

Food Supply, Demand and Trade: Aspects of the Economic Relationship between Town and Countryside

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It is a prerequisite that prosperous, expanding towns need to maintain a secure and ample food supply. How towns managed this issue, drawing foodstuffs from both their immediate hinterland and from further afield, and the resultant effect upon agricultural productivity are examined in this collection of 11 papers. The contributions mostly focus on the Low Countries and England, bar one on Westphalia, but they cover a broad chronological spectrum from the 13th to 19th centuries. This lends a certain coherency to the volume and allows for interesting comparisons between the papers, which often touch upon the same issues from differing perspectives; though such a comparative analysis is only briefly offered in the introduction to the book. For many of the contributors, the significant question is how the demands of large towns affected the agricultural and transport structure of their hinterlands, with the processes of agricultural specialisation and market integration to the fore. For others, the strategies and responses of municipal authorities, particularly at times of crisis, are the main concern.

London was by far the largest town in late medieval England, so its consumption of food and fuel was comparatively and uniquely significant. It is worth stressing London's weak powers regarding its rural hinterland. From 1327, rival markets and traders could be suppressed up to seven miles away, but otherwise London could not directly control the regional trade in foodstuffs. The city was reliant upon the effectiveness of surrounding market networks. However, James Galloway argues that we should not assume a commensurate and consistent impact upon the city's immediate hinterland and that a wider national and international context is vital. He explores the importance of the River Thames in London's food supply network, and how the relatively low costs of river and sea transport encouraged the growth of supplies from distant markets, particularly in crisis years but also for the more regular grain trade after the Black Death. This had a local effect in that we do not see the extent of adjacent rural development and arable intensification that one might expect. Galloway also posits the idea that we see 'a decline in overall integration levels, and a deprofessionalisation of the wheat trade, as aggregate demand declined' (p. 12) after 1350. Similarly, fuel supplies were traditionally drawn from the woodland nearby areas, but there was a gradual switch to coal by the 16th century that again meant London had an outlook that went well beyond its immediate hinterland.

In his contribution, Derek Keene looks more specifically at how London managed its food supply, especially in years of harvest shortage such as 1258, 1315–17, and 1438–40. The crisis of 1258 has not been extensively researched by scholars and Keene notes how the chroniclers record that London saw a huge influx of the hungry and that thousands died in the streets. There were various responses from the London citizens and royal government, but the market system generally worked well and there was little risk of hostile attack from outside, so London did not store grain. When prices were high, the financial strength of the city tended to draw supplies in its direction, even from a fair distance. London's authorities were able to prevent the grain then moving back to the hinterland or for export. There were other restrictions at times of shortages, such as on bakers through an increased monitoring of the assize of bread. However, Keene argues that the political situation in London made it difficult for them to take collective action in 1258. The famine of 1315–17 was a much broader crisis and the king actively intervened to encourage the import and necessary movement of grain, looking to international markets. The city authorities tightened up their regulations concerning brewers, the open grain market, and certain middlemen activities. The 1439–40 shortages led to the creation of a public granary (Leadenhall). Although this collective venture proved temporary, Keene suggests that it was recognition of how 15th-century London had become vulnerable to short-term price fluctuations and competition from continental rivals. London had long relied on its economic strength to attract grain supplies, but it still needed to take remedial action at times of crisis and the approaches reflect differing political circumstances, powers and identity as much as pragmatic means to alleviate food shortages.

The importance of a town's hinterland is similarly examined by Michael Limberger for 16th-century Antwerp. His conclusions are comparable to Galloway's, as he describes a complex inter-relationship that is not governed simply by economic demand in the von Thünen mode. Competition from other towns, political circumstances and geography all affected the supply networks. The immediate hinterland could only provide for some of Antwerp's growing needs in the 16th century and there was a certain dependence upon imports via the River Scheldt (eg. from Zealand), as well as from the Baltic in order to stabilise prices at times of bad harvests. Nonetheless, we do see some modest agricultural specialisation in the vicinity of the city alongside more traditional intensification of grain production. Limberger identifies a variety of farming systems in the hinterland, including a gardening belt in the south and east, and a zone of 'crop alternation' where legumes and livestock were used to help eliminate fallows. Like London, Antwerp did not have a particularly strong political hold over its surrounding countryside, but this meant that development of the hinterland was led by urban demand and investment by the city's wholesalers. In comparison, cities in northern Italy were dominant in their *contado*, but the result appears to have been a lack of investment and agrarian stagnation. Limberger notes that the investment in rural property by Antwerp citizens was to have ramifications for the property structures and relations, with a growth in the leasehold system and a greater economic stratification amongst the peasantry.

Johan Dambrine also stresses the dependence of early modern cities upon their hinterland, but again notes that the production levels in Flanders were insufficient to feed the cities. Most grain was imported from northern France via the Scheldt and Lys rivers. Ghent acted as important entrepôt in the interregional grain trade, but Dambrine asks if this was still the case as its staple right was eroded and more grain was imported from the Baltic. The staple right ensured that all of the Flemish grain trade had to pass through Ghent and some of the wheat and rye had to be sold in the city's market. Ghent's rights were upheld by the sovereign, linked to the latter's interest in river tolls. This was to change in 1587 under Philip II of Spain and the staple right no longer applied to unsold grain from outside Flanders, while the imposition of a saleable quota in Ghent was relaxed. Dambrine looks at two grain taxes, *muddegeld* and *zaemcoperie*, for which the documentation is particularly detailed after 1568. Due to Ghent's role as a staple transit port, its food supply was generally buoyant and price fluctuations were tempered, though the municipal authorities were careful to buy grain to guard against harvest failures. There were comparatively few food riots in Ghent, suggesting that the staple right and civic policies were beneficial to the city. It does also appear that wheat prices were higher in other markets, such as Antwerp, though this differential mostly narrowed during the 16th century. In general, Dambrine argues that the development of the grain trade in 16th-century Ghent was largely determined by cyclical economic factors rather than institutional, but the city's supply was often affected by political and military interventions.

The grain trade of the Low Countries is further examined by Milja van Tielhof, this time focusing on Amsterdam's role in distribution. Limberger and Dambrine argued that Baltic imports were relatively modest for Flanders, except at times of severe shortages, but for Holland they were increasingly important from 1530 to 1650 and Amsterdam dominated this trade. Dutch merchants, sailors, coins and language all permeated the Baltic grain markets. The prominent position of Amsterdam was partly due to the early successful resistance of its merchants to paying a Habsburg tax on grain exports (the *congégeld*) and later to low customs duties, good infrastructure, transmission of market information, and the flexible enterprise of the city's merchants. Van Tielhof also highlights the accompanying improvements in Dutch shipbuilding and ship design that helped lower transport costs via economies of scale. It was not until the late 17th century that Amsterdam's trade with the Baltic diminished, largely due to greater commercial restrictions and warfare in the region. By the 18th century, England had become more prominent in the importation of Baltic grain. At this time, Amsterdam was also more reliant on foreign merchants for its food supply, competitors were achieving similar efficiency in shipping, and the city began its decline as the main European entrepôt for grain.

Richard Unger approaches the grain supplies of towns in the Low Countries from the perspective of market integration, and whether the flow of goods was efficient enough to lead towards equalization of prices

between regions. However, Unger rightly notes that measures of market integration are problematic, not least due to the often incomplete data and difficulties of comparability. In the 14th and 15th centuries, there is anecdotal evidence for increasing integration of markets, with more trade per capita and more long-distance shipping. But the process was complex and certainly not linear. As Unger states, markets could both integrate and disintegrate. When looking across north-west Europe, 1384–1520, there are indications of price correlation between some pairs of towns and also very little in others. This may be because most late medieval towns did not need to look too far to satisfy their consumption needs. As we have seen, even the 15th-century cities of Flanders and Holland did not look much beyond northern France. There was no regular reliance on distant markets for grain imports. Instead, integration was on a regional level, such as in the southern Low Countries. Unger compares pairs of towns to show that there was an emergence of groupings in the 15th century, again indicating a series of regional markets. The improvements seen in ship design, and thus lower transport costs, did not translate into the integration of distant markets in the late Middle Ages, but rather it was river and coastal craft that seem to have created any benefits in flexibility and efficiency.

Bruno Blondé concentrates on the importance of these transport costs in feeding cities and agricultural development. He analyses the paved road network for Brabant in the 18th century. Paved roads provided advantages in terms of heavier freight loads, fewer horses, and more reliability, especially in bad weather. There were, of course, cost implications in terms of tolls, which could be quite hefty for marketable goods. Nevertheless, paved roads enabled cities to enlarge their hinterlands. In Brabant, the cities of Leuven and Brussels looked southward and reinforced their position, often to the detriment of small towns. This improved transport infrastructure was also pivotal in the market integration process, and Blondé downplays the negative impact of the toll structure by highlighting the preferential tax tariffs granted to farmers, which encouraged town-countryside exchanges. However, the tolls may have dampened inter-urban trade in bulk products, thus discouraging market integration. Nevertheless, paved roads appear to have increased agricultural productivity, especially when there were growing urban populations, with increased land prices near the new roads. The transport infrastructure was thus an important factor in town-countryside dealings.

John Chartres highlights the many middlemen who operated in the 17th- and 18th-century English grain trade and how they were subject to decreasing levels of regulation. He argues that this helped the integration of premium grain markets and provided a better response to harvest shocks. In examining these layers of mercantile relations, Chartres uses three case studies: the Kent grain trade; the middlemen of the partnership of Hoar-Galpine (Somerset); and the end-use of grains by a 1760s London distiller, Currie & Co. Chartres downplays the importance of export bounty payments, which have traditionally been regarded as a stimulus to producers and prices. He argues that although England was important in the overseas grain trade, it constituted less than 3.5 per cent of domestic output and its effect on prices was relatively minimal. There were some regional effects, such as the shift to commercial barley in East Anglia, while the dominance of the Amsterdam merchants also suffered. The corn bounties also generally indicate that Britain was domestically well-supplied with food and had a mature grain market system that could encourage regional specialisation and productivity gains. The wheat market was integrated through middlemen, particularly around London, but there was also a high level of asymmetrical power relations between these traders, who ranged from hoymen to cornfactors. This did not necessarily create monopsonies, but many of the more powerful middlemen assiduously sought information about prices, home and abroad, that influenced their market decisions and prospects.

Piet van Cruyningen approaches the issue from another perspective by concentrating on the agricultural producers in 18th-century West Zeeland Flanders. This arable region supplied the urban centres of Holland and its social structure had been largely formed by the investment of urban capitalists in the 17th century. There were a small number of large tenant farmers alongside a much larger number of farm labourers; the latter were increasingly seasonal workers from Flanders. Van Cruyningen uses accounts of a tariff on exported agricultural products, 1693–1793, to show a shift in destination for their grain from Flemish towns to those of Holland, particularly Middelburg or Rotterdam. Many of the smaller farmers had to sell quickly in order to meet their rents and taxes, and they were at the mercy of middlemen, such as the bargemen

(‘Oosterhouters’) who transported grain to the large cities, from whom they received a relatively low price for their produce. Only the wealthier farmers could afford to ship grain themselves to urban centres, often later in the agricultural year, and thus obtain higher prices from brokers. With this disparity in opportunity, many poorer farmers went bankrupt, thus reinforcing the dominance of the rural elite in West Zeeland Flanders.

It is difficult to measure the quantity of foodstuffs flowing into towns when victuals often escape the available documentation. Craig Muldrew looks at debt litigation for 17th-century King’s Lynn in order to provide a glimpse into the everyday food trade. Consumption estimates for Lynn suggest some 4.6oz of meat per person per day, supplied by 49 butchers, suggesting a significant level of activity. Similarly, the existence of 30 bakers indicates a thriving trade in bread. Most debt suits by butchers and bakers were for small-scale, consumption deals, reinforcing the idea that much victualling took place on credit. Unfortunately, the debt litigation provides little evidence as to how grain and livestock were actually brought into the town, with most of the disputes seemingly concerned with small retail transactions in food and drink.

The final paper, written by Michael Kopsidis, is chronologically the most recent and is also the only paper to look much beyond the Low Countries and England. His main aim is to examine how Westphalian peasant agriculture in the 18th and 19th centuries was shaped by processes of German market integration and industrialisation. Kopsidis notes that those regions with good connections to the expanding industrial markets of the Ruhr achieved better agricultural growth and intensification than more remote areas. However, regional grain markets were still weakly integrated by the 1820s, and did not become significantly integrated until the 1850s with the development of the railways and decreased transport costs. The railways also quickened the pace of agricultural growth in Westphalia. Farmers’ account and ledger books show contractual instruments for labour and capital that gave flexibility to the peasants. By the 1850s, this was an increasingly market-oriented peasant economy in Westphalia, but due more to differing processes of market integration rather than Prussian agrarian reforms.

One thing that clearly emerges from this collection is that the relationship between these north-western European towns and their hinterlands was far from straightforward. It is difficult to see clear zoning as in the models of Johann Heinrich Von Thünen, but certain rural areas did intensify and specialise their production in response to urban demand. The impetus behind these agricultural developments varied from a competitive response to high prices to deliberate investment by urban merchants. The importance of long-distance grain supply is shown for London, Antwerp, Ghent and Amsterdam, but this did not negate the significance of their immediate hinterlands. Such factors did, however, influence the extent, geography and chronology of market integration, linked also to price fluctuations, transport costs and the role of middlemen. Noticeable comparative threads thus run through these thought-provoking essays, but the similarities and contrasts between the papers are perhaps not fully highlighted. Nonetheless, this volume adds to the important debates on pre-industrial town-country relations and provides much food for thought.

The authors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further except to make say that this book is published in a series of comparable books on comparative rural history, namely the CORN Publication Series. See about the CORN network-Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area-network: <http://www.corn.ugent.be/> [2] See for the book series: <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=CORN> [3]

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