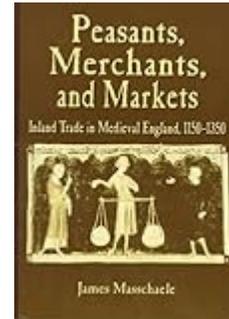


James Masschaele. *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England, 1150-1350.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xii +275 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-16035-7.



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J. Masschaele: Peasants, Merchants, and Markets

Medieval Commerce: Too Much of a Good Thing

You have got to feel sorry for our colleagues in medieval economic history. This bright and energetic group - Richard Britnell, Bruce Campbell, Christopher Dyer, Derek Keene, Maryanne Kowaleski, John Langdon, Mavis Mate, Larry Poos, Ambrose Raftis, to name just a few - are model scholars. To practice their craft they master Latin and paleography, they learn the subtleties of the documents, they spend the time in the archives. And the archives themselves are glorious: a mine of economic information so much richer than even what we find for eighteenth century England. But what reward do they get for all this effort and all this erudition? The more we learn about medieval England, the more careful and reflective the scholarship gets, the more prosaic does medieval economic life seem. The story of the medieval economy in some ways seems to be that there is no story.

Back in the bad old days, when the scholarship was less careful, the medieval economy was mysterious and exciting. Marxists, neo-Malthusians, Chayanovians, and other exotics debated vigorously their pet theories of a pre-capitalist economic world in a wild speculative romp.

But little by little, as the archives have been systematically explored, and the hypotheses subject to more rigorous examination, medieval economic historians have been retreating from their exotic Eden back to a mundane world alarmingly like our own.

This book, by James Masschaele, a historian at Rutgers University, is a nice piece of scholarship which constitutes a few more steps in this long retreat from paradise. His book is really a collection of essays exploring various aspects of the English medieval market before the Black Death. In successive chapters, through skilled and convincing use of tax records and other sources Masschaele shows that the medieval economy was thoroughly permeated by markets and market activities.

Thus the occupants of medieval towns engaged in a wide variety of specialized commodity production, of which the main were victualling, leather making, textiles, clothing, vending, metal working, and building. Those in towns were all engaged in the market. Some peasants were able to produce a substantial surplus of grain and animal products which must normally have been sold on the market. Many peasants were thus also in the market.

Much, and perhaps even most, of the great cash crop of medieval England, wool, was produced on peasant holdings and not on the lay and clerical estates.

Those with the right to hold markets defended that right vigorously and tried to limit competition. But the English courts generally interpreted this right as excluding only other markets held on the same day within 6.7 miles. Thus in the East Midland counties of Northampton and Bedford we see even before 1250 many markets within 6.7 miles of their neighbors. Indeed it seems from the map given in the book that the average location in these counties would be about 5 miles from a market by 1250. By 1690 I know from other sources that the average distance to market in these counties had shrunk to 3.3 miles. But this seems a very modest gain in the prevalence of markets over these years. If the monopoly right to hold a market exercised much restriction on the medieval economy, then markets should have generated significant incomes for their owners through market tolls. In fact toll rates were generally seldom more than 1% of the value of goods traded, and there were many who were by one custom or another exempted from toll. Thus goods bought for household consumption typically did not pay toll. Similarly small goods such as apples, or butter in earthen pots, produced by peasant households were also apparently often exempt.

Towns similarly seem to display an expected urban hierarchy, with a few major trade and manufacturing centers and a large array of smaller places with very little evidence of commercial or manufacturing activity. Using records of disputes over toll payments and toll exemptions Masschaele shows that there were significant trade relations between towns that could be quite distant from each other. Thus, for example, in 1315 the town of Sandwich seized the almonds, figs and raisins of a merchant refusing to pay toll, where the merchant was from London, 63 miles away.

Using again records of toll disputes Masschaele is also able to get some information about the marketing activities of rural producers. By the early thirteenth century English kings, as pious acts, had granted exemption from toll in all markets to most major ecclesiastical corporations. This exemption was held to apply to their manorial tenants also. The exemption was meant to apply to rural produce sold by the tenants to meet their rent pay-

ments to the houses. Tenants on the royal demesne had by custom a similar privilege. Tenants of both types, however, seem to have availed themselves of the exemption to further general trade activities. Thus even in the fourteenth century many court cases appear where rural tenants of religious orders or of the king are alleged to be buying goods with intent to resell, or selling goods they had bought.

In one of the later chapters Masschaele documents carrying costs by land and water per ton-mile in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire between 1305 and 1346. These costs suggest, for example, that if wheat was transported by water it would cost about 1.4% of its final value per additional ten miles carried. These costs seem relatively modest.

The concluding chapter begins with the statement, "By the end of the thirteenth century, England had developed a sophisticated commercial economy that embraced all levels of society" (p. 227). There is no doubt that this statement is well supported by the evidence of the book. But if medieval England was just a low-tech version of Kansas, why would anyone be interested in its economy? The early economy had, I believe, some very interesting features. But focused as this tradition is on the existence and extent of the market, I fear that further excellent scholarship such as this can only provide more compelling evidence of the utter dullness of the medieval economy. For this erudition to be more interestingly employed, at least as far as economic historians are concerned, it needs to be directed at a richer set of issues than just the existence of the market.

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Among Gregory Clark's recent publications are "The Political Foundations of Modern Economic Growth: England, 1540-1800," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 26 (Spring, 1996),

"Commons Sense: Common Property Rights, Efficiency, and Institutional Change," *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (March, 1998) and

"Land Hunger: Land as a Commodity and as a Status Good in England, 1500-1914," *Explorations in Economic History*, 35 (1), (Jan., 1998).

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