Moving targets: how place of origin affected the life chances of late medieval scholars at Winchester College and New College Oxford.

Abstract

This paper examines possible links between place of origin and life expectancy for the scholars enrolled at Winchester College and New College Oxford in the late medieval period. It particularly seeks to determine whether those coming from rural areas were at a disadvantage when moving into the urban environments in which the two colleges were located. It has previously been suggested that this was likely to be the case for those entering urban Benedictine monasteries, although evidence pertaining to the place of origin of young novices has not survived. The exceptional wealth of information within the collegiate datasets provides the ideal opportunity to test such a hypothesis and to ascertain whether those originating from urban environments consequently experienced better levels of life expectancy than their peers from rural areas. The data are placed into context through assessment of the living standards of medieval scholars. This paper asks important questions regarding the impact of prior exposure to urban disease environments upon those migrating to these centres from other areas.

Introduction

In 1486 Richard Smyth was admitted to St Mary’s College of Winchester, near Winchester. This foundation, better known to us today as Winchester College, provided an education in grammar to seventy ‘poor scholars’. The college had been founded in 1382 by William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester. It comprised one half of Wykeham’s larger educational scheme, and it was intended that the scholars enrolled here would continue their studies at the sister foundation, St Mary’s College of Winchester in Oxford (New College), before joining the ranks of the clergy.¹

Richard Smyth’s time at Winchester and New College can be traced through the numerous archival records that have survived at these two institutions. Indeed, the records are so good that his attendance at Winchester can be attested on an almost weekly basis, through reference to the college hall books.² These books were compiled by the fellows of the college, and listed the names of all those eating in hall in order to track expenditure on food. Richard Smyth’s first appearance in the dining hall was recorded in the first week of the fourth term, sometime around the last week of June.³ At the time of his admission, three other scholars at Winchester College shared his surname. To avoid confusion this group of boys were distinguished by their seniority, and referred to in the hall books as Smyth minimus, Smyth minor, Smyth major and Smyth maximus.⁴ On occasion, these boys were also distinguished from one another by reference to their place of origin; so we find Smyth of Adderbury, Smyth of Devizes, Smyth of Heyford, and Smyth of Henley. Such details were recorded systematically by both Winchester College and New College Oxford for all the scholars they enrolled, and provide a unique opportunity to explore the relationships between place of origin, geographical mobility, and longevity for the late medieval period.

² Winchester College Archive, Winchester (hereafter WCA) 22812–71 Hall books, 1395–1519.
³ WCA 22851 Hall book, 1486.
⁴ WCA 22851 Hall book, 1486.
The importance of place

As has been shown with the example of our four boys named Smyth, place of origin can be used as a means of distinguishing between individuals with the same, or similar, names. This has been crucial in analysing mortality and life expectancy among the 2,692 scholars enrolled at Winchester College in the period 1393–1540. These scholars have been followed through Wykeham’s educational system, and beyond into their post-Oxford employment. Place of origin, along with details relating to age and other distinguishing personal information, has proved a valuable tool in ensuring more accurate record linkage between individuals with the same name who appear in different record sets. Dates of death or last observation have been collated for all the individuals within the sample, and estimations of life expectancy have been calculated for the group across the study period. Analysis of the collated data has found that the life expectancy at age 25 of the Winchester scholars was generally better than for the monks of Christ Church Canterbury, Westminster Abbey, and Durham Priory, who have been the subject of previous analysis of this kind (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Comparison of life expectancy at age 25 between Winchester College scholars and the monks of Christ Church Canterbury, Westminster Abbey and Durham Priory

Source: Monastic data from Hatcher, Piper and Stone, ‘Monastic mortality’, p. 674 (Table 3) and Oakes, ‘Mortality and life expectancy’, chapter 6.
Note: Data shown for 25-year cohort groups at 10-year overlapping intervals.

The aforementioned studies of monastic communities highlight the possibility that place of origin may have affected the survival and life chances of the men recruited to these three

urban monastic institutions. Indeed, this is a logical assertion given what we know about early modern populations and the links between increasing density of settlement and the increased mortality rates associated with this. Surviving childhood in an area of high density population could thereby give an individual a greater chance of surviving their later years of life in a similar environment. Those who had grown up in areas of lower density population, however, might find movement into such surroundings more detrimental to their health, through exposure to pathogens they had not previously encountered or developed tolerance to.

The interpretations of the monastic data suggest that recruits to the monasteries would have encountered such a scenario, and that when entering such environments those monks recruited from the neighbouring countryside might have been more at risk, and may plausibly have ‘suffered from a lack of immunity to urban ailments’. This situation may have been aggravated at Westminster in the later part of the fifteenth century, when age at profession fell to ensure that demand for new recruits was met. Novices subsequently spent less time in the almonry where they might have had some exposure to the local disease environment before their admission to the monastery. This may go some way to explaining the precipitous drop in life expectancy at Westminster from the mid-fifteenth century, and the increase in mortality among the younger age-groups of monks. The life expectancy profiles for the three monasteries perhaps reflect the relative severity of risk from their local urban disease pools. The monks of Durham, a number of whom lived in external rural cells, had noticeably higher levels of life expectancy. At Canterbury, where there was a great through traffic of pilgrims and traders, life expectancy was appreciably lower. The monks of Westminster, close to the capital and to the seat of government, fared least well. They experienced the lowest levels of life expectancy, and were certainly disadvantaged by their proximity to London (see Figure 1).

Systematic investigation of the relationship between place of origin and longevity has been difficult to undertake for the monastic samples. In these communities place of origin has often been inferred from locative surnames. However, caution is needed with such inferences. By this period there is good reason to believe that surnames were becoming more fixed, and that locative surnames may have been retained by families long after they had migrated from the place to which the surname referred. It is for this reason that the Winchester College dataset is valuable, as place of origin was systematically recorded as an

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11 Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 143.
12 Harvey, *Living and Dying*, pp. 127–9, 138–41 and figure IV.5.
13 Hatcher, Piper and Stone, ‘Monastic mortality’, p. 675. Although it should be noted that the mortality profile of Westminster, and the years of apparent epidemic disease there, do not always seem to correlate with those identified for London (see Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 142).
15 Harvey, *Living and Dying*, p. 75.
item of information in its own right. This allows more secure analysis of the impact of place of origin on life expectancy, and initial testing of the hypothesis that those from outside of the urban environment in which the colleges were situated were more likely to succumb to ‘urban’ diseases. This paper presents the findings of an initial investigation using these data. The analyses presented here are limited to investigating whether those going to Winchester College or New College Oxford were more likely to die when exposed to the local environment of these two towns if they had not previously experienced living in such conditions. The methods employed for this analysis will be discussed further below. This pilot study also aims to determine whether more detailed future analysis of these data would be worthwhile.

**The Winchester data**

It is no accident that place of origin was recorded for those enrolled to Winchester College and New College Oxford. Indeed, place of origin formed one of the criteria for admission. Preference was given to those coming from estates held by the colleges, followed by those from estates of the Bishop of Winchester, and then from a range of counties in a specified order. A place of origin has been accurately identified for 1,999 of the 2,692 scholars in this sample (74 percent). In the case of the remaining 693 scholars, place of origin was either omitted from the documentary records, illegible through damage or deterioration of the document, or the information given was not adequate enough to allow the place of origin to be distinguished from other places of similar or identical name. Data regarding place of origin was standardized to modern Ordnance Survey nomenclature and spellings, and linked to six figure national grid references. In total 663 unique places of origin were identified among the sample group. Figure 2 shows the diverse geographical spread of scholars by their stated place of origin. As can be seen, boys were predominantly drawn from the southern counties. Some came from the far north of England to attend the college, and one recruit (who is excluded from Figure 2) came to Winchester from as far afield as Calais.

The plotted distribution of origins (Figure 2) is reassuring in terms of data validation. There is no apparent clustering in major towns, as might be expected if the nearest urban centre was being recorded for convenience, rather than an exact place of origin. Those scholars that did state a major town or city as their place of origin, such as London, Bristol or Winchester for example, frequently gave the parish within that city from which they originated. This extra level of precision suggests that they were indeed coming from these urban centres rather than giving the name of their nearest major town. The map also diverges somewhat from the pattern that would be expected if scholars had only been admitted from college owned estates. This not only suggests that recruitment was from a much wider area, but indicates a fairly high probability that place of origin was stated accurately and truthfully, even when scholars were coming from some distance away. Given that the statutes gave preference to those from certain areas, it is conceivable that an element of fabrication may have occurred if families wanted to get their son into Winchester College, for example by claiming to come from a college estate close to the place in which they actually lived. This might again have led to geographical clustering around college estates, which is not found in Figure 2.

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16 I would like to thank Max Satchell for guidance with the GIS mapping software. His time and patience has been greatly appreciated.

However, it may well have been the case that the local parish priest or lord was required to support the application of potential scholars, and that details were thereby supplied accurately. It seems that the data collated most probably reflect the reality of the recruitment area, and the true origins of the scholars in this sample.

**Figure 2. Map showing the places of origins of Winchester College scholars.**

Source: Data collated from Winchester College *Registrum Primum*, Winchester College Archive, Winchester (hereafter WCA), 21490a.
Note: The location of Winchester College and New College Oxford are shown with black dots.

**Data categorization**

It would be impossible to test whether those scholars originating from any one specific place had better expectation of life or chances of survival when moving to Winchester College than those from another specific locale. The data available are insufficient for such purposes; the numbers originating from any one specific place are small, and when spread across the study period would no longer be of statistical significance. However, it is possible to make a more general comparison of the relative experiences of those from different *types* of place. This has been achieved by dividing the recorded places of origin into broad categories.

The basic hypothesis to be tested in this instance is whether those who had previous experience of living in a large urban environment fared better than those from elsewhere.
However, defining categories into which each place of origin should be divided is no easy task. It is difficult, for example, to make clear distinctions between urban and rural for this period, and discussion of the characteristics of different types of settlement has been the subject of much research and debate.\textsuperscript{18} Contemporary terminology can be misleading, and it is not possible to rely upon medieval references to the term ‘vill’, as this could be employed to describe places with either rural or urban characteristics.\textsuperscript{19} Legal status is also a misleading guide as to what constituted a town. For example, many places enjoyed the legal status of ‘borough’ during this period, but did not develop into urbanised areas. Conversely, some undoubtedly urban centres never acquired this legal status.\textsuperscript{20} Westminster is one example of the latter, which was under the governance of the abbot and monks of Westminster until the Reformation.\textsuperscript{21}

Legal status is clearly inappropriate in this context, and can give no adequate answer as to what constituted an urban centre. Numerous other social factors might be taken into consideration, including the size and density of the resident population, the diversity of occupations practised, networks of trade and commerce, and issues relating to the nature of the built environment within the locality. Much work has been undertaken on these issues, frequently focusing upon particular urban centres or regions.\textsuperscript{22} The scale of the research necessary to pool all the available information, and qualitatively assess each of the 663 places referred to in the Winchester College records, is beyond the scope of the present study. However, information is more readily available relating to the relative size of the population in the provincial towns of England.\textsuperscript{23} The data derived from the 1377 Poll Tax are perhaps more useful for the purposes of this research, and provide a simple means of defining what constituted an urban area.

Examination of these listings has led to the places of origin of scholars given in the Winchester College records being divided into four main categories: London, greater towns, provincial towns, and what, for convenience, will be termed ‘rural’. London was unique among English cities of the time for its size, density of population and its role as a major centre of both domestic and international trade and commerce.\textsuperscript{24} In total, only 123 scholars were enrolled from the metropolis, but they were placed into a separate category to allow for specific analysis of the experiences of this group. Those places in the category of greater


\textsuperscript{19} C. Dyer, ‘Small towns 1270–1540’ in Palliser (ed.), CUHB, p. 505.

\textsuperscript{20} C. Dyer, ‘Small towns’, p. 505.


\textsuperscript{22} See for example, C. Dyer, Standards of living in the later middle ages: social change in England c.1200–1520, (Cambridge, 1989); J. Grenville, ‘Urban and rural houses and households in the late Middle Ages: a case study from Yorkshire’ in M. Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg (eds.), Medieval domesticity: home, housing and household in medieval England, (Cambridge, 2008); J.S. Lee, Cambridge and its economic region 1450–1560, (Hatfield, 2005); Wrigley et al., Population history, p. 352.


towns comprise those listed as such by Kermode in The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Kermode suggests that these towns were:

‘distinguishable from market towns by the scale and intensity of their urbanity: physical size and appearance, complex internal economic and social structures, sophisticated government and regional significance’.  

The more detailed descriptions of such places indicate environments in which people were ‘living cheek-by-jowl’, and where the proximity of dwellings to sites of manufacture and trade resulted in ‘dirty and crowded conditions’. It is worth noting that both Winchester and Oxford appear within this list.

The third grouping includes all those listed by A. Dyer in the rankings of provincial towns based upon their taxpaying populations in the 1377 Poll Tax (other than those already assigned to the category of greater towns). The size and relative regional importance of these provincial towns are highly variable, and there may be good reason to break this group down further for future analysis. For example, Southampton, a significant port town engaged in international trade with a taxpaying population of 1,152, is unlikely to be a fair comparison with Writtle in Essex, with its much smaller community of 600 taxpayers. However, for the purposes of this pilot study it was decided to leave all of these provincial towns in one group. The primary focus here is whether those from an environment similar to that of Winchester or Oxford, fared better when moving into those urban centres than did those from outside of the group of greater towns.

The final category, which for convenience has been termed ‘rural’, includes any place that is not listed in A. Dyer’s provincial town rankings for 1377, and thereby falls below the level of Sheffield, with its 555 taxpayers. The designation of ‘rural’ is perhaps misleading in this context, as the group inevitably includes a fair number of places that might be better defined as small towns. Again the issue of where the dividing line should lie between places of different size is obscure. At what point do provincial towns and small towns differ? How do some of these small towns differ themselves from villages, and indeed how do villages vary in terms of their settlement type and networks of trade and communication? Without further qualitative examination it is impossible to divide the data presented here into any more precise units. The arbitrary categories designated here suffice for the purposes of this initial study, which seeks to examine the differences between those coming from the greater towns and those who did not. The inclusion of a division between provincial towns and other smaller units provides a means of testing for any difference between size of town and possible variation in experiences. Although it is likely that the settlements will represent a continuum of a range of characteristics, making simple classification into types problematic, it is hoped that it will be possible to further refine these latter categories and groupings in the future, to more accurately assess the differences between those coming from what might be considered truly rural communities and those from towns of varying size and nature.

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30 C. Dyer, ‘Small towns’.
31 I would like to thank Chris Dyer for discussing this issue with me, and for sharing his insights into definitions of small towns within some of the southern counties of England relevant to my research.
Data analyses

A number of simple tests were devised in order to assess the hypothesis that those from outside of urban centres similar in nature to Winchester or Oxford may have fared less well in terms of life chances than those moving to those locations from similar areas. These tests comprised of:

1. Analysis of deaths at Winchester College, to see if they more commonly occurred among any particular group of scholars
2. Analysis of deaths at New College Oxford, to see if they more commonly occurred among any particular group of scholars
3. Analysis of age at last observation, to see if any particular group of scholars were more commonly observed exceeding the estimated average life expectancy for the sample

1. Deaths at Winchester College

Over the course of the study period 128 deaths were observed at Winchester College among the 2,692 scholars within the sample. These deaths have been broken down into categories according to the place of origin of those scholars. These data are given in Table 1 below, along with the total number of scholars from the sample group that fall into each category of origin. Aside from recording deaths, the Winchester records also frequently gave details as to the departure of scholars, either to continue their studies at New College or to pursue other employment opportunities. The numbers from this group of Winchester College ‘survivors’ divided by place of origin category are also given in Table 1. A further group of individuals were not recorded as having died, but have no record of their departure cause. These individuals do not appear at New College, and the reason for their exit from Winchester College is unclear. Over the course of the study period there were some years of defective registration, where departures and deaths appear to have gone unrecorded. These unknowns are from such years, and it cannot be determined whether this group contributed deaths to the sample, or whether they left Winchester College alive to follow other career paths. For this reason, this group of ‘unknowns’ are listed separately in Table 1, and have been excluded from the analyses that follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Greater Towns</th>
<th>Provincial Towns</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Unknown origin</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivors</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>1096</td>
<td>498</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknowns</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>558</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in sample</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>1441</td>
<td>693</td>
<td>2692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (excl. Unknowns)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>1170</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>2134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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32 This is discussed further in Oakes, ‘Adolescent mortality’.
A simple comparison of the numbers of deaths in each group is somewhat misleading. As the breakdown clearly shows, a far higher proportion of scholars were recruited from the rural group (54.8 per cent) than from all other groups combined. Instead, it is more appropriate to compare the percentages of deaths falling within each group to the percentage that each group comprises of the total sample size. This allows a comparison of how the proportion of deaths differs to what might be expected if the deaths had been divided among the different categories in the same proportions as that of the total sample size. These figures are given in Table 2 below.

| Table 2. Percentage of deaths compared to overall percentages for each origin group |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|----------|---------|-------------|
|                                 | London          | Greater      | Provincial | Rural   | Unknown origin |
| Total (N) excl. unknowns       | 84              | 178          | 167       | 1170    | 535          | 2134        |
| Total %                        | 3.9             | 8.3          | 7.8       | 54.8    | 25.1         | 100         |
| Deaths (N)                     | 4               | 5            | 8         | 74      | 37           | 128         |
| Deaths %                       | 3.1             | 3.9          | 6.3       | 57.8    | 28.9         | 100         |

Source: Data extracted from Winchester College *Registrum Primum*, WCA 21490a.

Table 2 shows that there were fewer deaths among those coming from London, the greater towns and provincial towns than might be expected if deaths were equivalent in proportion to the size of these individual groups. This was particularly true for those coming from the greater towns, with the proportion of deaths observed among this group just under half of the proportion that they contribute to the intake at Winchester College as a whole. Conversely, a relatively higher proportion of deaths was observed among the rural group than the proportion of scholars provided to Winchester College by these settlements.

The apparent variation between the relative size of each group and the percentage of deaths attributed to each of them is in many instances quite small. It is worth noting, for example, that the proportion of deaths of scholars from London is very close to the relative contribution that the group makes to the overall sample size.

What is apparent from Table 2 is the possible advantage experienced by those coming from the greater towns, with a far lower proportion of deaths among this group. These data appear to support the hypothesis that those from the greater towns fared better when moving into a similar environment than those from smaller settlements. To test the question laid out earlier – whether those from an environment similar to that of Winchester or Oxford fared better when moving into those urban centres than did those from smaller settlements – we can compare the relative number of deaths that occurred, on the one hand, by those scholars originating from London and the greater towns to those coming from the provincial towns and rural settlements, on the other. A Chi-squared test was undertaken to test if there is an association between the number of deaths and the number of survivors and these two broad classifications of origin (data in Table 2). This analysis indicates that there is evidence of an association ($X^2 = 2.97; P < 0.1$) and thus the null hypothesis that there is no association between the variables can be rejected. This further supports the hypothesis that those from smaller settlements than the greater towns fared worse when entering this type of urban environment than those with previous experience of it.
2. Deaths at New College

Similar analyses have been undertaken for the group of scholars in the sample who continued their studies at New College Oxford. Table 3 gives the number of scholars from each settlement type, and the numbers from each group who are known to have died at New College or survived their time there. Recording of deaths was much more systematic at New College, however, there are still some scholars for whom their cause of departure from the college was not stated. The numbers of these ‘unknowns’ are again given in the table below, and these individuals are excluded from the analyses that follow.

Table 3. Breakdown of New College sample by category of place of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Greater Towns</th>
<th>Provincial Towns</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Unknown origin</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deaths</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivors</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknowns</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total in sample</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>733</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>1378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (excl. Unknowns)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>1096</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Again, examination was made of the proportions of deaths among each origin group, as compared to the proportion of the total sample that each group comprised. These percentages are given below in Table 4.

Table 4. Percentage of deaths compared to overall percentages for each origin group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Greater Towns</th>
<th>Provincial Towns</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Unknown origin</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total (N) excl. Unknowns</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>1096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths (N)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths %</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data extracted from New College Liber Albus, New College Archive, Oxford (hereafter NCA), 9654; New College Registrum Protocollorum (vols. 1‒4), NCA 9746‒9.

What is striking in this table is the fact that the proportion of deaths from those among the urban groups is higher than might be expected given their overall contribution to the sample size. At New College it would appear that those from the group designated as ‘rural’ fared better than those who originated from any of the towns, with fewer than expected ‘rural’ scholars being observed amongst those who died at the college. The reasons for this remain unclear. However, it should be highlighted that all of the scholars attending New College had first completed their studies at Winchester College. Consequently, all New College scholars, regardless of their initial place of origin, had experience of living in one of the greater towns. This may have levelled the playing field, and the variations between the observed proportions of deaths and the proportion that each group contributed to the sample size might be better explained by other factors. The period of time that each scholar had previously spent at
Winchester may be one variable to take into consideration, and this will be examined in future analyses of this dataset.

The hypothesis that those originating from London and the greater towns fared better than those from other areas when entering the environment of one of the greater towns does not appear to hold in this instance. A chi-squared test shows that the null hypothesis of no association between these variables cannot be rejected ($X^2 = 1.09$), and that the distribution of the data in Table 4 may thus be the product of chance. However, the lack of association between place of origin and observed deaths is perhaps unsurprising in this instance.

3. **Age at last observation**

We turn now to the final form of analysis to be included in this paper, that of age at last observation. The purpose of this test is to see whether those from any particular place of origin were more or less likely to live beyond the average life expectancy as calculated for this sample group. Previous analysis of life expectancy for those from Winchester College has shown that, across the period as a whole, those scholars attaining the age of 25 could expect to live on average for a further 30.4 years. Life expectancy at age 25 did vary across the period, from a high of 35.2 for those enrolled at Winchester College in the period 1405–29, to a low of 27.1 years for those enrolled a century later in the period 1505–29. 33 A more nuanced analysis taking into account these changes over time will be the subject of future research, but for the purposes of this paper the average life expectancy of 30.4 years at age 25 will be used for the whole group.

Age at death is not known for every individual within the sample group, but where age at death has not been identified, an age at last observation can be given. As a large number of scholars did not progress to New College Oxford, and thereby disappear from observation around the age of eighteen, it was decided to exclude this group from the following analyses, and focus only on those attending New College. The sample was divided according to whether the individuals were last observed at an age below 55, or when aged 55 or above (i.e. whether they had reached the expected age of $25 + 30.4$ years). Table 5 below shows the number of scholars in each of these two age categories at the time of their last observation, divided into groups according to their place of origin.

| Table 5. Age ranges at which scholars attending New College were last seen alive |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Age at last observation | London | Greater Towns | Provincial Towns | Rural | Unknown | Total |
| Under 55          | 54    | 106           | 96              | 621  | 297    | 1174  |
| 55+               | 6     | 11            | 18              | 112  | 57     | 204   |
| Total (N)         | 60    | 117           | 114             | 733  | 354    | 1378  |
| % under 55        | 90.0  | 90.6          | 84.2            | 84.7 | 83.9   | 85.2  |
| % 55+             | 10.0  | 9.4           | 15.8            | 15.3 | 16.1   | 14.8  |

Source: Data extracted from New College Liber Albus, New College Archive, Oxford (hereafter NCA), 9654; New College Registrum Protocollorum (vols. 1–4), NCA 9746–9.

Table 5 shows the majority of all groups tending to be last observed before reaching the age of 55. Fewer of those from London and the greater towns were observed over this age than were seen from the provincial towns and from rural areas. It should be noted that many of

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33 See Figure 1 and Oakes, ‘Mortality and life expectancy’ chapter 6.
these individuals were not recorded as having died at these ages. Instead we are examining age at last observation, and using it as a guide to assess whether there were any notable variations in the longevity of those with different places of origins. The differences observed in Table 5 are slight, and the lack of any major trend in the data suggests that the origins of the scholars did not provide a key to their longevity. Subsequent life experiences are far more likely to explain the length of time for which these individuals were observed alive: thus it may not be where they came from, but where they went to, that determined their longevity. Among the sample are those who went on to high-powered positions, reaching the ranks of bishop, archbishop, or chief administrators for the crown. However, the group also contains a large number of individuals who did not rise above the rank of parish priest. The variability in their life experiences was no doubt of more consequence than was their place of origin. Their employment patterns will undoubtedly have affected our ability to trace these individuals through their subsequent careers, and age at death is more likely to have been recorded for those who went on to the more illustrious of careers. These issues provide the basis for ongoing research.

**Context and interpretations**

The data presented here suggests that some association may be inferred between the origins of scholars admitted to Winchester College and mortality among this group, with those from urban areas slightly under-represented among those who died while in residence at the college. This would seem to support the hypothesis that those who moved into urban environments from less urbanised areas may have been at a disadvantage as a result of having no previous exposure or conferred immunity to urban disease pools.

On moving to Winchester to attend St Mary’s College these individuals were undoubtedly placing themselves in a high risk urban setting. Although the college was situated just outside of the city wall, so as to be outside of the jurisdiction of the mayor and corporation of Winchester, the college was very much squeezed in, restricted to a relatively small site located between a Carmelite Friary, the college of St Elizabeth, and the Sustren Spital (maintained by the Cathedral priory). The lack of physical space and the size of the college community meant that the scholars shared rooms with as many as eleven other boys, with those under the age of fourteen sharing beds with one other boy.

Perhaps more alarmingly, and with very obvious detriment to the health of the community, the college obtained its water from a rather dubious stream, which ran through the college grounds. This water had been channelled through the city from the river Itchen and served St. Mary’s Abbey (Nunnaminster) and St. Swithun’s priory before flowing out of the city wall to the college. This water was used for cooking and cleaning, with a small outside conduit in Chamber Court near the kitchen. Not only did the water first flow through the grounds of two religious houses, but was also downstream from the areas of the town in which tanning and butchery took place. Problems of effluence in the water supply were noted in the fifteenth century. A grill was fitted to catch this waste, although this did not solve the problems of

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34 See discussions of this issue in Oakes, ‘Mortality and life expectancy’, chapters 2 and 6.
36 This calculation is based upon the number of available rooms allocated to the scholars and the size of the college community.
contamination. In 1483 William Waynflete, Bishop of Winchester and former headmaster of Winchester College, obtained the right for water to be brought into the college by a conduit from Segryme’s well at the bottom of St. Giles’s Hill. This undoubtedly helped the college, although the quality of this water is still uncertain, and problems with the water supply undoubtedly would have impacted on the health of the community.

If life at Winchester College was unfavourable, there was perhaps only marginal improvement for those scholars who continued their studies at New College. Once again the college was squeezed into available space, this time in a notoriously unsavoury part of the city where ‘malefactors, murderers, whores and thieves’ were to be found. The area had long been in decay, and it has been suggested that the arrival of the Black Death in 1348 was largely responsible for the desertion of this section of the city, although evidence also indicates that rents in this location had been declining before this date. Sand and gravel pits were noted as a common feature in this largely uninhabited area of the city, and the college was built right up against the city wall. A ditch ran outside of this wall, and was full of rotting waste.

Despite the apparent disadvantages of the area, the New College community were blessed with a relative amount of space and comfort, the site being larger than that at Winchester. The overall community was also slightly smaller in number, as after their two year probationary period scholars were made full fellows of the college. The fellowship were responsible for the governance of the college, and fulfilled the roles of bursar, seneschal of hall, and other administrative posts. At Winchester a dedicated group of adult fellows had been appointed to undertake these roles, and had so enlarged the size of the community to be housed on-site. The difference with Winchester College may be most clearly seen in the accommodation provided, with fellows being housed no more than four to a room, each man being provided with his own bed and study area, close to a window for light. The college also benefitted from its own well within the grounds from which it could draw water. A latrine block was also provided, with a cess pit enclosed beneath which was periodically cleaned. This was, however, situated in rather close proximity to the kitchen garden.

Given the relatively improved conditions to be found at New College, and that the scholars had first survived their time at Winchester, it seems unsurprising that no association has been found between mortality observed at New College and the place of origin of those scholars. Perhaps surprising is the slight disadvantage that those originating from urban environments appear to have suffered. However, the weak association between these variables suggests that they are in fact only loosely linked, and that other factors might provide a better explanation as to mortality patterns observed at New College. Such explanations are beyond the scope of

the present study, but examination of factors such as the period of time spent at Winchester, or the period of exposure to the Oxford environment will form the basis of future research.

It would seem that moving beyond Winchester weakened any likely association between mortality patterns and place of origin. This is hardly surprising, as their continued survival indicates their success in coping with the risks of urban living. That this association may have weakened over time is perhaps to be expected, as the individuals would have been exposed to a whole range of different environments and conditions through their individual subsequent career paths. This is a likely explanation for the apparent lack of correlation between place of origin and longevity. Whether an individual was more or less likely to be last observed above the age of 55 is much more likely to have been determined by the risks they encountered in later life, and hence by their subsequent employment patterns and standards of living. Examination of such factors may prove a fruitful avenue of future research, but speculation on the impact of different careers is beyond the scope of the present paper.

This paper has demonstrated the usefulness of place of origin data, and provided empirical evidence for the medieval period linking mortality within an urban institutional community to the place of origin of its members. Institutional living was likely to have held its own dangers, associated with the proximity within which such a community were living and the consequent ease with which disease might be communicated. However, it has been possible to show here that some correlation between place of origin and initial survival in an urban area may be linked. It seems that in such circumstances, as might be predicted, those from similar urban environments fared better than those who had no previous exposure to such a setting. Further analyses of the data presented here would be valuable, and might enable more nuanced interpretations to be made regarding the type of community from which people were originating, and whether altering the definitions of urban and rural affect the conclusions of such analyses.

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