

The Postan Thesis and Beyond
The English Agrarian Economy c.1200–1348

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any other degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Cameron Barnes

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Preface

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Introduction

The thirteenth century is generally regarded by economic historians as a period of extremely rapid demographic growth in England. It is believed that this increase in population meant that poorer and poorer lands were gradually taken under the plough. This trend, it is argued, led to an increasing disequilibrium between population and resources. In particular, the assumption is made that the ploughing-up of waste lands once used for grazing resulted in a worsening shortage of livestock and a progressive decline in the fertility of the arable land.

The newer arable lands, it is claimed, were unsuitable for long-term cultivation. Inevitably marginal in quality, such lands produced poor harvests after a few years of cultivation and were soon abandoned. The tillage of these mediocre soils therefore failed to compensate for the diminishing fertility of the old arable over the longer term. Demographic crisis could be averted only as long as the colonisation of the waste continued to provide temporary additions to the arable area.

Moreover, as the population grew, the number of smallholders attempting to wrest a living from their shrinking plots rose, and an increasing proportion of the rural population moved closer and closer to the edge of survival. As a consequence of this trend, the peasant community became more and more harvest-sensitive. Famines increased in number and severity. Any shortfall in yields due to a poor season meant a harvest of death and disease.

It is argued also that further opportunities for colonisation ran out sometime around 1300. England was left with a swollen population which it could no longer support. Hence, according to this interpretation, it took no more than a series of bad harvests between 1315–18 to begin a long period of demographic contraction which lasted until the middle of the fifteenth century. The ravages of the Black Death thus did no more than accentuate a trend which had already become apparent decades earlier.

During this period of contraction, the demesne sector of the agrarian economy disintegrated. Faced with rising labour costs, falling prices and diminishing yields, most lords abandoned the “high farming” policies of the previous century. Landowners abandoned their least fertile lands, commuted their remaining labour services, and parcelled out their demesne at fixed rents to lessees who would share risks as well as profits. In this manner, the demographic trends of the thirteenth century led directly to the late medieval transformation of the English rural economy.

This reconstruction of the economic history of England during the period c.1200–c.1348 is most closely associated with the late M. M. Postan. The “Postan thesis” was first proposed in the late

1940s and achieved widespread acceptance among English-speaking economic historians by the early 1960s.¹ It remains the closest thing to an orthodoxy among medieval economic historians in the Anglo-Saxon world.²

Even during its heyday, the Postan thesis never commanded uncritical acceptance. Critics of the Postan thesis in the late 1960s and 1970s included A. R. Bridbury and H. E. Hallam.³ During the late 1970s Marxists such as Robert Brenner and R. H. Hilton attacked Postan's interpretation of economic change in medieval Europe on the grounds that it ignored the issue of feudal exploitation.⁴ In recent years some of Postan's long-standing critics have repeated their objections, while a number of newer academics have proposed qualifications and amendments.⁵

Despite the progress made in the study of medieval English agriculture over the last two decades, there has been no thorough re-assessment of the Postan's interpretation of English agrarian history in the pre-1348 period. Perhaps because of the range of Postan's arguments, critics and commentators have been reluctant to embark on a comprehensive re-examination of the case upon which the Postan thesis rests. Nor has there been any attempt to draw together the different threads of debate or to examine the full implications of more recent research. A thorough re-assessment of the Postan thesis as it relates to the decades before the Plague is therefore long overdue.

This dissertation is intended to provide such a re-examination. The Postan thesis will be reviewed in light of more recent research into English agriculture before the Black Death, and the criticisms made of Postan's model over the last two decades. It will be argued that, although the

¹ For the first use of this term in print see H. E. Hallam, "The Postan Thesis", *Historical Studies*, 15 (1971-73), p. 202.

² For some comments on continuing importance of the Postan thesis as a virtual orthodox, see M. Bailey, "The Concept of the Margin in the Medieval English Economy", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 42 (1989), p. 1. As recently as 1987 a Canadian medievalist, Judith M. Bennett, was able to assert that:

Most opposition [to the Postan thesis] has, however, waned in recent years, with the exception of the idiosyncratic arguments found in H.E. Hallam, Rural England 1066-1348 ... (Judith M. Bennett, Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague, New York, 1987, p. 241)

³ A. R. Bridbury, "Before the Black Death", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 30 (1977), pp. 393-410. A. R. Bridbury, "Thirteenth Century Prices and the Money Supply", *Agricultural History Review*, 33 (1985), pp. 1-21. A. R. Bridbury, *The English Economy from Bede to the Reformation*, Woodbridge, Sussex, 1992, pp. 1-42. Hallam, "The Postan Thesis", pp. 202-20. See also B. F. Harvey, "The Population Trend in England Between 1300 and 1348", *T.R.H.S.*, 5th series, 16 (1966), pp. 23-42.

⁴ R. Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe", in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate*, Cambridge, 1985, p. 10-63. R. H. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism", in Aston and Philpin, *The Brenner Debate*, pp. 119-38.

⁵ H. E. Hallam, *Rural England (1066-1348)*, Brighton, Sussex, 1981, pp. 10-16. Bailey, "The Concept of the Margin in the Medieval English Economy", pp. 1-17.

Postan thesis offers important insights into the pre-1348 period, the opportunities for a successful adaptation to demographic stress before the Black Death were perhaps greater than Postan believed. A case will be made therefore for a more optimistic interpretation of the process of economic change in England during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.