



50 Years of the Tyranny of a Construct: A Discussion in Honor of E.A.R. Brown

Co-organized with Columbia University Seminar for Medieval Studies, Seminar for Affect Studies, CUNY Graduate Center Medieval Studies Program, LAMEM at Brooklyn College

The Tyranny of a Construct:
Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe

ELIZABETH A. R. BROWN

AT A RECENT CONFERENCE Thomas N. Bisson introduced his paper "Institutional Structures of the Medieval Peace" by cautioning his audience that in his discussion of peace movements, peace associations, and peace institutions in southern France and Spain he would not attempt to relate his findings to "feudalism."¹ His approach was descriptive—and thoroughly enlightening—and no further reference to any form occurred until the question period. Then, bestowing the double-edged praise that is his hallmark, Professor John F. Benton asked how historians could have managed to overlook for so long such abundant evidence that would necessitate the revision of numerous lectures on medieval society. Responding to this remark, Professor Bisson again alluded to the eventual necessity of evaluating his conclusions with reference to the general topic of feudalism, but time prevented him from elaborating. It occurred to me as this interchange was taking place that the failure of historians to take account of the data used by Bisson may well have resulted from their concentration on feudalism—as model or Ideal Type—and their consequent tendency to disregard or dismiss documents not easily assimilable into that frame of reference.

Whatever their relevance to the subject of Professor Bisson's paper, feelings of uneasiness concerning the term "feudalism" are not uniquely mine. Historians have for years harbored doubts about the term "feudalism" and the phrase "feudal systems," which has often been used as a synonym for it. One of the first, and certainly one of the wittiest and most eloquent,

An earlier version of this article was presented to a meeting of the Columbia University Seminar on Medieval Studies, May 8, 1975. I am grateful to the members of the seminar for their questions and suggestions. For their advice and counsel I would also like to express my thanks to Professor Francis Cheyette of Andrew College, Professor John Bell-Housman of the University of Iowa, Professor Joshua Prawer of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Professor Thomas N. Bisson of the University of California at Berkeley, Professor John F. Benton of the California Institute of Technology, Professors Edwin Barrows, Philip Dawson, Clayton Lewis, and Thomas Sneyd of Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Barbara W. Tuchman, and finally the members of the History Club and my students at Brooklyn College.

¹ Thomas N. Bisson, "Institutional Structures of the Medieval Peace," a paper presented to a colloquium held at Princeton University on March 21, 1975.

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Friday, November 8

1–3:30 PM

Columbia University Faculty House
and Zoom

*Pre-registration is required for both in-person
and hybrid. In-person space is limited.*



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