

Defence of the Seigneurial Social Contract: Who Rebelled in the Jacquerie of 1358, and Why?

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When looking at rebellion or revolution motivated by a failure to uphold or to endorse political rights, many will jump straight to the French Revolution. Thomas Paine's Rights of Man instantly resonates, and we think of the Bourbon failings to safeguard the natural rights of its peoples. We posit ideas of breached social contract forwarded by Hobbes or Rousseau yet perhaps a French predecessor can be found in the middle ages. The Jacquerie of 1358, a peasant revolt against the failings of their governors, offers an interesting lens to understand responses to a breach of social contract predating the Enlightenment. Although not acting to assert political liberties in the sense of 1789, the Jacques were responding similarly to failings to uphold their rights in the seigneurial relationship fundamental to feudalism. During the Hundred Years War, the nobility had failed on their part of what can be seen as a seigneurial social contract. In this system, the peasantry had surrendered a number of their freedoms in return for protection by their governing lords, yet in many areas that protection failed to materialise. This essay will attempt to set out who the Jacques were and why they rebelled in a medieval attempt to re-assert their rights. Through doing so I hope to showcase how the Jacquerie was more sophisticated than an explosive attempt at mindless class warfare instead being an organised and targeted response to compromised feudal rights.

The Jacques have been the subject of uncertainty for many decades now, both in who they were and why they launched a wave of violence against the nobles of the Beauvaisis region. An area just north of Paris, the Beauvaisis was wealthy, and peasants had suffered comparatively little to many compatriots in the chaos of the Hundred Years War. Thus, many scholars have tried to decipher what motivated such an eruption. One school of thought, coming from Cazelles and Bessen, is this was a co-opted rebellion between Etienne Marcel's Paris, Charles of Navarre and his partisans, and rustics who were more artisan and bourgeois than labourers.¹ This essay argues against this position, attempting to present a simpler explanation. Firstly, the composition of the rebels was undoubtedly rural with the majority being labourers, exemplified by remission letter samples.² They were not bourgeois, the remission letters and chronicles alike refer to the "non nobles" as "men of the plains". Additionally, we cannot count the external Navarrese and Parisian actors as Jacques, they were simply trying to use the rebellion to their advantage to disrupt Valois authority. Moreover, these rural peasants did not rebel in some mindless act of class war. They rebelled out of fear of pillaging, brigandage and aggressive lordship from a nobility that had corrupted its seigneurial role of protector in favour of political gain and betrayal. Sparked by increased militarism in the area, rural peasants were left exposed and

¹ R. Cazelles, 'The Jacquerie', in *The English Rising of 1381*, R.H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (eds.), (Cambridge, 1984), p. 83; D.M. Bessen, "The Jacquerie: class war or co-opted rebellion?" *Journal of Medieval History*, 11, (1985), p. 56.

² D. Aiton, "The Jacquerie of 1358: "Shame on him who allows them to live!" Ph.D dss, University of Glasgow, 2007 (From Tutor), p. 153.

thus organised themselves to attack what embodied their fears: the nobility and their fortified centres of power. The nobles had failed to protect the rights of their peoples, forfeiting their lordly privileges and through village assemblies, it was decided that resistance to current convention had to occur.

The Jacques of the Jacquerie were rural and the bulk of participants were labouring agriculturists. The identifier Jacques Bonhomme, literally meant peasants.³ Inhabiting the Beauvaisis region meant they were generally some of the wealthiest peasants in France. These agriculturists had developed greater economic independence and witnessed declining seigneurial dominance in years prior.⁴ Understanding the Jacques as a wealthier group of agricultural peasants is crucial to showing they were rural labourers rather than the bourgeois, rustic artisans that Cazelles speaks of.⁵ With greater independence and more valuable land these peasants had more to lose in the face of a militaristic noble presence and seigneurial betrayal.⁶ Ultimately, it is clear the Jacques were likely to be agriculturists as an encroaching soldiery put their livelihood at more risk than any other profession, through threatening provisions, harvests and property.

Remission letters are essential to discovering who rebelled. They demonstrate both evidence and issues that affirm rural peasant labourers as the bulk of the Jacques. Cazelles' argument for the Jacques being artisans rests on these same primary sources. He states the term 'homme de labour' used generally refers to manual labourers, with the majority being "shoemakers, coopers, masons, sellers of eggs, poultry and cheese, butchers, cartwrights", an artisan Jacquerie.⁷ Yet, this is a major oversight. Evidence against this position can be found in the same remission letters.

Using the example of 'Remission granted to Hue of Sailleuille', there is reference to the Jacques as, "people of the plain", suggesting contemporaries saw the rebels as coming from the fields.⁸ Moreover, Froissart in his chronicles regularly refers to them as "rustics" giving the impression, alongside the remission letters, that the overwhelming feeling of contemporaries was association with agriculturists.⁹ Cazelles' argument makes a further oversight in its failings to take account of who could purchase remission letters. Remissions were expensive and issued only on renown, prestige, or land.¹⁰ Thus, it is obvious richer peasants were more likely to comprise a lot of those listed, disregarding all those that could not attain one. Even then, in samples taken of recipients 82.5% listed no occupation, and the next largest group were listed as rural labourers at 8.6%¹¹. Demonstrated is a substantial leap to conclude the Jacques were artisans when there is so much ambiguity in contemporary listings of their composition.

We have established that the Jacques were primarily peasant agriculturalists, yet, we must also dispel Bessen's theory of co-opted rebellion to understand who it was that rebelled. Bessen argues the participants of the Jacquerie included Etienne Marcel and Charles of Navarre alongside their respective supporters. Asserted is a co-opted rebellion that utilised the Jacquerie in order to disrupt Valois strategy.¹² This position is problematic as Bessen assumes the peasants needed noble leaders to revolt. This is incorrect - the Jacquerie was an independent movement shown by its primary leader Guillaume Cale, himself a peasant. More so, remission letters show no clear signals that the Jacques were ever positive to towns folk, instead favouring a distinctly rural movement.¹³ The Jacques did receive support from towns like

³ G. Small, *Late Medieval France*, (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 73.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ Cazelles, 'The Jacquerie', p. 83.

⁶ M. Mollat and P. Wolff, *The Popular Revolutions of the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1973), p. 128.

⁷ Cazelles, 'The Jacquerie', p. 76.

⁸ S.K. Cohn, *Popular Protest in Late Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 2004), p. 185.

⁹ J. Froissart, *Les Chroniques de Froissart*, in Cohn, *Popular Protest in Late Medieval Europe*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Aiton, 'The Jacquerie of 1358', p. 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 153-54.

¹² Bessen, "The Jacquerie: class war or co-opted rebellion?", pp. 56-7.

¹³ Aiton, 'The Jacquerie of 1358', pp. 53-4.

Amiens, Rouen, and Clermont and aid from Etienne Marcel, but they had different objectives. Rebellion took different forms in separate villages working locally towards distinct ends. The Jacquerie didn't have one unifying target, Parisians and Navarrese saw it as strategic, whereas the Jacques saw it as a defence of their rights.¹⁴ The external forces of Paris and Navarre simply used it to their advantage and cannot be considered Jacques. This is evidenced in how Charles of Navarre turned brutally on the Jacques, massacring them at Mello once they had forgone their use to him. Moreover, a 'Letter from Etienne Marcel to the Communes of Picardy and Flanders' demonstrates how he was quick to distance himself once the Jacques had outgrown their use to him. Marcel writes, "may it please you to know that these matters in the Beauvaisis were done without our knowledge or will."¹⁵ We cannot term Parisian and Navarrese actors as Jacques, they simply used a distinctly rural movement to further their personal political aims when feasible. Meanwhile the real peasant perpetrators pursued a response to a lapse in their feudal rights, absent of the greater politics of the realm.

Fundamentally, the rural peasants of the Beauvaisis rebelled due to dissatisfaction with the state of the nobility and its role as seigneurial protector. As aforementioned, the agriculturist peasants of the region were some of the wealthiest and most independent in France. Thus, they had come to fear the ability of an armed nobility to disrupt their good fortune. Traditionally the role of castles and men at arms was to protect peasants through the seigneurial relationship. Yet, after seeing cases of the soldiery pillage for provisions they became a source of fear. As Small writes, "the lay aristocracy was less relevant to agriculturists as landowners and natural protectors, but more threatening to them as members of a military class which was

beginning to seriously damage their fortunes".¹⁶

The Jacques finally rebelled when they thought this fear was being materialised after the Dauphin stationed a number of garrisons to control the Oise valley. Large numbers of soldiers in the employ of the French Crown were attempting to live off the countryside, sparking revolt over use of peasant property.¹⁷ The Jacques identified the nobility as failing to protect them from soldiers who they allied with instead.¹⁸ The aristocracy became the embodiment of fears of pillaging and brigandage so naturally was the identifiable enemy.¹⁹

Fears from the peasants truly set in when knights of the region were ordered to provision fortresses. To do this they had to take supplies from peasants, affirming the threat to the fortunes of agriculturists. This prompted an attack against the nobles and castles that embodied this threat. The work of the chronicler Jean de Venette records, "Thus, these peasants were mortified that the knights who were supposed to protect them had decided to seize their property. For this reason, the peasants rose up with prodigious force and charged against the knights and all the nobles, even their own lands."²⁰ Nobles were supposed to protect their peoples in their seigneurial capacity but failed. There was already dissatisfaction with the military function of nobles after failings at Crecy and Poitiers.²¹ Thus, rebellion was easily sparked upon further witnessing betrayal and abuse.²² It was not just a violent class war against nobility though, shown by the lack of attacks on ecclesiastical nobles. The reasoning was to attack lay nobles who had breached their seigneurial role and had fallen into corruption. The seigneurial contract between lord and peasant had been consistently violated, ultimately prompting agriculturists to justify rebellion against a governing force that failed to safeguard their rights.

The Jacquerie's organisation offers another

¹⁴ J. Firnhaber-Baker, 'The eponymous Jacquerie: making revolt mean some things', in idem and D. Schoenaers (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (2016), p. 24.

¹⁵ Cohn, *Popular Protest*, pp. 177-79.

¹⁶ Small, *Late Medieval France*, p. 75.

¹⁷ N. Wright, *Knights and Peasants: The Hundred Years War in the French Countryside*, (Woodbridge, 1998), p. 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁹ J. Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, Vol. II (London, 1999), p. 328.

²⁰ de Vanette in Cohn, *Lust for liberty*, p. 35.

²¹ Cazelles, 'The Jacquerie', p. 81.

²² Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*, p. 35.

window of understanding why it occurred. Resistance to the soldiery had already begun to form militarisation out of fears of pillaging.²³ This militarisation led to organisation at the village level, being led by local people rather than outside agitators sent by Etienne Marcel. Sources show peasants engaging with politics, forming village assemblies and alliances, electing leaders and defending their rights by attacking class superiors who had betrayed them.²⁴ A Remission letter granted to Jean Morel, curate of Blacy states, “commoners of the villages of the plains of Perthois recently organised many assemblies in various places to knock down and burn the houses of nobles.”²⁵ The planning that went into the rebellion only signifies further that it was a stand against the state of lordship. Organisation was further carried out in the form of militaristic structure, shown by Guillaume Cale leading 5,000 men organised into units with banners and lieutenants.²⁶ These patterns of peasant organisation show that this wasn’t some spontaneous violent eruption but was in service to a clear purpose: revolt to defend agricultural peasants from an encroaching militaristic nobility that they had begun to fear, violating feudal social contract.

To conclude, those who rebelled in the Jacquerie were agriculturist peasants who had come to fear a nobility they identified as a threat to their fortunes. The composition of the Jacques was most likely agriculturist, as this group had the most to fear in the face of encroaching soldiery. It was not a co-opted rebellion orchestrated between Parisian, Navarrese, and bourgeoisie peasants. Instead, the Jacquerie was an independent campaign launched by villages against the state of the seigneurial role of nobles. Remission letters and chronicle evidence points to the rebels being “men of the plain” who rebelled violently after the politics of the region brought an unaccountable soldiery into an already fearful peasant worldview. The result was an uprising as an outlet of anger at the failures of aristocratic

protectors and an attempt to reassert the peasant position in the social contract of seigneurial politics. The Jacquerie then can perhaps be seen as a medieval predecessor to the French Revolution through observing it as a response to governing powers that abused medieval proto-liberties, met fundamentally by a concerted attempt to uphold peasant rights.

²³ Small, *Late Medieval France*, p. 71.

²⁴ Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*, pp. 34-5.

²⁵ Cohn, *Popular Protest*, p. 188.

²⁶ Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, p. 329.

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