

2 Popular piety and the Church's spiritual role

SOURCE 1

Roger Martyn grew up in the Suffolk village of Long Melford. His account describes what the Church was like during his childhood in the 1530s and how the Church was involved in people's lives. Here he describes events on Holy days:

On Corpus Christi Day the people of the parish carried the Blessed Sacrament in procession about the streets. I think that they went in procession ringing hand bells on St Marks Day. In Rogation Week, they beat the bounds of the town, praying for rain or for good weather as the time required. There was a bonfire on Midsummer Eve and on St James' Eve there was a bonfire and a tub of ale and bread given for the poor. On St Thomas' Eve there were also bonfires and on tables there was mutton and peas set out with bread and ale. At these times my grandfather invited friends and the more respectable poor neighbours to eat with us.

ACTIVITY

Evaluating primary sources

According to Source 1, how far was Roger Martyn's life shaped by the teachings of the Church?

The Church's spiritual role

The Church was powerful because it provided a link between God and human beings who could only reach heaven through membership of the Church.

Below is an extract from the churchwardens' accounts for St James', Louth, Lincolnshire in 1515. The churchwardens were chosen from the members of the congregation. They were usually respected men who were able to read and write.

SOURCE 2

Churchwardens' accounts, Parish Church of St James, Louth, 1515:

The fifteenth Sunday after Holy Trinity this year the weathercock was set upon the spire of the church. Will Appelby, the parish priest, was there and many of his brother priests were present to consecrate the said weathercock and the stone that it stands on. It was carried onto the top of the spire. The priests sang the 'Te deum laudamus' (Now thank we all our God) whilst the organs played. The churchwardens rang all the bells and provided all the people there with bread and ale. All this was for the glory of our loving God, Our Lady and all the saints.

ACTIVITY

Study Sources 1 and 2. In groups, consider:

1. why the ritual and theatricality of the events described might be important in farming communities
2. whether the events described united people in the community regardless of their social position, or reinforced the social structure?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- Popular piety and the Church's spiritual role
- Lay religious guilds
- Key beliefs
- The role of the priesthood
- The importance of printing

CROSS-REFERENCE

For more detailed information on the **Church's holy celebrations throughout a year**, please see page 12 on the liturgical year.

A CLOSER LOOK

The liturgical year

The life of the agricultural community and the Church year (liturgical year) fitted well together. The majority of feast days, or holy days, were days when the community would not work but would celebrate together. Figure 2 shows details of the main events in the liturgical year.

Season/Holy Day	Description
Advent	The Church's year began with Advent in early December when preparations began for Christmas. In the farming community December was the time to slaughter the pigs and turn them into a year's worth of ham, bacon, sausage, lard and pickled pig's feet.
Christmastide	Christmastide began with Christmas Eve. The darkest day of the year, 21 December, also marked the beginning of longer days. Christmas Day, which celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ, was followed by a number of feast days. The celebration of the arrival of the wise men on 6 January brought to an end the long Christmas celebration.
Candlemass	The three weeks of preparation before Lent was a time of cleansing. At Candlemass the community would process, carrying candles as a symbol of light. Lambs were born around this time.
Shrove Tuesday	The last day before Lent was Shrove Tuesday, when the last good meal for a while was eaten. It was often marked by a celebration of misrule or disorder. Customs varied from place to place, but the 'Abbeys of Misrule', which featured the election of a 'boy bishop' who would hand out pretend money and dispense false justice, appeared in many towns.
Lent	Lent began on Ash Wednesday, 40 days before Easter. The ashes, made from burning the palms from the previous year, were smeared on people's foreheads as a reminder of death. Lent was a season of fasting. No meat could be eaten. For the average poor peasant this was no different from usual. It was a time that coincided with declining food supplies.
Holy Week	Lent culminated in Holy Week. Christ's final days on earth were celebrated in great detail. This began with Palm Sunday and Christ's entry into Jerusalem, which was celebrated with the blessing and distribution of palms. On Maundy Thursday the Last Supper was celebrated. Good Friday, the most solemn day of the year, commemorated the crucifixion. People would often march in processions, flogging themselves or carrying the cross in commemoration of Christ's suffering and death. The vigil on Holy Saturday was a rich celebration, with the blessing of the huge Paschal candle [which burned continuously for 40 days].
Eastertide	Eastertide was the most joyous of Christian holidays, beginning with the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday. Some of the lambs, which had been born in February, were eaten in the traditional Easter feast. In a number of towns, for example Coventry and York, there were Mystery Plays performed in the streets. In March, farmers ploughed and sowed crops, like oats.
Rogation Sunday	Rogation Sunday was a major event when the whole community 'beat the bounds'. A procession walked around the parish boundaries carrying banners and the parish cross, bells were rung and prayers said to ward off evil spirits and to establish the physical property of the parish.
Pentecost (Whitsunday)	Pentecost (Whitsunday) occurred seven weeks after Easter and celebrated the descent of the Holy Spirit on his followers and the beginning of the Christian Church.
Ordinary time	Following Pentecost was the 'ordinary time' of the church, which coincided with the ordinary business of rural life: sheep shearing, haymaking and the harvest. This was also the prime campaign season for making war. There were a number of holidays of interest that occurred around this time: Feast of Corpus Christi (the Body of Christ). This was a major event in communities; in the towns all the officials would take part in the procession throughout the town.
Other holy days	During the summer there were a number of holy days when people did not work and celebrations were held. The summer activities on the land were haymaking and sheep shearing in June, the harvest in July and threshing the grain in August. After the June shearing, sheep that were no longer productive might be slaughtered for mutton. Food was often in short supply until the harvest was brought to market in July and August.
All Saints' Day and All Souls Day	The last Sunday in October was the feast of Christ the King. This was followed by All Saints' Day (All Hallows' Day) on 1 November and All Souls Day on 2 November, when the dead were remembered. October was the time to sow the winter wheat and barley.

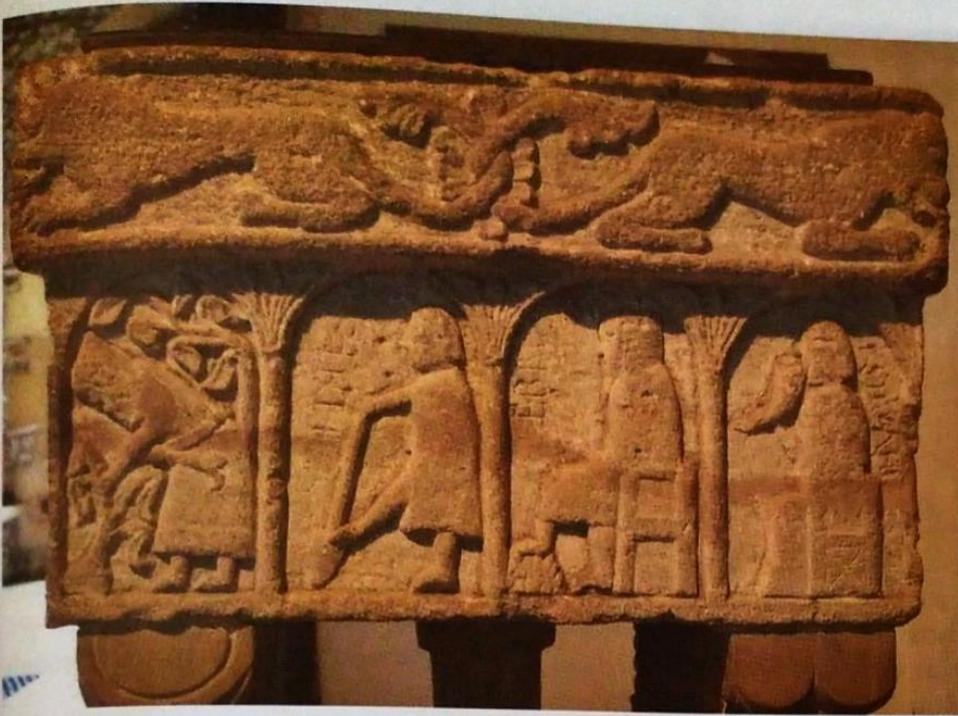


Fig. 1 Font frieze at St Mary's, Burnham Deepdale; this font (used for sacrament of baptism) shows the farming year, month by month

Lay religious guilds

In early sixteenth century society, the wealthy were able to finance the building of personal chantry chapels where a priest would be employed to say masses for the individual or family in perpetuity. For the vast majority of people this was not possible. Those who could afford to, joined guilds which provided a chapel and a priest for all those who contributed to the common fund; the guild would ensure that prayers were regularly said for a dead person's soul and it also provided a funeral with a requiem mass. Many of these guilds were based on crafts, but there were also fraternities which were open to both men and women. New guilds and fraternities were regularly formed and individuals often belonged to more than one. The guilds played an active part in religious festivals; the importance of individual guilds could determine their place in the Corpus Christi procession.

Membership of a guild not only meant that prayers would be said for the dead (an insurance for the afterlife); guilds were also concerned in caring for the living. They would provide benefits to members who were in difficult financial circumstances. Guilds also often imposed a strict moral code on their members and required attendance at Guild masses and the funerals of other members.

Key spiritual beliefs: religious doctrine and practice

Heaven, hell and purgatory

In the sixteenth century, people believed that they were sinners: not only were they born with **original sin**, but during their lives every time they disobeyed God's laws they would acquire more sin. When a person died, unless they had been very saintly and not committed any sins, Catholics believed they would spend time in **purgatory** where they would be judged before going to heaven. By the sixteenth century people believed that their time in purgatory could be reduced through earning **indulgences**, which might involve going on a pilgrimage or praying to a saint or touching the relics of a saint. Wealthier people would sometimes pay people to go on pilgrimages for them. It was believed that the saint would ask God to help a person on their behalf. Prayers

ACTIVITY

Research task

Use books and the Internet to investigate the original meaning of the religious festivals and why certain symbols were chosen to represent events. Do you think that people in the early sixteenth century took part in the ritual of the Church year because of religion or out of superstition?

KEY TERM

original sin: this was the sin with which everyone was born as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

purgatory: the place where, in the Catholic faith, the souls of the dead suffer for a suitable time to make them sufficiently pure to go to heaven. The amount of time a soul spends in purgatory is determined by their good works whilst alive and prayers said for a person after they are dead

indulgences: any sins already forgiven through confession could be further lessened through a type of pardon

KEY TERM

Mass: the most important service activities in the Catholic Church. During the Mass, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, the priest blessed the bread and wine as Catholics believed Jesus had done at the Last Supper. Catholics believed that through the prayers the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. This is known as **transubstantiation**

transubstantiation: this theory implies that the substance of the bread and wine changed miraculously at consecration into the body and blood of Christ, although the appearance remained the same

ACTIVITY

Thinking point

Figure 2 shows a doom or judgement painting created between 1536 and 1541 by Michaelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. Paintings such as this were intended to inspire the laity with the glories of heaven but also to make them fear hell. Why might the Church want to constantly remind ordinary people of heaven and hell?

were made to saints by people when they were alive and by relatives on their behalf when they were dead. In the same way, masses for the souls of the dead were believed to reduce the time a person spent in purgatory.

Reaching heaven was the central aspiration of individuals in the sixteenth century. Time spent on earth was seen as a preparation for eternal life. For a soul to go to heaven meant eternity spent in paradise in the company of Christ and the souls of those who had departed earlier and reached heaven. Hell, in contrast, meant spending eternity tormented by the devil in an inferno from which there was no escape. Participation in the rituals of the Church, receiving the sacraments, doing good works and prayer would all affect the soul after death.

Masses could be chanted in Latin in chantry chapels, and prayers could be said for the souls of the dead to reduce their time in purgatory. Throughout the day, parishioners would light candles in chapels around statues to the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, and to local saints. Saying prayers for the dead and giving gifts to the Church were examples of 'good works'. Good works also included helping the poor and going on pilgrimages; essentially 'good works' included all activities that the Church acknowledged could reduce time in purgatory. The means by which an individual was able to go to heaven through either faith and or good works is known as salvation or **justification**.

The following are inscriptions from the windows in the York church of St Michael le Belfrey. As members of the congregation read the names of the donors they would remember them in their prayers.

SOURCE 3

Inscriptions from the windows of Church of St Michael le Belfrey, York:

Of your charity, pray for the soul of Christopher Seel, Chanter of the Church of York and sometime Clerk of the Works: of whose devotion the window was glazed in the year of our Lord God 1537.

Of your great charity pray for the souls of Martin Sosa, he was sometime Sherrif of York and goldsmith, born in Spain, and Ellen his wife who caused this window to be made of his costs and charges.

Of your charity, pray for the soul of Mr Thomas Marsar, sometime clerk of St Peter's works, in whose time this church was new erect and builded and his devotion caused this window to be glazed with his own costs and charges.

Of your charity, pray for the souls of William Beckwith and Jane his wife, his son and Ann his wife caused this window to be glazed.



Fig. 2 A doom painting from Holy Trinity Church, Coventry

A CLOSER LOOK

Pilgrimages

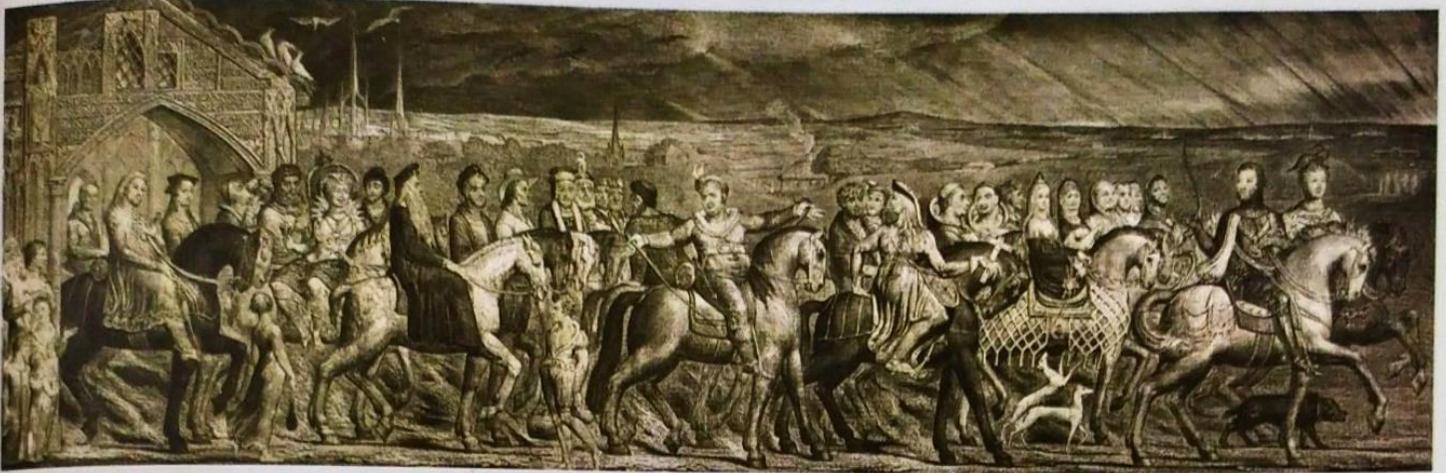


Fig. 3 A fresco depicting the Canterbury pilgrims; what does this show about the type of people who went on pilgrimages?

People could demonstrate their faith or their penance by going on a pilgrimage. Some journeys might be lengthy and dangerous even. The pilgrimage could be to visit the tomb of a saint, for example that of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury, or to a shrine built where there had been a reported visitation of the Virgin Mary, such as at Walsingham in Norfolk. Pilgrims would wear a pilgrim badge to show that they had visited the shrine. Pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela in Spain would wear cockle shells, a practice which was common at many pilgrimage sites. The very wealthy would wish to purchase relics of saints as well as praying at the tombs. The pilgrimage to the relic of the saint would count as an indulgence and was thus believed to reduce the time a person would spend in purgatory. People would also make pilgrimages to seek a miraculous cure for an illness or disease.

The seven sacraments

Beyond the concepts of heaven, hell and purgatory, there has been much debate as to what people actually believed during the sixteenth century, but the doctrine of the Church and its rituals were clear.

The seven sacraments were key to the Catholic faith. These sacraments, or religious ceremonies, took place throughout a person's life from birth (baptism) to death (last rites). The most important sacrament was the Mass. In this rite, the priest elevated the host and the wine and through his prayers Catholics believed a transformation occurred in which they became the body and blood of Christ. This is known as **transubstantiation**. The laity would only take the bread once a year at Easter and would never take the wine, which was consumed only by the priest.

A CLOSER LOOK

Evidence for people's beliefs

Historians have looked at a range of material relating to the Church in England to assess its state and the people's beliefs. Sources include episcopal court records, churchwarden's accounts, wills, private correspondence and artefacts such as devotional literature (texts used in religious worship). The research of historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, using will-based evidence,

CROSS-REFERENCE

Read more about **Saint Thomas Becket** in the Closer Look, Chapter 15 page 130.

A CLOSER LOOK

The seven sacraments

The seven sacraments were Catholic religious ceremonies or rites by which people received the grace of God:

- baptism – when children were cleansed of original sin
- confirmation – when young people became members of the Church and could take Mass
- marriage – when two people were joined together by the priest
- ordination – when a man became a priest
- confession – when a person told their sins to a priest and was made to do penance (a formal release from guilt)
- the Mass – when the priest carried out a re-enactment of the Last Supper of Christ.
- last rites – when the dying were anointed with holy oil before they died.

has shown the existence of groups who supported changes in religious beliefs. He has shown that the introductions to people's wills changed from purely Catholic statements to a reflection of Protestant views. He has also shown that in East Anglia, where there had been great investment in churches in the first two decades of the fifteenth century, there was very little opposition to religious change when it occurred in later years. This would suggest that people could support the Church but not necessarily support its beliefs. By contrast, Eamon Duffy has demonstrated in his work particularly *The Stripping of the Altars*, that there was great support for the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church in the first two decades of the fifteenth century.

STUDY TIP

When answering source questions it is important to establish what evidence is being presented. Consider whose views are being represented; this can be useful but can also demonstrate limitations. The sources are by their very nature, representative of those who were literate, and in most cases the wealthier members of the community. It is also important to consider the purpose for which a source was written; was it to provide a record of an activity or to look backwards or forwards?

A CLOSER LOOK

The priest's role

The priest, as part of his role, was required to say Mass every day; the laity therefore had the daily opportunity to observe the spiritual transformation of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. Attendance at Mass was a means by which time in purgatory could be reduced.

KEY TERM

confession: the laity were required to tell the priest of their sins before taking the Eucharist. The priest would forgive their sins in the name of God. All Catholics were expected to make a confession to a priest at least once a year



PRACTICE QUESTION

Evaluating primary sources

With reference to Sources 1, 2 and 3, and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these three sources to an historian studying the Church in England before 1529.

The role of the priesthood

The priest was central to the spiritual lives of members of the Church. He was the representative of God on earth and only priests were able to administer the sacraments. In the Mass the priest consecrated bread and wine which then became the body and blood of Christ. In this way, human beings, though imperfect and sinful, could be strengthened and aided by God's grace and by the Church. The priest reassured the people that, if they came to Church and did their best, God would be kind and forgiving.

The priest was central to the forgiving of sins. In preparation for the annual Easter Mass, it was vital that the individual was purged of his sins and was at peace with his neighbour. The priest would hear the **confession** of his parishioners and was able to forgive their sins on completion of penances. Once the person had been granted absolution then they could participate in the Mass and pass the Pax, a symbol demonstrating peace, to their neighbours. Only the priest was able to perform the sacrament of baptism, marriage and last rites. All of these were necessary, not just as rites of passage but as a means by which a person might attain everlasting life.

Most of the population were not able to read and write and indeed would have been unable to read the Bible which was in Latin. Whilst most would have understood the meaning of prayers recited in Latin such as Pater Noster (Our Father), they relied on the priest to interpret the word of God for his congregation. It was therefore important to the congregation that the priest in their parish was educated and capable.

The importance of printing

One of the main developments of the late fifteenth century was the growth in literacy amongst the nobility, gentry and merchants. To some extent, this was the result of the increase in grammar schools in the county towns and London. Grammar schools taught Latin grammar to the sons of merchants and the gentry, and occasionally a bright peasant boy. The ability to read and write could mean entry to one of England's two universities, to the Church, the legal profession or lead to a career as a merchant. Increased literacy was also

encouraged by the growth of the printing press and the availability of books. The printing press, which used moveable type, was developed in Germany in 1450. A single press could produce 3600 pages a day enabling large-scale production and distribution of books, which had long been the preserve of the very wealthy. However, the first book printed in English was only published in 1475.

ACTIVITY

Research the history of the oldest school in your town or area. Did it have its origins as a grammar school? Who founded it and why?

Religious books, especially Bibles, were very popular, although these were not translated from Latin into English; to have done this would have been regarded as heresy. Books were imported from the continent, often by merchants who traded in woollen cloth out of Antwerp. The impact of cheaper and more readily-available books was transformational. No longer did the wealthy have to sit and listen to a priest reading the Bible in a church; they could have their own Bible or Book of Hours at home and spend time reading the word of God for themselves.

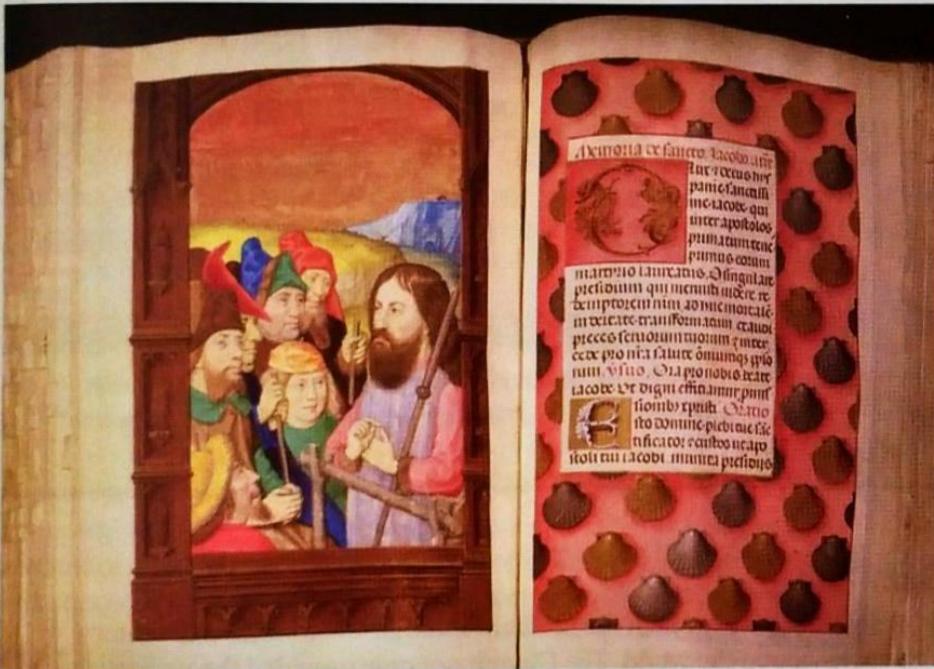


Fig. 4 This is from a cheap English printed edition which would enable a member of the laity to follow a prayer cycle similar to that of the clergy or monks

In addition to Bibles and Books of Hours there was a growing market for narrative tales such as the *Canterbury Tales*, which had been written in the late fourteenth century outlining the stories told by a group of pilgrims travelling from London to the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury. Books about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table were also popular. These too had a strong religious basis, often telling of the search for the Holy Grail, the cup in which Christ's blood had been held following the crucifixion and which had been used at the Last Supper.

ACTIVITY

Research the types of Books of Hours available before and after the introduction of printing. How might these be used by members of the laity?



Fig. 5 This woodcut, said to be the first illustration of a printing press, was produced in 1521 and demonstrates the importance of women in the printing process.

STUDY TIP

You need to think of ways in which the wealthy showed their concern for the Church, perhaps reflecting on their donations and participation in pilgrimages and balance this against the way the Church was important in the lives of the poor. Make a judgement as to which group found the Church more important.



PRACTICE QUESTION

'In the early sixteenth century, the Church was more important in the lives of wealthy people than those of the poor.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.

Summary

- Religion was very much the medium through which sixteenth century people viewed the world. The Church not only provided the structure of society and its values, it provided people with a means of understanding the world around them and explaining events before the development of science.
- Sixteenth century society was very hierarchical and the position of an individual in that society was deemed to have been ordained by God.
- Whilst not everyone would have thought profoundly about the deeper religious meanings of their activities, for many, codes of behaviour might be described as superstitious.