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The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487–1726

A Rural Society in Early Modern Europe

The Peasants of Ottobeuren offers a new perspective on one of the enduring problems of early modern European history: the possibilities for economic growth and social change in rural society. As such it is the most detailed reconstruction of its kind to date, and one of the first to analyze the structure of land and credit markets, the character of rural commerce, and the internal economy of the peasant family.

Based on the voluminous records of the Swabian Benedictine monastery of Ottobeuren, the book underscores the limitations of the traditional narrative of a sixteenth-century boom which foundered on the productive rigidities of the peasant economy and then degenerated into social crisis in the seventeenth century. Population growth did strain resources at Ottobeuren, but the peasantry continued to produce a sizable agricultural surplus. More importantly, peasants reacted to demographic pressure by deepening their involvement in land and credit markets, and more widely and aggressively marketing the fruits of their labor. Marriage and inheritance underwent a similar process of commercialization which made heavy demands on the peasantry, but which also produced a degree of social stability remarkably resilient to the devastations of war, plague, and famine.

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To my father, S. Ranga Sreenivasan,
and to the memory of my mother,
Claire de Reineck Sreenivasan

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Note on weights, measures, and currencies

During the sixteenth century, the most common unit of currency in the account books of the monastery was the *Pfund Heller*. The *Pfund*, or pound, was divided as follows:

$$1 \text{ pound } (\text{£}) = 20 \text{ shillings } (\text{ß}) = 240 \text{ pennies } (\text{d.})$$

By the early seventeenth century, the pound had been replaced in the accounts by the *Rheinische Gulden*:

$$1 \text{ gulden} = 1.75 \text{ pounds}$$

and

$$1 \text{ gulden (fl.)} = 15 \text{ batzen} = 60 \text{ kreuzer (kr.)} = 480 \text{ heller (h.)}$$

Arable and wooded land was measured in *jauchert*, while meadow and garden land was measured in *tagwerk*.

$$1 \text{ Ottobeuren } jauchert = 1 \text{ Ottobeuren } tagwerk = 0.4224 \text{ hectares}^1$$

Grain was measured in *malter*, usually the *malter* of the nearby city of Memmingen. For the so-called “heavy grains,” i.e. wheat, rye, and *kern* (husked spelt):

$$1 \text{ malter} = 8 \text{ viertel} = 32 \text{ metzen}$$

For the “light grains,” i.e., oats and *vesen* (unhusked spelt):

$$1 \text{ malter} = 17 \text{ viertel} = 68 \text{ metzen}$$

For barley:

$$1 \text{ malter} = 12 \text{ viertel} = 48 \text{ metzen}$$

Also:

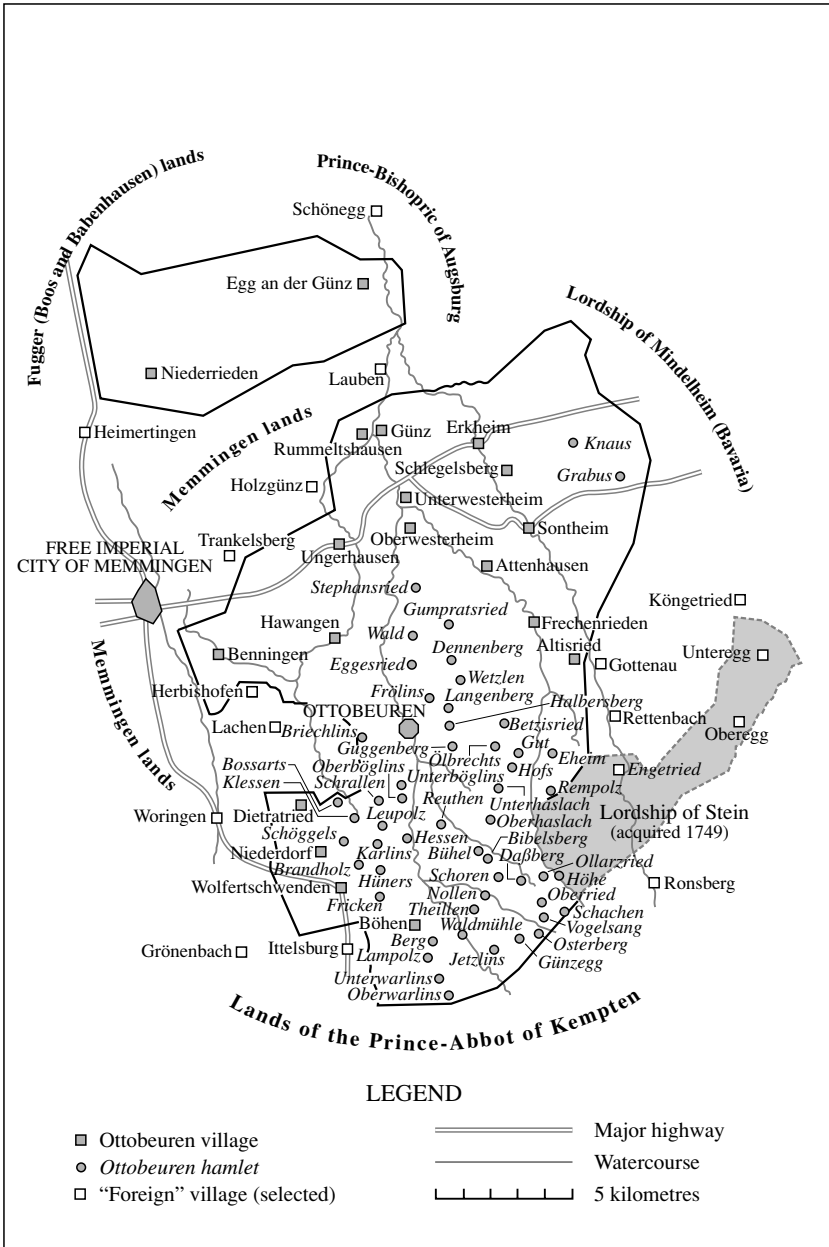
$$1 \text{ Memmingen } malter = 2.1867 \text{ hectolitres}^2$$

¹ Wilhelm Lochbrunner, “1550–1880: Ländliche Neuordnung durch Vereinödung,” *Berichte aus der Flurbereinigung* 51 (1984), p. 40. The *jauchert* and *tagwerk* were traditional measures of surface area in Swabia; they varied in size from territory to territory.

² Thomas Wolf, *Reichsstädte in Kriegszeiten* (Memmingen, 1991), p. 172



Map 1 Southern Germany, c. 1620



Map 2 The lands of the monastery of Ottobeuren, 1620