

VILLAGE COMMUNITY AND PEASANT SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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This thesis provides an overview of the scholarship examining the nature of the village community in medieval England. Beginning my analysis in the late nineteenth century I discuss the socio-political context within which the first studies of village communities emerged and I examine the influence of Romanticist traditions on the scholarship. I then look at the emergence and development of the social sciences in the early and mid-twentieth century, especially the rise of a more interdisciplinary approach within the social sciences as evidenced by a number of developments including the Annales School in France. Turning to the last two decades of the twentieth century, I describe the development of new theoretical models of community, which were developed by social scientists during the second half of the twentieth century. When applied to the study of the medieval village community, these models suggest that scholars must begin to move away from simplistic, binary conceptions of the village community. Finally, by examining how a few of the authors made use of the medieval documentary evidence I argue that scholars until very recently drew only upon those sources which fit their preconceived notions, which emphasized the communal organization and solidarity of the village community.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The structure of peasant society in medieval England has long been a subject of interest for scholars from many disciplines within the social sciences including history, sociology, economics and archaeology. The earliest authors who discussed peasant society, such as Sir Henry Maine, emphasized the communal, collective nature of the village community, and later generations of authors continued in this vein. Indeed, the majority of the scholars have until very recently been focused on describing various aspects of peasant life and community without ever critically analyzing their own basic conception of the rural community. Rather, they have continued to rely on old descriptive approaches and binary conceptions of the village community, which posited a basic dichotomy between the communal rural past and modern society organized around the individual.

The first of these approaches has involved examining the basic structure of society through the lens of social and judicial interactions. Scholars using this approach have focused on communal lawmaking, kinship networks, and legal activities both in the manor and village courts. The second approach has focused on the economic interactions within the community, and authors have therefore relied on manorial and other documents to paint the picture of the economic life of the rural community. This approach has emphasized the role of the rural land market and the growth of a market based economy, and the impact of these economic developments on the social status and interactions of medieval villagers. Finally, and primarily since the middle of the twentieth century, archaeologists and scholars from disciplines such as geography have argued for the importance of studying the basic structures of the physical landscape and settlement remains.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, however, a number of scholars from a range of disciplines began to go beyond simply searching for evidence of the organization and structures of the rural community. Indeed these scholars began to analyze fundamental assumptions about the very nature and meaning of community in medieval times and to apply these new theoretical models to their analysis of the village community and peasant life in medieval England. These scholars also proposed new models with which they hoped to uncover the full variety of peasant experience, models which emphasize the multiplicity and fluidity of community. Within this thesis I trace the development of our current conceptions of rural society in medieval England, and in so doing, shed some light on what I consider to be fundamental issues with regard to the study of the community and the nature of belonging in medieval society.

CHAPTER 2

ANCIENT COMMUNITY VS. MODERN SOCIETY

The earliest authors to discuss peasant society focused on the ancient village community, and they established two of the most basic models thereafter applied to examinations of the village community. These authors maintained that peasant society was in its most basic form united through common need and obligation. Furthermore, they believed that the basic communal framework of rural society had eroded over time and had ultimately been replaced by a model based upon individual obligation and profit. This basic dichotomy between the ancient, rural community and a modern, individualized society was first proposed by Henry Maine, an English jurist and historian who wanted to illustrate how many of the basic structures of modern society were derived from ancient law.

In his work Maine argued that, historically, the community had served as the basic unit of legality.¹ He proclaimed the “immense antiquity” of the village community, and contended that with regard to social obligations, the history of society had been uniform in one respect, namely the “growth of individual obligation” in place of family and communal dependency.² It was in his next publication that Maine dealt explicitly with the topic of the rural community. *Village Communities in the East and West* drew on Maine’s knowledge and experience from his service in the colonial administration in India. In this book, he discussed the village community’s role in society and argued that the similarity of the community’s organization and function within both India and England was evidence of the truth and historical importance of the village community. Maine believed that agricultural necessity was the primary or initial reason for the community’s existence and that the community held the land collectively and cultivated the arable “in lots

¹ Henry Maine, *Ancient Law, its Connection with the Early History of Society and its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861; reprint, London: John Murray, 1912), p. ix.

² Maine, *Ancient Law*, pp. 172, 272.

appropriated to several families.”³ The community was organized around the most basic concept of ownership in common, and Maine noted that this ownership was based on the law of “Authority, Custom, or Chance.”⁴

Moreover, Maine argued that it was only in more recent times that the contract had replaced both custom and community as the basis of law. He went on to explain the emergence of the manor and its lord. The manor he characterized as an entity separate from and in opposition to the village community. Here we see the emergence of another basic concept regarding the village community, namely that the community of the village existed in opposition to the manorial system. Maine believed that over time the manor replaced the village and the bond that kept the manor together was the manor court, not communal necessity. Maine used his experience in India to draw a comparison between how this process developed in the West and how it was developing in the East. In fact, he argued, such a change could be beneficial to eastern society because in the face of growing population and modernization only the manor under the lord was able to apply the necessary methods of agriculture needed to keep up with a developing society. Indeed he wrote, “For this work society organized in village-communities is but little adapted.”⁵ Maine further championed such a change by stating that even in village groups, though the population might be free of feudal services it was also “enslaved by custom.”⁶ Furthermore, he believed that because village groups were not true democracies but oligarchies, there was in principle no real loss of freedom under a feudal lord for the community

³ Henry Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West* (London: John Murray, 1871; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1974), p. 78.

⁴ Maine, *Village Communities*, p. 110.

⁵ Maine, *Village Communities*, p. 162.

⁶ Maine, *Village Communities*, p. 164.

as a whole. Thus the impact of the feudal lord and manorial structures on the villagers' life was a positive, economic one.

The next author to discuss the village community took a more pessimistic view regarding the development of modern society. Tönnies accepted the basic dichotomy of the ancient village community vs. modern contract based society as proposed by Maine. However, Tönnies proposed a more idealized vision of village communal action and he admired the functioning of that ancient community. Tönnies named the positive relationship of social groups based on mutual affirmation and collective terms such as union, fraternity, and association, *Gemeinschaft* (Community).⁷ Tönnies believed that *Gesellschaft* (Society), which he defined as everything modern, individualized and outside the public sphere, had meanwhile come to replace the old communal form of organization. He also drew a connection between *Gemeinschaft* and rural life and contrasted this with *Gesellschaft*, which was for him synonymous with urban life.⁸

Tönnies is perhaps responsible more than any other scholar for establishing enduring ideas about the rural community, which persisted throughout the twentieth century. Indeed Tönnies believed that village life meant mutual possession and enjoyment of property held in common, and he also linked the organization of village life to agricultural necessity and family life. Drawing evidence from Maine's work on village communities in the East and West, Tönnies compared the villagers to the organs of a body, and he suggested that since the villagers acted together to regulate the commons, the entire community should thus be viewed as constituting a household economy, wherein the household functioned along a "communitarian or communistic"

⁷ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, trans. and ed., Jose Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 17.

⁸ Tönnies, *Community*, p. 19.

model.⁹ He concluded that since Gesellschaft was based on individual will, Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft were “two diametrically opposed systems of law: one in which people are related to each other as natural members of a whole, and one in which individuals are entirely independent of one another,” and he was thus describing two contrasting systems of social order.¹⁰

⁹ Tönnies, *Community*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Tönnies, *Community*, pp. 187, 247.

CHAPTER 3 THE NEXT GENERATION

Although both Maine and Tönnies laid down the basic conceptual framework with regard to the study of the village community, the next group of scholars was the first to apply such concepts to the study of medieval village communities. Moreover, this group of scholars viewed the switch from village communities held together by communal obligation and necessity to a more modern society based around the individual, as a basically positive development. In 1883 Frederic Seebohm presented his thesis to the Society of Antiquaries, one of England's oldest learned societies, whose mission remains "the encouragement, advancement and furtherance of the study and knowledge of the antiquities and history of this and other countries."¹¹ Seebohm noted that he was approaching the question of the village community from the perspective of an economic historian. He was interested in explaining the amazing feat of English economic history and thus needed to determine whether this amazing development began with freedom or with serfdom. His basic question was whether or not medieval village communities were "free village communities or communities in serfdom under a manorial lord?"¹²

Like Tönnies, Seebohm believed that the need to organize the fields and agricultural practices led to the creation of the commons. For Seebohm though, the open-field system wherein property was apportioned equally to members of the community was "absurdly inefficient."¹³ Additionally, he suggested that by the time of the Norman conquest the open-field system and the institution of serfdom were one and the same in their general features. He contended that within this manorial system the community was divided into two classes, the

¹¹ Society of Antiquaries of London, "Mission statement," <http://www.sal.org.uk/> (accessed March 15th, 2006).

¹² Frederic Seebohm, *English Village Community* (London: Longmans, Green, Co., 1883; reprint, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971), p. ix.

¹³ Seebohm, *English Village Community*, p. 15.

villein and the cottar. Yet, he proposed that in essence these classes were indistinguishable from one another, for “the services of each class were equally servile.”¹⁴ He also examined the evidence for free village communities in late Saxon documents, specifically the use of the suffix *ham* and *tun* in connection with descriptions of donations of property to the Church. Seebohm concluded that the property granted in such donations was already manorial and therefore, “there seems to be no room for the theory that the Saxons introduced everywhere free village communities on the system of the German mark.”¹⁵ He concluded that the manorial system, rather than being an innovation introduced from the Continent, simply developed out of the Roman *villa*. Finally, Seebohm argued that communities of serfs, and not of free villagers, populated the *hams* and *tuns* of late Saxon England. With regards to the loss of village communities in the face of modernization, Seebohm suggested that the new order of society had triumphed, “by breaking up both communism of serfdom and the communism of the free tribe.”¹⁶

Two scholars went even farther than Seebohm in praising the results of modernization. Both G. Coulton and his student H. Bennett viewed the old system of society based on the village community as an archaic entity, and one which when combined with the power and role of the medieval Church kept the majority of the population in horrible conditions. In the preface to *Medieval Village*, Coulton justified the introduction of the new *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*, with the hope that the new series would redress the imbalance in medieval history, which he believed had for too long focused on constitutional and social

¹⁴ Seebohm, *English Village Community*, p. 79.

¹⁵ Seebohm, *English Village Community*, p. 179.

¹⁶ Seebohm, *English Village Community*, p. 439.

theory.¹⁷ In this book he focused on the legal status of the peasant in medieval life and throughout the work he relied on manorial documents to describe the medieval serfs' disabilities and abilities as defined by manorial law. In fact his work was the first to examine the medieval peasant not just as a member of the village community but also as an individual. Coulton began by drawing a comparison between the lot of the medieval peasant, at least half of whom were unfree, to the American plantation (Black) slaves.¹⁸

Like Seeböhm, Coulton viewed the open-field system of shared agriculture work as a restraint on peasant initiative, for everything had to be done within that cooperative system of collective farming. Again and again he emphasized the lack of stability in the peasants' economic and legal status and painted a grim picture of their life as violent and uncertain. Examples in this respect can be seen by the captions of just two of the illustrations he included in his text, namely the "Overseer Rod" and "Cottage and Skirmish."¹⁹ In describing the uncertain and unpleasant nature of peasant life Coulton insisted upon the role of the Church as landowner. He argued that "serfdom lingered longest on ecclesiastical and especially on monastic estates," and he noted that canon law did much to hinder manumission of those in serfdom.²⁰ For Coulton the monk and the churchman were not the pioneers of peasant freedom. In connection with his discussion of ecclesiastical lords he briefly summarized the image of the peasant as presented in medieval literature. He suggested that by the late Middle Ages the peasant was the pariah of medieval society. Coulton noted how peasants were often described as prone to bestiality and

¹⁷ G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. ix.

¹⁸ Coulton, *Medieval Village*, p. 27.

¹⁹ Coulton, *Medieval Village*, pp. 50, 324.

²⁰ Coulton, *Medieval Village*, pp. 162-168.

portrayed as geese or capons.²¹ Finally, Coulton believed that the “condition of the medieval peasantry as a whole...is quite sufficient to account for a great agrarian revolt,” the implication herein being that the great peasant revolt of 1381 was neither surprising nor unjustified. Therefore, he argued that the modern rosy image of the medieval peasants’ life must be abandoned, and concluded that the “modern laborer is better off.”²²

A student of Coulton’s H. Bennett, published *Life on the English Manor A Study of Peasant Conditions 1150-1400*, in that same series that Coulton had founded. As can be seen from the title, Bennett, like Coulton, examined the ways in which peasant society and life were affected or controlled by the manor lord and his administrators. Yet, he did not rely exclusively on manorial documents, for Bennett also drew on ballads and *fabliaux* in order to paint a richer picture of peasant life. He began his book with a description of the weekly life of an average peasant family. In this description Bennett emphasized the role of the Church as well as the burdensome obligations peasants had to their lord. For Bennett the life he described was not a pleasurable one, and he stated “the remainder of the book will show clearly enough the difficult existence which was all that most peasants could hope for.”²³

Bennett insisted on the negative impact of the medieval Church on the population of the village, it was he believed not a passive entity for the Church imposed itself on its parishioners.²⁴ He believed that the medieval peasantry lived an isolated life; for them the village was their whole world. Although Bennett acknowledged that the manor and the village were not the same

²¹ Coulton, *Medieval Village*, pp. 235, 520.

²² Coulton, *Medieval Village*, pp. 334, 392.

²³ H. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor a Study of Peasant Conditions 1150-1400*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 2, ed. G. Coulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), p. 25.

²⁴ Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, p. 30.

entity he believed that many of the conditions of peasant life were determined by the manorial system. With regard to the purported communal nature of peasant society, he argued little was known about the functioning of the village community outside peasant interactions with the manor. However, he did acknowledge that “just the term common fields points to the fact that much of medieval farming was cooperative.”²⁵ Like Coulton, Bennett believed that the medieval methods of agriculture were very inefficient and he suggested “that the waste might in fact have been vital to the livelihood of many peasants.”²⁶

Examining the economy of subsistence, Bennett analyzed the importance of livestock in feeding the peasantry and argued that a minimum of five to ten acres was needed for a family to achieve some basic level of subsistence. Therefore, “a considerable number of peasants in the medieval village lived very near the border line of actual want.”²⁷ Moreover, because of the continued exaction of heavy labor dues as well as the continued growth of royal obligations in the thirteenth and fourteenth century, Bennett believed that the peasants’ lot only grew worse over time. He therefore concluded that the end of the manorial system was a progressive step forward in history, for “when the manorial system ended so too did a system of personal subjection and all its humiliating consequences.”²⁸

²⁵ Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, p. 44.

²⁶ Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, pp. 49-59.

²⁷ Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, p. 96.

²⁸ Bennett, *Life on the English Manor*, p. 317.

CHAPTER 4

ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

What was the domestic political and social situation in England during these first decades when scholars such as Maine, Seebohm, Coulton and Bennett began to study the medieval village? What was the cultural milieu and what if anything can it tell us about these scholars' agendas or biases? Specifically two questions come to mind. Why were men like Maine and Tönnies yearning for the good old days of rural life, and what or whose rosy image of the medieval past was Coulton arguing against?

By the nineteenth century, England's transformation from a rural based society to a more heavily industrialized one had already begun. As Pamela Horn has explained, by 1851 the majority of English men and women had ceased to dwell in rural areas and by the last decades of the nineteenth century industrialization had swept aside the centuries' old predominance of rural life.²⁹ The decline of rural populations and the growth of urban industrial centers contributed to the growth of the *Romantic* and *Neo-Romantic* movements, which rejected this new modern industrialized society.³⁰ Both of these movements idealized the peasantry and the rural life and contrasted the simple pleasures of rural life against the evil and corruption of the city. This focus on peasant culture and the rural life also led to the rise of Medievalism, which became an important form of dissent within Victorian England. The new growing middle class was the first to take up this philosophical call for a return to a simpler life, as evidenced by the rise of two phenomena: the Arts and Crafts movement and the rambling movement. As exemplified by its early proponent and practitioner William Morris, the Arts and Craft Movement sought to

²⁹ Pamela Horn, *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Athlone Press, 1984), pp. 2-3.

³⁰ Michael Lowy, "The Romantic and the Marxist critique of Modern Civilization," *Theory and Society* 16 (1987): 901.

concentrate its activities in the countryside, to move away from objects machine-produced at an industrial scale and instead encouraged the handcrafts and arts associated with rural village life.³¹ Indeed in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, William Morris proposed an ideal society of the 21st century that would be modeled after that of fourteenth century rural life in England, a society based on agrarian communism without classes, state, private property, or money.³² The ramblers also emerged in this same period and were made up of generally middle class urban dwellers that on weekends and holidays would travel to the countryside and hike and camp in an attempt to soak up the rural simple life.

As we can see, when placed within this context the work of Maine and Tönnies, both of whom longed for a return to simpler village life, is not in the least bit surprising. Their work fits into the larger context of anti-industrial and anti-modern feeling which had developed in the upper and middle classes at the time, and which gave birth to such phenomena as the Arts and Craft and ramblers movements. At the same time we see men like Seeböhm reacting against the spread of rural nostalgia and chic. These scholars instead set out to accurately examine the medieval rural past in order to show their peers the harshness and poor quality of life in the medieval past and championed the progressive development of modern industry and society.

³¹ Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, p. 225.

³² Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 258-272.

CHAPTER 5

GROWTH OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

By the middle of the twentieth century an enormous growth in the social sciences had resulted in the establishment and development of a number of social science disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. At the same time many of the scholars in these newer disciplines began to propose a more interdisciplinary approach within the social sciences. Some of the biggest proponents of this new interdisciplinary approach were the French scholars Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, who in 1929 founded a journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. With this journal they stated their intention to create an open forum for interdisciplinary research. They hoped to promote a more concrete, collaborative work. This new interdisciplinary approach emphasized the whole dimension of the human experience and therefore looked at how humans interacted with their economic, cultural, environmental and geographic surroundings.³³ One result of this interdisciplinary move was the growth of what came to be known as social history. The initial move towards such interdisciplinary scholarship within the field of Medieval Studies can already be found in the writings of Coulton and Bennett who championed a new direction within medieval history. The goal of these authors was not to understand legal, royal or constitutional history. Febvre was an early proponent of this new social or total history, indeed he believed that historians must invite their comrades and brothers in the social sciences to work together in the proper spirit, and he wrote “Down with all barriers and labels.”³⁴ During the twentieth century peasantry and peasant society also came into focus. Primarily, this was due to a number of contemporaneous developments; including the growing importance of the Third World and the concomitant encroachment on rural and indigenous cultures. Indeed the conflict

³³ Lynn Hunt, “French History in the Last Twenty Years; The Rise and Fall of the Annales Paradigm,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 21 (1986): 213-215.

³⁴ Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History*, ed. P. Burke, trans. K. Folca (New York: Harper Collins, 1973), p. 31.

between the Soviet, Marxist, Neo-Marxist ideologies and the Western capitalist paradigm, as well as numerous peasant and indigenous struggles like those in Vietnam and South and Central America, were also directly responsible for this new interest in peasant economics and culture and society.

One of the earliest examples of this new interest in peasant society was the sociologist George Homans' book *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. Published in 1941, this book was Homan's attempt to examine the social order of medieval English villages. His work focused on champion England, which is the part of England home to the classical manorial system of open-fields and three-field rotation.³⁵ He defended his choice by noting that it was only in champion England that one could find nucleated villages, for in all other areas of the country, settlement was dispersed. Like the earlier scholars Homans emphasized the cooperative nature of village society. Within the medieval village, "cooperation in farm work was the basis of village life" and Homans pointed out the especially collective nature of village bylaws, which regulated agricultural life within the village.³⁶ Indeed for Homans, these by-laws were proof of the community's existence and independence. Moreover, kinship both formal and informal was key to the communal nature of village society. In this context he discussed the use of the phrase "the blood of the village" in medieval documents.³⁷ With regards to the villagers' relationship to the manorial system Homans suggested that although social rank, legal status, and economic status intersected, the main distinction was a legal one between freedom and villeinage. For Homans the medieval lord was not the all powerful figure envisioned by Coulton and Bennett. He argued that custom played an important role in structuring the relationship between the manor

³⁵ George Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), p. 17.

³⁶ Homans, *English Villagers*, pp. 81-104.

³⁷ Homans, *English Villagers*, p. 122.

and the peasant. The lord was not free to do what he liked, rather “he had to make use of customs of collaboration.”³⁸ Homans further believed that the lord dealt with the villagers more often collectively, as members of a community, than as individuals.

In a later article entitled “The Rural Sociology of Medieval England”, Homans continued his exploration of village society and also made clear his thoughts about new interdisciplinary methods and approaches. Discussing the new social history, Homans encouraged the continued fusion of the historian and sociologist. Specifically, he believed that by studying society as a system of interrelated institutions, “we shall be close to the systematic scientific history some of us...have looked forward to.”³⁹ In fact he compared the new social history to archaeology and more traditional types of history and contended that the distribution of custom was as good a basis for historical scholarship as was the distribution of broaches and burials.⁴⁰ Within this article he also expanded upon his view of custom, and the role it played in regulating the relationship between the village and the lord. Homans suggested that the manorial system was not a new system imposed upon the villagers by the lord. Rather, he believed there was little disconnect between the bonds of the village community and those of the manor. He noted the fact that the administration of the manor and its lands was heavily reliant upon the members of the village community. For him the manorial lord was simply a new type of village chief, and he agreed with the French historian Marc Bloch’s view that the role of the manorial lord was “less that of a modern landlord than that of first citizen of the commune.”⁴¹

³⁸ Homans, *English Villagers*, pp. 323-346.

³⁹ George Homans, “The Rural Sociology of Medieval England,” *Past and Present* 4 (1953): 33

⁴⁰ Homans, “Rural Sociology,” 36.

⁴¹ Homans, “Rural Sociology,” 41.

Taking his cue from Homans, Warren Ault focused exclusively on the collective actions of the village community, as embodied in the creation of bylaws. For Ault the medieval village was a unit of agriculture, a self-sufficient community. Ault believed that simply because of the practical requirements of medieval agricultural methods no man could work his field by himself. Bylaws, he argued, allowed the villagers “to regulate their agricultural way of life and to devise ways of policing those engaged in it.”⁴² Such laws did not come from the manor court, but were created and enforced by the village community. He pointed out that the majority of bylaws used phrases that alluded to their communal creation, such as “it is ordered by consent of all tenants” or “by common consent.”⁴³

In an article published in 1954, Ault stressed the importance of bylaws in any attempt to understand the village community. He believed that it was through the analysis of bylaws that one could study the village community outside of the framework of the manorial system. The earliest bylaws dealt with agricultural practices, and initially they concentrated on problems of the harvest. These earliest bylaws were apparently enacted to make sure that all in the village who could work did and for a reasonable price.⁴⁴ Eventually, the focus of bylaws changed and the majority began to deal almost exclusively with rights of the common and pasture. Looking at the development of bylaws Ault argued that more exist in the fourteenth and fifteenth century than in the thirteenth. This he attributed to the fact that when the lord broke up his demesne and

⁴² Warren Ault, *The Self Directing Activities of Village Communities in Medieval England* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1952), p. 8.

⁴³ Ault, *The Self Directing Activities*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ Warren Ault, “Village By-Laws By Common Consent,” *Speculum* 29 (1954): 378.

began to farm it out, the village became more self-governing due to a “loosening of *seigneurial* ties.”⁴⁵

Examining the role of bylaws in the relationship between the manor lord and village, Ault also believed that the lord was simply the leading member of the community. As a member of the community, the bylaws were in his interest as well; his interests were not paramount to the interests of the community. Therefore, Ault suggested that bylaws were not services the manor exacted from its tenants. Rather, Ault conceived of them as legislation in the common interest.⁴⁶ Arising as they did from village custom, bylaws were not easily ignored. Even the lord did not often overrule village custom. As evidence of their importance, Ault pointed to a number of court cases in manorial documents wherein the lord’s desire was overruled in the face of custom. Even more amazingly, Ault discussed cases wherein the court treated the lord as if he was one of his own tenants, a member of the village community. Analyzing the phrase “by common consent”, Ault acknowledged that in medieval society not all heads were counted the same, and that the lord’s wishes held more weight in the decision making process. Yet, he concluded that “common consent” still referred to all “shareholders in the agrarian enterprise be their status free or servile, and whether they be landlord or tenant.”⁴⁷

By the 1950 ‘s there was a growing public and scholarly interest in all things peasant and rural. I. Chivas published his work, which consisted of an overview of work on rural communities, through the UN publishing house. *Rural Communities* was envisioned as a tool for methodological guidance. Chivas defined the rural community “as a small social unit, living in a given area and drawing its livelihood from the working of the territory in a more or less enclosed

⁴⁵ Ault, “Village By-Laws,” 380.

⁴⁶ Ault, “Village By-Laws,” 384.

⁴⁷ Ault, “Village By-Laws,” 394.

economy.”⁴⁸ Describing the history of the subject, he noted that although initially studied by Europeans in order to deduce the nature and origin of property, the emphasis had now shifted from the juridical objects of ownership to the social unit owning the land. This shift had furthermore led to an emphasis on “analyses of structure and functions” and to attempts at establishing “typological classifications.”⁴⁹ Discussing communal organization within the rural community, Chivas suggested that the level of communal organization of territorial property and economic activities within the community corresponded to the communities’ degree of structuration. For Chivas the “technique of organizing the land belonging to rural communities is essentially a social one,” so much so that Chivas spoke of “a spatial projection of society.”⁵⁰ He also noted that the rural community was not just a physical community but an economic and civil community. Peasant law, Chivas believed, was based on a concept of community. Therefore the rights and duties of the individual were also based on membership in that community. He concluded that as the individual replaced communal organization within the economy, all the various communal aspects of society declined.⁵¹

Approaching peasant society from the perspective of an anthropologist, Robert Redfield attempted to define peasant culture as something different from the rest of civilization. To him the main characteristic of the peasantry was the fact that agriculture was a way of life, “not a business for profit.”⁵² Redfield also believed the peasantry to be the rural dimension of old

⁴⁸ I. Chivas, *Rural Communities; Problems, Methods and Types of Research* (Paris: UNESCO Publications, 1958), p. 7.

⁴⁹ Chivas, *Rural Communities*, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Chivas, *Rural Communities*, pp. 12-13.

⁵¹ Chivas, *Rural Communities*, pp. 21-24.

⁵² Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture; An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 27.

civilizations. Understanding kinship and family ties were key to understanding that dimension. In fact, Redfield argued that peasant societies could only be understood in terms of their connection to larger cultural influences coming from the elite. He emphasized that peasant culture should be thought of “as a small circle overlapping with much larger and less clearly defined areas of culture”.⁵³ What is interesting to note is that many of the new generation of scholars who came to the study of the village community in the last decades of the twentieth century, would take up this approach, and would argue for studies which emphasized regional networks and the villages’ connections with the outside world. Much of their work would consist of analyzing the local and supra-local networks, both economic and social, which the peasant interacted with and within.

⁵³ Redfield, *Peasant Society*, pp. 66-69.

CHAPTER 6

THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY AS AN ECONOMIC ENTITY

One very significant trend in the study of the village community throughout the twentieth century was the development of models, which could be applied to the study of the community's economic networks and relationships. A key point which many scholars explored is the distinction between legal status and economic or social status in the village. One could legally be either a serf or villein and still belong to a variety of economic and social groups. Robert Hoyt discussed the status of the peasantry as determined primarily by two facts. Peasant status he contended, was a factor of both the land, stocks at their disposal and the rights and duties enjoyed by or denied to them. Hoyt began by contrasting two models of communal, self-governing activity. In one the community of the vill was a voluntary community of neighbors. The other the farm of the manor, was a type of communalism imposed upon the peasantry by financial obligations owed to the lord.⁵⁴ Although one might leap to the conclusion that villagers were "self-governing" because of their farming activities he cautioned, that the nature and significance of this farming activity had not yet been thoroughly explored.⁵⁵

Hoyt began by reviewing evidence from the Domesday Book as he hoped to discover evidence for the farming of the manor by groups of peasants. He noted that in the few cases where there is evidence for a community of the vill or manor arising from voluntary economic activity, the community is not an egalitarian union of all peasants. In these cases, where there is at least some communal activity being undertaken by an organized peasantry, it is being carried out by the "peasant aristocracy"⁵⁶ Drawing on the Domesday evidence Hoyt contended that "the

⁵⁴ Robert Hoyt, "Farm of the Manor and Community of the Vill in Domesday Book," *Speculum* 30 (1955): 148.

⁵⁵ Hoyt, "Farm of the Manor," 150.

⁵⁶ Hoyt, "Farm of the Manor," 165.

vill as a unit of economic purposes is revealed by Domesday only under two circumstances; when the manor and vill coincide, and when the right to meadow or pasture of a vill is called into question.” Yet, he also acknowledged that this was a misleading low result, for the Domesday Book was not primarily concerned with either manorial values or economic organization.

Hoyt proposed that we distinguish between two types of communalism. The first, which he defined as economic communalism, was the result of the peasants’ willingness to assume a common financial responsibility and was found primarily in the more heavily manorialized south of England. The second form of communalism was agricultural, and was the result of the need for cooperation, which arose from the open-field system and accompanying agrarian techniques.⁵⁷ Hoyt concluded it was only in northern and eastern Anglia where the manorial system was less developed, that both types of communalism existed. He suggested that due to the scattered nature of settlement in those regions, the vill was the “essential form of rural organization”. Yet, he cautioned that in such instances the vill or community of peasants was a juridical not an economic community and therefore did not farm its manor.⁵⁸

Reginald Lennard was one of the first scholars to emphasize the economic differentiation of the peasantry. In the preface to his book *Rural England 1086-1135*, he wrote that one of the most surprising things he learned from his research was the amount of economic differentiation that existed within the peasantry.⁵⁹ He believed that the basic unit of rural life was the village community, and that the average Englishman did not live an isolated individualistic life.

⁵⁷ Hoyt, “Farm of the Manor,” 168.

⁵⁸ Hoyt, “Farm of the Manor,” 169.

⁵⁹ Reginald Lennard, *Rural England 1086-1135: A Study of Social and Agrarian Conditions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. v.

Examining the evidence from the Domesday Book, for the practice of leaseholds and the farming out of the manor, Lennard agreed with Hoyt's assertions. Lennard noted that it was generally impossible to know whether one "ought to think of a small manor held at farm by a village community or only of a few peasants paying a rent individually for their holdings."⁶⁰ Lennard believed that by this period money rents had become fairly common and the economy had also become basically monetary. Discussing the various types of leaseholders he was clear to distinguish the farmer from the peasant. The farmer may have controlled the agricultural services of the peasantry and even held the right to sublet portions of the demesne, yet he did not "become the substitute of the lord in all respects."⁶¹ Ultimately the lords' will was still dominant in the affairs of the manor.⁶² Turning his discussion towards the peasant and their obligations, Lennard noted that the village was the prevalent form of social organization.

Lennard pointed out that within the manorial documents, two discrepant criteria were used to classify the rustic population, namely legal and economic status. Yet, in spite of the variety of economic and social groups Lennard argued "Peasants of various classes or groups of peasants of the same class with holdings of different sizes" can be found together in almost every vill in the country.⁶³ Finally, with regards to the overall position of the peasant population he doubted any basic disposition towards revolting against their lord. As a population, the peasantry was too legally and socially diverse, to have any sort of class-consciousness. In fact he suggested that if

⁶⁰ Lennard, *Rural England*, p. 154.

⁶¹ Lennard, *Rural England*, pp. 198-199.

⁶² Lennard, *Rural England*, pp. 105-110.

⁶³ Lennard, *Rural England*, pp. 330-334.

anything, the peasantry was more animated by envious feelings or anger, “against their richer neighbor or the encroachments of the next village on his land.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Lennard, *Rural England*, pp. 387-390.

CHAPTER 7

MARXIST SCHOLARS AND PEASANT ECONOMY

Soviet research into peasant society and especially on the peasantry as an economic unit and force was very important in the second half of the twentieth century. The work of men like E. Kosminsky was widely influential especially for a younger generation of English economic and social historians, including M. Postan. Yet, even before Kosminsky's work was published in the 1970's, a Soviet economist named Anatoli Chayanov had released two treatises in which he advanced new models for studying peasant economies. In his review of Chayanov's theories Peter Gatrell explained that although Chayanov's main work was known to specialists when it was first published, it was only after his work was circulated in English in the 1960's that his models became extremely influential.⁶⁵

A. Chayanov's two principal treatises were; *On The Theory of Non-Capitalist Economic Systems* published in 1924 and *Peasant Farm Organization* published in 1925, both of which were republished in a new volume entitled *A. V. Chayanov On the Theory of Peasant Economy* by David Thorner. Although Chayanov based his models on research collected in Soviet Russia, he believed that they described the true nature of any peasant economy, whether in Tsarist Russia or medieval Western Europe. To begin with, Chayanov conceived of the peasant family farm as the basic, non-wage, familial economic unit of agrarian production.⁶⁶ More importantly, he proposed that the peasant family farm as an economic unit constantly strove to maintain equilibrium between family demand satisfaction and the drudgery of labor itself, when making decisions regarding their level of self-exploitation. Comparing the economic flexibility of the

⁶⁵ Peter Gatrell, "Historians and Peasants: Studies of Medieval English Society in a Russian Context," *Past and Present* 96 (1982): 44.

⁶⁶ A. Chayanov, "On the Theory of Non-capitalist Economic Systems," *A. V. Chayanov On the Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. A. V. Chayanov (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 1-2.

feudal lord to that of the peasant family, Chayanov concluded that the family farm was better able to adapt to market conditions because the lord faced significant barriers with regards to market intervention.⁶⁷

In *Peasant Farm Organization*, Chayanov began by emphasizing the fact that the peasant family farm would never hire wage labor. He noted that he was not describing a theory of peasant agricultural production; rather he was outlining the basis of peasant family labor, which was one of the factors, which influenced the organization of peasant agricultural conditions. Next, Chayanov expounded upon the model of peasant labor equilibrium, he had proposed a few years earlier. He believed that due to their desire to maintain the labor equilibrium the members of the peasant family farm actually had substantial amounts of “unutilized time.”⁶⁸ Moreover, Chayanov argued that on a peasant family farm the labor is fixed, because it is connected to family size. Therefore, peasant farms are naturally structured to conform to the optimal degree of self-exploitation. Chayanov’s basic point was, that since the peasant placed great importance on certain non-economic factors, they often engaged in inefficient economic activity. The peasant family farm could thus in certain instances, continue to operate as a unit and support the peasant family, in situations that would be untenable for a capitalist farm.

The next Soviet scholar to have a serious impact on the study of peasant society was E. Kosminsky. As Peter Gatrell explained, “The appearance of Kosminksy’s book on the English village during the thirteenth century constituted something of a landmark.”⁶⁹ What was so remarkable about Kosminky’s book *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth*

⁶⁷ Chayanov, “On the Theory of Non-Capitalist,” p. 21.

⁶⁸ A. Chayanov, “Peasant Farm Organization,” *A. V. Chayanov On the Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. A. V. Chayanov (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 75.

⁶⁹ Gatrell, “Russian Studies of Medieval English Society,” 40.

Century, was that he drew on new sources such as the Hundred Rolls and used the evidence he collected therein to point to clear signs of stratification in medieval peasant society. Kosminsky accepted that such stratification was not a new phenomenon in the thirteenth century, though he believed that during this period that stratification became greatly accelerated due to the growing monetization of the economy

Early in his book Kosminsky acknowledged that he had written the book on the basis of the Marxist-Leninist method. Even the editor Rodney Hilton, noted that Kosminsky had laid great stress on the human factors role in history “in the sense of the more or less conscious pursuit of social aims by the principal contending classes.”⁷⁰ Yet, this was not a case of mechanically applied Marxism.⁷¹ Kosminsky began by laying out a few key points with regards to his main body of evidence, the Hundred Rolls. First, he noted that the rolls were only meant to provide descriptions of estates in terms of arable land. There is in them no mention of the common lands of the village community. Kosminsky also accepted that the rolls were not representative of the conditions in all of England, for they provide evidence only for the most fertile, most commercially productive lands. The rolls therefore, represent only the fields of champion England.

He pointed out that there was little evidence in the rolls for the communal organization of the village and the manorial system, which was described, had been superimposed upon the village community. Therefore, he contended the two systems of economic organization were far from coterminous.⁷² The basic unit of agricultural production was the village, not the manor and

⁷⁰ E. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Studies in Medieval History, vol. VIII. ed. R. Hilton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. xxi.

⁷¹ Gatrell, “Russian Studies of Medieval English Society,” 40.

⁷² Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, pp. 69-74.

he believed that only within champion England did large, classical manors dominate the countryside. In fact Kosminsky stated, “The organization of the large manor is characteristic of the large scale feudal landed property, which played the leading role in thirteenth century English society and government.”⁷³ For Kosminsky the fundamental factor for determining the structure of the manor was the form of exploitation and appropriation to which the peasant was subjected. In other words, what was the predominant form of rent?

Based on a close examination of the evidence from the rolls, Kosminsky argued that by the thirteenth century money rent predominated. Although, there was clear economic stratification with the peasant population, he still believed that the medieval peasantry was characterized by “the anti-feudal direction of its interests and its class struggles.”⁷⁴ What was the root cause of the growing stratification within the village? Kosminsky made a clear connection between this process and the increasing contact and interaction of the peasant economy with the market. The growth of this connection was especially true in those parts of England where freeholders predominated. In these areas, where money rent also predominated, this weakening of customary links to the lord increasingly led to a small section of freeholders coming close to the position of small landowners. This small section of freeholders could thus speak of personal property and many of them came to hold small manors. Kosminsky argued that it was this group of peasants who required cheap, hired labor, which became the actors in a new mode of production. This new mode of production was in essence an embryonic form of the capitalist mode of production.⁷⁵

⁷³Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, p. 130.

⁷⁴ Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, p. 198.

⁷⁵ Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, p. 258.

Finally, Kosminsky returned to his description of the manorial system. Again he emphasized the pre-manorial existence of the village community; indeed he felt that the manor in fact strengthened the organization of the village community. Upon examining the economic requirements of the manorial system Kosminsky concluded, "Villein services, then, were inadequate for the demesne economy."⁷⁶ He proposed that the deficit was filled through the use of hired laborers who came from the ranks of the peasantry, for much of the population could not support themselves off their own land and thus relied on those wages for subsistence.⁷⁷ In his final chapter Kosminsky explained why this topic was important from a Marxist perspective. It was because England was the first country to carry through a bourgeois revolution. It was in England that men first came to rely on wages earned as laborers as a result of the increasing stratification within peasant society. Moreover, it was due to this increased stratification and their increasingly tenuous economic and legal position after the thirteenth century that peasants eventually revolted in 1381. Indeed for Kosminsky in spite of the differentiation, which existed within peasant society the peasantry was still a single class, one that acted together for the common good, in a "single anti-feudal movement."⁷⁸

However, scholars influenced by Marxist theory did not focus only on the economic aspects of medieval rural life. Indeed scholars such as the anthropologist Eric Wolf took as a starting point Redfield's assertion that the peasantry be viewed not as an autonomous unit but instead, as a small circle overlapping with a much larger and less clearly defined areas of culture.

⁷⁶ Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, p. 290.

⁷⁷ Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, pp. 294-296.

⁷⁸ Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History*, pp. 358-359.

Therefore, Wolf emphasized that the peasantry always exists within a larger system.⁷⁹ Basing his work on field research conducted in modern times Wolf focused on the networks, which connect the peasantry to the larger world. He began by defining the peasantry as rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group or class. He then wrote, “peasant needs...will often conflict with the requirements imposed by the outsider.”⁸⁰ He believed that Chaynov’s theory on the peasant economy was critical to understanding the peasantry because the constant search for labor equilibrium was the result of the need to balance the demands of the external world with the peasantries own needs.⁸¹

Wolf particularly focused on outlining the variety of exchange relationships, which existed within the peasantry as well as those, which connected them to the larger outside world. These included local and regional market networks with both horizontal ties within the peasant community and vertical ties between the peasantry and the non-rural (urban) regions. He believed that because of this variety of ties the peasantry was often stratified and did not take one form. He argued that there were generally different grades and levels of cultivators as was the case in medieval Europe.⁸² With regards to organization of the peasant community he believed that there was more than one possible axis of organization. The community could be organized as a corporate entity or horizontally with single strands of association. Moreover, Wolf argued that the more the community was organized along corporate lines the less flexible it was with regards to change.⁸³ He concluded with a discussion of contemporary peasant movements around

⁷⁹ Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, Series on Modern Anthropology, vol. XII. ed. Marshall Sahlins (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 8.

⁸⁰ Wolf, *Peasants*, p. 13.

⁸¹ Wolf, *Peasants*, pp. 14-15.

⁸² Wolf, *Peasants*, p. 49.

⁸³ Wolf, *Peasants*, p. 93.

the world in places like Vietnam, China, and in South and Central America. Here he noted, “Peasant movements like peasant coalitions are unstable and shifting alignments of antagonistic and autonomous units, borne along by a millennial dream.” He believed it was due to this inherent weakness of the peasantry that the Communist party was needed. Only the Communist party organization he suggested was able to provide “the staff of professional revolutionaries whose entire function is to provide the long range strategy of which the peasantry itself is incapable of.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Wolf, *Peasants*, pp. 108-109.

CHAPTER 8

ECONOMIC HISTORIANS OF THE WEST

Following the in the footsteps of Chayanov and Kosminsky, many scholars began to focus on problems of the manorial economy and peasant society. Although, many of these scholars did not share the Soviet authors' taste for Marxist economic theory they continued to rely on and make reference to the works of the Soviet authors. Early on in his book *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, M. Postan described society of the later Middle Ages as one where agriculture predominated and wherein the population consisted primarily of peasants.⁸⁵ He also laid out a fairly progressive view of history. Discussing long-term trends in the economic history of Western Europe, Postan argued that when viewed over time there has been a general trend towards economic growth. Distinguishing between the rise of money and the rise of a money economy, Postan noted that money had always played a variegated role in the economy of medieval Europe. However, he believed that it was only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the growth of money rents and markets that one finds the growth of a monetary economy throughout Europe. Postan contended that it was "out of this breeding ground" that English capitalism developed.⁸⁶

One interesting piece of evidence used by Postan was a charter, the *Carte Nativorum*. What was so unusual about this charter was that the parties mentioned in it are of peasant status, and range from villein to freemen. Postan believed that although this document discussed land transfers and sales among the peasant population, one should be careful not to date the document with the subject.⁸⁷ He argued that the economic and social relations of the village would not have

⁸⁵ M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 12.

⁸⁶ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 47.

⁸⁷ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, pp. 110-111.

changed so quickly. Therefore, he dated the beginnings of a land market to sometime prior to the twelfth century. He suggested that the *Carte Nativorum* was simply evidence of a new attitude on the part of the landlord, who was legitimating previously undated and unlicensed transactions through the granting of the cartulary.⁸⁸

Finally, with regards to the village community Postan accepted the reality of economic stratification as proposed by Kosminky. Yet, he cautioned against applying the term class to all these various groups. He believed that it was dangerous to speak of the rise of a middle or even middling class in the medieval period. Rather, he claimed that peasant society was a single class, forming “a common universe of social discourse.”⁸⁹ Because the peasantry was differentiated primarily along economic lines, one could find villeins at the highest layer of the village; or freemen at the lowest layer.

Like Postan, Edward Miller and John Hatcher considered expansion the dominant theme of the economic history of England in the late Middle Ages. However, they felt that the whole community did not benefit from this expansion. They contended that prior to the eighteenth century; high population levels made low standard of living the reality for much of the population. In their book *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086-1348*, they defined the manor “as a block of landed property managed as a single unit from a particular structure”, and agreed with Kosminky that the manorial system of organization had been superimposed upon the village community.⁹⁰ Miller and Hatcher also believed that because the

⁸⁸ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 131.

⁸⁹ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 279-280.

⁹⁰ Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086-1348* (London: Longman, 1978), pp. 19-20.

peasant community was both a community of tenants and small-scale producers, it was not a community of equals.

In Miller and Hatcher's view, the basic framework of the medieval economy set natural limits on how far the economy could grow and eventually as the population increased, more and more of the peasantry were forced into becoming what amounted to a "rural proletariat". They were essentially compelled into wage labor in order to sustain themselves.⁹¹ The result of all this combined with significant population growth was that by the late Middle Ages a progressively larger proportion of villagers had been pushed to the margins of subsistence, or even below.

Examining the obligations and relationships of the village community, Miller and Hatcher argued that there existed much evidence for the communal nature of the peasant community. To begin with they pointed out the cooperative nature of medieval agricultural methods and emphasized that in the face of a growing population, the villagers' control of the commons became especially important. Moreover, membership in the community was especially significant because it gave one use rights over the commons, something denied to those from outside the community.⁹² They believed that the community could also act collectively in non-agricultural matters. Villagers could band together to endow or found a church and they often had communal obligations to their parish. In fact, Miller and Hatcher stressed that the Church generally played a key role in defining and re-enforcing bonds of community throughout the year. Chiefly this was by serving as the spiritual and material center of the village, on festival and saints' days.

⁹¹ Miller, *Medieval England*, p. 49.

⁹² Miller, *Medieval England*, pp. 98-101.

As a number of the works above have indicated, many economists who studied the medieval period pointed out the role played by the land market in the economic development of Western Europe. James Masschaele took a slightly different but complementary approach and instead examined *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*. With this book Masschaele hoped to explain how English economic life had become substantially more sophisticated in the fourteenth century when compared to the twelfth. One example of this sophistication was the fact that by the fourteenth century, “virtually all peasants paid at least some of their rent in money”.⁹³ In his book, Masschaele examined medieval commercialization, but with special attention given to the connection between urban and rural markets and economies. With regards to the rural producers of the commodity goods, he argued that the peasants were the primary producers; in his model the lords took a back seat to their tenants.⁹⁴

Examining economic data from the records of Ipswich, Shrewsbury and Colchester, Masschaele concluded that there was a critical symbiosis between the town and country. Not only did the basic subsistence commodities of towns, such as grains and meats etc originate in the countryside but also the basic commodities required for the major medieval urban industries, such as wool and hides. Although, some scholars have acknowledged the importance of rural commodities to the town, he noted that they generally chalked it up to necessity. However, Masschaele claimed that this was a false assumption based upon their use of the model of labor equilibrium proposed by Chayanov. He proposed a new model for peasant production; namely simple commodity production, because unlike Chayanov he viewed peasants as economic

⁹³ James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England 1150-1350* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1997), p. 2.

⁹⁴ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, p. 7.

maximizers not simply economic satisfiers.⁹⁵ He contended that production, at least on a small scale was an intrinsic part of peasant production. In fact, he noted that the production of cereals and wool were mainstays of the peasant economy.

In order to better understand peasant wealth and economic activity Masschaele drew on two unique sources of information. First, he analyzed royal purveyance records drawn up during wartime. His analysis of these records led him to conclude that particularity with regards to foodstuffs, “peasants bore the brunt of most purveyance campaigns.”⁹⁶ Relying on this data as well as data drawn from Kosminsky’s book, Masschaele concluded that the majority of wealth in medieval England belonged to the peasants.⁹⁷ Additionally, he claimed that it was problematic to view the manor as primarily market oriented. Next, Masschaele looked at guild records from the three towns and arrived at the stunning conclusion. Namely that as early as the thirteenth century there were members of the village community making regular trips to the towns to sell their goods. He was able to pick out these men, because their foreignness (in relation to the residents of the town) was mentioned in the guild records. These men were noted in the guilds because they had been given the right to conduct business within the town walls.⁹⁸ Masschaele concluded, it was the peasant producers and merchants who turned “dirt paths and winding rivers into commercial thoroughfares...the lords simply knew how to ride coattails.”⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, pp. 33-34.

⁹⁶ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, p. 37.

⁹⁷ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, pp. 47-50.

⁹⁸ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, pp. 156-161.

⁹⁹ Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, p. 230.

CHAPTER 9

VILLAGE SETTLEMENT: PHYSICAL LAYOUT AND ORGANIZATION

One discipline within the social sciences, which achieved a huge boost in England following the end of World War II, was archaeology. There were a number of factors responsible for this including; the development of a number of new techniques and methodologies, as well the socio-political climate of post-WWII England. In the area of urban archaeology, post-war rebuilding booms resulted in a number of fairly large scale and long-term urban excavations such as those in the Cheapside neighborhood of London, and the still ongoing excavation of medieval and Viking Age York. However, it was the developments, which occurred in the archaeology of rural settlements that I will focus on for the purposes of this paper. Much of these developments centered on the work of Maurice Beresford and John Hurst who excavated numerous deserted medieval villages. The work of this generation of archaeologists was greatly aided by the application of new technologies and methods, especially aerial photography and whole site excavation. In fact, the first whole site excavation within England occurred at the famous deserted village of Wharram Percy. Additionally, much of the archaeological work, which came out in this period, was influenced by the multi-and inter-disciplinary approach that Hurst and Beresford championed.

Maurice Beresford's *The Lost Villages of England* has long since become the classic treatise about English deserted medieval villages. Yet, in reality although the book provided a brief sketch of the medieval village, as it existed in the Middle Ages, Beresford was primarily concerned with two tasks. The first was to provide a list of and description for the phenomenon known as deserted villages. His second task and the one, which took up most of his book was to analyze the factors, which led to the creation of the deserted villages. He also hoped to uncover the contemporary knowledge or lack thereof with regards to this phenomenon. This portion of

his book provides more of a window into the political and legal activity of Tudor and Elizabethan England however, as opposed to an analysis of the medieval village community.

Beresford noted early on, that the majority of the deserted villages are found in highly fertile, highly cultivated champion England. He declared, “Every village represented a community organized for work”.¹⁰⁰ Although only preliminary evidenced had been collected, he also noted that the evidence suggested that each settlement site actually consisted of multiple phases of planning and habitation. With regards to the impetus behind the desertions, Beresford clearly laid the blame at the feet of the lord. He noted that even in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries long after the medieval desertions, it was understood that desertion was due to lords converting land from corn to grass because the raising of sheep paid better.¹⁰¹ Beresford noted the depopulating effects of the Black Death and acknowledged that post-plague, some villagers might have left voluntarily. Yet, he concluded that by the fifteenth century the majority of the depopulations were not voluntary, at least not according to contemporary opponents of the depopulation.¹⁰²

While Beresford was trained as an economic historian, Hurst was the archaeologist. In his article entitled “The Changing Medieval Village in England”, he claimed that village plans had not remained stable through Anglo-Saxon and medieval times. Not only did housing designs change over the centuries, but settlement layout and plans also changed over the generations. He further stated, that not only was the peasant house rebuilt a least once a generation but that when

¹⁰⁰ Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), pp. 41-41.

¹⁰¹ Beresford, *The Lost Villages*, p. 178.

¹⁰² John Hurst, “The Changing Medieval Village in England,” *Men, Settlement and Urbanism*, ed. Peter Ucko, Ruth Tringham and G. Dinbley (Gloucester: Duckworth, 1972), p. 531.

rebuilt, it was often done on new foundations and along new village axes.¹⁰³ He also pointed out, that many times manorial building can be found to be resting on top of earlier peasant houses. Hurst concluded, “The medieval village was not planned only once...settlement organization and structures evolved.”¹⁰⁴

Archaeology was not the only discipline to turn its attention to the physical organization of the peasant community. Brian Roberts set out to explore the rural roots and settlement patterns of Britain with his book, *Studies in Historical Geography*. He stated that the history of rural settlement could be seen in one of two ways, as characterized by a state of continuous change or by periods of rapid innovation separated by phases of relative stability.¹⁰⁵

Based on evidence from the Domesday Book, Roberts divided the peasantry into three groups, dependent on the amount of land they farmed, With regards to the actual location of the village site he pointed out, that continuity of settlement did not mean continuity of site. The peasant community was the original, basic unit of social organization, and therefore he claimed that the parish and the estate or manor was superimposed upon this most basic unit of agricultural production at a later date.¹⁰⁶ Next, he outlined the three forms of evidence for village settlements; archival, archaeological, and morphological. After reviewing the variety of village plans and layouts, Roberts cautioned his reader, to remember that village plans were always changing. Indeed, he concluded, “Movement may be as much a characteristic of ‘permanent’ settlement as change.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Hurst, “The Changing Medieval Village,” p. 533.

¹⁰⁴ Hurst, “The Changing Medieval Village,” p. 540.

¹⁰⁵ Brian Roberts, *Studies in Historical Geography: Rural Settlements in Britain* (Kent: Dawson, 1977), p. 23.

¹⁰⁶ Roberts, *Studies in Historical Geography*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, *Studies in Historical Geography*, p. 138.

Like Hurst and Beresford, Christopher Taylor also approached the study of rural society from the perspective of the villages' physical layout. For Taylor there was little continuity between the morphology and position of medieval villages and those of the Saxon period.¹⁰⁸ In the eleventh century England was not a land of nucleated villages, though he noted that nucleated villages predominated in champion England by at least the thirteenth century. A number of features were typical of a nucleated village, but usually they included a planned village layout with houses on either side of the street, a centrally located parish church. The neighboring fields were typically organized according to the open-field method of organization. In spite of its planned nature the nucleated village was often transitory and would often last for less than a few generations. Therefore, Taylor concluded that patterns of medieval settlement were far more complex than previously believed.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Taylor, *Village and Farmstead; a History of Rural Settlement in England* (London: George Philip, 1983), pp. 122-124.

¹⁰⁹ Taylor, *Village and Farmstead*, p. 200.

CHAPTER 10

A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Out of all the conceptual approaches applied to the study of medieval peasant society, the one most favored by modern scholar, was one, wherein peasant society was defined by the social and juridical interactions of its community. Much of the early work in this vein can be divided into two groups; those authors who believed the village community had existed but that the communal bonds, which held it together, had died out after the plague, and those who believed that the communal bonds remained strong even after the plague. The first group came out of the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies (PIMS) in Toronto and the second approach can be associated with the English scholars Rodney Hilton and his student Christopher Dyer. Outside England, PIMS at the University of Toronto was the main school for studying all things medieval and rural during the last half of the twentieth century and under the leadership of J. Raftis students such as Edward Britton were produced. These scholars from the Toronto School hoped to make use of the vast amount of data on rural life, which they had gradually made available through the translation and archiving of court rolls. They eventually came to believe that as a result of the Black Death, rural society in England underwent a number of changes all of which dramatically affected the cohesion and solidarity of the communal group.

Edward Britton studied at the PIMS and in his book *The Community of the Vill* he explored family and community relationships in the medieval village. Britton started from F. Maitland's remark, that "the Norman clerks responsible for the compilation of the Domesday Book tore the villages of England into shreds and depicted the country as one consisting of manors."¹¹⁰ Britton's principal aim was to reconstruct life in the village of Broughton using data gleaned

¹¹⁰ E. Britton, *The Community of the Vill; a Study in the family and village life in fourteenth-century England* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1977), p. 2.

from court rolls. After describing the various social and economic divisions evident within the community, he noted, “although there was certainly inter-peasant cooperation in Broughton, such cooperation was quite in keeping with the social and economic hierarchy of the village”¹¹¹ He went on to point out that the court rolls rarely describe someone in terms of social status, especially in terms of free or un-free, rather they generally describes them as peasants or as belonging to the community of the vill.¹¹²

Britton argued that the court rolls indicate that there were two different but not always separate levels of reality operating in Broughton; one was the manor, which was by and large a legal and administrative entity and the other the village community, the social and economic reality in which the villagers lived every day. The court rolls indicate that a very definite village community lay beneath the manorial structures and Britton suggested that the place of the lord and the manor must be viewed within this context.¹¹³ He concluded his section on the village community by stressing its importance. He wrote, “if the social historian is to fully appreciate the life of the villager he must attempt to view the manorial system within its proper context, and realize that within such a context the village community occupied a position of primacy.”¹¹⁴

At the same time in England, scholars such as Rodney Hilton were contending that at its most basic level, rural society functioned as a collective unit. For these scholars the question was not whether the village community, organized around communal obligations had ever existed. Rather, the question was if this communal based organization had ever disappeared? Perhaps the greatest or at least the most influential of these authors was Rodney Hilton. His book *Bond Men*

¹¹¹ Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 114.

¹¹² Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 167.

¹¹³ Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 168.

¹¹⁴ Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 178.

Made Free looked at medieval peasant movements, especially the uprising of 1381. Hilton argued that already, in medieval times there existed social classes and he suggested that the peasant movements of the Middle Ages were attempts by the peasant class to pursue their economic interests. As one of his students Christopher Dyer pointed out in the introduction to the new 2003 edition of Hilton's work, this belief is a little outmoded. Dyer noted that this idea of a unified peasant class does not hold up in light of new work, which shows that peasants were much more closely integrated into medieval society. Yet, he noted that scholars had still not come up with a satisfying alternative."¹¹⁵

For Hilton a common feature of peasant life was the association of peasant families in larger communities and he wrote that the "solidarity of peasant communities is a well known fact of medieval social history, at any rate from the twelfth century onwards."¹¹⁶ This sense of community showed itself especially in times of opposition to outsiders, invaders, or oppressors. He followed the line of earlier scholars such as Ault and Coulton, who emphasized the agricultural necessity of common action as the basis for any other communal solidarity.¹¹⁷ Hilton acknowledged that the community was stratified; it was not a community of equals. Furthermore, he accepted that this stratification only increased with time. Yet, he contended that this stratification could only go so far, it could not create a new class. While there may have been rich and poor peasants they were still part of the same group. Besides rich and poor, peasant society was also divided between those who were free and those who were still obliged to perform labor services for the lord, those who were obliged to pay *chevage*, *taille*, and *merchet*. To Hilton however, regardless of these various categories "what provided the best protection for

¹¹⁵ Christopher Dyer, "Introduction," *Bond Men Made Free*, ed. Rodney Hilton (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. xv.

¹¹⁶ Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 28-29.

¹¹⁷ Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 29-31.

peasants, rich and poor, free or un-free, was the strength of common action in the local communities.¹¹⁸ It was this common action, which served as the basis for peasant movements.

Hilton saw the demand by peasants for more freedom as one of the major factors behind their communal organization. He looked specifically at the Italian and French rural communal movements and claimed that the control of village commons provided an important early focus for the development of self-administrations in northern Italy. Control of the commons was however, only the first step towards a form of autonomy. Hilton believed that it was in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the village communal movement really began.¹¹⁹ Hilton also examined the peasant movement towards enfranchisement in England. The results in England were not as successful as their continental counterparts though. Hilton wrote, “The nearest approach by village communities to the continental achievement of a charter of enfranchisement was the legal definition of fixed custom.”¹²⁰ He also examined village bylaws and discussed the ways in which the creation of these laws resulted in a form of self-government. Hilton pointed to the example of the village of Staines in Middlesex which in 1276 passed an ordinance against strangers being brought into the glean. This ordinance was “passed by the community of the whole village.”¹²¹ Although Hilton discussed the village community and its communal organization in terms of agricultural need along lines similar to W. Ault, he did not detail what form the village community may have had prior to its attempts to gain independence. It is clear from his work that there must have been some communal organization and action prior to their attempts to gain freedom. Yet, the village does not really coalesce for him, into a community,

¹¹⁸ Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 61.

¹¹⁹ Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 76-77.

¹²⁰ Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 89.

¹²¹ Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 90.

until its members set themselves in opposition to the lord. In Hilton's model, it was their common actions towards this end, which shaped them into an independent entity, separate from the lord and his manor.

The next author to examine the social organization of the village community was Richard Smith. In his essay "Modernization and the Corporate medieval Village Community in England: Some Skeptical Reflections" argued that the medieval village community did not split and disintegrate during the late Middle Ages. The modern view, which he attributed to the work of social historians, argues that market integration, regional specialization and other forces created serious social differentiation and dislocation within the village community.¹²² Smith looked at the issue of juridical jurisdiction and the movement from away from local courts to county or royal courts. He agreed that as the royal government instituted stronger local control the focus of legal activities moved from the village community to county communities.¹²³ Smith did argue however, that the change was one of intensity or degree rather than a major transformation of social structures. He did not accept the incorporationist view, according to which, local communities were eventually absorbed into wider political entities.¹²⁴ Rather, Smith proposed that certain categories of business had simply moved from one court to the other.

Christopher Dyer was a student of Rodney Hilton, but unlike his teacher Dyer focused more exclusively on the communal organization of the village. In his article "The English Medieval Village Community and its Decline" Dyer examined two key aspects of the village community. Dyer first wanted to define and locate the community's role in society and

¹²² Richard Smith, "Modernization and the Corporate medieval Village Community in England: Some Skeptical Reflections," *Explorations in Historical Geography*, ed. A. Baker and D. Gregory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 144.

¹²³ Smith, "Modernization and the Corporate," p. 145.

¹²⁴ Smith, "Modernization and the Corporate," p. 177.

government and secondly to establish whether or not the communal unity and activity of the village ever deteriorated.¹²⁵ Dyer wrote that the structures and settlements were less important in defining a village than the people, their land, and the requirements of the state. He also made a clear distinction between the manor as an administrative unit and the village, which although it was a part of the manor was a separate entity.¹²⁶ According to Dyer the basis for the village community was the need to manage resources and control individual action for the common good.

He began by examining the various forms of self-administration and collective action that the village community engaged in. Dyer first looked at attempts by peasants to gain formal privileges both in England and on the Continent. He explained that while the English villages were never granted the formal privileges of the continental communes they still had the ability to hold property corporately.¹²⁷ Moreover, the community was required to act collectively in order to fulfill various obligations to its lord and the state; such as collecting rents and tax quotas, producing representatives to sit on inquests and payment of collective amercements. To Dyer, “all the functions depended on the existence of machinery for choosing individuals to act on behalf of the community, to make assessments of neighbors, and to cajole them into making financial contributions”¹²⁸, and the fact that there are very few records of disputes over this sort of collective action made him believe that it must have functioned smoothly.

¹²⁵ Christopher Dyer, “The English Medieval Village Community and its Decline,” *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994): 407-408.

¹²⁶ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 408-409.

¹²⁷ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 410.

¹²⁸ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 412.

Involvement in the parish was another area in which Dyer believed evidence for the village community's ability to act collectively could be found. The villager's obligations to the parish were very similar to their obligations to the lord and the state. The community was required to raise monies for the upkeep of the church and the purchasing of various necessary items such as the vestments and books. Dyer believed that the proof of their ability to act collectively can thus be seen in the numerous and splendid medieval church buildings and halls found throughout England, as well as the lack of friction evident in the documentary evidence, or rather the lack thereof.¹²⁹ To those who would argue that in these cases of self-administration the requirement for village government may have been imposed upon the village community and thus cannot be used as evidence of the community's communal action, Dyer answered that all one needs to do is look back to earlier centuries. While such tasks as collecting subsidies and taxes may have evolved quite late, the tasks of managing fields had a much longer history and although the evidence for this is not conclusive, "it remains only a balance of probability that the self-government of the village-initially mainly for agricultural reasons-preceded the use of that organization by the lords and the king."¹³⁰ Dyer also drew on the work of his mentor Rodney Hilton adding one need only look at episodes of popular rebellion to find instances where villages organized themselves on their own initiative for their own reasons. Dyer concluded; "the village community had a real and practical existence. The village had its own internal hierarchy and traditions of self-regulation."¹³¹

Dyer believed that the notion of the village community's decline assumes that there was some golden age before the rot began. Relationships in the village were never harmonious; there

¹²⁹ Dyer, "The English Medieval Village," 413.

¹³⁰ Dyer, "The English Medieval Village," 415.

¹³¹ Dyer, "The English Medieval Village," 416-418.

were always tensions between families or between the rich and poor, old and young. Dyer noted that, “Such social variety warns us against emphasizing the egalitarianism of medieval rural society but need not detract from us regarding villages as cohesive.”¹³² Yet, in spite of this social disparity the difference between peasants was not as great as that between peasants and their lords, and opposition to their lords and to others who encroached on their land or their rights served to unit the peasantry. Dyer believed however, that village communities were held together not by some cooperative idealism, but simply by the need to survive in a harsh environment. Dyer declared that the peasant elite played a key role in keeping the larger community together and in defending the common good even if they did sometimes act in their own interest.¹³³

Examining the period after the plague in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Dyer discovered that when the villagers suffered greatly under the strain of higher taxes, debt and reduced agricultural productivity, they increased the number of community organizations and strengthened the structures of formal government.¹³⁴ As a result, Dyer argued that in fact the community did not decline, it became more active and was strengthened “there is no irony or contradiction in this. The village community had never been a community of equals. Its effectiveness in government had depended on hierarchy and the exercise of control. This was enhanced, not diminished, by the social differentiation of the late Middle Ages.”¹³⁵

Z. Razi earned his Ph. D. working under the supervision of Rodney Hilton and along with Hilton’s other students such as Christopher Dyer he was interested in examining rural society. However, Razi focused on the role of kinship and family ties within the community. In his article

¹³² Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 419.

¹³³ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 424.

¹³⁴ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 428-429.

¹³⁵ Dyer, “The English Medieval Village,” 429.

“Family, Land, and the Village Community in Later Medieval England” he used evidence garnered from the court rolls of Halesowen manor to examine whether the village’s communal bonds were weakened in the period after the Black Death. Razi first outlined the two models of peasant society that he was arguing against. One school, exemplified by the works of Alan Macfarlane and Martin Pimsler, which I examine below, believed that the village community had never been a close-knit communal entity. Rather, they believed that individualistic farmers had populated medieval England. The second model, characterized by the work of scholars from the Toronto school claimed that the communal ties which had held the community together disappeared in the post-plague period, because the ties between families and their holdings had loosened.

Razi began by stating that the phrase *tota communitas villatae*, which was used in the court rolls to describe the people who resided in the twelve townships on the Halesowen manor, is a sign that contemporaries viewed the community as a cohesive entity. The community’s functions included regulating the use of the open and common fields and common use rights, sometimes serving as a collective tenant, keeping the peace of the village, and the collection of various community wide levies and taxes.¹³⁶ Razi constructed his argument for cohesive action along the same lines as Dyer. He believed that in order to perform these various functions the village must have had well-organized internal machinery for governing the community. Razi argued that for the individual, the village community was the most important local organization, because in no other period of English history were more disputes over property and rights resolved within and by the local community.¹³⁷ He concluded that in the period before the plague, the village

¹³⁶ Z. Razi, “Family, land, and the village community in later medieval England,” *Landlords, Peasants and Politics in Medieval England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 370-371.

¹³⁷ Razi, “Family, land and the village community,” p. 372.

community was characterized by a high degree of cohesiveness, cooperation and solidarity as necessitated by the realities of agricultural life, that this solidarity was maintained by a highly developed corporate organization and by the community's continual active resistance to its lord.¹³⁸

Razi then turned to the period following the plague; a period, which he acknowledged, was characterized by very different economic and demographic conditions. Using data from the court rolls he argued that the village community during the years 1350-1430 continued to fulfill its communal functions. The community continued to elect official, supervise the use of these common lands, collect money for taxes and other collective payments to the lord and church and work together to keep the communal peace.¹³⁹ Razi believed that this continued functioning of the community's numerous institutions corresponded to the survival of the old cohesion and solidarity. Despite the increased economic competition in the village the community's solidarity and cohesion remained. He concluded, "Despite the growing polarization of village society its cohesion and solidarity were maintained as a result of a rise in economic interdependence and cooperation in the village after the plague and the intensification of the struggles against the seigneurial regime."¹⁴⁰

Besides the two groups discussed above there was another small group of scholars perhaps the most famous of whom was Alan Macfarlane, author of *The Origins of English Individualism*. Macfarlane and other scholars such as Martin Pinlser believed that there had never been strong communal bonds between villagers, and that medieval society had in fact been made up of individualistic farmers.

¹³⁸ Razi, "Family, land and the village community," p. 373.

¹³⁹ Razi, "Family, land and the village community," p. 386-387.

¹⁴⁰ Razi, "Family, land and the village community," p. 388.

In his article, “Solidarity in the Medieval Village? The Evidence of Personal Pledging at Elton Huntingdonshire” Pimsler argued against W. Ault who saw in the communal bonds of the medieval village the basis for a communal solidarity. Pimsler believed that although such writings state or imply, the important truth that economic reality necessitated a degree of cooperation among medieval peasants, they tend to offer little or no evidence to justify the romantic notion that the medieval village possessed a spiritual cohesiveness, that it represented a harmonious society with close emotional bonds between neighbors.¹⁴¹ The aim of his article was to question this standard assumption of village solidarity and to do so using the evidence on pledging from court rolls for the village of Elton.

Pimsler began his argument by treating solidarity as if loyalty were an essential part of its definition. The pledging that Pimsler examined was a practice by which medieval courts ensured the appearance in court of those accused of a crime. Pimsler disagreed with E. DeWindt’s take on personal pledging. In his 1972 book, DeWindt had used the large number of entries for personal pledging in the period prior to the Black Death to argue that society was close-knit, and had concluded that the decline in pledging entries after the Black Death showed a breakdown of the social fabric of the community.¹⁴² Pimsler agreed with DeWindt that most pledging occurred not between family members but was in fact extra-familial. He pointed out however, that most of the pledging was not reciprocal-wherein person A pledged for B and then person B pledged for A.¹⁴³ The cornerstone of his argument was that almost all the people who pledged were officials within the village and generally belonged to the wealthier segments of society. He argued that

¹⁴¹ Martin Pimsler, “Solidarity in the Medieval Village? The Evidence from Personal Pledging at Elton Huntingdonshire,” *Journal of British Studies* 17 (1977): 1.

¹⁴² E. DeWindt, *Land and People in Holleywel-cum-Needlingworth* (Toronto: PIMS, 1972).

¹⁴³ Pimsler, “Solidarity in the Medieval Village?,” 6.

this clearly did not correspond to the picture painted by DeWindt. Pimsler claimed that if the pledging was evidence for the spirit of cooperation as DeWindt suggested, “We might have expected the Elton villagers to use each other, rather than officials such as the reeve and the ale-taster.” Furthermore, Pimsler contended that DeWindt’s hypothesis made it difficult to explain why so little reciprocal pledging occurred. Indeed, if there were close ties among the various members of the community, we should expect a great deal of reciprocal pledging.”¹⁴⁴

In the following year Alan Macfarlane released *The Origins of English Individualism*. In this work he stated that he had become interested in the nature of the rural community when studying the rise of witchcraft accusations in the sixteenth century. What struck him about the evidence was that those making the accusations were not the *nouveaux riches*. Rather it was the poorer villagers who were accusing the *nouveaux riches*. His basic argument was that when looking at English parishes between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries it was impossible to use models of community based societies, such as those which have been generally applied. In fact, he believed that “a central and basic feature of English social structure has for long been the stress on the rights and privileges of the individual.”¹⁴⁵ Macfarlane believed that medieval rural England was basically a peasant society, which he defined as one wherein the basic unit of production was the small family farm. However, he noted that this was not a community in which common ownership, even of family property, was the norm.¹⁴⁶ He suggested that the historical model for Western Europe views history as a progression from small isolated communities inhabited by peasants bound together by communal obligation, towards the market

¹⁴⁴ Pimsler, “Solidarity in the Medieval Village?,” 11.

¹⁴⁵ Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property and Social Transformation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 33.

driven, open social structure of the eighteenth century. Although, this is a convincing and comforting story, which we may find hard to abandon, he argued that it was not an accurate picture of medieval England.¹⁴⁷

Macfarlane began his examination of peasant social organization in the sixteenth century and moved backwards from there to the thirteenth. For the sixteenth century he drew upon the diary of the vicar of Earls Colne (who was also a farmer) as well as those of other farmers from a range of economic strata for evidence. He claimed the diary made clear that in the sixteenth century the basic unit of ownership was the individual. Neither ownership nor production was based on the household unit.¹⁴⁸ The peasant village at this time was highly stratified and neither production nor consumption was communally based. The community was highly mobile both geographically and socially and Macfarlane argued that family size did not limit the holding size because of easy and regular access to wage laborers. Looking back towards the thirteenth century Macfarlane wrote that in principal, primogeniture and peasantry as a joint ownership unit were opposed. How far back did primogeniture predominate as the main rule of inheritance? He claimed that primogeniture and individual property were closely linked, and that primogeniture was “firmly established in England by the thirteenth century” even amongst the lowest levels of society.¹⁴⁹

Turning his discussion to the period after the Black Death, Macfarlane emphasized the emergence of a rural land market. He believed that given the strong link between land and family group in a classical peasant society the emergence of the land market could not have occurred, if the members of the village had a strong communal identity. Thus, he declared that peasant

¹⁴⁷ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 55.

¹⁴⁸ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁹ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 87-88.

society at least in the classical sense of the term did not exist after the Black Death.¹⁵⁰ Discussing Razi's examinations of Halesowen manor, Macfarlane believed that Razi's description of a society penetrated by cash, production for the market and the use of hired labor did not conform to the classical model of peasant society. Moreover, he wished to deemphasize kinship's role in the community. Looking through the court rolls and other documentary evidence led Macfarlane to conclude that neither parents nor children could depend on the goodwill of the other in contractual matters. In fact he claimed in this regard, "There was no enforceable customary expectation."¹⁵¹ For Macfarlane then, thirteenth century English rural society was not based around the idea of community. Rather, it was a highly individualized and mobile society, in which the "majority of ordinary people...from at least the thirteenth century were rampant individualists, highly mobile both geographically and socially".¹⁵² He declared that scholars must therefore abandon the long standing chronology of development as proposed by Maine and Tönnies, though he cautioned that he did not want to suggest that England in the thirteenth century was capitalistic. Indeed he drew a distinction between the spirit of capitalism and its manifestation in the physical world.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, pp. 95-101.

¹⁵¹ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 143.

¹⁵² Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, p. 163.

¹⁵³ Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, pp. 195-196.

CHAPTER 11

NEW APPROACHES TO PEASANT SOCIETY

In the last two decades of the twentieth century a number of scholars began to try and approach the study of peasant society by first redefining what community meant within the context of medieval society. Authors, such as Anne DeWindt, Miri Rubin and others, began to enlarge our understanding of the village community by examining the community's relationship to other local or regional communities and they began to develop new conceptual approaches to understanding the community and its function within rural society.

Anne DeWindt in her article "Redefining the Peasant Community in Medieval England; The Regional Perspective" argued that "the village community must now give way to the larger regional community"¹⁵⁴ Peasant horizons were not limited to the boundaries of one parish or village and historians must release peasants from the confines of a single community.¹⁵⁵ She used evidence from the court rolls for Huntingdonshire to show how the various economic and familial ties of individual peasants required regular involvement in the affairs of more than one village.¹⁵⁶ Marriage, trade, the owning of property all these activities extended the horizon of the peasants in the Ramsey region to a distance of at least ten miles.

DeWindt was careful to point out however, that generalizations should not be made, writing that "the size of the Ramsey region varied with the social and economic strata of the population involved as well as with our definition of 'region' as a catchment area for immigration or as an area within which regular social intercourse takes place individuals."¹⁵⁷ She believed that for those

¹⁵⁴ A. DeWindt, "Redefining the Peasant Community in Medieval England: the Regional Perspective," *Journal of British Studies* 26 (1987): 164.

¹⁵⁵ DeWindt, "Redefining," 165.

¹⁵⁶ DeWindt, "Redefining," 165.

¹⁵⁷ DeWindt, "Redefining," 188.

peasants who were on the lower end of the strata their region may have been geographical smaller.¹⁵⁸ DeWindt concluded that we must abandon "our identification of 'peasant community' with any single vill, parish or market town. Medieval peasants participated in a regional community".¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, she did not argue for the wholesale abandonment of the concept of village community. Indeed she acknowledged, "The physical layout of peasant homes alone would preclude such a possibility."¹⁶⁰

In an article entitled "Small Groups; Identity and Solidarity in the Late Middle Ages", Miri Rubin sought to explore the complexities of membership in communities during the medieval period. She noted that although historians are generally wary of social theories they have readily embraced the concept of community. She wanted to emphasize however, that while scholars who study medieval society have adopted the concept of community they have done so without being aware of some key aspects of the concept. Specifically, Rubin believed that scholars must be aware of the fact that "community, like all coins of social and political explanation is and always has been discursively constructed and is always laden with aspirations and contests over interpretive power."¹⁶¹ Community she contended was and is always constructed in order to persuade, include or exclude. Therefore we must not think of community as being a stable and enduring category. Instead scholars must in any analysis of community emphasize, who was being excluded or included and why.

¹⁵⁸ DeWindt, "Redefining," 191.

¹⁵⁹ DeWindt, "Redefining," 191.

¹⁶⁰ DeWindt, "Redefining," 192.

¹⁶¹ Miri Rubin, "Small Groups; Identity and Solidarity in the Late Middle Ages," *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth Century England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode (Clouchestershire: Alan Sutton, 1991), p. 134.

Rubin noted that anthropology has proven the importance of ritual especially religious ritual in shaping concepts of community and she argued that ritual's role in medieval society should be studied in depth.¹⁶² Finally, she applied such an analysis of ritual to the Corpus Christi processions in medieval towns examining the role played by fraternities and guilds. She argued that the procession was used to articulate both collective and individual identities. At the collective level the procession was used to articulate both the identity of the town as arising from a mythical past and also to express community wide aspirations for good fortune and virtue. At the level of the individual, the procession articulated the identity of individuals as members of crafts and guilds or even the wishes of the town's elite for a rigid corporate hierarchy.¹⁶³ Ultimately, she concluded that we must not get trapped into binary conceptions of belonging when studying the medieval period for then as now, social relations were "as infinitely creative, pragmatic, subversive, and manipulative, sometimes confused, at least as much as our own associations, friendships, and alliances are."¹⁶⁴

As Andrew Lewis wrote in his review of *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe*, Susan Reynolds primary objective was to argue that the organization of the laity was pervasive in medieval Europe and that government consultation with the various lay communities was the universal feature of medieval society between nine hundred and thirteen hundred. Thus any changes in society that occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries built on pre-existing patterns of behavior and attitudes.¹⁶⁵ In her book Reynolds examined the variety of medieval communities

¹⁶² Rubin, "Small Groups," p. 135.

¹⁶³ Rubin, "Small Groups," p. 146-147.

¹⁶⁴ Rubin, "Small Groups," p. 48.

¹⁶⁵ A. Lewis, "Review of *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900-1300* by Susan Reynolds," *Speculum* 62 (1987): 467.

including; communities of the parish, of the countryside and those of urban areas. In chapter five of her book, entitled "Villages and Rural Neighborhoods" she examined rural communities and outlined a number of the major questions and problems surrounding their study.

Reynolds defined villages only as those settlements that consisted of nucleated farms and open-fields, which existed in many areas of England by at least the eleventh century.¹⁶⁶ She believed that it was in the legal sphere, specifically its involvement in providing justice for the local community and in being responsible to a higher authority for justice, that the peasantry's most important collective action was taken.¹⁶⁷ Addressing the lack of strong evidence for this sort of collective action before the eleventh or twelfth centuries, Reynolds wrote "We cannot assume that the when the evidence starts to improve in the twelfth century that it was because the new structures of government had united local communities for the first time, so that a new 'spirit of association' had appeared, any more than that it was because people were then living in new forms of settlements."¹⁶⁸

From 1050 onwards, the evidence for collective action and organization becomes clearer, because by this time the use of the classic open-field system with strict regulation and rotation of the commons had become widespread. Reynolds argued that this shift and the increasing regulation of agricultural production that followed were both the cause and result of the increasingly close community.¹⁶⁹ She cautioned that the trend towards village charters tends to give the impression that settlements and their organization were much more recent than they really were. Additionally,

¹⁶⁶ Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Medieval Europe 900-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 106.

¹⁶⁷ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁶⁸ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁶⁹ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 124-25.

although she acknowledged that the struggles between lords and the village community, over the community's attempts to gain these privileges and charters did serve to unify the community, she believed that these formal liberties were not necessary for the creation of a sense of unity.¹⁷⁰

Reynolds argued for a flexible view of the community because although people in rural society were highly collective in their habits and attitudes, they were very flexible about the units in which they acted.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Reynolds saw the development of lordship and government as an essential part in the building of a communal identity, because this development provided a framework within which the community could continue its tradition of public action.¹⁷² Reynolds, like A. DeWindt believed that effective membership in the local community varied according to its economic, social and political structure. Yet she also suggested that in spite of this, the peasantry did act collectively in various capacities, as villagers and tenants of the manor.¹⁷³ Reynolds summed up her view on community with two points. While there were, some new forms of collective action that appeared in the twelfth century not all collective action was new and none reflected entirely new ideas.¹⁷⁴ Secondly, she proposed that between the tenth to fourteenth centuries there was no part in Western Europe in "which collective activity appears to have been organized in rigid categories, which excluded the community from making choices. Because village custom was so largely unwritten it was more flexible and gave more scope for change-for instance in field systems-than contemporaries themselves realized"¹⁷⁵ Yet Reynolds also

¹⁷⁰ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 130-135.

¹⁷¹ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 139.

¹⁷² Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 140.

¹⁷³ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 143-148.

¹⁷⁴ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 152.

¹⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 153.

concluded that despite the fact that villages were never places of complete democratic harmony there did exist a shared ideal of harmony through cooperative action.¹⁷⁶

Phillip Schofield in his book *Peasant and Community in Medieval England 1200-1500*, hoped to prove that the social structures of the medieval peasant community were not as rigid, well defined or exclusive as many scholars have portrayed them. In his introduction he laid out the theoretical outlook he hoped to bring to his study. He conceived of membership in communities as “fluid and insecure, determined by a variety of motives, agendas, and exogenous forces. He also believed that individuals are capable of multiple memberships, they are able to belong to numbers of communities.”¹⁷⁷

He began by defining the village community. Schofield believed that within the context of the medieval village community referred to means of self-regulation, mutual support and resistance, as well as insularity and shared assumptions. Schofield made clear that in order to develop a more nuanced view of the medieval peasant community he believed scholars first needed to acknowledge the differences within the community. They must also understand the reasons for these differences.¹⁷⁸ Schofield suggested a number of causes for this social differentiation. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were characterized by the morcellization of landholding, an increase in the number of small landholders. Together these processes resulted in an inevitable polarization of landholding and the emergence of a proto-yeomanry.¹⁷⁹ Local communities played an important role in modifying and storing custom through their resistance to excessive demands

¹⁷⁶ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, pp. 153-154.

¹⁷⁷ Phillip Schofield, *Peasant and Community in Medieval England 1200-1500* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), pp. 4-5.

¹⁷⁸ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, p. 26.

of their lords, in the form of rent strikes and rebellion. Such measures helped them to play a key role in determining levels of rent.¹⁸⁰ In his discussion of the peasant land market, Schofield noted that peasants were members of a number of different economic, political and familial communities, an argument that shares much with the work of A. DeWindt. He therefore cautioned that scholars must be careful not "to think of 'peasants' or 'tenants', even within the same community, as, in some way, a single group with common interests."¹⁸¹

As peasants became more market oriented during the later Middle Ages the village community became increasingly stratified and Schofield believed that the existence of these various interest groups heightens the feeling that the community of the village was not a level playing field, in which all members actions were for the greater good. There were winners and losers.¹⁸² Discussing the community of the church Schofield wrote "even in the most remote of English farmsteads, there were tenets of belief which its inhabitants shared not only with neighboring villagers but with villagers as far afield as the Baltic and the Mediterranean."¹⁸³ Even in this community of faith, collective action was the norm. Yet, Schofield made clear that in his eyes this religious community really consisted of more than one community. Peasants were members of the community of the parish, the greater Church of Rome, or various lay organizations and these and other communities required from the peasant, obligations and acts of collective action.¹⁸⁴ In his conclusion, Schofield wondered which peasant community scholars had in mind? Whether talking about the village, parish or family community, scholars must understand that the

¹⁸⁰Schofield, *Peasant Community*, pp. 41-44.

¹⁸¹ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, pp. 75-76.

¹⁸² Schofield, *Peasant Community*, pp. 139-140.

¹⁸³ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, p. 187.

¹⁸⁴ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, pp. 186-212.

label of peasant hides "multiplicities of experience."¹⁸⁵ Thus Schofield concluded, "the lives of these individuals were integrated into complex, long-standing and broad social, cultural, political, economic, and demographic systems and, what is more, their own actions within these systems mattered."¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, p. 213.

¹⁸⁶ Schofield, *Peasant Community*, p. 215.

CHAPTER 12

MEDIEVAL SOURCES AND THEIR USE

In this last section I discuss a number of authors and examine the ways in which they used their medieval sources. There are three basic typologies of medieval sources which scholars have relied upon, in order to study the medieval village community and peasant society. These three typologies correspond to three levels of examination; namely the local or village level, the regional or manorial, and royal or state. Within these groupings there are a variety of documents to be found, however the majority used fall into the following categories; by-laws found in court rolls but concerned exclusively with matters of interest to the village community, court rolls, charters and other manorial documents detailing sales and transfers of land, fines etc, as well as state or royal documents such as hundred rolls, which although similar to court rolls in content differ from them in scope. As I have outlined above one of the most significant shifts within the scholarship was the shift from viewing the communally organized village community as the most important unit of analysis towards a more holistic approach which sees the peasant as belonging to a number of communities, none of which exclusively defined their experience.

The old approach is perhaps best exemplified by Ault's work on village by-laws. In "Open-Field Husbandry and the Village Community" Ault linked the agricultural needs of the open-field system to the establishment of village by-laws and he stated his belief that the by-laws were the best evidence for the viewing the communal organization of the village.¹⁸⁷ He noted therein, that although by-laws can be few and far between, for anyone who was prepared to turn over a good many court rolls they could be found. He further pointed out that sometimes there was no record of the actual by-law but reference to one would be made in a court case. For

¹⁸⁷ Warren Ault, "Open-Field Husbandry and the Village Community: A Study of Agrarian By-laws in Medieval England," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 55 (1965): 12.

example, in August 1326 the Court Roll of Ely records that at the manor of Littleport, “Mabel Beucosin absented herself from the harvest and would not reap the corn of her lord and her neighbours for her wages, but quitted the vill, against the ordinance of the bylaw.”¹⁸⁸ The by-laws covered all aspects of the agricultural year including sowing, harvest and gleaning. Many of the laws were set up to protect the crops once harvested or to regulate the use of common pasturelands. For example, Ault cited a passage from September 1319 wherein the jurors presented, “that John of Stretham, servant of the Brethren of the Hospital gave away one sheaf of beans in the field against the by-law.”¹⁸⁹ Here again we see an example of the by-laws being used in a legal proceeding although we do not have the actual by-law.

Ault argued that in fact the by-laws were often simply unwritten customs, which over time were included into the court documents as necessary. Ault acknowledged that manorial court rolls reflected the interests of the lord; however he noted that when the rolls actually record a by-law and not just their use in court the scribe always included some reference to the community of the vill.¹⁹⁰ Since Ault believed that the creation and enforcement of the by-laws were an essential part of the village community, he argued that by-laws generally arose from custom. Therefore, he concluded that villagers could and did assemble on their own without the prodding or presence of the lord in order to draft ordinances and elect wardens to enforce their by-laws.¹⁹¹

Although I did not have access to the variety and number of medieval sources that Ault and the other authors did I believe that the authors’ conception of the rural society and the village community did play a role in their selection or emphasis of sources. For example, while I was

¹⁸⁸ *The Court Baron*, ed. Frederic Maitland and William Baidon (London: Selden Society, 1891), Record 14.

¹⁸⁹ *The Court Baron*, Record 128.

¹⁹⁰ Ault, “Open-Field Husbandry,” 40.

¹⁹¹ Ault, “Open-Field Husbandry,” 40.

able to read only a few of the numerous by-laws that Ault cited it became clear from even a cursory glance over the footnotes, that his conception of the village as communally organized was a result of his reliance and focus on by-laws. In similar ways later authors including members of the Toronto school such as DeWindt made use of court rolls to find evidence for personal pledging in order to illustrate the harmonious organization and structure of the village community.

Although not interested in proving the communal nature of the medieval village, M. Postan did want to prove the existence of a flourishing land market in the medieval countryside. He was also interested in discovering the impetus for the growth of this land market, which he believed to be one of the key engines of economic transformation and progress in the Middle Ages. He thus relied on manorial documents in order to find evidence of land transfers between members of the community. He was especially lucky because during his research he came across a peculiar document namely, the *Carte Nativorum* which is a manorial cartulary recording sales or purchases of land between both free and un-free peasants within the lands of Peterborough Manor. This was a highly unusual source because it was believed that villeins could not own or transfer property. However, he pointed out a number of passages, which detailed transactions between various *freman* (freeman) and *liefs* (serfs). For example, “Grant by Robert Freeman of Glinton to Arnold le lief of Werrington and his heirs of 3 roods in Glinton on the hill”.¹⁹² Postan argued that the charter must be about villein business because included within it were a number of documents of manumission for a number of villeins and their land, including the following passage “Confirmation by Abbot Alexander (1222-6) and the convent of the manumission of William son of Ralph of Thorpe, late husband of Cecily, and their sons and daughters and

¹⁹² *Carte Nativorum: A Peterborough Abbey Cartulary of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. C.N.L. Brooke and M.M. Postan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 274.

descendants, as granted and confirmed by Abbots Andrew and Acharius, with their lands in and out of Thorpe”¹⁹³

Postan believed that the evidence from these and other court rolls showed that as far back as the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries there was an active land market in which villeins as well as freemen took part.¹⁹⁴ He noted that many of the earliest references to land sales in manorial courts relate to mostly villein land and he pointed to the following entry in the *Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield*, dated to 1274 as evidence of unlicensed sales going on, “Wakefeud-William the Tanner sold certain native land to Thomas le Ragged by charter, and because he could not warrant it as free, according to his charter, without license of the Court, he is in mercy”.¹⁹⁵ Based on an overwhelming amount of evidence showing early land transfers between villeins, Postan concluded that the *Carte Nativorum* was not evidence of a new phenomenon. Rather he believed the unique charter was a response by the lord to the new realities of the land market. Specifically, as the thirteenth century came to a close, a growing shortage of land forced the lord to recognize the increasing value of such previously unofficial transactions. Therefore, the lord sought to make them official so that he could profit from such transactions.¹⁹⁶

Historians are always told not to let the sources shape their analysis, for good reason. As I attempted to point out in the paragraphs above, the early generations of scholars were strong

¹⁹³ *Carte Nativorum*, “Omnibus Christi fidelibus ad quos presens scriptum peruenerit, Alexander Dei permissione abbas de Burgo et eiusdem loci conuentus, salutem in Domino. Noerit uniuersitas uestra nos ratam et gratam habere manumissionem Willelmi filii Radulphi de Thorp quondam mariti Cecile et filiorum et filiarum suarum...cum terries suis tam in uilla de Thorp quam extra,” Charter 530.

¹⁹⁴ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 122.

¹⁹⁵ *Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield*, vol. 1, ed. William Baildon (Yorkshire: Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1901), Roll 88.

¹⁹⁶ Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture*, p. 122.

believers in the fundamentally communalistic nature of the village community. Although, it may be correct to argue that agriculture as practiced in medieval times necessitated cooperation, one must carefully avoid letting such a preconceived notion of the community's structure and organization shape their scholarly inquiries. The key point is not that Postan and Ault, along with their predecessors and peers used the documentary records they did, but rather that they allowed their biases and preconceived notions, which all scholars have, to influence their academic inquiry. Therefore, the goal of their studies was too often to uncover proof of this communalistic behavior, as opposed to asking more fundamental questions about the very nature of community and group identity in the medieval village.

CHAPTER 13 CONCLUSION

Towards the end of the nineteenth century scholars such as Maine and Tönnies constructed the basic framework for modern scholars' conceptions of medieval rural society, which remained in place for most of the twentieth century. Generally, scholars accepted the notion that the basic unit of medieval rural society was the village community. Moreover, they believed that this community was based on agriculture and that out of agricultural and social necessity it functioned as a communal entity. Thus, modern scholars focused primarily on describing the functioning of this communal based society, and its relationship with that other key structure in rural society the manor and the accompanying manorial system.

I believe that it is very important to focus on the basic conceptual structures applied by the earliest scholars, because as I have tried to make clear, the main interest of these authors was to explain the basic organizational features of society and its causes. Such an approach however, presents a number of problems. First and this is a point to which many of the authors alluded, much of the documentary evidence from this period comes from and deals with the manor and not with the village community. Additionally, as has been pointed out the manor and the accompanying manorial system did not often or ever correspond, especially geographically and physically to the village. This means that we cannot talk about the village as if it was the manor. The village was its own community. However, an author can if careful make out the village community from the impressions its members made on these larger systems. The result is that we are often studying the village community through what amounts to a mould or even a mirror and we must take care not to add our own pre and misconceptions to the mix.

The generation of scholars, such as Reynolds and Rubin, who were influenced by a number of new theoretical approaches developed in disciplines such as anthropology and

sociology, began the task of moving the research beyond such descriptive methods. They approached their work with an understanding of the complex reality of belonging. These authors insisted on a larger more fluid understanding of community. Some like Rubin even prompted us to move beyond older conceptions of community and to describe not only the community but to analyze the contemporary construction of the community's identity. The work of this generation of authors when compared to the work of Ault or even Postan does not rely on new, previously unknown evidence. However, because new models of peasant society such as those proposed by Redfield and Wolf influenced these authors, they were able to use the old evidence to come to new conclusions. For example, if one looks at Schofield's footnotes he cited many of the same court rolls, and cartularies used by Ault, Postan or members of the Toronto school. Yet, he did not arrive at the same conclusions.

Two reasons for this come to mind. First, Schofield and his peers were not approaching peasant society from a perspective, which placed supreme importance on the communal organization of the village. Rather they were interested in the whole of the peasant experience. They therefore viewed the village community as just one of the many communities to which the peasant belonged. They were much more interested in studying the interaction between the various communities. Schofield and his peers emphasized the multiple economic, social and political networks with which the peasant was engaged. That is not to say that they denied the importance of communal action out of agricultural necessity, or the ability of the peasants to act as a unified group against their lord. These authors simply avoid defining and categorizing the peasant and his/her community based upon this one facet of his/her life.

Who then was considered a member of the village community and what did membership in the community mean to them? A number of authors have noted that the community did not look

kindly upon outsiders. Who was considered an outsider and what were the ways in which membership was ritualized or constructed? The church would have played a key role in such matters. It has already been noted by some that the community of the parish was a key element in village unity, but were the two communities the same? Many of the authors have acknowledged economic stratification within the community, but have still held on to the belief that the villagers were still more united than divided, especially in actions against the lord.

We now know that at least some villagers had regular interaction with market networks and could even belong to town guilds. What all this means, I believe, is that we must continue to explore rural society not in order to find proof of the commonality and communality of the peasant experience. Rather, we must analyze and emphasize the multiplicity of communities to which the villager belonged and the numerous networks within which they acted. Only by so doing can we hope to uncover the complex reality of social and economic interactions in the village as well as the variety of relationships which they produced. One key point that needs to be explored in future work is how archaeology can help the historian arrive at a more complete picture of rural society. Up till now the archaeological research in England has focused on excavating whole villages and on unlocking the story behind the rise of the nucleated village or on understanding the processes which led to many villages ultimate desertion. Unfortunately as a result of this focus on the overall plan and layout of the fields and villages, archaeologists have forgotten the individual(s). Therefore, the individual must be brought back into focus, for if we combine the best of what archaeology has to offer as a discipline with the new models of peasant community developed in recent years by historians we will finally be fulfilling the dreams of those scholars who championed an interdisciplinary approach so many years ago.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Although born in New York City, I spent most of my formative years living in a rural farm community. This led to a lifelong interest in rural life in modern and pre-modern times. Moreover, being brought up within a minority religious community in America has also led to a lifelong interest into questions about identity and belonging. Both factors I believe are responsible for my general interest in social history and specifically community and identity studies. Finally, during my undergraduate and graduate studies, exposure to modern theoretical approaches to understanding ethnicity and other identities under the tutelage of Dr. Curta led me to the topic of my undergraduate honors thesis *Identity in the Danelaw*, as well as my current Master of Arts thesis.