

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF MEDIEVAL RURAL SETTLEMENT

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Opening Address

The progress of studies in the archaeology of medieval rural settlement is reflected today in the ability of this colloquium to select such a specialised subject for this year's delegates. The fact that archaeology has achieved this in barely fifty years is also remarkable, and although the choice of this theme may stretch our abilities to use the evidence available, it will also, one hopes, highlight the need for further specialist studies in this aspect of rural infra-structure.

It is appropriate first to remember the objectives set almost fifty years ago, when research began, and to summarize the contribution of archaeology in Britain to this subject area. The Deserted Medieval Village Research Group (DMVRG) was formed in 1952 to establish an inventory of sites, to stimulate research and act as a clearing house for information. With only patchy data available, it was difficult to synthesise or postulate sweeping changes or patterns, and effort was concentrated rightly on the assemblage of evidence which would provide a national picture on which to base policies for fieldwork, excavation and preservation. The files of documentary evidence, lists of estate maps, aerial photographs and field reports formed probably the most important database assembled in British medieval archaeology at that time, and the results of the research this instigated can be seen in the annual reports of the DMVRG and the many papers published by Maurice Beresford and John Hurst in the fifties and sixties. In the fifteenth Annual Report it was possible for Philip Rahtz in his first editorial to review progress to date, and to highlight the areas of future research, and the new directions which would look beyond the village core to embrace its context in rural landscapes. This change of emphasis was reflected in 1971 when the DMVRG decided to drop the word "Deserted" from its title, and to stress that research in rural settlement should embrace all the surviving medieval elements of villages both at its core and in the surrounding fields and territorial boundaries. This move became integrated in the wider landscape studies of the eighties as it was accepted, in the light of further research, that the complicated pattern of change in rural settlement would only be understood if the village, its territory, the political factors, external relations and environment of the day were looked at together. In the words of Brian Roberts "settlements are part of a matrix composed of two interlocking frameworks, on the one hand there is the physical environment, with the limitations and possibilities inherent in the variations in location, altitude, soil quality, local climate and biological response; and on the other hand there are the man imposed organisational frameworks of kingdom and honour, estate and manor, parish and township". The diversity of the medieval settlement pattern had become widely recognised by the nineties, and research in Britain now looks for more detail and precision to understand the process of change and the anomalies that occur.

What does archaeology add to the social dimension and the economic understanding after fifty years of research in Britain? First I think we can accept, that the study of buildings is one clue to the relations between people and their relative social importance, and that the function and types of buildings found within a village is a reflection of prosperity and status. John Hurst has distinguished three characteristic types of village dwellings representing different social status as the cot representing the poorest class of peasants, the long house, which combined house and byre and might be of considerable size, and the farm, where separate buildings within the toft served different functions, representing the richer freehold classes. There is therefore within the study of buildings scope for sociological interpretation, although this is beset with difficulties

when we do not have evidence for more than a few excavated houses for many villages and only a limited number of more extensive investigations. It also remains difficult to relate documents to a specific site on the ground. It is clear that by the 14th and 15th centuries there was an improvement in the workmanship and standards of construction and fittings of houses, and new excavations continue to suggest social development. At Burton Dassett, Warwickshire, for example one house, which formed part of a block of six set out in the late 13th century, had a name - Gormand - cut into the door jamb of what had been a late 14th or early 15th century rebuild. The problem of associating documents with sites are clearly illustrated in this case. Although the family name of Gormand can be identified in parish records of the period, the settlement at Burton Dassett is one of five within the manor, and the researchers have demonstrated that the land holdings of this family are in one of the other villages. This leaves in question the status of the excavated dwelling. One postulated link is tenancy, but whatever the explanation the sociological implications for local literacy, land holding and market forces at Burton Dassett form a perfect illustration of the social structures which we strive to understand. Unfortunately in Britain the contribution of excavation evidence to this research is likely to be hindered in future by the increasing cost of excavation which prevents large-scale investigations, and without this there will be less information on the date, functions, structural development and equipment of peasant houses which documentary evidence cannot provide. Professor Chris Dyer has pointed out, that houses represent then, as now, a major capital investment by the family, and they remain a vital element to the understanding of village society, in which archaeology can flesh out the bones of the written records. We cannot afford to neglect the evidence that archaeology can provide.

An archaeological contribution can also be recognised in the evidence for crafts identified during excavations at medieval settlements. Artefacts such as spindle whorls from many sites and a bobbin from Goltho attest the use of textiles, and the frequency of iron as personal possessions and home fitting simplifies easy access to the skills of a smith. Apart from Goltho little evidence exists for smithies within peasant crofts, compared to manorial sites, but arrangements to share the facility must have existed and common occurrence of objects such as horse and ox shoes particularly in the later 14th-15th century houses suggests that a skilled class existed in rural society. Carpentry skills are frequently evidenced in the excavation record by the carpenter's bits, chisels, etc. found at Wharram Percy, Barton Blount and other sites, although it is difficult to establish how far it was a specialist occupation. The saw-pit found at Barton Blount in a 15th century context implies the availability of more sophisticated techniques in the later periods, and the preparation of larger timbers and more the presence of substantial houses with staircases may represent an increase and spread of these crafts in village communities. The role they might have played could parallel that of the potters, who formed an element in the settlement at Lyveden, and implies the growth of specialist groups within rural settlement in response to the demands of an increasing population and growing rural markets. Jean le Patourel has analysed the pottery evidence for social and economic change, and also demonstrated from the material found at Wharram Percy the importance of ceramic elements as evidence of the range of vessel types used by the ordinary villager. The increased attention given to the finds from excavations on medieval rural settlements provides a clear picture of the wealth and status of different households, and the evidence for rural craftsmen by the later medieval periods implies that many of the trades recognised in the post-medieval period were already established to the same degree.

Pottery does prove the existence of links outside the medieval village economy, although we must assume that the more exotic items, found occasionally in fragments on house floors, were acquired in local markets. It has been suggested that coarse wares were obtained from a radius of 20 km, and better quality wares from a radius of 60 km except in coastal locations, where shipborne ceramics were traded over greater distances. Certainly one can assume that the manorial households in the community purchased both a wider range of commodities and sampled markets further afield, transactions which extended the range of knowledge in the peasant community, even if they had little share in it. Markets seem able to supply seafood such as cod to inland villages as remote from the sea as Wharram Percy, and coal was not unusual in locations far removed from the nearest surface outcrops. Many houses also possessed querns which would have come from the local quarries, and the trade in the lava quern stones from Niedermendig in the Eifel region of the Rhineland is testimony of an economy able to transport these large, heavy spacestones over great distances. Window glass has also been found at Wharram Percy, and it is evident, that the local markets traded with large rural hinterlands. The horse equipment found in peasant houses at medieval villages also suggests an ability to venture beyond the parish boundaries for the more prosperous householders, and documentary evidence for the later medieval period may reflect a rural trading economy that existed in outline in earlier periods.

Arable farming formed the basis of the rural economy, and the evidence of carbonised grain confirms the staple crops as wheat, barley and oats. On manorial sites such as Wood Hall, North Yorkshire these might be

mixed with other species, atesting gardens containing roses and other domestic species, but on peasant sites, it is clear that cereals dominate because of their importance as food crops. The samples of grain are small, and it is not possible yet to comment on the size of the grains or evidence of disease, which would assist in providing information on yields, although modern excavation which places more emphasis on the examination of the environmental evidence will eventually fill this gap. The frequent presence of animal bone means that more is known about the stock economy of medieval rural settlement, and it has called into question previously held theories about the wintering of stock, provided information on animal size, and on age patterns for the slaughter of different species. Differences in the population of the domestic animals - cattle, sheep, pig and horse - suggest specialisation at some sites, but wider samples are still necessary to draw conclusions that are relevant to the varied physical and human habitats of deserted settlements. New research has tried to widen the sample by taking into account animal bones from towns and castles, which were the markets for surplus stock. Higher proportions of forest animals highlight the importance of the chase at seigneurial sites, and very high quantities of pig, which were the main meat animal on these high status sites. The importance for sheep for their wool products has been recognised at several excavations, but attention has not always been paid to leather as a lucrative side product which must have been capitalised upon at every village. Excavations at West Coton, Northamptonshire, found significant quantities of bone on which the butchery marks imply skinning for leather from cattle, pig, horse and dog; and similar cuts on the skeletal remains of cat, fox, polecat, weasel and stoat might imply that fur was also a by-product of the countryside. The exploitation of local conditions will also produce other variations, and the manor at Writtle, Essex, included in its bone remains oyster-catcher and other wading birds from sea marsh habitats which lie within easy riding distance.

Research on medieval rural settlement still requires more consistent data from a wide number of sites if we are to understand the social and economic contexts of villages and settled farmsteads. The Medieval Settlement Research Group has produced in 1997 a new policy statement on research, survey, conservation and excavation which sets a series of guidelines, that all might study. These provide the framework into which must fit the many specialist studies considered at a colloquium such as this, which serves as a sounding board for the exchange of hypotheses and research within the wider scene.

LES ÉLÉMENTS SOCIAUX ET ÉCONOMIQUES DE L'HABITAT RURAL DU MOYEN ÂGE

Le colloque a une thème spécifique que les participants peuvent étudier par des approches différentes. Dans la lumière de la recherche au cours de la période de quarante ans, surtout en Bretagne, les éléments sociaux et économiques de l'habitat peuvent être examinés sur la base des vestiges en ce qui concerne des types de bâtiments, des biens et des équipements des habitants, de la différence des métiers et des vestiges du commerce et l'économie agricole qui ont soutenu le village et les exploitations isolées.

SOZIOÖKONOMISCHE ASPEKTE DER LÄNDLICHEN SIEDLUNG IM MITTELALTER

Das Kolloquium hat ein spezifisches Thema zum Gegenstand, das die Teilnehmer auf viele verschiedene Weisen studieren können. Im Lichte der vierzigjährigen Forschung, besonders in England, können die sozioökonomischen Aspekte der mittelalterlichen Besiedlung auf Grundlage der Nachweise für Gebäudetypen, Wohlstand und Ausstattung der Bewohner, Vielfältigkeit der Handwerke und der Nachweis von Handel sowie der landwirtschaftlichen Wirtschaft, die das Dorf und zerstreute Bauernhöfe unterstützte.

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