

CHAPTER FIVE
THE FAMILY ECONOMY

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INTRODUCTION: THREE TIME PERIODS

Family economy is the term that signifies the internal organization of production and consumption within the family unit, the *familia*. Throughout the millennium covered in this chapter, the main unit of economic activity was based around a *familia*, but, as one would expect, the meaning of the word changed and meant something different at the end of the period than it had at the beginning. The *familia* of the late Roman empire and the early middle ages was comprised of large numbers of people who were not necessarily related by blood, who were engaged in numerous economic activities, and whose members were subject to the authority of one person, the *paterfamilias*. By the end of the period, the predominant unit of economic activity was still akin to a *familia*, i.e. a group of economic agents that were subject to the authority of a head of the household (who was most commonly the senior male member of the unit), but the family group had shrunk in size to include only a small number of people, whose membership was primarily defined by their place in a hierarchy of blood relations. As the family groups became more exclusive, they gained an advantage in being able to respond more quickly to the economic opportunities and challenges brought about by social, legal and demographic change. It therefore makes sense for the purposes of the present analysis to divide our treatment into three distinct periods which correspond to

these changes.

The earlier period, from the sixth century AD to the eleventh century, was characterised by the gradual diminution of the Roman *familia* and similar Germanic groups. As production became increasingly specialized and market-oriented, the units of production became smaller, and individuals took on more sharply defined roles. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the legal, theological, and philosophical framework of the most influential governmental institutions, i.e. the church and the government administrations of European rulers, increasingly defined the body that was economically active as what we today would recognise as a “family.” This smaller (and more agile) body of producers was able to weather the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century and, as a concomitant, enabled an even smaller group of producers, essentially consisting of individuals, to flourish, at least until towards the end of our chronological period.

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL AGE, CIRCA 500-1000

The change from large units to smaller units is reflected in the changing meaning of the word *familia*. The Roman jurist Ulpian defined family as “the many persons who by nature or law are set under the authority of an individual, such as the *paterfamilias*.”¹ As late as during the reign of Charlemagne, estates as large as 2000 to 4000 acres would be cultivated by *servi*, of whom maybe ten to twenty percent were what we today would call slaves.² When the Venerable Bede used the word *familia* around 700 AD it referred to the *lands* controlled by a *paterfamilias* rather than the *persons* under his control, as did its use in the same century in Eadmer’s *Vita sancti Wilfridi*.

Thus, the great Roman *villae* worked by large gangs of slaves was gradually replaced by smaller peasant holdings worked by families, whose members were bound together by ties of kinship and who enjoyed a larger—though still not total—degree of freedom. These ties could be based both on blood-relationships and by spiritual relationships, such as affinity or adoption. This re-organization of the social structures of society, which was largely in place by the beginning of the twelfth century, encouraged the development of a relatively uniform system of production over the succeeding centuries. This has led some historians to characterize it as a system of “commensurable households,” i.e. that there was one, dominant unit of organization which could be found across social and geographical boundaries. By the end of the eleventh century, the living arrangements of the rich show more similarities with than differences from the homes of the less fortunate.³

Consequently, the word *family* needs to be understood in context: at certain times and in certain areas it encompassed all persons inhabiting farm-steads or peasant holdings found both within and outside the Roman empire, and, as time marched on, these “family units” became increasingly uniform and more similar to the definitions familiar to modern historians.

Peter Laslett suggests that a historian should focus on all those who contributed to the household’s income. The family group should include those inhabiting “the accommodation provided by a building, or in certain cases a number of conjoined or contiguous buildings, [for example] a farmhouse with a yard surrounded with outhouses which can be made suitable for occupation by people.”⁴ Laslett emphasised the importance of including all persons resident on a holding because they functioned for

most purposes as a co-ordinated workforce working towards the promotion of its group-interest, even when such a work-force consisted of members of more than a single kin-group or indeed if they maintained separate arrangements for consumption and housekeeping.

Direct and reliable information on the internal organization of work in these *familiae* is rare and practices varied significantly across Europe's regions. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the words for family and family members were applied to different groups of people according to context and that the use of the word both by modern historians and archaeologists and in contemporary written sources is far from consistent. The lack of an agreed definition of the word *familia* meant that it never formed the basis of a census or even taxation. Theologians or philosophers went so far as to define it, not as consisting of *persons*, but developed the definition that it consisted in the *possessions* of the *paterfamilias* or, as mentioned above, in the lands under his control. We have already mentioned that the Venerable Bede, whose use of the word is the earliest recorded use of the word *familia* in the British isles, mean "lands" and this meaning, or the alternative meaning of "(monastic) community," dominated its use in the British isles well into the eleventh century. It was not until 1057 that William of Malmesbury used the word for the first time to signify a "family related by blood."⁵

Most slaves would have been owned by men, but both slaves and land could be owned by women as well. In England, Æthelgifu, an elite woman who left a bequest of seventy oxen, thirty-four cows, 760 sheep, three herds of pigs, and rents in kind, had more than enough people to work her estate: she freed seventy slaves (including her priest) and bequeathed a number of other slaves to her friends and family.⁶

The archaeological record of Continental Northern Europe demonstrates that a fundamental change took place in the organization of society at the beginning of our period. The basic unit of habitation and of production, which used to be located in *longhouses*, developed into farmsteads and, driven by technological changes such as the introduction of heavy ploughs and crop rotation, farmsteads increasingly organized into villages consisting of habitations of ever smaller numbers of people. Minor farmers and landless workers entered leading farmsteads' households as clients or as slaves. These new farmsteads offered much better opportunities for organizing production effectively and centered around a household comprising both free and unfree laborers.⁷ The typical habitation at the beginning of the early middle ages consisted of a main house and outlying buildings. Humans and livestock shared the main building, which was divided in two sections: one for live-stock and another for humans. It is likely that all humans lived under the same roof, but also that there was a certain amount of social stratification, particularly between slaves and free-men. The main house would be surrounded by smaller huts, which were used for storage or housed workshops for the manufacture of cloth or minor iron works. These houses were often dug into the ground, which meant that they were easy to construct and relatively well insulated.⁸ These fairly simple habitations gradually changed: the animals were moved out of the habitation area and into purpose-built stables which could house up to one hundred cattle. The main building also changed to support larger and more complex living quarters, sometimes with several floor-levels. In the later part of the period, farmsteads were often distributed around a central square and covered a large area. Their status as the centers of production for a well-defined group of inhabitants is confirmed by the fact that

such habitations and their out-houses were commonly surrounded by fences.

As these settlements became larger and concentrated in recognizable villages, the physical, internal organisation of farmsteads became more complex. Large groups of individuals lived, worked and consumed goods under the same roof. Iron-age farmsteads, which had been easily accessed from the main roads of the village, became fenced off from their neighbors in the fifth to sixth centuries, indicating an increased awareness of private property and the farmstead as a focus of production and consumption. They also carried out more diverse economic activity than previously. For example, in Scandinavia the old-fashioned rubbing stone-querns used for grinding flour were replaced during the fourth and fifth centuries by more efficient rotary querns while new, more complex, weaving patterns and a relocation of the activity of looms indicate that cloth was becoming a more important product which was produced not only for domestic consumption but also for the market.⁹ Such changes in the internal organization of production affected both men and women. The increasing market orientation was reflected in the relocation of looms from the main living areas of the farmstead to separate (and better-lit) outhouses. A concomitant to this development must have been the establishment of a class of itinerant merchants and artisans who provided access to markets and provided specialist goods for the farmstead.¹⁰

Despite the relative scarcity of written evidence to document changes in social practices in the period 500-1000 AD, several scholars, including Karl Schmid and Georges Duby, have argued that a fundamental, “feudal mutation” took place around 1000 AD.¹¹ Although they do not argue that social change brought about this “mutation,” it coincided with the refinement of the Church’s teaching and legislation on marriage. In

turn, this intellectual change brought about the birth of a narrower definition of family and kin. Perhaps going farther than the evidence allows, they also argued that this brought about an emphasis on patrilineage and primogeniture in Western Europe.¹² Consequently, Europe saw a mingling of Germanic and Roman customs which took different shapes and progressed at different speeds across the various European regions.

We do not know the details of how inheritance was passed from generation to generation in the early middle ages, nor do we know the extent of female inheritance rights. But later eleventh- and twelfth-century evidence points to women having some inheritance rights: in England, the Domesday Book (1086) shows that daughters could inherit land if there were no surviving male heirs; among the Normans women took inheritance and maintained rights over their inherited lands; and in Scandinavia women enjoyed inheritance rights, although not at the same level as their male siblings. The archeological record suggests that there had been a gradual erosion of female inheritance rights: Danish archeological evidence shows that, in pre-Christian times, women had commonly been buried with as many (and as valuable) grave goods as the men, indeed, some of the most opulent, such as those in Himlingøje og Årslev, were women's graves.¹³

THE HIGH AND LATE MIDDLE AGE (CIRCA 1100-1500)

The twelfth century marks a watershed in European economic and social life. Not only did the period see what some historians have characterized as a legal and economic "revolution" which caused profound economic and cultural change.¹⁴ It also saw the

development of a system of fairs and markets that facilitated regional and international trade and the emergence of cities as centers not only of consumption of goods, but also as the focus of new, proto-industrial modes of production in certain sectors of the economy. Mediterranean cities became entrepôts where merchandise of all kinds was imported, stored or traded and usually exported to other parts of Europe. In Northern Europe the economy was generally based on agriculture but was supplemented in coastal areas by fishing on an industrial scale, and, in the fertile and densely populated Low Countries, by industry. This made for a vibrant economic climate which benefited from the agility of smaller family units that were more flexible than past family organizations, and thus encouraged the consolidation of a smaller, more sharply defined, family based around the conjugal unit as the basic unit of economic production both in towns and in rural areas.

The long twelfth century also saw the culmination of two separate developments: the European *familia* completed its transition from a loosely defined community of producers to a unit of producers bound together by well-defined bonds, either based on relations of blood or of spiritual affinity, and the Church refined its legal thinking in areas of family law. Since the time of Augustine marriage had been an essential part of the regulation of human sexuality, but it had taken almost six hundred years for the focus to shift from the regulation of sexuality to providing firm rules regulating how the conjugal unit was established and maintained.¹⁵ After a period of uncertainty lasting from the ninth to the eleventh century, during which the Church was unable to provide clear guidance on matrimonial matters, the combined effect of the rediscovery of Roman Law, the rise of centers of learning and of the academic re-examination of the Church's legal

corpus which the new centers of learning engendered combined with an increased activity in papal courts in matters of matrimony, made the conjugal unit the nucleus of family life and economy.

But it was not just the Christian community that discussed what constituted a conjugal unit. Jews had established a strong presence in several areas of Europe. Stealing a march on the Christians, they had developed centers of learning and academic analysis by the early eleventh century. Both Jewish and Christian scholars engaged in a lively debate on marriage. Both traditions regarded marriage as a contract and tried to define the limits of acceptable behavior in marriage. The influential rabbi Gershom ben Judah of Mainz (c. 960-1028) issued prohibitions of polygamy and involuntary divorce which came to be generally accepted in medieval European Jewish society.¹⁶ His decision may be seen as a Jewish response to the Christian prohibition of divorce, but it also reflects the reality of the relatively high status of Jewish women in their families. Rabbi Gershom's analysis of the conjugal unit also provided a number of protections of the woman's economic interests. Although Jewish law allowed divorce, Gershom's decisions provided a number of improvements to women's status: a wife could not be divorced against her will after the eleventh century and in Muslim areas she could expect her contract to prevent her husband from taking a second wife against her will. She could prevent him from beating her, travelling abroad without her consent, he could not force her to move to foreign lands, and in some cases, her *ketubah*—a written agreement which outlined the rights and responsibilities of the groom in relation to the bride—even inventoried her dowry.¹⁷

The Sexual Division of Work

Apart from the pictorial record, evidence of the work involved in the family economy during this period is mainly drawn from manorial accounts of hired labor, which means that direct and reliable information on women's work on the holding is relatively scant. Although men and women shared responsibility for maintaining the family economy, they rarely performed the same tasks. Historians argue that this pattern of differences reflected a principle which located women's work in the household and men's outside it.¹⁸ Women fed and clothed the household and men concentrated on field work.¹⁹ Even among rural gentry a similar division existed and in cities women specialized in work carried out inside the family dwelling or manor while men normally monopolized work that took them away from the home.

The majority of the medieval population lived in the countryside, and in rural areas the *household* was the most important center of production—for internal consumption as well as for distribution via the market. Family members worked both for subsistence and for the market. Their work most often took place within the household itself. But even when it did not, e.g. in the case of merchants and tradespeople, the members of a household formed an economic unit which worked to sustain its members as a group and many legal systems reflected this reality.

The kind of family economy through which women gained high labor status can usefully be distinguished from the family economy which produced for subsistence. While the two were similar in their demographic characteristics and in their aims, the “surplus production unit” that we are considering here differs from the subsistence activities that dominated the rural countryside: it did not produce solely for household

use but participated actively in the marketplace.²⁰ It should also be distinguished from the family economy in which members worked for wages to meet household subsistence needs. The market-oriented family economies did not sell the labor of its members. Instead, it produced goods for sale in a monetised economy. Martha Howell names this the "family production unit," but a more appropriate name for such a unit could be a "surplus production unit."²¹ These units were prevalent where money rents were paid out of marketed surpluses and the gendered work of women made a significant and direct contribution from both cultivation and home-manufacture.

The surplus production unit could earn its members high labor status in a market economy because it alone could have full control over the economic resources of production and distribution in a market society.²² Men and women of such units more easily worked independently of one another than men and women of family economies concentrating on subsistence. In the latter, a strict division of labor by sex was the rule. Some historians attribute division of labor to the fact that it insured the most efficient allocation of production time and thus best served the consumption needs of the family, others see it as an expression of patriarchal norms and practices.²³ It is certainly the case that cultural norms continued to distinguish between masculine and feminine work—perhaps because of a need to maintain cultural gender distinctions. Eileen Power may have been the first medievalist to suggest that women's physical capabilities and their roles as mothers made them less suitable for certain work, and this analysis has become a commonplace in the discussion of the assignment of gender roles.²⁴ Christopher Middleton raised a number of issues with this commonplace: while no-one can argue that the biological imperatives of pregnancy, childbirth and wet-nursing may

have restricted the mobility of mothers with young children, this does not explain the extension of tasks such as domestic housework, the rearing of older children, cleaning, and cooking to the unmarried, the widowed and the childless wife. Nor does it explain why the manufacture and repair of utensils and agricultural implements were typically a male responsibility.²⁵

Family economies were defined not only by the common participation of their members in one productive effort but by the way their members shared economic, social, and political resources. In some families all members joined in a common task but each assumed a different aspect of the task. In other families, tasks were shared or interchanged as needed. In still others, each member might engage in a separate business activity, such as fishing or trade.

(Figure 5.1)

In rural societies based on agriculture and animal husbandry adult tasks tended to be divided along recognizable gender lines. Evidence can be produced from numerous sources, literary, pictorial and legal. Extensive pictorial examples of gendered work can be found in medieval frescoes and manuscript illuminations, and the slogan of the English 1381 rebels, “when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” emphasizes the existence of a gendered labor division. A more detailed contemporary source is *The Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband*, an (incomplete) late fifteenth-century version of an older poem, which contrasts the chores of a poor, but “good huswyfe, curteys and heynd goodwife” with those of her husband. The poem originated in the high middle ages, but there is little reason to doubt that the theme and the description of the wife’s contribution to the family economy not would be much

different across time and space—at least since the early period of the medieval agrarian revolution of the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the poem the husband complains that although he has been performing the heavy labor of ploughing the fields with his “lade” and that he had “to walke in the clottes that be wette and mere” all day, his idle wife has not prepared “owr dyner.” He claims that his wife spends her time doing nothing but gossiping with neighbors. She responds and defends herself with a litany of jobs that she has to perform around the house: when she wakes up after a sleepless night with the newborn baby, she finds her husband asleep and the house in a mess. While her husband and the children sleep, she milks the *kine*²⁶ and sends them into the fields. When her husband leaves, she makes butter, wakes the children, feeds the chickens, hens, capons, ducks and looks after their geese who are on the green far away from the house. But that is not all: she bakes and brews ale, she combs the pounded but unworked flax, she separates the chaff from the grain, and she stirs the pot in the kitchen. She combs, cards, and spins wool on the wheel. When her husband objects that these chores cannot be enough to fill her day, she adds that she also makes linen and woolen cloth to make clothes for the children so the family does not have to purchase these things at the market. In addition to all these chores, she has to feed the livestock for a second time before her husband returns: no wonder she has no time to put dinner on the table.²⁷ Male tasks on the farm included ploughing, hedging, ditching, reaping, mowing, spaying and gelding while women’s farm-work included planting, winnowing, gathering straw, stubble and chaff, and weeding. Women also took care of the poultry and the dairy, as we saw in the poem mentioned above. But arrangements varied with the seasons and, when the demands of the agricultural seasons demanded

it, the sexual division of work could be forced by necessity to be more flexible and gender non-exclusive.²⁸

(Figure 5.2)

A rich variety of female tasks can be found in contemporary pictorial representations: The aristocratic manuscript of *Les tres riches heures de le duc de Berry* shows women engaged in most of the seasonal male tasks listed above—such as reaping, binding, mowing, and carrying corn. The *Roman des Girart von Roussillon*,²⁹ a Flemish illuminated manuscript from 1447 shows female stone masons and building workers. Heavy ploughing appears to be the only task from which women were almost totally excluded, but even in this regard there is evidence that women were accustomed to drive the plough oxen on some estates.³⁰ Frescoes in numerous Scandinavian churches, whose intended audience was of much lower social status than that of illuminated books, show women harvesting, churning butter, spinning wool, cooking and looking after children. Hanawalt's analysis of coroners' reports of death by misadventure in thirteenth- to fifteenth-century England adds more documentary evidence that peasant men and women not only undertook different tasks but had separate spheres of activity. She found that most women died in or around their homes, e.g. when fetching water, whereas men were more likely to die in fields or forests, or while harvesting or carting. Women's main sphere of work was the home, whereas men's was fields and forests. However, she also found that during, certain times, men and women performed many of the same tasks outside the home and manorial records show that women did undertake some of the same work as men for pay, such as reaping, binding, thatching, and shearing sheep.³¹

(Figure 5.3)

Whether rural or urban, households were not only affected by the seasons. Their organization also varied depending on their type of land tenure or rent arrangements. For most of the middle ages land-holding fell into two categories. One method was by feudal tenure, where the landlord provided the means of production, e.g. livestock and seeds, and the tenant provided the labor necessary to cultivate lands and livestock and where the peasantry worked the lord's demesne.³² The other form of tenure was land-holding for a fixed money rent. The period from around 1100 to 1500 saw an increasing number of peasant holdings converted from feudal tenure, where rents were due in kind, to a payment of rent in cash or by providing paid laborers to do assigned boon work. The change towards a more monetized economy facilitated a move from simple self-sufficiency to production, often on a considerable scale, for the market.³³ Those families who consisted of larger households or held land for a monetary rent were at a distinct advantage in this development. Their tenurial arrangements enabled them to hire labor to undertake the necessary boon work on the lord's manor and to employ their members in activities at the optimum time when the "core" household members would otherwise have had to perform boon work. They could thus maximize their productivity and produce a surplus that could be sold for money in the market-place and that money could be used to purchase additional agricultural land or farm implements, which would further the household's productivity.³⁴ However, this did not mean that the rural population produced exclusively or even predominantly, for the market. Historians have argued that there was a certain conservatism in the peasant population, but no sensible head of household would gamble on a particular cash-crop which would

expose his family to the vagaries of fluctuating and unpredictable market prices.³⁵ Peasants were also limited by the prevailing relations of production: the head of household was bound by a number of obligations to his neighbors. At times, these restrictions could appear unnecessarily restrictive—even exploitative—for example when the village limited the number and kinds of livestock that could be owned, or restricted the times when pigs could be put out to forage in the commons, or when a lord imposed restrictive levies on certain activities, such as erecting new buildings, employing new equipment or purchasing new livestock.³⁶ But at other times, these restrictions, though onerous, were imposed for the best of intentions. Two examples of these are the payment of tithes to the church, a third of which was destined for the poor, and the Icelandic system that deputized for the ecclesiastical tithes, the *hreppr*, which provided a complex system of exchanges of produce in cases of localised famines and poverty.³⁷

(Figure 5.4)

Smaller households also benefited from gradual developments in inheritance practices in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Changes in two areas were essential in this change: an increasing number of regions abandoned or diluted the inheritance rules of primogeniture (under which the oldest son took possession of the family lands) in favor of partible inheritance (under which all heirs took possession of a part of their family's possessions) and a whole-sale change took place in the nature of feudal rents, which increasingly were paid in money rather than in kind. An increasing number of landholders saw fit to endow their younger sons—and often also their daughters—with smaller parcels of land which could form the nucleus around which sons could build

larger land-holdings by selling or exchanging their lands for money or fields with better soils. This development is seen most clearly in patterns of English land-tenure, but it is clear from the manner in which Scandinavian law codes separate categories of land into patrimony and “bought lands” that such changes were not limited to England. This development of a pattern of smaller land-holdings encouraged the formation of smaller but more intensively managed households and a more active market in land. Chesterton in Cambridgeshire, where one-sixth of sons purchased land during the lifetime of their fathers, is an example of the increasing flexibility in land transfer.³⁸

In rural areas the performance of daily tasks, e.g. raising crops, producing textiles, making clothing, were performed by family members and split along gender lines.³⁹ Among the rural population, married women looked after the family’s pigs and poultry and tended the family’s orchard, a plot of land near the house where the family grew useful domestic produce, such as apples, kale and even wheat. Married women also produced for consumption outside the family: eggs, cured meats, bread and other domestic produce that was abundant enough to be sold at local markets, and brewing ale was virtually a female monopoly.⁴⁰

(Figure 5.5)

The simultaneous development of urban centers of industrial production and a rural hinterland with strong market-oriented manufacturing combined with an increased access to cash to allow women to take a more active (or at least a more visible) role in manufacture and trade.

The interpretation of the voluminous material produced by medieval city authorities has been the subject of many, varied studies. Merry Wiesner attributed the

decreased visibility of women in early modern sources to cultural factors: women's lack of skill and education, and an increased competition from men who refused to work alongside women, combined with the new moral concerns of the Reformation to push out women from the labor market.⁴¹ Martha C. Howell, on the other hand, attributed the same trend to a change in the relations of production, while acknowledging the importance of the social relations of production, i.e. the linkage of male political power to a protection of guild interests.⁴² In an ambitious study of women's changing economic activity in fourteenth and fifteenth-century York, P.J.P. Goldberg argued that the natural disaster of the demographic crisis brought about by the Black Death in the fourteenth century was the cause of changes. Initially, these improved the position of women and increased their economic choices. But the demographic recovery of the fifteenth century enabled men to reclaim the money-based sectors of the economy that had flourished and brought new independence to women in the century after the Black Death, and the improvements in women's freedom brought about by the previous century's demographic and consequent economic changes were reversed.⁴³ Ultimately, as Judith Bennett has pointed out, the analyses of this material have tended to reflect the political and social outlook of the historian performing the analysis.⁴⁴

Much of the monetized wealth released in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was in activities traditionally considered to be female crafts. Ale-making, spinning, and cloth-making were oriented towards the more profitable monetized market and allowed women a solid foot-hold in the market economy. Not only did these activities bring much-needed cash into a household economy where men predominantly worked to provide produce in kind for the sustenance of the family, including its children and

dependants, but there are clear indications that the increasing dominance of urban centres also played a crucial role in internationalizing domestic production (or at least production methods). Developments in the international trade in cloth have been traced in numerous works, and it is clear that this trade played a crucial part in the commercial revolution of the middle ages.⁴⁵ We are used to seeing the production of ale as being at best a regional activity, but, as is the case of the medieval production of wine, there are indications that ale produced in one European region was exported and not consumed locally. This point is vividly illustrated by the story of the thirteenth-century Danish bishop Gunnar of Viborg who took the ale-induced stupor of a peasant who had fallen asleep under his pulpit as an occasion to warn his flock of the dangers of consuming the recently-introduced, much stronger Saxon ale in its new and larger measures.⁴⁶ What we can see from surviving English manor court records is that the brewing of ale was a profitable side-line in the family economy that could provide a substantial supplement to the family, and sometimes even provide its main income. The sale of forty-three gallons (about 190 litres or 50 US gallons) of ale per week could provide an English alemaker with a profit of around ten pence; in other words, enough to sustain the alemaker *and* her family with enough money to purchase the necessities of life.⁴⁷

The most complete and detailed sets of contemporary records for the medieval urban family and its economy is the 1427 Florentine tax survey known as the *catasto*.⁴⁸ The *catasto* included information on the age and gender of the household head, his (or her) trade, the value and status of their property, the number of their dependents and their relation to the householder. By offering reductions of 200 florins for each dependant to heads of households the *catasto* encouraged a comprehensive and

detailed listing of household members.⁴⁹ The *catasto* gives evidence of a dynamic and ever-changing household structure, but also confirms male dominance in the family economy: men headed households, sons remained with their blood-kin (at least until their marriage after the age of twenty-five) and sons may have been encouraged to look after their parents. The *catasto* demonstrates how a high proportion of married men were not counted as heads of their households but were listed as dependant on an older male head of household. This older male was often their father or father-in-law. This trend was most pronounced in rural areas where less than ten per cent of households were headed by men under 28 years of age.⁵⁰ As a consequence, the Florentine household might often extend over three generations. Virtually all Florentine young women married, but remarriage on the death of their husbands was rare.⁵¹

The Family Economy in Secular Law (Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries)

The household was managed by its senior members who both resided with the household and had legal control of its assets. Ideally they employed the household wealth to support all the members of the household. Under English common law, no community of goods between a husband and wife existed; but it should be emphasized that, although the husband controlled virtually all the assets owned by either his wife or himself, he could not legally alienate these without the consent of his wife. Lands acquired by wives either before or during marriage were jointly owned by the original members of the family, i.e. the husband and wife. But joint ownership did not imply equal control. Perhaps women are best described as subordinate co-tenants with their husbands who acted as the guardians of their property, but medieval wives were not

only workers but also managers who supervised the other members of the household: children, servants, laborers, and adopted members of the family. In towns, the married couple also shared responsibilities. Although women appear to have had limited rights to enter into contracts and to alienate the family's property, economic actors often found ways to circumvent the legal limitations imposed on women in order to enable women to participate to an almost full extent in their husband's business. English laws allowed them to declare themselves *feme sole* for the purposes of business transactions and the limitations placed on Danish women's rights to enter into business were rarely enforced.⁵² Sometimes women even continued to run a family business which we would today call heavy industry when their husbands died.⁵³

English law thus made the family into a unit in which the husband controlled the joint wealth of a group of producers. This utilitarian approach to family wealth was explicit in Scandinavia where an institution, the *felág* or *fællig*, which originated in commerce was adopted in the late twelfth century to provide a framework for inheritance rules. Originally the *fællig* had been a temporary business partnership: a group of investors nominated a single member to conduct all transactions with their joint wealth. This *fællig* was established when a merchant set out on a business venture and it was dissolved when the venture came to an end. Individual partners were prohibited from entering legally binding contracts on behalf of the *fællig*, and, should they wish to withdraw from it, they were obliged to withdraw their *entire* share and not only a fraction of their contribution. A *fællig* also extended into contracts of employment in some areas. For instance, according to the Swedish *Östgöta*lov, the *bryde* (reeve) was in a temporary *fællig* with his master: rather than receiving wages for his work, his payment

consisted of a fixed proportion of the annual surplus of the estate. By the late twelfth century, Danish law adapted the *fællig* to a new use, namely to define the people who had rights to inheritance of movable goods. The innovation in Danish law was two-fold: 1) the *fællig* came into being automatically when a couple married, and 2) the *fællig* excluded patrimonial land and included *only* movable goods, i.e. chattels, lands that the family unit had purchased during the parents' lives, and, in some areas, gold.⁵⁴ Based around the conjugal unit, membership was not defined by blood-ties or by ties of affinity. Although the conjugal unit, consisting of spouses and their children formed the core, the guardian (*husbonde*) of the *fællig* (the husband of the original conjugal unit) could adopt members who henceforth became full members. In contrast to earlier Scandinavian uses, membership of the *fællig* was intended to be for life, although the *husbonde* could protect his wealth. If a member's criminal activity threatened to seriously harm the financial standing of the unit the *husbonde* could expel a member, regardless of whether he was related by blood or adopted. Land remained the property of the families of the spouses and, if a marriage was without children, the family of the spouses resumed possession of the ancestral lands. If the union had produced children, ancestral land was divided among surviving children and the surviving spouse.⁵⁵

These laws were written down in the late twelfth to late thirteenth centuries, a time rapid of legal development, when the Church established firm control over some aspects of marriage and most European kingdoms codified legal practices. Though the texts originate in the North, they show trained legal minds familiar with the latest European jurisprudence at work, both in terms of sophistication and in terms of the institutions that developed in the laws. For example, echoing previous centuries' use of

the word *familia*, Anders Sunesen's early thirteenth-century Latin paraphrase of the Law of Scania, *Liber Legis Scanie*, defines the *fællig* as those "who were partners of a community of goods," *qui fuerint commvniū bonorum consortes*.⁵⁶ In its composition and its function it shows a remarkable similarity not only to the family defined by English law but also to the Mediterranean business unit known as the *commenda*.⁵⁷ But it broke new ground when it was applied to a conjugal unit. Thus, by the thirteenth century, secular laws across Europe worked on the assumption that the core of the family unit was the married couple, and that, once established, their household served as a unit where goods and services were prepared for sale and where the preparation of goods and services for domestic use took place.

Most family units were producers of agricultural goods intended principally for subsistence, but in urban households the emphasis was on market production. However, even in the rural economy many goods made for domestic use were also sold in the market: ale, textiles, and clothing—goods that were often produced and not needed by the household—were marketed locally, while goods intended for sale were consumed by household members in times of need.⁵⁸ As the family changed, grew, and contracted individual family members moved back and forth between the two spheres despite some attempts by local customary rules to limit the impact of this change.⁵⁹ Commercial brewing of ale was a virtual female monopoly, but as the middle ages progressed women increasingly found alternatives, e.g. by making cloth for the market or by spinning woolen yarn for merchants. Within the medieval family economy specialized labor was performed by individual family members who would share the fruits of their labor with their family or household. Thus, the family can be said to be a

multi-generational group-producer in which capital and land was provided by the older generations and labor was provided by the younger generations. Initially, especially in rural areas, this kind of “family” appears to have produced mainly for the subsistence of its members. But as the European economy grew in size and complexity members produced goods not only for domestic consumption but also to sell and trade in a monetized market-place. The Low Countries and Northern France were part of a complex economic circuit built around trade and the manufacture of cloth, while the lands and cities that were part of the sphere of influence of the Hanseatic League engaged in both bulk international trade (which was at a steady level throughout the year) and hectic seasonal trade based on the migration of fish which, in the case of a single fair in Scania, produced an estimated annual 300.000 barrels of salted herring and provided seasonal work for thousands of households and individuals in the months just after the summer harvest.⁶⁰ Family economic activity was thus not limited to agricultural products: the family engaged in the provision of fish also fished, manufactured barrels for transport, filleted and salted fish, and provided other services for a larger market-place. Although we know that intensive fishing took place from the early eleventh century, the markets and fairs only leave documentary evidence from the early twelfth century. From this we can see that fishing was truly international: in coastal areas in the Baltic and in English towns such as Scarborough, King’s Lynn, Whitby, and Ravenser fleets of Danish, German, Flemish, and French fishing boats landed prodigious amounts of fresh and fish were prepared for export.

In the Baltic, the fishing industry attracted large numbers of workers eager for the cash that could be earned in the preparation of fish. These markets and fairs were

dominated by men, but the fishing industry also attracted its fair share of women, either as fish gutters or prostitutes.⁶¹ Though there are indications that the attraction of the fishing industry was strong enough to interfere with agricultural production when the seasonal work of the fairs coincided with the demands of the agricultural year, tensions between the two sectors were mostly limited to skirmishes.⁶²

The Demographic Crises of the Late Middle Ages (*circa* 1300-1500)

The demographic crises of the fourteenth century can be seen as the proving ground for the relatively new family economy. The short period of economic realignment that followed the famines of the early part of the century and the plagues of the middle of the century demonstrated the economic benefits and flexibility of the family economy based on the conjugal unit. Encouraged by an increasingly monetized economy and demonstrating that the old system of feudal tenure in which a reluctant tenant peasantry provided compulsory work on the lord's demesne was no longer fit for purpose, the thirteenth century had seen the beginnings of a major change which became dominant in the readjustments of the fourteenth century. This was the change from feudal tenure to freehold and caused the development of a lively market in land, which, on the one hand, enabled peasants to assemble much larger holdings, and, on the other hand, created a large population of laborers who worked the land for money and thus could be employed in the most productive way within the overall economy.⁶³

When a series of plagues hit Europe in the later part of the fourteenth century a re-adjustment of the family economy took place. There are a number of indicators of this change. For example, English sources indicate that life expectancy fell during the

fifteenth century despite the fact that staples, such as bread, were more abundant and the diet generally healthier than before, and yet mortality rates indicate that the population was aging and that family sizes decreased. An example of this is that a sample of English wills shows that the average family size in Kent declined from 4.08 in the fifteenth century to 3.90 in 1501-1530. This might have been caused by several traits in English population patterns, including a high proportion of the population remaining celibate or a rise in the age at which women started their reproductive careers, or an increased mobility among the peasantry which saw heirs increasingly selling their land rather than continuing to cultivate family lands in a particular area.⁶⁴

Whatever the causes, the symptoms were clear: after the plague, peasants expected improvements in their lots and in several ways their demands were met. The most famous expression of this trend is the passing of several instances of legislation which limited wages to pre-plague levels: the “Statute of Laborers” in England immediately followed the introduction of the plague in 1349-1351 and similar statutes were enacted in France and Castille in 1351 and in Bavaria in 1352.⁶⁵ While they were temporarily successful in suppressing wages, a series of uprisings across Europe ensured that the trend in wages was generally upwards. The plague also caused a weakening of family bonds and a re-alignment of the family economy. Young people were increasingly able and willing to find work or land away from their homes and women in particular were able to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by the demographic contraction.⁶⁶ P.J.P. Goldberg has argued that recovery after the onset of the plague occurred in several stages, some of which offered new opportunities for women. By extension, this meant that for a time the family economy went through a

period of reorganisation before ultimately returning to the status quo. Thus, immediately following the first outbreaks of the plague, work opportunities were relatively good. The high mortality created a shortage of labor which encouraged a, largely successful, demand for higher incomes, as evidenced by the need for repeated wage-restriction legislation. It also offered new opportunities for women as the manufacturing sector of the economy grew. As repeated outbreaks of plague disproportionately affecting the young swept across Europe, women were increasingly freed to join the labor force. Increased female economic independence led to a lower rate of marriage and a higher age at marriage. Women increasingly took over better paid roles in the economy and the pay gap between men and women decreased, though it was never eliminated. As late marriage became more common, the birthrate failed to keep up with mortality and this prevented a demographic recovery.

A contraction in the market for their goods eventually pressed out women from the labor market by the middle of the fifteenth century. After more than a century of falling marriage rates, and as a consequence of decreasing mortality from epidemics, a smaller European population, but one with the same age-structure as pre-plague populations, could not sustain the consumption of the relatively expensive goods produced in the sectors where women had increased presence. Women were then gradually pushed out of manufacture and into service and marriage and the previous structure of the family economy, in which men mostly produced for the market and women were mostly active in activities related to the internal household economy, reasserted itself.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

The millennium from 500 to 1500 saw substantial changes in the organization of the wider economy and the family economy. At the beginning of the period, it would have been impossible to identify a specific *European* family pattern, but by the beginning of the thirteenth century family structure and family production were recognizably similar across all of the continent. From 500 to around 1050 Europe saw unparalleled diversity in the typology of household organization. Modern historians have struggled to make sense of these and have suggested words like “households” or “housefuls” to describe the units contemporaries described as *famililae*, a single word that covered a multitude of meanings regarding land ownership, power relations, and forms of slave labor and serfdom. But from around the middle of the eleventh century the word was increasingly used to signify similar principles of household organization. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe saw an almost universal adoption of the meaning of the word defined by the Church as an ecclesiastically sanctioned conjugal unit and its progeny. This intellectual change in meaning mirrored a trend in the economy towards smaller units of production and consumption. The word *family* combined eleventh- and twelfth-century refinements in legal thinking to reflect the transformation from the early medieval *familia*, which had consisted of a multitude of unrelated persons, to a *family* based around the conjugal unit. Reorganization into smaller units of production made it easier for individuals and families to respond more effectively to economic and social change. The demographic crises of the fourteenth century bear witness to this efficiency as the family unit responded to rapid fundamental changes in the economic base: the relatively new family unit based on the intellectual understanding of twelfth-century legal scholars

responded well to the challenges of that century: new ways of organizing the economy, including boosting the manufacturing sector and increasing the participation of women in the labor force ameliorated the worst consequences of the famines and plagues of the fourteenth century and, when demographics changed in the fifteenth century, the family unit absorbed the previously economically active female labor force into the domestic sector of the economy. Although the latter development may not seem desirable from a twentieth-century perspective, it set the scene for further growth in the European economy in the Early Modern period.

1. Dig. 50.16.195, qtd in Herlihy 1983: 118.

2. Bautier 1971: 44–45; Boutruche 1968: 130–131.

3. Herlihy 1985; Herlihy 1987: 8.

4. Laslett and Wall 1972: 36.

5. Latham 1975–2013, s.v. *familia*.

6. Whittle 2016: 314. The will is reproduced in Whitelock 1968.

7. Hedeager 1992: 246.

8. Randsborg 1980: 61–69. A more detailed discussion of the literature which incorporates both modern interpretations and (relatively) recent archaeological reports is available in Danish: Liebgott 1989, 15–51.

9. Hedeager 2002.

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10. Hedeager 1992: 242–245.
 11. Duby 1978; Duby 1983; Schmid 1977; Stone 2013.
 12. Stone 2013: 230–231; Herlihy 1987.
 13. Hedeager 1980.
 14. Lopez 1971; Berman 1983.
 15. For an overview of the development of legislation, see Thomas Kuehn’s contribution to this volume.
 16. Shevet HaKehusi 1:315:1. An amendment to this ordinance forbidding polygamy provided that in case the wife was insane the rule might be abrogated with the written consent of a hundred rabbis from three different provinces (e.g., Francia, Normandy, and Anjou) Jacobs and Eisenstein 1901–06.
 17. As an aside it is worth noting that the same provision, i.e. protecting a woman from forcible relocation, can be found in the early twelfth-century Icelandic law code, *Grágás*.
 18. Illich 1983.
 19. Cf. Hanawalt 1986; Bennett, J. M. 1984.
 20. Moore 1986.
 21. Howell 1986. cf. Middleton 1979: 150.
 22. Middleton 1979: 153.
 23. Illich 1983.
 24. Power 1926: 412.

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25. Middleton 1979: 155. Cf. Bennett, H. S. 1937: 229–230.
 26. i.e. the lactating livestock, such as cows, sheep, goats
 27. Anon. 1845. Available online at <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/salisbury-trials-and-joys-ballad-of-a-tyrannical-husband> (accessed 1 August 2018).
 28. Middleton 1979: 153.
 29. *Roman des Girart von Roussillon*, Cod. 2549, f.167v, 1447, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.
 30. Power 1975: 71–74; Casey 1976: 227–231; Hilton 1947: 145–147.
 31. Hanawalt 1986.
 32. demesne, i.e. the land retained by the lord of the manor for his own use and sustenance.
 33. Dyer 2002: 163.
 34. Britnell 1996: 199–201.
 35. Britnell 1996: 202.
 36. Dyer 2002: 168.
 37. Tierney 1959: 96–97; Pedersen 1999.
 38. Dyer 2002: 158–159; Pedersen 1992.
 39. Middleton 1979; Illich 1983; Hanawalt 1985; Hanawalt 1986.
 40. Bennett, J. M. 1996; Bennett, J. M. 1987.

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41. Wiesner 1986.
 42. Howell 1986.
 43. Goldberg 1992b.
 44. Bennett, J. M. 1988.
 45. The literature is too comprehensive to list here, but a few works are essential: Lopez 1971; Fryde 1983; Postan 1966; Carus-Wilson 1967; Power 1941.
 46. Gertz 1970, 272–273.
 47. Bennett, J. M. 1996: 22–24; Dyer 2002: 170.
 48. The *Catasto* is available online: <http://cds.library.brown.edu/projects/catasto>. The Poll tax returns are published in Fenwick 1998–2005.
 49. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985: 10.
 50. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985: 302.
 51. Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber 1985: 311–312 & 330–331.
 52. Pollock and Maitland 1968; Dübeck 1978.
 53. Caroline Barron gives the example of a London bell founder's widow who produced bells and ran her husband's bell-foundry after his death. Barron 1989.
 54. Jørgensen 1959–1977; Blom 1959–1977; Yrwing 1959–1977; Nitemaa 1959–1977. Pedersen 1992 analyses the *fællig* for an English-speaking audience.
 55. The classic study of medieval Danish inheritance law is Iuul 1940, but cf. Pedersen 1992; Arnórsdóttir and Nors 1999. The fact that Danish inheritance law shows some

similarities to Muslim inheritance law, particularly to the Q'uran's sura 4:11 governing the distribution of inheritance between male and female beneficiaries, deserves further investigation.

56. *Liber Legis Scaniae* Chapter 15. The most accessible text and translation can be found in Tamm and Vogt 2016.

57. Udovitch 1962, 198.

58. Moore 1986.

59. For examples of how Danish law attempted to temper the impact of changing circumstances brought about by criminal liabilities or foreign trading ventures, see Tamm and Vogt 2016. For an analysis of the rules, cf. Pedersen 1992; Pedersen 1999.

60. Hørby 1972, 75–76; Jahnke 2000. At least another 100,000 barrels of herring should be added to this total from the Limfjord area in Jutland (Holm 1996).

61. Hørby 1972.

62. Jahnke 2000; Hybel 2003. Barret, Locker and Roberts 2004.

63. Dyer 2002: 137–145, 174–177.

64. Dyer 2002: 276.

65. Myers 1969: 993–994; Lütge 1972: 349–350. Perry Anderson characterised the Statute of Laborers as “among the most glacially explicit programmes of exploitation in the whole history of European class struggle” Anderson 1978: 201–202. But compare his assessment to Dyer's more balanced characterisation Dyer 2002: 282.

66. Dyer 2002: 280.

67. Goldberg 1992b: 345–350.