

EDITORIAL

Families 999AD, 1999AD

The imminent approach of the Millennium has prompted several attempts to look back at what life was like one thousand years ago, as part of an appraisal of what's changed and what hasn't. Lacey and Danziger's bestseller *The Year 1000* is a particularly lively and readable example. What, for example, do we know about the family in the period textbooks used to refer to as the 'Dark Ages'? It all depends, of course, on how you define 'family', and where you gather evidence from.

According to Pierre Toubert (1996), documentation from 800–1000 AD has confirmed that in France, Germany and Italy, the small peasant household normally comprised mother, father and their still unmarried children. The 'large extended family' popularly thought to have preceded our modern 'nuclear family' is not in evidence in this population. A census of 2,600 tenant families in about 820 AD on lands owned by the Saint-Germain-des-Prés abbey in France gave the average size of the peasant household as between 4.5 and 5.5 persons. Of these 2,600 families, only eight had more than nine members. At least in that region, at that time, the average household size was not very different from today's, and then, as now, economic necessity has a great deal to do with who lived under one roof, and for how long (the present trend for young adults to continue living with parents is simply one example, and one which seemingly contradicts our dogma that 'individuation' requires physical separation from family of origin).

A thousand years ago, according to controversial psychohistorian de Mause, infants appear to have been breastfed for about two years, but infanticide and abortion were widely practised (de Mause, 174: 51). Families on the poverty line might simply expose babies they could not feed. Wealthier families often farmed out their babies to wet nurses (a partial parallel with the role of nannies for the well-off at a much later era) and many nobly born children for this reason died not only of disease but also from neglect. Even though children were important as potential sources of labour (and for the upper classes, of wealth and dynastic alliances) what we now term 'attachment' between parents and children probably had a very different meaning to what it has today. The tears we shed at seeing little John deprived of his mother's presence (in Robertson's famous film) would seem unbelievably self-indulgent to a viewer in 999. Now, infanticide is a crime, rather than a regrettable fact of life. Our civilisation provides options and solutions for those who cannot (or prefer not to) breastfeed, those who seek to avoid conception, those who could not normally conceive, and those who would (in 999 AD) have died giving birth.

We have massively redefined the entire enterprise of conceiving, birthing and rearing children, creating a set of choices that would have been unimaginable in 999.

When many children routinely died in infancy, or before reaching maturity, their society defined them as dispensable, and sanctioned their abandonment (and, we may reasonably guess, their widespread abuse). Now, children are seen as enormously important, and society makes a huge investment in them. Their rights and entitlements are subject to societal protection. We exhibit more distress and concern at abuse of children than we do at abuse of adults.

The Frankish Empire, like every European society of 1000 years ago, was (in our terms) 'patriarchal'. Yet we would be ill-informed if we assumed that women were therefore as marginalised as they were in Victorian times. Prior to 1066, for example, women in England could own and inherit property in their own right, and they were clearly better off under the law than when the Norman conquest imposed more 'civilised' and 'courtly' values. The history of gender relations, like the history of the family, does not always evolve in the linear way that reflects our faith in progress.

In 999 AD, much of the money we now devote to health care was instead devoted to the church. The conjunction of Christian teaching, material deprivation, and the strong likelihood of an early death provided a setting in which religious devotion flourished. Because people believed that it would work, worship at the relics of saints clearly had some efficacy in curing physical ailments. Are we therapists different when we undertake our pilgrimages to sit at the feet of the great and holy individuals of our time, and come away uplifted and convinced that we will better help even our 'impossible' clients?

For us, the secular 'priests' of our era, the approach of the Millennium seems fraught with portents as dire as those which our ancestors worried about in 999. Will we be forced to embrace 'managed care'? Will brief (or even single-session) therapy become society's pragmatic response to increasing panic at 'treatments' that seem as interminable, and ineffective, as the saying of endless masses for the souls of those in Purgatory? Or, if only we were skilled enough, would we always work briefly anyway?

References

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