

6. Trade, urban hinterlands and market integration, 1300–1600: a summing up

CHRISTOPHER DYER

Historians of towns and trade must take advantage of a number of geographical theories.¹ These include the identification of towns as central places, which serve the commercial, administrative, religious and cultural needs of their ‘spheres of influence’. Towns are formed into hierarchies: their place in the ranking order is reflected in the scale, value and variety of their trade. Towns of different size and functions form a network, through which goods are distributed. All towns serve as market centres for their immediate locality, but larger towns tend to supply manufactured and traded goods to the smaller market towns in their vicinity. In turn the local markets act as collecting points for primary products (especially foodstuffs) which are then traded up to the larger or ‘higher order’ centres. English speakers have borrowed the German word ‘*hinterland*’ to describe the marketing zone around a town, but we have been reminded in one of these essays that the inner territory which provides the town with its main food supply is correctly called the ‘*umland*’, and *hinterland* refers to a more extensive district in which a wider range of goods are traded.

If the urban system was at a ‘primitive’ stage of its development it would lack a fully formed hierarchy, or the network would not work smoothly. Marketing would take place in ‘periodic’ venues rather than in permanent towns, and often exchange would involve some degree of political control and compulsion. Such an ‘immature’ urban system would usually be associated with an underdeveloped urban sector and a low proportion of town dwellers. A ‘mature’ urban system could be defined as one in which relationships between towns, their place and functions in the ranking order, and the flow of trade among towns and between town and country accorded with the models of central place theory. Historians benefit from these geographical concepts, and can contribute to them a concern for chronology. They have a special interest in the emergence of a mature system, because of its implications for the character of the whole economy and society.

The essays in this symposium are all concerned with the commercial role of towns in the later middle ages, and all of them are contributing to a debate about the nature of the medieval urban economy. The questions that they are all addressing is ‘to what extent are theories of central place, urban hierarchy and urban networks applicable to our period?’, and they are all implicitly making a judgement about the degree of ‘maturity’ that can be ascribed to the medieval urban system.

Britnell provides an overview of the whole subject, and sets an agenda for the other contributors. He has reacted to Masschaele’s pioneering book which argues that the

¹ H. Carter, *The Study of Urban Geography* 3rd edn. (London, 1981), pp. 59–141.

marketing system of c. 1300 had achieved a high degree of development. Britnell urges us not to overrate the degree of urban influence on the economy before the Black Death. The urban sector, he argues, was not big enough to have a dominant effect: most consumers (especially the numerous smallholders earning wages and buying food) lived in the country, and a great deal of exchange was conducted through informal channels, not in urban market places. The hierarchy of towns was unstable, with many places rising or falling over the two centuries after 1300. Indeed the much maligned fifteenth-century economy seems to have provided a more stable basis for towns, with better-off peasants providing a more consistent market for manufactured goods than the wage earners, whose numbers were diminishing. The towns articulated a more sophisticated trading system, for example serving the needs of the 'rural' textile industry. When growth returned in the sixteenth century, there was no reversion to the pre-1350 marketing system, but instead the expansion was built on fifteenth-century foundations. Britnell argues that an urban system took a long time to develop. There were symptoms of underdevelopment and fragility in c. 1300, and by c.1500 the economy had increased in maturity.

Historians tend to be influenced by the regions that they know best, and differences in historical interpretation often arise from real regional differences as well as from the approach of the researcher. Britnell's view is coloured by the special character of Essex, in which the largest town, Colchester, went through a phase of growth in the fourteenth century, against the general population trend, and then suffered decline in the fifteenth. Colchester's trading relations were with London and continental Europe, and its relations with local market towns, such as Coggeshall, do not seem to have been in accord with the usual patterns of an urban hierarchy. By the fifteenth century the rise of cloth making on the Suffolk-Essex border transformed the urban scene by making towns out of places like Nayland and Dedham.

My own view of this period is bound to be conditioned by the midland region of which I have the most intimate knowledge.² The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were a period of great instability and innovation, which is no great discovery as that period is known everywhere as one of rapid urban growth. We tend perhaps to think of this as a time when new towns were added to the urban network by ambitious lords, and forget the many casualties. In the west midlands some boroughs, like Bretford in Warwickshire or Newborough in Staffordshire, both founded in the thirteenth century, failed to thrive as urban centres. They left an indelible mark because the tenants were given the privilege of burgage tenure, and the plots granted to the early burgesses survived. Excavations have recently revealed a failed effort at town foundation which has left no trace in the documents, in the form of streets and plots laid out in the twelfth century next to the castle of the Boteler family at Oversley in south Warwickshire. A successful town had grown up nearby at Alcester at about the time that this early foundation was abandoned in the early thirteenth century. The period must have been a turbulent one as new

² Most recent works on this region are C. Dyer, 'Market towns and the countryside in late medieval England', *Canadian Journal of History*, 31(1996), pp. 17–35; J. Laughton and C. Dyer, 'Small towns in the east and west midlands in the later middle ages', *Midland History*, 24 (1999), pp. 24–52. My comments on the east midlands here depend on the work of Dr Jane Laughton for the ESRC-funded project on 'Urban Hierarchy and Functions in the East Midlands in the Late Middle Ages' (no. R0002359022).

boroughs and market centres encroached on the existing ‘spheres of influence’ of established towns. In south Warwickshire trade was dominated by Warwick itself between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. Alcester and Stratford-upon-Avon carved commercial territories c.1200 out of the southern end of Warwick’s hinterland, no doubt cutting out potential rivals such as Oversley. Their primacy was in turn threatened by the next generation of new towns, notably Henley-in-Arden and Shipston-on-Stour, though they remained very small, and other late borough foundations failed. In some regions foundations of the late thirteenth century, like Winchelsea or Hull, though at a disadvantage because they were tardy arrivals, might still overtake older established places in their locality. In other words the thirteenth century saw some ruthless competition between urban centres, in which weak towns were driven into obscurity or even extinction. Here indeed was a period of instability, in which the network was still being completed. The lower tier was still being added to the hierarchy, and the weaker towns were eliminated, through a process resembling natural selection.

Soon after 1300 the upheaval was over. The urban system had shed most of the weaklings, and had little room for further new towns. Most of the larger towns of c.1300 were those that were to dominate the midland hierarchy until the eighteenth century — Coventry, Bristol, Shrewsbury, Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester in the west, Lincoln, Stamford, Boston, Leicester, Nottingham and Northampton in the east. Among the larger towns some rose in the hierarchy in the fourteenth century, most spectacularly at Coventry, which makes a close parallel for Colchester, and others, such as Stamford, declined, but one is more impressed by the overall stability among the larger towns in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than dramatic changes in fortune. Even Coventry, which went through a great crisis in the 1520s, in its reduced state remained the largest inland town in the midlands, and still functioned as the regional capital, looking both to east and to west. Among the smaller towns in the east midlands there were remarkably few changes between c.1300 and the early sixteenth century. In the west the main change, apart from the demise of a few minor centres such as Chipping Dassett (Warwickshire), was the rise of new small towns in the areas of industrial growth, producing the clothing centre of Stroud, and a commercial focus for the iron-working settlements in south Staffordshire and north Worcestershire at Stourbridge.

The general lesson that can be drawn from this brief regional survey is that soon after 1300 a stable and enduring pattern had emerged in regions, such as the east midlands, where the countryside had a predominantly agrarian economy. There were most likely to be changes when the urban network was forced to adapt to the spread of rural industry, but even then the earlier hierarchy was modified rather than transformed. But this generalization is no doubt inappropriate to other regions. For example Devon and Cornwall, with their dozens of tiny towns, appear not to have achieved stability and ‘maturity’ by 1300, and in Devon at least the lower ranks of the urban hierarchy were changed a good deal by the growth in cloth making.³ A recent study of the towns of south-east Wales has plausibly argued for the weak development of an urban hierarchy in that region, in which the small towns depended on a distant higher-order centre,

³ H.S.A. Fox, ‘Medieval urban development’, in R. Kain and W. Ravenhill (eds.), *An Historical Atlas of South-West England* (Exeter, 2000), pp. 424–31.

Bristol. The fortunes of the small towns were closely connected with the political influence of the local magnates, and such was the fragility of the urban economy that Trellech, an apparently prosperous iron-working centre, collapsed in the later middle ages.⁴

Turning to the other papers presented to this symposium, let us see how they can help us resolve these problems of recognizing maturity in the commercial system. Galloway has used prices as a means of assessing the degree of fragmentation of the market. He shows that Gras, the pioneer of this method of investigation, who used rather poor quality data, was in error when he divided England into distinct corn marketing regions. The now formidable statistical collections analysed by Galloway suggest that by the early fourteenth century a single grain market existed in southern England, in which prices of wheat moved in a synchronized fashion. This is not just true of manors in different parts of the south-east, it is also found when prices in London and Exeter are compared. Setting aside the occasional anomalies, this supports the view that a reasonably efficient marketing network had been established, and that in the specific case of London, the largest centre of consumption, the hierarchy worked as the model predicts, with local market towns such as Faversham acting as collecting points for grain to be sent on to the capital.

London's role as a supplier as well as a consumer is revealed by the debt records investigated by Keene. The metropolitan role in distributing relatively expensive imported and manufactured goods seems to have been formed by the early fifteenth century, and developed further in the sixteenth century. We await the analysis of the early fourteenth century pattern, but it would be surprising if London merchants had not already by that date established themselves as the main source for the provinces of spices, high quality textiles and similar commodities. The common pleas debt records of 1424 and 1570 reflect the distributional role of the towns further down the hierarchy. The 'chapmen' from provincial towns such as York or Northampton who owed money to London merchants were in their own society regarded as prosperous mercers. When we turn to the records in the provinces we can see these merchants from the large towns selling goods either directly in small town markets, or supplying the petty traders who sold small parcels of dyestuffs, for example, to country cloth-makers. Nightingale's debt records reflect that relationship between London and Norwich, which at least for part of the early fourteenth century served as a provincial capital with close commercial links with its hinterland. This can be defined as extending for a radius of twenty miles, with a tendency to have stronger connections with the villages and small towns to the east of the city. The London merchants had a more complex part to play in the large scale provincial rural cloth industries, such as that in the south-west, and Keene shows how they were involved in advancing credit, presumably in connection with cloth sales. We are impressed again with the evidence from the common pleas debts for the extent of London's connections. For luxury and semi-luxury goods the whole of England formed London's hinterland. London also had its '*umland*' in the sense that the debts reflect the capital's close connections with its immediately surrounding countryside from which the bulk of its food was carried.

⁴ P. Courtney, *Medieval and Later Usk* (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 111–37.

Support for the central place model comes also from the analagous continental cases of Cologne and Nuremberg. They developed at some distance from other large towns. They obtained their everyday foodstuffs from their immediate vicinity, such as the ‘garlic lands’ near Nuremberg, and the intensive corn growing villages in Cologne’s neighbourhood, but cattle and timber were brought from specialized sources of supply at a distance. This accords with the model of von Thunen in showing that towns encourage in the rural neighbourhood the development of zones specializing in particular crops. The smaller towns lived under the shadow of their large neighbours, in the case of Cologne a number of these were involved in industrial specialization. Both German cities were industrial centres, and raw materials or semi-finished goods were also traded from the hinterland. The large towns were sources of capital and international trade links, and contained a much larger number of occupations and a more pronounced hierarchy of wealth than the small places. So close was the web of interconnections between town and country in Germany that historians talk of an ‘economic unit’, a phrase that might be difficult to apply to any of the regions around larger English towns. English regions are more untidy — they overlap and their borders lack clear definition.

A number of the papers touch on the technology of the market which played such an important part in creating an efficient commercial system. Galloway refers to the work of Kowaleski on the Exeter grain market, and shows that a sudden hike in price for wheat in 1319–20 created a remarkably rapid response. Within a few months shiploads of grain, which was not the easiest cargo to assemble and deliver, were arriving at the port of Topsham from as far afield as East Anglia and Normandy. This must imply the existence of an intelligence network which could spread news of local shortages. Kowaleski has been one of the few scholars working on English sources to discuss the problem of ‘transaction costs’ and to research business partnerships among traders.⁵ These, or at least those that went wrong, must lie behind many of the larger debts analysed by Keene and Nightingale. Many of these deals were done in private. As Britnell reminds us, trade was not channelled exclusively through the towns, and agricultural produce, to take the obvious example, was sold in the manor house or at the peasant’s door by private treaty. This direct method of conducting business has been claimed by some economic historians as an invention of modern times, and an advance on the meeting of buyers and sellers in a weekly market. Implicit in all of the contributions is the relative ease with which money, letters (or at least messages), and the traders themselves could travel, and of course the goods, many of them bulky and heavy, were being brought long distances. By c.1300 much had been done to bring down the costs of transport. The building of bridges and wharfs, the use of horses, and the development of more efficient shipping, had made possible the operation of the trading system.⁶

The contributions to this symposium are therefore presenting a good range of evidence that the commercial system had reached a high degree of maturity by the early fourteenth

⁵ M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 179–221.

⁶ D.F. Harrison, ‘Bridges and economic development, 1300–1800’, *Economic History Review*, 45 (1992), pp. 240–61; J. Langdon, ‘Horse hauling: a revolution in vehicle transport in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England’, in T.H. Aston (ed.), *Landlords, Peasants and Politics in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 33–64; G. Hutchinson, *Medieval Ships and Shipping* (London, 1994), pp. 10–20.

century. It may have developed further within our period, as Keene suggests in his comparison between the patterns of debt in 1424 and 1570, but this was from a high level of market integration.

But there are also many justifications for doubt. Keene reminds us that all of this was happening in the context of a landed society, reflected in the high proportion of gentry and other landholders appearing among the parties to debt litigation in the common pleas. Traders, and certainly people entirely dependent on trade for their living, formed a minority and of course they acquired landed property as the only secure way of storing their wealth.

The instability of the trading system needs no emphasis, with its vulnerability to war and political interference, and its dependence on the variable quality of the harvest. Galloway shows how the grain market was subject to sudden imbalances in supply and demand, such as the crisis at Exeter in 1319–20. The lengthy disruption of London's supply system in the 1350s and 1360s is much more subversive of the notion that the trading system had achieved a level of stability. This post-plague period contains many other unsolved mysteries, such as the unexpected trends in wages, which rose only modestly, and prices of grain, which held up when they should have fallen, and the incomes of manorial lords which fell a little, when we would have expected them to collapse. Nightingale's analysis of debts suggests that Norwich's role as a central place for its region was established only very temporarily, and external changes, such as political crises, could disrupt the local trading system. She argues from a study of the first half of the fourteenth century against the assumption that the commercial economy of Norfolk became progressively more integrated. Keene, surveying changes between 1424 and 1570, reports some tendencies towards a greater subordination of the provincial towns to London, but the opposite is true of the south-west, where Exeter became more of an independent regional capital.

We move into a different world when we turn to the situation in Nuremberg, and this raises an important point of comparison in general between England and other parts of medieval Europe. In so many ways the large German cities were very similar in their commercial life to London and the large provincial towns such as Coventry and York. Yet no English town had any political or jurisdictional control over its rural surroundings in the way that Nuremberg ruled its large territory. Continental city states, or even just towns with extensive market monopolies, were able to distort and divert the flow of trade. The districts around large English towns often contained few small towns and chartered markets, but this was partly because those who lived close to the town realised that they would fail to establish a centre for trade in the face of strong economic competition. Advocates of central place theory might argue that the existence of monopolies, suppression of competition, and the use of compulsion to bring goods to market were most appropriate in weakly developed economies — in short, as symptom of immaturity. That view might be supported by the attempts to enforce monopolies in late medieval Wales and Scotland, where towns were undoubtedly less securely founded than in England. But this can scarcely be the case in the advanced commercial world of the Rhineland, parts of the Low Countries, and in the city states of northern Italy, all of which were subject to a high degree of political control.

And finally, although the mechanics of trade may have worked smoothly, one reason for our lack of certainty about the trading system is the lack of concrete and detailed evidence in the form of letters and account books. In the absence of more than a few fortunate survivals, and then from a late period, we have to make the records of debt work very hard as historical evidence, and we can be sure that they do not reflect the whole trading system. We cannot rate the English merchants of the later middle ages very highly in comparison with their Italian contemporaries if they recorded their transactions either scrappily or not in writing at all.

Arguments have been advanced here for making either a positive or a negative assessment of the sophistication of the late medieval economy. This summing up has tended to favour a high rating for the performance of medieval trade and traders. Having accepted that commerce was fragile and subject to shifts, we cannot ignore the remarkable continuities represented by the towns themselves. If the flow of commerce had changed fundamentally in subsequent centuries, we would not expect to find that large sections of the fourteenth-century urban hierarchy were performing similar roles in 1600, 1700 and even after the Industrial Revolution.

