Approaches to famine in medieval England

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Given the potential importance of famine in medieval England, it is at least surprising that so little has been written on it. If we consider the greatest single famine event of the middle ages, the great famine of the early fourteenth century, a crisis event that may have killed something in the region of 10 per cent of the English population, the degree of historical discussion of this, relative to say investigation of the Black Death, is really quite muted. The main discussion of famine in medieval England, despite Jordan’s more general survey of the famine across Europe, remains Kershaw’s Past and Present article of 1973.1 Kershaw’s discussion offers an informed assessment of the key agrarian measures of famine in the period 1315 to 1322. The main thrust of his thorough analysis of the agrarian crisis was to test the potential impact of the famine years as putative cause of any subsequent adjustment of the medieval economy. As such Kershaw’s involved discussion was couched in terms established by the transition debate and the long-standing focus upon the nature and chronology of change in the medieval economy more than it was upon the explanation of famine per se.2 While themes highly relevant to the interpretation of famine are necessarily given centre-stage in Kershaw’s discussion, his is a study defined by medieval social and economic history far more than it is a study of famine per se. Interestingly, Jordan’s extensive review of the secondary literature in describing and discussing the Great Famine is also framed almost entirely by the immediate historiography of

medievalists and he offers almost no theoretical or comparative context in which to place the events he sets out.³ Prior to the work of Kershaw, discussion of the famine in England was mostly confined to one or two relatively brief assessments, including comments by Thorold Rogers and Lucas, both on the great famine of the early fourteenth century. Rogers’ discussion was brief but closely informed by his study of prices and wages and reflects a deliberately modern and involved assessment of the components of famine; Lucas tends instead to a narrative largely constructed from narrative accounts.⁴

We should of course note that in more recent years, medieval historians have taken to explore relevant features of the medieval economy and economic activity in relation to famine and food shortage, and especially the major crises of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. We shall return to some of this work later in this paper but for now it is worth noting that studies of the peasant land market have been undertaken in relation to harvest failure and crisis but one which tends to be contained within its own medieval context.⁵ In addition Barbara Hanawalt has offered one of the few attempts to explore criminality in relation to famine and dearth in this period.⁶

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³ There is, though, a brief and initial discussion of aspects of the modern commentary on famine, Jordan, *Great famine*, pp. 12-15.
Most recently, Bruce Campbell has examined the ways in which the social structures of regions within medieval England, and in particular eastern England, might make their population particularly vulnerable to harvest failure.7

With certain exceptions, most of these forays into crisis in the middle ages, and especially the crisis events before the mid-fourteenth century, have seldom had famine in high and late medieval England as their focus and there has also, unsurprisingly therefore, been little application of a burgeoning theoretical literature on famine to the medieval English experience or any significant attempt as yet to relate the great famine in England to contemporary or near contemporary events in other parts of Europe.8 To touch on this second point initially, discussion of medieval famine is also in its infancy in western European historiography, and there has, as yet, been little exchange of ideas in terms of approaches to research in medieval famine or investigation of comparative reference.9 A recent and valuable overview of the study of famine by François Menant has drawn together a set of highly pertinent themes and it is instructive to note Menant’s terms of reference. Some of these, such as an emphasis upon terminology, are strongly ‘European’ themes not as evident in the anglophone literature; others include some assessment of the supply- and demand-side factors in explaining famine and dearth in this period.10 Some further return to this European material will be made in this essay, chiefly as a means of testing issues arising from the study of continental European famine in the middle ages and

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8 The notable exception in recent years has been B.M.S. Campbell, ‘Nature as historical protagonist: environment and society in pre-industrial England’, Economic History Review, 63 (2010) ; also, idem, ‘Harvest shortfalls, grain prices, and famines in pre-industrial England’, Journal of Economic History (forthcoming). I am grateful to Professor Campbell for sending me a copy of this forthcoming paper.
9 See, for instance, the essays in Oliva Herrer and Pere Benito I Monclús, eds, Crisis de Subsistencia y crisis agrarias en la edad media (2007); also a series of conferences in 2004 and 2005 on la conjoncture de 1300 en Méditerranée.
assessing their relevance for our developing understanding of famine in medieval England. However, it is the first of my observations – the limited engagement by medievalists with the theoretical literature and commentary on modern famine – that will inform the greater part of the following discussion.

That famine has seldom been central to historical investigation of the medieval economy in this period may explain why there has, as yet, been little dialogue between the modern theoretical definition of famine and historical commentary drawing upon the available historical materials for famine and subsistence crises in the middle ages. In fact, historians of this period, where they have discussed famine at all, have tended to take the term at face value and to apply it rather generally to the experience of the period. Famine has tended to become a broad explanation of trends rather than an event in and of itself; furthermore, it has as often been treated as a largely exogenous variable far more than as, in part at least, an endogenous factor, a product of the inherent weaknesses of institutions and structures of medieval society. As modern commentators upon and theoreticians of famine, both contemporary and in past society, have come to recognise, simple identification of famine as an event is far from straightforward. For instance, Devereux has discussed the difficulties in any use of such an apparently simple category as ‘famine’ and, as we shall discuss more fully below, has identified a range of ways in which famine might be identified, not all of which fit comfortably with ‘outsider’ conceptions of famine. In a recent survey of famine, O’Grada has also set out a series of important measures of famine, possible keys to its identification and potential indicators of the relative force of famine, including the relationship between food shortage events and the role of markets,
individual and collective entitlements, and the importance of institutional responses.\textsuperscript{11}

Of course, much of this new work on famine, especially in its reflection upon the theory of famine, has at is core the interpretations proposed by Amartya Sen. Sen’s, articulation of his theory of ‘exchange entitlements’, most fully developed in his 1981 book on \textit{Poverty and famines}, challenges at a fundamental level the notion that famine is a product exclusively of food supply; the main proposition is that while famine may be a consequence of there not being enough food to sustain a population, the explanation for famine is not exclusively or necessarily at all determined by a \textit{per capita} lack of food.\textsuperscript{12} To date, historians have tended to view the famines and dearths of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as supply-side events, the assumption being that a decline in \textit{per capita} food supply caused famine; while there is no strong reason as yet to challenge that view, it certainly merits further testing not least in order to consider more closely the relationship between exogenous and endogenous explanations for harvest failure and consequent crisis events in this period.

\textit{Famine in medieval England: thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries}

In certain key respects, it is evident that we do already know a good deal about famine and extreme periods of dearth in medieval England and the mechanisms that may have generated such crises. In the first instance, contemporaries themselves drew attention to what to them appeared to be the most extreme instances of food shortage


as well as offering some reflection upon the motors that drove such events. For thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England the chronicle accounts provide a series of pinpoints into moments of evident shortage and harvest failure, and most likely coincide with periods of relatively serious shortage. Thus, to take one major example, in 1258, a year of recognised general harvest and severe limitation of basic food supply, a number of chroniclers make reference to shortage and its consequences. The chronicler of the Abbey of Meaux notes excessive rainfall, limited or no yield and an incapacity of the land to absorb the rains; the consequence of these disasters was that, on account of a shortage of grain, the poor perished. At Bury St Edmunds the chronicler also notes a shortage in all goods followed a year of excessive rainfall; the chronicler records very high grain prices as well as the extreme diets of the poor, which included horse meat and the bark of trees; according to the chronicler untold numbers succumbed.

In the majority of such relatively brief chronicle references, the chroniclers adopt a formula of development of language and idea so that shortage (caristia) leads to famine (fames); quite often the price of grain is offered as local and particular evidence of the severity and atypicality of the disruption. The vulnerable are also identified: the chronicles note that it is typically the poor who suffer and die from the shortage. This ‘formula’, or perhaps we are better to think of it as ‘structure’, is


\[15\] For other, and similar, instances of the formulaic presentation of dearth and famine (viz.: bad weather leads to increased grain price leads to disruption and deaths), Chronica monasterii de Melsa, ed. E.A. Bond (Rolls Series, 3 vols., London, 1867), ii., pp. 332-3;
entirely evident in both earlier and later chronicle accounts. Thus, for example in 1315, the author of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* records an extreme period of shortage of a kind unknown in the previous century; the author also records very high grain prices, as well as deaths from famine and associated disease. Here, in such examples, measurement resides only in the frequency of appearance of such chronicle references relative to the years of chronicle accounts and the limited estimates included within the narrative accounts themselves, as to price of foodstuffs and, occasionally, mortality. Chroniclers were clearly impressed by such apparent measures of disruption and tended to treat them accordingly; thus, the author of the chronicle of Meaux records, for another year of disruption, in 1284, the escalating price of grain, as well as the unseasonal and generally atypical weather. The message of the chronicles is, in part, to identify a series of potential indices of dislocation and disruption associated with and occasioned by famine and dearth in this period. The structure of the narrative, as already identified above, calls for consideration of the following potentially significant indices: poor climatic conditions, increased grain prices, social and political dislocation, mortality and morbidity crises.

Of course, we also know that some of these key indices cannot be entirely relied upon to reflect accurately the experience of medieval men and women during such crises.

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18 *Eoque anno unum quarterium frumenti ad xvi. denarios vendebar. Sed nocte sequente diem Sancte Margaretae descendit tempestas imbruum, toniturui et fulguris, concutiens sata et demergens, ita ut Londoniies quarterium frumenti usque ad 8 solidos max excrevit. Sicque per 40 annos, usque ad obitum Edwardi regis 2 [sic], extitit caristia bladi, ut aliquoties Londoniis unum quarterium frumenti ad xl. solidos vendetur.*

The more lurid accounts of infanticide and cannibalism have tended to be dismissed by historians as hyperbole and as narrative tropes, deliberate and direct Biblical allusion intended to inform the reader, already familiar with the references, that the described event was at the very least severe.\textsuperscript{19} We also recognise that we need to move beyond the bold narratives if we are to grasp the realities of famine or famine-like events, to comprehend more fully the ways in which famines were formed in the middle ages and to assess the ways in which medieval society coped, or failed to cope, with crisis events of this kind. As will already be evident, historians have already attempted to move us in that direction. Kershaw, writing as relatively recently as 1973, could lament that, in contemplating his own attempt to assess the significance of the famines and murrains of the early fourteenth century, ‘we know hardly anything other than what the chronicles tell us’.\textsuperscript{20} Extensive work on the supply-side issues, especially in gathering and analysing relevant quantitative data has also added considerably to our mapping of crisis in this period, points to which we will return below.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to review some of the ways in which historians might begin to test these issues to an extent hitherto not attempted for medieval famine in England and to reflect upon the potential significance of such attempts for our understanding of the actual concept of famine in this period, that is, rather than famine, however defined, employed as an explanation for other shifts in the medieval economy. In making this initial assessment I will concentrate upon the following potentially significant features: the chronologies of disruption; indices and measures of disruption; responses to crisis; and the regionality of such crisis events.

\textsuperscript{20} Kershaw, ‘Great famine and agrarian crisis’, p. 86. See also C. Dyer, ‘Did the peasants really starve?’ in Carlin and Rosenthal, eds, \textit{Food and eating in medieval Europe}, pp. 53-71 for identification some of the problems to be faced in addressing such questions.
To date most discussion of famine in medieval England has focussed upon the events of the great famine of the second decade of the fourteenth century; we are certainly aware of a large number of years of harvest failure and associated subsistence crises. For instance, by using grain price and yield data, available from the beginning of the thirteenth century, Dyer has identified a series of difficult years in which grain prices rose in excess of 25 per cent of the general moving average or yields fell 15 per cent the same.21 Dyer’s listing offers a usual general index of famine/dearth years and one that can also be set alongside a number of runs of data gathered by historians since the nineteenth century and revised more than once in recent decades.22 These offer us broad indications of significant moments of crisis and pinpoint years of exceptional vulnerability; allying price data to wage data, Clark has, for example, identified the decades either side of 1300 as uniquely difficult, the years 1296 to 1323 including ‘the seven worst years of real wages in recorded history’.23

That said, there have however been relatively few such attempts to chart the history of medieval famine. Instead, as noted already, historians have concentrated their attention on the single greatest famine event, guided in part by contemporary chroniclers and, conceivably, early conceptualisations of key events. Lucas in his

21 C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 262-3 (table 19). Thus, for instance, famines and dearths in the early fourteenth century have been identified by Dyer in the following way: All grains, 1310-11, 1315-16, 1316-17; Wheat, 1315-16, 1316-17, 1321-2, 1322-3; Barley, 1315-16, 1316-17, 1321-2, 1322-3. For a much earlier attempt to chart a general history of medieval European famine, see F. Curschmann, ‘Hungersnöte im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Duitschen Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 8. bis 13. Jahrhunderts’, *Leipziger Studien aus dem Gebiet der Geschichte*, vi (1900); also discussed in Lucas, ‘Great European famine’, n. 1. See also Campbell, ‘Harvest shortfalls, grain prices, and famines’.


23 Clarke, ‘The long march of history’, 110; also Campbell, ‘Nature as historical protagonist’, 285.
close survey of the great famine offered the initial general point that attention has been drawn to the famine of the second decade of the fourteenth century ‘because more references to it can be found than to any other mediaeval famine’. Furthermore, in their concentration upon the great famine historians have also tended to focus their attention upon the initial years of that event, from 1315 to 1317, rather than upon the extended period from 1315 until at least 1322/3. This is most obvious in the earlier discussions; both Curschmann and Lucas end their surveys of medieval famine in 1317; more recent work has stressed the longer span of the period of the great famine and only in the last few years have historians begun to test the force of the later years of this crisis. There have also been brief surveys of other key or unusual famine events, including some few attempts to explore the famine of 1438, but relatively little, in an English context, on the potentially major famines and dearths of the thirteenth century.

In these respects we might at least suppose that medieval historians have been inclined to follow, for the greater part, two leads in establishing a history of famine in the middle ages. In the first instance, it is hard not to detect in this history to date a focus upon the long-established meta-narratives of English ‘political’ history, with its foundation laid in no small part by early historical work using narrative sources, where big events feature in the landscape and lesser events go undetected. What is more, and probably of greater importance in this context, the identification and

25 See, for example, Campbell, ‘Nature as historical protagonist’, 287-93.
26 See, for instance, A.J. Pollard, ‘The north-eastern economy and the agrarian crisis of 1438-40’, Northern History 25 (1989), 88-105. For the chronology of famine in medieval Catalonia, for example, see P. Benito i Monclús, ‘Et si sterilitas, ut solet, in terra illa fuerit… Frecuencia, longevidad y gravedad de las carestías en Cataluña durante la « fase del crecimiento » de la economía medieval (siglos xi-xiii)’, in Herrero and Benito i Monclús, eds, Crisis de Subsistencia y crisis agrarias, pp.79-110.
27 See the narrative of the reign of Edward II in W. Stubbs, The constitutional history of England (4th ed., Oxford, 3 vols., 1896); more recent discussions of the reign having only relatively brief discussions of the famine which remains largely divorced from the political narratives: S. Phillips, Edward II (Cambridge, Mass., 2010).
focussing upon these few significant famine events is also founded in a particular interpretation of what constitutes ‘famine’. In this respect it seems reasonable to suggest that both medieval chroniclers and modern historians have concentrated upon a rather traditional but also potentially rather limiting interpretation of famine. Stephen Devereux usefully explores the range of definitions that have been applied to ‘famine’ and examines and distinguishes between discrete and definitive groups, including famine as ‘food shortage’, as ‘mass starvation’, as ‘community syndrome’, that is, a reflection of and potential cause of socio-economic disruption. These are all issues to which we will have cause to return but, for now, we need note Devereux’s interesting observation that such definitions tend to be made by outside observers of famine and that, at least in certain cases, they reflect a reliance on certain potentially flawed assumptions regarding definition and causality in famine. In particular, Devereux challenges the notion that food shortage, starvation or excessive mortality are necessarily essential components of a famine; these are, to quote him, ‘conventional “outsider” definitions of famine’. Citing Alex De Waal’s account of the famine in Darfur in 1984-5, Devereux notes De Waal’s insistence that victims of famine in the region identified famine not only in terms of mass starvation but also, distinctly, as hunger, destitution and social disruption. While it may be bordering on the absurd to suggest that historians can tease out the ‘insider’ definition of medieval famine, the sorts of distinctions that modern commentators on famine have helped to establish are important because, as in the case of chronologies identified in varying grain price movements across the high and late middle ages, they serve to remind us that there was a reasonably persistent risk of hunger, hardship and social disruption of a degree that enjoins the historian to eke out the signs of famine even where they are

28 Devereux, *Theories of famine*, pp. 10-16.
29 Devereux, *Theories of famine*, p. 18.
30 Devereux, *Theories of famine*, p. 17.
not already mapped onto the landscape of the main historical narrative.\textsuperscript{31} This is a view akin to Hatcher’s observation that the message of contemporary commentators in the period after the Black Death should not be drowned out by the more quantitative and sometimes seemingly contrary material.\textsuperscript{32} Certainly, when we consider, for example, venality satire of the early fourteenth century, reference to ‘derthe’, as in 1321, is not easily to be distinguished in contemporary perception from the earlier years of harvest failure and high prices in the second decade of the fourteenth century. Further, contemporary reflections on dearth, rather than famine, also include some of the criteria more evidently associated with, to use De Waal’s insider definitions, high prices and social disruption rather than, say, widespread mortality.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{Indices and measures of disruption}

That said, historians of medieval famine are much aware of most of the strongest indicators of both supply-side and, to a lesser degree, demand-side failures, and clearly cannot ignore them. In terms of supply-side failure, a good deal of work has been done on the key indices, including movements in grain price and yield, as well as some exploration of the exogenous factors that must have contributed to, and indeed most likely were the primary cause of, the most severe famines we can identify

\textsuperscript{31} In fact, it appears that Devereux makes the equal and opposite mistake in discussing famines in the more distant, suggesting that only modern famines need a new theoretical perspective as it is reasonable to assume that earlier, pre-modern famines, could be attributed almost exclusively to supply-side failures. He argues that a Malthusian explanation of famine was posited upon assumptions conditioned by the realities of famine in the eighteenth century; however it is at least as reasonable to suggest that pre-modern commentators on famine were failing to reflect the same subtleties Devereux argues we should ascribe to modern famine. See Devereux, \textit{Theories of famine}, pp. 28-9; for a more recent assessment of historical famine and one that admits the potential of demand-side factors in famine causation, see O’Grada, \textit{Famine}.


for this period. It is possible, as is well-known, to chart the behaviour of these indices and, as already discussed, to map the more significant features of disruption. This is especially the case for the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, where a combination of stronger price and wage data and greater volatility in grain price behaviour poses fewer challenges for the historian than does similar but rather less robust material surviving from later decades of the middle ages.34 There are also, at present, significant steps being taken in understanding more fully the environmental context in which famines occurred during this period; historians, with certain few exceptions, have yet to get to grips with the detailed chronologies of climate behaviour evidenced through dendrochronology and ice-core sampling which will add significantly to our appreciation of the vagaries of the climate and, in particular, the recurrence of poor weather conditions from one harvest to the next which are one of the key components of famine.35 Such work will add to and no doubt refine earlier work by a few historians on the documentary evidence for poor weather and its association with harvest failure.36 In particular, Titow’s analysis of Winchester pipe rolls of the thirteenth century offered the first systematic attempt to gather data on weather and climate change in a medieval English context.37

If we maintain our view, for now, on the classical components of famine: food shortage, starvation and excessive mortality, we should also seek evidence for widespread and unusual mortality in the worst harvest years. There has, as is also well known, been some attempt to chart the most obvious key indicators of a demographic

35 On successive years of poor weather and the impact of recurrent harvest failure see, for instance O’Grada, Famine, pp. 31-5; also Campbell, ‘Harvest shortfalls, grain prices, and famines’ for a discussion of back-to-back harvest failures and their significance.
36 See, for instance, Campbell, ‘Nature as historical protagonist’, p. 293.
response to harvest failure in this period. The major study, in terms of its resonance in
the medieval anglophone historiography, remains that undertaken by Postan and
Titow in 1958 where, extrapolating ‘heriot’ or ‘death-duty’ payments from the
Winchester account rolls and linking annual counts of these with grain price
movements, Postan and Titow identified a direct association between deaths and
harvests, in so far as their analysis shows a direct correspondence between the two.
While their methodology and approach have been subject to fairly severe criticism, a
point also made by Smith in his survey of demography in England before c.1350, the
general association is unmistakable and has been identified in other series in more
recent work.38 Such peaks are significant, even if as Kershaw notes, there are
numerous court roll series that do not offer the same patterns of peaks and troughs
consistent with such a correspondence.39 What they reveal are mortality peaks among
heriot-paying tenants, in other words, the mortality consequences within a cohort of
the landed peasantry; while that cohort was in no way fixed and undoubtedly included
relatively wealthy kulaks and significantly less advantaged small-holders, death-duty
payments offer an insight into one section of rural society, and not into the general
experience of the totality of that society. Furthermore, the extent to which a manor
generated heriots to be recorded by and for the lord was also conditioned by the
tenurial structure operating upon that manor; for instance, on those manors where
major customary units, if they had ever existed, were fragmented and where there was
less evidence for seigneurial commitment to labour services and the terra unius
familie, its record may simply have included fewer recorded heriots.40

38 R.M. Smith, ‘Demographic developments’, in B.M.S. Campbell, ed., Before the Black Death: essays in
the crisis of the early fourteenth century (Manchester, 1991), pp. 25-76.
40 See, for example, courts from 1315-1316 for Bocketon (Worcs.), Stafford Record Office,
D(W)1788/P39.B10, mm. 17-18. Bocketon was a small lay manor of hamlets and farmsteads, held
A comparison of information on landholding and total manorial populations as extracted from court roll series and rentals and ancillary taxation data, suggests that a significant proportion of medieval rural society, perhaps between 50 and 60 per cent, fell some way below the lower reaches of a taxation system which, by the end of the thirteenth century was based extensively on moveable wealth. Given this, it seems as inappropriate to extend mortality estimates of heriot-paying populations, or replacement rate calculations based upon inheritance data again of the relatively advantaged tenant population, to the wider rural population as it does to extrapolate wider mortality crises from the results of similar analyses of such discrete social groups as the clergy (through bishops’ registers) or the nobility (Inquisitions Post Mortem). Instead, we might be encouraged to think in terms of more general indices of population movement, such as the tithing lists examined by Poos for parts of Essex which suggest both a downturn in rural population and possibly rate of higher mortality (15 per cent) in the worst harvest years than the more general estimate of 10 per cent.\textsuperscript{41} By the same token, investigation of urban in-migration, as described for some of the poorer parts of London and of Norwich, may also speak of a more general experience of famine and harvest failure in this period, and especially in the first years of the fourteenth century.\textsuperscript{42} Further, while it remains highly unlikely that some of the more ‘hidden’ demographic features associable with modern famines, such as heightened rates of neonatal and infant mortality, reduced fertility and consequent generational morbidity, will be as, and certainly not more, detectable than they are for more recent famine events, it also remains at least remotely possible that a few


potential proxy measures for some such adjustments in demographic behaviour will be capable of being employed even for the middle ages. To date though the main demographic variables, mortality, fertility and mobility, remain elusive, and further regional and local study will be necessary if we are to add to and make more concrete some of the present estimates for famine mortality; in so far as it is possible to do so, historians will also need to try to seek out any such measures for years other than those of the great famine. That said, any such efforts will inevitably be hampered by the poverty of the relevant sources. Campbell’s proposal for a national population estimate based upon a calculation of per capita food supply c. 1300 illustrates one of the ways in which historians need to be flexible in their approach to the available data and the ways in which such data can be exploited.

Responses

It is perhaps in the assessment of responses to famine, the endogenous, demand-side issues, that most work remains to be done and, conceivably at least, there is also the greatest scope for purposeful research. Devereux’s suggestion that pre-modern famines were chiefly supply-side famines does not evidently or necessarily hold good for most, if not indeed all, recorded famines in past society. Historians working on medieval famine at earlier points in the historiography have of course recognised that the response mattered; Kershaw, for instance, outlined some of these issues in his own

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43 See, for instance, O’Grada, *Famine*, p. 106 on reduction in reported rape as a possible index of reduced libido in nineteenth- and twentieth-century famines. It is though less conceivable that a similar quantitative investigation might be made of relevant material from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century England; see, for instance, Hanawalt, *Crime and conflict*, p. 107.

review of the great famine.\textsuperscript{45} Since the 1970s application of Sen’s famous analysis of the Bengali famine of the 1940s, and his much vaunted discussion of entitlement, to much earlier famines has clearly illustrated the ways in which pre-modern famines can as usefully be considered in terms of ‘food entitlement decline’ (FED) as they can in terms of ‘food availability decline (FAD).\textsuperscript{46}

Research to date on famine in medieval England has illustrated some of the ways in which we might begin to assess the disequilibriums associated with access to resources and their distribution in crisis years. Most obviously, discussion of both the peasant land market and the extent to which individuals enjoyed access to rural credit has begun to shed some light on the ways in which medieval society responded to the challenge of harvest failure and food shortage in this period. Smith’s discussion of the market in customary land on the Bury St Edmund’s manor of Redgrave provides the most significant assessment of the ways in which individuals and families managed their landed resources in the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries; in particular, his application of research on intra-familial exchange of land in modern Bangladesh to \textit{inter-vivos} dealing in customary land in medieval England offers an especially insightful approach to aspects of support and reciprocity between siblings and across generations.\textsuperscript{47} Subsequent work on the peasant land market has also served to emphasise features of polarisation, accumulation and a general disequilibrium.\textsuperscript{48}

It is work on rural credit and indebtedness that has begun to move beyond measurement of the indices of disruption, such as the quantity and volatility of the land market, and to identify more fully potential motives for engagement in the land

\textsuperscript{45} Kershaw, ‘Great famine and agrarian crisis’, p. 129; see also Dyer, ‘Did the peasants really starve?’, pp. 65-8.

\textsuperscript{46} Note, for instance, the examples gathered by O’Grada, \textit{Famine}, pp. 159ff.


\textsuperscript{48} See, for instance, Schofield, ‘Dearth, debt and the local land market’.
market during periods of harvest failure and disruption. While there remains a good
deal of work to be done in exploring the nuances of the relationship between credit,
debt and the distribution of resource in the medieval English village, work to date has
at least made it reasonably clear that, even in periods of significant harvest failure and
crisis where it is evident that wealthy creditors could and did take advantage of their
less prosperous peers, not all indebtedness was extreme and that not all creditor-
debtor relations were aggressively uni-directional. Nor were they consistent from
manor to manor and village to village.\footnote{\textsuperscript{49}}

There is as yet relatively little work on other potentially significant social indices of
response in periods of harvest failure; the limited research on charitable provision and
agrarian crises, suggests only a piecemeal and entirely partial response to famine, if
one at least consistent with the precepts of charitable provision in this period.\footnote{\textsuperscript{50}}

Governmental legislation and attempts to adjust prices in the face of harvest failure
and reduced grain availability have enjoyed some limited attention and clearly
deserve more.\footnote{\textsuperscript{51}} Most obviously, the ordinances of Edward II’s reign, which reflect a
brief attempt aimed at fixing prices and were soon abandoned, illustrate one limited
calculation on the part of socio-economic and political elites intended to respond in
some form to the crisis of the great famine. Such attempts merit further examination
not least because they offer some insight into the institutional response and the ways
in which it was constrained and modified by a variety of other factors, including
internal politics, the competing demands of warfare and associated taxation, and the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{49} Schofield, ‘Dearth, debt and the local land market’, p. 1; \textit{idem}, ‘The social economy of the medieval
village’, \textit{Economic History Review}, 61 S1, pp. 38-63; C. D. Briggs, \textit{Credit and village society in
fourteenth-century England} (Oxford, 2009), pp. 151-5, 190-3.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{50} See, for instance, Dyer, \textit{Standards of living}, pp. 234ff; M. Rubin, \textit{Charity and community in medieval
Cambridge} (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 58ff; also Schofield, ‘Social economy’ for a case study of the same.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{51} See, for instance, Lucas, ‘Great European famine’, pp. 68-9.}
sheer independent force of the market. In this respect also, charitable provision, from within a variety of non-governmental institutions: towns, monasteries, guilds, local communities and parishes, might also benefit from further considered research, especially a more systematic attempt to accumulate data on responses, both in the most difficult harvest years and indeed more generally in this period. For instance, monastic sources suggest only a fairly limited institutional response to famine and dearth, at least in terms of any concerted effort at alleviation. At Westminster Abbey the majority of instructions to manorial offices and the recorded forinsec expenses relate chiefly to the administration and delivery of grain as well as to payments to third parties, governmental officials and neighbouring landlords. We know also that while lords might distribute small amounts of grain as doles in difficult years, the greater emphasis in the accounts is on the opportunities higher prices afforded grain producers in maximising their profits. In this respect we might also wish to consider more closely the relationship between seigneurial investment in the management of demesnes and the extent to which, directly or indirectly, this may have responded to periods of crisis and harvest failure. Work in recent years on adjustments to cropping practices, for instance, and a heightened awareness of the responsiveness of demesne

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52 There is, for instance, a useful indication of the respective concerns and priorities of Edwardian government evident in the roll of parliament from Lincoln, January 1316, where heightened food prices feature as an issue for discussion and as an explanation for the limited sitting of the parliament; relative to the political turmoil and the plans for a further campaign against the Scots, discussion of the famine-event appears of only limited importance, however: Lincoln Parliament, January 1316, from Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, ed. C. Given-Wilson et al. (SC9/20) : 2. Die sabbati sequenti concordatum fuit quod quaedam proclamacio prius facta de bobus, vaccis, multonibus, aucis, gallinis, et aliis victualibus sub certo precio vendendis revocaretur, et quod venderentur pro racionabili precio, prout prius fieri consuevit; et inde facta fuerunt brevia sub magno sigillo regis. [2. On the following Saturday it was agreed that a certain proclamation previously made concerning the selling of oxen, cows, sheep, geese, hens and other victuals for a certain price, was to be revoked, and that they were to be sold for a reasonable price, as used to be done previously: and writs were issued on this under the king's great seal.]

53 See, for instance, Westminster Abbey Muniments 25632, manorial account (Feering, 1315-16) and 25634 (1317-18). In 1315-16, there was less multure received from the mills at Feering ‘on account of the great shortage of grain this year’; the Abbey however paid substantial sums for large shipments of grain to be moved from Feering to London, a journey which involved payments to custodians, boatmen and such additional expenses as those arising from the costs of raising London bridge.

54 See, for instance, D. Stone, Decision-making in medieval agriculture (Oxford, 2005).
managers might also be set against an established chronology of grain price movements in order to assess more fully the relationship between such adjustments and institutional imperatives in the face of harvest failure. However, the extent to which any such developments may or may not have worked to the ultimate advantage of the truly needy in this period remains, and is likely to remain, unclear, dependent as any such advantage was upon the distribution of any improved yield through limited market mechanisms. In fact, Stone’s analysis suggests, unsurprisingly, that lords did adjust their cropping strategies in order to follow the most advantageous market rates.

Finally, Smith’s work on the structures of the peasant land market and the nature of *inter-vivos* distribution of plots of land also remains one of the very few attempts to date to illustrate the ways in which families sought to adjust their resources in order to respond to the vagaries of harvest failure. Smith’s prosopographical analysis of sibling groups in later thirteenth-century Redgrave (Suffolk), for instance, suggests both adjustment of resources within kin groups but also only limited regard for the protection of individuals within the family group.

.Regionality

Recent attempts to map distributions of population and wealth in medieval England have served to sharpen our focus on the potential famine ‘black spots’ in the high and later middle ages. Drawing on his extensive mapping of the agrarian economy of England in the early fourteenth century, Campbell has employed taxation data, allied to seignorial and the central governmental records of Inquisitions *post mortem*, to show how measures of regional taxable wealth in gross terms do not correspond to

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55 For some initial research in this area, see, for instance, Stone, *Decision-making*, pp. 52-3.
56 Smith, ‘Transactional analysis’.
per capita wealth in real terms. This association between areas of general prosperity and heightened poverty is well known and could be more fully examined for the middle ages. It is at least conceivable that areas likely to be subject to significant immigration, driven by perceptions of enhanced economic opportunity, were also best served by the kinds of infrastructure that might also produce the most extensive record-keeping, at least of a kind that might allow us access to the relatively poor.

Elsewhere, as, for instance, midland and champion England where developed manorial administrations directed their focus upon large tenurial units and seem often to have left sub-tenancies and the landless and near-landless largely unrecorded, it is possible that there was either simply less pressure on resources (the centrifugal effect of tenurial regimes operating in this part of the country, as described by Razi) or such pressures as there were went largely unrecorded, at least as regards such traditional indices as increased velocity in the market in land. Furthermore, other distinctly local and regional features in high and late medieval England, such as the vicissitudes of border warfare or the inconsistent demands of the English state in terms of prises and purveyance might well have contributed significantly to a varied experience of and capacity to cope with harvest failure and limited food availability.

The extent to which we can observe regional price differentials in this period is also of clear relevance in this respect. Significant differences in grain prices across regions within England, say, might go some way to supporting an argument for regional entitlements as at least partially determinative of crisis events at local levels. Walter

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59 Note for instance the detailed recording of the *inter-vivos* transfer of small plots of land in a context where the cumulative worth, to landlords, of such exchanges was significant and clearly worth the effort in monitoring and recording, R.M. Smith, ‘Some thoughts on “Hereditary” and “Proprietary” rights in land under customary law in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century England’, *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983).


61 See, for instance, Campbell, ‘Nature as historical protagonist’, 290-1.
and Schofield proposed such a possibility for the north and north-west in particular in the later middle ages and Appleby identified a strongly regional dimension to famine in northern England in the later sixteenth century.\(^{62}\) That said, the limited work on regional prices for the high and late middle ages suggests, to date, an only moderate indication of regional distinctions in grain prices.\(^{63}\) Research using Durham grain prices for the fifteenth century also suggests some few differences in the general behaviour of the main grains, to a degree consistent with both a discrete regional experience and the partial but almost certainly not total capacity of national and inter-regional grain markets to smooth out every vagary of local and regional harvests.\(^{64}\)

It is though also evident that contemporaries were themselves at least capable of generating their own regional distinctiveness. The chronicler, Trokelowe’s account of the disastrous English campaign against the Scots in 1322-3, describes how the Scots avoided major military encounter, removed their own resources and laid waste the countryside around so as to leave the English nothing. Lacking resources on the ground and receiving no further supplies by sea, a considerable number of the army starved or died from associated diseases.\(^{65}\) In less pronounced form, the combination of particular tenurial, economic and social structures operating within immediate

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\(^{64}\) Schofield, ‘Regional price differentials’; for some early and perceptive comments on this issue, see Rogers, *Six centuries*, pp. 216-7.

localities might also serve to generate the kinds of conditions that could improve or significantly reduce individual and group entitlements.66

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Writing two decades ago, at the conclusion to an involved and subtle reading of the demography of the early fourteenth century, Richard Smith suggested that ‘a comprehensive and systematically organised study of demographic and social consequences of dearth in the period 1310-22 is needed…’67 He went on to express the view that it would likely take more than the labour of one person to produce a really useful study of famine and dearth in this period. While there have been some inroads in the last two decades – above all in the investigation of the relationship between climate and harvest failure as well as in the accumulation of detail relating to land market and litigation evidence from manorial courts - much remains to be done and it will most certainly involve the efforts of more than one person. Smith’s own contribution in recent years has been to encourage further testing of the sorts of conclusions drawn from his pioneering work on the manors of the estates of the abbey of Bury St Edmund’s, work which has combined demography, law and the study of social structure in order to assess, inter alia, the responsiveness of medieval rural society to crisis and harvest failure. It is this further combination of the theoretical and empirical that needs now to be applied to the study of harvest failure, its cause and above all the nature of the response, if we are to meet the challenge of producing a comprehensive study of medieval famine in its own terms.

66 As, for example, Briggs, Credit and village society, pp. 190-3.
67 Smith, ‘Demographic developments’, p. 76.