

Revised Draft: **French agriculture 1250-1550: Crisis and Continuity**

The agricultural history of late medieval France was shaped by a succession of negative shocks reversing upward trends in population, output, and factor productivity that marked the economic expansion of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In northern regions and at higher elevations everywhere cooler weather announcing the onset of a ‘little ice age’ depressed crop yields. The plague that struck southern Europe in the spring of 1348 and flared up repeatedly for more than a half century respected no political or cultural frontiers, while the dynastic wars that ravaged France, Flanders, and southern Italy affected anyone for whom they represented an outlet for specialized production. The dramatic reduction in the ratio of men to cultivable land between 1350 and 1400 represented the dominant macroeconomic event in the later Middle Ages. Not only did it lead to a drastic reversal in the ratio of wages to land rent, it also triggered monetary reactions resulting in initial inflation followed by a prolonged monetary deflation. These shocks were shared by all of Europe. The shock of war, however, fell disproportionately on France.¹ For two centuries French monarchy had to defend itself against the pretensions of its ‘overmighty subjects’, aided and abetted by the English king, who was one of them.² Chronic warfare and in the intervals of peace roving bands of unemployed soldiers destroyed not only property and people, they also induced monetary and fiscal innovations that perturbed the distribution of rural income between lords and peasants. Currency devaluation deflated the real value of fixed nominal charges constituting a major share of seigniorial revenue to the benefit of the peasantry;

¹ Economic historians have tended to downplay the extent of destruction on the grounds that armies were small and ranged battles few. For a more pessimistic assessment, see Nicholas Wright, *Knights and peasants. The hundred years war in the French countryside*. Woodbridge (UK), Boydell Press (1998).

² The indispensable account of that conflict is Edouard Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, trans. W. B. Well. New York: Capricorn Books: (1965).

the establishment of permanent royal taxes on landed wealth diverted part of agricultural income from the peasants to the monarchy. Agricultural production was thus subject to powerful cross-currents that defy simple characterization of France's late medieval agricultural crisis in terms of changing factor proportions..

The conventional view of the crisis nevertheless follows the tradition based on the theories of Malthus and Ricardo and supported by the evidence of movements in agricultural prices and wages, according to which, the French rural economy at the turn of the fourteenth century suffered from overpopulation, manifested in the cultivation of agriculturally marginal land, the increasing subdivision of peasant holdings, and the piling up of footloose people into overcrowded cities. From that perspective the series of plagues beginning in 1348-49 and lasting half a century removed the 'surplus' population, restoring a sustainable balance between population and resources by 1400. The objection to this Malthusian interpretation is that except for a brief respite in the final decades of the fourteenth century, the French population continued to decline for another 40 years and recovered slowly for several decades thereafter, long after the plague had abandoned the countryside for the cities.³ A second view situates the crisis in the vicissitudes of what Epstein has termed 'the feudal tributary system.'⁴ According to that interpretation, wartime dislocation and destruction and declining population undermined seigniorial claims to income originating in agricultural production. The difficulty with this thesis is that in a time of generally contracting population and output, all incomes suffered, and though it is plausible that seigniorial income suffered most, the revival of

³ Jacques Dupâquier et al., *Histoire de la population française, 1. Des origines à la Renaissance*. Paris :PUF (1988).

⁴ S. R. Epstein, *Freedom and growth: the rise of states and markets in Europe, 1300-1750*. London and New York: Routledge (2000). 49.

the seigneurial system of landholding argues against the notion, except in terms of the turnover of seigniorial families, new lineages replacing older ones decimated by battle, expropriation, and economic catastrophe.⁵ Marxist historiography by contrast defines the crisis as the replacement of the 'feudal mode of production' by surplus extraction resting on the Crown's fiscal levies.⁶ Yet, in the degree that Marxist historiography advances the thesis of a rising 'capitalistic' form of agriculture, it also fails. The rural economy at the end of the fifteenth-century was neither more nor less commercially oriented than in 1300.

In 1550 France's rural economy appeared much as it had looked two centuries earlier. The methods of farming showed no fundamental differences, and unlike in England, where the decline in population had precipitated a significant reallocation of land from arable to pastoral husbandry, the division of France's farm land remained essentially unchanged. The huge farms which in 1300 provisioned Paris and the industrial towns of Flanders were probably smaller (though growing) two hundred years later, but the overall size distribution of holdings – where it can be detected – seems remarkably stable. The same is true of the legal framework defining property rights in agricultural assets and income streams. Most holdings were small, unlike in England, where in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century as much as a fourth of arable land was in seigniorial demesnes that were subsequently leased to large-scale tenant farmers.⁷

Although French lords also possessed arable demesnes, most notably on the great

⁵ Robert Boutruche, *La crise d'une société. Seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la Guerre de Cent Ans*. Paris : Les Belles Lettres (1963).

⁶ Guy Bois, *The crisis of feudalism : Economy and society in eastern Normandy c. 1300 – 1550*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1984).

⁷ Bruce M. S. Campbell, *English seigniorial agriculture, 1250 – 1450*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), 26.

ecclesiastical estates ringing the capital, the overwhelming majority of agricultural holdings consisted of perpetual hereditary tenements subject to a trivial annual charge (*cens*) recognizing the seigneur's superior property right (*droit éminent*) in the property, but in no way inhibiting the holder's right to freely dispose of it by gift, sale, or hypothecation.⁸ France's land market was thus mainly in the hands of the peasants and largely free of legal impediments to exchange.

By contrast, French lords held extensive judicial and administrative authority over the land and its inhabitants through the institution of the *seigneurie*. Whereas individual tenements could be abandoned and revert to waste, the *seigneurie* was preserved in a chrysalis of parchment, ready to come back to life with the restoration of peace, population and prosperity. A source of income from tolls, fees, and payments recognizing the lord's *droit éminent*, the bundle of rights preserved in seigneurial and notarial archives survived the crises of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Indeed, regulated and strongly protected by the courts they flourished and survived down to the Revolution.⁹

The dominant characteristic of late medieval French agriculture is its technological and institutional continuity with an earlier medieval past and the early modern future. The potential productivity of traditional agricultural technology has been recently demonstrated for the inner Paris basin, which was the arable district most

⁸ Land held for *cens* reverted to the lord only in the event of failure of heirs or default of *cens*. In the latter case, the lord's recovery involved expensive legal procedures that deterred exercise of the right except where the holding actually abandoned.

⁹ When it arrived, the collapse of the seigneurial regime was sudden, lasting from mid-May through late August, 1789. See Georges Lefebvre, *La grande peur de 1789*. Paris: Armand Colin (1970).

completely exposed to commercial opportunity.¹⁰ Yet French agriculture retained the legal encumbrances of its medieval past into the modern era. In areas not so exposed to trade, the burden of those encumbrances, and the consequent fragmentation of judicial and administrative authority in the countryside served to lock French agriculture in a low-level equilibrium of small self-sufficient holdings burdened by taxes and fees that supported a seigniorial class which no longer found social justification in military and administrative service. Yet, institutional continuity did not imply absolute rigidity. In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seigniorial institutions adapted to changing local demand for land, relaxing constraints in the face of falling population, tightening them in periods of recovery, all the while preserving the basic forms of property established before the crisis. Paradoxically, the seigniorial system seems to have emerged from the crisis stronger than it entered it.

The Demographic Context

By pre-modern standards, France on the eve of the Black Death was densely populated. According to an enumeration of fiscal households (*feux*) conducted in 1328 by the *Chambres des Comptes*, approximately 21 million people inhabited the territory of modern France, roughly the same number as in 1750 and implying a rural population density similar to the late nineteenth century.¹¹ In a celebrated article Édouard Perroy dismissed this estimate as implausible, on the grounds that it was incompatible with

¹⁰ Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Les fermiers de l'Île de France*. Paris : Fayard (1994); Philip T. Hoffman, *Growth in a traditional society. The French countryside 1450-1815*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1996)

¹¹ Jacques Dupâquier et al., *Histoire de la population française, 1. Des origines à la Renaissance*. Paris : PUF (1988), 262-63. The *État* was a fiscal document compiled from jurisdictions then subject to direct royal taxation. It thus excludes the part of modern France then in the Empire and fiefs held in *appanage* by the king's brothers and uncles. On the estimates, see Ferdinand Lot, 'L'état des paroisses et des feux de 1328,' *Bibliothèque de l'École des Chartes* 90 (1929), 51-107; 256-315.

contemporary agricultural technique.¹² Perroy's assessment of traditional husbandry was unduly pessimistic, however, and French demographers now accept the estimate and all it implies for the productivity of France's farmers. Unfortunately, the subsequent history of France's population cannot be inferred from the fiscal records, making it impossible to determine the magnitude of the late fourteenth-century decline and the timing of the late fifteenth-century recovery. In the interest of simpler accounting, the fiscal authorities began to rate poor households at fractions of virtual *feu*, breaking the link between the fiscal unit and population.¹³ The geography of population densities recorded in the *Etat* nevertheless provides valuable information bearing on the question whether pre-crisis France was overpopulated and the connections between population density and economic opportunity.

The most densely populated regions were in the north. In agricultural districts surrounding Paris, the Flemish plain, and Normandy the number of fiscal households exceeded 20 per square kilometer, implying population density of 90 to 100.¹⁴ Densities that high were uncommon. The lowest densities were in districts of limited agricultural prospects. The alpine districts of Provence and Savoie supported three to four *feux* per square kilometer, the *causses* of Rouergue and Quercy, and the cold plateau of Limousin

¹²'Les célèbres conjectures de F. Lot, d'après l'État des feux de 1328, aboutissent à compter 15 ou 16 million d'âmes en France, d'où une densité rurale de 35 à 38 habitants au km², si forte que la survie de cette masse humaine n'aurait pas être assurée.' Edouard Perroy, 'À l'origine d'une économie contractée : les crises du xiv^e siècle,' *Annales, ESC* 4 (1949), 168.

¹³ Lot, 'État des feux,' 292-93. Local records preserve the fractions. For example, in the 1470's Olivier de Beaumer farmed a holding of five to eight hectares of good land and was assessed at one-third of a *feu*; his neighbor Nicolas Goulyas, who held two to three hectares but made his living from fishing, was assessed at 1/16. Jean Gallet, *La seigneurie Bretonne 1450-1680. L'exemple du Vannetais*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1983), 180.

¹⁴ Guy Fourquin, *Les campagnes de la région parisienne à la fin du moyen âge*. Paris : PUF (1964), 63.

perhaps six, and the somewhat richer volcanic soils of western Auvergne possibly nine.¹⁵ Yet, the correlation between agricultural productivity and soil type is far from perfect: more densely settled regions were not necessarily the most fertile, nor were the more fertile districts always the most densely populated. Near Paris, for example, the rich plains that supplied the French capital with most of its bread cereals were relatively unpeopled in consequence of their being divided among extremely large farms that drew their seasonal workers from villages lining the slopes and waterways of the rivers converging on Paris. The agricultural specialization of the latter was winegrowing. In general, the most densely populated districts were specialized vineyards exporting wine to England, Germany, and the Low countries.¹⁶ The population density of the inner Paris basin thus owed less to the exceptional fertility of its loams than it did to vineyards, orchards, and market gardens endowed with mediocre soils but well situated with respect to market outlets for labour-intensive produce. The Flemish plain provides a similar example of a densely populated district located on mediocre soil. France's agricultural economy cannot be modeled by an aggregate production function that maps population density onto soil fertility along the lines of unified growth theory.¹⁷ Population density reflected permanent factors of soil type and climate, but it also responded to market opportunity, a factor that varied not only in space, but also in time.

¹⁵ Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la population française. t. 1. Des origines à la Renaissance*. Paris : PUF (1988), 242 – 260 ; Jean Tricard, *Les campagnes limousines du xiv^e au xvi^e siècle. Originalité et limites d'une reconstruction rurale*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1996), 89 ; Pierre Charbonnier, *Une autre France. La seigneurie rurale en Basse Auvergne du xiv^e au xvi^e siècle*. Clermont-Ferrand: Institut d'Etudes du Massif Central (1980), 286-87.

¹⁶ Roger Dion, *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France des origines au 19^e siècle*. Paris (1959) ; Edmond-René Labande, *Histoire du Poitou, du Limousin et des pays Charentaise*. Toulouse : Privat (1976), 190-91

¹⁷ For example, Oded Galor and David Weil, 'Population, technology and growth: from Malthusian stagnation to the Demographic Transition and beyond,' *American economic review* 90 (2000), 806-828.

Most Frenchmen were farmers. Were they self-sufficient? Writing in the first decades of the eighteenth century Richard Cantillon estimated that a French peasant family willing to live on bread, water, and garden vegetables could maintain itself on a holding of one and a half to two hectares.¹⁸ Scattered data from thirteenth and fourteenth century France reveal that a substantial proportion of holdings approached this limit. Sixty percent of holdings listed in a register compiled for a village in Hault in 1265 were below 2 hectares, and 80 percent below 4.5 hectares.¹⁹ Seventy-two percent of the tenants of the Comte de Hainault with holdings in a commune near Quesnoy in 1286 held less than three hectares; the majority of the holdings in a nearby parish at the end of the thirteenth century were smaller than one hectare.²⁰ Despite the decline in population, *minifundia* remained dominant into the fifteenth century. In 1397, 46 percent of holdings in the Châtellanie of Neubourg (Normandy) were smaller than 1.5 hectares. At the foot of the Pyrenees, 30 percent of the holdings in 1400 were smaller than two hectares, and only 25 percent exceeded six.²¹ At Saint-Nicholas d'Allermont, half of the farms around 1400 were smaller than 6 hectares, although they covered only 17 percent of the arable land.²²

It is unlikely that small holdings were a product of uncontrolled population growth. As noted above, the commercially oriented vineyards supported dense populations of winegrowers, barrel makers and vine-prop cutters supported by growing

¹⁸ Richard Cantillon, *Essay on the nature of commerce in general*. Trans. Henry Higgs. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers [c. 1730] (2001), 19. Cantillon probably obtained that estimate from fiscal documents obtained from the French tax authorities. The worksheets (mentioned in his text) were unfortunately destroyed in the fire that took his life in 1734.

¹⁹ Gérard Sivéry, *Structures agraire et vie rurale dans le Hainaut à la fin du moyen âge*. Lille : Presses Universitaires de Lille (1973), t. 1, 316 -317.

²⁰ Elisabeth Carpentier and Michel le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle : population, société, économie*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France (1996), 234.

²¹ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 329.

²² Bois, *Crisis of feudalism*, 150.

foreign demand wine.²³ In the near suburbs of Paris and the greater towns, opportunities for selling milk and garden produce and casual employment would have provided a reasonable standard of living while the cities prospered.²⁴ The great ecclesiastical grange farms of 50 to 200 hectares in the Île de France obtained their work force from the surrounding cloud of small holdings for whom seasonal work rounded out the annual budget.²⁵ An exceptional document recording land transactions between 1204 and 1412 in a suburban village outside Toulouse shows rising rents on demesnes and a sharp rise in land sales during the last two decades of the thirteenth century that have been interpreted as evidence of demographic pressure. Yet, in the same period, the village gained several bridges and four new grain mills, which hardly suggests immiseration.²⁶ A more likely explanation for rising rent is the growth of the Languedocian capital. The proliferation of tiny holdings in economically advanced districts testifies less to Malthus's relentless logic than it does to the logic of rural specialization. It was precisely such districts which bore the main brunt of the demographic and military catastrophes that struck France in the middle decades of the fourteenth century.

Agricultural Technique

Having acquired its definitive form in the Late Iron Age, European mixed husbandry survived with modest amendments to the technological breakthroughs of the 1830s and 1840s. The core of that technology consisted in the cultivation of bread

²³ In the words of the early seventeenth century agricultural writer Olivier des Serres, Olivier des Serres: 'Si n'estes en lieu pour vendre vin, que ferez-vous d'un grant vignoble?' cited by Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*,. 66. The estimate of the area in vineyards is taken from Cassini's map of 1785.

²⁴ Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 93-94.

²⁵ Guy Fourquin, *Les campagnes de la région parisienne à la fin du moyen âge*. Paris : PUF (1964), 74-76.

²⁶ Maurice Berthe, 'Marché de la terre et hiérarchie paysanne dans le Lauragais Toulousain,' in Elisabeth Mornet, ed., *Campagnes médiévales. L'Homme et son espace. Études offertes à Robert Fossier*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1995), 397-311.

cereals in fields regularly rotated through a course of fallow and livestock husbandry based stores of hay and straw for winter feeding. The synthesis of pastoral and arable husbandry occurred in the second half of the first millennium BC with the diffusion of ferrous metallurgical skills into the countryside. The critical element was the iron-bladed scythe, which accelerated the harvest of meadow grasses in the brief period when they were at the nutritional peak, thereby permitting farmers to keep more livestock through winter.²⁷ In late classical antiquity, the supply of fodder was further enhanced by the introduction from the Near East of luzerne (alfalfa) and other forage legumes to the Mediterranean basin, where they were widely cultivated.²⁸ It is not known whether they reached northern Europe, though it is known that in the fourth century AD red clover (*Trifolium praetense*) was being bred for resistance to cold.²⁹ In any event, the fall of the Roman Empire was accompanied by retrogression in farming practice. The sown forage legumes disappeared from fields in southern Gaul. The fate of the heavy mould board plow is obscure. Like the scythe, the heavy plough drawn by two to four pair of oxen was a labour-saving innovation of the late Iron Age. One might therefore expect its use to have expanded as a result of growing labour scarcity in the early medieval period. It is likely, however, that its use contracted. Osteological remains suggest a 50 percent decline in the weight of farm animals employed for traction, and the collapse of external demand for cereals would have greatly diminished the attractiveness of a technology

²⁷ George Grantham, 'Prehistoric origins of European economic integration,' *Economic history review* (forthcoming).

²⁸ Mauro Ambrosoli, *The wild and the sown. Botany and agriculture in Western Europe: 1350-1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1997).

²⁹ M. Zohary and D. Heller, *The genus Trifolium*. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Science and Humanities (1984), 1.

whose primary advantage was to release surpluses for a shrinking population of non-agricultural consumers.

The economic recovery that commenced towards the end of the tenth century reversed these trends. In the north, the mould board plough became the primary implement of cultivation, and from the middle of the twelfth century, three-course crop rotations with spring cereals began to displace the older two courses of winter cereal and fallow. Between 1000 and 1150 naked winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) displaced bearded spelt (*Triticum spelta*) as the 'noble' grain raised on northern ecclesiastical demesne farms, a substitution that had little impact on yield and bread-making properties, but greatly reduced the cost of transporting the primary bred cereal to markets.³⁰ On large farms in Artois and the inner Paris basin, cultivators began to use horses for plowing and harrowing, although the majority of farms retained the ox-team.³¹ There was also improvement in harvest implements. In the thirteenth century advances in forging technique made it possible to set the angle of the scythe to achieve a more level cut, and by 1300 Flemish farmers were employing short-handle scythe or reaping hook called the *piq* to harvest wheat and rye more rapidly.³² The trend in the later twelfth and

³⁰ As a hulled cereal, spelt preserved better than threshed wheat, but was considerably bulkier. The substitution seems to have been induced by increased commercial opportunity. Jean-Pierre Devroey, 'Entre Loire et Rhin: Les fluctuations du terroir de l'épeautre au moyen âge,' in J.-P. Devroey and Jean-Jacques van Mol, eds., *L'épeautre. (Triticum spelta). Histoire et ethnologie* Treignes (Belgium): Editions Dire. pp. 89-105; J.-P. Devroey, 'La céréalculture dans le mond franc,' in *L'ambiente vegetale nell'altro medioevo*. Settimane di Studio del Central Italiano di Studi Sull'alto Medioevo 37 (199), 221-56..

³¹ On the regional localisation of horses around 1300, see Philippe Contamine, 'Le cheval dans l'économie rurale d'après des archives de l'ordre de l'Hôpital,' in Elisabeth Mornet, ed., *Campagnes médiévales, l'homme et son espace. Mélanges offertes à Robert Fossier*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1995), 587-89. The use of horses is also attested for Artois in Richard, 'Thierry d'Hireçon,' 390.

³² Georges Comet, 'Technology and agricultural expansion in the middle ages: the example of France north of the Loire,' Grenville Astill and John Langdon, eds. *Medieval Farming and Technology. The impact of agricultural change in northwest Europe*. Leiden, New York, Köln: Brill (1997) 11-40; Georges Raepset,

thirteenth century was towards greater specialization of farm implements.³³ That trend continued through the later middle ages, supported by improvements in ferrous metallurgy and encouraged by the rising cost of farm labour. The rising cost of farm labour probably explains the spread of horses as draft animals. By the fifteenth century they were common in the comparatively remote Lorraine plateau.³⁴ The range of crops grown also expanded. Continued contact with the Near East supplied a thin stream of new garden vegetables like asparagus, spinach, and eggplant.³⁵ The forage legumes that had been abandoned in the early middle ages found their way in the course of the fifteenth century up the Rhone and into Burgundy. By 1500 the plants were well established in the lower reaches of the Rhone and along the Alpine routes into Italy.³⁶ Despite these undeniable signs of progress, methods of cultivation in the first half of the sixteenth century nevertheless remained similar to those of the previous millennium. In the 1560s the first extensive description of French agriculture by Estienne and Liébaut largely reproduced the Latin agronomical texts on which it was modeled.³⁷

Agricultural Productivity

'The development of farm implements between the Seine and the Rhine from the second to the twelfth centuries,' *Ibid.*, 41-68.

³³ Laconic texts make this difficult to document. The archeological record is surveyed in Pascal Reigniez, *L'Outil agricole en France au Moyen Âge*. Paris : Errance (2002).

³⁴ Plowing *corvées* indicate widespread use of draft horses in Lorraine at the end of the fifteenth century. Hélène Olland, 'Un exemple de reconstruction: Colombey-lès-Choiseul (1485-1550), in *La reconstruction après la Guerre de Cent Ans. Actes du 104^e congrès des sociétés savantes. Bordeaux, 1980*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1981), 74-76.

³⁵ Georges Comet, 'L'iconographie des "plantes nouvelles" ou une approche des débuts de la botanique moderne,' in *Campagnes médiévales*, 31-57.

³⁶ A. C. Zeven and C. J. Stemerink, 'A cluster analysis of eight medieval manuscripts based on depicted plant taxa,' *Journal d'agriculture tropicale et de botanique appliquée* 23 (1986), 225-42. Ambrosoli, *The wild and the sown*, 165-67; 171, 183-84.

³⁷ Charles Estienne and Jean Liébaut, *L'agriculture et la maison rustique*. Lyon (1583). The first edition was published in 1567.

The productivity of traditional husbandry is commonly underestimated. On well-equipped farms organized to supply Paris and the Flemish manufacturing towns wheat yields at the turn of the fourteenth century equaled and sometimes surpassed the best performances of the eighteenth century. The meticulous accounts kept by Thierry d'Hireçon, who served as Bishop of Arras in the early 1320s, record yield ratios implying a gross yield of approximately 25 hectolitres. The accounts described the operations of large farms that exported grain through the market at Grosnay to the industrial cities of Ghent and Bruges, which drew much of their subsistence from Artois.³⁸ In Flanders itself and in the adjacent county of Hainault, yields on the same order of magnitude can be inferred from contemporary tithe and rental receipts.³⁹ The same holds for the large farms that provisioned Paris. The accounts for 1281-82 for the demesne farm belonging to the Abbey of Saint-Denis at Gennesvilliers record yield ratios of 8.5 and 9.1 implying gross yields of 21 and 23 hectolitres.⁴⁰ The grange of Vaulerent situated two dozen kilometres east of Paris was the largest agricultural exploitation in Europe. When the Cistercian monks of Chaalis leased it out in 1315, the contract stipulated that no rent would be paid if the yield fell below 2 *setiers* per arpent (approximately 15 hectolitres per hectare). Since the lessees would have had to cover the costs of cultivation (the Abbey continued to supply the draft animals and equipment) as well as provide for a margin of safety, the

³⁸ J.-M. Richard, 'Thierry d'Hireçon, agriculteur artésien, 13.. 1328,' *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 53 (1892), 383-416 ; 571-604.

³⁹ Alain Derville, 'Dîmes, rendements du blé et « Révolution Agricole » dans le nord de la France au moyen âge,' *Annales ESC* 42 (1987), 1411-32 ; Michel Morineau, 'Les Taques d'Onnaing et de Quarouble,' in M. Morineau, *Les faux-semblants d'un démarrage économique : agriculture et démographie en France au xviii^e siècle*. Paris : Armand Colin (1971), 155-162.

⁴⁰ Guy Fourquin, 'Les débuts du fermage: l'exemple de Saint-Denis,' *Etudes rurales* 22-23-24 (July-December, 1966),. 30. At early nineteenth-century seeding rates, the gross yields would have been 24 and 27 hectolitres.

expected yield must not have been inferior to 20 hectolitres.⁴¹ French documentation provides no contemporary evidence on labour inputs, but to judge from Karakacilis's reworking of the accounts of the manors of Ramsay Abbey, labour productivity on large well-managed farms probably approached the levels achieved in the late eighteenth century.⁴² The examples come from economically developed districts, but high yields were also in more remote regions. A text describing the proportional tax owed to the Abbey of Saint-André in Auvergne from a property for which the area is known suggests a yield as high as 18 hectolitres;⁴³ a document from the parish of Vernou in the generally unproductive Sologne implies a yield of 18 to 20 hectolitres.⁴⁴ In an age when the average yield was probably no greater than ten hectolitres per hectare, the evidence of yields regularly exceeding twice that comes from too many sources to be seriously disputed.⁴⁵

That productivity did not come free. On the farms administered by Thierry d'Hireçon, land sown in wheat received four ploughings,⁴⁶ the harvest was screened to select the biggest and best-looking seeds, women were hired by the day to weed the standing crop, and children engaged to scare off birds.⁴⁷ On the Flemish farms fields

⁴¹ Charles Higounet, *La grange de Vaulerent. Structure et exploitation d'un terroir cistercien de la plaine de France xii^e-xv^e siècle*. Paris : SEVPEN (1965), 52.

⁴² Eona Karakacili, 'English agrarian labour productivity before the Black Death: a case study,' *Journal of economic history* 64 (2004), 24-25.

⁴³ Charbonnier, *Une autre France*, 297.

⁴⁴ Isabelle Guérin, *La vie rurale en Sologne au xiv^e et xv^e siècles*. Paris : SEVPEN (1960), 74.

⁴⁵ Gérard Béaur, 'From the North Sea to Berry and Lorraine : land productivity in northern France, 13th – 19th centuries,' in Bas. J. P. van Bavel and Erik Thoen, eds., *Land productivity and agro-systems in the North Sea area. Middle Ages – 20th century*. Turnhout: Brepols (1999), 136-167.

⁴⁶ In a dispute between Thierry and one of his farmers concerning the latter's failure to plant wheat in the first year of the rotation—as the primary cash crop the delay would have been costly--the farmer protested that he lacked sufficient time to give it the required number of ploughings, as the land was in too poor shape to be sown. Richard, 'Thierry d'Hireçon,' 388-89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

were ploughed up to six times.⁴⁸ The labour-intensity of these procedures were offset by the use of horses in cultivation, but neither high capital nor high labour-intensity could have been sustained without secure outlets for the grain surpluses they made possible. Thierry d'Hireçon's records are unique, but there is no reason to think that the performances they record were exceptional for the region. Thierry was not an agricultural innovator, but a royal servant from Berry whom Philip IV appointed Bishop of Arras to keep an eye on the Count of Artois.⁴⁹ His accounts nevertheless provide a unique insight into the techniques of medieval high farming at its peak.

Historians commonly attribute the low average yield of medieval farming to a shortage of crop nutrients, a notion that dates to the early nineteenth-century concept of a chemical steady state in cropped soils in which nutrients removed by cropping are just balanced by inputs resulting from natural processes and animal manure. On that model, the higher the yield, the greater the necessary steady-state input of nutrients.⁵⁰ The problem with this oversimplified view is that there were other claims on the stock of nutrients, the most important coming from weeds that volunteered in soils disturbed by cultivation.⁵¹ The decline in yield due to weed infestation may well have exceeded 25

⁴⁸ Derville, 'Dimes, rendements.'

⁴⁹ He was originally from the economically backward province of Berry.

⁵⁰ Many agronomists subscribe to this mechanistic vision. A particularly striking example is Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *Histoire des agricultures du monde. Du néolithique à la crise contemporaine*. Paris: Seuil (1997). An elementary analysis can be found in Robert S. Shiel, 'Improving soil productivity in the pre-fertiliser era,' in Bruce M. S. Campbell and Mark Overton, *Land, labour and livestock. Historical studies in European agricultural productivity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (1991), 51-77

⁵¹ For an elementary discussion of the basic concepts of weed ecology, see Barbara D. Booth, Stephen D. Murphy, and Clarence J. Swanton, *Weed ecology in natural and agricultural systems*. Wallingford (UK): CABI Publishing. (2003). See also W. Harwood Long, 'The low yields of corn in medieval England,' *Economic history review* 32 (1979), 459-69.

percent.⁵² The costs went beyond reduced yield, however, as cereals contaminated by weed seeds sold at a significant discount, fields sown and of course when sown reseeded the fields in weeds.⁵³ The ability of farmers to augment the available supply of nutrients (including water and sunlight) through more intensive cultivation explains why yields responded positively to more intensive plowing and timely weeding.⁵⁴ In light of that connection, it is hardly surprising that despite a rising land-labour ratio in the later Middle Ages, crop yields declined.⁵⁵

The responsiveness of crop yields to intensive cultivation had implications for farm size. At a yield of 20 hectolitres per hectare from land worked by hand, a peasant family could subsist on the produce of two and a half hectares sown in biennial rotation, which was well within the area it could effectively cultivate. Yet, whereas such a family might cultivate up to 3 hectares, a family working the land with a plough team managed by one or at most two labourers could cultivate 30 to 40 hectares with horses and 10 to 20 with and oxen. That labour saving, however, came at the cost of weedier fields and

⁵² At the end of the eighteenth century up to a quarter of the English wheat crop is thought to have been lost to weeds.. Eric Kerridge, *The agricultural revolution*, London: George Allen and Unwin (1967), 28. Since cultivation in medieval agriculture was less intensive, this probably represents a lower bound.

⁵³ Aussi, quand le bon grain est accompagné de vesse, yvraie, & autres herbes nuisibles, non seulement le pain est rendu mal plaisant, moins savoureux, mal sain et taché de mauvaise couleur, mais aussi ne revient de moitié du bon bled & froment non meslé de ces herbes meschantes, tellement que trois charges de tel bled, après être criblé, ne reviennent à deux de grain pur & net. Estienne and Liébaut, *L'agriculture et la maison rustique*, 299.

⁵⁴ Sigurd Hakannson, *Weeds and weed management on arable land: an ecological approach*. Wallingford UK and Cambridge MA: CABI Publishing (2003).

⁵⁵ During the French Revolution the shortage of hands resulted in a weed explosion in the grain fields. 'D'où il résulte qu'ils sont toujours mêlés d'une quantité prodigieuse de plantes qui leur nuisent considérablement.' Baron C.-F. Dupin, *Mémoire statistique du département des Deux-Sèvres*. Paris (an 12), 236. On the late medieval decline in crop yields, see Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'Land, labour, livestock, and production trends in English seigniorial agriculture, 1208-1450,' in Campbell and Overton, *Land, labour and livestock*, 144-182.

correspondingly lower yields.⁵⁶ The viability of large-scale farming thus rested on the labour saved per hectare exceeding the decline in output per hectare, which assuming a maximum yield loss of 50 percent would make the lower bound for a self-sufficient plough-based farm about 8 to 10 hectares. Unlike manual cultivation, however, plough-based farming enjoyed economies of scale, which meant that the larger the farm, the greater the proportion of its output that could be released into trade.⁵⁷ Large-scale farming therefore concentrated in regions with large off-farm markets for cereals, to which it was a response.⁵⁸ In more remote districts farms were usually only as large as was required for family subsistence and a small marketable surplus that usually went to the *seigneur*.

The question remains why yields on some large farms appear to have been so high under plough-based cultivation. In addition to the labour-intensive operations cited above in connection with the estate of Thierry d'Hireçon, thirteenth-century yields were raised by planting nitrogen-fixing pulses in rotation with cereals. Large farmers could also contemplate up-and-down husbandry, putting arable down to grass for several years in order to accumulate nutrients for successive crops of grain. In the late thirteenth century some farms in northern France had as much as 15 percent of arable in such crops.

Intensive plowing also generated positive feedbacks when seed harvested from well-tilled

⁵⁶ Pliny notes that as compared to the traditional stick-plow or ard, the iron mould board plough introduced in late antiquity prepared a much cleaner seedbed. (*nec sarrienda sunt hoc modo sata*). *Natural history*. Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library (1938), Book 18: 43.172-73.

⁵⁷ Robert C. Allen. 'The growth of labor productivity in early modern English agriculture,' *Explorations in economic history* 25 (1988) 117-146, and Jean-Marc Moriceau and Gilles Postel-Vinay, *Ferme, entreprise, famille. Grande exploitation et changements agricoles xvii^e xix^e siècles*. Paris, Ed. EHESS (1992), 198-209.

⁵⁸ At its greatest extent the grange of Vaulerent covered 320 to 380 hectares (800 to 950 acres). Charles Higounet, *La grange de Vaulerent. Structure et exploitation d'un terroir cistercien dans la plaine de France du xii^e au xv^e siècle*. Paris : S.E.V.P.E.N. (1965), 37. At that time it was probably the largest farm in Europe. With the exception of Milan, the great medieval Italian cities were partly or largely supplied by sea. Around 1300 Florence drew seven months of its cereal requirements from overseas suppliers. Edwin S. Hunt, *The medieval super-companies. A study of the Peruzzi Company of Florence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994), 44-45.

fields returned fewer weeds in succeeding plantings; domesticated and crop varieties adapted to looser and cleaner soils.⁵⁹ Increased supplies of straw and other fodders allowed farmers to keep and breed stronger draft animals, which in turn supported improved cultivation. Although draft animals were generally runty, the estate inventories indicate that prosperous farmers kept more expensive and more efficient stock.⁶⁰ The same held for ploughs, carts, and other farm equipment.⁶¹ The significance of these measures lies in their reversibility. When urban markets contracted after 1340, the economic circumstances warranting high farming disappeared. Large farms survived, but their methods of cultivation became more extensive, and they yielded less produce and lower rents to their owners.

The Agrarian Regime

Whether land was farmed in large or small units, most holdings were subject to claims on their income from persons other than the cultivators. Although freehold or allodial land survived the so-called ‘feudal revolution’ of the eleventh and twelfth century, almost all of France’s territory at the beginning of the fourteenth century rendered rent, service, or other acknowledgement of ownership to persons or institutions possessing a superior right (*droit éminent*) in it. The unit of administration of that right was the *seigneurie* or lordship, to which the actual tenants of the land owed dues, fees,

⁵⁹ In Swedish experiments, intensive cultivation of cereals raised yields 20 to 24 percent over 25 to 30 generations. L. T. Evans, *Crop evolution, adaptation, and yield*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993), 293.

⁶⁰ Gérard Sivéry, *L'économie du royaume de France au siècle de Saint-Louis*. Lille : Presse Universitaire de Lille (1984), 109-110; Contamine, ‘Le cheval dans l'économie rurale,’ 177.

⁶¹ Georges Comet, *Le paysan et son outil. Essai d'histoire technique des céréales*. Thèse d'État, Université d'Aix-en-Provence (1987); Georges Raepset, ‘The development of farm implements between the Seine and the Rhine from the second to the twelfth centuries,’ in Grenville.Astill and John Langdon, eds., *Medieval farming and technology* 41-68. Pascal Reigniez, *L'Outil agricole en France au Moyen Âge*. Paris : Errance (2002).

services, and judicial obligations that constituted the main support of France's political, military, and religious elite. The *seigneurie* thus mobilized agricultural surpluses for the public functions of defense and public administration, and not least, for the support of the living standards and political ambitions of the families performing them. In distributing income from agricultural enterprise, it also established the pattern of incentives that affected the responses of lords, landholders, and peasants to the late medieval contraction.

The origins of seigniorial property in France are hotly contested. Conventional historiography traces it to the dismemberment of the great estates in late Roman antiquity into hereditary peasant holdings owing labour service on the lord's demesne, and to conditional grants by Merovingian and Carolingian rulers of specific territories bundled with rights to exploit the labour of their inhabitants as compensation for military and public service to the state.⁶² This interpretation interprets the *seigneur* as a landlord and the labour services as a species of rent appropriate to a demonetized economy.⁶³ The alternative interpretation holds that the conditional grant was not in land, but in rights to fiscal revenues assessed on land together with the coercive authority to enforce them.⁶⁴ With the passage of time and the weakening of the state in the ninth and tenth century, the conditional grant became hereditary, vesting its holder with a measure of sovereign

⁶² For a review of the historiography and an exceptionally clear exposition of the issues involved, see James Lowth Goldsmith, *Lordship in France, 500 – 1500*. New York: Peter Lang (2003).

⁶³ Douglass C. North and Robert Paul Thomas, 'The rise and fall of the manorial system: a theoretical model,' *Journal of economic history* 31 (1971), 777-803.

⁶⁴ The key contributions in the French historiography are Jean Durliat, *Les finances publiques de Dioclétien aux Carolingiens*. Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag (1990); Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier, 'La gestion publique en Neustrie: les moyens et les hommes (vii^e-ix^e siècles),' in Hartmut Atsma, *La Neustrie : Les pays au nord de la Loire de 650 à 850*. Sigmaringen : Jan Thorbecke Verlag (1989), 271-318; and Karl-Ferdinand Werner, *Naissance de la noblesse. L'essor des élites politiques en Europe*. Paris : Fayard (1998).

power. In the first case, the *seigneurie* is a territory exploited as an agricultural enterprise; in the second, it is a tax base exploited as a fiscal enterprise.

The distinction between domanial and fiscal interpretations of the French seigniorial regime affects the interpretation of seigniorial responses to the late medieval shocks. If the *seigneurie* was a territorial grant, its evolution is plausibly explained by contracts devised by lords to maximize returns – not all of them monetary – from the land and labour subject to their control. In that case its institutional features would track the optimal contracts determining access to land. If, on the other hand, the *seigneurie* was a share of the tax base, its evolution is explained by measures taken by seigniors to grow the tax base and limit tax evasion. The operational significance is the difference in seigniorial degrees of freedom. In the domanial model the seignior controls access to land, which allows him to set the terms on which people farm it. For all their individual complexity, those terms reduce to an economic rent, and thus vary in response to changes in the relative scarcity of land and labour. In the fiscal model peasants already possess most of the land, possessing what the legal texts term a *droit utile*.⁶⁵ The *droit éminent* possessed by the seigneur is a right to take tax and other fees regulated by a ‘tax code’ preserved in charters and ‘deeds’ as interpreted by the courts. The fiscal seigneur thus had fewer degrees of freedom to adjust the price of access to land in the face of changing

⁶⁵ On the predominance of non-seigniorial property before the twelfth century, see Laurent Feller, ‘Statut de la terre et statut des personnes. L’alleu paysan dans l’historiographie depuis Georges Duby’, *Etudes rurales* No. 145-46. (1997), 147-64. Public lands originated in Roman imperial estates and supported public functions. They consisted of fiscal rights and land (*réserves*) farmed by salaried agents or by workers providing labour services in lieu of money to clear their tax liability. With the collapse of Roman administration, they fell to rulers of successor states, who managed them directly or delegated administration to ecclesiastical establishments. The Carolingian capitulary *De villis*, which has been interpreted by historians as documenting a classical manor based on *corvée* labour from servile tenants is in fact an administrative memorandum regulating the administration of imperial fiscal estates. Cf. Elisabeth Magnou-Nortier, ‘Capitulaire “*De villis et curtis imperialibus*” (vers 810-813). Texte, traduction et commentaire,’ *Revue historique* 299 (1998), 643-89. Guy Bois, *La mutation de l’an mil*. Paris : Fayard (1989) gives a Marxist interpretation of the predominance of allodial land before 1000..

relative supply. His room for manoeuvre lay in shifting land and persons from one legal category to another in order to exploit differences in rates of imposition. Most of our information concerning the civil status of the subjects of *seigneuries* comes from court proceedings contesting such attempts at ‘revenue enhancement.’

On the whole the evidence supports the fiscal interpretation.⁶⁶ The lightness of the fixed charges on peasant holdings and the exemptions associated with some of the heavier ones testify to their origin as taxes. The system acquired a definitive form in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the older method of assessing taxes on virtual entities was replaced by assessments on actual households and farmsteads.⁶⁷ The essential charges were a fixed cash payment (*cens*) usually combined with a fixed share of the crop (*champart*, *terrage*, *agrière*, *percière*).⁶⁸ Both were low, the *champart* averaging a seventh or an eighth, but sometimes as low as a sixteenth.⁶⁹ In addition to charges on land, a *seigneurie* also commonly included rights that flowed from the devolution of judicial and administrative authority. These included the right to collect tolls on roads, bridges, and waterways, fees for holding markets, the right to hold court

⁶⁶ For a vigorous defence of the traditional view, however, see Jean-Pierre Devroey, *Puissants et misérables. Système social et monde paysans dans l'Europe des Francs (vi^e-ix^e siècles)*. Bruxelles : Académie Royale de Belgique (2006).

⁶⁷ Goldsmith, *Lordship in France*, 105-107. Goldsmith argues that the Roman and early medieval fiscal system was adapted to a lightly settled territory divided into fiscal units serving as the basic units of assessment. Local officials distributed the associated burden among individuals attached to the unit. With the growth in population and colonization of new territory in the tenth and eleventh century, the old fiscal grid became increasingly cumbersome to administer, and from the twelfth century it was replaced by individual assessments modeled after the forms used on newly cleared land. On the difficulty of maintaining actual assessments in the later fiscal system, see footnote 13 above.

⁶⁸ The proportional charges seem to have been introduced into southern France somewhat earlier than in the north. The earliest examples date from Provence and the southwest date to the late tenth century. See Louis Stouff, ‘Redevances à part de fruits et de métayage dans la Provence médiévale : tasques et facherie,’ in *Les revenus de la terre : complant, champart, métayage en Europe occidentale (ix^e-xviii^e siècles)*. Flaran. ISeptièmes journées internationales d'histoire, 1985. Auch : Centre Culturel de l'Abbaye de Flaran (1987), 43-60, and Germain et Mireille Sicard, ‘Redevances à part de fruits et de métayage dans le sud-ouest de la France au moyen âge,’ *Idem*, 61-74.

⁶⁹ Gérard Sivéry, ‘Les tenures à part de fruit et le métayage dans le nord de la France et les Pays-Bas jusqu’au début du xvi^e siècle,’ *Les revenus de la terre*.

for certain types of (usually minor) offences, the right to demand watch service at the lord's castle, and the right to monopolize flour milling, baking, wine pressing, and taking of usury (by licensing Jews).⁷⁰ Because they stemmed from the judicial and police powers devolved on the *seigneurie*, these rights are commonly classed under the term *seigneurie banale*.

Like income streams resulting from the *droit éminent*, the *banalités* could be gifted, bought, sold farmed out to third parties, and by the thirteenth century hypothecated. This traffic in seigniorial income streams goes a long way to explaining why the rights of ordinary peasants were so well protected. The alienability of every form of seigniorial property, from the lowest peasant tenement to the most extensive fief created an inextricable web of interests inhibiting arbitrary expropriation of seigniorial property. A wealthy person who had purchased a *rente* (made a loan) from a peasant holding a *censive* or had purchased a rent from a *seigneur* on the basis of the *cens* he took from the holding had an interest in protecting that holding from the designs of other claimants, thereby indirectly protecting the peasant. The secular stability of the *seigneurie* seigniorial system down to the middle decades of the eighteenth century is largely owing to that unintended but in retrospect inevitable balance which caused the wealthy possessors to support legal processes that protected the property rights of all classes. Except for a small class of persons subject to the seigneurial *taille* (a kind of head tax), lords did not have untrammelled authority to control the mobility of peasants, nor could they arbitrarily adjust charges on land over which they held the *droit éminent*. That protection did not, as Marc Bloch conjectured, stem from the transcendental status

⁷⁰ Robert Boutruche, *La crise d'une société. Seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la Guerre de Cent Ans*. Paris : Les Belles Lettres (1963), 66-68.

of law and custom.⁷¹ The *seigneurie* was first and foremost a legal construction, whose categories were defined by jurisprudence to which all those able to take their case to court were able to draw on. It was expensive justice, but justice all the same.

Another consequence of the traffic in seignorial rights was geographical fragmentation. Land and people were well situated in space, but the space of claims on them was not topologically compact. Fragmentation and reassembling of seignorial rights by inheritance, gifts, and sale resulted in a geographical patchwork of overlapping claims which accentuated the system's legal stability. Residents of a given territory could owe dues and services to several seigniors to each of whom they owed specific dues and services. Thus, the local abbot possessed rights of justice in village of La Sauve in the Bordelaise, but possessed no seigniorial rights in land there.⁷² The intermingling of property rights generated an unending stream of legal actions. A dispute between the Cathedral Chapter of Lyon and nobleman Louis de Saint-Paul over milling rights is a typical example. In 1481 Louis, who held the *seigneurie* of Saint-Martin-la-Plaine jointly with the Chapter, sold his share in the *seigneurie* to a certain Louis Escot, who for an annual fee of 3 *oboles* farmed the right to operate ovens for their own consumption to 18 individuals. Having gotten wind of the transaction, the Chapter sued Escot in 1492 for having violated its *seigneurie*. The court at Lyons ruled for the canons and ordered Escot to renounce his three *oboles*, but at the same time it held that the Chapter had lost its monopoly of baking in the *seigneurie* by having neglected to enforce it, and refused to

⁷¹ 'It was custom that finally decided the fate of the legal heritage of the preceding age. Custom had become the sole living source of law, and princes, even in their legislation, scarcely claimed to do no more than interpret it. Marc Bloch, *Feudal society*. Trans. L. A. Manyon. Chicago: Phoenix Books (1974), 111.

⁷² Boutruche, *Crise d'une société*, 49.

order the destruction of the ovens.⁷³ The case exemplifies the importance of keeping good records. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the extinction of families owing dues, the abandonment of holdings, and the destruction of seigniorial and peasant archives by fire, flood, and sheer neglect gave legal work precedence over all other investments in the administration of landed property. Property could slip away by neglect and forgetfulness as well as by intention. To prevent that from happening seigniors went to great expense to document and defend their titles to seigniorial income.

The comparative fixity of seigniorial charges on individual holdings has an important implication for the interpretation of data bearing on the opportunity cost of land. In general, charges were lower on holdings situated in older settled districts than on those settled at the height of the medieval boon. Because the charges were fixed in perpetuity, a *seigneur* could alter them only on land newly taken in from the waste or on holdings that had escheated to his hand.⁷⁴ When population was rising, as was the case in the twelfth and thirteenth century, the charges on newly cleared land lifted the average charge on *censives*; by contrast, in the economic and demographic contractions of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the charges declined dramatically as peasants abandoned marginal holdings that paradoxically sometimes carried heavier charges than better situated ones. In effect, ‘rent’ on land held by *seigneurs* in *droit éminent* was sticky, and like all objects subject to sticky prices, adjustments to major shocks took the form of changes in quantity rather than price. In the fourteenth and fifteenth century, falling

⁷³ Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *Les campagnes de la région Lyonnaise au xiv^e et xv^e siècles*. Lyon : Bosc (1974), 290.

⁷⁴ A modern analogy would be the case of rent controlled apartments in which the tenant has the right to sell his lease, but the owner retains the right to reset the rent in the event the tenant fails to pay or dies without an heir.

demand for land initially resulted in abandonment of holdings whose productivity no longer supported the charges imposed on them. In a second phase, the charges were reduced as lords attempted to resettle their properties by offering better terms. What made this adjustment different from simple changes in rents is that once set, the new terms were permanent, though as we shall see below, in the later phases of recovery the lords often tried to revise them upward, with mixed success.

In addition to land over which they possessed a *droit éminent*, many lords also possessed land in their own right or in *droit utile*. Such properties are commonly called demesne or *réserve* and comprised not only arable, but more profitably vineyards, forests, and pasture. Historians have offered several explanations of the origin of these properties, but Fustel de Coulange's hypothesis that they descended from late Roman aristocratic estates (*fundi*) remains the most plausible account.⁷⁵ To these were added grants of unsettled 'waste' by post-Roman monarchs. Owing to the stylized account of the bi-partite estate propagated by Benjamin Guérard and perpetuated in modern textbooks, the seigniorial demesne is commonly associated with arable land worked by *corvée* labour supplied by servile peasants. There is some evidence for this type of farming in the texts, but it was never as extensive as in England, and by the beginning of the fourteenth century most of the arable demesnes that had been directly managed by bailiffs were leased to private operators who took responsibility for recruiting and managing an often considerable force of free farm labourers. Large demesne farms were most common around Paris and in districts of northern France where thriving urban markets for wheat created unparalleled opportunities for large-scale farming. In districts where demesne farming was profitable, lords rounded out their holdings by purchasing

⁷⁵ *L'alleu et le domaine rural*. Paris : Hachette (1889).

censives, which explains the odd situation in which lords owed labour services.⁷⁶ A significant portion of the grange at Vaulerent was assembled in this fashion.⁷⁷ After 1320, such acquisitions tailed off, although ecclesiastical establishments fortified by generally stronger finances than the lay *seigneurie* continued to make strategic purchases when the opportunity presented itself.⁷⁸ It was not before the late sixteenth and seventeenth century that lay lords – many of them freshly minted from bourgeois blanks – began to assemble new domains from *censives* acquired from impoverished peasants.⁷⁹ The size of the farms was thus large. Whereas a substantial peasant holding generally ranged between 8 and 20 hectares, a seigneurial demesne farm or ‘grange’ commonly exceeded 50 to 75 hectares.⁸⁰

Table 1 lists the extent of granges possessed by the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in 1384. The arable demesnes average 60 hectares, which was probably represents

Table 1
(arpents de Paris = .34 hectares)

<i>Grange</i>	<i>Arable</i>	<i>Meadow</i>	<i>Vineyard</i>
Antony	156	25	
Cachan	180		20
Paray	200		1
Le Brueil	141	40	12
Thiais	180	44	?
Avrainville	160	4	3
Villeneuve-St-Georges	200	43	9
Montéclin	200		11

⁷⁶ Sée, *Les classes rurales*, 560. Just as peasants did, lords commuted these services by cash payment.

⁷⁷ The sale of a *censive* did not erase its *cens* and other dues levied on it, liability for which passed to the new owner. At least 72 hectares of the arable at Vaulerent were tenements charged with *cens*, as was possibly half the estate’s original endowment. Higounet, *Vaulerent*, 33-34.

⁷⁸ Citation with example here.

⁷⁹ Louis Merle, *La métairie et l’évolution agraire de la Gâtine poitevine de la fin du moyen âge à la Révolution*. Paris : S.E.V.P.E.N. (1958); Marc Venard, *Bourgeois et paysans au xvii^e siècle : recherche sur le rôle de la bourgeoisie parisienne dans la vie agricole au sud de Paris au xvii^e siècle*. Paris : S.E.V.P.E.N. (1957); Jean Gallet, *La seigneurie Bretonne 1450-1680 : l’exemple du Vannetais*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1983).

⁸⁰ Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Les fermiers de l’Île de France*. Paris : Fayard (1994), 27.

Samoreau	160	8	16
Marolles	180		
Esmans	160	24	
Bailly	160		3

Source : Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 97.

a diminution from before the Black Death and the fighting that devastated the region between 1345 and 1380. The primary function of the *réserve* was generating cash income, and except where urban markets provided stable outlets for surplus produce, arable demesne farming was rarely profitable enough to warrant the risk and expense of outlays on seed and labour, and the implicit tax imposed by high transport cost. For the most part, *réserve* farms were home farms dedicated to provisioning seigniorial households (which included the very large households comprising establishments and the hospitality of lay landlords). It was the smaller *seigneuries* for whom the *réserve* was typically most important as a source of income. Revenues from *cens*, justice, and *banalités* were modest and often non-existent, making the *réserve* the main source of support for the minor nobility that fourteenth century still held *seigneuries* in fief for military service.⁸¹

For larger *seigneuries*, the receipts from the exploitation or leasing of meadows, pasture, woodland and vineyards constituted the primary sources of domanial revenue.⁸² Their produce was highly commercialisable, and except for wine, none was exceptionally labour-intensive. The right to cut woodland was usually leased at auction, as were the rights to graze livestock in wasteland pastures and the right to cut meadow hay. Owing to the strong market for hay within carting distance of Paris seigniorial meadows in that

⁸¹ Isabelle Guérin, *La vie rurale en Sologne au xiv^e et xv^e siècles*. Paris : S.E.V.P.E.N. (1960), 170-172.

⁸² Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 273-74.

district were usually leased separately from the farms to which they were theoretically attached, and never sold off as *censives*.⁸³ For the greater landlords, the non-arable demesne remained the largest and most profitable part of their agricultural holdings down to the Revolution, and unlike the arable properties confiscated by the state survived it.⁸⁴

Table 2 shows the distribution of land among *réserves* and *censives* for *seigneuries* held by the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés southwest of Paris in the second half of the fourteenth century. The table clearly reveals the relatively small share

Table 2
Seigneuries of Saint-Germain-des-Prés
(arpents)

<i>Seigneurie</i>	Réserve					Censive
	woodland	arable	wasteland	vines	meadow	
Avrainville		170	100	1	1	300
Bièvres	91	90			11	115
Cachan		120		38	44	150
Antony	1200	126		1	30	500
Châtillon		14		1		10
La Celle-St-Cloud	120		100			
Le Chesnay	10				4	
Épinay-sur-Orge		134	34		13	200
Fontenay				5	1	
Issy					4	250
Jouy	100	16			5	30
Paray		350			7	
Meudon		26	50	13	12	198
Suresne						250
Vanves		16	5	3		

Source: Bézard, *Vie rurale*, 81.

of land in arable *réserves* to seigniorial economy relative to woodland, waste and meadow. It also reveals the predominance of *censives*. In the late fourteenth and

⁸³ Bézard, *Vie rurale*, 127; Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*,

⁸⁴ Robert Forster, *The house of Saulx-Tavannes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press (1971).

fifteenth century, the share of arable was to decline even further, as lords desperate for short-term revenue sold off outlying parcels of demesne to peasants on *censive* tenure.

Seigneurial income thus rested on a broad base of revenue streams originating on the one hand in legal rights to tolls and *cens* and on the other from direct exploitation or leasing out of land owned outright. Table 3 shows the sources of income from three seigneuries possessed by a prominent noble family in Auvergne. They include charges laid directly on tenements, which include a fixed payment (*cens*) and a fixed share of the harvest (*percières*), tithes, and a charge levied on persons taking possession of a holding subject to the above dues. They also included income from the land held in full property by the lord (*réserve*), which in this highland district consisted in lease of rights of pasture and wood cutting, but in districts where arable farming was profitable would have included the profits from or lease of a demesne farm; *banalités*, which here included a right to directly tax tenants, fees from exercising the right to hold court and ‘donations’, which were not seigniorial income per se, but assets received in exchange for an annual rent payable to the donor.

Table 3 displays the variety and complexity of income streams from seigneurial properties in the hands of a locally prominent noble family in Auvergne. The receipts are organized under five rubrics. The first consists of charges comprised of the fixed cash payment (*cens*), a fixed share of the harvest (*percières*), tithes, and a fee levied on persons acquiring a holding in the seigneurie. The second are the receipts from the lord’s reserve, which in this region consisted of pasture, waste and woodland; the third are the receipts from tolls and local monopolies, the fourth the receipts from holding court, and

the final class of ‘donations’, which were not income per se, but assets acquired in exchange for an annual *rente* payable to the donor.

Table 3
Structure of Seigniorial Revenues in Auvergne ca 1315
(percent)

	<i>Coteuges</i>	<i>Murat</i>	<i>Olliergues</i>
Charges on Land			
<i>Cens</i>	65.9	34.1	26.3
<i>Pericère^a</i>		6.9	
Tithes	3.8	9.7	12.8
<i>Investissons^b</i>			1.6
Réserve			
Leased meadow		1.7	0.3
Leased mountain pasture		16.8	
Sale of wood		6.3	5.7
Leases woodland pasture			0.4
Sale of livestock	4.55	1.7	2.5
Banalités			
<i>Taille</i>			15.8
Mill		7.6	4.4
Oven		2.7	
<i>Leyde^c</i>			5.7
Road tolls			0.1
<i>Police des moissons^d</i>			1.9
Justice			
Fines	3.0		4.0
Donations^e	22.7	10.9	18.8
Total Revenue Reported	66	237.5	680
	<i>(livres tournois)</i>		

^a A charge proportional to the harvest

^b Charge for vesting tenants in a holding.

^c Tax imposed on serfs subject to *mainmorte*

^d Fines for unauthorized entry to field being harvested. It was usually farmed out.

^e Receipt of a property or income stream, in exchange for an annuity to donor.

Source: Pierre Charbonnier, *Une autre France. La seigneurie rurale en Basse Auvergne du xiv^e au xvi^e siècle*. Clermont-Ferrand : Institut d'Études du Massif Central (1980), 357.

Every seigneurie was different, so one cannot draw any conclusions from the structure of revenue streams with respect to proportions emanating from any single source. The critical point is the inflexibility of income from *censives* and the dependence of fees on the state of the economy. Both were to experience significant declines after

1348. Before we turn to that decline, we must consider a final organisational feature of the *seigneurie*.

Just as *censives* held by peasants were subject to the seigneur's *droit éminent*, so seigneuries themselves were held subject to a superior property right held by a third person or persons. The institution of holding was the fief, which obligated the possessor of a seigneurie to perform a ceremony of investiture in the presence of the suzerain or overlord known as *foi* and *hommage*, at which time the property and all its revenues were listed in a procedure known as *aveu et dénombrement*, the purpose of which was to verify that none of the property held in fief had been alienated without the suzerain's knowledge.⁸⁵

The ceremony formally recognized the suzerain's superior title to the seigneurie. The financial implications of that title varied from fief to fief, but in principle, the suzerain of the fief-holder was entitled to the support of his 'vassal' in time of war, contributions for his ransom, the marriage of his eldest daughter, and the knighting of his eldest son. Unlike the seigneurial payments extracted from peasants as a condition of tenure, however, the fief was in Marc Bloch's words 'a property not granted against an obligation to pay something ... but against an obligation to do something.'⁸⁶ To the suzerain, the value of his right over the *seigneurie* consisted in fee received on the occasion of taking *foi et hommage* from the new owner, and in its possible escheat in the

⁸⁵ Fiefs were defined by the ceremony of *foi et hommage*, which had to be carried out upon each accession even when the *seigneurie* was the hereditary possession of its holder's family, and regardless of his rank. English kings held their French possessions in fief of the King of France, while both the Emperor and the French King held fiefs of each other on either side of the frontier separating the two polities. By the thirteenth century objects held in fief no longer consisted only in land, but comprehended income streams such as *rentes*, *cens*, tolls, and a variety of services. Henri Sée, *Les classes rurales et le régime dominiail en France au moyen âge*. Paris : Girard et Frères (1903), 561.

⁸⁶ Marc Bloch, *Feudal society* vol. 1. trans. L. A. Manyon. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1964), 167.

event its holder failed to produce an heir. Over and above the bundle of rights defining the *seigneurie*, then, lay another layer of feudal property rights defined on territories ranging in size from a simple domains to principalities. To make an inexact analogy, a fief was a holding company for seigneurial property, and like a holding company its constituent parts could be broken up and sold off, always remaining subject to *foi et hommage*. From an economic perspective, the extra layer of feudal property made a complex net of seigneurial property rights even more complex. Both classes of property were well protected in law, but rights were often difficult to determine and always costly to enforce. In some years, the huge estate of the La Trémoilles spent 10 percent of its gross revenue on legal expenses.⁸⁷ Though uncommon, this proportion was by no means unheard of. Introductory texts frequently depict them as interlocking or superimposed triangles; in practice seigneurial property was like the tangled straw and twigs of a bird's nest.

The Crises of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century

The Demographic Shock

It is impossible to determine from the extant sources exactly how many people were carried away by the first visitation of the bubonic plague in 1348 and 1349, which was followed by return engagements in 1361, 1369, 1372, 1382, 1390 and 1400.⁸⁸ Froissart's judgment that the plague of 1348 killed 'la tierce partie du monde' probably sets a lower bound for the period as a whole.⁸⁹ After 1400 the plague tended to remain confined to towns, where its outbreaks were multiplied by epidemics of flue and

⁸⁷ William A. Weary, 'La maison de la Trémoille pendant la Renaissance : une seigneurie agrandi,' in *La France de la fin du xv^e siècle. Renouveau et apogée*. Paris : CNRS (1985), 202.

⁸⁸ Dupâquier, *Histoire de la population française*, 325-29.

⁸⁹ *Chroniques de J. Froissart, t. 4*. Ed. Siméon Luce. Paris : Jules Renouard (1873), 100.

smallpox carried by the flood of refugees seeking safety from the bands of armed men that ravaged the countryside. We are best informed about the decline in urban population. That of Paris fell from slightly over 200,000 in 1330 to perhaps 145,000 in the 1420s and possibly as low as 100,000 by 1440.⁹⁰ Insulated from the main battlefields and protected by its strong walls and the Duke of Bourbon's neutrality, Lyon may have actually increased its population from 20,000 to 33,000, and Bordeaux, equally protected its English occupiers probably held steady through most of the period.⁹¹ Other cities were less fortunate. Toulouse fell from 30,000 in the early 1330s to 19,000 in 1405.⁹² Between 1300 and 1400 Montpellier declined from 35,000 to 17,000, neighboring Béziers from 16,000 to 4,000, Nîmes from 18,000 to 7,000.⁹³ The number of fiscal households in Albi fell 55 percent between 1346 and 1356, at Millau it fell 67 percent.⁹⁴ Things were no better in the north. In the Loire valley the populations of Angers and Tours dropped by more than half. In the industrial districts, the cloth town of Arras fell from 30,000 to 10,000; Saint-Omer 35 to 13; Ypres from 20,000 to 8,000; Troyes from 25 to 17,000. Reims declined from 18,000 in 1315 to 9,000 in 1422.⁹⁵ Not all the decline can be attributed to the great pandemics. As centres of trade and manufacturing, the prosperity and population of cities was sensitive to the state of markets that were being hammered not only by overall population decline, but also by internecine warfare.

⁹⁰ Jean Favier, *Paris au xv^e siècle, 1380 – 1500*. Paris (1974), 60-61.

⁹¹ Paul Bairoch, *La population des villes européennes: banque de données et analyse sommaire des résultats, 800-1850*. Geneva : Droz (1988)..

⁹² Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 323.

⁹³ Bairoch, *Population des villes*.

⁹⁴ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 371.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

The significance of the decline in urban population for agriculture stemmed from the shrinking market outlets for specialized farm produce which generated the cash required for seigniorial dues, taxes, and country purchases of iron, salt and other necessities, and goods like ribbons, manufactured cloth, and jewelry that were not so essential but provided employment for dozens of towns.⁹⁶ In the early fourteenth century, possibly 15 percent of France's population resided towns greater than 1,500 to 2,000, making France the absolutely, if not proportionally, most urbanized economy in Europe. The collapse of that economy to perhaps 7 or 8 percent meant declining cash receipts from peasants' sales of poultry, eggs, garden vegetables, and hay and grain that supplied the means of making the remittance of *cens* and other cash payments to seigniorial agents. The collapse of the cities was thus a major element in the crisis of seigneurial incomes. An important consequence was the contracting scope for large-scale farming in the regions where it had taken hold around 1300. As this was the most productive part of France's agriculture, it is plausible that average productivity declined as a result.

It is impossible to know how far the rural population declined. Fiscal and seigniorial archives have left an abundant record documenting the fall in the number of tenants and parishioners, but the desertion of marginal territories and the devastation of more fertile districts by disbanded men at arms and soldiers stationed in garrisons makes it difficult to generalize from punctual data. Historians have assembled samples large enough from a few regions to hazard crude conjectures about the size of localized

⁹⁶ A compilation of the provenance of textiles listed in brides' dowries registered in the remote and poor province of Quercy shows that they came from all the major producing centres of western Europe. Jean Lartigaut, *Les campagnes du Quercy après la Guerre de Cent Ans (vers 1440 – vers 1500)*. Toulouse : Publications de Toulouse-le-Mirail (1978), 502-503.

population decline. In Artois it fell 43 percent between 1300 and 1460; in western Normandy, affected by the resistance to the English Occupation it fell 70 percent. The decline in the Midi seems to have been inversely proportional to the productivity of the land. Population fell 46 percent along the coast, but only 33 to 36 percent in the eastern mountains and the high Alps. But the pattern is not universal. In the Rhone valley the decline was 50 percent; in the mountains it was closer to 60.⁹⁷ The worst immediate declines occurred where the effects of the epidemics were conjugated with the ravages of war. In the Limousin, a lawsuit over a major inheritance in the 1480s citing real, as opposed to virtual *feux*, suggests a decline on the order of 30 percent from the *État* of 1328.⁹⁸ Since the region was then in recovery, the decline to 1450 would have been significantly greater. The geography of population decline was complex. It most severely affected marginal regions burdened with high seigniorial charges, which were emptied by emigration. Wars and brigandage affected disconnected blots of territory. The decline, then, cannot be easily analyzed in the aggregate ratios of men to agricultural territory. At the national level that ratio fell dramatically, but the decline varied in space and within individual regions in time.

War

In 1300 the core territory of France had experienced nearly two centuries of relative peace. The steady growth of royal power under the Capetians curtailed, though it did not entirely eliminate, the localized destructions from private war, and the only significant military actions were on the kingdom's periphery. France was thus

⁹⁷ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 376.

⁹⁸ Tricard, *Campagnes limousines*, 91-96.

unprepared for the storm that descended on the most prosperous parts of the kingdom in the early 1340s and lasted with unsatisfactory truces to the 1470s. Only a small part of the damage stemmed from direct military actions, although in the long years of peace fortifications situated beyond the shifting boundary between the Plantagenet fiefdoms and the royal domain had been permitted to fall into disrepair, leaving the countryside defenseless against English armies raiding from one end of France to the other in pointless but destructive *chevauchées*.⁹⁹ The greater damage was caused by the garrisons from both sides (and from parties opposed to the King) that periodically emerged from their fortresses to ravage the countryside. Even more devastating were the companies of men-at-arms hailing from all parts of Europe who raided and ransomed rural districts and small towns throughout France in the periods of truce when the official armies were disbanded. Contemporary doctrine with respect to the laws of war held that property and persons living in enemy territory were fair game.¹⁰⁰ After Poitiers, the future Charles V authorized royal garrisons to collect taxes directly from the peasantry, effectively legalizing extortion.¹⁰¹ Local authorities, with the connivance of rulers on both sides of the conflict thus regularized the extortion by assigning tax revenues to bands stationed in garrisons and fortresses situated in districts of contested sovereignty.¹⁰² The contracts,

⁹⁹ Examples here Black Prince from Bordeaux to Béziers and Narbonne; raid from Calais to Bordeaux.

¹⁰⁰ 'But if on both sides war is decided upon and begun by the Councils of the two kings, the soldiery may take spoil from the kingdom at will, and make war freely; and if sometimes the humble and innocent suffer harm and lose their goods, it cannot be otherwise.' Honoré Bouvet, *The Tree of Battles* (1387), Part IV, chapter 58. Cited in Wright, *Knights and peasants. The Hundred Years War in the French countryside*. Woodbridge (UK): Boydell Press (1998), 1.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Wright, *Knights and peasants*, 39-40. Garrisons levied protection money called *patis* raised as collective ransom from groups of parishes. To soldiers it was a private property like any other regular income stream, that could be sold, inherited, and litigated in court. In 1438 the États des Deux Auvergnés accorded a tax of 19,886 *livres* to reimburse the province's chief tax collector (*receveur*) for protection money paid to the notorious Spanish 'routier' Rodrigo de Villandando 'afin que à leur retour ils ne passent par ledit pays d'Auvergne.' Charbonnier, *Une autre France*, 508-509.

¹⁰² Philippe Contamine, 'Lever l'impôt en terre de guerre. Rançons, souffrances de guerre, dans la France des xiv^e et xv^e siècles,' in *L'impôt au moyen âge. L'impôt public et le prélèvement seigneurial fin xi^e-*

variously known as *appatis*, *patis*, *rançon*, and *bullete*, which was a safe-conduct pass that allowed merchants and peasants freely to move within a circumscribed jurisdiction, freed local districts from devastation for brief periods of time. The rates of extortion were high, and uncontrolled by royal authorities. Failure to pay resulted in the bands pillaging the countryside and unfortified towns in reprisal.

The nadir was reached in the first four decades of the fifteen century in the civil war between the Burgundians, seconded by the English, and the Orléanistes or ‘Gascons’ gathered around the Dauphin, subsequently King Charles VII, holed up in Bourges. Medieval war knew no ‘front lines.’ Both sides held strongholds throughout northern France from which garrisons sortied to attack passing supply trains, merchants, and peasants. Between 1420 and 1440 the region surrounding Paris was thus subjected to raids, reprisals, and scorched earth warfare between the enemies and supporters of the French King. As would occur in the Thirty Years War two centuries later, the devastation was mainly due to inadequate logistical supply and irregularly paid troops. Armies could not long remain in the field, which meant that a walled city or fortress had only to hold out for a few months to a half year to lift a siege, during which time the besieging troops requisitioned supplies from the surrounding countryside. To supply an army of 10,000 men was tantamount to feeding a medium-sized town in motion. In its march through the Cambrésis in 1339 foragers for Edward III’s army destroyed a belt of territory 40 to 50 kilometres wide.¹⁰³ The mass of professional soldiery were recruited and paid by captains under contract to the Crown. When their services were no longer

début xvi^e siècle. 1. Le droit d'imposer. Paris : Comité pour l'Histoire Économique et Financière de la France (2002), 11-39.

¹⁰³ Wright, *Knights and peasants*, 69

needed, they settled on the country like a plague of locusts, moving from one district to another as consumed supplies.¹⁰⁴ It was not until the 1440s that the French monarchy ‘nationalized’ the military by establishing a permanent army paid from taxes affected to that purpose. One of its first tasks was to suppress the private military companies. At the local level, the cost of defence shows in the reconstructed castles and strengthened fortifications needed to withstand long sieges and artillery bombardment.¹⁰⁵

The destruction is well-documented. In 1346 the chronicler Jean de Venette reported seeing smoke from burning villages on the outskirts of Paris that had been invested by English troops fresh from their victory at Crécy.¹⁰⁶ Fourteen years later, Petrarch lamented the ‘weed-infested fields’ that everywhere marked the ‘melancholy vestige of the English passage.’¹⁰⁷ A century later Thomas Basin gave an eye-witness account of utter desolation stretching from the margins of Picardy and Champagne to the Loire, ‘the peasants having been killed off or fled, and apart from a few rare corners the fields left untilled for years on end.’¹⁰⁸ We need not, however, rely on the chroniclers for documentation of the devastations visited on the countryside by brigands and warring armies. High church officials and religious establishments anxious to restore cash flow undertook systematic surveys of the state of their *seigneuries*. Among the fullest

¹⁰⁴ ‘When Provisions, Fuel and Horse-meat fell short in one village, they marched away full-speed to the next; wasting it in like manner.’ Sir John Fortescue, *De laudibus legum Angliae*. A new translation. London (1775), 122. As Captain of Meaux and Governor of the Brie under Bedford’s regency, Fortescue witnessed some of the worst destructions.

¹⁰⁵ Isabelle Guérin, *La vie rurale en Sologne au xiv^e et xv^e siècles*. Paris : S.E.V.P.E.N. (1960), 166-167.

¹⁰⁶ Guy Fourquin, *Les campagnes parisiennes à la fin du moyen âge*. Paris : PUF (1964), 226.

¹⁰⁷ *Letters from Petrarch*. Trans. Morris Bishop. Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1966), 196.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Nous-mêmes avons vu les vastes plaines de la Champagne, de la Beauce, de la Brie, du Gâtinais, du pays de Chartres, du pays de Dreux, du Maine et du Perche, du Vexin, tant français que normand, du Beauvais, du pays de Caux, depuis la Seine jusque vers Amiens et Abbeville, du pays de Senlis, du Soissonnais et du Valois jusqu’à Laon, et au-delà du côté du Hainaut, absolument désertes, incultes, abandonnées, vides d’habitants, couvertes de broussailles et de ronces, ou bien dans la plupart des régions qui produisent les arbres les plus drus, ceux-là pousser en épaisses forêts.’ Thomas Basin, *Histoire de Charles VII*, ed. Charles Samarin. Vol. 1, pp. 85-89. cited in Dupâquier, *Histoire population française*, 36.

accounts are the reports produced in 1456 by visitors sent by the Hospitalers of Saint-Jean de Jérusalem in Rhodes to survey properties held by the Grand Priory of France, which had inherited the vast holdings of the Templars in the Île de France and Normandy.¹⁰⁹ Their report confirms Basin's account. Between 22 and 75 percent of the land had gone out of cultivation. Of the 150 *feux* in the Norman *commanderie* of Valcanville, only 95 still paid *cens*. The rural mansions where the commanders received *cens* and other dues lay in ruins, the buildings decrepit and usually lacking roofs. As trustees for the Hospital, the commanders (seigniors) were responsible for maintaining the properties out of their own funds, a risky investment in times of political instability.¹¹⁰ The wars raised the cost of capital. In Paris *rentes* that could be had for six to eight percent in the thirteenth century paid 16 2/3 percent in the 1430s and 1440s, when they could be had at all.¹¹¹ While plague may have removed upwards of one-third of the population in a century, the most serious and persisting damage to France's agriculture stemmed from the misfortunes of war and the collapse of central government.

Monetary disturbances and the devaluation of the cens

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century France experienced significant episodes of monetary devaluation provoked by the King's need to secure revenue at times of acute

¹⁰⁹ Isabelle de Botton and Marie Offredo-Sarrot, 'Ruines et reconstruction agraire dans les commanderies du Grand Prieuré de France,' in *La reconstruction après la Guerre de Cent Ans. Actes du 104^e national des sociétés savantes. Bordeaux, 1980*. Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale (1981), 79-122.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹¹ Jean Favier, 'Une ville entre deux vocations : la place d'affaires de Paris au xv^e siècle,' *Annales, ESC* 4 (1973), 1241. This was the same rate as that charged for arguably riskier loans of sheep, which were highly vulnerable to epizootic losses, on contemporary share contracts. Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 703.

political and military stress.¹¹² The source of the financial difficulties that led to the manipulation of the currency was the insufficiency of the royal revenue base. The King's own properties had not supported the cost of the royal government since the early thirteenth century, and although the King had the right to demand (and subjects the obligation to supply) financial aid in time of war when the Kingdom was under attack, he had to deal with individual towns, interest groups, and provinces to obtain a time-limited right to collect taxes or 'contributions', which in the case of prelates and the nobility were described as voluntary 'gifts.'¹¹³ At the beginning of the fourteenth century, the King did not yet possess an unchallenged sovereign right to tax subjects on a regular basis. He did, however, possess the sovereign right to mint coins and to declare their value in terms of the unit of account. From the eleventh to the late thirteenth century, the monetary regime was stable. The first major debasement occurred in 1296, when Philippe IV devalued the *livre tournois* by 25 percent to finance his military operations in Flanders. On the morrow of the French defeat at Courtrai in 1303, he devalued the currency another 50 percent. Because it was an emergency measure undertaken to quickly augment the profit from minting new coins, devaluation most commonly occurred in wartime. The two worst episodes were 1337-1360, marked by the French defeats at Crécy and Poitiers, and 1417-1436, marked by the Anglo-Burgundian ascendancy that resulted in the English occupation of most of northern France. Between 1337 and 1342 the *livre* lost 80 percent

¹¹² Harry A. Miskimin, *Money, prices and foreign exchange in fourteenth-century France*. New Haven: Yale Press (1963); *Money and power in fifteenth-century France*. New Haven: Yale (1984).

¹¹³ Albert Rigaudière, *Les origines de l'impôt sur la fortune*, in *L'impôt au moyen âge. I. Le droit d'imposer*, 227-287. For a late example, see 'La noblesse et la rançon de François I^{er}', *Ibid.* 75-96.

of its value. Restored in 1343, it was devalued once again by 98 percent between 1348 and 1360.¹¹⁴ Between 1417 and 1421 it lost another 94 percent.¹¹⁵

The agricultural significance of the monetary mutations of the later Middle Ages lies in their effect on the real value of fixed payments, of which the most important from the standpoint of seigniorial income was the *cens*. By the end of the fifteenth century, money payments fixed before 1300 had lost three-quarters of their real value.¹¹⁶ The same is true of cash annuities (*rentes*) settled on landed property in the balmy days preceding the crisis. Fully protected by law, the devaluation of these fixed monetary charges represented a significant redistribution of income from lords and lenders to the peasantry. The long-term rate of diminution in the purchasing power of *cens* and *rentes* was nevertheless very low, a little less than 0.3 percent per year.¹¹⁷ Moreover, lenders and lords adjusted to episodes of high devaluation. In the early 1340s, lenders of livestock on a share contract known as *bail à cheptel* were demanding that the value of animals to be shared among the parties at the end of the lease be valued in ‘money of 1338.’¹¹⁸ For their parts, on land they leased, lords reduced the length of the term and increasingly specified payment in kind. A similar demonetization occurred with respect to bequests.¹¹⁹ It is difficult to assess the full effect of monetary devaluation on agricultural income. Inflation was eroding the *cens* from the second quarter of the

¹¹⁴ John Day, “‘Crise du féodalisme” et conjoncture des prix à la fin du moyen âge,’ *Annales, ESC* 34 (1979), 305-318.

¹¹⁵ Miskimin, *Money and power*, 58.

¹¹⁶ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xii^e au xv^e siècle*, 385.

¹¹⁷ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xii^e au xv^e siècle*, 385.

¹¹⁸ Michel Le Mené, ‘Métayage et bail à cheptel dans l’ouest de la France (1335-1342),’ in Elisabeth Mornet, ed., *Campagnes médiévales. L’homme et son espace. Études offertes à Robert Fossier*. Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne (1995), 700. Because of their high price and heterogeneity, the increase in cattle shared by lessor and lessee was calculated in money rather than by head.

¹¹⁹ Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *Vivre et mourir en Lyonnais à la fin du moyen âge*. Paris : Ed. du CNRS (1981), 37.

thirteenth century. On the other hand, that part of seigneurial income resulting from proportional taxes on the product of the land would have been unaffected by it.

Taxes

The later middle ages marks the establishment of permanent royal taxes in France, of which the most important forms were the *taille*, levied on agricultural wealth, and *aides* or sales taxes collected on goods in trade at the town gates. Until the 1440s, such taxes were treated as 'extraordinary' levies intended to cover the immediate expense of military operations to protect the realm, which everyone accepted was the King's responsibility. To obtain the funds to raise and provision an army and to fortify and garrison towns and castles, the King had to negotiate with his subjects, and although he could make demands, he usually had to settle for less than he asked for. The consultation could take the form of negotiations with individual towns, which were the main locus of cash holdings in medieval society, and in more general consultations known as *États*, which gathered in separate bodies the three orders of clerics, nobles, and commoners, each of which deliberated its individual contribution to the King's finances. The historical evolution of the *États* belongs to French constitutional history.¹²⁰ Between 1330 and 1450, a succession of military defeats resulting in ransoms to be paid, armies to be raised, fortifications to be strengthened, and payments to buy off marauding bands of soldiers led to French public's acquiescence in royal taxation to support a permanent army as the lesser of the many evils that had descended on the kingdom during its time of troubles. By the 1440s the taxes had ceased to be 'extraordinary,' as the King assumed the sole authority to determine what counted as an 'emergency' for the purpose of raising

¹²⁰ The most careful study is John Bell Henneman, *Royal taxation in fourteenth-century France*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society (1976).

them.¹²¹ More than two thirds of the revenue went in principle to paying a standing army of ten to twelve thousand men at arms. The remainder went to gratify the King's supporters and appease his potential enemies with pensions and places.¹²²

The expansion of direct royal taxation had two effects on the recipients of agricultural income. The first endangered seigniorial claims on the small disposable surpluses generated by the peasantry. As we have seen, the seigniorial system originated in taxes, and seigneurs had every interest in protecting the fiscal capacity of 'their' peasants.¹²³ For his part, the King used every means at his disposal to limit taxation of 'his' subjects by princes and nobles.¹²⁴ In 1346 King John II ordered castellans oppressing peasants of a *seigneurie* held by the royal Abbey of Solignac to cease taxing 'his' peasants.¹²⁵ The expansion of royal taxation is thus one element of the 'crisis' in seigniorial income. As to the peasants, their burdens increased, but in return they benefitted from greater internal peace. By the fifteenth century, most seigniorial taxes had been commuted to an annual cash payment or folded into the *cens*. The *tailables* and *mainmortables* who were subject to arbitrary tallage were largely gone by 1450. Many of them were too poor to be taxed, while others bought out their degrading status

¹²¹ Martin Wolfe, *The fiscal system of Renaissance France*. New Haven: Yale University Press (1972), chapters 1 and 2.

¹²² Peter S. Lewis, 'Les pensionnaires de Louis XI,' in *La France de la fin du xv^e siècle*, 167-181.

¹²³ When the Archbishopric of Paris learned that the *élus* (royal tax assessors for the *taille*) intended to levy a heavy tax on subjects of its *seigneurie* of Chatenay, it engaged the services of Jacques Juvenal des Ursins to negotiate a lower rate. A heavy hitter in his own right, one of his brothers was the king's Chamberlain and the other the king's advisor and famous political theorist. Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 408.

¹²⁴ As suzerain the king could prohibit seigniorial tallage of subjects of royal *seigneuries* and *seigneuries* possessed by religious establishments he controlled. Gérard Sivéry, *Saint Louis et son siècle*. Paris: Taillandier (1983), 275.

¹²⁵ Jean Tricard, *Les campagnes limousines du xiv^e au au xvi^e siècle*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne (1996), 16.

or simply escaped the condition by emigrating.¹²⁶ The second effect was paradoxically to create new sources of income for the class of persons who ordinarily held seigneuries. At the end of the fifteenth century, royal taxes may have taken three percent of GDP.¹²⁷ A little more than half went to support the army and other military expenditures. The rest was channelled to an increasing number of royal officials, pensions, and great officers of the state. For most *seigneurs* the reconstruction at the end of the Hundred Years War did not soon restore their pre-war level of income. The great fortunes were now earned in serving the King.

The Adjustments to the Crisis

Prices and Output

The trend in grain prices in France was similar to that in other parts of late medieval Europe. Between 1300 and the 1370s they tended to rise, in the first decades under the influence of a growing population, and after 1350 as the result of the sudden rise in the per capita money supply.¹²⁸ The next forty years experienced falling prices followed by a spotty reflation from 1410 to 1440. Between 1440 and 1470 prices plummeted again under the impact of a diminishing stock of bullion, and then recovered after 1470 as population began to rise again. Livestock prices followed the same general trends, but because the amplitude of their movement was less, their price relative to the price of grain moved inversely to absolute grain prices. The result was that as elsewhere

¹²⁶ Guérin, *Vie rurale en Sologne*, 203-204.

¹²⁷ Henri Dubois, 'Le commerce de France au temps de Louis XI, in *La France de la fin du xv^e siècle*, 18-19.

¹²⁸ Ron Findlay and Mats Lundahl, 'Towards a factor proportions approach to economic history: population, precious metals and prices from the Black Death to the Price Revolution,' in Ronald Findlay, Lars Jonung and Mats Lundahl, eds., *Bertil Ohlin. A centennial celebration*. Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press (2002), 495-528.

in Europe, the price of livestock products relative to cereals rose between 1370 and 1470.¹²⁹ The movement in nominal wages follows the general trend, slowly increasing in the first half of the century, rapidly in the two decades following the Plague, stable to the 1410s, and rising again to the 1460s. From the 1470s wages fell back slowly but steadily. As in most pre-industrial nominal wage series, the chronology displays long periods of stability punctuated by short episodes of change, generally caused by monetary shocks, but sometimes responding to the great visitations of plague. The overall consequence was a rise in the real cost of labour down to the 1460s. It would be imprudent to draw any conclusions concerning the standard of living of working people, as so few supported themselves exclusively by wage labour. A more revealing source of evidence is the assessments for the royal *taille*, which in principle could reveal the proportion of rural people whose income fell below the exemption level.

Agricultural production undoubtedly declined. As market demand for all kinds of produce contracted and wages rose under the impact of plague and warfare, the French agricultural economy drew in its horns. The most productive farms contracted in size and reduced the expenditures that had sustained high yields. Even a considerable increase in per capita consumption of foodstuffs, for which the evidence is decidedly mixed, could not compensate for the declining number of consumers. Between the 1410s and the 1460s yields in the parish of Onnaing near the Belgian border fell from 21 to 15 hectolitres per hectare.¹³⁰ At Vaulerent, the cultivated area declined 15 percent between 1315 and 1346 and rents by 90 percent.¹³¹ The decline in demand was most severe for producers specializing for particular markets, such as the grain-producing farms in the Île

¹²⁹ Carpentier and Le Mené, *La France du xi^e au xv^e siècle*, 389-397.

¹³⁰ Morineau, *Les tâques d'Onnaing*, 128.

¹³¹ Higounet, *Vaulerent*, 59.

de France and Artois and the wine-growing districts of Bordeaux, Paris, Burgundy and the West. But it also affected more remote regions specializing in more tradable products. We do not know by how much meat production fell in the high pastures of Auvergne, but the rent of those pastures declined 60 percent between 1315\25 and 1410.¹³² By contrast, outside districts disturbed by war, productivity on smaller subsistence holdings, which was already low, probably remained stable.

The movement in tithes gives the best (though imperfect) picture of the magnitude of the decline. In the Cambrésis, farms selling to towns in the Low Countries saw wheat output decline by 45 percent between 1320 and 1460, and oats by 65 percent.¹³³ The Abbey of Notre-Dame-des-Prés in Douai took an average of 210 *muids* of tithe grain in the 1320s, but only 130 to 140 in the 1370s.¹³⁴ Receipts of the Abbeys of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris show even greater declines as a result of near continuous warfare in the Île de France. An inventory undertaken in 1373 of estates in Périgord possessed by the Order of Saint Jean de Jérusalem revealed an 87 percent decline in rents from before the plague.¹³⁵ In Anjou the tithes and rent data indicate a decline of 30 percent in overall wheat production between 1350/80 and the early fifteenth century and another 15 percent in the troubled period between 1420 and 1435.¹³⁶ An

¹³² Charbonnier, *Une autre Franc*, 291.

¹³³ Hugues Neveux, *Vie et déclin d'une structure économique. Les grains du Cambrésis fin du xiv^e-début du xv^{ie} siècle*. Paris : Mouton (1980), 61.

¹³⁴ Carpentier and Le Mené, *Op. cit.*, 419.

¹³⁵ Arlette Higounet-Nadal, *Histoire du Périgord*. Toulouse : Privat (1983), 144.

¹³⁶ Michel Le Mené, 'La conjoncture économique angevine sous le règne de Louis IX,' in *La France de la fin du xv^e siècle*, 52.

inquest carried out for the Pope between 1387 and 1395 revealed that a quarter of the benefices in the Province were of ‘nulle valeur’.¹³⁷

Wine production fell off sharply, and its composition shifted towards lower quality wines. In the Paris region, wines that had been the envy of Europe in the thirteenth century, such as the glorious white of Argenteuil which was described as ‘clers comme l’erme d’euil’ (clear like a tear in the eye) were replaced by prolific ‘mauvais gamay’ grapes, better suited to an impoverished clientele.¹³⁸ Specialized production in other parts of France also contracted. The collapsing market for wines that travelled, due in part to falling population and more importantly to the urban depression, made it impossible for growers to specialize in such costly crops. The finer *cepages* survived in vineyards kept by townsmen and ecclesiastics for their own consumption, and as long as the English occupied Bordeaux, wine export its *banlieu* continued unabated. But the overall picture is one of depression, which most strongly affected the marginal vineyards for which transport cost cut most deeply into the net price.

Despite the rise in the relative price of animal products, the livestock sector also contracted. Wars were especially damaging, as troops and marauding bands seized cattle and sheep for their own consumption. The increasing risks of animal husbandry, translated into higher interest rates on loans of livestock, which reached 17 to 18 percent in the early fifteenth century, discouraging intensive livestock husbandry. Sir John Fortescue, whose first-hand account may be somewhat biased an intention to blacken the French Constitution, claimed that ‘they do not eat flesh except it be the fat of bacon, and

¹³⁷ Lartigaut, *Les campagnes de Quercy*, 40.

¹³⁸ Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 82.

that in very small Quantities with which they make a soup.¹³⁹ Whereas in central Europe meat consumption per head reached 70 kg per head, the few observations we have from France suggest something more like 30 to 40, only slightly more than in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴⁰ There were nevertheless some signs of adjustment to the changing supply prices of land and labour. The stock of animals nevertheless declined less than the output of cereals and responded more rapidly to the recovery in the demand for wool after 1390. In the Midi the development after 1420 of a large transhumant sheep sector based in the lowlands of Provence raised the price of highland pasture in the Alps. Migratory livestock husbandry expanded everywhere in the south after 1450, in response to growing demand for wool in the major textile sectors of Italy and the North, and the recovery of local textile centers. This adjustment was facilitated by the flow of capital from small towns in the form of the *bail à cheptel*, in which the lender put out animals for a half share of the product and the growth in value. In the fifteenth century this was a major source of finance for farmers seeking to reconstitute their stock of draft and farm animals.¹⁴¹

The economic conjuncture in rural France was similar to that in other parts of Europe subject to the plague and general commercial contraction of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The responses to the broad price changes are in line with what one expects from economizing, not say a profit-maximizing producers. The response, however, cannot be reduced to or simulated by a simple general equilibrium exercise that

¹³⁹ 'Of other types of meat they do not so much as taste, unless it be the Inwards and Offals of Sheep and Bullocks, and the like, which are killed for the better sort of People, and the Merchants..... As for their Poultry, the Soldiers consume them, so that scarce the eggs, slight as they are; are indulged them by way of a Dainty.' Fortescue, *De laudibus legum Anglaie*, 126.

¹⁴⁰ Carpentier and Le Mené, *Op. cit.* 426.

¹⁴¹ Le Mené, 'Bail à cheptel'; Jean Tricard, 'Livres de raison et présence de la bourgeoisie dans les campagnes limousines (xiv^e – xv^e siècles),' in Mornet, ed., *Campagnes médiévales*, 709-22.

begins from a shock to the ratio of land to labour. The greater part of agricultural production continued to be produced on farms that yielded at best a small surplus consumed locally. Larger more specialized operations were affected as much by the collapse of external markets as by rising labour costs. The problem was collapsing demand, not collapsing supply. The greater mobility of animals and the transportability of hides and wool supported to extensive grazing in districts where the loss of population released land for pasture.¹⁴² But the main impact of the economic crisis lay elsewhere, in the abandonment of farms, the spread of brush and forest, and the contraction of agricultural income which by virtue of the institutional arrangements for its distribution, at first fell disproportionately on the seigniorial class, whose responses conditioned the nature of the recovery.

Seigneurial Crisis and Recovery

The crisis of the seigneurie was first and foremost a crisis of falling incomes and rising expenses. The broad outlines of the problem are clear enough. Declining population led to the abandonment of holdings that paid *cens* and other fees from which the lords derived the bulk of their income. Collapsing urban and foreign demand for specialized agricultural produce reduced the income from property held in demesne. On land farmed in *métayage* the share going to the lord declined. Shares that before 1348 were a quarter or a half of the crop declined to an eighth or a sixth. The chapter of Sainte-Radegonde had to reduce shares of *métayages* at Vouillé and Champigny-le-Sec

¹⁴² In fifteenth-century Auvergne the value of hides made up one-third the price of a slaughtered animal, which testifies to their transportability. In the eighteenth century, when the long-distance meat market was more developed, that share had fallen to a tenth. Charbonnier, *Une autre France*, 181..

from an already low rate of a sixth to one-ninth.¹⁴³ Rents from demesnes leased by the Abbey of Saint-Denis fell from 17,916 *livres* in 1342-43 to 6,994 *livres* in 1374-75.¹⁴⁴ They were to fall even further before the troubles finally ended in the 1440s.

One of the most prominent elements of the agricultural crisis was massive abandonment of peasant holdings. Given the predominance of small holders in the countryside, the decline in population could hardly yield a different outcome. The geography of that abandonment, however, was uneven. As noted above, the fixity of charges on *censives* and the relatively high *terrages* on land taken in at the peak of the medieval expansion in the thirteenth century meant that the marginal territories were among the first to be vacated when the conjuncture turned negative. That emptying out of marginal land was made even more attractive by the depopulation by the devastation in more fertile territories by brigands and armed men attracted to them by their greater potential for extortion. The results were tragic. In the Hurepoix southwest of Paris, the village of Chateaufort in 1482 had only six buildings meriting the term *maison*. Seven others still had their foundations, but the 45 remaining lots were empty.¹⁴⁵ Untilled fields and uncared for meadow reverted to waste, ‘tout occupés et remplis de bois, buissons, espices, et tout inculte.’¹⁴⁶ In the districts especially subject to ‘taxation’ by men-at-arms, seigniorial barns and farm buildings were pillaged repeatedly and systematically, making large-scale operations impossible until they were repaired.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Le Mené, ‘Redevances à part de fruits’, 23.

¹⁴⁴ Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 265.

¹⁴⁵ Bézard, *Vie rurale dans le sud du bassin Parisien*, 49.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁴⁷ Isabelle de Botton and Marie Offredo-Sarrot, ‘Ruines et reconstruction agraire dans les commanderies du Grand Prieuré de France,’ in *La reconstruction après La Guerre de Cent Ans. Actes du 104^e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes. Bordeaux, 1980*. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale (1981), 79-122.

Declining rents and seigniorial fees had a dramatic effect on seigniorial revenues. The losses were most severe on small *seigneuries* that had been created as fiefs for military service. Their income from *cens*, *banalités*, and the exercise of justice and police powers were modest and often non-existent, making them dependent on the sinking demesne revenues.¹⁴⁸ In the Paris region, the majority of *seigneuries* held in fief of the Abbey of Saint-Denis in the early fourteenth century were no more than large houses situated in farming villages, whence they drew their revenues.¹⁴⁹ The *seigneurie* held by Adam de Mitry is a good example. It consisted of a ‘maison’ a *réserve* of 6 arpents (3 hectares), and a cash income of 5 sous plus six *setiers* (9.4 hectolitres) of wheat, which would not quite feed a family of four.¹⁵⁰ The extent of such lordships can be inferred from their distribution in western mounts of Auvergne, where the average *seigneurie* covered 16.5 square kilometers, or a circular space of radius 2.3 kilometers.¹⁵¹ Their income rarely exceeded 100 *livres*, which was only four to five times that from a typical peasant holding.¹⁵² In many cases it was much less. In the depths of the fifteenth-century depression, many *seigneuries* in Sologne yielded only 20 *livres*.¹⁵³

While such incomes would more than cover the living costs of substantial peasants, and in the higher ranges that of prosperous townsmen, they were generally insufficient to cover the expenses entailed by the requirement that *seigneurs* live nobly, with its expenses of armor, horses, and armed retainers for military service as a condition of holding the fief, and the need to maintain a substantial household capable of providing

¹⁴⁸ Guérin, *Vie rurale en Sologne*, 170-72.

¹⁴⁹ Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*, 138.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 139.

¹⁵¹ Charbonnier, *Une autre France*, 353.

¹⁵² André Leguai, *Histoire du Bourbonnais*. Paris : Presses Universitaires Françaises (1974), 33.

¹⁵³ Guérin, *Vie rurale en Sologne*, 170.

hospitality to guests and social peers. It even included the expenses of the final parade in funeral expenses and masses for salvation after death.¹⁵⁴ Court cases were expensive and plentiful when an estate was divided among several heirs the will contested. It was also expensive to defend the lord's rights of *seigneurie*. In the late fifteenth century, Louis de la Trémoille, admittedly a vigorous prosecutor of his rights, spent over 10 percent of his annual revenues in legal expenses.¹⁵⁵ Ransoms were a major expense during the wars and intervening times of trouble. If the lord held a stronghold, he incurred expenses to fortify it against the new weapons of artillery, and damaged buildings had to be rebuilt. Professional soldiering might earn an occasional wage, but irregular payment and periodic lay-offs left many seigneurs with no other recourse than to mortgage or sell off their property. The turnover rate of the smaller *seigneuries* could be high. The lordship of Puynormand, which was far from insignificant, passed through the hands of six families between 1250 and 1350, and in the next century split into several smaller *seigneuries*.¹⁵⁶ In the short run few of these properties passed into the hands of the urban bourgeoisie, who typically restricted purchases to more commercially viable vineyards and country residents in the vicinity. Lyon was an exception, owing to its explosive growth as a commercial and banking center after 1450. But in the greater part of France, prosperous tradesmen followed the counsel of Étienne Benoist, a merchant in a small town in the Limousin, who advised avoiding the purchase of land not required for personal supply,

¹⁵⁴ The Seigneur de Grailly, Captal de Buch allocated funds for 50,000 masses to be said on his behalf. Boutruche, *Crise d'une société*. 276. On the reasons for these expenditures, see Jean Favier, *François Villon*. Paris: Fayard (1982), 67-82.

¹⁵⁵ William A. Weary, 'La maison de la Trémoille pendant la Renaissance : une seigneurie agrandie,' in *La France de la fin du xv^e siècle*, 202.

¹⁵⁶ Boutruchye, *Crise d'une société*, 239-240.

and to have as little to do as possible with *seigneurs*, nobles, churchmen, and great princes.¹⁵⁷

The troubled state of seignorial incomes has a bearing on the measures undertaken to restore the agricultural economy during and after the disasters of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Except for a handful of well-capitalized tenants in the Paris region, many of whom suffered huge losses during the civil war between the Burgundians and the Orleanists, the peasantry had few resources other than labour to undertake the arduous task of bringing brush-filled fields back into production. Lords of the smaller *seigneuries* were in hardly better shape to finance reconstruction. We are naturally best informed about the efforts undertaken by the ecclesiastical lordships and certain noble fiefs whose records have survived in greater number than the thousands of small *seigneuries* of which little is known but their name. They often had access to credit from an embryonic banking system, while their great wealth provided a cushion against declining revenues.

The administration of the vast holdings in northern France inherited from the Templar estates by the Grand Prieuré de France provide an instance of the measures taken to restore the damage.¹⁵⁸ The Prieuré administered the properties from Paris for the Hospitaliers de Saint-Jean-de-Jérusalem (Knights of Rhodes, subsequently Knights of Malta), headquartered in Rhodes to whom it remitted the income from the order's commanderies (*seigneuries*). In 1456 and 1495 the Knights at Rhodes sent visitors to

¹⁵⁷ Jean Tricard, 'Livres de raison et présence de la bourgeoisie dans les campagnes limousines (xiv^e – xv^e siècle,' in Elisabeth Mornet, ed., *Campagnes médiévales. L'homme et son espace. Études offertes à Robert Fossier*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne (1995), 709-22. The notarial records indicate that their investments were concentrated in their businesses and suburban property. Tricard, *Campagnes limousines*, 118-119.

¹⁵⁸ Botton and Offredo-Sarrat, 'Ruines et reconstructions agraire.'

inspect the reconstruction, and to see that it be carried out as quickly and cheaply as possible. As temporary holders in fief, the commanders were supposed to restore them at their own expense, but unless they possessed a personal fortune and were willing to risk it, the investments were not undertaken. For their part, their superiors in Paris and the major towns of the region seem to have dedicated their revenues to sumptuous lodgings, and were expected to remit the excess to Rhodes. By default, reconstruction had to take the form of granting rebates of rent and *cens* to farmers prepared to restore the land and buildings. The contract between the Commanderie of Reims and Jean Culin is typical. In exchange for the concession of *censives*, farms, and arable, Culin was to restore the buildings within four years and bring 10 arpents of land back into cultivation within ten years of signing the lease.¹⁵⁹ Similar contracts can be found in the archives of the great Parisian ecclesiastical establishments.¹⁶⁰ Once the properties were restored, the rent was raised to reflect its true value. Since the reduction in effect subsidized agricultural investment, the rise in rent after 1450 does not unambiguously track rising land scarcity.

To attract settlers the seigneurs often had to offer longer leases. This usually meant six to twelve years, but could extend to several dozen years on leases for two or lives. Long leases, however, were dangerous, as the terms were sufficiently similar to *censive* tenure that tenants came to regard the holdings as their own property, going to far as to divide them among their heirs and even sell them to third parties. Although the lord's interest was protected at law, such protection was costly. It was simpler to keep

¹⁵⁹ Jehan Culin moyennant le rendage pour les mesures et censives de 5 sols et 60 sols pour les terres et en outre a la charge de faire réédifier maisons de deux travées d'estable dedans quatre ans et de dessayer mettre en culture dix arpents en dedans 6 ans.' Bottin and Offredo-Sarrat, *op.cit.*, 96.

¹⁶⁰ Bézard, *Vie rurale* ; Fourquin, *Campagnes parisiennes*.

leases short and discourage families from establishing offspring on the property.¹⁶¹ Yet, for all their precautions, however, by the end of the sixteenth century the great farms leased from ecclesiastical seigniors in the plain of France were beginning to be virtual fiefs held by rising tenant farmers who placed their growing fortune not in land, but in acquiring the leases of new farms for their offspring and investing them in the church. By the mid-eighteenth century, these farmers ranked among the wealthiest commoner families in France.¹⁶²

By far the greater part of France's cultivable land, however, was given out on *censive*. As noted above, charges on these properties were fixed, a situation that protected peasants in times of rising land scarcity, but injured them in periods of land abundance. From the perspective of *seigneurs*, abandoned *censive* land earned no *cens* and *terrages*, and empty villages and parishes yielded no monopoly fees and court costs. Their overriding goal was therefore to resettle the territory. It is here where the legal framework provided by the *seigneurie* had its greatest impact. Although peasants 'owned' *censive* land, subject to paying its generally light charges, if they abandoned it the property reverted to the lord to become part of his *domaine utile*. The devastations that paradoxically mined the seigniorial revenue thus simultaneously increased the amount of land under their direct control. The problem was how to extract an income from it, in other words, how to get the land resettled.

¹⁶¹ In 1511 the convent of the Célestins in Paris signed a lease with Jean Crespières stipulating that Crespières sons marry leave the holding upon reaching their majority. 'Ledit Crespières marioit ses enfans masles, incontinant sera tenu de les pourveoir et mettres dehors d'avecque luy avecques leurs femmes et ne pourront demourer avecques luy oudit hostel sans le congé desdits Célestins et par escript. Bézard, *Vie rurale dans le sud du bassin parisienne*, 113-114.

¹⁶² Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Les fermiers de l'Île de France*. Paris : Fayard (1994). Moriceau was able to trace some of the greatest farmers of the mid-eighteenth century to leases given out at the beginning of the fifteenth.

The primary device employed by lords to attract colonists was the contract of *accensement*, in which exchange for clearing the land and constructing new farm buildings, the settler was exempted from various taxes, *tailles*, and *cens* for a predetermined number of years. The contract specified the rights of the lord, including his rights of justice, along with the rights of each party to the waste and commons.¹⁶³ In Quercy and other parts of the Massif Central that were largely abandoned, such contracts were often given out to a collective of farmers jointly responsible for making the clearings and paying the charges. Although the contract was made out to a collectivity, the land was cleared and cultivated by individual families for whom the legal costs of partition were sufficiently high to delay division. With the coming of the second generation, the play of inheritance and other land transfers made this virtual property increasingly unwieldy, and by the end of the fifteenth century, most were divided into individual farms.¹⁶⁴ Lords frequently alienated demesne lands on contracts of *accensements* in places where their operation as part of a large farm was unprofitable. Many of the marginal parcels that had earlier been acquired by the Paris estates were let out in this manner. Overall, reconstruction benefitted the peasantry through the reduction of charges and, more importantly, by the transfer of considerable property into their *domaine utile*. The late fifteenth century can thus be seen as a high point in peasant property-holding in France. Royal taxes, though rising, remained low and do not seem to have increased faster than national output; the seigneurial charges were reduced; and the status of the land outside the regions dominated by sharecropping privileged peasant property. In the next two centuries these conditions were to be reversed by rising taxes,

¹⁶³ Lartigaut, *Campagnes du Quercy*, 61-65.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 137 ; Pierre Charbonnier, 'Reconstruction en Auvergne, Remise en question de quelques idées reçues,' in *La reconstruction après la Guerre de Cent Ans*, 44-45.

the return of civil war in the mid-sixteenth century, and the growing effective demand for property coming from townsmen who now included not only local merchants and tradesmen, but the growing class of royal officials.

Reconstruction was also supported by the spread of a lease of livestock known as the *bail à cheptel*. The practice of lending animals for a fixed period of time in return for a share of their product (which included any change in the number and value of the livestock) goes back to the thirteenth century, but it seems to have spread in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth century as one of the primary means by which farmers acquired working stock.¹⁶⁵ Although lenders came from all classes, the predominant source was townsmen seeking to place their capital in a comparatively safe investment whose risks were covered by a high implicit interest rate. Promissory notes also seem to have been more common than one might anticipate at such an early date. In the Limousin nobles were the main lenders of the small loans that running to arrears were eventually consolidated into *rentes* settled on the peasant's holding.¹⁶⁶ Thus, in 1460 Guillaume and Bernard Pinquier conceded the usufruct of two vineyards to a local nobleman and a merchant of Figeac in repayment of a loan of 43 *écus*.¹⁶⁷

By various and multiple channels, short-term credit for livestock husbandry seems to have found its way into the countryside with few impediments.

¹⁶⁵ Le Mené, 'Métayage et bail à cheptel'; Tricard, *Campagnes limousines*, 149-52.

¹⁶⁶ Tricard, *Campagnes limousines*, 160-164.

¹⁶⁷ Lartigaut, *Campagnes du Quercy*, 311.

The Revival of the Seigneurie

The favorable terms granted during the first phase of reconstruction were partly reversed as the land filled up. In the case of terminable leaseholds and sharecrops, the rent was revised upward upon termination of the lease. The case of the *accensements*, which gave the lord only a *droit éminent* over the land was more complicated. In cases where the *accensements* were vague with respect to right retained by the *seigneur*, the lack provided pretexts for revising *cens* upward on the grounds that the original contract was flawed by failure to carry out the proper legal procedures, or that the *seigneur* had been ‘deceived’.¹⁶⁸ Lords also took occasion to confect *terriers* specifying and notarizing their rights, some of which would have been neglected. Some of the reaction was simply an attempt to evict squatters. Where abandoned or uncultivated land had reverted to waste many of the boundary markers disappeared in the brush, and no one could remember where they were or if they still existed what they signified. The monks of Vaux-de-Cernay found that returning *censitaires* no longer remembered exactly where their land lay.¹⁶⁹ Memory is selective, and many lapses were undoubtedly deliberate attempts by tenants to take advantage of the destruction of records by asserting that the ancient charges on the land were extinct.

Untenanted holdings nevertheless created difficulties independently of such ruses. A seignior could hardly permit squatters to farm them without paying the *cens* that symbolized his *droit éminent*; on the other hand he could not lease it to new tenants

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 147. Such revisions must have been common in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth century.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Quand le peuple est retourné audit pais, les terres estoient au si grand ruyne et désolation que n’estoit homme ne femme qui osast aller au pais recueillir ses revenues ne autres choses.’ Yvonne Bézard, *La vie rurale dans le sud de la région parisienne de 1450 à 1560*, Paris : Firmin-Didot (1929), 49.

without obtaining the consent of the unknown old possessors for fear that when the land had been put back into a state of cultivation and the buildings restored, the old tenants would return to assert their rightful claim.¹⁷⁰ The reconstruction of the countryside, then, required reassertion of property rights, without which no tenant would risk his labour and capital to restore the land to cultivation. But lords could not arbitrarily claim abandoned *censives*, because a *censive* was a fully protected property which reverted to the lord only in the event of deliberate non-payment of its dues or certified abandonment. To assert his *droit éminent*, a lord had to obtain a court judgement for every property reclaimed. This was expensive and as a result, the procedure was employed only for the most valuable lands, mainly vineyards. Similar costs faced seigniors attempting to evict *censitaires* for non-payment of *cens* and other charges. In the latter case they usually found it easier to settle, which explains the decline in the rate of *cens* in the fifteenth century.¹⁷¹

Often the only way a lord could exercise his *droit éminent* was to secure (for a fee) a royal letter or *ordonnance* authorizing a procedure to demonstrate a holding was vacant. The earliest were issued by the English Regent in Paris at the end of the 1420s to permit owners of abandoned buildings to declare them vacant in order to let or sell them.¹⁷² Persons opposing the declaration had six months to present their titles, after which they could be reclaimed by their *seigneur* and sold at auction. The procedure was extended to rural property in the 1440s and frequently resorted to in the next 60 years. The letters authorized the drawing up a *terrier* listing properties, their charges, and their

¹⁷⁰ ‘Pour doubte que quand ceulx à qui’il les auroit baillé ou bailleroit, les auez essartez et mis en labeur et revenue, aucuns se apparaissent qui y demandassent ou reclamassent aucun droit.’ Cited by Bézard, *La vie rurale*, 52.

¹⁷¹ Boutruche, *Crise d’une société*, 297-298.

¹⁷² Letter issued by Henry VI.. 1428. ‘Touchant les rentes constituées sur les maisons et héritages à Paris. *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises depuis l’an 420 jusqu’à la Révolution* de 1789. Paris (1821-1833), vol. 8, 50.

owners. They thus broke the legal deadlock represented by vacant property held in *censive*. Although they were drawn up at the initiative of the lord, the exercise was generally supported by the peasants, who saw in the *terrier* a clarification and protection of their property rights in land. Their acquiescence reflects a general acceptance of the *seigneurie* as the institutional framework for landholding and rural administration.

The most important institutional development in the reconstruction of the *seigneurie* was the development of the *terrier* as the legal instrument for specifying the rights of lords and peasants in the land. Before the fourteenth century, estate administrators generally kept registers recording dues paid by tenants (the *liève, leva, reçu de cens*), which in combination with the *censier*, which listed the dues and services owing, was used in day-to-day administration.¹⁷³ As working documents for internal use, however, these documents had no probative status in judicial proceedings. From the middle decades of the fourteenth century, seigniorial authorities made increasing use of an instrument drawn up by a notary and sworn to by all parties concerned as the repository and proof of property right. The development was partly a consequence of the rise of notaries as the public officers responsible for authenticating titles to property and keeping the record of those titles.¹⁷⁴ The destruction of archives by marauding troops and brigands made the construction and preservation of those titles even more important. In the course of the fourteenth century the formulae were standardized, streamlining the process. The creation of a *terrier* was expensive, and only the wealthiest lords could afford the luxury of updating them once every generation.¹⁷⁵ They were generally drawn

¹⁷³ Charbonnier, *Une autre France*, 18-19.

¹⁷⁴ In northern France, titles were proved by means of a court case, as in England..

¹⁷⁵ Lorcin, *Campagnes lyonnaise*, 256-58.

up in periods of calm, when the tenants could be called to collectively swear to theirs and the lord's rights.¹⁷⁶

The terrier put the legal imprimatur on the *seigneurie* as a mode of organizing land ownership in France. The vicissitudes of the fourteenth and fifteenth century shook but did not break that institutional framework, which emerged more strongly protected from them. French agrarian history in the later Middle Ages was a complex mix of many changes, many of them offsetting. What is remarkable about them is how in the end so much had stayed the same in fundamental technology and institutions of land-holding. The major changes occurred on the edge of the agrarian economy, in the decline of the great urban centres of 1300 and the difficult birth of a centralized monarchy. In 1500 much of France would have looked very much like it did in 1300. By 1600 that would no longer be true, as the effect of the subterranean changes in technology and the more apparent rebirth of the cities and the state made themselves felt in the countryside.

George Grantham
McGill University

¹⁷⁶ René Verdier, 'Les terriers en Dauphiné. Instruments de résistance seigneuriale,' in Ghislain Brunel, Olivier Guyotjean and Jean-Marc Moriceau, *Terriers et plans-terriers du xiii^e au xviii^e siècle*. Paris : École des Chartes. Bibliothèque de l'Histoire Rurale 5 (2002) 207-16; Denise Angers, 'Terriers et livres-terriers en Normandie (xiii^e au xviii^e siècle,' *Ibid.*, 19-35.