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David Herlihy

### **Three Patterns of Social Mobility in Medieval History**

Medieval rulers and philosophers repeatedly affirmed that the divine will had established social inequality, and that the good Christian should be content with his station in life. “Let everyone,” Charlemagne instructed his subjects in the early 800s, “serve God faithfully in that order in which he is placed.”<sup>1</sup> In an oft-quoted poem written about the year 1000, Adalbero, Bishop of Laon, described the Christian community, which appeared to be one, as divided into those who prayed, those who fought, and those who labored; all functional groups had to fulfill their lawful duties, to assure for the people peace, justice, and salvation.<sup>2</sup> “The dispensation of divine providence,” Pope Gregory VII declared in 1079, “ordered that there should be distinct grades and orders.”<sup>3</sup> He went on to state that the community could not exist without a diversity of social ranks, and without the subordination of the lesser orders to the greater. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII reiterated: “According to the law of the universe, all things are not reduced to order equally and immediately; but the lowest through the intermediate and the intermediate through the superior.”<sup>4</sup> The members of each order should not aspire to the prerogatives and honors allotted to those in other social positions. Nor should Christians seek to surpass their peers in wealth or dignity. “He who has enough to satisfy his wants,” the scholastic philosopher Henry of Langenstein concluded in the fourteenth century, “and nevertheless ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position or that subsequently he may have

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1 “Unusquisque in eo ordine Deo serviat fideliter in quo ille est.” Missi cuiusdam admonitio, a. 801–812. *Capitularia regum francorum*, A. Boretius (ed.), (Hanover: 1883), I, 240.

2 Carmen ad Rotbertum regem, in *Patrologia Latina*, J. P. Migne (ed.), (Paris, 1853), CXXI, 782. “Triplex ergo Dei domus est quae creditur una: / Nunc orant, alii pugnant aliique laborant.”

3 E. Emerton (trans.) *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII* (New York, 1932), 142.

4 From the bull *Unam Sanctam*, dated November 18, 1302. For the complete text, see Coleman J. Barry, (ed.), *Readings in Church History* (Westminster, Md., 1960), I, 465–467.

enough to live without labor, or that his sons may become men of wealth and importance—all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality, or pride.”<sup>5</sup>

These and similar statements convinced historians of an older generation—Sombart, Max Weber, Tawney, and many others—that medieval society was based upon a system of closed and stable estates, in which social mobility was officially discouraged and rarely in fact achieved.<sup>6</sup> This familiar thesis has, however, two weaknesses, which recent research has made blatantly apparent. It was founded upon a distorted interpretation of social values and policies of the Middle Ages. Although medieval moral counselors were suspicious of personal ambition, which they equated with avarice or pride, they never advocated a social system based on hereditary, impenetrable castes. On the contrary, one of the most powerful religious movements of medieval history—the reform of the Church in the eleventh century—aimed at outlawing clerical marriage and abolishing clerical dynasties. The success of the reform assured that one of the most important elite groups in society, the clergy, would be open to new men. The clergy had to be recruited anew with every generation, and this made the Church the most visible avenue of social advance in the medieval world. Although most great prelates continued to be drawn from the prominent lay families, still, low-born men of talent could occasionally attain the highest levels in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Pope Gregory VII, who gave his name to the eleventh-century reform; Pope Urban II, who summoned the first crusade; Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, chief adviser to two French kings; Thomas Becket, the ill-fated archbishop of Canterbury; and many other famous clerics were of relatively humble (or at least obscure) social origins.

Moreover, Sombart and others erroneously believed that the ideals expressed and the exhortations found in theological and moral treatises accurately depicted life as it was lived in the Middle Ages. Current research has focused sharply upon the realities, as well as the aspirations, of medieval society, and our picture of social mobility is

5 Cited in R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York, 1963), 38.

6 According to Werner Sombart, in the precapitalistic economy, which allegedly persisted in Italy until the fifteenth century and elsewhere in Europe until the sixteenth, peasants, artisans, and merchants worked only as much as was necessary to maintain themselves in their stations in life, and did “nothing more.” Cf. *Der moderne Kapitalismus* (Leipzig, 1916, 2nd ed.), 188–198. For an evaluation of the work of all of these historians in the light of recent research on the medieval economy, see J. Gilchrist, *The Church and Economic Activity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1969).

now much transformed. Historians today recognize that both the feudal nobility and the urban “patriciate” (as the great city families are now usually called) were largely formed in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries.<sup>7</sup> The very appearance of these aristocratic classes is irrefutable evidence of social mobility. And new men continued to penetrate the ranks of both privileged orders during the subsequent Middle Ages.

The reality and importance of social mobility in the Middle Ages are today unquestioned. Its further investigation promises to illuminate the origins, functions, and character of the rural and urban aristocracies. The conclusions of this inquiry should also have considerable theoretical interest. Medieval Europe was very much a world in formation. Its history offers a precious opportunity to identify and observe the forces which, over a lengthy span of years, on the most fundamental levels, shaped and reshaped society.

In this paper, we shall describe three specific patterns or models of social mobility, which are observable at various epochs and in various parts of medieval Europe. We do not claim that these models offer an exhaustive description of this type of social movement; they are, however, comparatively well illuminated in this period of sparse sources. The models are distinguished primarily by varying economic conditions which affected their functioning. The three sets of conditions were: (1) the economic stagnation, which gripped the medieval world until about the year 1000; (2) the expansion and the rising per-capita productivity which marked the medieval economy between approximately the years 1000 and 1300; (3) the social and economic conditions specifically associated with the medieval towns, which become most visible in the late Middle Ages (c. 1300–1500).

7 For an excellent discussion of social mobility in medieval society, with a bibliography of recent research, see David Nicholas, “Medieval Patterns of Social Mobility,” forthcoming. Among the many useful studies which could be cited, see especially L. Genicot, “La noblesse dans la société médiévale. A propos des dernières études relatives aux terres d’Empire,” *Le Moyen Age*, LXXI (1965), 539–560; *idem*, “The Nobility in Medieval Francia: Continuity, Break or Evolution?” *Lordship and Community in Medieval Europe. Selected Readings*, Fredric L. Cheyette (ed.) (New York, 1968), 128–136; Georges Duby, “Une enquête à poursuivre: la noblesse dans la France médiévale,” *Revue historique*, CCXXVI (1961), 1–22; K. Bosl, “Ueber soziale Mobilität in der mittelalterlichen ‘Gesellschaft.’ Dienst, Freiheit, Freizügigkeit als Motive sozialen Aufstiegs,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, XLVII (1960), 306–332; *idem*, *Die Gesellschaft in der Geschichte des Mittelalters* (Göttingen, 1966). For a discussion of recent views concerning the origins of the town patriciate, see B. Hibbert, “The Origins of the Medieval Town Patriciate,” *Past and Present*, III (1953), 15–27.

Before examining medieval social mobility against the background of these differing sets of economic conditions, we must first consider one force or factor which will have fundamental importance in each of the three patterns we shall explore. Medieval society was divided into many social estates, orders, strata, or groups, which performed specific functions for the community. Considerations of security, welfare, or salvation made many of those functions essential. In order to provide a constant level of services, the community had to maintain a roughly stable or proportionate allocation of its members among its various functional groups. It had to preserve this proportionate distribution over time and across generations. Otherwise, the ability of one group or another to perform essential services would be compromised, and this the community, whether for economic or cultural reasons, could not tolerate. Paradoxically, therefore, the very ideal of a society divided into stable orders, which performed fixed duties, could result in considerable social movement. The implementation or the defense of the ideal could well require that members from one order be encouraged or forced to transfer to another, for the purpose of preserving a traditional and necessary numerical balance.

A shift of members would clearly be indicated whenever one functional group was not replacing itself by natural means at an appropriate rate in comparison with the others. The recruitment of the Christian clergy once again offers a salient example of differential rates of replacement engendering social movement and mobility. As the clergy did not replenish its members through natural reproduction, so the community, demanding the services of a clergy, had to recruit individuals, from differing social backgrounds, to enter upon an ecclesiastical career. The need to muster a new clergy every generation made the Church, as we have already noted, the most open avenue to social preferment in medieval society. But differing rates of natural reproduction and replacement could also generate movement among the other social strata and orders as well. We thus confront this question: did all social and functional groups in medieval society maintain their numbers over time through natural reproduction at comparable rates?

Whenever the sources allow us insight, the conclusion they consistently indicate, for nearly every documented period of the Middle Ages, is this: success in rearing children, in bringing up heirs and successors, was closely related to welfare. Those blessed with the goods of this earth were also blessed (or burdened) with children. In a

Biblical passage which medieval writers were fond of quoting, “where there are great riches, there are also many to eat them” (*Ecc. 5:10*). In contrast, the deprived, the heavily burdened, the poor left comparatively few heirs to follow in the traces of their miserable lives. This principle, that welfare affected replacement, is so central to our argument that we must illustrate some of the data from which it derives.

The earliest surviving sources which allow us to observe how medieval communities perpetuated their numbers over time date from the late eighth and ninth centuries. They are surveys of serf or peasant families subject to the authority of a particular manor. Although limited to the peasant population, the surveys sometimes record the number of adults and children in the households, and they frequently give indications of status and welfare. They therefore allow us to identify who in the population were supporting the larger numbers of children, and to compare this distribution with indices of welfare, such as the status and size of the tenure, the dues imposed, or the number of animals owned.

One survey from the monastery of Farfa in central Italy, redacted between 789 and 822, describes nearly 300 peasant households and identifies the kinds and (although not consistently) the number of farm animals owned.<sup>8</sup> Table 1 is a cross tabulation of household wealth, as indicated by animals present, with average size and average number of minors recorded. Because of defective reporting, the kinds, rather than the numbers of animals, are used as the index of wealth, on the assump-

Table 1 Animals Owned and Household Size at Farfa, c. 800

KINDS OF ANIMALS	HOUSEHOLDS	MEMBERS	AVERAGE	MINORS	AVERAGE
0	170	745	4.38	397	2.34
1	43	193	4.49	105	2.44
2	37	184	4.97	109	2.95
3	35	204	5.83	127	3.63
4	9	55	6.11	35	3.89
5	1	11	11.00	9	9.00

Source: I. Giorgi and U. Balzani (eds.), *Il regesto di Farfa compilato da Gregorio di Catino* (Rome, 1892), V, 254–263.

8 The kinds of animals are *boves* (oxen and cows), *vitelli* (calves), horses, donkeys, and pigs.

tion that the more prosperous farms would also own a greater variety of animals. “Minors” include all persons in the household who are younger, in terms of generations, than the household head; children, nephews, their possible spouses, and grandchildren are all counted as minors.

Both the average size of households and the average number of minors present show an unmistakable correlation with the kinds of animals owned, and indirectly with the prosperity of the peasant family. This survey illuminates, of course, only part of the total spectrum of Carolingian society; but even among the peasants, the influence of welfare upon reproduction, and eventually upon replacement, seems apparent.

The largest and in many respects the most detailed of all the Carolingian manorial surveys is the “polyptych” of Irminon, who was abbot of the monastery of Saint-Germain-des-Prés near (and now part of) Paris in the first quarter of the ninth century.<sup>9</sup> It describes the estates and the dependent farms, called manses, subject to the monastery’s authority in the vicinity of Paris. The manse, as the basic tenurial unit, was classified into three types: free (*ingenuilis*), “lidile” (*lidilis*), and servile (*servilis*). Presumably these categories recalled the personal juridical status of the peasants who had first held the manses—free cultivators (*coloni*), slaves (*servi*), or half-free *lidi*. This last group is of uncertain derivation, but may possibly have been recruited from barbarian captives. In any case, at the time the survey was redacted, the status of the manse had no fixed correspondence with the personal status of the peasants settled upon it. The free tenures were usually the largest and the least burdened with charges; the servile tenures were the smallest and the most heavily taxed; and the “lidile” tenures occupied an intermediate position. Roughly, then, families settled upon a free manse were better off than those which held a servile tenure. The polyptych also identifies children (usually called *infantes*) in the peasant households, and once again permits us to identify who were the most successful rearers of children in these peasant communities.

It should be noted that servants or household helpers are not mentioned in these surveys. If they were present, their numbers were

9 On the nature of the source and the character of the families resident upon the estates of Saint-Germain, see most recently the studies by Emily R. Coleman, “A Note on Medieval Peasant Demography,” *Historical Methods Newsletter*, V (1972), 53–58; *idem*, “Medieval Marriage Characteristics,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, II (1971), 205–219.

doubtlessly small. Moreover, hired helpers in these agricultural communities would more likely be able-bodied adults rather than *infantes* (the word itself implies dependency). Servants, hired helpers, and similar groups, if they were present at all, could not have much affected the distribution of children.

Table 2 Tenures, Children, and Adults at Saint-Germain-des-Prés

	TENURES			TOTAL
	FREE	“LIDILE”	SERVILE	
Number	1430	25	191	1646
Persons:				
Children	4615	133	568	5316
Percent	86.8	2.5	10.7	100.0
Adults	4028	124	558	4710
Percent	85.6	2.6	11.8	100.0
Ratio:				
Child/Adult	1.14	1.07	1.02	1.13

Source: Auguste Longnon (ed.), *Polyptyque de l'abbaye de Saint-Germain-des-Prés* (Paris, 1886-95), I, 237-238. The calculations were made by B. Guérard.

Among the serfs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, children were not distributed in the same proportions as adults among the three types of tenures. There were relatively more children on the favored free manse, and fewer upon the heavily taxed servile holdings. Although the differences may appear slight, still, if the population remained fixed on the holdings and if all children survived equally well, then the proportion of those living upon the servile manse would be reduced by approximately 10 per cent with each generation. Ultimately, most peasants would look back to ancestors who at one time had been settled upon the free, rather than the servile tenures.

These surveys usually included only peasant families, but it is worth noting that four of the households at Farfa were headed by a *scario*, who was an official or steward responsible for the administration of the monastic estates. The *scario* thus occupied a high social position. The four households were among the largest surveyed. Their average size was 9.5 persons (as opposed to 4.7 for the entire population) and the average number of minors or dependents counted in them was 7.5



(the comparable figure for all households was 2.7). Although the four households constitute a minuscule part of the survey, these important families were substantially larger than those of the ordinary peasants: much wealth, many to consume it.

Our last example takes us far from the Carolingian countryside to a vastly different if still medieval world: the Florentine dominions in the year 1427, which then included nearly the entire province of Tuscany. A survey of that year, called the Catasto, has preserved a unique insight into a population of 260,000 persons, resident in 60,000 households. The survey meticulously records possessions as well as people, and permits a precise differentiation between rich and poor. This was a much more complex society than the small peasant communities previously considered, and it included a large proportion of urban residents. About a quarter of the population was living in cities of more than 3,500 inhabitants—a very high figure by medieval standards. Because there may be a tendency for the wealth of households to decline as their heads pass beyond the prime of life, we shall consider the population by three age categories: minors, aged 0–17; young adults, aged 18–47; and older adults, aged 48–99.<sup>10</sup> In the Catasto, servants were not counted in the households of their masters but were considered to form households in their own right and name. The children in the survey are thus the natural or legal dependents of the person named as household head.

Again, the distribution of minors and dependents in the Tuscan households is not the same as the distribution of young adults across these various wealth categories. In particular, the two richest categories of households, with 34.3 per cent of the young adults, contained 36.5 per cent of the children. On the assumption that the children survived equally well and that no subsequent adjustments were made in the distribution of the population across the wealth categories, then the two richest categories would grow by more than 6 per cent in relative size over each generation. Where, in Florentine society, there was much

10 The word “minor” here designates all persons, married or unmarried, who appear in the Catasto with a stated age of 17 years or less. In reporting ages, the population tended to favor years exactly divisible by 10 and 5, and this “age heaping” is particularly pronounced among the poor and the rural segments of the population. In order to diminish possible distortions arising from this tendency, the intervals are broken at age 17 and 47, rather than the favored ages 15 and 45. This avoids placing a favored age at the margins of the intervals. On the character of the Catasto and the reliability of the data it contains, see Christiane Klapisch, “Fiscalité et démographie en Toscane (1427–1430),” *Annales-Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations*, XXIV (1969), 1313–1337.

Table 3 Welfare and Age Distributions in Tuscany, 1427

	ASSESSMENT (FLORINS)				TOTAL
	0	1-100	101-400	OVER 400	
Ages:					
0-17					
Persons	10901	57200	24053	15139	107293
Percent	10.2	53.3	22.4	14.1	100.0
18-47					
Persons	9635	50595	19938	11402	91570
Percent	10.5	55.2	21.8	12.5	100.0
48-99					
Persons	6366	35761	12972	5540	60639
Percent	10.5	59.0	21.4	9.1	100.0
Total	26902	143556	56963	32081	259502
Ratio:					
Minor/Young Adult	1.13	1.13	1.21	1.33	1.17

Only persons with stated ages are included. Assessment is the total value of taxable assets before allowable deductions and is expressed in gold florins.

wealth, so there would be many to consume it. Interestingly, the absolutely destitute at Florence, with no taxable assets, replaced themselves as well as those with some but little property. A large number of apparently destitute families were sharecroppers (*mezzadri*) who lived on well-stocked farms owned by urban landlords; presumably they benefited from the use of capital invested by the city. Taxable wealth may not be a flawless index of welfare, but it still provides a sufficiently accurate measurement.

In spite of the great differences in location and character of the communities we have considered, consistently in the medieval world those families and social strata which commanded the larger part of available resources were also rearing the greater number of children. Doubtless other factors influenced rates of reproduction and replacement. There are indications that the poor segments of society were more sensitive than the rich to long-term economic swings. Bad times delayed marriages among the poor and discouraged procreation; the resources commanded by the wealthy gave them partial immunity from such pressures. Bad times therefore heightened the contrasts between poor and rich in average household size, children supported, and eventual replacement. Such contrasts seem to have diminished in

prosperous years without, however, disappearing.<sup>11</sup> Residence was another factor affecting replacement, particularly residence in towns; this we shall consider when we examine our third pattern of social mobility. The forces affecting reproduction and replacement were thus complex and shifting. It remains true, however, that whenever our sources permit us to judge, welfare was exerting an important influence upon the ability of medieval social groups to preserve their numbers across generations.

The consistency with which this principle operated is remarkable (we have not cited all possible examples), but not perhaps the principle itself. Medieval society was living close to the margins of what its available resources could produce; access to those resources was not distributed evenly among all members. Those favored with resources could therefore afford to support more children, heirs, and successors than the economically deprived. If all segments of society reared as many children as they could reasonably support, then the contrasts in replacement rates, which we have observed, would inevitably appear.

The correlation of welfare and replacement had profound repercussions for the pattern of social mobility in medieval society. If the argument so far presented has validity, then the conclusion is obvious: the dominant direction of social mobility in medieval society had to be *downward*. The more rapid expansion of the higher social strata tended to create a top-heavy social pyramid. Stability had to be sought by forcing a continuous downward settlement of family lines from higher to lower social levels. No society can function with all chiefs and no warriors, with all stewards and no serfs, with all lords and no laborers. The children of the privileged thus faced an uncertain social future, and, barring extraordinary efforts, many of them would have to accept a lower status than their parents had enjoyed.

Support for this conclusion—that the dominant direction of social mobility in medieval society was downward—can be found in many literary texts. References to impoverished nobles and other *déclassé* persons are in truth far more numerous in medieval sources

11 At Verona, for example, in 1425, when the economic depression of the late Middle Ages continued to affect the city, the correlation between taxable wealth and the number of children aged 0–15 in the city households is 0.434. But in 1502, during an economic upswing, the coefficient drops to a weak 0.199. Wealth, in other words, no longer was exerting so strong an influence over the number of children households were supporting under prosperous times as it had during the previous economic slump. For the data upon which these figures are based and further discussion concerning them, see my “The Population of Verona in the First Century of Venetian Rule,” forthcoming.

than allusions to self-made men. The Carolingian capitularies frequently mention free but impoverished persons. Many abandoned their freedom and became serfs; still others “because of need become beggars, thieves or criminals.” This awareness of the instability of status probably contributed to the notorious medieval sense of the fleeting character of worldly honors. “I myself have often observed,” Lotario Segni (later Pope Innocent III) lugubriously observed in the 1190s, “how much and how many important men are in want. Wealth does not make a man rich, but puts him in need.”<sup>12</sup> Medieval literature has preserved many somber reflections on the great families of the past, now much diminished:

It will not seem or strange for thee or hard  
To hear how families degenerate,  
Since even cities have their term of life.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, a paradox. The dominant downward drift of family lines could also favor a small but significant upward movement. This downward drift tended to obscure juridical distinctions among persons, as, for example, those separating the free from the unfree. It therefore blocked the formation of impenetrable status barriers between the orders. The decline of some important families also opened room at the top, which persons from humbler origins could hope to fill. Above all, the tendency for privileged families to lose status created a fluid situation, which allowed some social movement in all directions.

We are now prepared to consider our three patterns of social mobility in medieval society.

**THE AGE OF STAGNATION**      The European economy seems to have achieved little real growth over the five centuries that constitute the early Middle Ages (c. 500–1000). The population remained small, but it was not evenly distributed across the countryside. Rather, it was

12 Cf. Boretius (ed.), *Capitularia missorum specialia*, a. 802, *Capitularia*, I, 100, “De oppressionibus liberorum hominum pauperum, qui in exercitu ire debent et a iudicibus sunt oppressi.” *Ibid.*, 125, “. . . propter indigentiam mendici latrones seu malefactores efficiantur.” “Quot et quanti magnates indigeant, ipsemet frequenter experior. Opes itaque non faciunt hominem divitem, sed egenum.” De contemptu mundi, in *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1855), CCXVII, 720.

13 “Udir come le schiatte si disfanno, / non ti parrà nuova cosa nè forte / poscia che le cittadi termine hanno.” Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XVI, vv. 76–78. The translation is from Courtney Langdon (trans.) *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), III, 16.

concentrated into “population islands.”<sup>14</sup> The cultivators mounted little concerted effort to push back the wilderness which hemmed them. Constraints of various sorts—insecurity, fear of the wilds, strong manorial discipline, kinship ties, lack of capital—kept the peasants huddled together in packed communities, in which signs of overpopulation and land crowding frequently appear. The imbalance between such factors of production as land and labor imposed poverty on the people and frequently subjected them to famine and starvation.

As the surveys of Farfa and Saint-Germain-des-Prés show, these impoverished communities were far from stable in their social structures. Rather, the surveys record some extraordinary social shifts. It is instructive to observe, for example, the relationship between the personal status of the cultivators and the tenurial status of the lands they worked on the estates of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Table 4 displays this relationship.

Table 4. Status of Tenures and Status of Persons on the Estates of Saint-Germain-des-Prés

	TENURES			TOTAL
	FREE	“LIDILE”	SERVILE	
Number	1430	25	191	1646
Tenant Families:				
Liberi	8			8
Coloni	1957	29	94	2080
Lidi	29	5	11	45
Servi	43		77	120
Mixed	160	25	101	286
Unknown	199	8	42	249

Source: Longnon (ed.), *Polyptyque*, I, 237–238.

The term *liberus* in Carolingian records usually refers to a free man not bound to the soil, but subject to heavy obligations of military service. The word therefore often designates nobleman, in the sense of one who fights but does not work. The eight families of *liberi* in the survey clearly had lost status, since they appear as tenants upon

14 Cf. Georges Duby (trans. Cynthia Postan), *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West* (Columbia, 1968), 14; R. Fossier, *Histoire sociale de l'Occident médiévale* (Paris, 1970), 85–112, where the author discusses the “force des contraintes internes” which kept the population huddled into packed communities.

holdings primarily responsible for agricultural rents. The *coloni* were technically free cultivators, but bound to the land which they worked. A deterioration in the status of many *coloni* is also apparent. More *coloni*, according to Table 4, were working inferior “lidile” tenures than *lidi*, and, more remarkably, more *coloni* were holding heavily burdened servile tenures than *servi*. The status of tenures, presumably established when the manses were first settled, was relatively stable, but the status of persons, altered with each generation, was not. At the time the survey was taken, if we exclude the “mixed” category, the proportion of free (*coloni*) families—92.6 per cent—surpassed the proportion of free tenures—86.8 per cent. If we also exclude from consideration the eight families of *liberi*, which were too few to have much of a demographic impact, the conclusion is apparent: as the generations passed, the members of the community were being assimilated under the most favored social status. Families in the favored social categories had more sons than were needed to take their fathers’ places, and these sons were forced to replace the missing children of slaves, on servile tenures.

But there is also evidence of upward mobility. Some 29 *lidi* and 43 *servi* enjoyed the possession of a free manse. Moreover, in marriages between persons of unequal juridical status, it was more common for men to marry women of a higher, rather than a lower, social station.<sup>15</sup> They did this probably to assure a higher status for their children, who assumed the status of their mothers. Still, they had to have some resources in order to win brides from more exalted social levels. We do not know how exactly the resources were gained that made possible this limited but visible upward social movement. Chance probably played a role. A *servus* might inherit several tenures. Since the replacement rates for the servile population were generally low, the concentration of inheritances in the hands of few heirs was statistically not unlikely, and such property could serve as a platform for an upward thrust in society.

From other sources it is apparent that a principal avenue to vertical social mobility was service—to the manorial lord or to other great men in the neighborhood. With large manor houses to administer, there was need for supervisors and stewards, and the personal contact with powerful persons could provide numerous advantages. One phenomenon evident in early medieval sources is the transformation of

15 For a study of this phenomenon, see Coleman, “Marriage Characteristics.”

titles, the tendency for names, which first appear as designations of slaves or servants, to evolve into terms referring to high personages in the aristocracy. "Knight," for example, derives from a word originally meaning "boy" or "servant" (modern German, *Knecht*). "Vassal" or *vassus* similarly comes from a Celtic word for "boy," "slave," or "servant." "Baron" may derive from a term meaning "rustic lout." "Marshal" originally referred to a servant in charge of horses, and "constable" to one who cared for the stables. The Anglo-Saxon *thegn* was in its earliest appearances equivalent to the Latin *puer*, in the sense of "boy" or "servant." Another word adopted in the language of feudalism to signify "vassal" was *homo* or "man" (cf. "homage"). It too had disreputable beginnings, as its earliest comparable meaning seems to have been "slave." This vertical upward drift in social terminology is quite striking, even if the stages of the evolution cannot be dated with precision. The process seems to reflect the experience of many servants, who through valued services to powerful men rose from low to high social levels and added dignity to the names they bore. In the early Middle Ages, as subsequently, service was one important way to social preferment.

The pattern of social mobility in early medieval society thus indicates a circulatory movement through the body social. The tendency of family lines in elevated social positions to lose status was partially balanced by the penetration of lucky or talented persons of humble birth into the higher social levels. Both movements worked to obliterate the traditional juridical distinctions separating one status from another. The erosion of the ranks of the unfree is particularly notable, as it may be considered to represent the last phase in the disappearance of ancient slavery in the West. Still, under conditions of a stagnant economy, it may be doubted that the lot of the lowest social classes was much improved.

**THE AGE OF EXPANSION** From about the year 1000, the European population began to pour out of the settlement islands which had hitherto contained its numbers. Within Europe, a vigorous attack was launched upon the forests and wastes that still dominated much of the landscape. Still other colonizers pushed beyond the frontiers of the former Carolingian empire, to eastern lands beyond the Elbe River and down the Danube valley, to the south into the heart of the Iberian peninsula, and into southern Italy and the western islands of the Mediterranean Sea. The crusades to the east are only the most famous,

but probably not the most significant example, of the advancing frontiers of Europe in the central Middle Ages.

Although no figures can be given, there can be little doubt that this movement resulted in real economic growth, in the sense of rising per-capita productivity. The newly settled areas were marked by a better balance between the factors of land and labor, and their opening relieved population pressure and factor imbalances in the older centers of settlement. The development of regions with different “factor endowments” and resources gave a powerful stimulus to the growth of trade and markets. The influence of the market in turn promoted a greater division of labor and more specialization in productive efforts. Even without dramatic changes in technology, the cultivators of the twelfth century could work more efficiently than their predecessors of the Carolingian epoch.

The growth of trade further stimulated a rebirth of urban life, and the towns became centers of exchange and of various manufacturing processes, especially involving textiles. Again, gains in productivity came from the advancing specialization of labor, and urban markets facilitated the flow of both goods and capital. In sum, the economy of the central Middle Ages was changing considerably; it placed at the disposal of society a greater social wealth, which could be divided among its various institutions and members.

Social change accompanied economic change. In particular, two new groups came into prominence: the feudal nobility and the urban patriciate. Most historians today maintain that neither group was directly connected with the older aristocracies of barbarian or Carolingian Europe.<sup>16</sup> At least there is no evidence of continuity in the aristocratic classes across this period of profound social transformations. The appearance of both nobility and patriciate thus offers an exceptional chance to study how this vertical social mobility was achieved against the background of a growing economy.

We shall first consider the feudal nobility, and we shall begin our analysis by relating a “success story” which seems to illustrate a pattern

16 See the now classical discussion by Marc Bloch, (trans. L. A. Manyon), *Feudal Society*, (Chicago, 1961), 283–285. “The most striking feature of the history of the dominant families in the first feudal age [i.e. those families established by 1100 or 1150] is the shortness of their pedigrees . . . To speak of nobility is to speak of pedigrees; in the case in point, pedigrees did not matter because there was no nobility.” Only a few of the greatest families, according to Bloch, can trace their lineages as far back as the ninth century. For most families the traces disappear in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This problem has been much discussed; see n. 7.



widely repeated in the growing Europe of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. One of the principal feudal families of northern Italy was the house of Canossa, which at the height of its wealth in the eleventh century controlled a vast assemblage of lands in Tuscany, Emilia, the Romagna, and elsewhere. The most famous member of the family was Matilda of Tuscany, who supported Pope Gregory VII during the bitter Investiture Controversy with the German emperor Henry IV. Her castle of Canossa, near Modena, was the scene of Henry's penance and submission in the snow, in January, 1077.

The pedigree of Matilda's house is, however, notably short. The earliest known ancestor of the family, and indeed the founder of its fortunes, was a man called Adalberto-Atto, who first appears in a charter of 958. Recently, an Italian scholar has intensively studied the career of Adalberto-Atto in order to determine how he carried his household and his lineage to such social heights.<sup>17</sup> Adalberto-Atto had no known connection with the older Lombard or Frankish aristocracies, but from his earliest appearances in the sources he was already a property owner with some resources. He seems, in other words, to have sprung from the rural "middle class" of small landlords. The secret of his spectacular success was the contribution he made to the resettlement of the lands of the lower Po valley, between the river and the Apennines. Settlement in the region had been traditionally concentrated on the higher, drier lands forming the approaches to the Apennines. The low lands close to the banks of the Po River were poorly drained and largely deserted, but they were potentially fertile. One great need of new settlers was protection, and protection was best afforded by the construction of castles. Adalberto-Atto seems to have achieved his success primarily as a builder of castles. At times he built his fortresses while the surrounding lands were still dominated by woods and marshes. But they attracted settlers into their environs and became centers of new communities. The farms laid out on the reclaimed lands were larger and more productive than the crowded holdings in old-settled areas; the colonizers improved their own economic position, and were simultaneously able to pay Adalberto-Atto for the protection afforded them. "New lands for a new lord," is how Fumagalli summarizes this process of resettlement and social advance for Adalberto-Atto and his house. By 962, this new lord had several vassals, who were rising in society along with their chief. When the German king,

<sup>17</sup> Vito Fumagalli, *Le origini di una grande dinastia feudale Adalberto-Atto di Canossa* (Tübingen, 1971).

later emperor, Otto I arrived in Italy, he showered favors on this already powerful man in order to win his support. In the years after 962, Adalberto-Atto became count of Reggio, Modena, and Mantua. He thus arrived at the pinnacle of the new, feudal aristocracy of northern Italy.

Careers comparable to that of Adalberto-Atto can be noted widely across Europe during the central Middle Ages. There is a still better-known example in the accomplishments of the Hauteville brothers, sons of a petty knight in Normandy named Tancred. Facing impoverishment at home, three sons of Tancred emigrated to southern Italy in the 1030s, where they distinguished themselves first as hired mercenaries, then as castle builders, and then as rulers. Two younger brothers soon followed. One of them, Robert Guiscard, took the title of count (later duke) of Apulia, and his brother Roger eventually became count of Sicily. Roger's son, Roger II, claimed to be and was recognized as king of Sicily. The descendants of a petty Norman knight thus established one of the most powerful feudal dynasties in Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Still another example of a comparable rise is given by the career of Rodrigo Diaz of Vivar, called the Cid, the great Spanish hero of the Middle Ages. The Cid came from a class of minor landowners called *infanzones*. Through his exploits as a frontier fighter and governor, he was to attain wealth, power, and renown. "Today the kings of Spain," the later *Poema de Mio Cid* states with justification, "are among his kinsmen."

Both along frontiers and in old-settled areas, those warriors and castle builders who could provide protection were well rewarded in this age of expansion. It has been estimated that the number of fortresses constructed in this epoch in France alone came close to 10,000.<sup>19</sup> These sellers of protection undoubtedly formed a chief component in the new feudal nobility.

It is important to note that Adalberto-Atto, the Hauteville brothers, the Cid, and others, derived not from the highest levels of the older society, and certainly not from among the destitute. They came

18 Cf. the classic account offered by C. H. Haskins, *The Normans in European History* (Boston, 1915), Ch. 7.

19 For the Cid's historical career and his place in literature and legend, see the excellent study by Stephen Clissold, *In Search of the Cid* (London, 1965). For a list of medieval castles by *département*, see Camille Enlart, *Manuel d'archéologie française depuis les temps mérovingiens jusqu' à la Renaissance* (Paris, 1916) II, 623-753. See also Jacques Levron, *Le château fort et la vie au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1963), 30.

from the hard-pressed middle ranges of society—those petty land-owners who, in spite of some resources, were most sensitive to the threat of a deteriorating social position. Literary sources contain frequent allusions to the pressures operating upon these men. In summoning the first crusade at Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II is reported to have told the knights:

... the land which you inhabit, shut in on all sides by the sea and surrounded by mountain peaks, is too narrow for your large population; nor does it abound in wealth; and it furnishes scarcely food enough for its cultivators. Hence it is that you murder and devour one another.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Damian, an Italian leader of the reform movement of the eleventh century, complained about how his contemporaries, pressed by need, entered the service and assiduously cultivated the favor of rich men; others sought “to increase their moneys in ambitious business”; still others hired themselves out as mercenary soldiers. According to Damian, these energetic and ambitious men were claiming: “We cannot obey the commandments of God, because we do not have enough earthly property for our needs.”<sup>21</sup>

Leadership in the new enterprises of the medieval world seems primarily to have come from those social levels which had to struggle to repair their perpetually sinking fortunes, but which controlled some property to help support their efforts. A large share of the resources controlled by these social groups was likely to be turned to entrepreneurial purposes. Aided by a buoyant economy, this entrepreneurial drive and willingness to commit resources carried many men of low and middling origins to high social positions.

The origins of the second aristocracy of medieval society—the urban patriciate—show many similarities to the patterns which marked the formation of the feudal nobility. The Belgian historian

20 According to the account of Robert the Monk. See August C. Krey, *The First Crusade. Accounts of Eye-Witnesses and Participants* (Princeton, 1921), 31.

21 *Patrologia Latina* (Paris, 1853), CXLIV, col. 524. “Ubi sunt illi qui dicunt: Nos Dei praecepta servare non possumus, quia terrenam substantiam ad usos necessarios non habemus... Egestatis quippe angustatus inopia, non ad obsequendum cujuslibet domum potentis intravit, non adulari divitibus, ut mos est pauperum, studuit, non ambitiosa negotiatione augere pecunias anhelavit, non periculosae militiae quae sine peccato bajulari non potest stipendium concupivit, sed muliebri contentus officio simplicem victum manu et arte quaerebat...” Peter is comparing the simple life of St. Severus of Ravenna with the exaggerated efforts of the men of his own times to find sustenance.

Henri Pirenne advanced the famous thesis that the great urban families were recruited primarily from the “proletariat” of feudal society, from those “foot-loose adventurers” who owned no property and had no vested interest in preserving things as they were.<sup>22</sup> Only the destitute, argued Pirenne, had reason to cultivate an entrepreneurial spirit. Pirenne had a gift for clear and appealing exposition, but today, after more than two generations of research, little remains of his thesis. Intensive investigation of the origins of the great urban families, both in Flanders and in Italy, identifies them as small property owners even before their immigration to the city.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the contention that families with property were therefore devoid of incentive ignores the problem of younger sons or too many sons, which is everywhere visible on the medieval social scene. The heir with some property, but not enough to live after the manner of his parents, is most likely to engage in *ambitiosa negotatio*, in Damian’s phrase.

In sum, the model we propose as a generalized description of social mobility in this age of expansion is this: the upper levels of society continued to replace their numbers more successfully than the lower, and this created a continuing downward pressure upon family lines. That pressure was particularly intense within those ranks of society with some, but limited resources. The sons of petty landlords, warriors, or knights either had to contemplate an imminent loss of status or seek to repair their fortunes through effort and daring. From the ranks of such small landlords, the great entrepreneurs of the age—Adalberto-Atto, the Hauteville brothers, the Cid, and many urban patricians—were primarily recruited. An entrepreneur requires, after all, both incentive and some initial resources. The processes we have explored explain why men from the low but still propertied ranges of society would have both incentives and ambitions, and the means to pursue them.

**CITY AND COUNTRYSIDE**     The economic expansion from approximately the year 1000 brought to Europe a rebirth of urban life, particularly notable in such regions as northern Italy or Flanders. The

22 The thesis is developed in his *Medieval Cities* (Princeton, 1925).

23 See especially J. Lestocquoy, *Les villes de Flandre et d’Italie sous le gouvernement des patriciens (XIe–XVe siècles)* (Paris, 1952). The problem is discussed by Lucien Febvre, “Fils de riches ou nouveaux riches?” *Annales-Economies-Sociétés-Civilisations* I (1946), 139–153. For Florence, the work which reversed the older assumption that the urban population was recruited mainly from escaped serfs and the destitute was J. Plesner, *L’émigration de la campagne à la ville libre de Florence au XIIIe siècle* (Copenhagen, 1934).

economic crisis of the closing Middle Ages (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) does not seem to have influenced the proportion of the population living in towns. In Tuscany, for example, about a quarter of the population continued to live in cities during the last two hundred years of the Middle Ages.

How did the presence of a large urban sector affect patterns of replacement and mobility in medieval society? The rich data from the Florentine Catasto of 1427 can give us partial but suggestive answers. Table 5 shows the distribution of minors, young adults, and older adults according to residence in the city of Florence, in the small cities (Pisa, Pistoia, Arezzo, Prato, and Volterra), and the surrounding rural areas.

*Table 5* Residence and Age Distributions in Tuscany, 1427

	RESIDENCE			TOTAL
	FLORENCE	SMALL CITIES	COUNTRYSIDE	
Ages:				
0-17				
Persons	15671	9930	81692	107293
Percent	14.6	9.3	76.1	100.0
18-47				
Persons	13230	8793	69547	91570
Percent	14.5	9.6	75.9	100.0
48-99				
Persons	7083	6543	47013	60639
Percent	11.7	10.8	77.5	100.0
Totals	35984	25266	198252	259502
Percent	13.9	9.7	76.4	100.0
Ratio:				
Minor/Young Adult	1.18	1.13	1.17	1.17

Only persons with stated age are included.

The most remarkable result which emerges from Table 5 is the success with which the population of the city of Florence was maintaining its members. There is apparent no replacement deficit, in the sense of a smaller portion of minor children in comparison with that of adults, in the Florentine urban population, and only a minuscule deficit can be observed in the small cities. To be sure, the countryside

included many stricken areas, such as the high mountains, and the global replacement ratios cannot be considered representative of the prosperous rural areas. Still, cities have a long-standing reputation for being, in comparison with rural areas, poor producers of children; this is not apparent in the Florentine domains in 1427.

However, to gain a better grasp of the patterns of replacement present in Tuscan society, we must take a closer look at our data. Did welfare, for example, have a different impact upon replacement in the cities than in the rural areas? Table 6 illustrates the distribution of minors, young adults, and older adults, according to four wealth categories, exclusively for the households of the city of Florence.

Table 6 Welfare and Age Distributions at Florence, 1427

	ASSESSMENT (FLORINS)				TOTAL
	0	1-100	101-400	OVER 400	
Ages:					
0-17					
Persons	1713	2564	2969	8425	15671
Percent	10.9	16.4	19.0	53.7	100.0
18-47					
Persons	1635	2566	2770	6259	13230
Percent	12.3	19.4	20.9	47.3	99.9
48-99					
Persons	1095	1581	1788	2619	7083
Percent	15.5	22.3	25.3	36.8	99.9
Total	4443	6711	7527	17303	35984
Ratio:					
Minor/Young Adult	1.05	1.00	1.07	1.34	1.18

Only persons with stated age are included.

If the results of Table 6, for the city of Florence, are compared with those for the entire population of the Florentine dominions (Table 3), then it becomes evident that the poorer households of the urban population were conspicuously less successful than poorer families generally in rearing children. With “minor–young adult” ratios of 1.07 and less for the three lowest categories of assessed wealth (Table 6), those segments of the urban population were clearly not maintaining their numbers through natural increase. The apparent success of the city in rearing children was exclusively the success of its richer families, those with more than 400 florins of assessed wealth.

The influence of residence upon replacement seems, therefore, to have been strongest among, and indeed limited to, the poor and the lower middle classes. Table 7 cross-tabulates residence and age distributions for Florence, the small cities, and the countryside, but only for those persons found in households assessed at 400 or fewer florins.

*Table 7* Residence and Age Distributions in Tuscany, 1427  
(Households Assessed at 400 or Fewer Florins)

	RESIDENCE			TOTAL
	FLORENCE	SMALL CITIES	COUNTRYSIDE	
<i>Ages:</i>				
0-17				
Persons	7246	7416	77492	92154
Percent	7.9	8.0	84.1	100.0
18-47				
Persons	6971	6785	66412	80168
Percent	8.7	8.5	82.8	100.0
48-99				
Persons	4474	5469	45156	55099
Percent	8.1	9.9	82.0	100.0
Total	18691	19670	189060	227421
Percent	8.2	8.7	83.1	100.0
<i>Ratio:</i>				
Minor/Young Adult	1.04	1.09	1.17	1.14

Only persons with stated ages are included.

Table 7, which incidentally surveys about 87 per cent of the inhabitants of the Florentine dominions, confirms that urban residence interfered with reproduction and replacement, but only at the lower levels of the social scale. (The assessment level between 300 and 400 florins would, however, include many artisans and shopkeepers in the city, who would have to be described as “middle class” in their social position.) The patrician families, in spite of their urban residence, continued to support large numbers of children in their households.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The median age of the population resident in households with more than 400 florins of assessment was 18, and for those with 400 or fewer florins it was 26. The rich households, in other words, were prolific in the numbers of children they were supporting. As servants were not registered in the Catasto, the children were all the products of the natural reproduction of the rich families.

On the assumption that the size of the population and its residential distribution were constant over time, then about 10 per cent of the middle and lower classes of the urban population would have to be recruited by means other than natural reproduction and replacement. The replacement deficit of these groups could be overcome either by encouraging immigration from the more prolific countryside, or by absorbing persons from the higher and more prolific urban social strata. The patrician families were, however, likely to resist this second alternative.

Two principal conclusions flow from our data. The threat of losing status, which particularly pressed the lower but still propertied classes in the countryside, reached into much higher social levels in the city. The urban patriciate had to find careers for its plentiful children, or watch them sink to lower social positions. Many, but clearly not all, of the patrician sons and daughters could enter upon ecclesiastical careers or join religious orders. Many more had to make their way in a highly competitive world. Contemporaries were quite aware of the pressures working upon the patrician families. A historian of Florence, Goro Dati, who appears in the *Catasto*, offered this striking account of the behavior of the Florentines in the face of demographic pressures:

... the city of Florence is placed by nature in a rugged and sterile location which cannot give a livelihood to the inhabitants, in spite of all their efforts. However, they have multiplied greatly because of the temperate air, which is very generative in that locale. For that reason, for some time back it has been necessary for the Florentines, because they have multiplied in number, to seek their livelihood through enterprises. Therefore, they have departed from their territory to search through other lands, provinces and countries, where one or another has seen an opportunity to profit for a time, to make a fortune, and to return to Florence... For some time now it has seemed that they were born for this, so large is the number (in accordance with what the generative air produces) of those who go through the world in their youth and make profit and acquire experience, daring (*virtu*), good manners and treasure. All of them together constitute a community of so large a number of valiant and wealthy men which has no equal in the world.<sup>25</sup>

25 L. Pratesi (ed.), *L'istoria di Firenze dal 1380 al 1405* (Norcia, 1904), Bk. IX. For the character and date of Dati's chronicle, see the recent comment by Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni. Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Chicago, 1968), 138-150. Baron believes that the work was written in 1409.



Goro Dati was clearly not describing the humbler inhabitants of Florence, few of whom wandered great distances through the world, few of whom made fortunes. He described the life style of the patricians. Still, in his estimation that demographic pressures demanded that the sons even of the privileged assume and maintain an entrepreneurial stance, he now confirms what data from the Catasto also reveal.

The second conclusion from our data is that the replacement deficit from the middle and low classes of urban society engendered a recruitment of new men, partially from other cities, but pre-eminently from the villages and small towns of the countryside. Numerous men of talent responded to the call, and they especially filled the ranks of artisans, notaries, and government servants—careers where skill counted more than capital. Many great literary figures of Renaissance Florence came from rural or small-town origins—Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Marsilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano, and others. Many artists were of similar derivation—Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Desiderio da Settignano, and more. Few of these gifted immigrants penetrated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries into the ranks of the patriciate. One ominous result of this mass recruitment of talented men was that it introduced them into society at levels—the middle urban classes—where their own reproduction was hampered. Ultimately, massive immigration may have been destructive of talented lines and wasteful of human capital. But in the short run, these gifted newcomers were given an opportunity to display their skills, and Florentine culture was immeasurably richer for it.

These, then, are the principal conclusions which our considerations of social mobility in the Middle Ages suggest. Because of differences in rates of replacement across the social spectrum, families in favored positions produced more heirs and successors than those on the less advantaged levels of society. The dominant trend of social mobility in this traditional society was therefore consistently downward. Still, markedly different results could follow, which pre-eminently reflected the economic conditions of the period. In the stagnant epoch of the early Middle Ages, the privileged tended to lose position, while some few lucky or talented persons gained it. The overall result was a shuffling of status; in consequence, juridical differences, notably between slave and free, were progressively obliterated. The economic takeoff from the year 1000 enabled those facing a threat of losing status to assume the function of entrepreneurs. They had powerful incentives, and enough property, to be both willing and able to gamble upon their

talents. Conditions of urban life heightened pressures on the privileged, requiring them under penalty of loss of status to keep their sons in an entrepreneurial stance. Also, in increasing the difficulties of reproduction for the city poor, urban conditions forced a continuous recruitment of new men from the countryside, to which the talented and the motivated were especially prone to respond. The pressures upon the rich, the opportunities offered to the talented poor, combined to lend to the late medieval and Renaissance town its creative vitality. In sum, medieval society, rural and urban, presents dynamic patterns of social movement, which historians are only today coming to appreciate and study.