
Matthew Frank Stevens, *The Economy of Medieval Wales (1067-1536)*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2019, pp. 149.

Until now, research on the economic history of Wales has applied interpretative models developed for England, constructing a narrative mainly by identifying similarities or differences between Wales and the better known English model. Reversing this perspective, Matthew Frank Stevens, an internationally acknowledged expert in the field of medieval history, traces an economic history of Wales between 1067 and 1536 based exclusively on the data of that region (extrapolated from the available bibliography) and only then does he draw comparisons with the English experience.

The book, which makes enjoyable reading, comprises three narrative chapters, each focusing on a specific period (1067-1315, 1282-1348, 1315-1536), plus a concluding chapter that compares the empirical reconstruction with the interpretative models best known to historians of England and Europe. The dates delimiting each period are rough markers – we are largely dealing with long-term phenomena – but

there are some events with which the reader is encouraged to become familiar already in the introduction: the Norman conquest of the region (1067); its completion by the English king Edward I (1282); the great famine (1315-1322), the two waves of plague (1348-1349 and 1361-1362); the anti-English rebellion of Owain Glyndŵr (1400-1416), and the acts of union between England and Wales (1536). Framed by these events, the three periods mark a trajectory in which (1) the Welsh economy grows, (2) reaches its apex, and (3) eventually declines, with no substantial recovery until the beginning of modern industrialisation. The issues addressed are typical in current research on medieval economic history: demographic trends, forms of exploitation of the agricultural landscape, social relations both in the countryside and in towns, the production and circulation of goods and wealth.

Chapter one ("Early History, Conquest and Colonization, 1067-1315", pp. 14-51) deals with changes that the Anglo-Norman conquest brought to the Welsh economy and society. During the Early Middle Ages, Wales, not unlike other European countries, was politically divided into rival kingdoms, each headed by a king or a prince and divided into administrative-territorial units called *cantref(i)*, subdivided in turn into *commote(s)*, *maenor(au)* and *tref(i)*. Taxation refers to *maenor(au)*, either unfree, i.e. populated by people who render the prince various labour services, or free, and in this case managed by people who pay a tax called *gwestfa*. After the Norman conquest these structures changed. First of all, in the unfree units, the traditional parental groups called *gwely(au)* – "four generation agnatic kin group ... the unit of production from time immemorial when Norman lords first reached the Welsh borders" (p. 18) – began to extend their activities towards less productive lands, thus creating new semi-free production units also named *gwely(au)*. De facto, many peasants began to lose their unfree status. At the same time, the invaders conquered tracts of Welsh land and created the so-called marcher lordships, over which they exercised almost complete authority by building castles and into which many English peasants were relocated. Whereas in Europe the availability of resources

encouraged unparalleled demographic growth between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, in Wales the limited amount of arable land (610,000 acres, 14% of the entire country) made that phenomenon much less perceptible. The foundation of new settlements on marginal lands suggests an increase of 35-70%, with numbers that around the year 1300 correspond to 250,000-300,000 people. This percentage is low by comparison with England's growth of 200%. In all likelihood, population growth in Wales was largely a reflection of British immigration. Thus, a new agrarian economy developed, based on lordships composed of three elements: 1) the castle, i.e. an administrative and authority centre holding most of the revenue-generating powers; 2) the manor, i.e. that part of the lordship directed towards surplus production of grain, originated from lands escheated or confiscated by the Norman invaders; given the prevalence of English peasants, it was also called *Englishry*; 3) the *Welshry*, i.e. that part of the lordship given over to pastoral activities, mostly populated by native Welsh people. The Englishries were usually located in the arable lowlands, the Welshries in the pastoral uplands. (The historical ethnic difference between them has been confirmed by recent DNA analysis.) But the most spectacular economic and social phenomenon in medieval Wales was the rise of a network of over 100 towns between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Defined as places "where most of the population derived most of their income from craft and commerce" (p. 40), often benefiting from public documents known as "borough charters", towns became the cornerstones of a new commercial network that transformed the natural economy into a monetary economy and fostered craft and professional specialisation. Since these foundations were induced from the outside, the author efficaciously defines their rise as "institutional urbanism". Chapter two ("The Medieval Economy at its Apex, 1282-1348", pp. 53-74) offers a snapshot of Welsh economic and social structures between the end of the conquest and the Black Death. This was the peak period in Welsh economic history. Based on the research findings of Edward Lewis, the author outlines the new economic circuits of the period, dis-

tinguishing between an internal circuit and an external circuit. The former concerned agricultural production, forest goods and fishing, both in Welshries and Englishries, and the production of wool, cloth and urban crafts, thus also including the activities in towns. The latter concerned exports and imports, passing through ports, and thus referred exclusively to towns. Eighty towns had a population of more than 1,000, and at least another forty had 500-600 inhabitants. The lordships also testify to growth in incomes, but with a difference in comparison to England: their incomes were not based on ordinary rents, but rather on profits deriving from the development of judicial lordship (judicial court access fees, fines, compensation, confiscations, tolls) and an intensification of the so-called "arbitrary taxes" (gifts, grants, subsidies). This development did not increase the average wealth of the Welsh: the surpluses acquired by the lordships were not reinvested, while those that did flow into markets eventually arrived in England.

Chapter three ("Crises and Restructuring, 1315-1536", pp. 77-102) describes the least fortunate period in the economic history of medieval Wales, studded as it was with disruptive events such as famines, the plague and the Glyndŵr rebellion. The *gwely* structure had already begun to falter in the late eleventh century, but it now collapsed definitively. The English crown encouraged this development, as was already clear in the statutes of 1284: for instance, if the local customs of the *gwely* prevented women from receiving an inheritance so to avoid a dismemberment of the family economic unit through marriage, the new statutes envisaged the possibility for women to inherit in the absence of legitimate male heirs and thus to own land, threatening the integrity of the *gwely* from many sides. For this and other reasons, the so-called *Welsh tenure* was increasingly seen as disadvantageous compared with *English tenure*, and Welsh natives themselves tried different routes to acquire English status in law – purchasing it outright, petitioning the crown or buying a property in a town. Famines and plagues accelerated this process of erosion, so that the division between

Welshry and Englishry eventually lost its meaning. More generally, the communal agriculture centred on the nucleated village and on manors was being undermined, while individual property and a new attitude toward accumulating estates and money gained ground. Some post-plague and post-rebellion phenomena closely resembled those of England and Europe. Two examples are the prominence of a new class of owners with English cultural traits, the so-called *squirearchy*, and the reorganisation of industry around the textile sector. But if, elsewhere, the period from the late fourteenth through the fifteenth century saw an improvement in peasants' living standards and an increase in wages, this was not evident in Wales, probably owing to its limited natural resources. Moreover, during that period the direction of migration reversed, with the Welsh now migrating eastwards. In contrast with the improvement in peasants' living standards in England and other part of Europe, in Wales there was a clear division between territories more closely linked to England – the South, the Northeast and the Southeast – and the rest of the region, where a general recovery did not begin until modern industrialisation.

Chapter four ("Modelling the economy of Medieval Wales", pp. 105-125), in a highly original manner, reverses the common historical methodology of starting out from a precise theoretical model and then gathering and interpreting data. Stevens compares his history with different interpretative models, the ones most widely used by historians of England and Europe, and seeks to discover which one is most suitable for understanding Wales. The three models are: the "demographic model", the "neo-Marxist model" and the "commercialisation model". The demographic model, traceable to Thomas R. Malthus and David Ricardo, starts from the assumption that the population grows in geometric progression (e.g. 2, 4, 8, 16) and resources in arithmetic progression (e.g. 2, 4, 6, 8), and contends that the growing mismatch between the two is the key determinant of economic and social change: it was the demographic take-off and the more intense exploitation of resources in the eleventh-thirteenth centuries that sowed the seeds of the disasters of the fourteenth century

and the consequent rebalancing of the situation during the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. This model does not work for Wales, as economic growth there was modest and came largely from an “external” phenomenon, English immigration. The neo-Marxist model, rooted in the studies of Rodney Hilton and Guy Bois, interprets economic change through the lens of the relationship and struggle between different social classes. It frames the Late Middle Ages in light of the phenomenon – first identified by Marc Bloch – of the “crisis of feudalism”, caused by a worsening of relations between lords and peasants and between employers and wage earners, with the consequent rebellions of the lower classes and the achievement of their objectives. Wales does not suit this second model as well, being a “confusingly multi-ethnic place where the prevalence of peasant freedom offers little scope for discussion of the struggle of bond men and women to be free” (p. 115). However, the model might work if an ethnicity parameter were introduced (e.g. English lords vs Welsh peasants) and if the concept of class were articulated in non-economic as well as economic variables. The commercialisation model, originating in Adam Smith’s studies and valorised by Richard Britnell’s research, focuses on phenomena such as urbanism, monetisation and economic specialisation and observes their interconnections. This model does fit some aspects of Welsh economic history, in particular the history of towns and the processes of productive specialisation. But, again, the development of the Welsh economy and market-oriented specialisation was hampered by several factors: the Glyndŵr rebellion, which led to the burning of at least forty towns and the consequent failure of many of them; the post-Glyndŵr drain of fiscal and human capital towards England; the intense eastward emigration of Welsh natives. The author concludes that, at least for Wales, the best way to identify a suitable interpretative model is to keep in mind the main drivers of economic and social change in *that* specific country. He identifies three such factors. The first was the Anglo-Norman conquest, which altered the trajectory of almost every native Welsh social and economic institution, leading to the erosion of the *gwely*, the levelling of

ethnic groups and the proliferation of written sources. The second factor was ethnic difference, a key to explaining the diverging settlements after the conquest, the ghettoisation of the Welsh peasantry, the Glyndŵr revolt, and in part the disappearance of the *gwely* itself in favour of practices closer to the English models. The third factor was geography, given that the low productive potential of the region always constituted a brake on its economic growth and fostered economic, social and ethnic inequality between relatively unproductive Welsh upland areas and more dynamic Anglicised inland areas. These three factors are uniquely relevant to the history of Wales and may well be the linchpin of a specific historical model. Understood in this way, Wales could be an excellent term of comparison for future studies of other small nations of medieval Europe.

Stevens's book is particularly effective for at least three reasons. First, it offers a synthesis that can easily bring Wales into today's debates on the economic and social history of the Middle Ages. This means not only putting Wales to the test of medieval Europe, but also comparing the interpretations of other regions with this new model, one that could be called a "politically-driven economy". Second, in a highly original way, it eliminates the historiographical barrier between the countryside and the city, a barrier still very resilient in the field of economic and social history. Third, at a more general level, it explicitly demonstrates the inadequacy of research conducted by applying pre-established theoretical models to single bodies of sources or to single local histories: such a procedure, rather than testing a hypothesis, reifies an interpretation regardless of what actually emerges in the research. In a spirit reminiscent of recent admonitions by David D'Avray, Stevens proposes, on the contrary, to reverse the perspective by first reconstructing events, structures and processes, and then comparing them with theoretical models. In this sense, his book can be useful both to model-oriented historians and to those who prefer to remain more firmly anchored to empirical data.

A specialist reader might point out three ways in which this excellent

work could be improved. First, a clearer account of the Welsh political framework would have made some sections easier to comprehend. Second, a more thorough discussion of the sources available for Wales – a very complex topic, but already introduced by the author in a work published in 2015 in *Studia Celtica* – would have made it easier for readers to get their bearings in the complicated and singular history of this region. Finally, the book lacks a problematisation of the “Encastellation” (or Incastellamento, according to Pierre Toubert), a topic that is almost mandatory today for research on the economic and social history of the High Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, *The Economy of Medieval Wales* fully achieves its aim of offering a historical overview for Wales and stimulating new reflections. To give just two examples, the study of the Welsh model, with its economy driven by the conquerors, could find fertile ground in the latest studies and debates relating to the New Institutional Economics, with their stress on the importance of political aspects for understanding economic change. Similarly, Stevens’s observations about wealth per capita of Welsh natives compared with the English (p. 37) could be elaborated on further in light of Thomas Piketty’s recent researches on the relationship between average wealth and purchasing power. In other words, if in 1290 the per capita wealth of a Welshman was significantly lower than that of an Englishman, can the same be said of their purchasing power? I leave this and other questions to future scholars and readers.

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