

Time and Space: Living in Sixteenth-century Europe

Landscape and People

For the inhabitants of sixteenth-century Europe life was dominated far more than it would be today by the physical landscape. In today's western society, landscape is to all intents and purposes an optional feature of existence: experienced most directly as a vacation diversion or digression from the everyday. In the sixteenth century, in contrast, the physical environment – urban or rural – was the overwhelming, determining fact of life, shaping lives as surely as any human capacities or limitations.

Experiencing the natural world as we do today, mostly voluntarily, we can delight in its grandeur – but it is a grandeur that we have rendered largely risk free. Only on very rare occasions can we experience the potency, the overwhelming force of nature. Our sixteenth-century forebears had a very different relationship with their environment, be it their physical location, the natural world or their own bodies. Civilization was prized precisely because it was so thin and brittle a veneer.

The physical landscape of Europe in the sixteenth century would have been, to our eye, imposing and dangerous: far more varied, full of stark contrasts, much less densely settled – above all, untamed. Far less of the surface area was urbanized; of the remainder, far less was intensely farmed. The population of Europe seems to have been 70 million in 1500; at this level it had barely recovered to the level it had attained some 200 years before, in 1300, before the ravages of the Black Death. By 1600, it had grown to around 89 million. But even at

that level, there were six times fewer people in Europe than there would be in the year 2000. One has now to go to some of Europe's remotest regions – the Highlands of Scotland, for instance – to find overall population densities equivalent to those of the sixteenth century.¹

Europe still possessed huge areas of natural wilderness: marshland and fen, undrained lakes, huge mountain ranges. A far higher proportion of the surface area was wooded, ranging from the huge impenetrable forests of southern Germany and eastern Europe, to the more domesticated, but still vastly impressive mature woodland of southern England. Roads were rudimentary or haphazard; rivers could be either vital arteries of communication, or impassable barriers. For many of Europe's peoples, the physical landscape created an immediate context for life that was in our terms quite narrowly defined. Many would live, work, marry and die within a few kilometres of where they were born. The difficulties of transporting goods long distances meant that most of the necessities of life were grown, farmed or manufactured within a very small radius.

In communities defined by their physical location, places could be quite close to each other and yet utterly remote. The southern French towns of Carcassonne and Mazamet, less than 50 km apart, are nevertheless separated by an imposing set of wooded mountains that would have inhibited any real contact. The port town of La Rochelle was connected to the outside world only by the sea, for impenetrable marshes separated it from its rural hinterland. Landscape created boundaries far more than did borders. The concept of a border between territories or kingdoms as a line rather than a zone only really began to take root in the eighteenth century, when advances in government and cartography made such a concept meaningful. In the sixteenth century, lives were bounded by natural features, and when none existed (or even, in the case of rivers, where they did), people moved between different jurisdictions with considerable freedom. Until the treaties of Madrid (1526) and Cambrai (1529) it was impossible to speak of a frontier between France and the Netherlands in any sense we would recognize. Fifty years later during the Wars of Religion citizens of both lands would continue to exploit the lack of controls or border markings to take themselves beyond the reach of trouble almost at will. In eastern and central Europe geographical borders between states were even more uncertain. Following the Ottoman conquest of much of Hungary in the 1520s and 1530s, boundaries between areas of Turkish and Habsburg overlordship remained cloudy

for generations. This allowed many Hungarian lords to continue to exercise jurisdiction over parts of their lands now under nominal Turkish control. A sixteenth-century traveller would have measured progress far more in terms of places of refreshment (towns, inns or taverns) or economic barriers (tolls and ferries) than jurisdictional boundaries.

In a world defined, shaped and dominated by natural features, towns stood out. Sixteenth-century peoples were proud of their towns, as is demonstrated by the new (and very expensive) genre of topographical woodcuts, which represented Europe's great cities, majestic behind their great walls, a honeycomb of churches and imposing civic buildings. Here European peoples created intricate, densely populated societies of considerable sophistication and drive. All were by today's standards small. The city of London comprised a bare square mile, and its population of some 60,000 at the beginning of the sixteenth century was only then beginning to sprawl beyond the walls. The great imperial cities of Nuremberg and Strasbourg housed populations of 20,000 to 25,000 in an even smaller space. Many cities were only just beginning to outgrow the natural features, the island or hilltop, that had defined the ancient settlement, and the extramural suburbs were often little more than slum shanty towns, heartily disapproved of by the urban grandees, and easily sacrificed in time of war.

Between these towns and cities by 1500 there existed networks of communication and trade that were often intricate and sophisticated. Much of this trade was river borne, reflecting the poor quality and danger of sixteenth-century roads. But all travel was attended by a level of risk, uncertainty and physical danger that is hard to contemplate today. Travellers' tales were popular precisely because roads were such perilous and eventful places.

Nevertheless one should not believe that because of these impediments people in this period led bounded, limited lives. It is possible to reconstruct not untypical careers, where men and women lived their entire lives in the same settlement. Their range of acquaintance was defined by homestead, village, kin and civil authority: essentially a series of concentric circles with contact of diminishing frequency away from the central core. But even this limited worldview implies a degree of connectedness with the outside world. Even in an essentially static life, every community would receive visitors: travelling salesmen, migrant workers, roving players, quack doctors or teeth pullers, fair-ground performers. If they were less fortunate, they would experience the disruption caused by organized bands of troops or beggars. All, for

good or ill, would bring their experience of the world beyond the village.

In truth, travel was a ubiquitous part of sixteenth-century life. Many people would themselves have experienced, or known someone who had made a long journey. Mediaeval Europe offered many opportunities for pilgrimage, and whole communities existed to service this religious *Wanderlust*. The Scottish burgh of St Andrews had grown up around this industry, its very remoteness (which incurred pious hardship for the dedicated pilgrim) here turned to advantage. Pilgrims who made the journey to see St Andrew's bones under the High Altar of the Cathedral – one of the largest ecclesiastical buildings in northern Europe – could buy a pleasing variety of souvenir trinkets from local tradesmen. In fifteenth-century Worms the first successful business enterprise of Johannes Gutenberg, later inventor of printing, was the mass production of pilgrims' mirrors.

In towns the effect of population movements was even more profound. Sixteenth-century towns experienced vast inward migration: often young men looking for work, sometimes whole families. Many incomers had their hopes of finding fortune in the city cruelly dashed, and ended up begging or on the poor rolls. The reorganization of poor relief, one of the principal bureaucratic achievements of the age, was partly stimulated by this vast flow of peoples towards the cities. But if migrants impinged on the consciousness of the city fathers



Figure 1 Pilgrim badge of St Andrew. Courtesy St Andrews Museum. Pilgrims collected such badges as tokens of their visits to Europe's many pilgrimage centres. Pilgrimage was big business; Johann Gutenberg made the fortune that first floated his experiments in printing from the manufacture of pilgrims' mirrors.

largely when they became a problem, they were also a necessity, because sixteenth-century towns could not sustain themselves by the natural cycle of birth and death. Sixteenth-century cities were great killing fields, particularly prone to epidemic disease and the illnesses caused by poor sanitation and dirty water. To the extent that the sixteenth century saw a growth of urbanization, it probably also saw a general reduction of life expectancy.

To this normal, traditional pattern of people movements the sixteenth century added another more turbulent: the phenomenon of religious exile. The religious convulsions of the period, and particularly the second half of the century, saw very considerable population shifts as people fled persecution, or made a pre-emptive bid for religious freedom. An estimated 50,000 people left the Netherlands in the wake of the collapse of the first brief experiment of religious coexistence in 1566–7, and France experienced a similar exodus after the St Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572. Such mobility had a very profound economic impact, not least because these migrants included a disproportionately large number of skilled artisans and men with working capital, often travelling without or ahead of their families. Shrewd governments took positive steps to recruit such workers to revitalize flagging local economies. Overall, the impact on the European economy was overwhelmingly positive, spreading new technologies and deepening the web of connections between the central powerhouse economies such as the textile towns of Flanders and more peripheral places. But the immediate context was a great deal of individual hardship.

We can experience the harsh realities of divided families and loved ones left behind in a rare survival from the Royal Archives in Brussels. This dossier consists of some 79 letters written by men and women in the towns and villages around Saint-Omer to their friends and relations who had taken flight to England from religious persecution in the Low Countries. A sister writes to her brother that their mother desired urgently his return, 'because she has cried almost from the hour and day of your departure, praying God for your return'. The wife of Plennart Martin related that the younger of their two little girls asked constantly for their father: the older sister told her that Daddy could not come back because he had bad feet. One can almost hear the children's voices in this kindly, nonsensical explanation. The poignancy of these simple familial greetings is only increased by the fact that we know that the letters will never reach their destination. Intercepted by the Catholic authorities the whole

consignment of letters was deposited in the Royal Archive, where it remains today.²

Time

What impresses about much of this confiscated correspondence is the speed with which it reached its destination. One letter in this bundle is a reply, dated 6 January, to a letter of 26 December – and remember that this particular correspondence relied wholly on an unofficial and largely underground postal network. The Dutch church in London logged in letters received on 12 January despatched from Antwerp on 9 January, an apparent speed of transmission that would do credit to a modern postal service.

Yet here we need to exercise a measure of caution, because dating sixteenth-century documents presents many pitfalls for the unwary. When a document is dated 9 January in the latter sixteenth century, this can be ‘New’ or ‘Old’ Style, a consequence of the long gestated calendar changes introduced during this era. Still more confusingly, much of Europe continued the practice of dating the New Year from Easter rather than 1 January; in which case a letter of 9 January 1561 would in fact emanate from 1562 according to our method of calculation. These are pitfalls for the unwary historian; but in fact sixteenth-century peoples themselves had great problems with time.

Let us begin with what was shared, and obvious. In the sixteenth century peoples’ sense of time was dominated by the natural day, and by the rhythms of the agricultural year. This was an age when light, other than that provided by the sun, was vastly expensive, and carefully rationed. So too of course was fuel – within living space the need to maximize light had to be carefully balanced against the equally imperative need to keep out the cold. In consequence workmen, in town or country, worked long hours in summer, and a much shorter day in winter. Country life especially was dominated by the rhythms of the seasons: planting, tending, harvest and slaughtering. Just as had the church in the Middle Ages, so the new emerging apparatus of government and commerce in the sixteenth century silently acknowledged the power of nature’s calendar by setting their dates, for taxation and interest, for instance, to the traditional year.

Nevertheless the sixteenth century was certainly characterized by a steadily more intricate sense of time. The governing of a large con-

glomeration of territories required the transmission of instructions over long distances. Complex legal issues might rest on when such instructions came into force. Printed versions of French royal proclamations carefully recorded the dates in the various stages of onward transmission: signed in the Royal Council on 30 March, registered in the Parlement of Paris on 3 April, proclaimed on the streets and in the marketplaces of Lyon on 30 April. In Spain's global empire the passage back and forth of advice and orders might well take months, a physical limitation which does much to explain both the problems experienced in the Netherlands, and the freewheeling spirit of the conquistadors.

In grappling with these problems the sixteenth century developed an ever more exact and exacting sense of time. The two centuries before this had seen the invention, perfection and gradual domestication of the mechanical clock. Although still a luxury item, by 1400 most large cities had invested in a prominent public timepiece, whose visible presence and chiming of the hours permitted a far more exact and objective measurement of the business day. Such clocks were commonplace by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and in the years that followed it was government initiative that lay behind the installation of such public clocks in the smaller towns and villages. The motivation was clearly spelt out in the Ecclesiastical Constitutions of Saxony: 'In villages without a clock, the pastor should admonish the church, and in particular the people who can afford it, to buy one, so that the church-offices can be carried out at the appropriate time in accord with the clock, and the people in other respects, too, should be guided by it in their housekeeping'.³

Clocks were seen as conducive to good order. A familiar if rather obscure saying of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V makes the point: 'Portae, pulsus, pueri: gates, bell strokes, children.' Solid walls, proper schools, and the orderly measurement of time were for the emperor the characteristics of a well-governed city. Conversely the removal or dismantling of a tower and bell as punishment for rebellion amounted to a loss of legal status and disenfranchisement. At the end of the century one of the most knotty problems encountered in communities divided between Protestants and Catholics was control of the bell tower. The commissioners of Henry IV of France despatched to enforce the Edict of Nantes after 1598 were often forced to resolve these complicated 'bell wars'.

It would be wrong to infer from this, however, that the pressure for more exact timekeeping came only from above. The generalization of printing technology also opened the way for mass-produced calendars,

with their standardized renderings of months and astrological seasons, feast days, fairs and the phases of the moon. The enormous popularity of such calendars and almanacs reveal the increased importance attached to time and timekeeping through all social orders. The rapidly rising production of small personal timekeepers opens a further chapter in the history of time consciousness.

Nevertheless, the sixteenth century had a major problem with time. For while the Roman reordering of the calendar year had served Christendom well (the emperor Augustus had finally fixed the names of the months and their lengths) it was by the sixteenth century common knowledge that the calendar year had drifted away from the true seasons. The error – the difference of the true summer from the calendar date – was now of the very significant order of 11 days. But how should this drift be corrected? Various papal commissions grappled with the problem, before the matter was finally taken in hand by Gregory XIII in 1581. For decades theologians had wrestled with the technically difficult and theologically charged issue of determining the true astronomical year, and by now they had both their measurements and a solution. On 1 March 1582 Gregory signed the bull proclaiming the new Gregorian calendar: at midnight on 4 October the calendar year would leap forward to 15 October.

The effect was, to say the least, traumatic. Many felt that ten days had, quite literally been snatched away from them: in the German city of Frankfurt people rioted against the pope and mathematicians. And how was one to calculate interest in a month reduced to 21 days? Europe's Catholic countries by and large fell into line: Spain, Portugal and the Italian states on the specified day, France and Flanders at the end of the year. Bavaria and the Austrian lands converted in 1583, as did Würzburg, Münster and Mainz (though each dropped a different set of ten days). But for Protestant states the Gregorian calendar was just one further example of papal arrogance and power, and they emphatically rejected the reform (as did the Eastern Orthodox). For over a century Protestant and Catholic Europe would march to different time. This had some bizarre consequences. A traveller journeying from Catholic Regensburg to Protestant Nuremberg, a journey of 70 km, would set off on 1 January and arrive on 21 December the previous year. It says a great deal for the intensity of religious passions, that these absurdities were not resolved for the best part of 200 years. England was the last major Protestant state to adopt the Gregorian calendar, in 1752. The Eastern Orthodox churches remained utterly

opposed to the 'new' calendar time until the twentieth century, and even now continue to celebrate Easter on a different day.

Opposition to calendar reform was not the limit of the Protestant assault on 'Catholic' time. Protestant reformers looked with considerable disfavour on a year measured through Catholic feast days. The traditional holidays associated with saints' days were an early victim of reforming fervour, but the name days of saints were still universally cited in calendars and almanacs. Only in Calvinist Geneva was the matter taken efficiently in hand, with the development of a new calendar that swept away the traditional name days, and substituted an eccentric miscellany of biblical and classical events, together with commemorations of heroes of the new movement. Thus January noted the Circumcision of Christ, Nebuchadnezzar's siege of Jerusalem (10th), and the conversion of St Paul; but also that on 24 January the emperor Caligula had been assassinated, and the Duke of Somerset executed in London in 1552. On 18 February the calendar called our attention to the fact that on this historically busy day the Romans celebrated the festival of fools, Noah sent out the dove that brought back the olive branch, and Martin Luther died in 1546.

Living and Dying

Even Geneva's most pious citizens would probably have taken no more than a casual interest in the making of this new model calendar. For most, life was full of far more pressing concerns. After all, a throbbing toothache was just as painful on the date of the execution of the Duke of Somerset as it would have been on the feast day of St Anthony. Illness, disease, incapacitating accidents, disability, keeping clothed and fed, all of these were infinitely more perilous than they are for many of us today. In this at least, rich and poor, townsmen and country folk, shared common concerns.

For the vast majority of Europe's population, diet was much less varied than it is today. Most of Europe's peoples subsisted on a limited diet of grains, milk products, and a little fish. Bread, usually made of cheap inferior grains, composed a large proportion of the countryman's diet. Even in the eighteenth century, up to 95 per cent of the diet of the rural poor in France was cereal in various forms. Within this general context there were clear regional variations. Germans, according to the chronicler Sebastian Franck, subsisted on black

bread made of rye, oatmeal porridge and boiled peas. Bretons preferred buckwheat porridge, the Burgundians ate bread made of rye and oatmeal, supplemented by maize porridge. Only in times of dearth would country folk resort to peas and beans, normally only fed to animals. The ubiquity of bread in the diet of the poor, and the fact that few would have an oven to bake at home, meant that bread was the most heavily regulated of consumer products. The size, weight and quality of a loaf were all closely regulated, and infractions of the regulations severely punished. Only in the nineteenth century would the potato begin to offer a cheap alternative source of basic nutrition.

If diet was unvaried, then in truth this was less of a concern than one might imagine. Monotony at least implies regularity, which, given the vagaries of weather, could hardly be guaranteed. Times of dearth were terrifying, and, for many on the economic margins, potentially deadly. A shortfall in the harvest of 20 per cent could raise prices by 80 per cent. A 50 per cent shortfall would send prices leaping up to 450 per cent above normal levels. These were deadly figures. No wonder town governments in the sixteenth century gave considerable attention to the establishment of municipal grain reserves, which could be used to turn back the ire of the poor in times of extreme want. Even in normal times lack of protein and vitamins led to near permanent undernourishment among many rural populations. In the poorer parts of Europe the poor assuaged the gnawing pangs of hunger with bread so adulterated with field grasses that it may well have had hallucinatory qualities; if so, this ‘bread of dreams’ offered no more than a brief respite from life’s harsher realities.⁴

The rich, of course, fared better, none more so than the rural aristocracy who could draw on their estates for varieties of game, meat and quality grains (wheat), and, depending on location, the manufacture of beer or wine. They also enjoyed the underappreciated boon of abundant supplies of unadulterated water. Employment in the households of the rich was in the sixteenth century as reliable a passport to regular nourishment as had been life in a medieval monastic community, for conspicuous consumption left much surplus food to be redistributed according to the careful hierarchies in which sixteenth-century society so excelled. Surviving accounts of magnate kitchens allow us to experience vicariously the best that sixteenth-century eating had to offer. At the palaces of the family d’Albret in the south of France the retinue of the kings of Navarre ‘feasted from platters heaped high with every imaginable wild beast of the field, bird of the air, and on holy days, fish of the sea’.⁵ At a normal winter meal,

family and guests would be served at least a dozen types of meat, game and fowl, along with elaborately prepared patés. Such a household could be a mainstay of the local economy, as merchants strove to outdo each other with ever more exotic delicacies. An extant purveyorship contract specifies 187 different kinds and cuts of meat, fish and fowl that merchants were prepared to bring to the d'Albret table. Nor need a fish day necessarily be a fast day: oysters, salmon and sole, even whale, decorated the table on Fridays. But sixteenth century food culture also had its hazards for those with money to spare. Because meat eating was the prerogative of the well-off, they tended to do too much of it, leading to health conditions associated with vitamin deficiency such as scurvy and ulcers. Massive consumption of wine brought retribution in the agonies of gout.



Figure 2 Doctor visiting the sick. Woodcut from *Das Buch zu distillieren*, Strasbourg, 1519. Courtesy St Andrews University Library. The doctor at the bedside was more an indicator of the patient's social status than holding out any hope of effective treatment.

Bringing food to the table, especially in the growing cities, increasingly distant from their centres of supply, was for sixteenth century peoples just one of the many hazards of life. Illness, disease, disfiguring accidents or conditions, these were all endemic and all had to be borne with far less hope of effective treatment than we have today. In an age before anaesthetics there were few conditions that justified the agony and risk of a surgical operation. While theoretical texts on the body and its humours multiplied, most people had too much sense to allow doctors to practise what they preached, at least on them. Most perilous of all was childbirth, both for infant and mother. Multiple, sequential pregnancies were the Russian roulette of the pre-modern age. Most parents experienced the agony of losing children in infancy. Here, the basic demographic facts make chilling reading. In sixteenth-century Castile in the rural areas around Valladolid, 40 to 50 per cent of all children died before their seventh year; in Palencia for the period 1576–1600 this figure rises to 68 per cent. A not untypical experience was that of the French family Capdebosc. The parents, Jean and Marguerite, who married in 1560, had ten children, five of whom died before they were ten. The surviving children in their turn raised a total of 23 children, 10 of whom survived childhood.⁶ Thus of the 33 children of this prolific family, only six children lived to found a family of their own. The social consequences of these pitiless statistics were profound. Those determined that a family name should live on often took the precaution of giving the same Christian name to several children, to maximize the chance that it should survive for posterity. Fathers left with young children would usually swiftly remarry, often to a younger wife; their death in turn allowed the widow to continue a chain of serial relationships of partners of unequal age.

To these regular hazards, epidemic disease added a further, terrifying element of uncertainty. Sixteenth-century Europe made no progress whatsoever in grappling with the scourge of epidemics. Indeed the growth of cities, unaccompanied by any breakthrough in public sanitation or public hygiene, may indeed have intensified its impact. Many cities suffered incidence of epidemics at least every ten years. In the middle of the sixteenth century England was twice laid low by the sweating sickness, a mysterious if deadly affliction which modern medical science has struggled precisely to identify. Most terrifying of all was the Black Death, the bubonic plague, introduced to Europe in 1348, and a regular visitor thereafter. Epidemics could kill up to one third of a city's population in one year, a rate of mortality that left few households untouched. While its cause was still unknown, the plague

sent terror through communities that recognized the tell-tale signs of a new outbreak. Panic led to the wildest accusations: some believed that plague was deliberately spread by malign individuals, and communities turned on these plague spreaders with a ferocity that in the next century would be reserved for witches. Even Calvin's Geneva was not spared this sort of irrationality. Three times in the sixteenth century Geneva initiated proceedings against unfortunate individuals who it was alleged had deliberately spread plague in the city. Evidence collected under torture revealed a bizarre conspiracy to spread the disease by smearing door lintels with grease concocted



Figure 3 The Apothecary's Shop, from *Das Buch zu distillieren*, Strasbourg, 1519. Courtesy St Andrews University Library.

by rendering fat from the foot of a corpse removed from the town gibbet. Incredible though this might seem to us, the magistrates were in deadly earnest. In the third episode, in 1570, 115 persons were prosecuted and 44 executed.⁷

With all of these contending perils, it is perhaps surprising that life expectancy was not lower than it was. In fact, if an infant survived his or her first year (admittedly a considerable qualification), average life expectancies were not lower than those of our great grandparents' generation. Only in the last century has modern medicine and nutrition significantly lengthened the average adult life span. But issues of life and death were still perceived very differently. Firstly, the arbitrary quality that attended issues of mortality gave a different quality to life. Death was literally all around: few lives would have been untouched by the sudden brutalities of its sheer unpredictability. Furthermore, although lives were often long, they were, in health terms, qualitatively different. Pain and disability were the common lot, often to be endured over a long span of years. Pain was an everyday part of life to an extent we can scarcely understand. This is a circumstance that historians take insufficiently into account when we pass judgement on the actions of sixteenth-century opinion formers. When the real extent of the health problems with which they laboured can be deduced (which is infrequently, given the nature of the surviving evidence), one begins to wonder why policy-making was not more arbitrary and wilful than it was. A modern analysis of the illnesses of the Genevan reformer John Calvin reveals a body so riddled with debilitating conditions that it is a wonder that he could drag himself to the pulpit. For the last ten years he suffered from kidney stones so agonizing that movement was a torment. The only proposed medical solution was that he should attempt to dislodge them by vigorous horse-riding. The emperor, Maximilian, seems to have enjoyed robust good health until his late thirties, when he contracted syphilis. In 1501 he fell off his horse, damaging a leg, which gave him pain for the rest of his life. His major problem seems to have been morbid depression. After 1514 he always travelled with his coffin, which, considering he lived a further five years constantly on the move, must have been a great trial to his servants.⁸

Such conditions, when they can be deduced, can be factored into our analysis; but inferior healthcare also had less tangible and culturally more subtle effects. In an age when spectacles were a rare luxury and an inexact palliative, inferior eyesight was by and large a condition that had simply to be endured. In societies like our own which assume clear (or at least reliably corrected) eyesight, the cultural effect of this is hard

to imagine. But it is possible to postulate that the sixteenth century in fact had a quite different hierarchy of the senses: the dissemination of information and shaping experiences relied far less on what was visually perceived, than on hearing, touch and taste.

This insight can be applied to all of the senses to a greater or lesser degree. In the sixteenth century medical diagnosis relied to a large extent on taste and smell, although, it need hardly be added, with erratic results. This was also a much more tactile age. There were fewer people but they lived, paradoxically, in conditions of far greater intimacy. Dwelling places had far fewer rooms; the concept of privacy had little meaning for most people of that time. Even among the well-born, polite society revolved round a complex ritual of greetings and physical contact. But it is most of all our elevation of visual experience that separates us from the past. Ours is a highly visual age, particularly in the field of information technology. It was not only because literacy was a less universal skill that the same reliance could not be placed on visually perceived information: people simply did not see as well, if indeed they could see at all. A sense of this would encourage a reinterpretation of the impact of many communal activities, from processions and pageants to sermons and public executions. In the world of the arts and public display colour would have been more important, the precision of line less so. The salutary impact of a public burning may have had more to do with the awful sounds and smell than the visual tableau. Certainly, and more prosaically, a sense of this reordered hierarchy of sensory experience points up the continued importance of aural communication – song and speech – in a world that was experiencing the creeping importance of print.

This World and the Next

If in the light of this review of the basic circumstances of existence we are to try now to get inside the minds of our sixteenth-century forebears, where does this leave us? A basic and obvious observation is that the sheer unpredictability of existence – an untamed landscape, the constant danger of sudden calamity – left far more space than we leave today for the operation of supernatural powers. The sixteenth century world had far more space for God. They saw God at work in many aspects of their day-to-day existence, where we now offer an undeified, scientific explanation. They saw God in the weather. They prayed urgently for a merciful sun at time of harvest, and gave

grateful thanks for full bellies in winter. Floods, tempests, thunder and lightning were all seen as direct evidence of God's anger, for what else could it be? The All Saints flood of 1570 in the Netherlands was inevitably interpreted by Catholic authors as God's judgement on the recent iconoclastic attack on the churches during the first phase of the Dutch Revolt; Protestant commentators, naturally, did not agree. However interpreted, tales of natural calamities became one of the most popular classes of sensation literature as cheap printed books began to be mass-produced in the second half of the century.

The calamity of illness and epidemic, whether it struck at members of the family or livestock, were all laid at the door of an all powerful deity. Incidences of the plague invariably brought forth from the pulpits of the afflicted community loud calls for repentance, for it seemed a matter of course that such a severe affliction could only be a sign of God's special disfavour. In Dutch the plague was known simply as *De Gave Gods*: God's gift. Those spared in such circumstances gave grateful thanks; as did those who experienced the everyday miracle of the successful delivery of a healthy child. When the distinguished Nuremberg jurist Christoph Scheurl was blessed with a first surviving child at the age of fifty-one his ecstatic journal entry was careful to give credit where credit was due: 'By the will of the Lord God, to whom alone praise and honour is due in all things, my dear wife Katharina gave birth to an early son on the Friday after *Misericordia Domini*, April 19, at three and a quarter hours sunrise, or 8.15 a.m. by the tower clock.'⁹

For a family on the edge of subsistence the loss of livestock could be an even greater calamity than the loss of children. The medieval Cornish hermit Saint Brannoc knew what he was about when he manifested his sanctity by resurrecting a cow. His cult was still enthusiastically celebrated in the English West Country in the sixteenth century. Just as did individuals, so too communities saw manifestations of the divine will in good times and bad. Seeking an explanation of a recent influx of poor people, which threatened the fragile social order in the city, the city secretary of Strasbourg in 1534, Lucas Hackfurt, saw the hand of God behind the recent rise in prices: 'What drives the poor here in such numbers? Answer: the great need and the dearness of all things. And where does this dearness come from? From God. Why did he send it to us? Because of our disbelief and sins, our ingratitude and selfishness, from which develops great cruelty and unbrotherly hardship for our neighbours.'¹⁰

The Genevan reformer John Calvin would later in the century begin one section of his great work the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the exhortation 'let God be God'. To most of Europe's citizens this would have seemed strangely superfluous. For to them, God was everywhere, even as they schemed and plotted to achieve their own very human ends.

The question that troubled theologians more was not the presence, or ubiquity of God, but to what sort of God, or gods, were the mass of the population offering their allegiance. If God was ceaselessly active in the world, then so too was the Devil and all his instruments: these too had to be fought, warded off or, on occasion, propitiated.

Belief in the Devil was not simply the preserve of the superstitious common folk. According to a recent and revolutionary study of the German reformer Martin Luther, his whole life can accurately be described – in his own perception – as a struggle against Satan and his cohorts.¹¹ Luther, through his dramatization of the Christian struggle for salvation, in fact intensified the medieval belief in the Devil and lent it additional urgency. His lead was followed by a whole generation of Lutheran ministers, who effectively filled the world with Satan's cohorts by diabolizing all vices. Printing presses in Germany were soon turning out dozens of treatises on the various devils and their specialities. One writer, the learned Professor Martin Borrhaus, even took a census of hell, counting exactly 2,665,886,746 devils in the infernal kingdom.¹²

Those rooted in a progress-orientated view of history should consider this evidence well. By the second half of the sixteenth century, with something like 250,000 of these devil books in circulation, this one genre had captured something like 10 per cent of the Protestant book market in the empire. And it is clear that this post-Reformation fixation did not originate with the people, but was developed by the educated, and spread by them to the populace. Far from being a product of popular superstition, this obsession with the Devil, like the concurrent witch-craze, was the outcome of a prolonged educational campaign by the political and intellectual elites.

In such a cosmic understanding, belief slid easily into superstition, and peoples across Europe used a variety of instruments in the endless struggle with the forces of the night. In times of sickness the local wise woman was far more accessible and affordable than any physician, and probably, with a rudimentary knowledge of herbs and homeopathic remedies, far more efficacious. But healing and magic were closely intertwined, and the search for remedies often involved a complex

jumbling of potions and incantations. Even within the bounds of the official church, the frantic search for assurance, both in this world and the next, led to excesses which many churchmen found troubling. In a world where death was so close, invariably had been experienced within the immediate family, and where bodily pains gave constant intimations of mortality, the two worlds were simply far more connected. Sixteenth-century men and women did not feel disconnected from dead kin; they thought about them frequently, and gave great pains to preparing the way for when they eventually slipped across the narrow gate between life and death.¹³ All commodities have their price, and anxiety commands a very high price indeed. The sixteenth century inherited from the medieval world a complex and vibrant economy of the afterlife. By the turn of the century church life had accrued a dense and intricate structure of memorial masses, altars and pious associations dedicated to smoothing the path to salvation of those who had gone before.