

Introduction

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In the European economic history of the pre-modern era, the integration of rural product and factor markets has become a focus of research. Market integration is regarded as a characteristic feature of the spread of commercialisation, which, together with other institutional changes, may have fuelled economic growth even in periods of slower technological change.¹ In this context, rural and agrarian historians have become increasingly occupied with analysing patterns of transfer of tenant land in terms of the formation of the land market as part of rural factor markets, based on the assumption that the rise and integration of tenant land markets changed the land market in a broader sense. So far, historical research on Central Europe, as opposed to other European regions, has concentrated on the early modern period² or followed theoretical assumptions which have come under harsh criticism in recent years. However, new studies indicate that villagers' trading in land, as well as market transactions with tenant land, may not only have already existed in the later Middle Ages, but may have been of considerable importance with regard to regional economic and socio-structural developments.³ To assess the significance of the rural land market in medieval times, more work is needed in terms of comparative empirical case studies as well as studies that address existing research focused on other European regions.

Research in European economic history related to the late medieval and early modern periods has tended to rely on three approaches.⁴ The first approach, based on Malthusian and Ricardian theories,⁵ has long been the dominant one. Up until the 1980s, historical materialist approaches formed the main alternative.⁶ Finally, studies concentrating on trade and the spread of the monetary economy comprised the third ap-

1 Cerman, *Theoretische Perspektiven*; Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*; Grantham, "Contra Ricardo".

2 Exemplary: Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren*.

3 Cerman, "Bodenmärkte"; Cerman, "Social Structure"; Ghosh, "Ellwangen".

4 Cerman, *Theoretische Perspektiven*; Harvey, *Introduction*; Kriedte, "Spätmittelalterliche Agrarkrise".

5 Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur*; Postan, *Medieval Economy*.

6 Aston, Philipin, *Brenner Debate*; Hilton, *Transition*.

proach.⁷ Originally criticised for a relatively narrow thematic focus and the assumption of a linear progression of commercial integration, this latter approach has re-emerged over the past two decades in the context of empirical studies. It calls into question the general image of “stagnant” pre-industrial or “feudal” European societies and economies that emerged from the Malthusian and Marxist research traditions. Lacking the greater cohesion sometimes attributed to the other two theoretical approaches, this recent research has been grouped together from time to time under the heading of “commercialisation”.⁸

The example of the English experience against the backdrop of a broader European perspective has yielded studies based on the idea of commercialisation in the Middle Ages and early modern period. These studies aim to identify, besides major technological breakthroughs, the factors influencing long-term economic growth. Apart from classifying the nature of technological change in pre-industrial societies as incremental (rather than as completely absent), they highlight the importance of a long-term reduction in transaction costs and costs of trade due, for example, to institutional change. As Govind Sreenivasan put it in his profound study of the peasant society subject to the monastery of Ottobeuren (Upper Swabia) in early modern times: “production and exchange” on the one hand and “social reproduction” on the other are “constitutive of each other”. This development “was characterized by much more intensive involvement in land and credit markets, but built on institutional foundations – in particular the establishment of stable and transferable peasant property rights – laid in the previous century [i. e. the 15th century]”.⁹ Accordingly, processes of specialisation, urbanisation, growth of trade, increasing market integration and institutional innovation form the research focus of these new approaches.

As a corollary of this new perspective, the perception of the medieval economy, even in its early stages, changed considerably. Against the conventional interpretation of a long period of stagnation and decline, new research has established a wide-ranging amount of evidence that trade and communication across religious and cultural borders was the main driving force of European economic growth as early as the eighth century.¹⁰ In these studies, the causes and structure of commercial transactions have been highly disputed. Overall, however, they support an interpretation that emphasises the dynamics of medieval economies since the early Middle Ages – i. e. even before the frequently invoked commercial revolution in the high Middle Ages. In the economic-historical analyses of the early and high Middle Ages, agriculture always played a central role. Here, too, the opinions of researchers differ widely. A common denominator,

7 Lopez, *Commercial Revolution*; Pirenne, *Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*.

8 Kitsikopoulos, *Agrarian Change*, pp. 2–7.

9 Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren*, pp. 194–195.

10 McCormick, *Origins*; Verhulst, *The Carolingian Economy*; Wickham, *Framing*. For English growth before 1300, see Britnell, Campbell, *Commercialising Economy*.

however, is the importance of market relations for farms, which increased for both dependent and personally free peasants in the course of the high Middle Ages. In the later Middle Ages and the 16th century, however, the primary driving force of market expansion in the rural world too seems to have been the increasing number of subpeasants, i. e. of that large segment of peasants who, possessing insufficient quantities of arable land, necessarily had to rely on markets for subsistence: markets for commodities, of course, but also credit, labour and land markets. The growth of early modern economies is thus based upon these structural social and economic changes, which date back to the growing commercialisation of the medieval period and particularly the later Middle Ages.¹¹ Intermediate conclusions on these long-term processes of growing market integration¹² contrast strongly with the picture of inflexibility and inherent stagnation of pre-modern societies that was predominantly at the heart of Malthusian-Ricardian but sometimes also Marxist interpretations. Consequently, theories of commercialisation represent an important and innovative theoretical alternative.

The majority of these new interpretations primarily refer to goods markets. Topics such as the significance of the later medieval and early modern trade fair networks or the trajectory of commodities exchanged in long distance trade and goods, such as textiles or spices, dominated this approach to a large extent.¹³ This focus was due, in part, to the availability of the relevant source material, ranging from account books to customs tariffs and other written documents connected with the trade of commodities and raw materials.

Increasing commercialisation coupled with a long-term decrease in transaction costs and the costs of trade not only boosted goods markets but supported the development of factor markets, too. In the past two decades, this structural imbalance in the research has been addressed systematically within English-language research, with a focus on England,¹⁴ and to some degree in research on the Low Countries,¹⁵ France¹⁶ and a few regions in Italy.¹⁷ Studies on markets, economic specialisation, credit and use of money in the world of Central European peasants are still infrequent and only available for some territories such as the lands of Ottobeuren in the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁸ Comparative analyses of the long-term development and the causes of rural commercialisation, with important consequences for the interpretation of the transi-

11 Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*; Hatcher, Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*; Ghosh, "Rural Economies"; for a local example, see Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren*, pp. 153–154.

12 Britnell, *Commercialisation*; Epstein, *Freedom and Growth*; Persson, *Economic history*.

13 Munro, *Textiles, towns and trade*.

14 Britnell, *Commercialisation*; Britnell, Campbell, *Commercialising economy*; Campbell, "Factor markets"; see Hatcher, Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*.

15 van Bavel, *Manors and Markets*; van Bavel et al., "Organisation of markets".

16 Cursente, *Recent trends*, pp. 78–79.

17 Carocci, *Poteri signorili*; van Bavel, "Markets for Land, Labor and Capital".

18 Sreenivasan, *The Peasants of Ottobeuren*.

tion from feudal to capitalist economy, are still an exception.¹⁹ Solid conclusions linked to the impact of commercialisation phenomena within factor markets require further empirical studies that include other regions.

The essays collected in this volume intend to address this task mainly with a focus on the 15th and 16th centuries, combining an in-depth analysis of selected case studies north and south of the Alps and a discussion of the broader picture of the evolution of rural land markets in pre-modern Europe. The aim of the comparison between four Austrian regional examples, one Czech, one South-Tyrolian and one Italian case study is not to attest a particular region as more progressive and another as more backward, but to reconstruct the elements which prove relevant, decisive or obstructive to the development of flexible land markets. On the one hand, the selected case studies are similar enough with respect to the legal and agrarian framework. On the other hand, the comparison will highlight the specific features of the single case studies. In looking at distinct but similar Central European regions, both the hitherto dominant focus on West European conditions and the all too simplifying conclusions, already established, on the differences between North and South European conditions may be ignored. The result, we hope, will extend our understanding of the late medieval and early modern European land market by illustrating commonly shared patterns and regional differences.

The essays were presented and discussed at a workshop organised by the editors in November 2018 at the Almo Collegio Borromeo in Pavia.²⁰ The conference marked the final stage of the research project *Busy Tenants. Rural Land Markets North and South of the Alps in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times*, which was funded by the Austrian Fonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (FWF) from 2014 to 2018. The majority of the authors were directly involved in the project: Thomas Ertl as principal investigator (in the first two years together with Markus Cerman, and since October 2015, after Cerman's unexpected death, alone); Birgit Heinzle, Johannes Kaska and Samuel Nussbaum as PhD students; Thomas Frank as senior researcher from the beginning of the project until October 2014. We are very pleased that two other colleagues, Janine Maegraith and Tomáš Klír, have joined us with contributions on two Central European regions (South Tyrol, Western Bohemia) that lie outside – though not too far away from – the geographical focus of our case studies. Since the loss of Cerman, for whom late medieval and early modern Bohemia was always a focus of research, Eastern Central Europe has fallen off the horizon of the *Busy Tenants* project. We would also like to thank Emmanuel Huertas, who participated in the workshop in

19 Ghosh, "Rural Economies".

20 Conference report: Samuel Nussbaum, "Trading Peasant Land: Patterns and Strategies of Land Transactions in Late Medieval Central Europe and Northern Italy", November 22–23, 2018, Pavia, *H-Soz-Kult*, January 11, 2019; URL: <www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8053>, accessed on June 28, 2020.

Pavia as a discussant and is the author of the closing remarks, for producing a critical summary.

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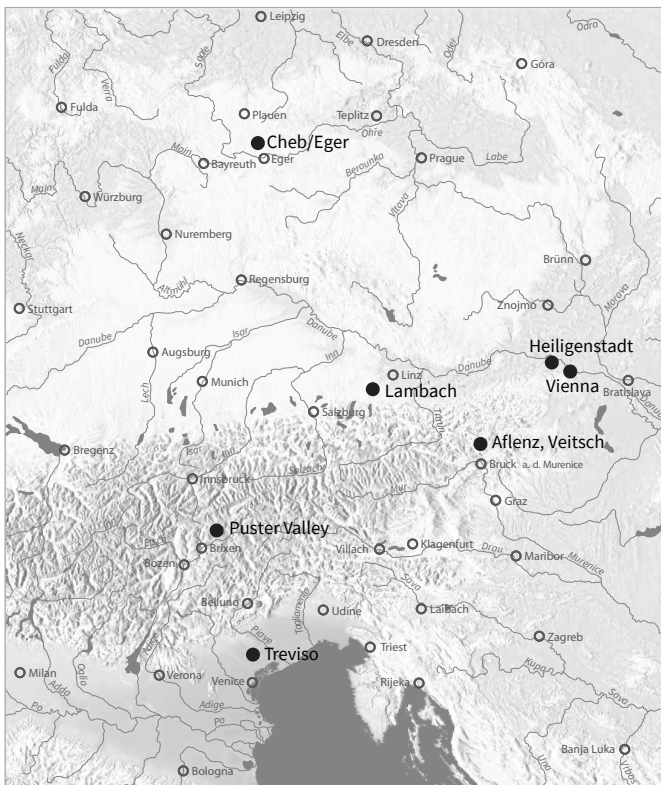


Figure 1 Geographical overview of the case studies. Design: Johann Kammerer (Bozen)

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