

Articles of the Peasants of Memmingen (1525)

These articles show that towns were also landlords and serfowners, and they were almost as reluctant as other lords to redress their peasants' grievances. The council's replies, where given, are in italics following each of the articles.

1. It is our humble and most sincere request and plea that we may now elect a pastor for ourselves, who will proclaim the divine, almighty, and living Word and holy Gospel, which is a food for our souls, [and do so] purely and clearly, without any human addition, doctrine, or command. We will provide the same pastor with a suitable competency. If such a pastor behaves improperly, then we may dismiss him and take on another in his place but always with the knowledge of the entire commune. For without proclamation of the divine Word we cannot be saved, as St Paul has shown us.

On the first article: where they are lacking, the council will provide and help to maintain Christian pastors in the parishes which belong to it as soon as it can obtain them, so that [the parishes] will be adequately provided for. But in the case of Woringen and other parishes where the council does not have the advowson, it will speak seriously to the pastors where they are deficient, and where a pastor will not amend himself, it will afterwards write to the collator about providing his subjects another pastor or allowing them to elect their own.

2. Since we have been forced to pay the tithe, we think that we should not be obliged to give it any more, for the holy New Testament does not oblige us to give it. We will also provide for the pastor's bodily needs.

On the second article, concerning the tithe, my lords think it good that the peasants and subjects suspend this article until the common peasantry everywhere have reached a settlement with the common Estates of the league. What the peasants then gain from other lords will be conceded to the council's subjects without delay.

3. It has hitherto been the usage that we have been held as your poor serfs, which is pitiable, given that Christ has purchased and redeemed us with his precious blood, the shepherd the same as the Emperor. It is not our intention to have no authority, for we will be obedient to all authority appointed by God in all fair and reasonable matters, and we do not doubt that as Christian lords you will release us from serfdom.

On the third article concerning serfdom: my lords purchased this for a considerable sum of money, and the serfdom of a Christian is no hindrance to the salvation of his soul, but so that the subjects may see and recognize the council's good will, it will release and absolve its subjects from such serfdom as far as it belongs to and is held by the council. In return they shall pay my lords a reasonable amount of protection money and accept no one else's protection since they are within the council's jurisdiction. They shall likewise allow no one to join [their community] who is not free; similarly, its subjects may marry no serf, whether man or woman, but only free persons, and otherwise be obedient to the council in all

reasonable things. And once anyone has discharged his obligations, he may then move wherever he wishes without hindrance from the council.

4. It has been the custom that a poor man did not have the right to catch or shoot game, likewise fish in running water, which is also not permitted us. We regard this as quite unjust and not in accordance with the Word of God, for when the Lord God created man he gave him power over the fish in the water, the birds in the air, and all the animals on the earth, etc. Our request does not apply where someone has [common] water that he has purchased unknowingly, for there one has exercise Christian concern out of brotherly love.

On the fourth, my lords will gladly concede that, as far as the council's forest and its authority extends and no further, its subjects shall and may catch and shoot any game and fowl on their holdings as they require, but they may not use the proper traps for that falls within the privilege of sovereign authority alone. And when the subjects pursue and want to catch or shoot game they should take care that they do harm to no one else's property

On free water, it is the council's will that no one may fish in running or still water that has been purchased. But whatever water was free and common shall be free again, and everyone shall be allowed to fish and catch with a hand net but with no other tool, only whatever he can eat and use himself in his own household, and he may not give away or sell anything beyond that, in order that the streams and pools are not exhausted and dammed dry or the meadows and banks spoiled or undermined, so that no great harm befalls the common man thereby.

5. It is our humble plea and request that since we have hitherto been long and greatly aggrieved by services, which have multiplied and increased from day to day, a gracious consideration might be given to how our forefathers supplied services, but only according to the Word of God.

On services: the council's subjects cannot complain, in that the majority of services were imposed upon them by other lords before the council purchased them... Nonetheless, where anything has been too hard for them, and it is put to the council in detail, and the letters of obligation are also read, it will show good towards them.

6. We request that henceforth we be not burdened by entry-fines, but when a holding is leased for a suitable rent the tenant and his heirs may enjoy the holding without further impositions.

Sixth, on entry-fines: my lords will not use these any more but in return will not lease any farm for more than a year. So when someone does not pay his rent or does not keep the farm in good order the council may evict him after a year, if it so chooses, and lease the farm to another. But whoever did not pay the old entry-fine may receive his farm anew each year, as this article provides.

7. Some villages are aggrieved about the fines for felonies and request that we may remain by the old usage.

On forest crimes, it is my lords' will that the fines and punishments relating to seigneurial and common woodland should remain the same and the punishment should be set

at a florin for each offense. However, the council will at all times provide its subjects with adequate supplies of firewood, wood for fencing, and timber for building. On the other penalties, my lords think that those currently in force are fair, as they were in part imposed at the request of the subjects themselves, and they should so remain in order that there will be peace and change will be avoided.

8. It is our humble request and plea that since some villages are aggrieved about woods, fields, pastures, and other rights which at one time belonged to the communes, these should be returned to them.

Further, if the communes are aggrieved about wood, pastures, fields, and other things, the subjects should indicate to the council which in particular; it will appoint councilors to inspect and decide if certain rights have been taken away from a commune and whether something ought to be restored in their place. Whatever the council decides that it is obliged to do, it will keep to it.

9. It is our diligent plea that when we provide a rent for a feudal lord we should be able to work our holdings to our best advantage and sell its produce when and where we choose, without hindrance from the feudal lord. If Almighty God sends us a failed harvest or a hailstorm the feudal lord should then remit rent according to the circumstances.

On the ninth article, the council denies having forbidden its subjects to sell their produce once they have paid their rent, but when and where it may have occurred it should be clearly indicated and the council will act fairly. If there is a hailstorm, the council will try to effect a Christian remission of rent after inspecting the damage.

10. Since some of our holdings are so heavily burdened that we cannot retain them all, we ... request a reduction of the burdens.

The council will inspect whatever holdings are thought to be burdened and take account of what it finds.

In conclusion, it is our final opinion and wish that if we have presented one or more articles not in accordance with the Word of God, which we do not think we have, then that article will be void. Similarly, where any articles are conceded and subsequently found through the clear evidence of the Word of God to be unjust, then we will not have them. By contrast, if we later find one or more articles contrary to the Word of God, we desire at all times to reveal it to the worthy council, for such action benefits you as our gracious feudal lords as much as us ...

In all this the council reserves its sovereign authority, with the addendum that if it identifies something contrary to justice or the Word of God, it will reduce or abolish it, where it has the power to do so, to the extent requested by its subjects in their articles.

From:

Tom Scott and Bob Scribner, *The German Peasant's War. A History in Documents* (London: Humanities Press, 1991), 78-80.