

Credit and Village Society in Fourteenth-Century England

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Abstract

Exploring the role of credit is vital to understanding any economy. In the past two decades historians of many European regions have become increasingly aware that medieval credit, far from being the preserve of merchants, bankers, or monarchs, was actually of basic importance to the ordinary villagers who made up most of the population. This is the first study devoted to credit in rural England in the middle ages. Focusing in particular on seven well-documented villages, it examines in detail some of the many thousands of village credit transactions of this period, identifies the people who performed them, and explores the social relationships brought about by involvement in credit. The evidence comes primarily from inter-peasant debt litigation recorded in the proceedings of manor courts, which were the private legal jurisdictions of landlords. A comparative study which discusses the English evidence alongside findings from other parts of medieval and early modern Europe, it argues that the prevailing view of medieval English credit as a marker of poverty and crisis is inadequate. In fact, the credit networks of the English countryside were surprisingly resilient in the face of the fourteenth-century crises associated

with plague, famine, and economic depression. This volume will be essential reading for specialists on medieval Britain and will also engage a more general readership interested in conditions and structures in pre-industrial and developing societies.

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