

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

A MAJOR BREAK

Many historians have been fascinated by that major break in European history at the end of what may still conveniently be called the 'middle ages'. The greater part of the Continent was at that time in the throes of a deep depression. For more than a century it suffered a massive decline in population and regression of productive capacity. In scope and duration the phenomenon had no known historical precedent. It took place in an atmosphere of catastrophe: ceaseless epidemics, endemic war with its train of destruction, spiritual disarray, social and political disturbances. When it was ended, European society emerged remodelled from top to bottom. What was the significance of this violent upheaval?

Since the penetrating analysis of the *Bordelais* by Robert Boutruche¹ innumerable publications, conferences, and congresses have been devoted to this 'crisis of a society'. To add to these works may therefore appear foolhardy. Yet the intensity of the controversies they have aroused and are still arousing is proof that the question remains open.

Some of the answers suggested or maintained can be discarded. First, the most traditional and deep-rooted of all: war, source of all evils. This is still the explanation served up to generations of school-children. In the last analysis, it reduces the affair to the consequences of a feudal conflict mingled with dynastic interests. Later, and particularly in Britain, the emphasis was placed on plague and demographic phenomena. The origin of the crisis was said to lie in an accident of epidemiology, the effect of a kind of intercontinental pollution caused by new contacts between Europe and Asia. The

¹R. Boutruche, *La crise d'une société: seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la guerre de Cent ans et la reconstruction de la France*. Paris, 1947. (Publications de la Faculté des lettres de Strasbourg. Mélanges, 1945, III.)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

consequent demographic collapse swept Europe into a long phase of economic depression. An exogenous factor, a sort of kick at the human antheap, was thus the source of the disaster.

An explanation of the same type is the hypothesis of a cooling of the European climate, born of recent work in historical climatology. Agriculture, rendered vulnerable by the extension of tillage, staggered under the effects of the cold, which first bit deep in the hard winters of 1315–20.

Then there is the ‘conjuncture’, the combination of circumstances, arisen one knows not where, with its succession of wage and price curves. Did the inadequacy of bullion reserves create a deflationary situation generating the decline? Could not the constant fall of the agricultural price curve have been the primordial origin of the difficulties of the rural world?

Probably no one of these answers claims to exclude the others. Moreover, in 1949 Edouard Perroy presented a vast synthesis analysing a successive chain of distinct ‘crises’: agricultural, monetary and fiscal, demographic.² Ultimately, he argued, it was the coincidence or succession of these crises that gave the fourteenth century its tragic colouring.

These varied approaches to the same problem have certainly brought new and interesting insights. That they have adduced elements of the answer there is no doubt. None of these, however, can be considered decisive if we wish to avoid a one-sided, and hence distorting, analysis of economic facts.

No sensible historian would dare deny the devastating effects of war. But the reasons for an endemic state of war throughout Europe must be investigated, unless it is to be seen as a sequence of purely circumstantial conflicts. The Hundred Years War, as the evidence shows, drew constant sustenance from the economic and social situation. Through booty and ransoms, it was directly linked to the crisis of seigneurial revenues. And how can its effects themselves be isolated from the economic context? If the economic context is precarious and unstable, the slightest destruction assumes catastrophic scope. Conversely, in a reinvigorated and dynamic economy, even the worst outrages are quickly erased. The Burgundian campaign in northern Normandy in the summer of 1473 provides a striking illus-

²E. Perroy, ‘A l’origine d’une économie contractée: les crises du XIV^e siècle’, *AESC*, 1949, pp. 167–82.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 3

tration. Villages were razed, whole harvests annihilated, the scorched earth policy born. A few years later, only the memory, but no visible trace of these events remained. The famous 'state of desolation' of the countryside in the mid fifteenth century can probably be attributed in part to such destruction, but to a far greater extent to an anaemic economy incapable of raising up what had been destroyed or of maintaining what war had spared; ruin was thus heaped upon ruin for more than a century.

No serious demographer would dare deny the murderous effects of plague. But if the event is viewed in its context (even its purely demographic context), it becomes clear, as R. Mols has noted, that the demographic system is the major issue.³ The pandemic of 1348 extended and aggravated a regressive trend long since begun, whence its irreparable effects. On the other hand, where the epidemic struck a population whose demographic balance showed a large surplus – as in Rouen in 1521–2 – the gaps were rapidly filled.

Climate? In an economy strained close to its breaking point contingent variations will have unfortunate consequences – but only in such a case.

Combination of circumstances? The reservations here are still more serious, for 'conjunctural' or cyclical analysis sometimes tends to overemphasize certain factors or indices of economic life (for example, prices), which are presented as primary data and ascribed a determining influence on everything else. In short, it displays an irritating tendency to rule out non-cyclical determinants.

As distinct from these 'partial' interpretations, there are also 'global' hypotheses. They express concern to go beyond empirical observation of economic facts and to grasp a process in its entirety. To this end, their authors are open to economic arguments. Their paths, however, do not meet.

In the brilliant thesis advanced by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie,⁴ Malthus is the master of ceremonies; the two main actors are the population curve and the gross product curve. The multiplication of people gives rise to fragmentation of land and pauperization. The inexorable ceiling of resources is soon encountered: growth then gives way to decline. Hence the great waves that mark the rhythm of the history of the European countryside. In such a 'model', the

³R. Mols, *Introduction à la démographie historique des villes d'Europe du XIVe au XVIIIe siècle*, Louvain, 1954, vol. 2, pp. 436–7.

⁴E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, Paris, 1966, pp. 634–54.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth are the final phase of a 'great agrarian cycle'.

With M. Dobb,⁵ E. A. Kosminsky,⁶ and R. H. Hilton,⁷ the inspiration is Marxist. Problems are posed in terms of 'economic and social formations', characterized by a dominant 'mode of production'. The period under consideration is seen as one in which the 'feudal mode of production' declined and the capitalist mode of production simultaneously arose. These are powerful hypotheses, but their verification is impeded by a major difficulty: the economic system before capitalism remains a question mark. Its actual functioning – its specific mechanisms and internal logic – is still essentially unknown. Neither the physiocrats nor the founders of English political economy nor their illustrious heir, Karl Marx, were able or willing to analyse these mechanisms as a whole. Adam Smith, Quesnay, Malthus,⁸ and Ricardo, who went furthest in this field, were primarily concerned with contemporary facts. But for the most part these mechanisms had ceased to exist; and the historical knowledge of past societies then available did not permit resolution of this vast problem. For more than a century (for reasons that I cannot analyse here)⁹ it remained at the point at which these great thinkers had left it.

Perhaps I may be permitted to express my conviction that the solution to this problem, probably in the next ten years, will be a fundamental turning-point in medieval economic historiography; it should at last enable the subject to emerge from a protracted prehistory. My optimism is based on the belief that the key to the problem will be uncovered by a combination of two distinct and complementary approaches: by history and economic science. An entire complex of circumstances now favours this convergence. Economists are striving to ground their arguments on historical data and, like

⁵M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, 3rd edition, London, 1947.

⁶E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, 1956; 'Services and Money Rents in the Thirteenth Century', *Ec.HR*, V(2), 1934–5, pp. 24–5.

⁷R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society. The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century*, London, 1966 new edition Cambridge, 1983; and 'Y eut-il une crise générale de la féodalité?', *AESC*, 1949, pp. 23–30. See also *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1975.

⁸I am thinking of the Malthus of 1820, author of the *Principles of Political Economy*.

⁹Despite the fascination of the subject.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Witold Kula,¹⁰ are advancing the initial hypotheses. For a longer time historians, starting from the facts, have been completing the other segment of the journey, moving into the field of economic theory: Pierre Vilar, for example, in his study of the growth processes in pre-capitalist economies,¹¹ or Georges Duby¹² in his powerful synthesis devoted to the rural economy in the middle ages. The dialogue has begun. It would be surprising if it were to be interrupted. Too many young researchers have felt that they were wandering in a field in which their horizons were limited by empiricism or dogma and that they were condemned to conscientious but timid investigation of a strictly partitioned domain, to fall into the pit in their turn.

The present work seeks to contribute to this convergence. Its intentions must be clear from the start. Starting from the general standpoint of historical materialism, the existence of a coherent socio-economic system (or 'mode of production') is postulated and the laws by which it functions investigated. All pseudo-theoretical short-cuts, all pre-established overall models are rejected. Research into the laws of feudalism cannot proceed by speculation; it requires patient historical investigation. This should be enough to make it clear that the present book is not set within the perspective of regional history. Indeed, it rejects just such a perspective. The unfortunately widespread idea that the juxtaposition of many regional studies will automatically bring about a burst of illumination is pathetically sterile. What would be said of a biologist who proceeded in like manner? Nonetheless, this type of research, motivated by an interest in general history, must still be set within a regional framework or field. Only at this level does the historian find the tools investigation requires.

A FIELD OF INVESTIGATION: EASTERN NORMANDY

The field of observation should be neither too wide nor too limited. If it is too limited it is not possible to measure certain demographic or economic indices (prices, for example); if it is too vast it immedi-

¹⁰W. Kula, *Théorie économique du système féodal. Pour un modèle de l'économie polonaise, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, 1970.

¹¹P. Vilar, 'Communication à la Première conférence internationale d'histoire économique', Stockholm, 1960.

¹²G. Duby, *L'économie rurale et la vie des campagnes dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, 1962, 2 vols.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Introduction*

ately becomes an intolerable burden to the researcher faced with an abundance of source material.

The choice of Normandy was guided by two principal factors. It belongs to that great expanse from the Loire to the Rhine in which economic and social mutations (the establishment of seigneurial and feudal structures) were most deep-seated and complete. Because of this, the rural economy there experienced an early and remarkable upsurge. The Norman countryside, like that of the Paris region or of Picardy, took the lead in the thirteenth century, both technologically and demographically. In short, it can be regarded as typical of the medieval western countryside and is therefore of particular interest.

The second factor is purely academic. Since the work of the great scholars of the last century, L. Delisle¹³ and C. Robillard de Beaurepaire,¹⁴ the Rouen archives have attracted scarcely any university research in this field. The historian of upper Normandy Michel Mollat took up the study of commercial and maritime life.¹⁵ The administration of Normandy was the speciality of J.-R. Strayer.¹⁶ Agrarian history, on the other hand, seems more neglected. The work of Lucien Musset dealt with earlier periods: the early middle ages and the results of Scandinavian settlement;¹⁷ André Plaisse, for his part, followed the evolution of the countryside from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, but in the limited context of the barony of Le Neubourg.¹⁸ Large areas consequently remained unexplored. So large, in fact, that the need to define the field of study more closely was evident.

¹³L. Delisle, *Etudes sur la condition de la classe agricole et de l'état de l'agriculture en Normandie au Moyen Age*, Evreux, 1851.

¹⁴C. Robillard de Beaurepaire, *Notes et documents concernant l'état des campagnes de la Normandie dans les derniers temps du Moyen Age*, Evreux, 1865.

¹⁵M. Mollat, *Le commerce maritime normand à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, 1952.

¹⁶J.-R. Strayer, *The Administration of Normandy under Saint Louis*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1932; *The Royal-Domain in the Bailliage of Rouen*, Princeton, N.J., 1936.

¹⁷L. Musset has published various very interesting articles (cf. the Bibliography at the end of this book).

¹⁸A. Plaisse, *La baronnie du Neubourg. Essai d'histoire agraire, économique et sociale*, Paris, 1961.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern
 Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Spatial limits

Upper Normandy or eastern Normandy? After some hesitation, the arguments earlier advanced by Jules Sion¹⁹ won the day: eastern Normandy offers greater unity. Consider for a moment the description the geographer gives of it in his magisterial work. Hemmed in by the Channel and by the rivers Seine, Epte, and Bresle, it forms a gently undulating plateau, ranging from 100 to 200 metres in altitude, resting on a thick layer of chalk up to 300 metres deep. The upper part of the chalk has been weathered into flint-bearing clay, thin in the Vexin but up to 30 metres deep in the Caux district. Covering it all, a thick formation of alluvium has by good fortune afforded the region fine agricultural land, among the best wheat-growing soil in France. In some places, however (the *boutonnière* (fissure) of the Bray, the periphery of the plateau), this valuable covering has been eroded. The soil becomes heavy, hard, difficult to work. Grass, but primarily forests, heath or fallow land are more common here.

Is this a naturally homogeneous region? Jules Sion²⁰ would say that it is rather an 'organic collection of natural regions', which has given the various '*pays*' a specific physiognomy.

First, Caux, the '*bon pays*' with a fine soil, despite its permanent handicap: the shortage of water, which has been remedied by creating ponds.²¹ It is the distant descendant of the *pagus Caletus* of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods (bounded at that time by the River Béthune to the north), then of the *bailliage* of Caux which, under St Louis, incorporated those of Arques, Neufchâtel and Aumale. From then to the Revolution, the *bailliage* of Caux preserved its boundaries, which correspond to those of the modern department of Seine-Maritime, except for the district of Rouen (which corresponds to the viscounty of Rouen, in the *bailliage* of that name). The Caux district therefore has a strong personality: a dia-

¹⁹J. Sion, *Les Paysans de la Normandie orientale. Etude géographique sur les populations rurales du Caux de Bray, du Vexin normand, et de la vallée de la Seine*, Paris, 1909.

²⁰J. Sion, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²¹The wells have in fact to be very deep (sometimes as much as 100 metres). In 1484, Jean Masselin drew the attention of the Estates General to this handicap of the Caux 'almost all of which suffers extremely from being deprived of water'; quoted by J. Sion, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

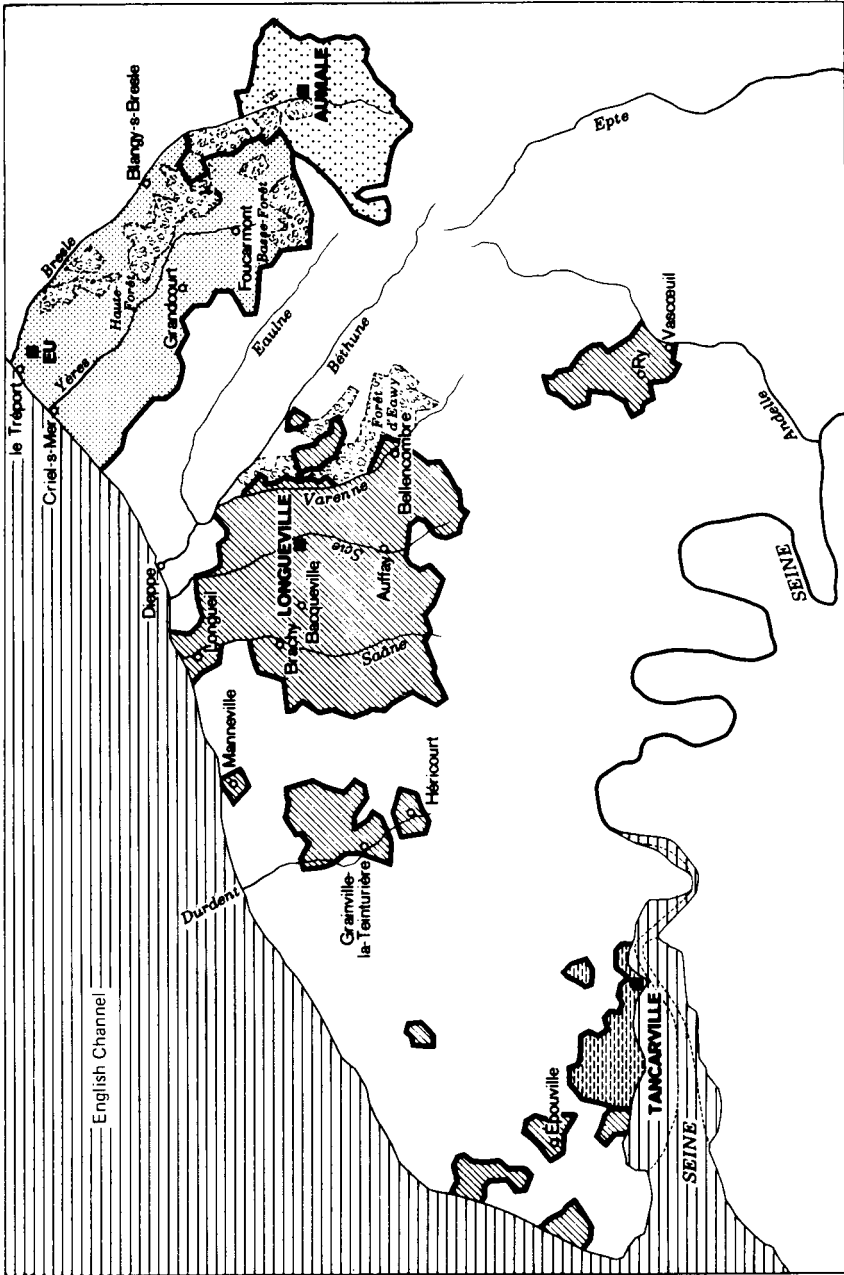
Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)



Eastern Normandy: The major fiefs (Aumale, Eu, Longueville, Tancarville). The county of Maulévrier was too dispersed to be shown here.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)

lect, a habitation pattern marked by a high degree of dispersion and a multitude of farmsteads (*masures*), whose outbuildings are scattered over the grassy enclosure of the farmyard. Above all, in questions of inheritance, its custom is distinct from the general practice of Normandy, conferring almost the entire patrimony of the family on the eldest son. Yet so many qualifications are needed here! The real Caux lies west of a line from Dieppe to Duclair. To the east its specific characteristics become blurred; dwellings in particular have always been more clustered. And once into the *bailliage* of Rouen, the Norman custom of divided inheritance applies. North of the Béthune begins the 'Petit Caux', already strongly influenced by Picardy.

Another '*pays*': the Vexin, its name still evoking the tribe of Velio-cassians. Between the Epte and the Andelle the alluvial layer is at its thickest, reaching a maximum of 10 to 12 metres around Etrépagny. The Vexin, like Caux, is also a granary, oriented, because of the direction of its rivers, as much towards Paris as to Rouen. Its rural physiognomy, with compact villages, is also more reminiscent of the countryside of the Paris region than of Caux. Administratively, it was included in the *bailliage* of Gisors.

Bray is more difficult to define. Its boundaries have never coincided with any administrative or religious district. To the northwest it shades into Caux, and to the southeast extends into Beauvaisis. Its personality is geographic rather than historical. The formation of pre-Cretacian Jurassic strata lends it a strong individuality. The clay soil of the basin makes the region not only unsuitable for agriculture but also unhealthy for human beings prone to fever.

A final region with a clear individual character: the Seine Valley. From 5 to 10 kilometres wide, it played a decisive role throughout Norman history. Imposing forests cluster in between the bends: Roumare, Trait, and so on. The property of the king or great seigneurs, these woods are especially valuable since the river makes it easy to market their products and the centres of consumption are nearby. In the humid riverbeds, and particularly on the polders of the estuary, prairie grass was already widespread, belonging to seigneurial demesnes. Impressive herds were led to this rich pasture from as far as lower Normandy. A further characteristic, the great monastic foundations cluster here: not only Jumièges and Saint-Wandrille, but also the Cistercians of Le Valasse and, further west,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27490-6 - The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy c. 1300-1550

Guy Bois

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Introduction*

the Abbey of Montivilliers. Finally, the river itself contributes much to the exceptional animation of ‘the valley’. Michel Mollat described the function of this fluvial axis in the major trade routes so well that there is no need to elaborate on it here.²² From Harfleur to Vernon via Tancarville, Caudebec, Duclair, Rouen, Pont-de-l’Arche, Les Andelys, the intensive traffic that enlivened the river at that time made it the real unifying feature of eastern Normandy. The beneficiary was Rouen, where all routes converged.

The city of Rouen lies outside the framework of this study,²³ but its influence extends over the entire region. Only the eastern margins were concurrently subject to the influence of Paris. To the west, Dieppe, Fécamp, and Harfleur were but secondary poles of attraction. On the Caux plateau itself the shortage of water prevented any urban development. The hinterland of the regional metropolis, however, was not vast. All the same, Rouen was probably the second city in the kingdom at that time. In the mid thirteenth century it included 9,000 households, or at least 30,000 or 35,000 people.²⁴ It is easy to imagine the effect of such a city on its surroundings, if only because of its demand for food supplies.

This, then, is the geographical framework selected for an economic study of the *longue durée*.

Chronological limits

The chronological framework – from the beginning of the fourteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth – violates the frontier which school and university textbooks have done their utmost to perpetuate. It therefore needs to be justified. In a period marked by a kind of brutal oscillation it is fitting to follow the two movements that compose it: the long phase of regression and the phase of reconstruction or ‘recuperation’, even expansion. The choice of chronological limits amounted to fixing ‘broad dates’, on the one hand for the first signs of recession, on the other for the end of sixteenth-century growth.

But by what criteria? The demographic seemed the least arbitrary.

²²M. Mollat, *Le commerce maritime normand à la fin du Moyen Age*, Paris, 1952.

²³G. Sadourmy wrote a doctoral thesis on the history of Rouen in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

²⁴According to the Eudes Rigaud Survey. The figures are approximate since the Survey says nothing about several urban parishes. BN., Ms. Lat., 11052.