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Valor, Proficuum, Waniagium, Extenta:

The Construction of Value in 13th- and Early 14th-Century England

Between the 1180s and the 1340s, the English Kingdom, as the rest of the Latin West, saw a marked increase in the production of swritten documents used for administrative, economic, or legal purposes - a phenomenon which is described as the pragmatic turn in literacy. This phenomenon was especially strong in England, for a series of factors including the strongly centralized administration of the English Crown, as we know of course from Michael Clanchy's famous work. New types of records such as accounts, surveys, bonds and quittances, cartularies, and legal and judicial documents were more commonly used and contributed to the structuring of the administrative state and other institutions.

What is less studied is how this pragmatic literacy impacted on economic thought through the development of pragmatic numeracy, which can be defined as the handling of numbers for economic and administrative purposes. The most important exception to this is the outstanding work of Joel Kaye. In his recent book on the *History of Balance*, Joel Kaye has demonstrated how a conceptual shift in thought occurred between 1250 and 1375, leading to a more geometrical, a more proportional conception of the the world, expressed through the central notion of balance. If we look closely at English seignorial accounts in this period, we can indeed see that there are some important changes taking place at a very elementary level: for example, the most striking evolution is how increasingly frequent is the use of the division. I have mostly studied the accounts of Norwich Cathedral Priory, so most of my examples will come from there. Norwich manorial accounts begin in the 1250s, and what I can see in these accounts is that they will increasingly mention the price per unit, they will calculate the rate of grain sown per acre, they will calculate the value of animals per animal, and they will calculate cereal yield ratios no only in grains harvested per grain sown, but also in grains harvested per acre. Such calculations which rely on

dividing one number by another increase in frequency in the last quarter of the 13th century, and so we can really see how the way numbers are used to frame agricultural practice is changing, although one must stay aware that what we see are only the records of the larger seignorial landlords, especially monasteries.

It is important to understand first that the reason why we have such an incredible insight in English medieval agriculture is twofold: the first reason is that in the 13th century most lords progressively took their demesne back into direct management. Estates, divided into manors, were run by manorial officers who had to render account of everything that was produced on the demesne. The second reason is that these manorial accounts were often put into writing and that the account rolls have been rather well preserved compared to what can be found on the Continent. The earliest existing manorial accounts were produced by the Bishopric of Winchester from 1207/8 onwards; the practice grew increasingly after 1250 and became more generalized after c.1275.

In this paper I would like to highlight another fundamental change in the construction of value in this period, which is a new and varied interest for the annual net produce of agriculture. Again, we are here in a seignorial context, which is quite specific, but at that time we observe many large lordships engaging in the calculation of the value of their estates, of the value of their arable land, and in the value of their farm animals. I will begin by detailing this, before proposing some explanations.

1. PROFIT, WAINAGE AND EXTENT

Manorial accounts are parchment rolls on which are listed as receipts everything that was produced by the manor, and then as expenses all the costs incurred by the manorial officers. But from the beginning, manorial accounts could also feature in addition a value called the *proficuum* or *profectus*, meaning the profit of the manor.

According to Eric Stone, profit is the annual net value of a manor, which includes agriculture, but also rents and court proceedings. Although it is not always clear how it was calculated, a 1258/1259 account from Canterbury Cathedral Priory confirms that it was

generally the difference between the value of the produce and the associated costs. In order to achieve this, the produce which was not sold but consumed in kind was converted into a monetary value, either by using a standard value, or the current price of grain.

Soon after, another value appears: it is called *waniagium*, or wainage. Whereas profit is the value of the manor as a whole, wainage is the annual net value of the cultivation of cereals. A late-14th-century accounting treatise from St Alban's explains that it can be calculated by adding the value of all the cereals produced, then deducing all the costs of agriculture.

But at Norwich Cathedral Priory, a rich community of Benedictine monks, another method is used, more complicated but also quite revealing. They took the profit, and deduced from it all the income which did not come from cereals - for example, tithes, livestock, the proceeds of justice, etc., while adding the costs that did not relate to agriculture. What the very rich records of Norwich Cathedral Priory reveal is how the understanding of the costs of agriculture became more refined at the end of the 13th century. For example, the value of livestock has to be deduced, and this is accounted for in two ways. First, as the difference between stock bought and stock sold, accounting for trade in animals. But cows are also farmed for their milk and calf: the produce of cows is accounted for as the value for which they could have been leased out, because this corresponds to the standard value of a cow's produce. And the expenses for manure are accounted for by deducing the value at which pastures could have been leased out, because pasture yields manure, and manure, as a fertilizer, counts as a cost for the cultivation of cereals. And, indeed, meadows and pastures are deduced expressly as costs of the cultivation of cereals. Another sign of the focus on net values is that income from the courts and mills is said to be *ad commodum*, which means that it is the difference between income from these activities and their costs.

This refined understanding of costs can be seen at least in part as a consequence of the shift in favour of direct management, in the sense that if you have an officer on your manor and you want to control him, you need to know as precisely as possible what you are in right to expect from your land and your animals, and you need to assess the costs that your

officer is in right to claim. As a matter of fact, this is repeated at length in the agrarian treatises which are written in the same period.

Profit and wainage are calculated year on year, but English lords also sought to establish standard values for land and animals. This is the practice of *extentare*, which means to evaluate something. An extent is a document evaluating all the components of a manor, and so the word is commonly used to describe the standard value of these components, for example, the standard value of an acre of arable land. It is unclear how this was calculated; it is sometimes suggested that it was calculated from the average data of manorial accounts.

In the late 1270s, a popular agrarian treatise known as Walter of Henley's *Husbandry* hints at a new practice: lords should "lead their life according to the extent", meaning that they should compare their agricultural income with the standard value that is expected. And sure enough, it becomes the practice of certain lords to compare every year the true arable value of their arable land - the wainage - with the standard value of that land, the extent, in order to see if they made a loss or a profit.

However, one should not deduce that this was an unbridled profit-seeking attitude: on the contrary, the idea was mostly that land and animals had an expected yield - possibly one ordered by God - and that one should attain this quota, but not seek to produce more. Although profit and wainage have complex uses, the comparison between wainage and extent served first and foremost to control manorial officers. The St Alban's treatise seems to conclude that if the wainage is insufficient, the officer himself has to make up for it and top up. This is akin to a quota of production, a practice which is well attested in English demesne-farming at the time, for example with cereal yield ratios.

2. FROM AGRICULTURE TO TAXATION: NEW USES FOR THE VALUE OF ARABLE

This flourishing of new concepts however does not happen in isolation, it is not limited to seignorial agriculture. If English monks are lords who have to run estates, they are also subject to the new burden of royal and papal taxation. Royal taxation on laymen is assessed

on the value of moveables. But as it is not tolerable to reduce the assets of the Church, ecclesiastics are taxed not on their moveables, but on their income. Usually taxation took the form of a tithe, meaning one tenth of annual net income.

Here again, between the 1200s and the 1330s, the process of assessing annual net income for taxation purposes becomes more precise. This is expressed by the words used in justifying new assessments: until the 1250s, ecclesiastics are expected to state their income under oath, but in 1254, a new assessment is made by the chief collector Walter Suffield, Bishop of Norwich, which claims to establish a *iusta estimacio*, a “just evaluation”, on the basis of an inquest, then the following year a papal nuncio demands a reassessment so that from *iusta* it should become *vera*, a “true” evaluation. In the following decades the pursuit of a *verus valor*, a true value, is a leitmotiv of taxation - mostly a pligh to obtain more money.

In 1291, when Pope Nicholas IV allows the king to levy an ecclesiastical tithe for six consecutive years to finance a hypothetical crusade, much effort is put into assessing accurately ecclesiastical income all over the Kingdom [Diapo]. Official guidelines are to calculate the average income using manorial accounts for a number of consecutive years - and when we look at taxation records, it appears that they simply used the extent as a proxy for ecclesiastical income, which reinforces the idea that the extent is an average value. In any case, basic running costs should be deduced from taxation. It is not surprising that the methods used for assessing taxation align themselves with the agrarian calculations which we have discussed, as they are often done by the same men.

In the early decades of the tithe, between the 1220s and 1240s, when monks had to swear the amount of their income to the assessor, it is not impossible that profit calculations served the monks for assessing their income and making sure they didn't commit perjury. And when taxators began using manorial accounts for their assessment, it is not unthinkable that the practice of written accounts could have been encouraged and fostered by taxators. To summarize, the calculation of net agricultural income was a common problem both for taxation and for estate management.

As a conclusion, it appears that both seignorial agriculture and ecclesiastical taxation focussed on a better calculation of value, based on a refined and more precise

understanding of costs, and juggling between standard values which sometimes serve as quotas, and actual values calculated from the accounts.

However, in 1294, the value of taxation is settled once and for all and not reassessed, and in the 1330s, lords begin to revert to farming out their estates: and so the face of pragmatic numeracy shifts towards new problems. Thus comes to a close a very specific moment in English economic thought, which was certainly not without longstanding repercussions on the definition of economic value.