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Economic Co-operation between Feudal Lords and Feudal Peasants in the Late Middle Ages: Swiss and Southern German Case Studies

Wirtschaftliche Kooperationen von Lehenherren und Lehenbauern im Spätmittelalter: Schweizer und Süddeutsche Fallbeispiele

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Abstract: This article uses case studies from eastern Switzerland, southern Germany and Austria to analyse economic relationships between feudal lords and peasants in the late Middle Ages. The focus is on agriculture. In principle, this was an asymmetrical relationship, as the feudal tenants were bound to their lords of the manor by feudal law and were therefore dependent upon them for their property and, in some cases, also personally. The aim of this article is to show that, despite the dependence of peasants on their lords, a certain consensus between them was common in everyday economic life.

In the late Middle Ages, the region under study was dominated by the manorial system (*Rentengrundherrschaft*). The holders of fiefs had great power of disposal over the estates granted to them by the lords of the manor. Peasants acted entrepreneurially and promoted select agricultural sectors together with their lords. Co-operation between feudal lords and peasants was also common when it came to investing in the maintenance and expansion of the fiefs. The relationship required a certain degree of trust. The presence of landlords with institutions that served as an internal market for economic exchange with their fiefholders was important. In addition, lords of the manor sometimes coordinated the exchange between individual farmers.

JEL-Codes: N 33, N 53, N 93

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Until well into the early modern period, agriculture was the most important economic sector. Most land belonged to a small group of secular and clerical lords. Farming was carried out by peasants, over whom this elite ruled. How their rule was actually exercised has long been the subject of controversial debate. There will never be a universally valid answer to this question; opinions vary from manorial oppression and exploitation of the peasantry at one extreme to consensual relationships at the other. The day-to-day economic relationships of lords and peasants in the Middle Ages can only be analysed by looking at individual periods and regions with specific questions. These can shed light on individual aspects, in the full knowledge that much remains unconsidered.

This article uses the example of eastern Switzerland and parts of southern Germany to illustrate economic co-operation between feudal lords (*Lehenherren*) and feudal peasants (*Lehenbauern*) who were in a legal and economic relationship with each other: While recognizing that the peasant families mentioned in sources preserved by the lords were bound to their landlords by feudal law and were thus dependent on them in material terms and, in some cases, in personal terms, I hypothesize that a certain degree of consensus and reciprocity between these two parties was a prerequisite for economic success.

1 Different Types of Lords and the Manorial System

The economic relationship between lords and peasants in the late Middle Ages was governed by a particular manorial system (*Grundherrschaft*), which was the central political, legal, and economic organization of activity. In Switzerland and southern Germany during the late Middle Ages the rentier manorial system (*Rentengrundherrschaft*) predominated: this system left the cultivation and exploitation of estates to the feudal peasant in return for levies paid to the lords. Lords could be ecclesiastical (monasteries) or secular (nobles, burghers, or municipal institutions such as hospitals). Researchers have argued that as the earlier form of demesne-based seigneurialism (*Villikation*), where agriculture was organised by the lords themselves, gave way to *Rentengrundherrschaft*, landlords largely withdrew from agricultural production and restricted their economic

activities to levy collection.¹ However, more recent regional studies that specifically analyse pragmatic documents such as rent-rolls, *urbaria*, or fiefdom-, rent- and account books, suggest that many landlords were very actively involved in the economic activity of their peasants.²

Whether and in what way feudal lords participated in the work of their peasants depended, among other things, on the type of manorial system that governed their relations. Late medieval manorial systems consisted of a bundle of dynamic economic and social relationships between feudal lords and tenants, which varied by type and region. This interpretation of the manorial system forms the basis of this article, whereby I will here concentrate on the economic aspects of manorial relations between lords and tenants in late medieval eastern Switzerland and southern Germany.³

Eastern Switzerland and neighbouring Germany were home to important manorial systems held by various types of lord: ecclesiastical, noble and secular-urban.⁴ The largest ecclesiastical lord was the Benedictine monastery of

1 In the older literature: F. Lütge, *Deutsche Agrargeschichte*, Bd. 3. *Geschichte der deutschen Agrarverfassung vom frühen Mittelalter bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1967, p. 56. Landlords in the late Middle Ages withdrew more and more from peasant production, which led to the formation of a *pure rent-landlordship*. Newer research takes a more nuanced view, while recognising the tendency of landlords to withdraw from the peasant economy. See: W. Rösener, *Grundherrschaft im Wandel*, Göttingen 1991, p. 563.

2 S. Sonderegger, *Active Manorial Lords and Peasant Farmers in the Economic Life of the Late Middle Ages: Results from New Swiss and German Research*, in: T. Iversen/J. Myking/S. Sonderegger (Eds.), *Peasants, Lords, and State: Comparing Peasant Conditions in Scandinavia and the Eastern Alpine Region, 1000–1750*, Leiden 2020, pp. 292–318. A list of literature on rural society in German-speaking Switzerland can be found in: K. Hürlimann/S. Sonderegger, *Ländliche Gesellschaft im Mittelalter*, in: *Traverse* 18, 2011, pp. 48–76. See also: J. Demade, *The Medieval Countryside in German-language Historiography since the 1930s*, in: I. Alfonso (Ed.), *The Rural History of Medieval European Societies*, Turnhout 2007, pp. 173–252.

3 The research debate on the concept and content of manorial lordship has been going on for a long time and is difficult to keep track of. Heide Wunder coined the term “lordship with peasants” for late medieval manorial lordship: H. Wunder, *Die bäuerliche Gemeinde in Deutschland*, Göttingen 1986. See also the detailed study on Salem abbey by Katherine Brun which summarises the relationships between the abbey and its subjects as follows: “It was a multidirectional bargaining process that involved shifting alliances, unequal partnerships, reciprocity, compromise, and even cooperation among various groups.” See: K. Brun, *The Abbot and his Peasants. Territorial Formation in Salem from the Later Middle Ages to the Thirty Years War*, Stuttgart 2013, p. 415.

4 For a characterisation of different types of manorial lordships in a region, see: D. Rippmann, *Wirtschaft und Sozialstruktur auf dem Land im Spätmittelalter*, in: *Regierungsrat des Kantons Basel-Landschaft* (Eds.), *Nah dran, weit weg. Geschichte des Kantons Basel-Landschaft*, vol. 2: *Bauern und Herren. Das Mittelalter*, Liestal 2001, pp. 139–164.

St. Gallen. Founded in the eighth century, St. Gallen was an important imperial monastery with extensive landholdings on both sides of Lake Constance, stretching as far as the Swiss Plateau. Over the course of the 15th and 16th centuries, the monastery expanded into a sovereignty (*Landesherrschaft*). Until the abolition of the monastery in 1803, the Prince-Abbot of St. Gallen owned one of the largest territories in the Swiss Confederacy. Numerous economic studies have been made of important medieval ecclesiastical centers, including St. Gallen and the Fraumünster in Zurich,⁵ and more recent institutions from the High and Late Middle Ages, such as the Dominican priory of St. Katharinental in Diessenhofen in Thurgau (1242 to 1245), the Cistercian abbey of Magdenau to the west of St. Gallen (1244), the Dominican convent of St. Katharinen in St. Gallen (1228), and the Premonstratensian abbey of Rüti in the canton of Zurich (before 1209).⁶ For southern Germany, there are also studies on the Cistercian monasteries of Salem and Tennenbach,⁷ as well as the Benedictine monasteries of Reichenau, Ellwangen and Scheyern.⁸

5 C. Köppel, Von der Äbtissin zu den gnädigen Herren. Untersuchungen zu Wirtschaft und Verwaltung der Fraumünsterabtei und des Fraumünsteramts in Zürich 1418–1549, Zurich 1991.

6 On St. Katharinental: E. Eugster/V. Baumer-Müller, St. Katharinental, in: Die Dominikaner und Dominikanerinnen in der Schweiz. Die Orden mit Augustinerregel, Basel 1999, pp. 780-840; A. Knöpfli, Das Kloster St. Katharinental, in: Kunstdenkmäler des Kantons Thurgau, vol. 4, Bern 1989. On Magdenau: C. Schäfli, Herrschaft und Wirtschaft des Klosters Magdenau im ausgehenden Mittelalter. Edition and analysis of the fief book of the Cistercian convent of Magdenau, unpublished licentiate thesis, University of Zurich 2008. On St. Katharinen: R. Krauer et al., Klosterfrauen wirtschaften, in: St. Katharinen. Frauenkloster, Bibliothek, Bildungsstätte – Gestern und Heute, Herisau 2013, pp. 112-176; S. Mengis, Schreibende Frauen um 1500. Scriptorium und Bibliothek des Dominikanerinnenklosters St. Katharina St. Gallen, Berlin 2013. On Rüti: A. Zangger, Grundherrschaft und Bauern. Eine wirtschafts- und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchung der Grundherrschaft der Prämonstratenserabtei Rüti (ZH) im Spätmittelalter, Zurich 1991.

7 On Salem: K. Brun, The Abbot and his Peasants. On Tennenbach: C. Stadelmaier, Zwischen Gebet und Pflug. Das Grangienwesen des Zisterzienserklusters Tennenbach, Munich 2014.

8 On Reichenau: H. Derschka, Die Reichenauer Lehenbücher der Äbte Friedrich von Zollern (1402–1427) und Friedrich von Wartenberg (1428–1453), Stuttgart 2018. An overview of available sources from Southern Germany is given by Shami Ghosh: S. Ghosh, Rural commercialization in Southern Germany, c. 1200–c.1500: Sources, problems and potential, in: Mediaeval Studies 82, 2020, pp. 207-274; S. Ghosh, The Imperial Abbey of Ellwangen and its Tenants. A Study of the Polyptych of 1337, in: Agricultural History Review 62, 2014, pp. 187-209. Ghosh argues that – contrary to the prevailing opinion in the historiography – the strong commercialisation of English agriculture was not an exception. Equally strong commercialisation tendencies can be found at the same time in the area of southern Germany, eastern Switzerland and Austria. In more detail and with extensive knowledge of the literature, see: S. Ghosh, Rural Commercialisation in Fourteenth-Century Southern Germany: The Evidence from Scheyern Abbey, in: Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 104, 2017, pp. 52-77. From my own research

An example of a secular manorial system that rose to prominence during the late Middle Ages was the urban hospital. This article will demonstrate that hospital landlords were increasingly active in the peasant economy during this period. A large part of what is presented here is based on research on the Heiliggeistspital St. Gallen, founded in 1228, and the *leprosorium*, also located in St. Gallen, which has documentation dating back to 1225.⁹ The importance of medieval hospitals, and the St. Gallen hospital in particular, to unravelling economic relations between lords and peasants can be outlined as follows. Municipal hospitals in the late Middle Ages and early modern period were polyfunctional institutions. They served not only as hospitals, but also as old people's homes and orphanages. This social and charitable mission was a major financial burden that required income. As in the case of St. Gallen, hospitals usually traded in agricultural products and thus assumed a central function in the city's supply system. These institutions can be considered secular manorial lords who owned land, which they farmed like other landlords in return for levies from peasants. Agriculture was a profit-orientated sector whose management was taken seriously: the Heiliggeistspital sought the guidance of members of the town council with expertise in managing St. Gallen's flourishing international long-distance linen trade, for example. Such strategic management is further reflected in the extensive administrative records that were kept, such as deeds, charters, rent- and account books. Hospitals pursued the principle of written-based economic management by controlling receipts, payments and outstanding debts.¹⁰ This strong econom-

and knowledge of the literature, I agree with Ghosh; the opinion that England was a *special case* is partly due to the fact that many relevant works written in German on Germany, Austria and Switzerland are regional studies and are not sufficiently recognised outside the German-speaking area. See also: G. Sreenivasan, Beyond the Village. Recent Approaches to the Social History of the Early Modern German Peasantry, in: History Compass 11, 2013, pp. 47-64. For Tyrol, see: S. Nicolussi-Köhler, Grundbesitz und Einkünfte des Stiftes Stams im Spiegel der frühen Urbare unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Urbars von 1355, in: J. Hörmann-Thurn und Taxis/T. Pamer/J. Schwarz (Eds.), Anfang und Werden – Stift Stams im Mittelalter. Vorträge der wissenschaftlichen Tagung anlässlich des 750-Jahr-Jubiläums des Zisterzienserstiftes Stams 1273–2023 Stift Stams, 22. bis 24. September 2022, Innsbruck 2023, pp. 119-158.

⁹ S. Sonderegger, Landwirtschaftliche Entwicklung in der spätmittelalterlichen Nordostschweiz. Eine Untersuchung ausgehend von den wirtschaftlichen Aktivitäten des Heiliggeist-Spitals St. Gallen, St. Gallen 1994; P. Sutter, Arme Siechen. Das St. Gallener Siechenhaus Linsebühl im Spätmittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit, St. Gallen 1996.

¹⁰ S. Sonderegger, Aushandeln, festlegen, abrechnen, kontrollieren – Zur Finanzierung und schriftlichen Administration des Spitals der Reichsstadt St. Gallen im Spätmittelalter, in: A. Dirmeier/M. Spoerer (Eds.), Spital und Wirtschaft in der Vormoderne. Sozial-karitative Institu-

ic orientation in the landlordship of hospitals is not only evident in St. Gallen, but also in the research on the hospitals of Lucerne and Zurich, and on the hospital in Basel,¹¹ as well as on hospitals in the northern Lake Constance region, which are implicitly included in this study.¹²

The chronological focus of this article lies in the 15th century. The late Middle Ages were characterised by major social and economic changes, not least in agriculture. Beginning in the 14th and accelerating throughout the 15th century, a strong commercialisation of agriculture can be observed. This manifested itself, above all, in agricultural specialisation and in the integration of peasant production into the market.¹³ Peasants acted as entrepreneurs together with their landlords and promoted selected agricultural sectors for in-demand products.

tionen und ihre Rechnungslegung als Quelle für die Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, Regensburg 2020, pp. 65-101.

11 On Lucerne: S. Jäggi, Die Rechnungen des Heilig-Geist-Spitals von Luzern für die Jahre 1502–1507. Eine Edition, in: Der Geschichtsfreund. Mitteilungen des Historischen Vereins der Zentralschweiz 143, 1990, pp. 5-69. On Zurich: D. Schwab, Das Urbar des Zürcher Heiliggeistspitals aus dem 15. Jahrhundert. Edition and commentary, unpublished licentiate thesis, University of Zurich 2013. On Basel: M. von Tscharnier-Aue, Die Wirtschaftsführung des Basler Spitals bis zum Jahre 1500. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Löhne und Preise, Basel 1983.

12 C. Heimpel, Die Entwicklung der Einnahmen und Ausgaben des Heiliggeistspitals zu Biberach an der Riss von 1500 bis 1630, Stuttgart 1966; B. Zeller, Das Heilig-Geist-Spital zu Lindau im Bodensee. Von seinen Anfängen bis zum Ausgang des 16. Jahrhunderts, Lindau 1952; A. Semler, Geschichte des Heilig-Geist-Spitals in Überlingen am Bodensee, Überlingen 1957; K. Militzer, Das Markgröninger Heilig-Geist-Spital im Mittelalter. Ein Beitrag zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 15. Jahrhunderts, Sigmaringen 1975; U. Knefelkamp, Das Heilig-Geist-Spital in Nürnberg vom 14.–17. Jahrhundert. Geschichte, Struktur, Alltag, Nürnberg 1989. More general hospital research from an economic perspective: H. Stunz, Hospitäler im deutschsprachigen Raum im Spätmittelalter als Unternehmen für die Caritas – Typen und Phasen der Finanzierung, in: M. Ma-theus (Ed.), Funktions- und Strukturwandel spätmittelalterlicher Hospitäler im europäischen Vergleich, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 129-159; M. Pauly, Von der Fremdenherberge zum Seniorenheim. Funktionswandel in mittelalterlichen Hospitälern an ausgewählten Beispielen aus dem Maas-Mosel-Rhein-Raum, pp. 101-116; O. Landolt, Finanzielle und wirtschaftliche Aspekte der Sozialpolitik spätmittelalterlicher Spitäler, in: N. Bulst/K.-H. Spiess (Eds.), Sozialgeschichte mittelalterlicher Hospitäler, Ostfildern 2007, pp. 273-299; M. Scheutz et al. (Eds.), Quellen zur europäischen Spitalgeschichte in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit, Vienna 2010; L. Vervaeet, Het Brugse Sint-Janshospitaal en zijn grote hoevepachters in de 15e en 16e eeuw. Wederkerigheid en continuïteit in functie van voedselzekerheid, in: Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis 90, 2012, pp. 1121-1154.

13 On the theory of commercialisation, see: M. Cerman, Theorien der klassischen Nationalökonomie und Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte des vorindustriellen Europa, in: M. Cerman/F. Eder/P. Eigner/A. Komlosy/E. Landsteiner (Eds.), Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Europe 1000–2000, Wien 2011, pp. 31-43.

Peasants were not just subjects, but actors who invested in the rural economy together with their lords. The rentier manorial system (*Rentengrundherrschaft*), which left the cultivation of the estates to peasant-tenants in return for levies, offered the peasants economic freedom of action.¹⁴ This is an important difference to the self-management organised by landlords themselves, as was common in the demesne system of the early and high Middle Ages (*Villikation*).

I aim to show how and where peasants and landlords co-operated by means of concrete case studies in a micro-historical manner based on archival records. It becomes clear that landlords provided services to support the production of agricultural goods and their distribution. However, this also came at a price. The greater involvement of the peasants in the market also made them more dependent on its whims. Furthermore, the active participation of landlords in the peasant economy served to tie peasant families even more closely to their landlords in economic terms, in addition to their feudal dependence on the landlord. Even though this article is concerned with the presentation of consensus-orientated cooperation, these downside aspects should not be forgotten.¹⁵

2 Fief Law Ties between Feudal Lords and their Peasants

The economic relationship between lords and peasants essentially consisted in the granting of land by the former to the latter. The fief or tenure established a legal relationship between service and consideration, often laid down in a charter. The landlord's service consisted of granting the use of the land to feudal tenants under certain conditions. Their consideration was the payment of levies in the form of in kind- and monetary rents, tithes and serf labour. These manorial, economic and legal ties formed the basis for the organisation of the relationships between lords and peasants, which determined their everyday lives. Within these relationships, there were various actors with different roles. The large Benedictine abbey of St. Gallen held the superior ownership (*dominium directum*) of many estates in eastern Switzerland. However, it rarely managed the land itself, but

¹⁴ Arguing similarly for England: J. Claridge/V. Delabastita/S. Gibbs, (In-kind) Wages and labour relations in the Middle Ages: It's not (all) about the money, in: *Explorations in Economic History* 94, 2024, p. 40, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2024.101626> (19.10.2025).

¹⁵ I have explained in detail the extent to which debts bound peasants to their landlords in another study, see: *Sonderegger*, *Landwirtschaftliche Entwicklung*, pp. 368-370.

often lent it to other landlords, including monasteries, municipal institutions such as the Heiliggeistspital or burghers.¹⁶ The prince abbey of St. Gallen continued to hold overlordship of the fiefs. The municipal hospital, called Heiliggeistspital, the leprosorium and the convent of St. Katharinen, of which the latter was supported by city authorities, became tenants of the prince abbey when they took over these properties and associated rights. These urban tenants can be described as holders of sub-ownership (*dominium indirectum*);¹⁷ however, they did not usually manage the estates themselves either, but in turn leased them to peasant families in the region in the form of sub-loans (*Unterlehen*) in return for rents in kind and money, as well as tithes and other levies, some of which were linked to serfdom. The owners of these sub-loans – the peasants – were the ones who used the land for agricultural purposes; in legal terminology, they were the owners of the usable property (*dominium utile*). This graduated relationship meant that the Heiliggeistspital, the leprosorium and St. Katharinen monastery themselves became feudal lords vis-à-vis the peasants they leased to, it was probably at this level that most of the contacts between feudal lords and feudal peasants took place, or at least this is where they are best documented in writing.

The quality of the relationship between the feudal peasants and their feudal lords depended largely on the conditions under which the landlords granted their feudal tenants the use of their estates. In the late Middle Ages, two different legal forms were widespread in the land tenure system in southern Germany and Switzerland: the temporary fief and the hereditary fief. A temporary fief was understood to be a non-hereditary, time-limited right to use land.¹⁸ The time span ranged from one year to 25 years. In the Cistercian monastery of Magdenau, west of St. Gallen, where the temporary fief was the most common form of loan between the 15th to the 16th century, the most common term was 15 years.¹⁹ In the Premonstratensian monastery of Rüti in Zurich, loans of three years were the most common, but there existed a wide range (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12 and 25 years). For

16 See: S. Sonderegger, Städtisches Geld regiert auf dem Land – die Territorialpolitik der Reichsstadt St. Gallen im Vergleich mit Zürich, in: M. Rothmann/H. Wittmann (Eds.), Reichsstadt und Geld. 5. Tagung des Mühlhäuser Arbeitskreis für Reichsstadtgeschichte, Mühlhausen 27 February to 1 March 2017, Petersberg 2018, pp. 201-228.

17 R. Krauer, Die Beteiligung städtischer Akteure am ländlichen Bodenmarkt. Die Region St. Gallen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert, unpublished Dissertation, University of Zurich 2018, pp. 19-29.

18 K. Scherner, Zeitpacht, in: Handwörterbuch zur deutschen Rechtsgeschichte, vol. 5, Berlin 1998, pp. 1645-1646.

19 C. Schäfli, Herrschaft und Wirtschaft des Klosters Magdenau, p. 39.

Upper Swabia, David Sabeian identified 26 year loans as having been the average duration (with 2, 5, 8, 24, 27, 31, 35, 36, 37 and 42 year loans conferred).²⁰

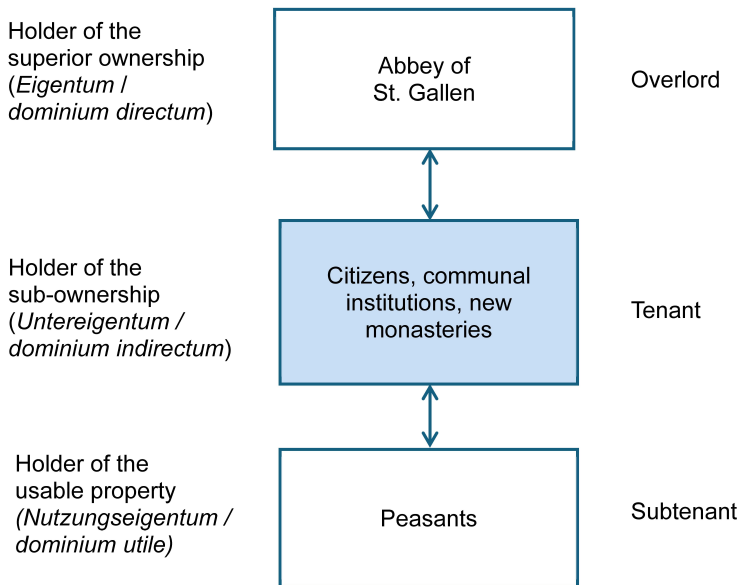


Fig. 1: Visual representation of subtenure. Note: Visualisation by Rezia Krauer and Stefan Sonderegger.

By contrast, in a hereditary fief system the fief rights were inherited by the peasants' successors. This meant that a farm could be farmed by the same family over several generations. The holders of hereditary fiefs had great power of disposal over the property they had been given. The holders could sell, sublet or pledge rights of use to the hereditary fief or parts thereof,²¹ and the Swiss

²⁰ D. Sabeian, *Landbesitz und Gesellschaft am Vorabend des Bauernkriegs. Eine Studie der sozialen Verhältnisse im südlichen Oberschwaben in den Jahren vor 1525*, Stuttgart 1972.

²¹ On selling: These are indications that a lively market for land or rights associated with land existed within rural society, which has not yet been sufficiently analysed in Switzerland. See: M. Cerman, *Bodenmärkte und ländliche Wirtschaft in vergleichender Sicht. England und das östliche Mitteleuropa im Spätmittelalter*, in: *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 2, 2004, pp. 125-150; T. Ertl/T. Frank/S. Nussbaum (Eds.), *Busy Tenants. Peasant Land Markets in Central Europe (15th to 16th Century)*, *Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, supplement 253, Stuttgart 2021. On sub-loans, see: H.-J. Gilomen, *Die Grundherrschaft des Basler Cluniazenser-Priorats St. Alban, Ein Beitrag zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte am Oberrhein*, Basel 1977, p. 209; R. Krauer, *Stadt-Land-Beziehungen im Spätmittelalter – Beispiele aus dem Alpenrheintal*, online at:

legal historian Peter Liver coined the term “*Nutzungsseigentum*” (“usufructuary ownership”) to describe this system. Hereditary feudal relationships, which had become a legal custom, meant the fiefholders essentially held ownership rights including the free use, inheritance and sale of the peasant fiefs.²² Examples are known from case studies in eastern Switzerland in which members of the same family remained on the same property for more than a hundred years.²³ Inheritance by the sons of the following generation was common. In Long-term hereditary feudal relationships the reference institution on both sides remained stable over generations, so to speak. In this way, relationships of trust could develop between lords and peasant families and relationships were probably characterized by a high degree of consensus.

3 Flexibility of Levy Collection

Analysing the levy relationships is one of the best ways to assess relationships between feudal lords and feudal tenants. A basic distinction can be made between levies based on a material bond or those based on a personal bond between the feudal peasants and the feudal lords. The former include rent in kind – for example grain, cheese, butter, vegetables, eggs, chickens – and monetary rent, which the peasants had to render to the lords for the use of the land and farm lent to them. The latter include, for example, the mortmain payment (*Todfall*) – the obligation to hand over the best piece of livestock or the best dress to the lord

<https://www.hvsg.ch/diskussion.php> (29.05.2024). For a similar development see: V. Stamm, Kauf und Verkauf von Land und Grundrenten im hohen und späten Mittelalter. Eine Untersuchung zur historischen Wirtschaftsanthropologie, in: Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 96/1, 2009, pp. 33-43; T. Ertl, Small Landlords: Land Transactions in and around Bozen (South Tirol) in the Mid-Thirteenth Century, in: Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 104/1, 2017, pp. 7-28.

22 P. Liver, Zur Entstehung des freien bäuerlichen Grundeigentums, in: Zeitschrift für schweizerisches Recht 65, 1946, pp. 329-360. Liver also argues that the fact that peasants could not only bequeath but also sell their fiefs meant that the landlords' right of authorisation had been transformed into a right of pre-emption. The pre-emptive rights of the landlords are sometimes mentioned in the feuds. See, for example: O. Clavadetscher/S. Sonderegger (Eds.), Chartularium Sangallense, vol. 10, no. 6358 (15.11.1389), St. Gallen 2007.

23 A. Zwahlen, Die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Schoretshueb. Eine Mikrogeschichte zur spätmittelalterlichen Getreideproduktion in der spezialisierten Landwirtschaft der Nordostschweiz, unpublished Master's thesis, University of Zurich 2011, pp. 105-106. Zwahlen limited his study to the period up to 1570. Whether the farm continued to be run by the Mauchle family in the following period must be left open here.

The first two lines in the rent book entry correspond to the normative levy claim of the feudal lord, which was established as the norm regardless of who managed the farm. Translated to modern German as “*Schorantzhube der Hof gibt jährlich 24 Malter beider Korn in Bischofszeller Mass, 3 Pfund Denaren und 10 Hühner und 200 Eier und 2 Kloben Werg*” this reads as follows in English: “Schorantzhube the farm gives every year 24 malter of corn [oats and spelt] in Bischofszeller measure, 3 pounds of denarii [money] and 10 chickens and 200 eggs and 2 bundles of flax”.²⁵ The third line reads in English: “Seed [in the form of] 12 malter of spelt [Fesen] and 8 malter of oats are to remain on the farm”. This apparently means that the lord of the manor had provided the peasant of the farm with seed at the start of the feudal relationship. This was to remain on the farm if the tenant changed.²⁶ This could be described as start-up aid from the feudal lord for his peasant.

Line 4 mentions who managed the farm. In 1442, this was Hans Rütiner, with whom the accounts were settled after Easter (“*post pasce*”) and who then owed the Spital manorial estate “*1 Pound Denarii*” (1 pound equals 240 denarii or *Pfennige*). The fact that the settlement had taken place between the hospital management and Hans Rütiner can be deduced from the abbreviated Latin word “*ro*” for *ratio* meaning account or settlement in Line 4.

The following lines, which begin with “*dedit*” (i.e. the peasant Hans Rütiner “gave” to the hospital) are particularly significant. While the first two lines of the entry contain the legal claims of the Spital’s manorial lordship, lines 5 to 12 as well as lines 14 and 15 reflect the levies actually paid by the peasant.

When comparing the norm – that means the legal claims of the manorial lordship – with the practice of the levies actually paid by the peasants, one realises that they often differed both qualitatively and quantitatively. This can be illustrated by another example, also from a rent book of the Heiligegeistspital St. Gallen.

²⁵ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 22 recto.

²⁶ A similar duty existed also in parts of Tyrol: “[...] relinquet agris seminatos”, meaning that the peasant had to sow the field before leaving the manor. K. Linder/N. Grass/F. Klein-Bruckschwaiger, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Klostergrundherrschaft Stams O. Cist. unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Leiheformen, in: F. Grass (Ed.), Beiträge zur Wirtschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Zisterzienserstiftes Stams in Tirol, Innsbruck 1959, p. 94.

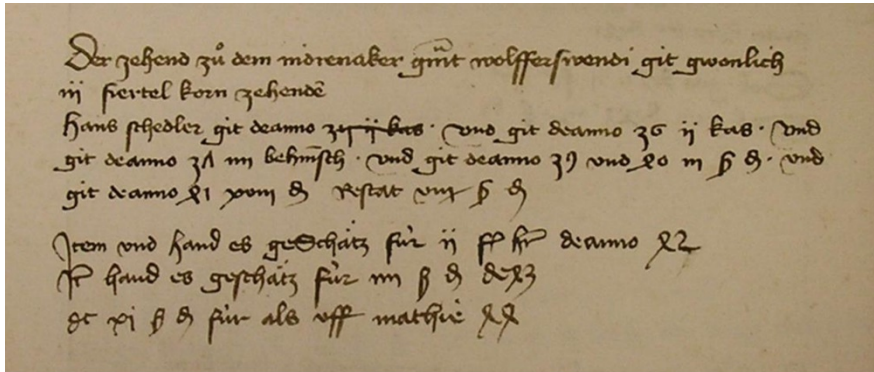


Fig. 3: Extract from the rent book of the Heiliggeistspital St. Gallen (1436 to 1444). Source: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A,3, fol. 24 verso.

The first two lines of this entry translate into modern German as follows: „Der Zehnt zu dem Nidernacker, genannt Wolferschwende, gibt gewöhnlich 3 Viertel Korn Zehnten.“ (“The tithe to the Nidernacker, called Wolferschwende, usually gives 3 quarters of a grain tithe.”)²⁷ At the beginning of the third line, the tithe payer named Hans Schedler is mentioned. One would expect him to have paid the tithe in the form of grain. However, this is not the case. In 1436 he delivered two cheeses (“gibt de anno 36 2 Käse”), and in 1437, 1439 and 1441 he delivered money (“Bömisches, Schilling Denaren”) to the lordship. The third and second-last lines are also very revealing with regard to the day-to-day levy relationship: the levy for 1442 was estimated at “two quarters of oats” and for 1443 at “4 shillings denarii”.

The third example is an extract from the rent book of the St. Katharinen convent in St. Gallen dating from 1488 onwards.

The entry on the settlement of accounts between the nuns and their peasant named Geiser begins as follows: “Item der Geiser hat Holz gegeben für 1 Malter Vesen” (“Item the Geiser has given wood for 1 Malter of spelt”).²⁸ It then mentions that the accounts were settled on the Sunday before Otmar’s Day, concluding that Geiser owed the monastery “3 Malter Fesen” (spelt) and “6 shillings” and that Geiser wanted to supply wood in return. This example shows that the individual availability of peasants’ resources could play a role in the collection

²⁷ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 24 verso.

²⁸ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Altes Archiv, vol. 482, p. 102.

of levies, which could serve both parties. Geiser evidently had enough forest at his disposal to supply the monastery with the wood it needed.

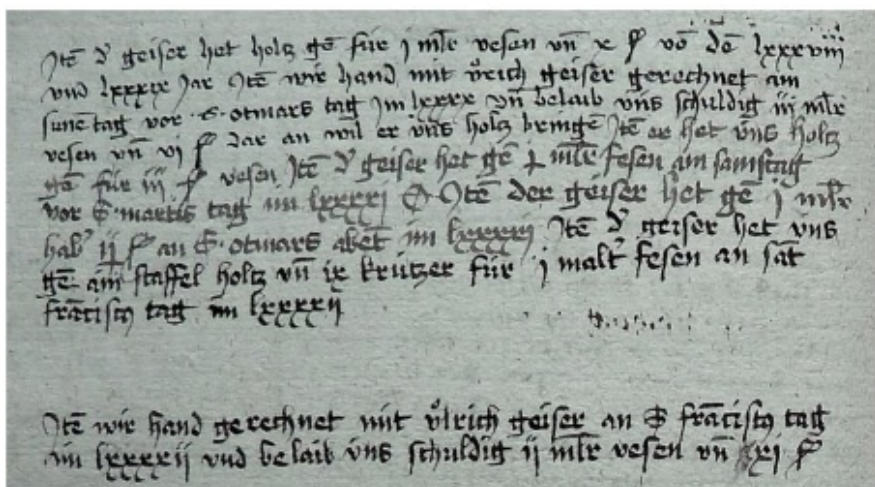


Fig. 4: Excerpt from the fief book of the St Katharinen convent in St. Gallen concerning the levy relationship between the convent and its peasant named Geiser (1488 to 1490). Source: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Altes Archiv, vol. 482, p. 102.

Finally, the next example from the St. Katharinen monastery in St. Gallen from 1494 shows that the manorial demand for a particular product played a role in the collection of levies. Here, the nuns settled accounts with their peasant named Wirt.

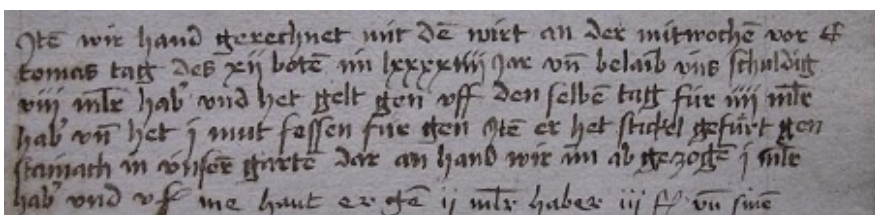


Fig. 5: Excerpt from the fief book of the St. Katharinen convent in St. Gallen concerning the levy relationship between the convent and its tenant peasant Wirt (1494). Source: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Altes Archiv, vol. 482, p. 9.

In the last three lines of this entry, it was recorded that Wirt had transported “vineyard stakes” (“Stickel”) to Steinach on Lake Constance to the nuns’ vineyard and that “1 malt of oats and 5 shillings” were deducted from his dues.²⁹

The four examples lead to the following conclusion: The levy system was more flexible in practice than is reflected in the normative sources. The levies recorded in deeds and other normative sources should be seen as approximate or estimated values with a wide range of options, rather than fixed values. They served as a basis for determining the actual annual payments to be made, both in terms of type and amount, between the lordship and its peasants. The current harvest results were taken into account. This is particularly evident in times of poor harvests, when the peasants were partially exempted from paying levies or were at least granted reductions.³⁰ Another criterion was the availability of in kind or money payments on the part of the tenants. And, finally, the needs of the landlords also played a role in the actual levies.

Further evidence of a flexible levy relationship is provided by the wording used in *urbaria* and rent books, where the rent or tithe are often mentioned as “gives about” (“*gibt etwa*”) so and so much. Such sources shed light on the daily relationship of feudal lords and peasants. In everyday economic life, it seems to have been customary to negotiate the exact amount of levies for a year on the basis of experience, taking into account the current situation. In many cases, the actual levies to be paid were probably only determined in a personal meeting in which lord and peasant negotiated how much of the available land was being cultivated and how good or bad the harvest could be or already had been. This flexible levy practice affected not only the amount of tax but also the form of its payment. All in all, such examples of levy practice convey the impression of a far-reaching reciprocity and even consensus in the economic relationship between feudal lords and peasants.

4 Sharing Expenses and Income

A certain degree of consensus was particularly necessary when it came to promoting certain agricultural sectors. In many areas of Europe in the late Middle Ages, the intensification of selected agricultural sectors led to agricultural spe-

²⁹ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Altes Archiv, vol. 482, p. 9.

³⁰ S. Sonderegger, ... *der Zins ist abgekon* ... Aushandeln von Schadensteilungen zwischen Grundherren und Bauern in schwierigen Zeiten der Landwirtschaft, in: R. Kiessling/W. Scheffknecht (Eds.), *Umweltgeschichte in der Region*, Konstanz 2012, pp. 139-157.

cialisation on a smaller or larger geographical scale. Late medieval agricultural specialisation refers to the intensification of the production of a particular agrarian commodity for commercial interests. For example in England and Spain sheep farming expanded primarily for wool production, while Hungary and Denmark simultaneously specialised in cattle breeding. The cattle were exported in herds and were used to supply meat to urban centres such as Augsburg, Munich, Nuremberg, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Ulm. Large-scale cattle breeding expanded in northern Germany and also in the Alps of Switzerland, Savoy and Piedmont. Cattle and horses from Alpine central Switzerland were sold to Lombardy. In the Po Valley, cattle farming for meat and hard cheese production became established due to irrigated pastures. In France, grain fields were converted into vineyards in the Bordelais and Auxerrois regions. In many areas, viticulture achieved a monoculture-like position, especially near towns. A great demand for beer led to an intensification of the cultivation of hops in the vicinity of large Hanseatic cities in northern Germany; the hops were not only used for local beer production but also for export to Scandinavia and Holland. Vegetable and fruit regions developed in the vicinity of large cities such as Paris and Cologne, and olive groves in Italy. In Spain and Italy, the cultivation of saffron, which was used not only as a spice but also for dyeing cloth, was promoted. Other special crops whose growth was intensified were linen, hemp, flax, rose madder and dyer's woad; the latter was used for blue colouring and was grown intensively in Thuringia. The majority of these examples are large-scale agricultural specialisations. Even if there are still few research papers on the subject, agricultural specialisation in products for food and trade are likely to have existed in many regions of Europe, especially in urban hinterlands.³¹

Eastern Switzerland also witnessed agricultural specialisation. In the 15th century, specialisation was pushed by urban demand and with the help of loans from burghers and urban landowners hospitals and city monasteries. In the area surrounding St. Gallen, these included viticulture in the Rhine Valley, livestock farming in the pre-Alpine Appenzellerland and Toggenburg and possibly also flax cultivation as a raw material for St. Gallen's important linen production. The latter has not yet been conclusively proven. The promotion of viticulture

³¹ This overview of examples of agricultural specialisation is based on: *H.-J. Gilomen*, *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Mittelalters*, München 2014, pp. 104-107; *R. Kiessling/F. Konersmann/W. Trossbach* (Eds.), *Grundzüge der Agrargeschichte*, vol. 1: *Vom Spätmittelalter bis zum Dreissigjährigen Krieg (1350–1650)*, Köln 2016, pp. 113-130; *R. Sablonier*, *Ländliche Gesellschaft im Mittelalter*, Vorlesungsmanuskript Universität Zürich, unpublished, Zürich 2000.

and livestock farming, on the other hand, has been well researched and led to agricultural specialisation in the area surrounding St. Gallen.³²

The map of north-eastern Switzerland (Figure 6) shows that viticulture was particularly widespread in the Rhine Valley and, as the above entry from the rent book of the St. Katharinen monastery in St. Gallen proves, also in places near Lake Constance.

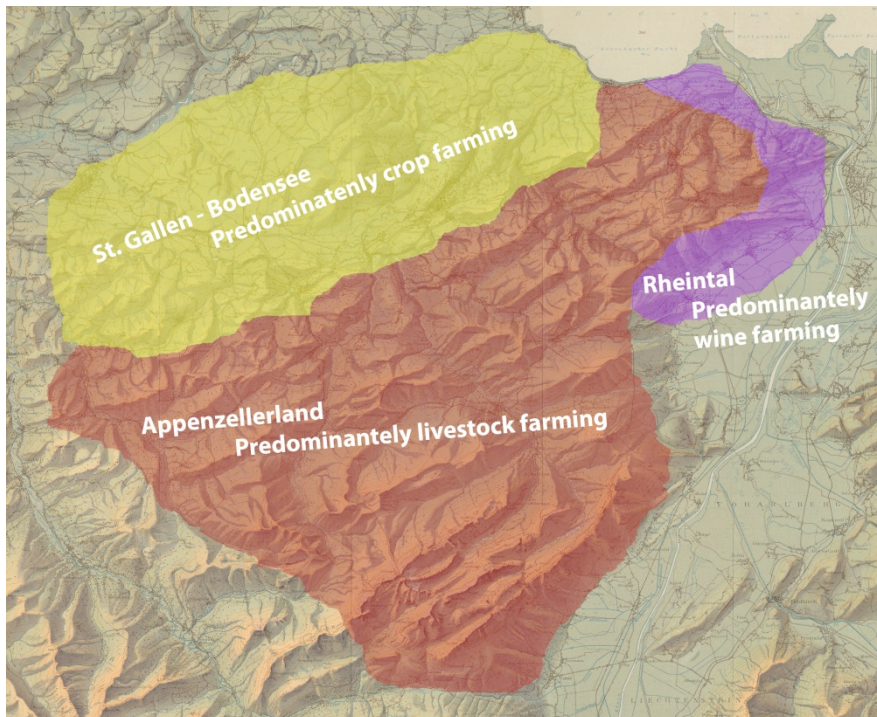


Fig. 6: Agricultural specialisation in north-eastern Switzerland in the 15th century. Source: Oliver Ittensohn.

For the case of agricultural specialisations in viticulture in eastern Switzerland, it can be shown that basic consensus between lords and peasants was even legally established. In viticulture, sharecropping (*Teilbau*) was widespread, often on a

³² S. Sonderegger, Landwirtschaftliche Spezialisierung in der mittelalterlichen Ostschweiz. Diskussion der schriftlichen Quellen, der Treiber der Entwicklung und der Folgen, in: S. Ebert/G. Schenk (Eds.), *Vom Buch aufs Feld – vom Feld ins Buch. Verflechtungen von Theorie und Praxis in Ernährung und Landwirtschaft (ca. 1300 – 1600)*, Stuttgart 2024, pp. 320-351.

half-lease basis (*Halbpacht*), i.e. half of the grape harvest was to be paid by the peasants to the lord of the manor.³³ The legal form of half-lease in viticulture is similar to the *mezzadria* in Tuscany.³⁴ Expenses and income, and therefore also the risks, were shared between the landlord and the winegrower. If there was a public interest in production that went beyond the bilateral relationship between a landlord and his feudal peasants, contracts were even concluded at the level of political bodies. One such case has been preserved for eastern Switzerland in 1471. In a so-called *Rebbrief* (vine charter) between the city of St. Gallen on the one hand and the four villages of Altstätten, Marbach, Berneck and Balgach in the Rhine Valley on the other hand, annual price fixing was regulated. From year to year, the town and the villages in the Rhine Valley alternated in proposing a price. An ingenious arbitration procedure settled the case if no consensus was reached.³⁵

In addition to the division of the yield, this contract also regulated the division of expenses. The payment of materials for the maintenance of the vines (vineyard stakes, fertiliser), the wages of labourers for work in the vineyard and during the grape harvest, as well as transport costs were divided between the landowner and the winegrower. The distribution of risks and profits also manifested itself in the fact that in years with poor yields, landlords waived all or part of the wine due to them as a levy or at least granted a time extension for (partial) additional payments.

Such agreements are evidence of co-operation between landlords and peasants, which was based on profit opportunities for both sides. This was typical of commercial agriculture in the late Middle Ages in the vicinity of urban centres.³⁶ Urban lords of the manor and entrepreneurial citizens invested in viticulture, livestock farming and other specialised crops together with peasants, whose produce benefitted from rising demand. In viticulture, increases in production

33 K.-H. Spiess, *Teilbau*, in: *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 8, 1996, pp. 526-527; K.-H. Spiess, *Teilpacht (métayage) et Teilbauverträge (baux à part de fruits) en Allemagne Occidentale au Moyen Âge et aux Temps modernes*, in: *Les revenus de la terre. Complant, champart, métayage, en Europe occidentale (IXe–XVIIIe siècles)*, Toulouse 1987, pp. 119-144.

34 S. Epstein, *An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe 1000–1500*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 59-60.

35 S. Sonderegger, *Der Rebbrief von 1471 – eine wichtige Quelle zum Weinbau im St. Galler Rheintal. Kommentar und Neuedition*, in: T. Meier/R. Sablonier (Eds.), *Wirtschaft und Herrschaft. Beiträge zur ländlichen Gesellschaft in der östlichen Schweiz (1200–1800)*, Zurich 1999, pp. 43-53.

36 D. Cristoferi, *The Ties that bind. Mezzadria and labour regulations after the Black Death in Florence and Siena, 1348–c. 1500*, in: T. Lambrecht/J. Whittle (Eds.), *Labour laws in preindustrial Europe: the coercion and regulation of wage labour, c. 1350–1850*, Woodbridge 2023, pp. 78-99.

were achieved by planting new vines and increasing productivity, for example by removing shade-casting trees and using more fertiliser.

In late medieval and early modern viticulture – and similarly in livestock farming, as I have explained elsewhere³⁷ – it becomes particularly clear, that agriculture on fiefdoms was by no means only meant for the consumption of the landlords and peasants. Landlords and peasants participated in the local, regional and sometimes even supra-regional trade of wine, meat, dairy products and other goods. Part of the peasants' production was used to sell and exchange goods for their own needs. It has long been recognised that peasant farms were not purely subsistence economies, but were integrated into the circulation of goods. The only question is how significant this economic participation was in individual cases and what different forms of commodity exchange existed.³⁸ The latter is the subject of the next chapter, in which an exchange of goods organised by the manorial lordship – an *internal market*, so to speak, between the manorial lordship and his peasants – is presented.

5 An Internal Market

The increasing commercialisation of agriculture raises a very fundamental question about the rural economy in the late Middle Ages. Agricultural specialisation down to the level of individual farms was ultimately only possible if the supply of daily necessities to farming families was guaranteed. If these were not produced on the farm, they had to be supplied from outside. Here too, landlords played an active role. In the late Middle Ages and early modern period, trade in goods was not limited to official markets institutionalised by authorities. To a

³⁷ In livestock farming, another highly commercialised agricultural sector, urban financiers – butchers, merchants and hospitals – invested in the livestock of farmers in the surrounding urban areas. So-called cattle communities were widespread. Here too, as with viticulture, a fundamentally co-operative attitude can be seen in the sense of sharing costs and income. In return for monetary loans, the farmer had to pay for the stabling, maintenance and feeding of animals. In return for this effort, he received the milk and manure and was able to use the animals' draught power. The common benefit for creditors, often urban landlords, and cattle farmers was an increase in the value and offspring of animals, which were shared between them depending on the lender's involvement. See: *Sonderegger*, *Landwirtschaftliche Entwicklung*, pp. 252-258.

³⁸ S. *Sonderegger/A. Zangger*, Zur Deckung des bäuerlichen Konsumbedarfs in der Ostschweiz im Spätmittelalter, in: *J. Tanner/B. Veyrassat/J. Mathieu/H. Siegrist/R. Wecker (Eds.)*, *Geschichte der Konsumgesellschaft. Märkte, Kultur und Identität* (15. – 20. Jahrhundert), Zurich 1998, pp. 15-33.

large extent, landlords organised the exchange of goods between themselves and their peasants, but also directly between peasant families.

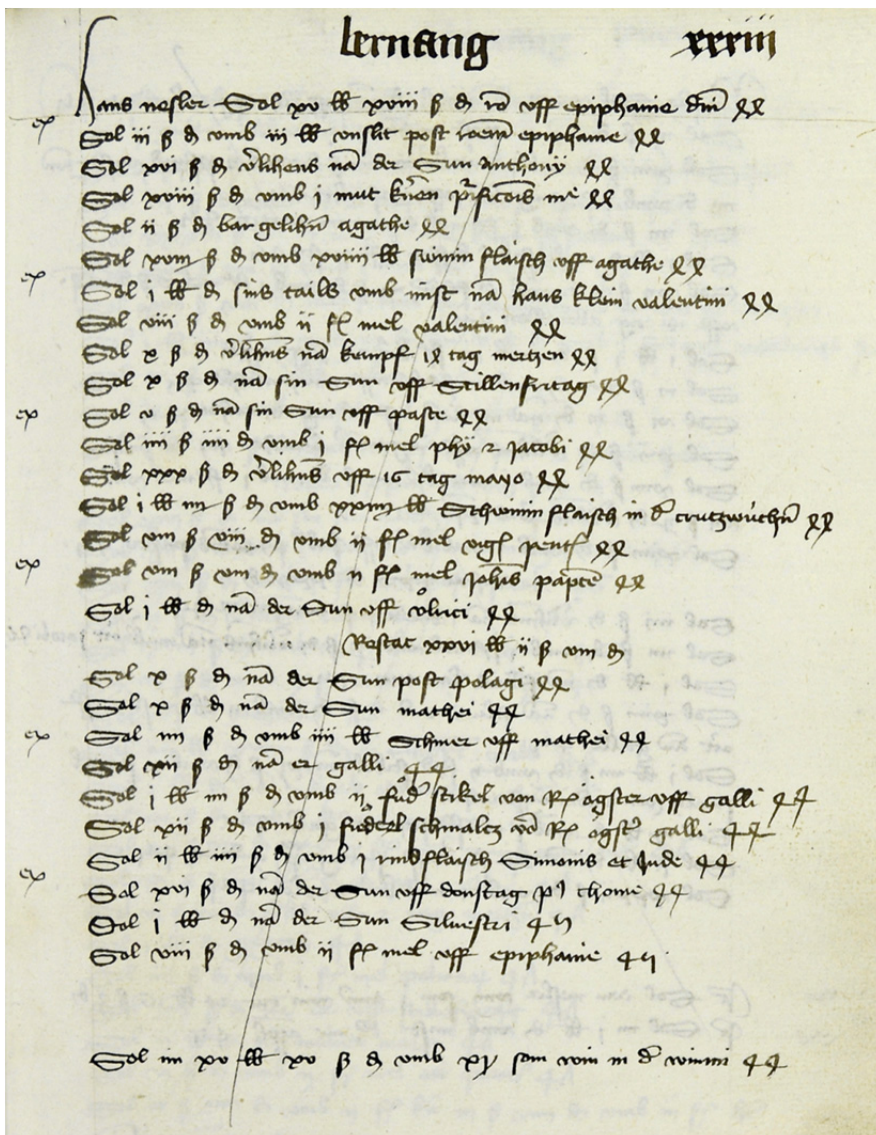


Fig. 7: Extract from the Rheintal debt register of the Heiliggeistspital of St. Gallen. Source: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, C, 2, fol. 33r.

Research on the Premonstratensian abbey of Rütli in the canton of Zurich and the Heiliggeistspital in St. Gallen shows that landlords organised exchanges between different agricultural zones by buying agricultural produce from their peasants and supplying them with the goods they lacked in return. This was a largely cashless exchange; the peasants had the purchases of goods recorded and paid back later in whatever form was possible or convenient for them. To illustrate this *internal market* between a lord of the manor and his peasants, we can draw on the excellent sources of the St. Gallen Heiliggeistspital and comment in detail on an extract from a so-called debt book, the Rheintal debt register from eastern Switzerland.³⁹

The debt book entries for the years 1444 to 1447 relating to the winegrower Hans Nesler illustrate the structure and content of such accounts:

-
- 1 Hans Nesler sol 15 lb 18 s d r[ati]o [= settlement] uff Epiphanie domini [= 6 January] [14]44
 - 2 Sol 3 s d umb 3 1b unslit [= fat] post [rationem] Epiphanie [14]44
 - 3 Sol 16 s d verliheng [borrowed cash], nam der sun [= son] Anthony [14]44
 - 4 Sol 18 s d for 1 mut [= Mütt, measure of grain] kernen [= husked spelt] purificationis Marie [14]44
 - 5 Sol 2 s d bar gelihen Agathe [14]44
 - 6 Sol 17 1/2 s d [= shillings pfennigs] for 19 lb swinin flaisch [= pork] uff Agathe [14]44
 - 7 Sol 1 lb d [= pound pfennigs] sins tails umb mist [= manure, fertiliser], nam Hans Klain Valentini [14]44
 - 8 Sol 8 s d for 2 fl [= quarter] mel [= flour] Valentini [14]44
 - 9 Sol 10 s d verliheng, nam Kempf 14 mertzen [14]44
 - 10 Sol 10 s d, nam sin sun uff Stillenfritag [14]44
 - 11 Sol 5 s d, nam sin sun [= took his son] uff Pasce [14]44
 - 12 Sol 4 s 4 d umb 1 fl [fiertel] mel Philippy et Jacobi [14]44
 - 13 Sol 30 s d lost uff 16 tag mayo [14]44
 - 14 Sol 1 lb 3 1/2 s d umb 23 1/2 lb schwinin flaisch in der Crutzwuchen [14]44
 - 15 Sol 8 s 8 d umb 2 fl mel vigilia Pentecoste [14]44
 - 16 Sol 8 s 8 d for 2 fl mel Johannis paptiste [14]44
 - 17 Sol 1 lb d, nam der sun uff Uolrici [14]44
 - 18 Restat 26 lb 2 s 8 d
 - 19 Sol 10 s d, nam der sun post Pelagi [14]44
 - 20 Sol 10 s d, nam der sun Mathei [14]44
-

³⁹ *Sonderregger*, Landwirtschaftliche Entwicklung, pp. 51-54.

-
- 21 Sol 4 s d umb 4 lb Schmer [= fat] uff Mathei [14]44
- 22 Sol 12 s d, nam er Galli [14]44
- 23 Sol 1 lb 4 s d umb [=for] 2 fuoder stikel von [= 2 wagenloads vineyard stakes from] R[uedi] Oegster uff Galli [14]44
- 24 Sol 12 s d umb 1 fiedrel schmaltz [= butter] von [=from] R[uedi] Oegster Galli [14]44
- 25 Sol 2 lb 4 s d umb 1 rindflaisch [= beef] Simonis et Jude [14]44
- 26 Sol 16 s d, nam der sun uff donstag post Thome [14]44
- 27 Sol 1 lb d, nam der sun Silvestri [14]45
- 28 Sol 8 s d umb 2 fl mel uff Epiphanie [14]45
- 29 Sol im [= him, i.e. Hans Nesler] 15 lb 15 s d umb 10 1/2 som [= Saum, measure of liquid] win [= wine] in the wimmi [= grape harvest] [14]44.
-

Note: “*Sol*” at the beginning of a line expresses the debit to the hospital; “*umb*” can be translated as “for”; “*ratio*” (Line 1) can be translated as “at the time of settlement”; “*post rationem*” means that the goods or cash were obtained immediately after the previous settlement (see Line 2); “*verlihens*” means “it was borrowed” (see Lines 3, 9); “*nam*” can be translated as “took” (see Line 11); “*restat*” means “there remains a debt owed” (see Line 18); “*sol im*” means what the hospital owed (see Line 29).

The first line shows the name of the debtor (Hans Nesler) and the outstanding amount owed to the Heiliggeistspital for his purchases of goods and money from the hospital. This entry was made during or shortly after the annual accounts and was therefore a balance carried forward from the previous accounting year. Throughout the year, the winegrower Hans Nesler purchased everyday necessities from the Heiliggeistspital, primarily grain and meat. In return, he supplied the Heiliggeistspital with the wine he produced himself. All these services and considerations were recorded item by item in the Rheintal debt registers in the form of these current accounts between the winegrower and the hospital.

These transactions are expressed as follows: Lines 2 to 17 show the amounts charged to Nesler for the goods consumed from the hospital on an ongoing basis, with the monetary value owed to the Heiliggeistspital for the goods purchased expressed as “*sol*”. Money does not appear here in its most important function in the modern market economy as a medium of exchange, but merely as a unit of measurement.⁴⁰ Whether monetary credits (expressed in “*verlihens*”

40 The most important functions of money are as a medium of exchange, store of value, and unit of measurement. The importance of money as a medium of exchange has increased in the modern market economy as compared to its role in medieval economic conditions. The second function as a store of value, on the other hand, was probably already of great importance in the Middle Ages, because it enabled purchasing power to be stored instead of being spent immediately. See: A. Brunetti, *Volkswirtschaftslehre. Eine Einführung für die Schweiz*, Bern 2021,

in the sense of “was borrowed”) were granted without interest must remain open. Sometimes a person other than the account holder carried out a transaction, for example Line 11 mentions Hans Nesler’s son.

Sometime in the summer – between Ulrici and Pelagi – an interim balance was set (“*restat*”), summarising the debts incurred by Hans Nesler to date. The current account then continued until the final line (line 29), which contains the amount credited to Hans Nesler by the Heiliggeistspital for the wine he had sold to them, which amounted to 15 pounds for 10.5 Saum of wine. However, no actual payment was made, but the amount mentioned was deducted from Nesler’s accrued debts in the following year’s accounts.

This extract from a debt book shows that an exchange of products (here grain, meat, etc.) for another product (here wine) took place between lords and peasants, which was documented in written credits or debits in monetary terms. The following explanation is important with regard to the wine deliveries from the Rheintal peasants to the town: according to the half-lease agreements, half of the annual yield went to the lordship as a levy, and the other half remained with the wine producers. The account explained above shows the wine sale of a peasants (unfortunately, the levy is not recorded in the Rheintal debt register). Generally, peasants traded the wine they had produced and which was still available after deduction of the levies, thus paying off the debts they had incurred over the year through purchases of goods and money from the lord. Both parties were in a reciprocal supplier and buyer relationship with each other, so both parties were interested in maintaining this functioning exchange relationship via the internal market organised by the manorial lordship.

6 Presence in the Countryside

When exchanges of goods between peasants and their lord as described above are embedded in an overarching regional analysis, it becomes clear that the three zones of agricultural specialisation that existed in eastern Switzerland since the 15th century (grain cultivation, livestock farming and viticulture, see Figure 6) were in a complementary relationship to one another. Most of the grain supplied by the Heiliggeistspital to the winegrowers came from the flat grain-growing zone west of St. Gallen, while the meat and butter came from the pre-alpine or alpine

pp. 346-347. See also: P. Rössner, Einführung in die Wirtschaftsgeschichte, vol. 4: Frühe Neuzeit, Stuttgart 2024, pp. 155-174.

zone, which specialised in livestock farming. The agricultural specialisation of individual zones around St. Gallen thus led to a division of labour within the region of eastern Switzerland. There was an exchange of agricultural products between the differently structured agricultural zones, and here too landlords played an active role, as the following shows.

The presence of manorial estates with their own institutions in the region was important for the functioning of the so-called interzonal exchange. Manorial *internal markets* existed in addition to official markets, about which little is known due to a lack of sources. In any case, the function of official markets should not be overestimated, as village or town markets were by no means the only institutions for the exchange of goods in the pre-modern period, nor were they the most important in some places.⁴¹ Many manorial estates had branches in the countryside that served to maintain direct contact with their peasants and were part of the *internal markets*. The Heiliggeistspital St. Gallen, for example, owned estates in Altstätten and Berneck, the two most important villages in the St. Gallen Rhine Valley region. These branches in the countryside were of central importance to both lords as suppliers and buyers of goods *and* peasants in need of food and other products that they did not produce themselves or did not produce in sufficient quantities. With such infrastructure, a manorial estate also took on the role of an economic hub by serving as a regional supply market. It can be assumed that the business transactions with the peasants documented above in the Rheintal debt register were carried out in the manorial institutions in the countryside. This means that central functions of the Heiliggeistspital manorial estate, such as the supply of basic foodstuffs for its peasants, occurred via branch offices rather than in the town centre. In this respect, branches of manorial estates, mills, taverns or harbours may have acted as central economic place for small communities.⁴² In the case of the St. Gallen Heiliggeistspital, this process can also be deduced from the transport payments for the Rorschach-Rheineck shipping service, where invoices still exist for reciprocal shipments of wine to the hospital in St. Gallen and grain to the Rhine Valley. The town of Rheineck was the most important goods transshipment centre between the Rhine

⁴¹ On the discussion of markets, see: U. Kypta, *How to study the Premodern Market: The Concept of Market Exchange* in: T. Skambraks/J. Bruch/U. Kypta (Eds.), *Markets and their Actors in the Late Ages*, Berlin 2021, pp. 7-25

⁴² See: M. Mitterauer, *Das Problem der zentralen Orte als sozial- und wirtschaftshistorische Forschungsaufgabe*, in: *Markt und Stadt im Mittelalter. Beiträge zur historischen Zentralitätsforschung*, Stuttgart 1980, p. 31.

and Lake Constance.⁴³ The Heiliggeistspital possibly organised the distribution of the goods to the individual villages with its own coachmen (*Karrer*).⁴⁴ Possibly also, local peasants, who were used to providing haulage services, worked for the Heiliggeistspital in return for payment, as this provided an opportunity to earn extra money. The final part of the whole transaction chain was the exchange of goods in the Rhine Valley, again either in the hospital's own branches in the villages or directly at the shipping pier.

The well-documented exchange of goods via *internal markets* organised by a manorial lordship, as described above, should not obscure the fact that we know little about other forms of exchange. These might include, for example, inter-peasant exchanges, which are at best indirectly documented. The following case study from the sources of the Heiliggeistspital St. Gallen shows that landlords also fulfilled a coordinating role in these sorts of exchanges.

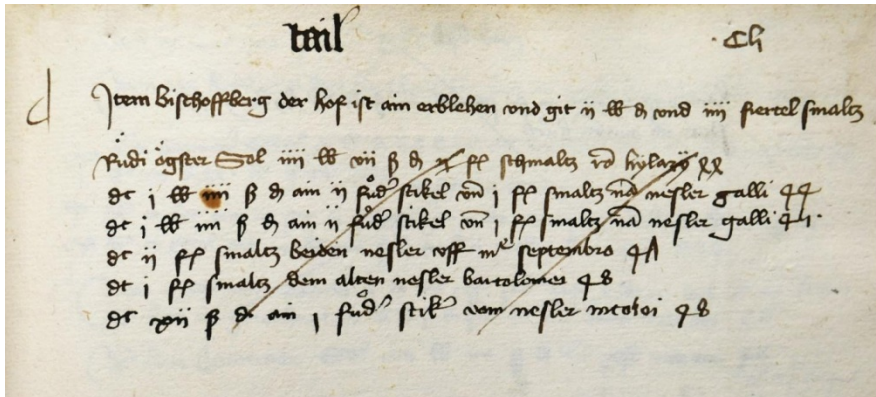


Fig. 8: Extract from the Ruedi Ögster rent book of the Heiliggeistspital of St. Gallen (1444 to 1448). Source: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, Pfennigzinsbuch A,5, fol. 151.

In the Rheintal debt register, the above-mentioned wine producer Hans Nesler was charged an amount of 1 pound 4 shillings denarii for “2 Fuder Stickel” (“two wagonloads of vineyard stakes”) and additionally for “Schmaltz” (“butter”)

⁴³ The harbours on Lake Constance that were served from Rheineck in the 15th century included Lindau, Überlingen, Radolfzell, Constance and Rorschach. See: G. Niederer, Die einstige Rheinschiffahrt oberhalb des Bodensees, in: Montfort 11, Dornbirn 1959, p. 21-23.

⁴⁴ In Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, C, 2, fol. 2r, a hospital coachmen is mentioned: “Sol [Rohner= a hospital peasant] 4 s d umb 1 fl mel, braht im unser Karrer Agathe [14]44.”

from a certain R. Ögster.⁴⁵ If we now try to find out who this Ögster was and what his relationship was to the manorial estate, we discover the following: Ruedi Ögster owned a hereditary fief of the Heiliggeistspital in the area of today's political municipality of Heiden in Appenzell Ausserrhoden, i.e. in the pre-alpine zone specialising in livestock farming and forestry. The amount that was debited to Hans Nesler in Berneck in the Rhine Valley for the delivery of vine stakes in the settlement with his landlord, the Heiliggeistspital, appears in the accounts of Ruedi Ögster, namely as his credit balance (with the endnote "*dt*" (*dedit* in Latin, as in "he gave").⁴⁶

A kind of triangular relationship thus crystallises between the winegrower Nesler, the cattle farmer Ögster and the Heiliggeistspital St. Gallen manorial estate, to which both peasants belonged. The hospital, which according to the half-lease agreement with the Rhine Valley winegrowers had the duty to procure one half of the required vineyard stakes, fulfilled its task by having them provided by other peasants, who were obviously better equipped to produce these stakes, in return for compensation. This gave the latter the opportunity to pay their levies in a form that was currently suitable for their productive activities.

This leads to the following conclusion: the wine-growing community of Berneck at an altitude of 400 metres, where Hans Nesler lived, and the village of Heiden at an altitude of 800 to 900 metres, where Ruedi Ögster lived, are 8 kilometres apart. Berneck belongs to the predominantly wine-growing region and Heiden to the predominantly livestock farming zone. In other words, the relationship between these two peasants represented an inter-peasant trade between two regions with different agricultural structures. The contact was mediated and documented through their common lordship. The lord's coordinating functions are evident in the fact that they were used to establishing synergetic relationships between the areas of different agricultural structures.

At this point it must be emphasised once again that the written sources only show part of the circulation of goods. The fact that money is very often mentioned in the documented levy relationships between the feudal peasants and their manorial estates – for example in the extract from the debt register of Hans Nesler shown above, 13 of a total of 25 transactions involve money – prompts us to think about undocumented trade relationships. Even if this cannot be proven in our case studies, it can be assumed that the peasants not only covered their consumption via their manorial estates, but also via local markets or market-like institutions.

⁴⁵ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, C, 2, fol. 33r. See Fig. 7 above.

⁴⁶ Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 5, fol. 151r.



Fig. 9: Places of relations between the winegrower Hans Nesler, the cattle and timber farmer Ruedi Ögster and the Heiligeistspital St. Gallen. Source: Swisstopo, public.geo.admin.ch (12.12.2025).

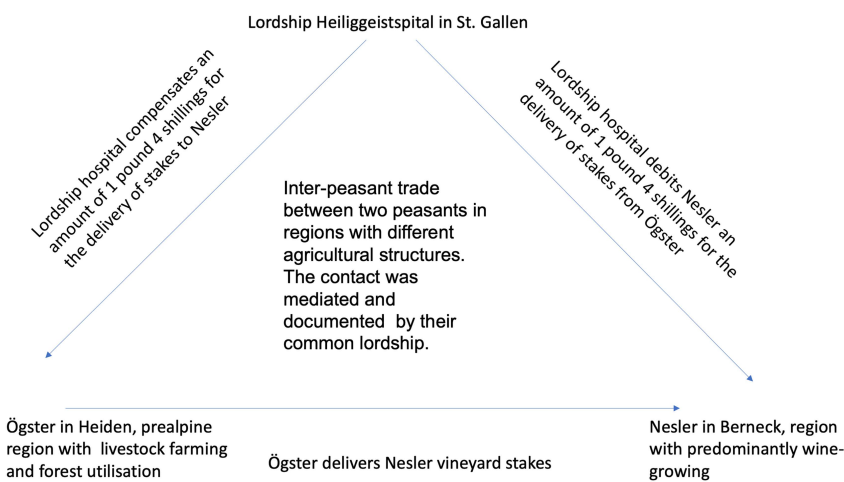


Fig. 10: Exchange organized by the Heiligeistspital St. Gallen between two peasants in regions with different agricultural structures. Note: Author's own visual representation.

It can also be assumed that the peasants also traded goods among themselves without the involvement of their landlords by exchanging products with each other without cash or by paying for purchased products with money. Such transactions are not documented in writing, but the sheer quantity of money received by the feudal peasants from their landlords suggests that the exchange, purchase and sale of consumer goods in late medieval peasant households was commonplace.⁴⁷

7 Investing Together

Consensual relationships between feudal lords and peasants presuppose a certain degree of mutual trust. In the case of pre-modern economies, a methodological distinction is made between trust in individuals and trust in institutions,⁴⁸ whereby a clear distinction is impossible in many cases – and also pointless. In pre-state times, services that built trust could be organised by landlords. One example of this is the *internal market* that has been described above, whereby the lordship was responsible for supplying the farming families by mediating and coordinating the exchange between individual producers in a region with differently orientated agricultural zones.

Conditions in which lords and subjects pursued the same or at least similar economic goals despite their different social and political status, motivated peasants to take their own economic initiative, as can be seen in farm renovations and expansions. There is evidence of a variety of co-operations between lords and peasants in the zone with grain cultivation.⁴⁹

In contrast to basic farm maintenance, which was the duty of the peasants alone, renovations and the construction of new buildings were subsidized by lords via levy reductions for manual labour and related expenses. The following example illustrates this: in 1443, Hans Buchman, a peasant in Niederbüren, west of St. Gallen, was granted a sum of money in the rent book for “*carpentry*

⁴⁷ Sonderegger/Zangger, Zur Deckung des bäuerlichen Konsumbedarfs, p. 16.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the concepts of institutions and trust in historical research, see: U. Kypta/T. Skambraks, Transaction Costs and Institutions, in: U. Kypta/J. Bruch/T. Skambraks (Eds.), *Methods in Premodern Economic History. Case studies from the Holy Roman Empire, c.1300–c.1600*, Cham 2019, pp. 28–35.

⁴⁹ For Tyrol see: S. Nicolussi-Köhler, Credit for the Poor, Investments for the Rich? Different Strategies for Investing and Saving Money in Medieval Tirol, in: *Economic History Yearbook/Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 66/1, 2025, pp. 93–130.

work on the house". He was also credited with a sum for expenses incurred on the occasion of the inspection following renovation work.⁵⁰ Renovations and new buildings enabled many fief owners to pay their levies not only with agricultural produce, but also with services from a secondary occupation. These side employments fit in well with the agricultural yearly routine, right up to the modern day. Outside of the busy periods of agricultural activity, there was capacity for various jobs that served to generate income. Ancillary earnings in connection with woodwork are well documented, for example deductions from the peasants' interest charges for making wooden shingles or for cutting, preparing and delivering firewood.⁵¹

New buildings and conversions on fief farms were usually carried out in co-operation; they were in the interests of both the landlords as owners of the farms and the peasants as users of the farms. Special initiatives taken by the tenants themselves were financially supported by the landlord because they served to maintain or increase the value of the farm. Extensive remodelling and new buildings carried out by the farming families themselves were pre-financed by them and compensated by the landlord when they left the farm. One example among many: in Sulgen in Thurgau, Hans Koler built a new house on the farm at his own expense. A contract has been preserved, stating that if he moved away, a commission consisting of representatives of the lord and the peasant would decide how much he would receive from the lord as compensation for his investment.⁵²

The fact that wooden buildings, and farm buildings such as stables and granaries in particular, were considered *movable* property (*Fahrnis*), further guaranteed peasants a benefit from their investments after they moved on. Such chattels did not belong to the lord of the manor, but to the peasants.⁵³ Farming

50 Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 51r. Further examples: Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 44r: "Dedit 1 Pfund Denaren an einen Schopf zu zimmern, an Nicolay 1442." fol. 56r: "Dedit 1 Pfund 8 Schilling Denaren verbaute er auf dem Hof, auf Cuonradi 1442."

51 Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 63; S. *Sonderegger*, Gaiserwald im Mittelalter, in: E. *Ziegler* (Ed.), Gaiserwald, Abtwil, St. Josefen, Engelburg, Gaiserwald 2004, pp. 11-28.

52 Stadtarchiv St. Gallen, Spitalarchiv, A, 3, fol. 67r.

53 W. Meyer, Hirsebrei und Hellebarde. Auf den Spuren des mittelalterlichen Lebens in der Schweiz, Olten 1985, p. 86. Even under present-day Swiss law, huts, barracks and the like can still be regarded as movable structures and belong to their owner. Article 677 of the Swiss Civil Code (ZGB) states: "Huts, barracks and the like, if they are erected on third-party land without the intention of permanent connection, retain their special owner." See: O. *Clavadetscher*, Kontinuität und Wandel im Recht und in den Lebensverhältnissen, in: Neujahrsblatt des Kantons St. Gallen 132, St. Gallen 1992, pp. 22-23.

families who moved away could dismantle such buildings and rebuild them at the new location; the reuse of well-preserved building materials was widespread and must be considered as an important resource.

The possibility of transferring farm buildings when peasant families moved is well documented in the sources of eastern Switzerland. In 1453, for example, the Cistercian monastery of Magdenau granted a farm with a granary and a barn to Ueli Schnätzer, his wife and their children. The granary and barn were separate outbuildings that Schnätzer built on his own initiative, possibly with the support of the monastery. As the owner, he was free to dispose of the buildings as he wished and the fiefdom entry states that: “[...] if he no longer wishes to be there, he may remove the barn and granary.”⁵⁴ Another option was to sell buildings that had apparently been built by farming families without significant support from the lord of the manor when they left the farm, however, the lord had a right of pre-emption.

Building contracts not only contain legal information, but also information on the construction method, the proportions and the construction period. In some cases, this gives the impression that new buildings served to enlarge the farm. Such substantial investments involved entrepreneurial risks that affected both the lords of the manor and the peasants. For this reason, the mutual services and obligations of the co-operation were recorded in writing in detail, as the following case shows: In 1471, Magdenau Monastery agreed with a certain Stainmann that he was to construct a building “of 16 pillars” (upright beams) on the monastery farm at Hagenbuch near Winterthur.⁵⁵ This is a clear reference to the *post-and-beam* construction method.⁵⁶ According to the contract, the 16 pillars were the vertical uprights that were placed on the horizontal members and, in their arrangement, determined the floor plan and area of the new building.⁵⁷ The contract also describes how the new building was to be divided up and used. Two “*Gädmer*” (“rooms”) were to be built on top of each other. These could have been rooms in the farm, part of the farmhouse or rooms in the residential part.⁵⁸ There were clear ideas about the size of the stables: the cattle shed was to provide space for twelve large oxen, the smaller stable behind it for two horses. It was therefore a rather impressive building. The monastery’s con-

⁵⁴ Archive of the Cistercian Convent of Magdenau, vol. 41, fol. 31r.

⁵⁵ Archive of the Cistercian Convent of Magdenau, vol. 41, fol. 34v.

⁵⁶ On the spread of the post-and-beam construction method and variations thereof, see: R. Weiss, *Häuser und Landschaften der Schweiz*, Erlenbach 1959, pp. 40-44.

⁵⁷ Zangger, *Grundherrschaft und Bauern*, pp. 441-442.

⁵⁸ Anon., *Schweizerisches Idiotikon. Wörterbuch der schweizerdeutschen Sprache*, vol. 2, Frauenfeld 1885, pp. 114-116.

tribution to the costs was also specified. Stainmann received 14 *Mütt* of hulled spelt, 10 *Mütt* of oats and 5 pounds and 3 shillings in cash as well as 5,000 roofing nails. The monastery also took over the transport of wood with four horses for three days, while the peasant was responsible for their upkeep. All in all, the contribution of the lords of the manor consisted of material deliveries, the provision of transport infrastructure as well as money and grain payments. The money and grain were probably largely used as wages and to feed those working on the building site and their families.⁵⁹ These are not mentioned, but it can be assumed that in addition to professional builders and carters, workers also included labourers from neighbouring farming families.⁶⁰

Investments in the maintenance and expansion of fiefs, which were jointly initiated, realised, and financed by lords and peasants suggest a fundamentally cooperative relationship between lord and peasant. It can be assumed that such relationships existed above all in the case of hereditary fiefs, where mutual rights and obligations were passed on without everything being regulated separately and in writing. However, such well-established relationships could quickly be jeopardised by changes in practice and lead to a loss of trust; this can be concluded from the following observation: in the decades leading up to the Peasant Unrest of 1525 and the period thereafter, customary law that had not been recorded in writing increasingly gave way to the written legal claims of landlords, which made it possible to check the agreements. As a result, peasant society was subjected to greater control by their feudal lords, which was an important cause of conflict during the period of unrest.⁶¹

59 D. Rippmann, „Sein Brot verdienen“. Die Verköstigung von Arbeitskräften im Spätmittelalter, in: *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 34, 1996, pp. 91-114.

60 A. Zangger, Alltagsbeziehungen zwischen Klosterherrschaft und Bauern am Beispiel des Prämonstratenserklusters Rütli im 15. Jahrhundert, in: T. Meier/R. Sablonier (Eds.), *Wirtschaft und Herrschaft. Beiträge zur ländlichen Gesellschaft in der östlichen Schweiz, 1200–1800*, Zurich 1999, pp. 295-309; Sonderegger, *Landwirtschaftliche Entwicklung*, pp. 103-113.

61 S. Sonderegger, Verschlechterung der rechtlichen und wirtschaftlichen Bedingungen als Ursachen für bäuerliche Beschwerden. Dargestellt am Beispiel Oberschwabens und der Ostschweiz am Vorabend des Bauernkriegs, in: S. Hirbodian/S. Holtz/E. Weber (Eds.), *Akteure des Bauernkriegs im deutschen Südwesten. Motive – Strategien – Kommunikation – Lernerfahrung*, Ostfildern 2025, pp. 195-225.

8 Conclusion

When it comes to analysing the economy of landlords in the Middle Ages, agriculture takes centre stage. Until well into the modern era, most people lived in the countryside and farmed. In many cases, the land they farmed belonged to nobles, monasteries, municipal institutions such as hospitals, or townspeople. They gave the land to the farming families to use as a fief in return for payments in kind, money, and labour. This created a relationship between feudal lord and feudal tenant. In principle, this was an asymmetrical relationship, as the feudal tenants were bound to their landlords by feudal law and were therefore dependent upon them for their property and, in some cases, also personally. What this meant on the relationship level between landlords and peasants is the subject of a long discussion and can best be analysed in individual case studies. Using case studies from eastern Switzerland and parts of southern Germany, this study has shown that despite the feudal dependence of peasant upon lord, a certain consensus was necessary in order for both of them to thrive in everyday economic life.

The form of manorial lordship was an important framework condition for the manorial economy. In the late Middle Ages, the region under study was dominated by the rentier manorial system (*Rentengrundherrschaft*). The holders of fiefs had great power of disposal over the estates granted to them by the lords of the manor. The fief holders could sell, sublet or pledge utilisation rights to the fief or parts thereof. This gave the feudal peasants the freedom necessary to adapt their agriculture to changes. From the 14th century onwards, and accelerating in the 15th century, there was a strong commercialisation of agriculture. This manifested itself above all in agricultural specialisation and the marketisation of peasant production. Peasants acted entrepreneurially and, together with their landlords, promoted select agricultural sectors, the products of which were in high demand. Thus peasants were not mere subjects, but economic actors who co-operated with lords and invested in the rural economy together with them. This is particularly evident in viticulture. The effort and yield, and thus also the risks, were shared between the lord of the manor and the winegrower. Co-operation between feudal lords and peasants was also common when it came to investing in the maintenance and expansion of the fiefs. Renovations and additions were jointly initiated, realised and financed by feudal lords and peasants. Such consensual relationships required a certain degree of trust, with mutual rights and obligations being recognized and respected without minute regulation separately or in writing.

Co-operation and mutual flexibility can also be inferred from the levy relationship between feudal lords and peasants. In many cases, the levies recorded in normative sources did not correspond to the levies actually paid by the peasants, either in terms of type or amount. In everyday economic life, it was customary to negotiate the exact amount of levies for one year on the basis of experience, taking into account the current situation and forming realistic expectations. This made it possible to react to the individual situation of a peasant by the landlord. Current harvest results could be considered. It was common for lords of the manor to reduce levies after poor harvests. The availability of natural resources or money for peasants to pay their levies was also considered. Finally, when negotiating, peasants were granted flexibility in the type of payment they might make to their landlord – in kind, money or labour. This extent of flexibility in levy practice leaves the impression of a far-reaching consensus in the economic relationship between feudal lords and peasants.

Thanks to the excellent source material for the St. Gallen Heiliggeistspital's manorial estate, it has become clear that the levy collection relationship developed into an exchange relationship. A cashless exchange of products (grain, meat, etc.) for products (wine) took place between the hospital and its winegrowers, which was documented with written credits or debits in monetary values. Accounts kept by the manorial estate reveal that the exchange of goods served to cover basic needs. In this exchange relationship, the hospital secured the wine it needed to supply its residents and trade in the town, while winegrowers – whose self-sufficiency had decreased due to their specialisation in viticulture – acquired daily consumer goods. This exchange relationship can be described as an *internal market* organised by the lordship. Both parties were in a reciprocal supplier and buyer relationship with each other, so both parties were interested in maintaining this functional exchange relationship.

The presence of manorial lordships with their own institutions across regions was important for the functioning of the exchange between feudal lords and peasants. Many manorial lordships had branches in the countryside that served the purpose of direct contact and access, particularly for economic exchange with their peasants. With its regional representative offices and their associated infrastructure, the manorial lordship not only assumed a management and control function, but also served as an economic hub for the supply of goods. This was not just a matter of exchange between the manorial lordship on the one hand and a peasant on the other hand. The manorial lordship also coordinated and mediated the exchange between individual peasants.

However, the well-documented exchange of goods via the *internal market* organised by a manorial lordship, as described in this article, should not obscure

the fact that we know little about other forms of exchange. These include, for example, inter-peasant exchange, which is not or only indirectly documented in writing. The case studies presented here point to something fundamental: different distribution systems functioned alongside each other. In addition to official, institutionalised markets, whose importance should not be overestimated, there were other important institutions and places for the exchange of goods.

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Bionote

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<https://www.hist.uzh.ch/de/fachbereiche/mittelalter/titularprofessuren-und-privatdozierende/sonderegger/publikationen.html>