

WHERE NEXT IN RURAL HISTORY?

Current trends and future directions in the rural history of later medieval England (c. 1200–c. 1500)

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Abstract

This article surveys a range of work on the later medieval English countryside published since 2000, and offers some predictions and suggestions about future research. It shows that the field of ‘rural history’ has rarely been closely defined, and indeed has tended to be treated as a broad church that can accommodate many different kinds of approach, themselves drawing on a variety of disciplinary traditions. The article identifies and discusses recent and current innovation and creativity in research within two such broad approaches, one mainly ‘economic’, the other ‘cultural’. It concludes by arguing for the gains that can be enjoyed through the combination of elements of the two approaches, and especially through a renewed emphasis on the illumination of the general through an intensive focus on the local.

Introduction: conceptualising ‘rural history’

An invitation to reflect on the theme of ‘where next in rural history?’ immediately invites two further questions. First, what actually *is* ‘rural history’ today, where the Middle Ages are concerned; how far is it a clearly defined research field with its own distinctive agenda, as opposed to an umbrella term for a potentially diffuse collection of approaches? Surprisingly few commentators seem to have written directly on this issue at any length, and there appear to be few if any institutional or theoretical discussions of ‘rural history’ of the kind that have been undertaken for economic history, social history, cultural history, and so on.¹ The second, related question is, where are we now in medieval rural history? Tackling that issue would seem an important precursor to the question of where we could or should go next. The bulk of this article attempts answers to these two questions, before offering, in the final section, some thoughts on possible future trends in scholarship on the English countryside in the later Middle Ages.

In 1990, in a piece commissioned for the first ever issue of *Rural History*, Christopher Dyer reflected on the then state of his own research area of medieval rural history.² Largely eschewing theoretical reflection on the character of ‘rural history’ as a field or practice, Dyer opted instead to concentrate on recent developments in two key areas of scholarship: the origins of the village; and debate around the ideas of M. M. Postan, which at that time had ‘dominated the study of the later medieval rural economy for forty years’.³ These topics were well chosen because, as the author noted, they were so pivotal, and touched on so many different related problems, that a discussion of them allowed him at least to mention the bulk of the most important recent research.

Reading that essay now, over thirty years on, provides a reminder of just how much has changed in the interim, and how much has been achieved by scholars in a variety of disciplines

who have contributed in multifarious ways to the history of the medieval English countryside. The question of village origins continues to command attention, though it now sits within a wider set of lively debates in settlement and landscape history.⁴ Dyer's decision to devote attention to research that by 1990 was acting collectively to undermine Postan's 'grand unifying hypothesis' makes perfect sense in its context. Nonetheless, the point he was seeking to make might seem slightly surprising now to younger scholars, who do not have first-hand experience of the mid-twentieth-century dominance of Postan's ideas, and in the twenty-first century have become comfortable with the idea of plurality and interconnection in theories of rural economic change.⁵

It is noteworthy that in opting to dedicate part of his 1990 essay to the 'Postan thesis', Dyer implied that one way of understanding 'rural history' is to treat it as more or less synonymous with 'economic history'. To do so is entirely reasonable. Almost any discussion of the general characteristics of production and consumption in the Middle Ages is by definition a form of rural history, simply by virtue of the fact that the bulk of the population lived in the countryside, and the majority of economic activity took place there, underpinned by the dominant sector, agriculture. Furthermore, such an approach was, and is, deeply rooted. By 1990, debates around the nature of the medieval economy and its transformation were already over a century old, and had coalesced around a series of topics focused on agrarian life such as agricultural performance, land tenure, and rural demography and living standards.⁶ One obvious approach to the question 'where next in rural history?' is therefore to focus on new ways in which the exploitation of rural evidence might help us better to understand structural change in England's economy in a long-run perspective.

The tradition whereby 'rural history' is undertaken as part of something best described as 'economic history' has thrived since 1990, and remains alive and well, as will be demonstrated below. However, perhaps the main point this essay wishes to make is that there is another burgeoning body of work on the medieval period, most of it produced relatively recently, which is also undeniably 'rural history', not because its primary concern is with wider trends or processes that happened to take place mainly in rural settings, but because its foremost interest lies in the lives, experiences, and even ideas of people of who lived in villages, hamlets and farmsteads, and their relationships with each other and their surroundings. The keynote of much of this second form of rural history is perhaps 'culture', rather than 'economy'.

The diverse corpus of scholarship in this second category is a primary focus of the present essay partly because the journal *Rural History* appears to have been set up originally to provide a space for research of this kind. A short, agenda-setting editorial in the maiden issue of *Rural History* noted that 'rural history is often seen as synonymous with agricultural history', and expressed regret that "'rural history" continues to be rather narrowly defined, confined by an essentially economic agenda'. As a response to this, the editors expressed the wish to encourage and publish a striking variety of interdisciplinary research, on subjects ranging from rural folklore to material culture, which would sit alongside the 'traditional economic agricultural history that will always be the mainstay of the subject'.⁷

The sections that follow aim to show that since the turn of the millennium, 'the traditional economic agricultural history' has indeed remained a mainstay of rural history, has adopted new forms, and has arguably prospered as never before, while new and very different approaches to the medieval countryside have meanwhile come into being, and demand attention in any review of 'rural history'. Limitations on space mean the discussion is confined to the period c. 1200–c. 1500, and to work published since the year 2000. Even within these parameters the potentially relevant literature is huge, and it is not possible to be exhaustive. Even some key works inevitably receive brief treatment. Regrettably, too, some important strands in the rural history literature are ignored, such as work on the structures of the late medieval church, which focuses on the rural parish and its lay members; and research on the peasant land market, rural migration, money in the countryside, and the 1381 rising.⁸

Rural history as economic, social and demographic history

Since 2000, huge advances have been made in the study and understanding of structural changes in economy and society in our period, as medievalists – often inspired by methods and questions of economic historians working on later periods – have collected new data and advanced fresh interpretations. Only a few exemplars from this literature can be mentioned here; had space permitted, one might have focused in on other themes, such as women's work, or the debate on real wages, in order to make similar points. All the research mentioned below has taken the discussion in striking and influential new directions, while contributing in each case to a topic that would have been recognisable in 1990 as a strand in 'traditional economic agricultural history'.

The first area to note is the history of agriculture itself. It is now nearly a quarter of a century since Bruce Campbell published *English Seigniorial Agriculture, 1250–1450*, a truly monumental work, which represented the culmination of intensive research reaching back into the 1980s undertaken on the records of English demesne agriculture.⁹ It certainly cannot be claimed that *English Seigniorial Agriculture* represents the last word on the husbandry practices of medieval landlords, as a host of work in this area inspired to varying degrees by Campbell's book continues to appear.¹⁰ Two particular grounds for the study's importance may be stressed here. One is that it adopted a 'big data' approach that would set a pattern for subsequent research on agrarian history of this era, basing its findings on unprecedentedly large computerised databases of sources such as manorial accounts and *inquisitiones post mortem* extents.¹¹ A second consequence of *English Seigniorial Agriculture* is that in illuminating the demesne sector so fully, it showed how much remained to be learned about the less well documented but quantitatively more significant agricultural production undertaken by the peasantry. The latter has since become an especial focus of scholarly attention, as will be shown later in this article.

A second traditional strand in medieval agrarian history recently to undergo a 'great leap forward' is that of serfdom. Here the key contribution has been that of Mark Bailey, whose 2014 book, together with a series of related articles, has transformed understanding of the nature and impact of serfdom, both in its heyday in the 'long' thirteenth century and during its subsequent decline, though other scholars have also contributed to a renewal of interest in the subject.¹² A distinctive feature of Bailey's work on serfdom, and one shared with Campbell, is the focus on the painstaking assembly and presentation of large quantities of new primary data, again extracted mainly from England's abundant manorial records. This forms the essential precursor to fresh analysis and interpretation: in Bailey's case, most notably, a revised model and chronology for serfdom's decline in which important features of servility are shown to have disappeared more rapidly after the Black Death of 1348–9 than previous discussions had allowed.

The question of serfdom and its decline also features in a set of contributions that focus on the long-term structural changes to England's economy set in train by the demographic losses of the Black Death and later epidemics. These works engage both explicitly and implicitly with long-standing debates concerning the nature of preindustrial social and economic change, most of which found expression in discussions in the 1960s and 1970s on the 'transition from feudalism to capitalism', and the 'Brenner debate' of the 1970s and 1980s. The latest works in this group also offer up new material relevant to more recent controversies, such as that on the origins of the so-called 'Little Divergence' through which certain early modern economies in north-west Europe pulled away from those of the rest of the continent. Other shared features of this body of literature include a preoccupation with the development of agrarian capitalism, attention to proto-industry, and a determination – necessarily, given their research questions – to cross traditional chronological boundaries.¹³

A fourth and final example of a traditional theme in medieval agrarian history given fresh urgency over the past decade or so is the study of inequality and the social distribution of income and wealth. An important part of this research effort has been directed at the construction of social tables, which aim to measure the size and incomes of the urban population alongside those of rural

households comprising landowners and tenants of various kinds in addition to craftsmen, cottagers, labourers, paupers and vagrants. Once again, the emphasis is on assembling data that is as robust and comprehensive, and therefore as comparable, as possible.¹⁴

What does the work all too briefly summarised in this section have in common? Firstly, there is a determination to situate evidence and arguments in a long-term perspective. A second shared characteristic concerns scale; the aim is generally to help establish a national picture, even if the work in question itself takes the form of a regional investigation, or uses a selection of manors or parishes. Finally, as already noted, all this research is driven to one degree or another by the rigorous collection and presentation of aggregated data. To be sure, just a few of the publications reviewed may be described as exercises in ‘big data’. Also, it would be absurd to claim that the histories discussed in this section are entirely preoccupied with structures and trends, at the expense of lived experience, since many of the authors mentioned make use of qualitative case studies, and delve frequently into the life histories of contemporary actors. Nonetheless, even in such methodologically eclectic studies, the prime *raison d’être* of the investigation remains the presentation of new, quantifiable material that can lead the main arguments. Using such methods, evidential and interpretative advances in economic and social history have reshaped our understanding of the medieval rural world.

Rural history as environmental history

The previous section identified recent advances across a selection of research problems of long-term interest to economic historians who work on rural society. But in the last two decades, perhaps the most distinctive trait in writing on the medieval economy – and therefore, by extension, on medieval rural experience – has been the emphasis on the role of shifting environmental conditions in shaping fortunes and trends. This is a feature that was barely anticipated at all in Dyer’s 1990 essay, in spite of its emphasis on the plurality of explanations that were then in the process of dismantling the ‘Postan thesis’. However, it is a historiographical tendency that has become increasingly understandable as our own twenty-first-century climate crisis deepens, and as the effects of the coronavirus pandemic continue to be felt. The idea that interactions between nature and society are key to grasping the challenges faced by the late medieval world has been advanced by some of the same scholars whose works were reviewed in the previous section, most notably Bruce Campbell.¹⁵ Furthermore, like the scholarship discussed in the previous section, the literature on medieval climate and disease also places great emphasis on the value of large datasets – including those generated by non-historians such as climate scientists and bioarchaeologists – and on the gains from situating late medieval English experiences in a much wider chronological and geographical framework.¹⁶

Put crudely, in foregrounding environmental factors broadly defined, and inviting us to consider ‘nature as a historical protagonist’, this work seeks to explain how and why western Europe’s long period of economic and cultural growth and ‘efflorescence’ of the central Middle Ages went into reverse from the later thirteenth century onwards. Its key contention is that ‘unique combinations of environmental and human factors’ help us to understand this process.¹⁷ It stresses the effects, both in terms of long-term trajectories and short-term exogenous shocks, of cooling temperatures and increasing rainfall, and urges a scholarly focus on the harvest failures and recurrent outbreaks of ‘emerging diseases’ affecting humans and animals that are the hallmarks of this era. Clearly in an important sense this body of scholarship too is ‘rural history’, since it carries obvious and deeply pessimistic implications for the rural inhabitants of later medieval England, who were faced with the increasing incidence of pestilence, death, flooding, and the heightened mortality and morbidity of their sheep and cattle. Some scholarship in this vein has given attention to ‘coping strategies’ and human responses to disaster, and all of it has demonstrated sensitivity to Slavin’s warning that ‘blaming everything on nature means to fall into the trap of environmentalist

reductionism and determinism'.¹⁸ Even so, it remains clear that the main consequence of 'putting nature back in' has been to scale up estimates of the severity of the shocks, leading to the inevitable impression that medieval individuals and communities were largely powerless in the face of an overwhelming combination of natural disasters.

Peasants and rural culture

Work inspired by environmental history has allowed us to perceive what was going on in later medieval English villages and hamlets in the context of longer-term shifts at the global scale. Yet it leaves us wondering about the experiences at the micro level of those who lived through these shocks, or about contrasts between the years of greatest crisis and more stable periods. As one recent contribution puts it, 'an interpretation which puts heavy emphasis on the climatic factor in causing the "crisis of the 14th century" and the 15th-century depression is dissatisfying because it pays insufficient attention to the human dimension . . . The importance of the period is not just the capacity of medieval people to recover from disaster: much else was happening that was creative, ingenious and enterprising.'¹⁹ These comments are emblematic of a more widespread ambition among certain medievalists to put people and their thoughts, actions, and agency at the centre of discussions of the rural world. They bring us to that second major category of 'rural history' that has developed apace since 2000 and which, while not totally distinct in terms of subject matter from the research discussed in the two previous sections, is nonetheless usually rather different in approach. The proponents of this work have not been afraid to take on the challenges involved in exploring the mentalities of people who produced very few records of their own, and certainly rarely if ever directly expressed their own views or ideas in written form. Another important feature of this work is that it is 'rural history' not simply in the sense that it happens to study people who lived in the countryside. Rather, one of its functions is to open up the question of how far inhabitants of these places may have had an identity, culture or mode of perception that was distinctively *rural* in character.

One means by which to appreciate the particular flavour of this literature is to reflect on the current standing of the term 'peasant'. In commentary from around the end of the last century, it was possible to detect a degree of doubt and defensiveness surrounding use of the words 'peasant' and 'peasantry' in scholarly discourse on the English Middle Ages. Existing misgivings about the historicity and future analytical utility of these venerable terms were given considerable further impetus in 1978 by the appearance of Macfarlane's *Origins of English Individualism*, and lingered a good while thereafter.²⁰ Today, however, the pendulum has swung back almost entirely the other way, and the terms of the debate have changed. Most are now very happy to talk about peasants, and to regard this as the most convenient term for a diverse group. As one useful and typically broad recent definition has it, peasants were 'country dwellers who sustained themselves mainly by working the land – smallholding farmers, village labourers, and rural craftsmen (most of whom were farming too, part of the time)'.²¹ Schofield's 2016 discussion of this terminological question concludes that anxieties over the appropriateness of the term 'peasant' are now largely of historiographical interest.²² Christopher Dyer's recent magnum opus, *Peasants Making History*, with its telling title, and proud defence of a 'peasant-centred' approach, perhaps represents the culmination of this tendency.²³ The terms 'peasant' and 'peasantry' are used with increasing confidence and frequency, not simply because they are once again regarded as fitting labels for one portion of the social structure, but because the peasants themselves have become the primary focus of good deal of the debate.

A new 'optimistic' tendency in recent historiography, articulated most fully by Dyer but shared by others, has sought to investigate and highlight peasant agency, autonomy and effective decision-making. In such work, while it is recognised that estate structures shaped choices over the long term, the peasants rather than the lords emerge as the vital and dynamic element in the late

medieval countryside.²⁴ Rather than being impoverished, downtrodden, entirely inward-looking or constrained by tradition or circumstances, peasants are seen as highly capable of adapting, shaping their own destinies, and engaging proactively with the world beyond the village.²⁵ The material and spatial ‘turns’ have also made themselves felt in these treatments of medieval English peasants and their surroundings.²⁶ Partly as a result of these influences, a striking range of topics has been given fresh impetus or has received serious scholarly attention for the first time. For instance, the conclusions of new work on peasant diet and material conditions are broadly positive or optimistic, emphasising, for example, the generally satisfactory nutritional content of even a pre-plague diet based on legumes, rather than its monotony or inadequacy.²⁷ Work on peasant credit and on land markets has also explicitly associated its findings with the idea of an adaptive peasantry capable of overcoming problems.²⁸ The legal sophistication and knowledge of peasants, reflected in their familiarity with phenomena such as seals, charters and law courts, has been repeatedly highlighted.²⁹ Structures of local governance shaped and staffed by the peasants and responsive to the needs of the community are being reconstructed in ever-closer detail.³⁰ Rural childhood in medieval England has received its first serious treatment, which features a strong focus on recovering the experiences of young people.³¹ Trends in vernacular architecture and later medieval rural housebuilding are seen as a further illustration of peasants’ capacity to take the lead and to innovate.³²

It is not possible here to consider all these subfields in detail. Instead, to substantiate the broader point, two other key areas of research not already mentioned in the previous paragraph will be given slightly fuller treatment: peasant agriculture, and peasants and the landscape.

As mentioned earlier, work on agriculture published since 2000 has been interested rather less in the further study of landlords through manorial account rolls, than in finding new ways to investigate the numerically more important peasant producers.³³ Stone showed that the sophisticated managerial decisions revealed by the account rolls were actually made by peasant demesne farm managers who possessed an acute understanding of market conditions, and were able to adjust cropping according to prices.³⁴ He also suggested that the levels of peasant yields and animal stocking densities might have been underestimated in relation to those of demesnes. These latter findings have been backed up by some more recent work on peasant pastoral husbandry.³⁵ Using tithe accounts Dodds, like Stone, revealed forms of sophisticated market-awareness and price-responsiveness among non-seigniorial producers.³⁶ Indeed tithe records, which were relatively neglected until the early 2000s, have proved an especially promising source for peasant agriculture. Not all scholars have found evidence of market-oriented peasant agriculture in the tithe materials, but even those who have reached different conclusions about the objectives of small-holder husbandry nonetheless also accept that such farmers undertook rational decision-making, and possessed a capacity to vary behaviour in response to changing stimuli.³⁷ Of course, this body of work on peasant agriculture belongs in part to the ‘economic history’ tradition of rural history, since its findings concerning cropping decisions and productivity levels carry significant implications for estimates of England’s wider economic performance. Yet the historians involved have also increasingly framed the subject as one of culture and mentality, by asking (for instance) how far custom, tradition and ideals of self-sufficiency played a role alongside market forces in shaping the peasant approach to working the land.

Fields, meadows and pastures were of course not simply a source of food, but parts of a wider landscape in which peasants lived, laboured and interacted. Scholarship that seeks to uncover contemporary actors’ relationships with and attitudes to that landscape represents perhaps the most methodologically innovative and explicitly interdisciplinary strand in the recent ‘peasant-centred’ tendency in rural history.³⁸ Several of the key works under consideration here see themselves as contributing to important shifts in medieval landscape and settlement history, a well-established and rich discipline in its own right, and one that may be regarded as yet another long-standing member of the ‘broad church’ of rural history. Studies of peasants and their environment fit well within a broader tendency in recent landscape history, which seeks to bring in closer attention to human

experience alongside a traditional focus on physical aspects such as field systems, village desertion and survival, and settlement morphology.³⁹ In this work on human interactions with their material surroundings, traditional tools of landscape history such as place names and field names are brought together with other information bearing on place and identity, such as personal naming patterns. The leading light in this field is Susan Kilby, whose work (like that of others working on these themes) is inspired by ideas from cultural geography, landscape history and archaeology. Drawing on these disciplines in a study of three contrasting communities, Kilby is able to follow peasants as they named, remembered, managed and traversed their physical environment, while at the same time shedding new light on peasant relations with lords and on the divisions between free and servile.⁴⁰

It is possible to draw out common characteristics of the work on peasants and rural culture reviewed in this section while recognising its diversity. In terms of sources and methodology, a data-driven approach and high degree of quantitative sophistication are not entirely absent; one may observe this in some of the investigations of peasant production by Dodds and Sapoznik, for instance. On the whole, however, qualitative approaches and small-scale case studies prevail. This is emphatically not a research field motivated by 'big data', or by an effort to generalise experience at the national scale; indeed, often the point is that it is the very local that matters most. One thing indisputably common to all this research is a willingness to grapple with intractable sources. Whether one is investigating smallholders' cropping decisions, or movement of husbandmen through their physical surroundings, creative approaches to exiguous primary materials are essential, as is a capacity to recognise and work within their limitations.

Of course, recent scholarly interest in medieval peasants and their experiences has not come out of nowhere, as it taps variously into the traditions of 'history from below', the gentle radicalism of early medieval landscape history, the mid-twentieth-century sociological approach of G. C. Homans, and the profound respect for and fascination with the rhythms and values of preindustrial rural life epitomised in classic works by scholars such as H. S. Bennett and G. C. Coulton.⁴¹ Yet what undoubtedly *is* new about this work is its degree of theoretical sophistication, its avowedly interdisciplinary character, and its determination to tackle subjects and reveal perspectives that previous scholarly generations might have deemed irrecoverable.

Future directions

In 1990, the first ever issue of this journal conceived of rural history as a capacious and diverse category. Where the English Middle Ages are concerned, it is clear that this way of looking at the subject still makes sense over thirty years on. The very term 'rural history' can mean different things to different scholars. An initial comment about future directions, therefore, is that medievalists are likely to find it beneficial to engage ever more explicitly in their work with conceptualisations of 'the rural', rather than taking it for granted. This would inevitably involve a renewal and refocusing of long-standing comparisons of the rural and the urban, perhaps along the lines of Goldberg's use of material culture to identify 'peasant' and 'bourgeois' value systems, as well as comparative analysis that aims to situate all the recent work on the late medieval English peasantry in a longer-term European or even global context.⁴²

The present essay has focused on reviewing just two bodies of work, representing broadly contrasting contributions to 'rural history'. The aim has been to show that each represents a large and important area of scholarship. Furthermore, each will doubtless continue to advance in the years to come by drawing in hitherto unknown evidence, and by grappling further with methodological difficulties and questions of interpretation. Each will also benefit, in ways that cannot be predicted here, from engagement with work on similar themes being conducted by experts on earlier and later periods, and on other regions. This essay's focus on England has necessarily obscured the striking growth in dialogue with specialists on other parts of Europe that has shaped the study

of rural history over the past two to three decades.⁴³ It is very much to be hoped that the scholarly networks involved can be further strengthened and broadened as we move forward.

On the ‘economic’ side of rural history, there is undoubtedly scope to accumulate fresh evidence on long-standing problems, though none of it will necessarily be easy to identify, to gather, or to use with an appropriate degree of sensitivity to its original purposes. Some of these accumulations of evidence might be in a form and on a scale where the description ‘big data’ is appropriate. The voluminous records of royal government in The National Archives (TNA) may well prove to be the most fruitful place to look for those seeking out new data on large questions of agrarian change. Campbell’s work on the *inquisitiones post mortem*, discussed above, demonstrated twenty years ago just what is possible in this regard.⁴⁴ More recently, the development of online indexes to the plea rolls of the later medieval court of common pleas (TNA class CP 40) provides another example of the way in which digital techniques can open up materials ripe for quantitative analysis that had hitherto remained formidably inaccessible. Those records are starting to be used to illuminate subjects such as occupational structure, many of which are of intense interest to rural historians.⁴⁵ Recent work on the late medieval records of the escheator, a royal official, provides an example of material in the government archives with a potential not fully appreciated hitherto, in this case for the study of the material culture of rural households.⁴⁶ The possibility exists for further work on a variety of topics in both CP 40 and the escheators’ records, and the untapped riches in the TNA records of course do not end there. There may be scope, for instance, for research which exploits materials generated by the wool taxes of the 1330s and 1340s in a way which contributes to our understanding of wool production and trade, itself a crucial subject that has recently received a small but significant resurgence of interest.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, on the ‘cultural’ side of later medieval rural history, it is perhaps more difficult to identify scope for generating entirely novel *categories* of written evidence. That said, new collections of the key familiar documentary sources (such as charters) will be undoubtedly be identified and gathered, and exchanges with adjacent disciplines offer potential for the further incorporation of a wide variety of material and visual sources. Some of the latter may be exceptional survivals; one example would be a fourteenth-century ‘girdle book’, combining text and images, probably aimed at use by a manorial official, whose potential as a source has been noted, but not yet fully exploited.⁴⁸ Future developments within the ‘cultural’ approach to medieval rural history are perhaps more likely to lie in the realm of concepts and interpretation, rather than in the identification of unnoticed materials with the capacity to answer current questions. Scholars are thus perhaps likely to push the boundaries by focusing ever more closely, for instance, on asking whether we can speak of a ‘shared’ mentality or culture, which overrode divisions of gender and drew in all groups within a broadly defined peasantry.⁴⁹

It is also to be hoped that the two broad styles of rural history discussed in this essay will not simply progress independently of each other, but will be combined fruitfully in future research projects. We certainly do not have to choose between tackling classic questions of long-term, large-scale agrarian change using new datasets, or probing the relationships and thought world of individual peasants at the level of the individual settlement. Instead, it is possible to blend the best of the two research agendas, and to gain thereby a clearer grasp of economic and social trends. This involves giving attention to individual-level variations and by observing in action processes that can only be guessed at through analysis undertaken at an aggregated scale. One approach to the study of medieval rural societies which in some ways already does this centres on the role of institutions – the humanly-devised formal and informal constraints that governed collective life – as a key explanatory variable in shaping economic outcomes.⁵⁰ Other recent work shows alternative routes through which this blending can be done. Examples include Stone’s close analysis of the mindsets of medieval cultivators conducted through a study of a single farm and the people who worked it; Bennett’s moving account of the experiences of the young men and women of one Lincolnshire village, which underpins arguments about the European Marriage Pattern; or the diverse set of sources used by Myrdal and Sapoznik to draw attention to the potential importance

of small-scale technologies in medieval peasant cultivation.⁵¹ As these instances show, it seems obvious that the small-scale, local case study, itself of course a tried and tested mode of research, will continue to have a great deal to offer practitioners of rural history.

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Notes

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- 3 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 4 See works cited in n. 39 below.
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