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Chapter 1

'A puzzling economy': demesne cultivation and seigniorial autarky in the age of commercialisation

Commercialisation and marketisation of the late medieval economy

In the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, England and other west European countries underwent a significant degree of urbanisation. Older towns grew, new ones were founded and the urban population expanded accordingly.¹ By 1300, there were between 4.75 and 6 million people living in England, about 15 per cent of whom dwelled in towns.² The single largest urban settlement was London, with a population of some 70,000 people.³ London, however, was clearly exceptional in its size: Norwich, the second-largest town, was inhabited by no more than perhaps 15,000 citizens around that time.⁴ Winchester, Bristol and York had between 10,000 and 12,000 burgesses each.⁵ Northampton and Gloucester housed around 3000 and 4000 individuals respectively.⁶ Most urban settlements, however, were even smaller: for example, the population of the abbatial town of Ramsey was most certainly less than 1000.⁷ Regardless of size and population density, however, one main distinguishing characteristic of towns was their pronouncedly non-agricultural nature. This meant that the urban populations did not have a direct and ready access to food supplies, which

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1. *On late medieval urbanisation in England, see various articles in D. Palliser (ed.), The Cambridge urban history of Britain, vol. I (Cambridge, 2000).*
 2. *The estimates vary a great deal. Most recently, the Warwick University-based project reconstructing the GDP of England (and later, Great Britain) and Holland in a very long run suggested 4.75 million in 1290. See S. Broadberry et al., 'British economic growth, 1270–1870' (working paper, 2010), available: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/academic/broadberry/wp/britishgdplongrun8a.pdf> (accessed 11 October 2011). Richard Smith, on the other hand, suggested the ceiling of 6 million: R.M. Smith, 'Human resources', in G. Astill and A. Grant (eds), *The countryside of medieval England* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 189–91.*
 3. *Again, estimates differ here. See B.M.S. Campbell et al., A medieval capital and its grain supply: agrarian production and distribution in the London region, c.1300 (London, 1993), p. 31; P. Nightingale, 'The growth of London in the medieval economy', in R.H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds), *Progress and problems in medieval England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 97–8.*
 4. *E. Rutledge, 'Immigration and population growth in early fourteenth-century Norwich: evidence from the titling roll', *Urban History Yearbook 1988* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 15–30.*
 5. *D. Keene, *Survey of medieval Winchester*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1985), I, pp. 352–68; E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: towns, commerce and crafts, 1086–1348* (London, 1995), p. 326.*
 6. *R.H. Britnell, *Britain and Ireland, 1050–1530: economy and society* (Oxford, 2004), p. 140.*
 7. *A.R. DeWindt and E.B. DeWindt, *Ramsey: the lives of an English fenland town, 1200–1600* (Washington, 2006), pp. 43–6. It is assumed that five out of six towns had a population of less than 2000 people. See R.H. Britnell, 'Town life', in R. Horrox and M. Ormrod (eds), *A social history of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 145.*

Figure 1.1 Not Shown

had to come from the surrounding countryside. The growth of urban populations inevitably increased the demand from towns for various raw foodstuffs and led to an expansion of commercialisation and marketisation, especially throughout the thirteenth century.⁸ On the eve of the Black Death (1348–51) there were around 2100 settlements with 'formal' markets and fairs in England, in contrast with only around 500 such places c.1200.⁹ Naturally, the figures varied from county to county, indicating different degrees of regional commercialisation. Thus, in Norfolk, one of the most commercialised counties, there were 283 markets and fairs in some 175 vills (that is, some 8 per 10,000 inhabitants and 14 per ten square miles). Similarly, in neighbouring Lincolnshire there were 238 markets and fairs (around 8 per 10,000 inhabitants and 9 per ten square miles). Even in more backward Lancashire there were 82 trade hubs (about 14 per 10,000 inhabitants and 5 per ten square miles). In other words, one can boldly state that by the early fourteenth century England had achieved a remarkable degree of commercialisation, the clear manifestations of which were a proliferation of markets and fairs; a strong reliance on monetary and credit economies; a certain degree of market integration, revealed by relatively uniform or similar commodity prices; and a dependence on international trade, with wool and textiles as the chief articles of export.

8. See R.H. Britnell and B.M.S Campbell (eds), *A commercializing economy: England 1086 to c.1300* (Manchester, 1995).

9. Retrieved from S. Letters, *Gazetteer of markets and fairs in England and Wales*, <http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/gaz/gazweb2.html>.

Arguably, the single most demanded product was crops (grains and legumes). In late medieval England, and especially before the Black Death, crop-based products such as bread, ale and pottage constituted the largest part (around 70 per cent) of an average commoner's diet, in both towns and villages. A daily per-capita consumption of a 2lb bread wheat loaf and some three pints of light barley ale would require the supply of 1.63 quarters of wheat and 1.42 quarters of barley on an annual basis.¹⁰ On the eve of the Black Death the population of Norwich, which had risen by that time to around 25,000,¹¹ would have required at least 75,000 quarters of grain on a daily basis and some 27.4 million quarters of grain on an annual basis. The figures for the provisioning of pre-plague London were significantly higher.¹² There is no doubt that ensuring a steady supply of grain to such large urban communities, notwithstanding the well-developed network of grain markets, was a challenge for a variety of reasons. First, communication and transportation systems were relatively under-developed. Second, the ongoing warfare with Scotland in the north and France in the south tended to disrupt the supply of grain because military incursions destroyed fields and granaries and because of forced extraction of grain to provision garrisons, as well as rising transportation costs resulting from these conflicts.¹³ Finally, and chiefly in bad years, some lords tended to hoard their grain either for speculation or household consumption. Speculative prices contributed to the disruption of the supply of and access to grain resources because real wages tended to be abysmally low in years with bad harvests, such as those between 1315 and 1317.¹⁴

To avoid potential subsistence crises, urban communities had to learn how to cope with difficulties in grain supply. A crucial role here was played by grain merchants, known as 'cornmongers', whose place and activities within the commercialised economy of the late medieval period is well documented. In effect, they were middlemen between the rural producers and the urban consumers. By 1300 there were some 50 grain traders in London: a truly striking figure given the fact that there were only four 'formal' grain markets in the city at that point.¹⁵ This, however, does not imply that these cornmongers were serving only these four markets. It is highly likely that they also provided 'door-to-door' deliveries of their merchandise to customers such as bakers, cooks and brewers. It is known that cornmongers purchased grain both from rural marketplaces and directly from demesnes.¹⁶ Credit-based transactions

10. For the conversion of grain volume into weight, see Campbell et al., *A medieval capital*, p. 41.

11. For the population of Norwich, see E. Rutledge, 'Economic life', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds), *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2004), pp. 157–8.

12. Campbell et al., *A medieval capital*, pp. 25–36.

13. P. Slavin, 'Food security, safety, and crises', in K. Albaladejo (ed.), *A cultural history of food: vol. 3: the Renaissance 1300–1600* (London, 2011), pp. 63–82.

14. B.M.S. Campbell, 'Four famines and a pestilence: harvest, price, and wage variations in England, 13th to 19th centuries', in B. Liljewall, I.A. Flygare, U. Lange, L. Ljunggren and J. Söderberg (eds), *Agrarhistoria på många sätt; 28 studier om människan och jorden. Festskrift till Janken Myrdal på hans 60-årsdag* (Stockholm, 2009), pp. 23–56.

15. This is the average figure deriving from the London portion of 1292 and 1319 tax assessments. See Campbell et al., *A medieval capital*, p. 83.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–9.

related to the grain trade were becoming increasingly widespread in that period, too, both in towns and the countryside. In some cases lords were willing to sell their grain on credit to cornmongers, while some grain-traders were found to have served as creditors to both landlords and peasants.¹⁷ Credit transactions were particularly crucial in years of bad harvests or economic crisis. Another measure of security against potential hazards was a sophisticated network of crop storage facilities, in the form of granaries and barns. These were found all over the country, both in the countryside and in towns. They were available for either rent or purchase and they functioned not only as space for carrying over the grain from one year to another, to avoid the risk of bad harvest and starvation, but also as intermediary stations in the process of grain delivery from producers to consumers.¹⁸ Paradoxically, however, there was not a single public granary in English towns similar to those established in some continental cities, such as that in Ghent created shortly after the Great Famine of 1315–17. Finally, a reliance on grain imports was yet another crucial strategy in ensuring the steady supply of provisions to the urban population. Around 1300, the shipment of grain from East Germany, Poland and Baltic lands to England was a commonplace. In 1317, amidst the Great Famine, Edward II extended special privileges to grain merchants from Sicily, Spain and Genoa, all areas unaffected by the famine. The most important grain trade hubs were Boston, Hull, Lynn and Ipswich.¹⁹

17. *Ibid.*, p. 100 and C. Briggs, *Credit and village society in fourteenth-century England* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 37–9, 47–51 and 61–2.

18. Campbell et al., *A medieval capital*, pp. 102–3; J. Claridge and J. Langdon, 'Storage in medieval England: the evidence from purveyance accounts', *EcHR*, forthcoming; the early view version is available at <http://www.blackwellpublishing.com/journal.asp?ref=0013-0117>.

19. N. Hybel, 'The grain trade in northern Europe before 1350', *EcHR*, 55 (2002), pp. 219–47.