

History

Lesson 2 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Medieval Lives in the Luttrell Psalter

Enquiry: Which sources reveal the most about medieval peasants?

Mr Sellin



What is the Luttrell Psalter?

Sometime between 1320 and 1345, a wealthy landowner and knight called Geoffrey Luttrell ordered, and paid for, an exquisite book to be designed and handcrafted. The book (known as a **psalter**) was a collection of Bible stories (psalms), prayers and religious songs written in Latin. This **psalter** was designed to demonstrate that Geoffrey was a rich man with educated, holy interests.

However, historians have become far more interested in the drawings that are found in the margins on each page. This **marginalia** depicts the daily life of Geoffrey, his family, and the peasants working on his manor. It has become an exceptionally useful source for understanding ordinary medieval life, and provides an insight into the early fourteenth century.



What can the Luttrell Psalter tell us about peasants?

The psalter shows a year's work for agricultural peasants. Wheat is cut, sheep are kept, a feast is prepared, wool is spun, ploughs are operated, archery is practised, and much more. Music is included, not just in pictures of choirs, but in note form for readers to sing along. Men and women are both included. Some jobs are being done separately and some jobs, like collecting in the **harvest** from the field, are done by men and women together.

Leisure activities are included, but there is a divide between richer and poorer people. Board games, hunting, acrobatics, and hairdressing are activities done by richer figures, whereas poorer figures are shown throwing stones and wrestling. The psalter appears to show the peasants as not having the time nor money for many hobbies enjoyed by Geoffrey's family.



What can the Luttrell Psalter not tell us about peasants?

While it might seem that the psalter is a tremendously useful source, there are two main issues with using it to learn about medieval peasants. Historians are not sure how **idealistic** the pictures are. The psalter was ordered by Geoffrey, not his peasants, and the peasants are shown to be working calmly, loyally, and without any great sense of danger. Geoffrey would probably have wanted his book to show an ordered and healthy manor, so that he could say he was a good lord.

Furthermore, the psalter might be very useful as a window into one agricultural manor, but the lives of poorer people in towns, or even other manors, might be quite different. Unlike Domesday Book, which covers all of England, this psalter shows only one example.



Glossary

Harvest: the collection of crops from the fields when they are ripe and ready to eat

Idealistic: not a realistic image, often shown to be better than reality

Psalter: a collection of Bible stories, songs, prayers, and stories

Marginalia: drawings that are found in the margin of books, around the outside of the text. They can sometimes be unusual and rather rude!



Comprehension Questions

1. Why is this source called the Lutterall Psalter?
2. What language is the text of the psalter? (Bonus - what does this suggest about the psalter?)
3. What does the psalter reveal about women?
4. Apart from farming, what can the psalter reveal about medieval peasants and their surroundings?
You might start your answer with: *The psalter reveals much more than how peasants farmed. For example,...*
5. Why might the psalter be less helpful for investigating medieval peasants?

