Beyond the Manorial Economy: An Introduction to the Seminar

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In the past, the predominant, classic representation of Carolingian economy and society has been that of the manorial system or mode of exploitation adopted by the "great bipartite estates". The bipartite system was characterized by an organic link between a "demesne" exploited for the benefit of the owner and tenures (or "manses"), that is, land assigned to tenants (some free, others considered to be unfree) in return for rents and labour services performed on the demesne. In this classical view, the flourishing of the Carolingian economy coincided with the high point of organization and exploitation of the big estates (both lay and ecclesiastical holdings).[1]

In a superb essay published in 1966, Adriaan Verhulst showed that this model, "the great Carolingian bipartite estate," far from the rule, was in fact an exception. It emerged in highly particular circumstances, around Paris, in the area between the Loire and the Rhine, by an act of voluntarism of the royal power.[2] It is hardly surprising that the bipartite estate was also to be found here and there in other regions, associated with great monasteries invested with public power; but, as Guy Bois observed, this is not enough to justify assuming its wide diffusion throughout the lands under

[1] Devroey, 2001, pp. 117-120; Kuchenbuch, 1991, pp. 20-26.
[2] Verhulst, 1966.

Frankish rule.[3] Since that seminal article, therefore, there has been a thorough-going review of the Carolingian economy. Various regional studies (including Italy, Picardy, Provence, Catalonia) have demonstrated that in Carolingian Europe there existed an important sector of small peasant property that completely escaped the manorial system.[4] On the economic level, this configuration involved a great deal of integration between various agrarian infrastructures: large estates, tenures, and smallholdings. These differentiated forms of management in turn involved a mixed labour regime. Slaves cultivated the demesne. Free and unfree peasants lived side by side on the tenures, and although the difference between them in status was diminishing under the umbrella of tenancy, as Alice Rio has recently reminded us, neither slavery nor forced labour had disappeared.[5] There were also free peasants who escaped this form of subordination: occasionally, they could be recruited on the landlord's estate, perhaps not least as daily or seasonal labourers.

Within this flexible scheme, the peasant family household was the typical, most representative production unit of the peasant economy. The basic peasant household consisted of a married couple and their offspring.[6] As a socio-economic unit, the peasant family household grew crops primarily by deploying the labour of the members of the family to satisfy their own needs. The household might also include one or more slaves, dependents, and occasionally hired hands. But the total contribution of these non-family members to crop production was likely much less than that of the family members.[7] Medieval historians disagree not so much over this basic purpose of the peasant economy, but rather over the forces that determined its expansion. Some argue that it was demand in the form of rent, tithes, or labour that offered a possibility for the peasant

[3] Bois, 1992, p. 6.
[4] Wickham, 1981: Italy; Bonnassie, 1975: Catalonia: Poly, 1976: Provence; Fossier, 1968: Picardy.
[5] Rio, 2017.
[6] Verhulst, 2002, p. 24.
[7] Thorner, 1971, p. 205; Shanin, 1971, p. 243.

household to be subsumed under more inclusive social units (estate, village, monastery, state). Within these social units, its principles of labour organization took on a new function, namely producing an agrarian surplus to serve external demand.[8] Others maintain that it was the peasant household that evolved towards more complex patterns than those governing simple reproduction. It was the peasant initiative which, by generating economic expansion and market exchange, allowed the establishment of more complex organizations.[9]

Expanding on these two arguments, this collection of papers investigates the role that peasants and their labour played in this system. We are interested in the strategy by which peasants managed their labour relationships with the "public" power, the lay and ecclesiastical estates, before and after the transition from the Carolingian state to the seigniorial regime. At the same time we examine the way in which peasants reacted to the vicissitudes of their households, such as death, illness, the transfer of labour by the creation of new couples through marriage; and single events relating to extreme weather conditions or famines that also changed peasant strategy. Thus our key question is: To what extent was differentiation in labour regimes and social status, which in turn generated flexible spatial and social mobility, produced by the mechanics of large estates and to what extent by the individual stories of the peasant households?

We are well aware of the difficulties of such an actor-centred approach to peasants and the peasant economy. We lack the source materials needed to describe peasant agency properly, because we have nearly no texts written by peasants themselves. We cannot say much about the beliefs and intentions of individual peasants, or even groups of peasants, and even less about their emotions, hopes, wishes and interests. We have descriptions by others, who tend to define peasants from a top-down perspective. We certainly have no

[8] Feller, 2007; Wickham, 2005, pp. 280-302; Verhulst, 2002, pp. 34-37; Innes, 2000, pp. 141-164; Devroey, 1986; Toubert, 1986; Kuchenbuch, 1978.
[9] Bois, 1992, p. 125; Hodges, 1988, pp. 148-155, 154.

intention of reanimating the tiresome debate on what a "peasant" actually was.[10] However, we do think that it is important to integrate the possibility of peasant agency or, as Chris Wickham calls it, "peasant protagonism," into our models.[11] One way to do this is to consider the peasant economy and the strategy of the peasant household in the broader political, economic and environmental context. The four essays that follow present some of the possible trajectories for the peasant economy and argue that while peasants' fundamental concern was the reproduction of the basic cell, it would be misleading to see peasant households as exclusively subsistence-oriented. By definition, they existed in a specific territory, and they were bound to surrounding institutions: public powers and their representatives, lay and ecclesiastical estates, ecclesiastical structures, and the market. In a sense, the peasant household is simultaneously master of its output and subject to demand from the institutions and organizations that operate in the surrounding territories.[12] In Carolingian and post-Carolingian Europe, that is, both peasant household and estate were crucibles of innovation in economic ideas and practices, functioning as a powerful driving force of social and spatial mobility.[13]

In the first essay, Thomas Kohl captures the basic features of the peasant unit through careful examination of the sources from East Francia. Kohl notices that the size of the holdings farmed by smallholders or tenants varied substantially, apparently owing to adaptation to the vicissitudes that affected the peasant household. Significant variations in the number of producers or consumers due to death, birth, injury, disease, marriage, or even the mobility of household members, brought radical changes in the peasants' reproductive strategy, which in turn imposed alterations in the size of the plots cultivated.

After describing the composition and structure of the peasant

[10] Wenskus, 1975, p. 13.
[11] Wickham, 2009, pp. 39, 214.
[12] Thorner, 1971, p. 206.
[13] Hahn-Hart, 2011, p. 35.

household, Kohl moves on to explore its relationship with the estate. Tenants gave part of their profits in kind or in money as well as a portion of their labour to their landlords in return for the lease of the land. For their part, smallholders had to perform services and pay tithes on their agrarian production, or on any other commercial or artisanal activities. Kohl observes that the amount extracted from peasants varied greatly from plot to plot, but the criteria governing the distribution of the obligations corresponded neither to what we would call economic rationality nor to the legal status of the subjects. Kohl's observation concerning economic rationality challenges the thesis that the method of assessment of the various obligations was related to landholding; put simply, he doubts that any obligation was assessed according to the size, quality, or demographic composition of the land.[14] In this the author embraces Alice Rio's convincing argument against some of the older scholarship, that the polyptychs and charts (the principal evidence for this kind of rational correlation) represent not a fossilized form of record, but rather the result of a negotiating process, a point upon which landlord and tenants had managed to agree.

Kohl agrees with Rio also when she argues that there was no strong sense of division within the community on the basis of legal status. Peasants could have a vested interest in the unequal distribution of labour duties, and legal status became a "proxy through which to fight over minute differences in internal estate hierarchy and the distribution of labour duties."[15] All the same, paradoxically, it was not necessarily the case that the tenants with the heaviest burdens were always the (most) unfree, although on some Frankish estates one does find a certain correlation between number of days of labour services owed and legal status. Legal status, in other words, still mattered to both parties, even if there was no consistent relationship between a particular set of obligations and a particular legal status.[16]

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[14] Esders, 2009.
[15] Rio, 2017, p. 198.
[16] Rio, 2017, p. 198; Ghosh, 2017.

Reading Kohl's reflections, one may ask whether a comprehensive definition for this heterogeneous labour force exists. In this context, both "slavery" and "serfdom" appear anachronistic terms.[17] This is not the place where we can review this old debate, but it would be helpful to consider the notion of "servility" as a possible alternative, in that it appropriately describes the condition of this mixed labour force, composed of unfree and free tenants deployed on the estate. In Carolingian Europe, estates were conceived of as a set of obligations to which peasants, no matter their legal status, were subject.[18] According to this schema, the forms of land tenure were thus arguably the key factor influencing their lives, but social relations between lord and dependent, as Kohl remarks, were governed by fluid, overlapping networks of patronage, in which tenancy was a factor but not the only one that mattered.

It is also worth noting that in Kohl's analysis monetization was an integral part of this sphere of lord/dependent relationships, which were also the main motor of peasant mobility. He mentions cash loans by landlords to peasants to allow them to perform their compulsory services in places far from their residence. This practice attests to the need for money in the countryside, but it cannot be taken as evidence either of a process of "proletarianization" of the labour force (there is no evidence of eviction) or of the dissolution of the "servile" bond. Quite the opposite, cash loans were instrumental to the performance of the compulsory services. Thus, cash payment reinforced the retention rather than the "emancipation" of the labour force.

This last observation on the role of monetization and its impact on the status of peasants and labour organization led us to compare conditions in East Francia with those in the core of the Carolingian Empire, the area stretching from the Loire to the Rhine. This is the main focus of Alexis Wilkin's study. Wilkin contributes by exploring the structure and functioning of the classical manorial system. As

[17] Banaji, 2010, pp. 233-239; Freedman, 1996; Goetz, 1993; Verhulst, 1991.
[18] Theuws, 2008, p. 212; Faith, 1997, pp. 69-70.

we have seen, the manorial system was based on the division of the estate into two parts, the demesne exploited directly by the landlord and the tenancies assigned to free or unfree peasants. In theory, Wilkin observes, the compulsory labour services provided by the tenants on the demesne (which he calls "boon work") were the linchpin of the manorial organization. The central role and ideological dominance of boon work had led historians to restrict the scope for peasant mobility to the manor itself, both spatially and socially, downplaying the importance of wage labour and denying the existence of a labour market.

Based on rough estimates of the labour requirements of numerous ecclesiastical estates, Wilkin turns this picture upside down. He shows that even where boon work was a determining factor, internal economic stratification and variability in peasant labour was the rule, generating various degrees of spatial and social mobility.

With regard to monastic institutions, Wilkin examines three main objectives governing their choices: stability, productivity, and charity. From a narrowly economic perspective, these three determinants would appear to be opposing forces, but in reality, taken together they provide a versatile structure suitable for reproducing the original agrarian cell (the peasant household), transferring excess labour to new economic units (sons deprived of access to family land formed new households), and remunerating this supplementary labour force as circumstances required.

Let us look briefly at the mechanics of each of these driving forces. In the ecclesiastical ideology, stability was predominant: preservation of the traditional religious, social, and economic order. The first concern of the monastic institution, not dissimilarly to the peasant household, was reproduction (in this case, of the religious community). From this standpoint, boon work offered a constant supply of labour while at the same time reinforcing the institution's ideological control over the surrounding territories and their population. This did not exclude a certain degree of mobility of the labour force, however. Intermarriage, the physical mobility of younger sons, spontaneous emigration triggered by land clearance, the flight

of slaves, or even their social elevation to tenant status (*servi casati*) – all factors examined by Wilkin in detail – were responses to demographic pressure within the manorial organization that produced spatial or social mobility. A side effect of such "externalization" of the labour force was the formation of a pool of reserve labour from which the monastic institution might recruit daily / seasonal or wage labourers (sometimes called *lunarii* or *praebendarii*), in order to satisfy its supplementary need for labour. In this context, cash payments were a powerful lubricant of production and exchange. However, as Wilkin suggests, it would be an oversimplification to interpret the existence of wage labour as the direct result of the market mechanism, insofar as more often than not the recruitment of labourers was governed by an ideological apparatus that put charity above profit.[19] In a sense, this invites reflection on how, in our context, labour relationships continued to be subsumed under tributary (or feudal) relations of production, without preventing us from considering monetization as one of the most sensitive indicators of the conditions of a society.

Let us now turn to the importance of natural events in the life of a peasant society. Nicolas Schroeder's essay investigates the crucial question of the impact of extreme weather events and climate variability on Carolingian farming and peasant societies. Schroeder observes that some recently formulated theses on the socio-economic impact of food shortages and climatic fluctuations are contradictory. Scholars agree that from the mid-eighth to the late ninth century the lands under Frankish rule experienced demographic and economic expansion, and argue for a causal relation between improving climatic conditions and agrarian expansion. Some assume that mild temperatures and moderate rainfall were favourable to farming. Against this background, Schroeder observes convincingly that correlation is not the same as explanation. Since climate variations did not affect landscapes and farmers uniformly, the vulnerability and

[19] Brown, 2002, p. 31.

adaptability of farming systems to changing climatic conditions must be assessed by consistent analytical instruments.

To this end, Schroeder introduces the concepts of "spatial scale" and "social complexity." He borrows the expression "spatial scale" from ecology, where this interpretative tool serves to locate dramatic events in their proper ecological context and evaluate their impact on the appropriate scale. Citing numerous local and regional studies (Jura, Ireland, Provence, Italy), Schroeder demonstrates how micro-historical approaches reveal the great geographical, social, and economic diversity of the various socio-environmental systems that formed the Carolingian empire. This diversity (or, better, complexity) does not mean that climate variations had no impact on agrarian practices and forms of land use. Rather, it suggests inquiry into how the consequences varied regionally and even locally, depending on social and ecological vulnerability and adaptability. The notion of spatial scale helps to assess the impact of climate variations on regional and local environments. In short, it elucidates the consequences of external or natural processes. The concept of social complexity, then, in Schroeder's words, is an invitation to consider the differing degrees of vulnerability and adaptability of various social groups within Carolingian societies. It discloses the importance of internal processes at both the political and the social level. Because of the imbalances in Carolingian societies, certain individuals and social groups could be more or less adaptable and vulnerable to environmental crises and food shortages. To identify the more vulnerable groups, Schroeder uses an analytical tool elaborated by Amartya Sen in his outstanding book on famines, namely the "entitlement approach."[20] Sen argues that the traditional analysis of famines based on food supply is fundamentally defective and proposes an alternative approach, concentrating on ownership and exchange to demonstrate that famines are the effect of the relationships of persons to the commodity of food, not simply the scarcity of food

[20] Sen, 1981.

as such. This observation leads Schroeder to argue, on the basis of the available evidence, that no matter the initial causes of a shortage, the unequal systems of food circulation in the Carolingian lands generated situations in which particular social groups, such as aristocrats, tended to have privileged access to resources and foodstuffs, even at times of dearth and famine, while the groups at the margins of the productive system, such as day labourers, beggars, and widows, were the first victims of food shortage. In essence, Schroeder argues that in a food crisis the social groups that were neither direct producers nor *rentiers* were denied access to food. Between these two extremes was the majority of peasants. The extent to which peasants were vulnerable to food crisis is a matter of debate: as the peasantry consisted of both landholders and tenants of varying statuses and wealth, their fate depended mainly on the vicissitudes of the peasant household in reproducing its basic demographic structure. In certain circumstances peasant households were able to cope with bad weather and related food shortages by self-regulating the internal equilibrium between producers and consumers (or between hands and mouths), by negotiating the share of the harvest that had to be transferred to the Carolingian state or the aristocracy as duties or rent, or by reducing the surplus that went to the market.

However, the events that could trigger a structural crisis for the household were multiple and unpredictable. As Henry Bernstein has noted, a shock such as the illness or death of a key household member or eviction from the land due to indebtedness might push the household over the borderline between "getting by" and "going under."[21] Essentially, the question is whether in certain circumstances food crisis acted as a powerful means of "proletarianization" of the labour force and not just a factor aggravating the pre-existing imbalance inherent in a society.[22]

In the last essay, which returns to the relationship between peasant labour and the political system, Laurent Feller accepts the hy-

[21] Bernstein, 2010, p. 108.
[22] Geremek, 1997, pp. 92-101.

pothesis that the existence of groups living and working at the margins of the manorial organization might actually be the result of expansion rather than deterioration of the system. That is, economic expansion might coexist with, or even determine, the poverty or marginalization of certain social strata. But Feller shows that in the transition from the dislocation of Carolingian power structures in the late ninth century to the so-called "mutation féodale" or "feudal revolution" in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the military aristocracy prevented any form of proletarianization of the labour force by transforming its control of all local power structures into control of all land and human resources. In short, by "caging the peasantry" they paved the way for the rise of the seigniorial system.[23] The seigniorial system consisted of a number of tracts of land administered from a central building (typically a castle).[24] The landholding, or manor, was organized into demesne and tenures, the former managed directly by the lord and the latter cultivated by peasants, who received them as compensation for labour and payment of various dues. Labour was therefore rewarded by the concession of land, and conversely the right to land was acquired by the rendering of labour. From the lord's perspective it was all the more logical to demand labour services, since land was abundant and men were few. However, Feller rightly observes that the scarcity of labour in a demographically depressed area put the lord in an unfavourable position if the bargaining was conducted in solely economic terms. Given scarce labour supply, workers could demand relatively high wages. Accordingly, coercion played a central role in the establishment of a system in which forced labour (in the form of *corvées*) was extracted from the peasantry, preventing them from earning the market price. The asymmetrical nature of this relationship means that in this system we cannot liken transactions between lord and tenant to contracts (as the New Institutional Economics would have it).[25] The

[23] Wickham, 2009, p. 530.
[24] Wickham, 2009, p. 517.
[25] Feller, 2011.

seigniorial system offered guarantees for the stability of tenants' possession of the land. The quality or nature of the service rendered to the lord was an indication of the peasant's status in this land tenure relationship. It also effectively assured the physical protection of the subjects and functioned as a judicial institution capable of regulating the inevitable conflicts that arose in agrarian society. Yet it remained a hierarchical system. All the same, Feller argues, the seigniorial organization was not a static arrangement but evolved in response to internal as well as external stimuli.

To summarize the principal dynamics, in Carolingian times forced labour was a burden shouldered first of all by tenants and secondarily by slaves working on the demesne. In the seigniorial economy, this second element diminished progressively, accompanied by the substantial reduction in slavery and increasing dependency of the peasantry. From then on the tasks originally performed by slaves were shifted onto peasants, who were remunerated in non-monetary forms (protection, gifts). Starting from the twelfth century, population growth, a reduction in land clearing, the development of the trade economy, and the multiplication of marketplaces induced the aristocracy to change its economic strategy once again. As the price of land rose and labour became more readily available (hence cheap), lords stopped procuring labour in the form of compulsory services and started compensating their tenants in money or in goods. The sweeping replacement of labour services by cash rents and monetary wages, in turn, generated increased monetary circulation and enhanced flexibility in the relationship between lord and dependents. Demographic growth thus appears to have been one of the conditions for the peasants' legal emancipation, before the crises of the fourteenth century changed the situation once again.

In conclusion, we can easily see a recurrent theme running throughout these articles: that of peasant labour and its relatively rapid variations. The collected essays discuss the political, economic, social and environmental causes that transformed the peasant household, and with it peasant labour. Specifically, they reinforce the thesis that alterations in labour regimes (and in the legal status

of the peasants) were the result of a complex interaction between changes in social relations and the associated demographic regimes.

The essays gathered in this volume also offer different – and sometimes, conflicting – interpretations of the drivers of change, and of their reciprocal causal order. Collectively, they manifest this volume's ambition to move beyond the identification of any single prime mover, and to provide instead a more nuanced interpretation of change as the result of multiple, intertwined factors.

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