



Panel

## 11.5. Everyday Relations between Tenant Farmers and Landlords in the Middle Ages

**Panel organiser: Sonderegger, Stefan, University of Zurich, Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürgergemeinde St.Gallen, Switzerland**

Rural society in the Middle Ages was organised in the form of ecclesiastical and secular landholdings. Monasteries, members of the nobility and urban institutions leased plots of land to farmers who worked the land against dues in monetary form and in kind. These dues were the landlords' main source of revenue. Thus the relationship between landlords and their tenant farmers was one of mutual dependence, which becomes particularly clear in economic terms. Especially for late medieval urban institutions there is a rich supply of written records available in the form of charters and, from the 15th century on, serial administrative documents including registers of dues and payments, bills and accounts. In a micro-historic approach everyday relations between farmers and landlords are to be discussed based on the example of late medieval urban institutions in St.Gallen which had real estate in the wider urban area. The rich supply of written records provides us with a detailed picture of the regional ownership and farming structures. The micro-historic approach enables us to track the development of individual farms over several decades, turning history into close-up stories of family lives. Who lived on a certain farm? How large were the individual farmers' families? What arrangements were in force between them and their landlord? What forms of cooperation and what kinds of conflict were there? What rights did the farmers have in connection with the property that had been leased to them? Can any economic innovation be identified in area of agriculture? What role did rural trades play? The panel focuses primarily on the late medieval rural society in Eastern Switzerland. Here we can build on existing research in this context, which reveals a high degree of commercialisation and specialisation in the agriculture in the late Middle Ages.

**Chair: Sonderegger, Stefan, University of Zurich and Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürgergemeinde St.Gallen, Switzerland**

Thursday, 22 August 2013 // 1430 – 1630 // Session 11 – Room A 027

### 11.5.1. Entails – greater dependency on landlords or more freedom for tenant farmers?

Paper

**Krauer, Rezia, University of Zurich and Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürgergemeinde St.Gallen, Switzerland**

The topic of this paper is the everyday relations between feudal landlords and their tenant farmers in the Middle Ages. The legal framework was one of the factors in this relationship. It mattered greatly, for example, whether a farm was let for a limited period only or let in the form of an entail. A study of the relevant charters reveals that, in the 14th century, numerous urban players, both individual citizens and urban institutions, purchased farm estates in the surroundings of St. Gallen. They let these farms to local farmers who, together with their families, cultivated the land. In most cases the lease was granted in the form of an entail. Such a farm could then be run by consecutive generations of a single family. Entailment was a widespread form of lease in the south-western regions of the Holy Roman Empire in the Late Middle Ages, yet we know little about the details of the lease arrangement. Most of the legal texts available that list the conditions for tenants of an entailed estate point by point stem from a later age. From the 14th century we have primarily charters that give us insights into the tenants' tasks and obligations. What are these conditions outlined in the charters? Was an entail a form of de facto ownership by the tenant, as is occasionally claimed? What interests did the feudal landowners pursue by granting entails? What influence did the entail form have on agricultural production? Did it possibly even generate progress in agriculture?

### 11.5.2. A convent and its farmers – conflict and consensus

Paper

**Sutter, Claudia, University of Zurich and Stadtarchiv der Ortsbürgergemeinde St.Gallen, Switzerland**

The impression that charters give us of the relations between feudal landlords and their tenant farmers is highly one-sided. Charters tend to reflect only the normative side of the relationship and the conflicts. In order to gain insights into the everyday relationship, we need to turn to other sources. In account registers, for example, we find information on the routine relations between feudal landlords and their subordinate farmers, as well as on the farmers' economic situation. By means of charters and account registers, the everyday relations between the Dominican convent St. Katharinen in St. Gallen and the farmers cultivating one of its estates can be retraced in detail. The account registers contain records of the individual payments of dues together with information on the material, the amount and the person delivering these dues to the convent. Irregularities such as long time gaps or unusually large amounts of payment can be brought into connection with conflicts recorded in the charters, which opens new perspectives on the conflicts and their resolution. It can be shown that the feudal landlords did not insist on their rights in every case, they were, under certain circumstances, prepared to find a consensual solution.

### 11.5.3. Micro-history – an important approach to the everyday history of Late Medieval rural society

Paper

**Zwahlen, Adrian, University of Zurich, Switzerland**

Numerous studies in economic history that based their findings on normative sources gave rise to the impression that feudal landlords in the Middle Ages ruthlessly oppressed and exploited their tenant farmers. Such reductionist conclusions are today considered obsolete and have been revised, not least thanks to micro-historical research. A detailed look at rural lives, focussing on everyday economic relations, shows that relations between landlord and feudal tenant often took on a partnership-like form. This is confirmed by the micro-historical study on the economic developments of the Schoretshueb – a large, crop-producing farm estate in Late Medieval north-eastern Switzerland. It reveals, for example, that town-based landlords would reduce the payments due in the event of harvest losses due to bad weather, or would provide the farmer's family with staple foods in times when they were not able to feed themselves. The landlord's records of dues from tenants, which served as the basic source for this study, also provide answers to other important questions on the social and economic history of rural society: How large were the farming families? What non-family members worked on the farm? What contribution did side-line work make to a farming family's economic situation? What social class did a farming family belong to?

#### Participants

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