City and Countryside in Medieval England

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HOW SOCIETIES in the past achieved economic take-off is an issue of considerable interest and concern for historians and academics in general. That it is a complicated matter almost everyone agrees, if for no other reason than that such economic take-off has proved elusive for so many countries today. Nor are these questions limited solely to recent centuries. Examples of many countries today. Nor are these questions limited solely to recent centuries. Examples of economic take-off are by no means restricted to the industrialized world, and could often be very wide-ranging over time and geography. Indeed, it can be argued that studying these earlier cases - take-off in embryo, as it were - will provide a clearer picture of the sequence of events leading to new levels of economic development.

Medieval England is, in many ways, an ideal society to study in this regard. Its economic development was still at a relatively early stage, yet, as with the rest of Europe, it was undergoing a fairly remarkable economic transformation up to the end of the thirteenth century in particular. Furthermore, the documents for this period in England survive in remarkable numbers, not only in the famous example of Domesday Book but also in the wealth of manorial records from the thirteenth century onwards, which sources survive in large numbers for the period under review. Also, the project incorporates large amounts of data from urban records, particularly those dealing with merchants who were prominent in organizing London's food supply.

A critical issue for such projects are the boundaries that the organizers decide to set for themselves, and here the project requires careful scrutiny. For the purposes of the first part of the project and the volume under review here, one of the crucial decisions was to set the study in a fairly narrow time-frame around the year 1300. This was an eminently sensible choice, since the beginning of the fourteenth century marked a time of peak economic activity and population growth and thus...
provides a very useful datum line to assess economic activity before and after.1

On the other hand, the geographical limits were much more problematic, partly because, in some ways, it involved second-guessing the results. Ideally, in order to provide as much area as possible to test the project's theoretical hypotheses, it might have been advisable to set the area covered as widely as possible, surveying, say, all of south-east England, with its western and northern boundaries stretching from Hampshire through Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire round to Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. Clearly, funding and other concerns led Campbell and Keene to opt for a more limited geographical coverage, focusing on the ten counties (in clockwise order) of Kent, Surrey, Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Essex, which the authors have designated as the 'London region'. In effect, the emphasis geographically is very much upon the Thames basin, since seven of the counties border on the Thames, while another - Hertfordshire - is linked by a tributary, the Lea. Conversely, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire, not being connected to London through inland waterways, seem peripheral, as indeed the data ultimately suggest.

In addition to this geographical limitation, the project also has a rather single-minded focus on the demesne sector. While this is largely forced by the survival of sources, the almost complete absence of the peasant sector in the data is particularly problematic, especially as that sector farmed something like two-thirds of all cultivated land. For the purposes of the study, the authors have assumed that local practice would dictate that, within a particular region, both sectors would operate more or less in concert in terms of farming methods, and thus the patterns revealed by an analysis of demesne farming could be taken 'as broadly diagnostic of the rural economy as a whole'.2 While Campbell et al clearly recognize the fragility of this assumption,3 on many occasions, however, the potential differences between sectors gets pushed back too far from the analyses (as I shall discuss below).

Nevertheless, from the start, one can say that A Medieval Capital is very impressive. Although it deals with the supplying of grain only to London, it is obviously an important topic and one that certainly deserves a full-length treatment. Of particular note is the sheer mass of reading background that is brought together by the authors. The detailed knowledge of the historiography of grain supply,

not only of medieval England but also from a wide range of other areas and time periods, is readily apparent and provides a solid theoretical grounding for the project. In fact, the 'Feeding the City' team takes a rather narrower theoretical framework than one might expect, in that they have opted to analyse their results predominantly from the perspective of Johann Heinrich von Thünen's early nineteenth-century model, which postulated that pre-industrialized cities created specialized zones of agriculture around themselves that were determined largely by transport costs.4 Such a tight theoretical focus does, however, tend to enforce methodological discipline, which is a particular strength of this work.

Another strength of the volume is its clarity. The methods used in this work are primarily those of historical geography and are consistently presented in an imaginative and thoughtful way. As a result, the monograph is a mine of interesting and stimulating material. Nor is it at all a timid work. The authors are certainly willing to comment on large and controversial issues, particularly in chapter IV and part of chapter V, when they extrapolate from their calculation of the London region's food-producing capabilities to reassess the overall population of England c 1300 and also (more indirectly) of London itself. Somewhat surprisingly, their conclusions go against the current trend of revising these figures upwards and claim that the population of England overall was unlikely to have been more than 5,000,000 and that of London probably not much more than 80,000.5

In terms of analysing London's effect upon the countryside, the core of the book revolves around the detailed assessment of crop data from the demesne accounts of 204 manors. As might be expected, the patterns of crop production and disposal did display great complexity. Broadly speaking, von Thünen's model does seem to apply, especially in regards to production, in that crops like oats that did not bear transport costs well were found to be grown in considerable amounts immediately round London, while costlier grains like wheat, which bore transport costs more easily, were the specialities of demesnes much further away from London. Of particular interest was the concentration of demesnes along the upper Thames, especially from Henley down to London, which produced very notable levels of rye or rye-mixtures (that is, maslin and 'mancorn' - wheat-rye and rye-barley combinations respectively), which were clearly destined for lower-class consumption in the capital.6 Similarly, the proportion of grains actually

1 Indeed, phase II of the 'Feeding the City' project is concerned with the second half of the fourteenth century.
2 Med Cap, p 17.
3 Ibid, esp p 176.
5 Ibid, pp 121-2.
6 Ibid, pp 121-2.
sold showed a marked response to metropolitan influences, although the influence here was less obvious than for production because of the tendency of many of the demesnes in the account sample, especially those from monastic or collegiate estates, to transfer much of their grain directly to estate headquarters, thus bypassing the market.

There were some areas in the region, however, where the influence of London upon agriculture was seemingly either non-existent or distinctly ambiguous. One was the Nene valley in northeastern Northamptonshire, a high productivity area which seemingly displayed a much stronger connection to the ports of the Wash through the pull of overseas markets. More intriguing is the case of Kent, the most impressive grain-producing area in influences, although the influence here was less sold showed a marked response to metropolitan forthright in bringing up one of the more likely options to the London market at all. This was most clearly evident in price data, which showed Kent often having grain prices 30 per cent or higher than those prevailing in London. For most of the book the authors are remarkably coy about the reason for this, and only in the conclusion are they clear not only in the crop production and disposal margin (26 per cent), opting instead to transfer most of their grain on the market, followed fairly closely by royal (52 per cent) and lay estates (49 per cent). Conventional and collegiate estates - not so surprisingly - came last by a good margin (26 per cent), opting instead to transfer rather more grain directly to their monastic or collegiate headquarters. Although the contradiction between production for subsistence (emphasizing the need for a stable output) and for the market (tending to encourage the increase in output) introduced a complicating factor for demesne agriculture, geographically some areas clearly produced more for the market than others, most notably northern Kent and along the Thames valley upstream from London with a notable cluster of market-oriented demesnes around Henley. Here the Henley-Faversham axis along the Thames had a notable effect, particularly for very marketable grains like barley and wheat, but it certainly was not enough to shift demesnes overwhelmingly towards market production, and, even within a few miles of London, some estates chose to maintain subsistence-oriented policies on their demesne. Nevertheless, market activity was strong enough to maintain a vibrant market structure in London itself. Chapter VI, although misleadingly entitled 'Links between Producers and Consumers' (since the links discussed are between producers and commongers rather than the actual consumers themselves), nevertheless provides much useful and fascinating information about, among other things, the numbers and status of commongers, the average size of their transactions, the seasonal patterns of sales and prices, the distribution and size of granaries, trading regulations, credit arrangements, and market information and intelligence. The end result of this

14 Ibid, p 126.
16 Ibid, p 107.
19 Ibid, p 135.
20 For example, Britnell, Commercialisation, p 118.
21 Ibid, pp 156–70.
23 Particularly the dean and chapter of St Paul's Cathedral in London: Med Cap, p 149.
excellent chapter is to show how much the grain market (at least as practised by commongers) resembled that described by F J Fisher for London three centuries later. But useful as this analysis of demesne agriculture and commonger activity is, is it nonetheless an illusion as far as describing the total economy? For one thing, the self-reinforcing nature of the materials and assumptions employed in this study are all too obvious. It is hardly surprising that a combination of demesne accounts and extents from inquisitions post mortem (emphasizing large-scale farming), an analysis of commongers (emphasizing well-to-do corn dealers largely based around London's dock-side markets) and the geographical limits chosen (effectively the Thames basin) would give an interpretation of the grain trade as being largely water-borne, reasonably large-scale and commercialized. Indeed, it is interesting that the presence of commongers in London declined just at about the same time as the decline of direct demesne farming, suggesting perhaps that commongers could not maintain the same links with the more locally oriented demesne lessees than they had formerly with estate owners and their administrators. The possibility is then, that the interconnected nature of the sources used by the 'Feeding the City' team, far from giving a broader view of the metropolitan grain trade, is simply tending to reinforce a more detailed view of a particular sector of that trade.

This problem is especially marked in the authors' transport-cost analysis, which is based on the assumption that transport services were commercialized to the degree that they were seen as 'real' costs across all sectors of society. While this possibly applied to water-borne transport, where the owners of boats may have considered them as pre-eminently cash-raising assets that were not tied to other more subsistence-oriented activities, it is much less clear for land transport. First of all, although the 'Feeding the City' team comments on the frequency of horse-hauled carts on demesnes, these facilities were swamped by those owned by peasants, probably by at least five-to-one and possibly very much more, and a similar domination also probably occurred between peasant and urban sectors. Secondly, it is likely that these peasant transport resources were usually very underemployed, since they were often or by peasants as convenient accessories to the peasant holding in general rather than being primarily for the market. Certainly, they were idle for much of the year, and so, for example, could easily satisfy the often very heavy transport demands for purveyance campaigns. In terms of hauling his own grain and other goods to market, however, it is likely a peasant's carting facilities in effect were very nearly costless for most of the year. Such a situation would put them in a very favourable situation market-wise against those for whom transport costs were very real, such as.

31 Med Cap, pp 107-10.
32 Ibid, p 82.
33 This may be a debatable assumption, since it implies a considerable degree of professionalization on the part of boat operators on the inland waterway system. Yet, as with carts, the ownership of such boats seems to have been very dispersed and often connected with other activities than carrying, as at Ramsey, where the 15 boats recorded in the lay subsidy return of 1290 were scattered among 15 owners, many of them fishermen: J A Rafis and M P Hogan, eds, Early Huntingdonshire Lay Subsidy Rolls, Toronto, 1976, pp 47-56.
34 Med Cap, pp 56-9.
may even have undercut the advantage of water transport, since peasants might have been willing to go quite long distances to take advantage of favourable price differentials. If so, for the peasant sector, transport-cost isopleths around London would be much more like von Thünen's concentric circles (and with a much more gradual cost gradient) than the 'Thames-distorted version created by the 'Feeding the City' group. This would also reconcile evidence recorded in 1305 for very heavy cart traffic into London that the authors felt constrained to explain away in their emphasis upon a water-borne supply route for London.22

Perhaps the most important aspect of all of this is that it emphasizes very much the dual-sector nature of London's grain supply. Indeed, away from access to water transport, the peasant sector may have been so competitive that it effectively froze out the demesne sector, hence the fact that in the presentations by the 'Feeding the City' people, the intensity of demesne agriculture, especially for the lower-price grains, seems to fade away relatively quickly away from access to water transport.23 Where demesne production probably held its greatest advantage over the peasant sector was for the overseas trade, where advantages of high-level contacts, the ability to supply very large amounts of grain, easy access to water transport, and a greater propensity to bear capital investment (such as for storage areas) may have been important. Hence, it may be no accident that the high productivity areas for demesne farming as a whole across England seem to be found along the coast in places like eastern Kent, eastern Norfolk, north-eastern Northamptonshire and Holderness, all with good access to overseas markets. On the other hand, the relative weakness of London to mobilize demesne production in its immediate hinterland to the extent, say, of eastern Kent may simply reflect the competitive situation that existed between demesne and peasant agriculture around London. This does not diminish the importance of London as a force for mobilizing production, but it does make it critical to realize that it was acting on (at least) two separate sectors in two distinctive ways. Indeed, recognition of this point raises the possibility that the impact of London was far greater than that indicated by the 'Feeding the City' people, in that taking the two sectors together, or even the peasant sector alone, the area influenced was much more widely diffused than indicated in this volume. As a result, we are increasingly in danger of focusing too narrowly on a sector which — after all — may be very unrepresentative of medieval English farming as a whole.

To avoid this pitfall, we need to inspect the possibilities of examining peasant agriculture much more effectively and systematically than we have in the past. One of the unfortunate effects of A Medieval Capital is that it imparts a certain pessimism about the possibilities of studying medieval peasant agriculture.24 Yet, there is good reason for optimism. Aside from work that has been done on aspects of peasant agriculture,25 there are many possibilities for future work.26 As one example of a particularly ignored source in terms of systematic study, peasant inventories have the potential of transforming our knowledge of medieval peasant farming. Occurring in court records of every type, often as the result of confiscations for felonies or debts, peasant inventories often supply considerably useful data. A few have been able to supply yield data,27 and many more list sown crop acreages and

10 As indicated by manorial accounts, which often show demesne cars working year-round without any appreciable break: Langdon, 'Economies', p 33.
21 This is most obvious in the fifteenth century, from such sources as the Southampton brokerage books, which show people with cars and pack-horses making impressively long journeys (for example, O Coleman, ed, The Bookage Book of Southampton, Southampton Record Series, vols IV, VI, 1960-1, esp pp xxiii-xxvi), but earlier purveyance accounts also impart a strong sense that small-scale carriers were well accustomed to travelling long distances, as for the 20 carters who were hired to take provisions for the king's army from Nottingham to Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1301: PRO, E101 580/3, m 4.
22 Med Cap, p 31.
25 Perhaps most strikingly seen in the 'Feeding the City' team's analysis of demesnes in the top decile percentage-wise for specialization in the various grains produced on demesnes (pp 14-15) and in their analysis of cropping intensity as an inverse relationship to the amount of winter-sown crops grown (pp 120-3).

11 Only on p 176 is a note of hope supplied; otherwise the message is a pessimistic one: Med Cap, pp 17, 38.
24 For example, work is already being done on peasant agriculture from accounts that give good tithe and multure returns (Med Cap, p 176). Similarly, a more detailed analysis of sixteenth-century probate inventories and the like with the possibilities of seeing the 'shadows' of earlier medieval farming is possible (as in the case of the use of probate inventories to shed light on issues such as the size of the medieval peasant plough-team: Langdon Horses, Oxen, pp 221-4).
animals. Although it would take a great amount of work, a systematic search of manorial rolls, coroners' rolls, eyre rolls, extents of debts, even central court records, would certainly provide a sample in the hundreds if not thousands. At the very least they provide a potential source of comparison with the demesne material, and, as innovative techniques for measuring early modern yields from probate inventories have emerged in recent years, it may be possible to do more with peasant inventories than currently seems likely.

These must only remain possibilities for the moment. A Medieval Capital proves in an exciting and imaginative way what can be done on medieval agriculture with sufficient data. At the very least, the connection between agricultural and urban development has been well established in this study and has provided valuable clues as to how early societies could achieve some elements at least of economic take-off. Finally, even if it should turn out that the findings of A Medieval Capital are less broadly applicable than the authors would like us to believe, the book does provide a first-class analysis of what was happening in the demesne sector, making it all the easier for future work on peasant agriculture to site its findings effectively.

A good example found recently in the coroners' rolls by the author while looking for transport information concerned the confiscated lands and chattels of Roger son of Nicholas de Wodecote of Woodcote (in Ashby de la Zouch, Leicestershire), who, in early August, 1336, held 24 arable acres, of which three were sown with wheat, three with barley, and ten with peas. His stock consisted of two oxen, two horses, and two cows (PRO, JUST 2/25, m 2).

In my study of draught animals, for instance, it was relatively easy to gather together a sample of 52 peasant inventories, mostly taken from secondary sources: Langdon, Horses, Oxen, p 178.