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Survival and Discord in Medieval Society, Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer

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Richard Goddard
John Langdon
Miriam Müller
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John Hare

This festschrift pays tribute to one of our most distinguished medievalists, who has helped shape the subject through his teaching and writing, and through his active support for societies and individuals. He has ranged widely, bringing to the forefront issues and evidence that had hitherto been ignored, using the evidence of archaeology and the landscape as well as the more traditional documents of the historian. This volume provides a variety of explorations whose starting points are appropriately local, national and international in turn. The seven pages listing his publications reflect the wide range of his work. His Middle Ages is a world full of people, acting and interacting in a wide range of ways in which their lives and goods have been brought in from the cold.

Grenville Astill?s article reminds us of the recipient?s welcome readiness to be concerned with archaeology and settlement. He examines the development of rural settlement between the 8th and the 13th century, emphasising the complexities of its development: phases of particular importance as in the 8th and the 12th centuries, and a wide range of geographic, market and demographic influences.

The late Harold Fox explored the importance and the value of waste through a study of Dartmoor. To the peasantry, waste offered a vital extra resource. Meanwhile lords also sought to tap and manorialise this wealth, but with only limited success against the customary rights of the tenants, although they achieved greater success against outsiders. A case study of Okehampton Park emphasises the economic value to the lord of parkland, and renting pasture.

Richard Britnell assesses the impact of Postan?s article on the 15th century, ?a brash article? that has been so hugely influential, evaluating its continuing validity and limitations both within the context of what Postan was trying to do, and of subsequent work that has done so much to emphasise the complexity of the period and the overconfidence of his generalisations. Britnell urges us ?to abandon battles between optimism and pessimism? and to turn to ?more subtle analyses of development? exploring the responses to the problems of the period that were to be influential in the future.

The treatment of towns is restricted to the great, Winchester, Nottingham and Chester rather than the small towns which the recipient has done so much to establish as worthy of our attention. Richard Goddard examines the work of the late medieval borough courts with their predominance of debt cases, focussing on Nottingham and Winchester. In so far as debt cases provide a measure of economic activities, this emphasises the activity of the economy in the later 14th century and the difficulties of the economy from the 1420s. But while this is enough to emphasise that the economy ?ebbed and flowed?, the paucity of Winchester?s documentation after 1433 poses considerable difficulties. How far had it seen recovery in the 1430s and 1440s? How long was the recession? As suggested here, the recovery may have resulted from declining role of courts or record keeping.

Jane Laughton?s study of the regional capital of Chester shows the detailed painstaking attempts to impose law and order, but with limited success. Below the formalities of the structure of urban government, the citizens were heavily involved in the attempted maintenance of the peace through the provision of sureties or bonds and arbitration. James Masschaele shows how the national legal system of assizes, gaol deliveries and peace sessions served to connect town and countryside. With the large number of jurors required to attend from the countryside it would not merely have been a point of contact, but, as several hundred visitors might be expected to come, would be good for business and trade.

Robert Swanson continues his treatment of tithes and other spiritualities, the economic demands of the church, examining three parishes in the Peak district of Derbyshire. He emphasises the need to avoid ignoring spiritual revenues and especially tithes, despite the rarity of the sources. Here his accounts are for 1400?1 and 1537?8, supplemented by the chapter act books, with the tithes being leased to a variety of men including nobility, gentry and some merchants.

John Langdon examines the wage rate in the building industry and royal castles where so much of our evidence lies, exploring the problem of wage rates and their stickiness: the tendency to become fixed at a certain level. He emphasises the way that the additional family labour of children and women could be used as a modifier of wages, and highlights the difficulties in raising a workforce 1270s and 1280s, to add to the better known and more dramatic labour shortage after the Black Death

A group of articles explore aspects of the relationship between individual peasants, their community and their lord. Philipp Schofield examines the role of trespass legislation in the manor courts, and how central court law may have been moulded and utilised by the manorial courts and as a product of peasant activity. Matthew Tomkins examines the process of leasing on a Buckinghamshire clayland manor and the collective role of the village community. Here the demesne was leased particularly early, in 1320, and this communal lease remained for the next five centuries. It showed a mixture of collectivism and individualism. The lease was collective and by probably the 15th century the tenants had converted most of the demesne into a common pasture, and were prepared to stand up and fight the lord (New College, Oxford). But at the same time the individual interests of the tenants were crucial and the pasture land held by the demesne tenants were only open to a small proportion of the village tenantry. The fight against New College was a struggle in

support of individual enterprise, but by the 16th century many of the tenants lived outside the village and sublet. The 14th-century community of the village had rotted away. Chris Briggs examines the critical role of the peasant elite in acting as reeves or officials for the lord: they could benefit from the role, and for the lord they had the advantage of knowing the local conditions and issues. Essentially they acted as an intermediary between the lord and his tenantry and, before the Black Death, the system seemed to work on the manors examined, according to the court presentments: at least there was a common interest between reeve and community. But on the evidence of Great Eversden and a series of presentments, there may have been growing difficulties with their bailiffs in the later 14th century, raising the question of whether such difficulties may have been a factor in generating the leasing of the demesnes.

Jean Birrel, in her essay on Alrewas, provides a further example of early 14th-century conflict between lord and community over the terms of their landholding, suggesting that the 1341 custumal should be seen not as an imposition from the lord but as the product of negotiation between the lord and the tenantry, after earlier struggles concerning heriots. Miriam Müller examines the long-term changes in the diet of the labouring classes as seen in both the literary evidence and the more prosaic record of the account rolls and the harvest boon works, which suggest a shift to better grains or meat, or to fresh meat and fish. But food inequalities were also seen as symbolic of the differences between the poor and the landed, of class divisions, and thus could become a source of social conflict, as with legislation on hunting in parks and warrens, as also at a manorial level.

The last two essays focus on popular revolts, exploring the European dimension to a subject that Dyer covered in his work on the Peasants? Revolt of 1381. Bas van Bavel opens up the four big rural revolts in the Low Countries in the century or more before the Black Death, which occurred in very different circumstances to later revolts, at a time of rising population. Here was a relatively free peasantry, in a world of weak manorialism, and with strong traditions of free and communal associations enhanced by a growing market; it ran into conflict with lords backed by the church, and support from a distance around. The conflicts were more regional in character, in contrast to the situation in the larger 14th-century revolts in England and France. Samuel Cohn compares and contrasts the English experience and the traditional focus on 1381 with continental patterns of popular revolt. He emphasises the lack of confidence and the relative absence of rural revolt after 1381 and our need to pay more attention to urban conflict and protest in England. But perhaps we also need to give more attention to a comparison of 1381 with the later revolts between 1450 and 1549?

This is a welcome and much deserved volume. It ends with a list of Dyer's publications so far, and leaves us looking forward to more.

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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