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.

Govind P. Sreenivasan is Associate Professor of History, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.
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The Peasants of Ottobeuren, 1487–1726

A Rural Society in Early Modern Europe

GOVIND P. SREENIVASAN
To my father, S. Ranga Sreenivasan, 
and to the memory of my mother, 
Claire de Reineck Sreenivasan
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Newton, Massachusetts
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 pound (£) = 20 shillings (ß) = 240 pennies (d.)

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

1 gulden = 1.75 pounds

and

1 gulden (fl.) = 15 batzen = 60 kreuzer (kr.) = 480 heller (h.)

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

1 Ottobeuren jauchert = 1 Ottobeuren tagwerk = 0.4224 hectares

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 malter = 8 viertel = 32 metzen

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

1 malter = 17 viertel = 68 metzen

For barley:

1 malter = 12 viertel = 48 metzen

Also:

1 Memmingen malter = 2.1867 hectolitres

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.

Map 1 Southern Germany, c. 1620
Map 2 The lands of the monastery of Ottobeuren, 1620

Legend

- Ottobeuren village
- Ottobeuren hamlet
- “Foreign” village (selected)
- Major highway
- Watercourse
- 5 kilometres