

A Peasant's Dwelling

The building was large for it was more than a dwelling. Beneath its sagging roof were a pigpen, a henhouse, cattle sheds, corncribs, straw and hay, and last and not least, the family's apartment, actually a single room whose walls and timbers were coated with soot. According to Erasmus, who examined such huts, "almost all the floors are of clay and rushes from the marshes, so carelessly renewed that the foundation sometime remains for twenty years, harboring, there below, spittle and vomit and wine of dogs and men, beer...remnants of fishes, and other filth unnamable. Hence, with the change of weather, a vapor exhales which in my judgment is far from wholesome."



The centerpiece of the room was a gigantic bedstead, piled high with straw pallets, all seething with vermin. Everyone slept there, regardless of age or gender—grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, and hens and pigs—and if a couple chose to enjoy intimacy, the others were aware of every movement. In summer they could even watch. If a stranger was staying the night, hospitality required that he be invited to make "one more" on the familial mattress. This was true even if the head of the household was away, on say, a pilgrimage. If this led to goings-on, and the husband returned to discover his wife with child, her readiest reply was that during the night, while she was sleeping, she had been visited by an incubus. Theologians had confirmed that such monsters existed and that it was their demonic mission to impregnate lonely women lost in slumber. Of course, when unmarried girls found themselves with child and told the same tale, they met with more skepticism.

If this familial situation seems primitive, it should be borne in mind that these were prosperous peasants. Not all their neighbors were so lucky. Some lived in tiny cabins of crossed laths stuffed with grass and straw, inadequately shielded from rain, snow, and wind. They lacked even a chimney; smoke from the cabin's fire left through a small hole in the thatched roof—where, unsurprisingly, fires frequently broke out. These homes were without glass windows or shutters; in a storm, or in frigid weather, openings in the walls could only be stuffed with straw, rags—whatever was handy. Such families envied those enjoying greater comfort, and most of all they coveted their beds. They themselves slept on thin straw pallets covered by ragged blankets. Some were without blankets. Some didn't even have pallets.