

The High Middle Ages saw the rise of “super-princes” and a growing sense of national unity. In addition, the advent of natural disasters, such as the Black Death, gave surviving laborers significant potential power over their masters. In relating the Peasants, Rebellion of 1381, the French chronicler Jean de Froissart shows England as a prototypical fourteenth century European kingdom - thus warning contemporaries to be mindful of troublesome workers in their own lands. England is a country with a centralized government, lucrative cities, and, of course, a restive labor force.

Froissart’s account begins with theological arguments from the “commonalty” of several English counties against their mistreatment by the gentry. Citing the Bible as proof against the contemporary social hierarchy, since “in the beginning of the world there were no slaves,” they demand freedom and pay for any service performed. In truth, the typical peasant was not a Biblical scholar, but John Ball’s recorded assertions of Canonical support for a new form of universal freedom are somewhat akin to the activities of the traveling preachers who promoted humility, in some opposition to the splendor of the material glory of the Church and the nobility. In addition, new cultural emphasis on personal devotion may have led serfs to individual reflections on lessons from Genesis that matched Ball’s cries.

Beyond establishing theological arguments, England’s peasants successfully enter London and convince their King, Richard II, to mandate their release from centuries-old bonds of servitude. While Richard soon recants this order, his initial concession and his inability (after Froissart’s account ends) to completely check serf liberation indicates some strong advantage held by the peasantry. This advantage was most likely the result of the natural catastrophes of the preceding decades, rather than of the religious stances addressed above. Over the first half of the fourteenth century, Europe faced famine and the Black Death, resulting in the deaths of up to fifty percent of the populace. Labor supply dramatically decreased. As the demand for this labor dropped significantly less, peasants now could offer a scarce resource, and thus had a key bargaining tool. From England to Italy, rulers issued decrees to keep farm workers from negotiating higher wages and privileges for their services. Nonetheless, peasants were no longer expendable. For the first time, they could rebel and could earn the King’s approval, even after murdering four of his men. While Froissart ends his account with the official suppression of the Rebellion and nobility triumphant, one must keep in mind the concessions made by nobles thereafter, and one must recall the chronicler’s potential desire to shape history to favor those of his own rank.

The fact that the serfs think to seek justice from Richard II, and that he is capable of yielding a meaningful ruling to be applied to his entire realm, indicates a centralization of authority relatively new to Europe in the fourteenth century. While kingship and the subdivision of land among nobles and knights had been established by the turn of the millennium, for much of the Middle Ages, kings had very little real power outside of their immediate environs. The peasant’s world extended little beyond his local noble’s territory; all matters of dispute were handled by the noble. Froissart, however, presents a King who grants freedom and orders death throughout the counties of his realm. Perceiving this control, John Ball urges the serfs “[l]et us go to the king and remonstrate with him.” The power of English royalty by Richard’s time largely derived from the

system of laws established two centuries before by Henry II. Henry set a strong precedent, sending his men throughout England to keep order according to royal standards.

By the fourteenth century, cities enjoyed relatively long standing reputation as mercantile centers. However, in Froissart's record, London plays a newer urban role as a hub for social ferment, in addition to housing rich nobles and merchants. Londoners "envious of the rich and noble" seek to destroy them in the guise of fighting for serfs, freedom, thus producing the Rebellion. In Froissart's presentation, the social order is successfully attacked, as protesting peasants quickly note the city's wealth and take to looting. While probably better viewed as a product of Plague and of the sense of a unified authority against which to revolt, the Peasants, Rebellion also can be taken as another scene in the play of contemporary urban unrest.