court roll for 1314–15. This roll is made up of 13 sheets of parchment stitched together end-to-end, and it measures more than 19 feet in length.

three Edwards—Edward I (1272–1307), his son Edward II (1307–1327), and his grandson Edward III (1327–1377)—turned repeatedly to ordinary peasants to find money, men, and food for their wars in Wales, Scotland, and France.

Bishops, monks, and nuns were also supported by manors, and like monarchs, they had further interests in the peasants who lived outside their episcopal palaces and monastic walls. In common with all medieval Christians, peasants were compelled to **tithe**, which meant that each year one-tenth of their harvested grain, new lambs, and other produce was given to the Church. Peasants were also subject to ecclesiastical jurisdiction, and, if brought into a church court for fornication, slander, bigamy, or other offenses that fell under Church supervision, they could face fines and physical punishments. Some peasants so angered Church officers that they even endured excommunication, that is, they were cut off from participation in the sacraments and

community of the Church. In January 1299, for example, the Bishop of Lincoln ordered the excommunication of everyone in Brigstock who had participated in a robbery the week before. The thieves had secretly entered the chamber of Hugh Wade, a lodger in the house of a local widow, and stolen money and goods out of his strongbox. More than likely, the Bishop responded so strongly to this theft because Hugh Wade may have been a cleric or servant of the Bishop (or both). It was in the interest of monarchs and ecclesiastics to keep good records of these additional dealings with peasants. Wherever tax lists, military requisitions, ecclesiastical court books, or bishops' registers survive, they provide further information about the lives of ordinary people in the medieval countryside. As with manorial documentation, so too with these other types of records: they are especially full and abundant for England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.⁴

In short, we can study medieval peasants because their labor was so important in supporting the Church, the monarchy, and the landed elite. Although all records pertaining to manors and peasants are useful, the most useful are manorial court rolls. Peasants brought most of their legal business to these courts. Although free peasants could take some complaints to county or royal courts and serious crimes (such as murder and rape) often had to be judged in higher courts, it was to manorial courts that most rural disputes, crimes, inheritances, and contracts were reported. The court records for the manor of Brigstock survive in exceptional number for the time of Cecilia Penifader: 549 courts held between 1287 and 1348. It is important to recognize, at the outset, that manorial courts were different from modern courts. Today, most of us go to court only when forced by special crisis or summons; in the fourteenth century, Cecilia Penifader and other tenants in Brigstock attended court every three weeks, accepting its meetings as an ordinary and expected obligation. Today, we usually go to court for unpleasant reasons, especially to resolve conflicts or crimes; Cecilia and her neighbors certainly raised such difficulties in their court, but they also registered agreements, exchanged land, and agreed on ordinances. Today, courts are dominated by professional lawyers without whom almost nothing can be done; the peasants of Brigstock were so fully conversant with the rules of their courts that they seldom needed specialists to help them. The meeting of a manorial court was so ordinary a part of life in Brigstock that most people probably felt as comfortable in court as they did in church or in the lanes in front of their houses. Special court buildings were rarely constructed, so when peasants attended court, they literally gathered at their local church, in the lane, on the green, or at some other familiar location.

In its origins, a manorial court was an instrument of seignorial power, a way for the lord or lady to control the manor's tenants and to extract income

⁴In some cases, the superiority of English records seems to stem from the more careful record-keeping of administrators in medieval England, but, in most cases, it has been mostly a matter of survival through the centuries. Thanks to a strong legal system and a relatively stable social order, England's medieval archives have survived especially well. In France, for contrast, many medieval archives were destroyed during the French Revolution.