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A different perspective on the Carolingian economy: Material culture and the role of rural communities in exchange systems of the eighth and ninth centuries

Kemme, A.W.A.

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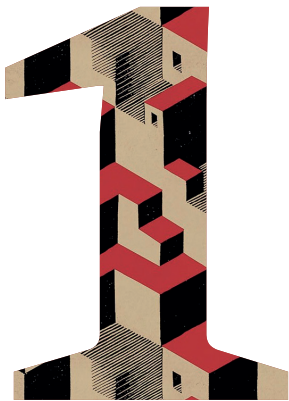
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Author: Kemme, A.W.A.

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PART I



The debate

Introduction

This chapter aims to highlight the aspects of the current debate on the Carolingian economy among historians and archaeologists which are relevant for an investigation of the nature of exchange.

The debate on the nature of the early medieval economy has long concentrated on the relative importance of agrarian production on the one hand and exchange, particularly long-distance exchange, on the other. The origins of the current debate can be traced back to the works of Pirenne and Dopsch at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Since then the arguments put forward by these two scholars have been contested and refined. New elements have been added such as the importance of craft production, gift-exchange and ritual for a better understanding of the development of the early medieval economy.

At present there sometimes seem to be two separate debates which are not always well articulated. One is mostly concerned with the agrarian elements of the economy and ultimately focuses on explaining the economic growth which is presumed to have taken place during the Carolingian period. The other discussion is primarily interested in identifying the characteristics of exchange in the Early Middle Ages, often ostensibly in order to explain the rise of towns from the late ninth and tenth century onward.² Where one of these themes is stressed, developments in the other are often presented as a consequence rather than an active constituent.

Despite the many current differences of opinion about the more detailed functioning of the Carolingian economy in comparison with preceding centuries, economic growth is almost unanimously and unquestioningly believed to be a defining characteristic of the Carolingian period. Moreover, only few historians bother to examine what this presumed economic growth actually entailed. Was there an increase in the absolute volume of agricultural output, was there growth in gross domestic product (GDP), or a rise in income per capita? These are all different measures of the state of an economy and each has a different meaning for our understanding of the effects that any growth may have had for groups in society. We shall see that a small minority of historians and archaeologists are less convinced that the Carolingian economy experienced overall growth.

A perhaps even more unanimously held position is that elites played a crucial role in the direction taken by the entire economy, be it positive or negative. The general trend is to see elite demand, which often is believed to include royal and ecclesiastical dues, as a positive driving force for increased agricultural production and exchange. Again, a small number of scholars has a different view but only in as far as elite intervention is considered to have had negative consequences for agricultural output, craft production and the development of trade. The actual importance of elites in this respect is rarely contested.

Tied up with these broader themes are more detailed aspects such as the importance of the gift-economy and the role of prestige goods, monetisation, manorialisation, the level of state intervention in the economic sphere and the degree to which exchange was embedded in social practise. There are aspects for which archaeology cannot conceivably offer new insights, for instance the effects that the juridical status of various groups in society had on their ability to participate actively in the economy. Establishing whether the inhabitants of an excavated settlement were free or unfree, tenant or independent proprietor or a mix of these categories realistically lies beyond the scope of archaeological inference.³ This implies that some themes, which may well be important for a full understanding of the Carolingian economy, will be discussed in less detail than others and some

¹ Pirenne 1937; Dopsch 1921-2.

² Verhulst 2002, 132-135; Hodges 2012, 136-138.

³ Theuvs in press a.

elements will simply not be highlighted, such as the origins of manorialisation or the extent of the slave trade.

Finally, as it is the aim of this chapter to present the debate on the Carolingian economy as it relates to the research at hand, namely networks of exchange in the context of rural communities, and not to produce a complete historiographical overview of the debate, it is limited to what are considered currently to be the most influential or important viewpoints. We will first examine trends in the debate among historians and archaeologists separately and then look at how the role of peasants in the economy is conceived by scholars in both disciplines.

1.1 Historians' models of the Carolingian economy

One of the key questions in the historical debate on the early medieval economy is how to explain the so-called Carolingian Renaissance. How were the means to build palaces like Aachen and Ingelheim and the many great monastery churches procured? As mentioned above, the fact that the period was characterised by economic growth is generally accepted, yet there is a problem explaining this phenomenon. Several factors have been suggested, for example the development of the bipartite manor, the presence of relatively stable state structures, population growth and new technologies and agricultural practises.

Adriaan Verhulst saw the development of the classical bipartite estate as the major innovation of the Carolingian period, an innovation probably stimulated by Carolingian rulers.⁴ According to Verhulst the prime motivation for creating manors was to increase production by optimising efficiency, in order to increase deliveries to church, court and army.⁵ However, in what respect the bipartite estate system was more efficient remains somewhat obscure. In Verhulst's analysis this can certainly not be found in an increase in yield ratios. Instead increased output is supposed to have been achieved through reclamations, the creation of large uninterrupted blocks of land and the introduction of the three-course crop rotation system, in other words using more land more intensively.

Since Philip Grierson and George Duby it has become increasingly common in historical and archaeological research on the Early Middle Ages to view the economy of this period as grounded in different principles than those of the modern era.⁶ Economic relations have come to be seen as embedded in social relationships. This has led some to suggest that redistributive systems of gift exchange or patronage networks among the elite were the ultimate driving force behind the growth of the Carolingian economy.⁷ In this view, propagated among others by Matthew Innes, the king played an important role in generating the networks of patronage which came to dominate the Carolingian economy. Royal patronage had already been a key aspect of aristocratic status in the seventh and eighth centuries when gifts were primarily redistributed from plunder and war booty. Items such as high quality weaponry and brooches were not commodities because their value lay more in the relationships they helped build and maintain.⁸ When these forms of income began to dry up at the end of the eighth century the resources necessary to keep patronage networks afloat started

⁴ Verhulst 2002, 33-60.

⁵ Verhulst 2002, 59.

⁶ Grierson 1959; Duby 1973, 60-69; Devroey 2003, 175-178.

⁷ Innes 2009, 46-48. According to Innes non-elites could also profit from these networks, but they were not responsible for their instigation or maintenance.

⁸ Innes 2009, 47-48.

to be extracted from agricultural production. The upkeep of relationships within the aristocracy is considered to have given direction to a substantial portion of manorial estate management. Again, the king was the main initiator, introducing the manorial system which was soon embraced by large ecclesiastical institutions, which at any rate were structurally linked to the royal house.⁹ These institutions were required to produce surpluses in order to meet royal demands, in particular in view of supplying the army.¹⁰ Aristocrats, wishing to play a part in the patronage networks of kings and ecclesiastical institutions similarly set out to produce surpluses which could be transformed into objects suitable as gifts. Although the 'state', in the form of the king and ecclesiastical institutions, are deemed to have been the initiators of patronage networks, this model does not imply that their actions should be interpreted as intentional economic policy. On the contrary, the exchange mechanisms which were the result of patronage networks were mostly an unintended by-product.

For Chris Wickham as well, economic growth in the Early Middle Ages is intimately tied up with elite demand. In his view the Early Middle Ages are characterised by increasing aristocratic domination over peasants. In many parts of Europe the aristocracy is considered to have been relatively weak after the collapse of the Roman Empire, up to the seventh century.¹¹ Although Wickham believes northern Gaul was an exception to the rule, even there tenants are thought to have been subjected to less intensive exploitation than they had been under Roman rule.¹² From the seventh century onwards aristocrats began to gain increasing control over the peasantry in most areas, especially in the heartlands of the Frankish empire.¹³ By the Carolingian period aristocratic dominance was more or less complete. The bipartite estate was the result of the aristocracies wish to increase production in order to take advantage of increased possibilities for exchange.¹⁴ In fact the aristocracy was the only group in society that was wealthy enough to ensure that consistent demand for bulk exchange within regions became viable. This consistency also made craft specialisation possible.¹⁵

The positive appraisal of economic developments in the Carolingian period has not always been shared by all. In his 1973 work *Guerriers et paysans, VII^e - XII^e siècles : premier essor de l'économie européenne*, George Duby presented a view of early medieval north-western Europe as a bleak, harsh, backward world where innovation was almost non-existent and people used primitive and ineffective tools made mostly of wood. Despite the rather negative overall assessment of the early medieval economy, Duby did see growth in production during the early and late phase of Carolingian rule intersected by a period of decline in the first half of the ninth century.¹⁶

Like Wickham, Duby did not view aristocratic dominance as a wholly positive development, as they only achieved growth through exploitation of the peasantry, forcing them to work harder in order to deliver higher rents. Neither, in Duby's model, is the development of the bipartite estate an unambiguous success story. The bipartite manor, instigated by kings and monasteries, is considered to represent the most advanced form of agricultural organisation at the time. However, the level of labour services on these estates is interpreted as an indication that ploughs were rather ineffective,

9 Verhulst specifies that this development started on royal estates in the area between the Seine, Meuse and Rhine (Verhulst 2002, 34).

10 Devroey 2006b, 570-579.

11 Wickham 2005, 178-180, also 180-184 for Wickham's reasons for arguing for a relatively uninterrupted aristocratic presence in northern Gaul.

12 Wickham 2005, 534.

13 Wickham 2005, 570.

14 Wickham 2005, 290.

15 Wickham 2005, 706-707.

16 Duby 1973, 96-97.

and yield estimates for various crops based on the polyptych of the royal manor at Annapes, very low.¹⁷ The advantages of the bipartite estate are supposed to have been a lowering of staff costs and generating enthusiasm among tenants, which in turn led to higher productivity and ensuring replacement of tenancies through hereditary rights. However, as with aristocratic domination this is thought to have put extra pressure on an already undernourished peasantry, without this leading to the development of new techniques or the expansion of arable land. With a supposed population growth occurring from the late seventh century onward requiring more mouths to be fed the cumulative effect was an agricultural crisis by the early ninth century. Peasant resistance of their exploitation is read by Duby as an indication that the manorial system described in polyptychs was disintegrating by the second half of the ninth century; in fact, the polyptychs themselves are understood as attempts to stave off any further decay of the system.¹⁸ Supposedly, this worked during the first half of the ninth century after which population pressure became so great that technological innovation and reclamations were initiated.

In these scholarly discussions Jean Pierre Devroey stands out by questioning the nature of economic growth rather than treating it as something merely to be explained. He mainly criticises the current debate, first of all on the grounds that the modern concept of economic growth as a complex, long term process was anachronistic for the Early Middle Ages and long after as well.¹⁹ Optimal economic action entailed maintaining the existing state of affairs. Second, growth can mean different things to different groups at different times, for example tenants may experience growth in net income with the lightening of dues. Also, forms of cooperation between tenant and lord may lead to a lightening of workload and more prosperous conditions for both. Third, it should be made explicit what is meant by growth, for example whether it implies an increase in GDP, income per capita or increased total (agricultural) output.

Although Devroey questions what we should understand by growth and what different kinds of growth could mean for specific groups in society, he does believe the period from the seventh to the eleventh century saw steady economic improvement.²⁰ In other words, Devroey does not truly question the basic premise that growth occurred, just which form it took in addition to how it can be explained.

For most historians exchange in the Carolingian period was ultimately a consequence of surpluses created on royal, ecclesiastical or secular aristocratic estates.²¹ Surplus production was not the primary aim of these manors, which was to provide the goods necessary within the households of landowners. Although past notions of royal and ecclesiastical estates having been mostly geared towards self-sufficiency are now largely obsolete, the idea of them working with an explicit profit motif is also generally rejected.²²

For many scholars, exchange in the Carolingian period is considered mainly a means of translating surpluses into goods not produced on lords' own estates. This could involve foodstuffs or tools, but also items exchanged within networks of patronage. Duby framed exchange in the Early Middle Ages, up until the ninth century, almost entirely in terms of gift exchange, which also include the dues owed to lords.²³ These were exchanges within reciprocal relationships and trade

17 In fact these estimates are today no longer deemed realistic (Devroey 2003, 115-119).

18 Duby 1973, 111.

19 Devroey 2006b, 359-363.

20 Devroey 2006b, 373-375; Devroey 1998, 70-73.

21 Duby 1973, 112-113; Verhulst 2002, 87; Devroey 2006b, 556-558; Costambeys *et al.* 2011, 328-329.

22 For example Costambeys *et al.* 2011, 335; Verhulst 2002, 128-129.

23 Duby 1973, 62-63.

was essentially marginal within early medieval Europe. Perhaps the other extreme is represented by Michael McCormick who strongly rejects a view of an inward turned Carolingian empire with relatively little commercial exchange and manors geared primarily toward self-sufficiency.²⁴ In fact McCormick treats the bipartite manor as clear evidence for economic dynamism in the Carolingian period. In his view, the internal redistributive systems of manors encouraged the development of local and more centralised markets where surpluses could be sold for profit. Others, such as Devroey are positioned somewhere in between: they argue that it was primarily patronage networks, together with the internal redistributive systems of royal, ecclesiastical and aristocratic domains which encouraged the development of regional and long-distance exchange in the Carolingian period.²⁵ The vast geographical distribution of royal, monastic and some aristocratic estates meant that produce needed to be transported in one way or another from outlying properties to the residences of their proprietors. Partly, this may have happened through the obligations of transport and labour services owed by dependents of bipartite estates. Dues from monastic estates were in some cases to be brought to regional collection centres by tenants as part of their services from where goods were transported further to the abbey.²⁶ This created a system of regional and interregional transport; according to Innes there may have been room for trade on the back of these redistributive mechanisms.²⁷ Peasants charged with transport duties could have sold some of their own produce at markets around the main centres of exchange or royal palaces.²⁸ Verhulst and Devroey believe a considerable portion of transportation and exchange was undertaken by dependents of estates or at least by individuals who were tied to estates for set periods.²⁹ Meanwhile McCormick places more emphasis on the role of professional merchants, who lived solely off of commercial exchange.³⁰ These were active across Carolingian Europe, some working within regional or interregional networks, others over longer distances, perhaps spanning the entire Mediterranean and further.³¹

Stephane Lebecq is another historian who argues for an important role for agents of ecclesiastical institutions and the lay aristocracy, but also stresses the importance of the activities of the peoples inhabiting the regions surrounding the North Sea.³² From the early seventh century onward inhabitants of these parts engaged in exchange amongst each other. In the eighth century these networks came to the attention of inland elites who were starting to produce an increasing volume of agricultural goods. According to Lebecq, these two developments stimulated each other, which in turn encouraged the inhabitants of the North Sea region to venture further inland in order to trade, and landed elites (including ecclesiastical institutions), to actively engage in sale of surpluses beyond their own direct needs.³³

Wickham holds a similar view. Whereas he also attributes the flourishing of exchange in the Carolingian period to increased surplus extraction on aristocratic manors, he believes this was intentionally pursued by landlords who wished to convert surpluses into other agricultural and artisanal goods.³⁴ Surpluses were, in other words expressly created for sale at markets. To put it

24 McCormick 2001, 6-10.

25 Devroey 2006b, 581; Costambeys *et al.* 2011, 337, 346-347.

26 Devroey 1979, 547-548.

27 Innes 2009, 49.

28 Verhulst 2002, 89.

29 Verhulst 2002, 113; Devroey 2003, 154-155.

30 McCormick 2001, 644-647.

31 McCormick 2001, 639-695.

32 Lebecq 2000; Lebecq 2005, 658-659.

33 Lebecq 2000, 147.

34 Wickham 2005, 289.

succinctly, according to Wickham the expansion of the manorial system was caused by an increased incentive to produce surplus meant for exchange, not the other way round as we saw above.³⁵ This does not necessarily imply a pure profit motive, for increasing production, ultimately for use in exchange may still have been pursued to satisfy the demands of an elite lifestyle. Gift exchange and local exchange were not large scale enough to characterise the entire economic system and while redistribution systems within a manorial setting may have been quite voluminous, for Wickham trade in bulk goods such as ceramics and glass is the principle marker of the scale and complexity of any economic system.³⁶ Wickham suggests the buying power of great landowners and the scale of movement of goods between their lands was perhaps even enough to substitute for a tax system such as existed under the Roman Empire.³⁷

It is relevant to note that ceramics are considered by Wickham to be the best way to examine patterns of large-scale exchange because they are most common on archaeological excavations and can be reasonably well provenanced.³⁸ McCormick presents a similar argument but lays more emphasis on the relationship between political developments and pottery distributions. He sees a correlation between the spread of Rhineland ceramics and the annexation of new territories under the Carolingians as well as the expansion of monastic property.³⁹

The role of towns within the early medieval economy is, in general, a marginal topic within historical discourse. *Emporia* such as Dorestad or Quentovic are often viewed as one of a series of places where surpluses not needed within the estate structure may have been sold off.⁴⁰ There is some discussion over the extent to which *emporia* such as Dorestad were creations of Carolingian rulers. Duby saw monarchs as actively involved in controlling markets and long-distance trade.⁴¹ Others such as Verhulst believe that, though kings clearly showed an interest in regulating exchange, this cannot be taken to imply they explicitly wished to encourage or control it.⁴² In his view the evidence is simply too ambiguous. On the one hand rulers presented themselves as protectors of merchants and trade for which they claimed income from tolls in return. They also attempted to curb the proliferation of tolls. On the other hand the burden of tolls extracted by kings, especially at the borders of the empire can be considered a negative influence. Others, such as McCormick and Bruand believe the evidence for extraction of tolls is actually a witness to the vitality of trade for it suggests that the volume of exchange was sufficient to overcome the burden of toll- and tax collection.⁴³

Verhulst, following Lebecq, believes *emporia* originated in the context of a North Sea trade network which was developed mainly by Frisians and started in the middle of the eighth century, although Lebecq himself traces its origins further back to the beginning of the seventh century.⁴⁴ In Lebecq's view the earliest ports were spontaneous creations and preceded by geographically diffuse exchange along the coasts of the North Sea, such as at beach markets.⁴⁵ However, early on the rulers on all sides of the channel recognised the potential of these sites and sought on the one hand to

35 Wickham 2005, 802. However, the extent of the spread of the bipartite system under the secular aristocracy in Carolingian northwestern Europe is not at all clear from historical sources.

36 Wickham 2005, 700.

37 Wickham 2005, 804.

38 Wickham 2005, 702-703. The validity of this claim will be examined in the final part of the research.

39 McCormick 2001, 659-669.

40 See for example Verhulst 2002, 112.

41 Duby 1973, 97.

42 Verhulst 2002, 129-130; Costambeys *et al.* 2011, 344.

43 McCormick 2001, 641; Bruand 2002, 118.

44 Verhulst 2002, 109. Lebecq includes the Anglo-Saxons as important instigators as well (Lebecq 2005, 645).

45 Lebecq 2005, 644.

facilitate exchange by providing security, but on the other, they were also interested in profiting from exchange by the collection of tolls and taxes, and the sale of goods.⁴⁶

Historical sources for the early period of development of exchange networks are scant, but during the eighth and ninth centuries the historical evidence for merchants, markets and artisans increases, which for some suggests the existence of complex patterns of internal and external exchange.⁴⁷ For Duby in the 1970's the historical evidence for an apparent increase in trade in the Carolingian period had been a mere reflection of the source material, not of actual growth.⁴⁸ McCormick is almost diametrically opposed to this idea, arguing forcefully that the evidence points to exchange increasing in range, volume and variety between 700 and 875.⁴⁹ In addition to the *emporia* he points to the importance that temporary fairs organised around saints days or general assemblies may have had for commerce.⁵⁰

According to the most recent survey of Carolingian history by historians of a younger generation, namely Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes and Simon MacLean, the success of the *emporia* and their demand for tradable goods as well as items for consumption on site, stimulated the development of secondary centres further inland by the rural elite, leading to a denser network of local and regional exchange in lower-value, high quantity goods.⁵¹ These local and regional markets eventually made the *emporia* obsolete. Devroey is more inclined to identify the impetus for the development of markets and towns in the estate system which encouraged the development of exchange networks that were primarily regional in character with little interaction between regions.⁵² Moreover, most of the internal redistributive systems of estates would have been rather linear, from outlying properties to the central manor with little need for intermediary stages. Therefore, Devroey considers trade to have been marginal to the Carolingian economy.

Verhulst also sees an important role for abbeys and royal estates in the development of towns operating at a regional level from the second half of the ninth century, but in a more direct way than Devroey envisages. Based on analysis of the development of towns in the middle Meuse valley and in the west of Flanders Verhulst believes market places were initially created adjacent to large abbeys and royal manors, for example at Gent, Arras and Valenciennes.⁵³ These towns, inherently linked to estates, were developed first and foremost in order to meet the needs of the abbey itself or the royal household. However, according to Verhulst, in several cases they provided the impetus for the establishment of markets geared explicitly toward exchange for profit at a location nearby the estate town. International trade only started to play a role in the development of towns in the eleventh century.⁵⁴

In sum, long-distance exchange via *emporia* is thought by most historians to have been of lesser importance for the economy as a whole compared to the mechanisms of local, regional and interregional elite led (redistributive) exchange. Similarly to long-distance exchange, the artisans' role in the economy is believed to have been rather marginal. At best craft production is considered a marker for the complexity of an economic system, indicating that elites had become sufficiently

46 Lebecq 2005, 646, 654.

47 For example Lebecq, see above. Also McCormick 2001, 6-12; Wickham 2005, 801-805.

48 Duby 1973, 121.

49 McCormick 2001, 695.

50 McCormick 2001, 647-653, 663-668.

51 Costambeys *et al.* 2011, 350-351.

52 Devroey 1998, 55.

53 Verhulst 1999, 56.

54 Verhulst 1999, 69.

reliable buyers to allow for craft specialisation.⁵⁵ Craft production is perceived mostly to have taken place within the confines of manorial organisation as part of labour services. Even where artisans were not directly incorporated in an estate structure they may still have been dependent on it. In other words, it is thought unlikely that they were working solely or primarily for their own benefit.⁵⁶

1.2 Archaeologists' conceptions of the Carolingian economy

Whereas historians tend to concentrate on the landed elite and mechanisms of redistribution among manors to explain trends in the early medieval economy of Europe, archaeologists focus more on exchange and the communities involved in exchange. The nature of archaeological evidence and the development of the discipline has led to research primarily being focussed on what historians would consider the regional or even sub-regional level. Consequently, few archaeologists have explicitly engaged with the broader issues concerning the development and nature of the early medieval economy.

For some time, the main archaeological contribution to the debate on the early medieval economy was Richard Hodges' 'Dark Age Economics'.⁵⁷ It revealed a world hardly visible in historical sources before the ninth century, that of the North Sea exchange network. In essence it describes a transition from a socially embedded economy in the late seventh century toward a more formal economy near the end of the Carolingian period. Elites played a critical role in this development as they monopolised the exchange of prestige goods. In order to maintain their position within networks of peer-polity interaction they were obliged to sustain a non-producing class, in turn requiring agrarian intensification and specialisation. Crucially, the model puts emphasis on control of distribution rather than production as the main factor in the creation of rural economic stratification. Disinterested commodity exchange was only thought to have occurred from the late ninth and tenth centuries onward. Before this, exchange was mostly limited to reciprocal gift-exchange of luxury items among elites.

Hodges' concept of the early medieval economy was formulated at a time when the number of well-published early medieval sites in northwestern Europe was minimal. New excavations conducted since its first publication have led several archaeologists to challenge the model, not least among which Hodges himself in a relatively recent 'new audit'.⁵⁸ Still, to this day it guides much of the discourse on the nature of the early medieval economy among archaeologists.

Criticisms of interest in the context of this research are the central role of elite in the control of trade and trading towns and the degree to which exchange was embedded in social relations.

Before discussing these points we will first look at archaeologists' views on the question of growth. If archaeologists of the early medieval West participate in broader debates on the economy at all, generally speaking they do not engage explicitly with this topic. Their focus is mostly on towns and trade and much less on whether developments necessarily constituted overall economic growth. For example, Chris Loveluck challenges the idea of elites being the only catalysts for the development of

⁵⁵ Wickham 2005, 259.

⁵⁶ Verhulst 2002, 72.

⁵⁷ Hodges 1982.

⁵⁸ Hodges 2012.

towns, trade and rural reorganisation.⁵⁹ To an extent, he plays down the importance of the bipartite estate and emphasises research showing that the most numerous type of property in the eighth to tenth centuries in the early medieval west was the free peasant allod.⁶⁰ For Loveluck there is no doubt that the introduction of the bipartite estate led to a redefinition of elite identity and the ways in which the latter was expressed, yet at the same time he points out that this expression is not always visible in the morphology of excavated settlements. Engagement with the question of economic growth is limited to examining how exchange and towns developed, without necessarily taking into account the economy as a whole, including the rural economy.

In his new appraisal of early medieval economics, Hodges proposes reasonably steady economic growth from the sixth century onward with periods of stagnation. First came a period in the sixth and seventh century in which manors were developed by the secular aristocracy, incentivised by the revival of exchange networks in which both aristocrats and peasants could participate.⁶¹ From the late seventh to the third quarter of the eighth century exchange in trading towns became more important and the yields of exchange networks were now confined to inhabitants of these towns and landed elites. Because peasants were largely excluded from this system, rural economic growth is deemed to have stagnated. For reasons unknown trade is seen to have declined during the last quarter of the eighth century after which monasteries and Carolingian legislation are considered the instigators of a revival of exchange. According to Hodges the economy during the first half of the ninth century was primarily based on exchanges of tribute and conspicuous consumption among the elite and above all monastic investment in monumentality. The construction of churches and monasteries, inspired by the palaces of the Carolingian kings, required large scale investment, which then fuelled trade at *emporia*. This long distance trade is considered to have been part of Carolingian royal strategy. Circumstances changed again around the middle of the ninth century when internal demand, this time including peasant demand, became more important than demand for internationally traded goods. The breakdown of previously existing ranked spheres of exchange, led to agricultural growth created by motivated peasants, though still under aristocratic guidance. Only from the late ninth century onwards does the rural landscape become the engine of the European economy.

According to Joachim Henning, the bipartite manor was designed to maximise surpluses to be collected as tribute, not to increase agricultural productivity in general. In his view there is no evidence for technological improvements on Carolingian manors, if anything he sees a decline in the quality of tools available.⁶² The bipartite manor had a negative effect on production as a whole because tenants were forced to divide their time over both their own land and that of the lord while using the same technical know-how and implements. Furthermore, because the work on the land of the lord was not to their benefit peasants will have showed less initiative and therefore worked less efficiently. With an increase of control on labour, the Carolingian period saw a decrease in economic growth. In this model the elite remains the instigator of economic change, albeit now in a negative sense.

Frans Theuws likewise questions whether the Carolingian period saw economic growth. However, Theuws also believes elites are not necessarily required to explain economic developments and were

59 Loveluck 2013, 5.

60 Loveluck 2013, 10. Several of the studies Loveluck references deal with the (late) ninth century and later (Davies 1988; Bonnassie 1991a) and are situated in areas which can hardly be considered typical for the Carolingian world (Catalunia, Normandy).

61 Hodges 2012, 121-136.

62 Henning 2007, 23-26.

certainly not needed to stimulate large scale exchange in the Early Middle Ages. He argues that the Merovingian period saw significant transfers of goods over long distances, evidenced by the vast amount of objects found in rural cemeteries.⁶³ Merovingian cemeteries show that rural dwellers, at least at this time, had access to large networks and the amount of objects found in graves indicate that production must have been substantial too. The relatively affluent Merovingian countryside encouraged the aristocracy to introduce the manorial estate system in order to skim off surpluses. What appears to be economic growth in the historical sources of the eighth and ninth century may be a reflection of aristocrats' increasing success at exploiting the rural population rather than actual growth in output. Because burial customs involving burial goods died out around 700 AD it is much more difficult to establish whether such exchange networks as existed in the Merovingian period remained in place during the Carolingian period.

Given the fact that the models of archaeologists emphasise the development of exchange and towns, the role of *emporia* plays a central part in the debate. Were these towns where only finished or semi-finished commodities were traded or was craft production conducted there also? Was trade limited to long-distance luxury goods controlled by aristocrats and royal officials, as Hodges suggested, or was Dorestad a hub for interregional exchange of bulk goods? Were *emporia* part of an evolution from beach landing sites to fully fledged towns or did they exist simultaneously with other types of settlement with a trading component? And what was the role of older Roman towns which had remained active in the Late Roman and Merovingian period?

Henning believes craft production made up a significant part of the activities conducted at Dorestad and other continental *emporia*.⁶⁴ *Emporia* and other trading sites along the North Sea coast are interpreted as attempts to escape the manorial system. The role of craftsmen and traders in the development of the early medieval economy is paramount according to Henning. Based on an inventory of archaeological finds relating to agricultural and craft production and the slave trade, he concludes that the Carolingian period was an interlude between two periods where peasants, craftsmen and traders could operate with little or no royal or aristocratic control, leading to higher overall efficiency.⁶⁵ Collectives of craftsmen and traders grouped together at specific places and generated trade at first without any form of overlordship. Kings and aristocrats only became interested in these sites at a later stage and even then mainly offered protection in return for the right to levy taxes, just as Verhulst has suggested. Kings did not interfere in the running of these places. As discussed above, the control over rural production had a negative effect on rural productivity and this extended to urban development. Henning's view of the aristocracy as having a negative impact on the early medieval economy is clearly opposed to the generally accepted views among historians presented above.

Chris Loveluck and Dries Tys also agree that royal interests lay in collecting taxes and not in controlling the distribution of luxury goods. However, rather than primarily as sites of craft production they see a role for *emporia* and *wics* as places where the exchange of bulk goods could be taxed by rulers.⁶⁶ Apart from the *emporia* they suggest there were several other kinds of trading sites along the coasts on both sides of the North Sea. Regional settlement hierarchies existed in the maritime landscape without a great deal of royal or aristocratic influence, with communities having extensive access to what are generally deemed luxury items by archaeologists. Here Loveluck

63 Theuvs 2012, 34; Theuvs 2014, 5.

64 Henning 2007, 4-5.

65 Henning 2007, 31; Henning 2008, 50-53.

66 Loveluck/Tys 2006, 146.

and Tys recognise a distinct maritime identity in which items that were seen as luxuries by inland communities were rather more common for coastal dwellers.⁶⁷ Loveluck believes that by the seventh century merchants and artisans in marginal areas had developed a predisposition towards commerce and were familiar with profit oriented exchange.⁶⁸ Loveluck suggests that when land-based elites started playing a part in this exchange system their embedded rural economy was transformed by the experience. This is a challenge to Hodges' model proposing a transformation from embedded elite-led exchange to alienable commercial exchange. The North Sea exchange system had always been predominantly commercial, it was the elite-led rural exchange system that was transformed.

Theuws questions both the importance of craft production for the development of towns and trade and the distinction made between socially embedded and commercial exchange systems.⁶⁹ Archaeological investigations at Dorestad and other town sites of the eighth to tenth century in the Netherlands have revealed hardly any indications of craft production on a scale sufficient to explain the 'urban development'. This does not seem to have been the most important aspect in their development. For Theuws, characterising the economic system of early medieval Francia as based on either commodity or gift-exchange is tantamount to presenting a false dichotomy.⁷⁰ Early medieval exchange in any form was always embedded in a wider concept of the cosmological order. Theuws suggests conceiving of the early medieval economy as an eclectic economy consisting of components from a range of different kinds of economies and exchange systems.⁷¹ Instead of attempting to determine whether long-distance, regional or local exchange was more important for the economy, Theuws advocates analysing how these different spheres were articulated.

1.3 Views on the peasantry in historical and archaeological models

Peasants are severely underrepresented in historical sources, which makes it difficult to define what their position was in the early medieval economy. Often they are largely ignored in historians' models because they can be so poorly identified. Traditionally, whenever they are discussed it is usually in relation to their juridical or tenurial status, particularly with regard to the question whether they were free or unfree and to what extent these categories were important within society.⁷² The degree to which peasants could organise themselves and their access to public law courts have also often been debated.

Several more recent authors rightly point out that it is difficult to make the connection between legal status and economic activity.⁷³ The actual economic autonomy unfree peasants might have had was more important than their legal status. Theuws also questions the importance of the free-unfree divide as a status indicator, as other factors may have played just as important a role. From an archaeological perspective it is practically impossible to distinguish between and identify holdings of free dwellers, dependent tenants and unfree peasants. Excavated houseplans, farmyards and material culture of the Early Middle Ages rarely show any form of distinction within settlements or between settlements, certainly at a regional level.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ Loveluck/Tys 2006, 161-162.

⁶⁸ Loveluck 2013, 206.

⁶⁹ Theuws 2012, 30.

⁷⁰ Theuws 2004.

⁷¹ Theuws 2012, 44. Also see following section for more detail.

⁷² For example Verhulst 2002, 46-47; Costambeys et al. 2011, 263-268.

⁷³ Wickham 2005, 260; Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012, 32.

⁷⁴ Theuws in press a.

Some believe the period between the Late Roman period and the seventh century was a relatively good time to be a peasant.⁷⁵ Aristocracies were weaker than before and held less land, which meant there was literally more room for peasants and also more scope for peasant autonomy. However, this did not necessarily lead to better access to goods, which in turn could improve their quality of living. Although in terms of autonomy these early centuries were a golden age for peasants, Wickham believes that did not manifest itself in material terms and their role in economic developments.

Both Wickham and Devroey have devoted considerable attention to the peasantry. The latter's analysis focuses almost exclusively on peasants that were in some way in a dependant relationship to a lord.⁷⁶ In the early medieval west, the composition of the peasant household, a stem family where up to two generations lived on a holding, and its productive characteristics, namely small-scale and based on a mixture of agriculture, animal husbandry and use of the forest, are thought to have developed independent of seigneurial influence.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, these elements became more or less fixated, as this type of household became the basic unit of administration in the context of landlord's management of estates. Rents were demanded at the level of the household, in the form of goods, services or money. Before c. 700 rural households are believed to have been largely self-sufficient.⁷⁸ The influence of landlords on peasant households is thought to have increased after 700. One of the consequences was that peasants became involved in networks where goods circulated over wider areas. In some parts, especially where goods were produced that involved specialist knowledge such as textiles and wine, surplus could have been marketed. However, these networks ultimately developed through and served the needs of elite groups. At the level of the village, in areas where land was predominantly in the hands of large landholders, communities of tenants were characterised by reciprocal relations between themselves and the landlord, but also communal arrangements and ceremonies among tenants, such as sharing of obligations, rights to commons and the use of the local church and cemetery.⁷⁹ There was a considerable degree of stratification within these communities, often related to the size of their lands, and holding certain positions within the estate system. There were also intermediaries who formed the link between the landholder and the tenants, ensuring the collection of dues in exchange for part of the revenue.

Wickham sees a fundamental distinction between several 'modes of production', namely the slave, feudal, capitalist and peasant modes of production. The main distinguishing characteristic of this last mode is that peasants are not obliged to provide rents to a landlord or state on a systematic basis.⁸⁰ Due to the sparse historical sources at his disposal much of the analysis is based on models of peasant society developed in fields such as anthropology, sociology and philosophy. Usually the peasant mode functions at the household level, the workload is shared among all members of the household, and goods are exchanged between households in reciprocal relationships through gift exchange or barter. Peasant societies before industrialisation were basically subsistence producers. Besides the requirements for basic subsistence, agricultural production and internal exchange were stimulated by the need for meeting social requirements. This implies there was little incentive for peasants to produce more than they needed, making markets for external exchange marginal to their livelihood. Wickham suggests indicators of such a peasant mode of production would be a relative

75 Wickham 2005, 534; Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012, 14; Theuvs 2014.

76 Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012.

77 Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012, 19-20.

78 Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012, 25-26.

79 Devroey/Nissen Jaubert 2012, 31.

80 Wickham 2005, 537.

lack of economic differentiation and limited artisanal scale and complexity, restricted population levels and simple agrarian technologies.⁸¹

As mentioned in the previous section Henning regards peasants, craftsmen and traders to have been the instigators of economic growth and the development of towns. When left to their own devices, without control from above, they could work more efficiently. Henning argues that craft production started much earlier in the west than is usually assumed and many of the technologies attributed to the Carolingian period were already in use in the Late Roman and certainly Merovingian periods. Although Carolingian controls on trade stifled earlier progress, there were still pockets of entrepreneurial activity. The portion of production that was not intended for tribute to lords could be exchanged by craftsmen and merchants for their own profit. Differently to Wickham, Hodges claims that in the sixth and seventh centuries peasants could take part in the same exchange networks as the aristocracy. Theuws goes further by proposing that it was the peasantry that sustained large scale exchange networks during the Merovingian period and perhaps also during the Carolingian period.⁸²

Loveluck's view of the peasantry depends largely on where they lived. Inland status was dependent on the control of landed resources, the possession of certain kinds of artefacts, and forms of consumption whereas in coastal areas land was much less important and artefact assemblages are less easily equated with social status. On the one hand Loveluck criticises the often simplistic equation of imported luxuries with elite status. Once renders and rents had been paid free and tied peasants operated on their own behalf. On the other hand he does believe that by and large this equation is correct, except when it comes to coastal communities. The excavated hamlets and single farms which were supposedly inhabited by (free) peasants in rural areas contain no traces of conspicuous consumption, crafted items were for household use and most importantly there are no indications for a 'gravitational pull' on resources.⁸³ Because of the presumed limited possibilities for agriculture in coastal areas the inhabitants are assumed to have been more predisposed to alienable exchange and thereby had access to goods that further inland were limited to elite groups. In rural areas there was a hierarchical ranking related distribution of luxury items, but in coastal zones this was much less the case.⁸⁴ In Loveluck's opinion, craft specialist and merchant communities had better access to a wider range of imported goods than farming communities.

Theuws agrees that peasants did play a role in exchange networks including long-distance exchange. But whereas Loveluck believes this to be a unique characteristic of coastal dwellers, Theuws holds the same to be true for individuals living inland.⁸⁵ As we have seen, this view is based on cemetery evidence, but also on the fact that preservation conditions create a bias in the recovery of certain types of artefact between the coastal area and sites inland, primarily due to differing soil conditions, groundwater tables and the destruction of the top layers of features which usually hold the majority of finds.⁸⁶ In particular, peasants living along major rivers may have been economically active in different roles simultaneously, such as that of farmer, trader, fisherman and artisan, but

⁸¹ Wickham 2005, 539.

⁸² Theuws 2014.

⁸³ Loveluck 2013, 42.

⁸⁴ Loveluck 2013, 208.

⁸⁵ Theuws in press a.

⁸⁶ The potential effects of these and other factors on the nature of the data collected for this research will be discussed in chapter 3.

peasants in more rural areas could have practiced a similarly broad array of economic activities.⁸⁷ In some of these capacities they may have participated in large exchange networks.

There is some historical evidence that the rural communities which seem rather homogenous and modest in material terms may in reality have been more socially diverse and enterprising than the archaeological record and certain anthropological models suggest. Pierre Bonnassie has used documentary evidence to show that peasant communities in ninth and tenth century Catalonia instigated the building of churches and defensive works as well as undertaking reclamations on their own initiative, partly through construction of hydraulic systems, including watermills.⁸⁸ Bonnassie believes this shows that rural communities could be innovative, economically pro-active and in particular indicates that they planned ahead, saving in order to invest.

According to most historians, peasants became increasingly dominated and exploited by the aristocracy during the Carolingian period, thanks in no small part to the introduction of the bipartite manor. The fact that this observation may be in some way correlated with the increase in documentation during the same period, particularly of documents pertaining to dependant tenants of monasteries and royal estates, is acknowledged by some but rarely taken into account in their models.⁸⁹

In Wickham's feudal mode, which in his view is characteristic of most areas within the Carolingian empire, peasants were obliged to pay some form of rent to landlords. However, in general landlords in the feudal mode do not interfere in the actual production process giving peasants autonomy in how they manage the land, their primary focus being sustaining their own household.⁹⁰ One of the key differences between the peasant mode and feudal mode is that in the former, aristocracies had not yet become powerful or dominant enough to influence economic choices of all peasants. Once landlords gained the upper hand they dominated the main lines of economic exchange because they themselves were the main consumers, buying other agricultural and artisanal products. In this model, wealth is directed at the political and social needs of the elite rather than material and social consumption of peasant communities. Wickham firmly believes that peasants in Francia were dominated by the aristocracy by physical force, and that peasants had not internalised the values of the elite or entirely accepted their dominance.⁹¹ In contrast to the general model of the feudal mode, the existence of the bipartite manor system is considered an indication that in the Carolingian period landlords did interfere directly in the production process, the reason for this being the incentive provided by increased opportunities for exchange, as we saw above.

This image of a perpetually antagonistic relationship between landlords and peasants is challenged by several scholars. Innes, Devroey and Theuvs all believe it possible that either party could have mutually benefitted from their relationship. For peasants the advantages of entering a manorial estate as a tenant would have been relative stability in passing on land to heirs and rights to the use of common land and forests.⁹² Peasants may also have identified with the fortunes of their lord leading to commonly held values and a shared identity related both to the physical and social

87 Theuvs in press a.

88 Bonnassie 1991b, 243-249.

89 For example, Verhulst assumes agriculture was partly practised by free, independent peasants but because they are difficult to grasp in the sources he concentrates on large landowners (Verhulst 2002, 31). Devroey highlights some of the issues relating to the use of polyptychs in order to draw general conclusions about rural communities (Devroey 2003, 50-55; Devroey 2006b, 426-432).

90 Wickham 2005, 536.

91 Wickham 2005, 440-442.

92 Devroey 2006b, 524; Innes 2003, 108-110; Theuvs 2010.

landscape.⁹³ Bonnassie's research revealed reciprocal relationships between communities and counts laid down in franchises which guaranteed the autonomy of villages on several issues in return for rents and military service.⁹⁴ Only in the eleventh century, when aristocratic and monastic holdings started to encroach on property associated with autonomous villages, often aggressively, and the power of counts was contested did these relationships start to break down.

1.4 Conclusion

In this overview of the debate on the economy of early medieval north-western Europe we have seen that in many respects historians and archaeologists seem to be engaged in different discussions. Perhaps this should not surprise us, given the nature of the sources available to either discipline. The sources of historians consist mainly of royal charters, estate inventories and lists of property transactions involving monasteries. The vast majority of these documents relates to landed property and its management. This presumably explains why historians have developed models that emphasise the role of the landed elite, royal legislation and manorial management of the land. It also accounts for the preeminent role ascribed to regional and local as opposed to long-distance exchange, the redistributive nature of exchange and the marginal role attributed to craft production.

Archaeologists' sources, on the other hand, consist of the remains of settlements and of the objects used by people. Interpreting traces of buildings and yards in a wider economic context can be difficult, which may be why archaeologists of the Early Middle Ages have tended to concentrate on artefacts and exchange systems. Certain objects can be provenanced to a greater or lesser degree and therefore it is possible to trace their movement from production to consumption sites, allowing exchange networks to be deduced from their distribution. This has led to a focus on trading sites and the development of towns, craft production and perhaps a greater appreciation of the role of commercial exchanges in the early medieval economy. In contrast, conceptions of the rural world are less clearly formulated.

These differences between historians and archaeologists are carried through to notions of the part peasants played in the economy of the Early Middle Ages. In written sources peasants rarely occur and if they do, in many cases it is because of their dependency toward a landlord. Archaeologists on the other hand have ample evidence for peasant regimes but the particular focus on artefacts and exchange often leads to interpretations centred on elite consumption, the lifestyle of town dwellers and craft production. Historians, but also several archaeologists, perceive non-elite rural communities as passive receivers of goods, either within a manorial setting, or through goods trickling down from elite exchange.

⁹³ Theuvs 2010, 49-50.

⁹⁴ Bonnassie 1991b, 249-251.

