Peasants' Landholdings and Movement in the Frankish East (8th-9th Centuries)

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The Carolingian economy has traditionally been studied from the perspective of large-scale landholdings. In past decades, scholarship has therefore stressed the importance of centralized dominance and dependency in Carolingian society.[1] However, while large landholdings were certainly an important reality of Carolingian society in general and of the economy in particular, they are not the only relevant level for investigating the agrarian economy of this era.

This paper treats the economy of the Carolingian era from the perspective of the peasant unit, that is the land held and worked by a peasant household. The reason for this focus is that this was – in many senses – probably the most important economic unit of production. It is not my intention to reject the notion that great domains are a useful unit of study, much less to deny their existence.[2] In this essay, however, I focus on the peasant unit – known as a "hide" in English, and as *huba*, *mansus*, *colonia*, among other terms, in the Latin sources – as the main aspect of peasant economic life and the level at which most of peasant economic agency took place.[3] It is also

[1] Verhulst, 2002, pp. 4-7, for a brief overview, and the introductory note by Tedesco in this volume. For a German example, see the contributions in Rösener, 1993; on the early medieval agrarian economy in general, see Devroey, 2003; 2006a, and Wickham, 2005.
[2] See Wilkin in this volume.
[3] Wickham, 2008, p. 7.

comparatively well documented. We have by far the most evidence for this type of economic unit compared with other types of organization, such as the larger units of centrally organized demesne lands, and we must assume that peasant agency played out mostly at this level. This does not mean that there existed in Carolingian Francia a "peasant mode of production" in which surplus extraction was nil or at most sporadic.[4] On the contrary, every piece of landed property obliged its holders to render payments and/or labour services to someone else – we are clearly dealing with tributary or feudal systems. This was true both for those peasant units that were part of larger domains and for those fully owned by the peasants themselves. These obligations and extractions varied, and a number of factors helped to determine their magnitude; this depended not only on the legal status of the property or its holders but on several other factors, which for the most part are not discernable from the sources. The names given to the renders – *servitium*, *munera*, *corvada*, *census*, *decima* (or *nona*) – indicate that they had different origins and meanings, even if on a material level they added up to the same thing. This indicates that other things were important to the people on both sides of these exchanges. It seems that maximum extraction was not the aim of all lords.

First, I will treat the sources for peasant history, focusing mostly on private charters, since these are the most important sources on peasants in that time and place, but drawing also on letters and polyptychs. Then I will offer an overview of the size and composition of peasant units based on the charters, since the eastern polyptychs only very rarely indicate the size of a peasant unit, speaking mostly only of unspecified *mansi* or *huba*. After that, I will briefly focus on the complexities of the peasant economy using a letter from the collection of Einhard, Charlemagne's famous biographer, as an example.

The second part of the paper treats peasant mobility, which is often seriously underestimated. There was a great deal of movement among the peasantry, as transport and messenger services, such as

[4] Wickham, 2008.

scara and *angaria*, travel for harvest arrangements, and other types of movement could turn into more permanent migration.

Sources

The most important sources of information on peasants in the eastern Frankish regions are charters, specifically private charters. Almost all of them document donations of property to monasteries or important churches. Polyptychs, property descriptions, are rare in the east for this period, but a few smaller texts do exist, treating the landholdings of the monasteries of Wissembourg, Lorsch, the Augsburg domain of Staffelsee in Bavaria[5] and the property of the episcopal church of Freising in Bergkirchen (Freising 642). The major polyptych from the Lotharingian monastery of Prüm also concerned property stretching into the middle Rhine area. There are many more private charters from the eastern part of the Carolingian Empire in our period, most of them from Fulda, Lorsch, Wissembourg, St. Gall and Freising, transmitted mostly through cartularies, but sometimes as originals (St. Gall). This is a marked contrast to the western parts of the Frankish empire, for which the transmission of private charters is sparse, but where polyptychs were more common and detailed in the ninth century. Numerous as these charters are, their purpose was not to provide a detailed description of the peasant economy, or even of peasant households. Instead they were intended to describe property at the moment of its transfer; that is, they are snapshots, recording a single moment in time, so it is hardly possible to trace change or development at the level of any given piece of land. Moreover, the descriptions of property are sometimes highly specific, but sometimes extremely sparing. Often, they mention the buildings and the different types of land by size or by yield; sometimes they mention the names and the family connections of the peasants being transferred (or working the land transferred).

[5] Esders, forthcoming.

Very often, however, charters and notices recording transactions include such information as that N. "gave all his land in the villa of X." or "we give to the saintly martyr of Christ Y. whatever we have as property in the *marca* X.," both of which are entirely unhelpful. Also, the documents were mostly written by scribes who were not interested in details of agriculture and the peasant economy. And they were in Latin, which meant the scribes struggled to make sense of and transpose the vernacular local economic terms. Finally, on top of all this, many of the documents survive today only in the form of copies, some of which were made centuries after the act they recorded, and often severely abridged, because much of the information – such as the names of peasants – had become irrelevant in the meantime (e.g. in the twelfth-century cartulary of Lorsch).

Nevertheless, there is a wealth of information to be found in a number of these documents. Peasants, specifically, may be found in two places in the charters. Most are found as an element in descriptions of what was being transferred, that is as dependents, either unfree or of one of the many statuses of reduced freedom.[6] There were further nuances to this principle: sometimes the peasants would be described as belonging to the land they worked (e.g. "*hoba cum mancipiis*"); sometimes the charters framed this the other way around (e.g."*mancipia cum hoba ipsorum*"). Since sometimes both versions were used for the same transaction, we should not assume that this reflected a real difference in legal status of the peasant and/or the land.[7] Other peasants appear in the charters as donors of land, although it is very hard to discern whether the person giving the property in fact worked on it himself.[8] Still, this must have been the case for some of those donating small bits of property to a monastery, such as Ratpald, Odalman, and Kerperht, who sold their entire property in Ursdorf in Bavaria to the Abbot of the monastery of Mondsee in return for horses, cattle, a little land and military equipment

[6] Rio, 2017.
[7] E.g. Lorsch 505; see Freudenberg, 2013, pp. 127-128.
[8] Renard, 2006, p. 329; Jordan, 2006.

(Mondsee 5). In the eighth and ninth centuries transferring property meant that the donors were legally free, although this was not the case later: in the tenth century, we regularly find *servi* selling and exchanging land.[9]

There are only a few exceptions to this pattern. Neighbours, for example, who are mentioned in transfer charters in isolated cases, may or may not have been peasants.[10] There is, however, evidence that in some cases we are clearly dealing with peasants. For example, a Freising notice from 825 includes the result of negotiations between a Freising chaplain named Uuago and eleven peasants who agreed to take on ecclesiastical land in return for labour services and dues (Freising 523b). It specified that five of the men – named Saxo, Oadalmunt, Toto, Sigadeo and Deotmar – agreed to work on land directly managed by the church of Freising: They would plow three days each three times per year, sow three days per year, harvest three days and bring what they harvested into storage. Three other men – named Uueliman, Cozpald, and Uualdker – owed the same services, and in addition had to pay 15 measures of grain, three of them barley (the rest presumably wheat or spelt) plus a young pig (*friskinga*) worth two *saica* (a monetary unit in Alemannia and Bavaria valued at between one and five *denarii*).[11] Selprat and Alprat were required to plow, harvest and transport the harvest "like the others" (*sicut alii*), while Hroadfrid, in addition to plowing like the others and giving another young pig, had to render ten measures of oats.

The peasants' status is ambiguous. They are initially described as "*liberi homines qui dicuntur barscalci*", "free men that are called *barscalci*", employing a term known only in Bavaria. Later, however, the text describes Hroadker's plow duty as follows: "*Hroadfrid arat pleniter sicut alii servi*", "he plows fully like the other serfs", clearly referring to those just mentioned and their duties. That is, these men were depicted at the same time as free and unfree, an ambiguity re-

[9] See Freising 1042 for an early example.
[10] Fulda CDF 228; see Kohl, 2019, pp. 314-317.
[11] Kohl, 2010, p. 114, f. 286.

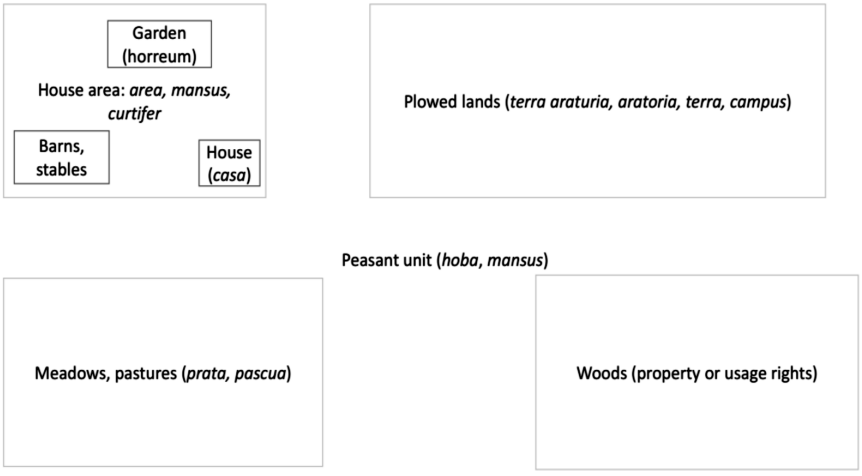
flected in the term "*barscalcus*" itself, which (probably) derives from "*bar*"– ("free") and "*scalcus*" ("slave" or "servant").[12]

We do not know why the dues demanded of the various *barscalci* differed – did they reflect property size or value? Did they depend on the relative status of the individuals within the group of *barscalci*? Were they tied to family size or the number of available workers on a unit? Did Hroadfrid specialize in oats? We do not know, but we should bear in mind that dues and the circumstances of those paying them could be quite different.

The peasant unit – composition and terminology

In the case of the *barscalci* who agreed to be tenants of the church of Freising, we know nothing about the composition of the property they received. However, the evidence, where it exists, is quite consistent (Figure 1 below). The peasant unit usually consisted of a house and other buildings, plowed land, meadows and pastures, woods (or wood usage rights) and access to water.

FIGURE 1



[12] Banzhaf, 1991, pp. 82-89.

For the most part, there is no way to tell from the historical record whether the meadows and pastures mentioned in our sources were plow-land that lay fallow – I rather suspect not, although this is impossible to prove. Water access was a given – running or standing water is a standard component of detailed property descriptions in charters. An economically viable unit also included either woodland or access to woods and usage rights. Sometimes, the writers mention orchards, *pomaria*, and in rare cases we find other special cultures, such as hops in parts of Bavaria (grown in *humularia*: see Freising 833, 872, 874, 884, 891, 922, 990). The most important of these cultures was, however, wine. Vineyards are found along the Rhine, mostly to its west in Alsace and the Wormsgau and Speyergau, but also on its eastern banks, if much less extensively, and along the upper Neckar valley.[13] Except for some vineyards in what is now upper Austria on the Danube, they are rare in the rest of eastern Francia, even in areas where it must have been ecologically possible to grow wine grapes, such as along the Main. This suggests that there were other factors in play – tradition, perhaps, or problems with transportation, since a lot of wine was shipped north and east to places where it could not be produced.

Peasant units are called variously *mansus*, *hoba*, *colonia* or *area*. None of these terms is unequivocal. A *hoba*, for instance, can refer either to an entire peasant unit or to the plowed land associated with it. *Mansus* may also designate the core of a peasant unit on which the buildings and gardens were sited.[14] Sometimes the components of a *mansus*, a *colonia* or a *hoba* are named, as in these examples: *mancipia et hubam ipsorum cum edificio superposito et XX iurnales* (Lorsch 2986), or: *unum mansum vestitum et iugeres XL et de pratis XX carradas* (Freising 157).

The key here is to translate "*et*" not as "and", but as "that is", i.e. as a description of what belonged to a *mansus*.[15] In the areas stud-

[13] Kohl, 2017, pp. 17-20.
[14] Freudenberg, 2013, pp. 80-93, for eastern Francia; Kohl, 2010, pp. 326-333, for Bavaria.
[15] Freudenberg, 2013, p. 75, speaks of the "explicatory et" to describe this phenomenon.

ied here, for the most part the extent of plowed land was indicated in *iugera* (yokes) or *iurnales*, but we do not know exactly how large a *iugum* or a *iurnalis* was, or if in fact the measurements were equal in all areas and meant the same thing. In spite of their etymology – both refer to a day's work with a pair of oxen – they were not derived directly from experience in plowing the land in question, since we also find woodland, which of course is not plowed, measured in *iurnales*.[16] In any case, I believe that estimates placing both *iugum* and *iurnalis* at between a quarter and a third of a hectare are broadly correct.[17] Taken together, these cases allow us to establish that peasant units had an average of 30 yokes of plowed land in eastern Francia proper, i.e. the larger Rhine-Main area documented in the Fulda and Lorsch cartularies (but rather less where vineyards were part of the unit).[18] The same is true in Bavaria.[19] Very roughly, we may assume an area of about 10 hectares per peasant unit. Meadows were the only other part of the property that was regularly measured, and usually in *carradae*, or cartloads of harvested hay. An average meadow would yield somewhere between 15 and 20 cartloads.

These average figures allow us to consider also the sources that do not refer to a *hoba* or *mansus* but mention plowed land, meadows and buildings, i.e. the typical features of a complete peasant unit, sometimes including the peasant family (or a number of persons consistent with a nuclear family). Indeed, we find very many within a range of 20 to 50 yokes, which allows us to infer that this must have been the size of landholding adequate for the needs and the working capacity of one nuclear family.[20]

However, we also find examples that are well outside the typical range of areas, a few bigger and some smaller. These smaller plots, consisting sometimes of ten yokes but sometimes just one or two yokes of plow-land, may have been the result of divisions between

[16] E.g. Freising 918.
[17] Renard, 2000, p. 184.
[18] Freudenberg, 2013, pp. 94-95.
[19] See the figures in Kohl, 2010, pp. 329-331, f. 33.
[20] Freudenberg, 2013, p. 96.

heirs or transfers relating to marriage, and the owners may have donated these fragments to churches precisely because they were not economically viable. But it is also entirely possible that some of these smaller blocks were the result of adaptations to the needs of a specific peasant family, which might not have been able to work more land or did not need more sustenance than could be produced on a smaller plot. Indeed, considerable variations in both of these factors – number of workers and of mouths to be fed – and radical changes were central features of the peasant life cycle, brought on by demographic events of all kinds – death, birth, injury, disease, marriage, and migration.[21]

Similar variation may be found in what the peasants had to pay or do in return for their tenancy or as a result of their subjection. The differences here are greater in the charters than in the polyptychs, which tend to lump together groups paying roughly the same amount and providing the same services.[22] In the charters, we seem to find more individual agreements, ranging from heavy workloads of three days a week plus additional services at harvest time and dues for only a largely symbolic payment of a few *denarii*.[23] Even free peasants who had their own inherited land were subject to extractions: tithes had to be paid, work on roads, fortifications and bridges had to be done, and under certain circumstances free men had to go to war.[24]

The evidence from the charters does not allow us to link dues and renders to the size or quality of the property. We should probably assume that the plots worked by unfree peasants, who were required to work on the lord's lands for three days every week, were smaller than the plots of those who had to work less or not at all for their lords; but beyond that, there is very little we can say. In any

[21] Devroey-Schroeder, forthcoming.
[22] See Goetz, 2019, for a recent study of one example from the polyptychs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.
[23] Eg. Lorsch 1477 (two *denarii*).
[24] Haack, 2019, pp. 220-223.

case, we should probably assume that the causes of the differences are to be found elsewhere in the socio-economic relations between landowners and peasants. As we observed above, we cannot link the renders to economic rationality as we understand it today. Or, to put it differently, in the eighth and ninth century acting rationally did not mean maximizing profit. Other factors were obviously important, but for the most part the eastern charters and polyptychs do not indicate any reasons for specific types of service or dues. However, letters cast some light on the complex rules governing the relationships of giving and receiving. A letter written by Einhard in the 820s or 830s, for example, describes a case in which renders, judicial fines and patronage are intertwined. Einhard writes:

> "My man N. prepared... your pigs. […] Because the same man N. has served me with devotion and loyalty for a long time now, thus I ask your Kindness, in so far as it is possible, to consider sparing him in the matter of that fine, which he owes you by law; so that I may hold him to his necessary service to me. You may in justice always find me even readier and more anxious to carry out your wishes."[25]

N. owed the addressee (whom I shall call "A.") pigs. Perhaps they had been entrusted to N. for raising, or he had to give them as part of his *census*. In any case, there is more in play here than a simple transaction between (land)lord and peasant. N. was not simply A.'s serf, but was in Einhard's *servitium*. In writing the letter, Einhard fulfilled his role as N.'s patron by pleading for leniency in the case of the fine the latter owed to A., and he professed to do so out of self-interest – he mentions N.'s capacity to serve, which might be impaired by the fine. We do not know N.'s legal status, although the fact that he was fined and spared corporal punishment may be taken as evidence of his personal freedom. In any case, it is quite clear that the social relations here were more complicated and varied than a simple model of lordship and tenancy would suggest.

[25] Einhard, *Epistolae* 62, translation by Dutton, 1998, p. 161, with changes.

Peasants and mobility

We do not know how far the Freising *barscalci* had to transport their harvest to their lord's barn, nor whether Einhard's man N. had to travel far in order to herd the pigs he had raised. But it is evident that mobility was a necessary feature of the Carolingian economic system, at least when large-scale landholdings were involved. In general, mobility is not a major theme in studies on the early medieval peasant economy. This is due to the fact that the sources documenting peasant lives – above all charters and polyptychs – are by nature not documents that focus on movement. However, while charters hardly ever mention moving peasants (although see below pp. 160-161), some of the more detailed polyptychs do offer quite extensive information on peasants' movement. For the relevant regions, the polyptych of Prüm dated 893 is especially useful. It consists of detailed descriptions of the monastery's property, ordered by villages, and includes extensive notes on the dependents as well as detailed, minute descriptions of the services and dues to be rendered. Here, we also find information on movement, as in the chapter about Albisheim, a village 20 km east of the episcopal city of Worms. The first part of the chapter describes the *mansa ledilia* – manses held by *lidi*, peasants with a status between free and unfree not unlike the *barscalci*, and their duties. Passages mentioning or implying supralocal mobility are set in bold:

> About Albisheim
> In Albisheim there are 17 manses of *ledi* and two half manses. Each of these gives 30 *denarii* for a shirt, a pig worth five *solidi*, a piglet, a ram or 12 *denarii* at Easter, five hens, 15 eggs; five stakes for the vineyards or five *denarii*; each mows **five wagonloads of hay in Altrip** or pays five *denarii*; they do **15 nights three times** [per year]: once for the feast of Saint Martin, once more in February, and a third time in May; for harvesting grain and making hay [they supply] two *mancipia*; they transport hay and two wagonloads of grain to the lord's barn; **two of them together do *angaria*** as they do in Rhein-

> Gönnheim, each provides for [*facit*?] three acres of land and sows two measures of his own grain [there]; each does **a *scara* to Prüm on horseback** […], renders two wagonloads of wood, **[sends] two *mancipia* to Dienheim for harvesting grapes**; threshes 12 measures of grain and **brings them to Worms by boat**; each makes bread and beer as in Rhein-Gönnheim, each has to wash and shear sheep; each one of them must feed two of the lord's pigs from the feast of Saint Martin until mid-March. (Prüm 116).

Several different forms of mobility are described here. Making hay in Altrip implies a round trip of almost 90 km, probably on foot – a journey of several days. "Fifteen nights" (*noctes*) refer to services that required the *lidi* to spend time away from home, probably cutting wood, building or guarding.[26] On top of this, each of the holders of a manse was expected to send two serfs to Dienheim (about 32 km away) to harvest grapes, and had to transport 12 measures of grain to Worms by ship.

The requirements to perform *scara* and *angaria* are less straightforward.[27] For each mansus, the holder was required to perform *scara* duties on horseback to Prüm, 160 km away as the crow flies and almost twice that distance following the Rhine and Moselle to avoid mountain ranges. *Scara* involved transporting lighter goods, probably individually, on foot, horseback or boat. The tenants of nearby Rhein-Gönnheim, which is named for comparison twice in the chapter on Albisheim, were required to carry either six salmon, six sheets of linen or eight shirts to Prüm on their *scara*-duty, and we may assume that the requirements in Albisheim were similar.[28]

In contrast to *scara*, *angaria*, which were required from two of the *lidi*, were transports of larger amounts of agricultural goods such as grain or wine on oxcarts, but they might also involve herding livestock to the place of consumption or sale.[29] The polyptychs never

[26] Kuchenbuch, 1978, pp. 126-148.
[27] Devroey, 1979.
[28] Kuchenbuch, 2016a, on Rhein-Gönnheim.
[29] Devroey, 1979; Kuchenbuch, 2016a.

name a destination or an origin for these *angaria* services, indicating that the monastery wanted to preserve some flexibility in this matter. A northern Frankish glossary sheds further light on the practice of *angaria* where it defines the word *enteca*, literally "purse" or "cash-box." In the context of *angaria*, however, *enteca* consisted of a loan – ideally without interest – taken out by peasants to pay their expenses while carrying out their duties of *angaria*, i.e. goods transport, as ordered by their landlords.

> *Enteca* is a certain sum of loaned money. Lesser men that do *angaria* are accustomed to ask their *maior* to give them a certain amount of shillings as is necessary for the voyage […], in such a way that 100 shillings – or more or less – are evenly divided among these lesser men. In return for this, each of them shall write a charter about how many shillings he received and confirm by his signature that he will return them […].[30]

The loan was provided by the *maiores*, the managers of the estates, and consisted of about 100 shillings in total for all the travelling men. This is a substantial sum, and it would have been paid in the form of 1200 *denarii*, pennies, since hardly any other coins were minted in this period. The size of this loan indicates that it was probably given to large groups of dependents travelling together – we can conclude that large trains of carts drawn by two or four oxen must have been a familiar sight on the roads of the empire, especially after harvest in the autumn.

Two other conclusions may be drawn from this brief text. First, there was an infrastructure for travelers along the roads that offered room and board in return for money. Second, these taverns or road stations catered to the needs of *minores*, of dependent peasants, or were at least open to them.[31] But, as the institution of *enteca* proves, it seems that peasants commonly did not have coins enough for the long journeys they had to undertake.

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[30] Ed. by Bougard, 2010, p. 478 with the comments on 444.
[31] Kuchenbuch, 2016b, pp. 115-119.

The expectation in all of these forms of mobility is that the peasants would return to their homes after performing their various duties. Of course, one may also hypothesize that peasants travelling on their lords' account along the major routes could find opportunities to set out for themselves. Presumably they would talk to other people and perhaps decide to leave, but this type of migration is hard to trace in the sources.[32] The same is true for clearances, which were probably major factors in peasant migration, either at the order of the lords and with their tacit approval or, on the contrary, undertaken by peasants fleeing their lords in search of better living conditions.

There are, however, definite signs of migration in sources mentioning dependents of other lords living within the manor of a given lord, usually married to a dependent of the latter. Intermarriage was probably an important factor in peasant migration. An exchange between the Bavarian bishops Abraham of Freising and Michael of Regensburg, sheds some light on this (Freising 1166). It dates to the mid-tenth century but describes a situation that had persisted from the ninth. Bishop Abraham gave his colleague three men and seven women with between one and five children each from his domain of Isen and received three other men and five women with between one and four children from Regensburgs's domain in Helfendorf in return. Unusually, these people are described as *mancipia coniugata*, married serfs, but there is no indication that the men and women named in the document were married to each other, nor do they appear as family groups. This must mean that their spouses had other lords, presumably the church of Regensburg and the church of Freising respectively. The exchange was therefore a way of clarifying the property situation by uniting the married couples and their children in the hand of one lord.

What is interesting here is that Isen and Helfendorf are more than 40 km apart. The document indicates not only that there must have been regular mobility between these places, enough to allow at least

[32] See in general Devroey, 2006b.

19 marriages between the serfs of either church. And since marriage meant a shared household, this possibility of temporary mobility eventually produced permanent migration for one of the spouses.

Mobility and the peasant unit

This has taken me quite far from my starting point, namely the peasant unit that was the focus of the economic activities of most peasants in the eastern part of the Carolingian empire in the eighth and ninth centuries and would remain so for the centuries to come. It was inhabited and worked by small groups, mostly two-generation nuclear families as a model, but not necessarily as a reality. It sometimes included additional men and women, probably relatives in many cases. They worked an economic unit consisting typically of a house, other buildings for storage and livestock, an average of 30 yokes of plow-land, meadows, and access as well as usage rights to pastures, woods and water. For the use of this land, peasants gave part of their surplus in kind or in money as well as a portion of their work capacity to different lords; free peasants with their own allodial property had to perform public duties and pay tithes and other fees. The extraction varied greatly according to legal status and social factors governing the relation between lord and dependent. Sometimes it was negotiable, as the case of the Freising *barscalci* shows. As Einhard's letter demonstrates, these relations were much more complex than appears from the polyptychs or charters that privilege information about the link between landowners and tenants. Social relations were governed by fluid, overlapping networks of patronage, in which tenancy was not the only factor that mattered. These networks, I would argue, were typical for early medieval social, economic, and even political relations from the lower echelons of society up to the very top.[33]

The polyptych of Prüm shows that renders were in many cases

[33] Haack, 2019, pp. 212-215; 223-227).

transported to the place of consumption or sale by the peasants, supplying the distant monastery with the product of its enormous and scattered landholdings. Peasants were also expected to perform some of their corvée services in other places to help with harvest or hay-making. In the case of Albisheim, this involved several trips yearly of up to several hundred kilometers for all holders of a manse, who sometimes had to go into debt to perform these services. These modes of forced mobility, together with voluntary, sometimes illegal forms of peasant mobility that are hard to pinpoint in the sources, sometimes resulted in permanent migration. An example of this is the exchange of *mancipia* in Isen and Helfendorf, who had married into other lordships. And this is probably only the tip of the iceberg of peasant migration in what was probably a much more mobile society than is usually assumed, even at the level of the peasantry.

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