

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

(text of the speech)

In the next fifteen minutes I'm going to talk about micro-historical questions and their value for the social and economic history. The main subject of this speech is the quality of the relationship between feudal landlords and tenant farmers. The initial-point of this question is a micro-historical study about a large, crop-producing farm estate in Late Medieval north-eastern Switzerland. This study was my master thesis which was submitted in January 2012.

My master thesis was about one single corn-producing farm estate, which is shown on this picture. This farm had to work the land against dues. The landlord was a town-based institution called Heiliggeist-Spital St.Gallen.

What's the topic of this speech: First of all, I'm going to describe the farm and the economic background of the region, then I highlight the methods and the sources of my study, and finally I'm talking about the relationship between feudal landlord and tenant farmers.

What kind of farm did I research? What's the economic background? In the last twenty years several agricultural studies about late medieval north-eastern Switzerland showed the organisation of the regional production: In the Rhine valley of St.Gallen the tenant farmers specialized in wine production. Here painted in blue. In the hilly region of Appenzell and Toggenburg, cattle-breeding was the dominant form of agriculture. Red painted. And in the quite plane region of the upper Thurgau, the St.Galler Fürstenland and the lower Toggenburg, the farmers produced above all spelt and oat. Here painted in black.

We already know quite a lot about the regional specialisation in wine production: Stefan Sonderegger showed in his dissertation of 1993, that crop production was reduced in order to increase the wine production. This wine producing farmers in the Rhine valley needed additional corn supply because of a low level of self-sufficiency. This corn supply was provided by the town-based landlord, the Heiliggeist-Spital St.Gallen. We also know a lot about the regional cattle-breeding. There was a specialisation in cattle-breeding in the hilly Region of Appenzell and Toggenburg because the cultivation of grain was not very profitable there. Like in the wine producing region, the farmers weren't able to feed themselves with corn. So, corn had to be transported in this region as well. The specialisation in wine production and cattle-breeding led to a system of food-exchange, which is shown on this picture. The feudal landlord, the Heiliggeist-Spital, organized this food-exchange: Corn was sent to the specialized farmers in the hinterland and these farmers provided their surpluses of wine and meat in return to the town-based landlord, who made a bargain by selling these products in the city of St.Gallen. The farm I researched, the so-called Schoretshueb, was situated in the corn-producing area and was one of the biggest corn-producer in the region.

Methods and sources:

Like all other medieval farmers, the husbandman of the Schoretshueb left no own records. If we want to learn more about one single farm estate in the late middle ages we have to consult the records of the landlord. The best sources to describe the economic reality of the rural society are the landlord's records of dues from tenants. These records show all incomes of the landlord which are provided of their tenant farmers. So, these records contain more information than charters or rentals, which normally only reveal the claims of the landlord. If we have a complete inventory of serial records of dues, we have the best conditions to describe the late medieval history of the rural society. The richness of detail of every single farm estate mentioned in these books is remarkable. In St.Gallen there is a complete inventory of serial records of dues starting in the 1440ies. These documents from the Heiliggeist-Spital were the most important sources for my master thesis.

The Heiliggeist-Spital, situated in the city of St.Gallen, was one of to the most important economic players in the region and organised the above-mentioned system of food exchange. The hospital described very exactly their incomes and outcomes of food and other goods. The records of dues played an important part in the administration of the hospital. With them the bookkeeper of the

hospital had a good overview and control of the incoming goods. The incomes were charged against the claims and the resulting balance was charged with the accrued debt. As this information exists from every single farm estate, detailed micro-historic studies are possible.

The following copies of a record of due help us to get an idea of the detailed information in these sources. In every book the landlord's claim on every farm is written down. This text shows that the so-called Schoretshueb had to give three pounds denarii, twenty seven mortar of corn, two brackets of flax tow, ten chickens, two hundred eggs and one loading of straw. We also see the name of the husbandman, it's a mister Mauchle. On the right-hand side in parentheses, the above-mentioned claims are repeated in short form. Top right you can see how much seeds the husbandman received from the landlord. On the lower part of this copy you can see the amount of debt at the beginning and at the end of the year. And on the next page, we learn the name of the delivering farmer, the date of the fee and the amount of it.

What did I do with this information? I excerpted all these notes for a period of 130 years, from 1440 to 1570. On the basis of the numbers in this book, I tried to reconstruct the history of this farm estate. For this presentation I emphasise the aspect of the relationship between landlord and tenant farmer: Numerous studies in economic history that based their findings on normative sources gave rise to the impression that feudal landlords of the Middle Ages ruthlessly oppressed and exploited their tenant farmers. Such reductionist conclusions are today considered obsolete. Also the analysed farm estate in this study disagrees with this interpretation.

Relationship between landlord and their tenant farmers:

As already mentioned the records of due not only contained information about claims, fees and debts. In some years there were also references to the relationship between landlord and the farmer. In this micro-historic analysis, I made following observations:

- Quite often the dues of crop were replaced by other payment dues. Mostly the farmers used transport services to substitute the dues of crop and money. Between 1520 and 1570 the farming family replaced the dues of money every year with transport services. This shows that the mode of the fee was not strictly regulated. They were probable flexibly negotiated.
- From time to time, bad weather or plant diseases caused harvest losses. In such cases the landlord reduced the payment dues, so that the tenant farmers debt didn't rise to high. With this practise the risk of harvest losses was borne by both parties. A similar principle was applied in viniculture, were investments and earnings were negotiated between landlord and tenant farmer. This practise of reduced payment dues is diametrically opposed to certain phrases in charters, where reductions of payment dues seemed to be strictly expelled.
- Sometimes, if the yields of crop were very bad, the landlord cancelled the whole payment dues and even delivered the farm estate with spelt. Here, we can see the amount of spelt which was brought from the hospital to the farm estate and here we can see the amount of oat.
- Besides, I could observe quite a regular transport of goods between the landlord and this tenant farmer. Besides crop, the hospital delivered onions, flour, lard, timber or straw. The mentioned dates show that landlord and tenant farmer were in close contact.

These results of the study illustrate the rather cooperative than exploitive relationship between the hospital and the farm estate.

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 farmer families? What non-family members worked on the farm? What contribution did side-line work make to a farmer family's economic situation? What social class did a farming family belong to? Or we could use data of the corn fee to support other methods that research the climate and weather conditions. Here we can see for instance that the bad weather conditions of 1490/91 also hit this analysed farm estate. This can be observed for whole Europe. Or we could do some research about debt in the rural society. Here for example, we can see the accrued corn debt of the farm estate.

Conclusion:

The landlord's records of dues belong to the best sources to describe the rural society. Other than charters or rentals, the records of dues not only show the landlord's claims, but also the real amount of

the fee. These records are therefore good sources to describe the history of the rural society. If we have a complete inventory of serial landlord records of dues, micro-historic studies to single farm-estates are possible. These micro-historic studies show numerous details which highlight the everyday economic relations. Like the relation between landlord and tenant farmer. These results of the study illustrated that relations between landlord and feudal tenant often took on a partnership-like form.

Literature

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