Your Name

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Roman Empire vs. Medieval West

Medieval life certainly seems awful to many of us because every single day we benefit from (relatively) modern discoveries and inventions that make our lives easier, healthier and more joyful. If a coddled 21st-century person was magically transported back to AD 800 or AD 1200 then yes, their life would seem dreadful. It is worth noting, however, that it is impossible for us to see the past through the eyes of those who actually experienced it. What seems awful to us - filth and terrible hygiene; backbreaking toil; small, cold and uncomfortable shelters; frugal flavorless food; no electricity; plodding (or non-existent) transport; widespread disease and infection; high mortality; no established ‘rights’, human or otherwise - was all normal in medieval times (Duby). Humans are remarkably adaptable creatures, but I imagine the following aspects of medieval life must have been the most ‘challenging’.

1. Sickness and pain: There were no antibiotics or anesthetics. Infections and diseases, that we can cure easily today were lethal. Surgery was primitive and performed while the patient was conscious. Medicines and remedies were a quack and often more harmful than helpful (Duby). Dental work was performed by the local blacksmith. For these reasons and more, getting hurt or sick must have been terrifying.
2. Grief: The levels of infant mortality were appalling and wives, mothers and daughters often died giving birth. In times of war, husbands, fathers, and sons were lost as well. During outbreaks of disease, such as the plague, families - even villages - were decimated.

On the contrary, if one lived in a big city of the Roman Empire, there would be free food and no one would need to work. In fact, one could make extra money just by going around to estates of wealthy people each day and showing his loyalty for patronage and some nominal amount of money (Veyne). Furthermore, public infrastructure such as police, fire departments, etc. (unless provided for by a populist politician such as Caesar) really did not exist. Normally, if some public project was built then it was built out of the patronage from someone wealthy and emperors tended to have a lot of wealth and reason to keep the mobs remembering their good deeds. The Roman Republic was a libertarian’s dream where everything was guided by market forces (Veyne). Even the military was, by and large, a private army, there was a saying that people couldn't consider themselves rich if they couldn't afford to raise their own army.

# Works Cited

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