The Commercialization of English Society, 1000-1500

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In the end, however, what is remarkable about *Perception and Passion* is not its critical attitude or theoretical stance at all, but its *practice*, for in it we are allowed to watch an elegant and graceful explicator at work, a truly learned and inventive reader who manages—mirabile dictu!—to make Aristotle jump right off the page at you. As a review of basic Scholastic terminology and theory, as a "handbook" of philosophical backgrounds to the *Commedia*, and as an example of source scholarship at its very best, this is a book that every Dantist should read.

Paul Spillenger, University of Central Arkansas


The Commercialisation of English Society is an important new interpretive study by an author who, through his numerous articles and his monograph, *Growth and Decline in Colchester*, has already established himself as one of the preeminent historians of the medieval English economy and society. In his latest work Britnell has chosen the time frame 1000 to 1500 for "convenience," not because it encompassed the beginning and end of anything or because it embraced the transition from a "natural economy" to a "market economy." He points out that there was throughout this period a market sector that touched the lives of almost everyone in England. But obviously the importance of the market sector was greater in 1500 than in 1000. The author has divided his study into three parts: part 1 (1000–1180), part 2 (1180–1330), and part 3 (1330–1500). Within each part he has woven his narrative around the same three topics, which he has entitled "markets and rules," "trade and specialisation," and "lordship." Britnell uses the earliest part of the study for a benchmark. Here he assesses as accurately as possible the scope of commerce during that period. Then he examines, in the two remaining parts, the changes that occurred during the later periods and, wherever possible, relates commercial development to other causes of social and economic change, including demographic change, inequitable distribution of wealth and power, and governmental policies and actions.

In part 1 Britnell describes the informal markets of the rural villages, the established markets of the larger towns, and the fairs and discusses the sources of the rules that governed commercial activity within each of those environments. Seignorial control over markets and fairs increased during the period from 1000 to 1180 as lords realized they could be sources of new revenue. The royal government was still little involved in the regulation of trade. Rules governing trade, especially in foodstuffs, were primarily matters of local or private concern and local regulation. The author takes issue with historians who minimize the importance of money during this early period, arguing that the English economy already had its monetized sectors. Taxes levied by the king were paid in money; manors were leased for annual money rents; and feudal obligations were settled with monetary payments. He explores lordship (the lordship of the Crown, as well as feudal and manorial lordship) primarily from the standpoint of its effect on personal freedom, including the rights to contract, to dispose of land, and to choose an occupation. He argues convincingly that economic conditions, including the high demand for land, limited wage-earning opportunities, and low wages more effectively tied villeins to the land than did the coercive power of manorial lords. Few people were willing to abandon a landholding, even with all the personal disadvantages it entailed, for an uncertain future as a wage earner.

During the early part of the second period (1180–1330) there was a dramatic acceleration in the growth of English commerce. Markets and fairs increased in number, and
most older markets expanded. At the same time, commercial regulations multiplied as the Crown and local authorities promulgated new laws. The population grew rapidly and the money supply increased. Manorial lords, utilizing more efficient estate management, effectively exploited the rising demand for foodstuffs created by a growing urban population. Smaller farmers also utilized the urban markets, but Britnell believes they did so more as a matter of compulsion (the need for money to pay rents and taxes) than out of an entrepreneurial spirit. There were modest technological advances and greater opportunities for nonagricultural wage earning, but the population was growing so rapidly that these positive developments did not result in a general improvement in the standard of living. By the end of the period there is some evidence that older towns were in decline and that new opportunities for nonagricultural employment had faltered. Well before 1330 feudal relationships were giving way to patronage, with dependent relationships defined in written contracts and money stipends granted as compensation for service. The Crown, especially the expanding royal judiciary, became more intrusive. It gave greater protection to the rights of freemen, but the Crown and its functionaries did little to alleviate the problems of villeins, and it burdened the country with an increasing number of rapacious royal officials. Town charters, which were granted in increasing numbers, increased urban privileges, but, at the same time, a division occurred within the towns between the sworn burgesses and the inhabitants who were not burgesses.

The third and most tumultuous period of the study (1330–1500) witnessed a dramatic decline in population caused by famine and disease and the decay of the old marketing structure of markets and fairs. Adverse effects resulting from the demise of the old system were at least partially offset by the emergence of new commercial patterns, which included greater domestic production, woolmen making their purchases directly from the growers, and increased exports. As the population declined, productivity and the standard of living rose. At the end of the period the population of England was smaller than in 1330, but it was more urbanized and work had become more specialized. Although the money supply contracted, it remained adequate for the commercial needs of a smaller population. In the countryside landlords abandoned demesne farming. Leasing of demesne was widespread, and relationships between landlords and tenants were commercialized as money rents replaced labor services and payments in kind, but class distinctions became more numerous and more firmly set both in the countryside and in the towns. Britnell refuses to characterize the period as one of continuous commercial decay and decline. Instead, he argues that the economy suffered through a series of depressions with intervals of revival in commerce.

A reader should not expect to find in this study a significant body of original research. The author certainly put in his archival time for his earlier writing, but for this interpretive work he relied heavily on recent local and regional studies that exist mainly in the form of articles. Britnell's thirty-page bibliography and the extensive documentation of his text are evidence of his mastery of this formidable body of literature. The author's writing style is quite readable. His arguments are persuasive and his conclusions logical.

There is much to admire and little to criticize in this study, but there is at least one thing that will raise questions in the minds of some who read this work—the absence of any discussion of enclosures and their social impact. Enclosures, which began well before 1500, loomed rather large in most earlier economic and social studies but are scarcely mentioned by Britnell. The reader is left to wonder if Britnell believes recent research has shown the enclosure movement to be a matter of little consequence in the history of English commerce and society (which his emphasis on demesne leasing might suggest), or if he has assumed that his readers know all they need to know about enclosure and its economic and social impact. Finally, although the author does not claim that his
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bibliography includes all scholarship pertinent to the topic of the study, its sheer size makes it vulnerable to criticism for omissions. For example, although Britnell mentions the Riccardi, an Italian merchant-banking firm that was active in England in the last half of the thirteenth century, he does not cite Richard Kaeuper’s Society of the Riccardi in England, nor does he include it in his bibliography.

A few omissions in a study of this scope in no way diminish its importance. It is a work that should be included in the collection of every research library, and anyone interested in the history of medieval England will find it useful and informative.

Richard H. Bowers, University of Southern Mississippi


Readers of Richard Bulliet’s earlier books on medieval Islamic history will find Islam: The View from the Edge by turns both familiar and fascinatingly new—familiar, because he bases some of his arguments on the findings of his earlier research dealing with the learned classes of Nishapur, the process of conversion to Islam in the medieval period, and transportation technology; new, because he situates all of that earlier work, and a good deal of new exploration, in a much broader historical framework and uses it to draw important and suggestive new conclusions.

The book is in no sense a survey that tries to cover uniformly all aspects of Islamic history. It is, rather, a sweeping, interpretative essay elucidating a selection of themes that Bulliet deems central to the history of the Islamic community from its origins to today. It implicitly divides the history of the Islamic community into three main phases. The first phase, which takes up the bulk of the book (chapters 1–8), extends from the origins of Islam to about the twelfth century (here and below all dates are “common era”); the second (chapters 9 and 10) spans the period from the twelfth to the eighteenth century; and the third (chapter 11) is sketched in some of Bulliet’s reflections on Islam and the edge in recent and modern times. The book packs many hypotheses and lots of probing historical analysis into its rather brief compass; its range makes summarizing all major points impossible within the space of a normal review, but in what follows I shall try to sketch out some of the main lines of Bulliet’s arguments.

The section on the early period begins by pointing out that early Islam is usually viewed from “the center”—that is, as the story of the Prophet, the evolution of the caliphate, and the spread of Islamic orthodoxy. Bulliet suggests that the “view from the edge”—that is, the view from those areas within the Islamic community (often newly converted to Islam) that lay far from the drama and concerns of the caliphate—gives us a much truer vision of the wide diversity of opinions and practices that early Muslims subscribed to or engaged in, and so serves as an important corrective to the view from the center. Bulliet argues that many new Muslims on the edge—and, indeed, even some not-so-new converts—had at first very little knowledge of Islam or even of the Qur’an, and in many cases no convenient way of securing precise knowledge of their new faith. As a result, these Muslims continued practices and beliefs familiar to them from their previous religious traditions until finally such practices were either rejected as “un-Islamic” or incorporated into the Islamic tradition—a process that took, in many cases, several centuries.

Much of the refinement and self-definition of edge societies in the early Islamic centuries took place in towns and cities, some of them of new foundation. Bulliet finds wanting the idea that the rapid growth of early Islamic cities was the result primarily of better agrarian technology and a greater diversity of crops. He argues instead that the