

Local markets and regional trade in medieval Exeter

MARYANNE KOWALESKI

Fordham University, New York



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1995

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1995

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Kowaleski, Maryanne.

Local markets and regional trade in medieval Exeter / Maryanne Kowaleski.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 33371 7

1. Exeter Region (England) – Commerce – History. 2. Exeter Region (England) –
Industries – History. 3. Markets – England – Exeter Region – History. 4. Exeter
(England) – Economic conditions. 5. Commerce – History – Medieval, 500-1500.
I. Title.

HF3520.E95K68 1995

381'.18'0942356–dc20 94-8396 CIP

ISBN 0 521 33371 7 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52195 5 paperback

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	page xi
<i>List of tables</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xvi
<i>A note on dating</i>	xvi
Introduction	1
Part 1: The regional economy of medieval Devon	
1. Agriculture, industry, and trade	9
2. Markets, fairs, and towns	41
Part 2: The economy of medieval Exeter	
3. Economy and government in medieval Exeter	81
4. Commerce and the occupational structure	120
Part 3: Local markets and regional networks of trade	
5. Transaction costs	179
6. The port trade and the hinterland	222
7. Internal trade and the hinterland	279
Conclusion	325
Appendices	
1. Sources and methodology	334
2. Markets and fairs in medieval Devon	353
3. Population and households, Exeter 1377	371
<i>Bibliography</i>	396
<i>Index</i>	423

Figures

1.1	Regions in late medieval Devon	11
1.2	Cloth sales and exports in Devon, 1395–98 (in cloths of assize)	24
2.1	Markets in medieval Devon before 1400	44
2.2	Timing of fairs in medieval Devon before 1400	47
5.1	Medieval Exeter	182
6.1	The hinterland of the port of Exeter in the late fourteenth century	275
7.1	Inland trade and the hinterland of Exeter in the late fourteenth century	284

Tables

- 1.1 Cloth exports (in cloths of assize) from Devon during the late middle ages p. 21
- 1.2 Regional distribution of cloth sales and exports in late medieval Devon p. 26
- 1.3 Devon's shipping fleet in the fourteenth century p. 29
- 2.1 Wealth and population of fourteenth-century Devon taxation boroughs p. 71
- 3.1 Immigration to Exeter, as indicated by place-name surnames and stated origins of freemen, 1284–1349 p. 85
- 3.2 Indices of economic trends in medieval Exeter (in decennial averages) p. 92
- 3.3 Entries to the freedom of Exeter, 1284–1499 p. 97
- 3.4 Political rank, commercial activity, and wealth of Exeter householders in 1377 p. 102
- 3.5 Creditors and debtors in Exeter by political rank p. 108
- 3.6 Debt amounts of Exeter creditors and debtors by political rank, 1378–88 p. 110
- 3.7 Court results for Exeter creditors and debtors by political rank, 1378–88 p. 113
- 4.1 Multiple occupations in Exeter, c. 1377 p. 125
- 4.2 Indices of wealth, servants, commercial activity, and political rank of occupational groups in late fourteenth-century Exeter p. 128
- 4.3 Debt suits and debt amounts of Exeter creditors and debtors by occupational group, 1378–88 p. 130
- 4.4 Brewing activity in Exeter households by occupational group, 1365–93 p. 134
- 5.1 Types of debts by amount for all litigants, and for non-Exeter litigants, 1378–88 p. 203
- 5.2 Commodities involved in Exeter debt cases, 1378–88 p. 206
- 5.3 Court results by debt amount for all litigants, and for non-Exeter litigants, 1378–88 p. 218

- 6.1 A comparison of coastal and overseas imports at Exeter, 1383–1411 p. 227
- 6.2 Goods imported at the port of Exeter in the early and late fourteenth century p. 230
- 6.3 Home ports of ships at the port of Exeter in the early and late fourteenth century p. 240
- 6.4 Residences of importers at the port of Exeter in the early and late fourteenth century p. 242
- 6.5 Wine importers and imports at the port of Exeter in the early and late fourteenth century p. 245
- 6.6 Ownership (by percentage of total amounts imported) of selected imports at the port of Exeter, by importer's residence, 1381–91 p. 246
- 6.7 Approximate customed values (in £) of selected imports at the port of Exeter, by importer's residence, 1381–91 p. 251
- 7.1 Regional distribution of non-Exeter litigants in Exeter debt cases, 1377–88 p. 282
- 7.2 Distribution of non-Exeter litigants in Exeter debt cases, by distance from Exeter, 1377–88 p. 286
- 7.3 Average debt amounts in debt cases in the Exeter borough courts, by creditors' and debtors' residence, 1378–88 p. 287
- 7.4 Court results for creditors and debtors in debt cases in the Exeter borough courts, by residence, 1378–88 p. 288
- 7.5 Residences of dealers in hides and skins at Exeter, 1370–90 p. 301
- 7.6 Residences of fish dealers at Exeter, 1370–90 p. 312
- 7.7 Regional distribution of non-resident and Exeter traders in selected commodities at Exeter, 1370–90 (by percentage of known residences) p. 322
- A1.1 Occupations and occupational groups p. 351
- A2.1 Markets and fairs in medieval Devon p. 360
- A3.1 Exeter householders in 1377 p. 378

Introduction

In his ambitious survey of the economic history of pre-industrial Europe, *Civilization and Capitalism*, Fernand Braudel divides his study into three parts, likening these parts to the floors of a house.¹ The bottom floor represents material civilization: the structural underpinnings or context of everyday life, comprised of the sources of population, subsistence, energy, and money. The uppermost storeys represent capitalism and the action of more sophisticated economies within a world sphere. In between these two levels lie the first stages of market exchange. Since this middle storey contains the very roots of modern capitalism, it critically holds the house together; but it is also a “shadowy zone” because its intermingling of the lower natural economy and the capitalist economy involves mechanisms not yet fully explored. In order to understand the genesis of modern capitalism, therefore, historians need to focus attention on this crucial middle stage. Only detailed studies of the fundamental structures and instruments of exchange in pre-industrial economies will allow us to analyze fully this critical conjuncture of economic systems.

While Braudel’s analogy presents a handy way to conceptualize the evolutionary stages of the modern economy, his application is flawed. Because the operation of pre-industrial markets is most obvious between major merchants and major cities, Braudel and other historians have tended to focus their efforts on an upper level of trade conducted over relatively long distances, and on early modern rather than medieval trade. Their perspective, however, does not give due consideration to the vital function of local markets and the links between these markets and wider networks of exchange. As Rodney Hilton has recently suggested, the emergence of a capitalist economy was probably fueled as much by the spread of simple commodity production in market towns as it was by the growth of merchant capital in the larger cities and ports.² Since

¹ Braudel 1981–84.

² Hilton 1985. Britnell (1981b) also concludes that local trade between agricultural producers, craftspeople, and traders was the most important factor in promoting economic growth in the high middle ages.

the transition from subsistence production to a profit-based commercial economy began in the middle ages, it is particularly essential to acknowledge the significance of local markets and domestic trade in the medieval economy. Only after we have traced the inner workings of the fundamental building blocks of the medieval economy – local markets and regional trade – can we begin to explain the crucial shifts that had moved western society towards a capitalist economy by the end of the middle ages.

This volume takes up this challenge by examining the local markets and regional trade of the south-western town of Exeter during the middle ages. The aim is twofold: to explore the crucial role of the urban center in linking local, regional, and international trade, and to determine how medieval marketing systems worked by analyzing their organization, participants, and mechanics of exchange. This approach also makes it possible to analyze the role played by local markets and regional trade in the relative prosperity of late medieval Devon and Exeter, both of which experienced considerably more economic growth than other late medieval English counties and towns. “Local markets” refers to the buying and selling that took place within Exeter between its resident consumers or traders and their suppliers (most of whom also resided in the town). “Regional trade” refers to transactions that brought together buyers and sellers of different settlements, or transferred goods to Exeter or beyond its environs. The distinctions between these two types of trade do not necessarily make them mutually exclusive; indeed, one of the central points of this study is that regional networks of trade were often comprised of overlapping networks of local trade. A similar observations can be made about the dividing line between regional and international trade, since the import or export of foreign goods at Exeter depended heavily on coastal trade which exploited regional links via maritime rather than overland routes.

Local markets in medieval England have usually been discussed in the “economy” chapter of a book on a particular town or village. On occasion these studies also examine economic links with the surrounding region or overseas,³ but regional trade has usually been explored via studies of “internal” trade which are more common for the early modern than the medieval period. Overseas trade, particularly the export market, has received a disproportionate share of scholarly attention, in part because the national records of port customs are so quantifiable. This focus, however, has tended to emphasize unduly the role of long-distance trade and the export market in explaining the evolution and growth of

³ Two recent works are noteworthy here: Keene 1985 and Britnell 1986b.

the medieval English economy, even though the home market played the more significant role in terms of employment, demand, and the evolution of commercial techniques and organization. Scholarly neglect of domestic trade has also led us to undervalue the economic contributions of artisans and retailers in favor of merchants and distributors, even though the latter represented a minority (albeit a powerful minority) of medieval people.⁴ This study does not neglect the powerful role played by merchants in the medieval economy, but it does dwell longer than most studies on the commercial functions and activities of artisans and retailers, groups whose economic contribution was evident in small villages, market towns, seaports, and regional capitals alike.

In stressing the commercialization of the medieval English economy, this study follows a recent trend in English historiography.⁵ Historians of agrarian economy and society in medieval England, for example, have increasingly focused on the penetration of medieval agriculture by market forces, as seen in patterns of peasant indebtedness, differentiated and consolidated landholding, and agricultural specialization geared to the market.⁶ Several scholars have traced the pace and distribution of this commercialization in the proliferation of markets and the emergence of hierarchies of markets catering to different types of consumers.⁷ Because of their role as centers of distribution and/or consumption, the central places in these hierarchies have received particular scrutiny.⁸ Marketing connections between town and country have also been explored in studies of the spatial and temporal aspects of the regional marketing system, an approach that draws attention to the models developed by geographers and anthropologists to explain the economic ties that linked peasant villages and market towns together.⁹ The applicability of some of these theoretical models (based on such diverse societies as highland Ecuador, late imperial China, and tribal Africa) to the medieval European system is open to debate. While they are helpful in pointing out the importance of specific factors that ordered a hierarchy of markets within regions, their causal explanations often fail to take into account the peculiarities of the pre-industrial situation.

⁴ Swanson 1989 has done much to rectify this imbalance.

⁵ See especially Britnell 1993.

⁶ See especially Clark 1981; Biddick 1985, 1987; Campbell 1988 and forthcoming; McIntosh 1986; Farmer 1991a.

⁷ See especially Britnell 1981b; Dyer 1989a, 1992.

⁸ Britnell 1986b; Keene 1989a; Campbell, Galloway, Keene and Murphy 1993.

⁹ For example, Unwin 1981 and Biddick 1987. Useful introductions to regional analysis may be found in Smith 1974 and (ed.) 1976. One of the few attempts (Russell 1972) to apply central-place theory to the medieval period has met with mixed success. A more recent attempt (Hohenberg and Lees 1985: esp. 4–6, 47–73) suggests a model based on a dual perspective derived from central-place theory and network theory.

The study presented here adds to this growing body of evidence on the commercialization of medieval England by concentrating primarily on the participants in trade, the mechanics of exchange, and the commercial ties that linked local, regional, and overseas commerce. The ancient city of Exeter in Devon serves as the focus of this exploration. With a population of about 3,100 in 1377, Exeter was not big enough to affect patterns of agrarian production in its hinterland, but its gateway position to the south-western peninsula and easy access to both maritime and overland routes helped make it the administrative, ecclesiastical, and economic center of south-western England by the eleventh century. It served as the seat of a diocese that included all of Devon and Cornwall and presided over a commercial hinterland that stretched throughout Devon and well into the neighboring counties of Somerset and Dorset.

Part 1 examines the regional economy of medieval Devon, exploring how the county's agricultural diversity, geographical situation, and seaward orientation promoted commercialization. The hierarchy of markets, fairs, and towns established by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries provides one reflection of this process. Part 2 focuses on the local markets of Exeter. Although long-term economic trends are examined, much of the analysis centers on the late fourteenth century when a particularly good body of evidence allows us to trace the urban occupational and political structure in an unusually precise and comprehensive manner. Through a variety of indices compiled to measure wealth, status, economic privilege, and commercial activities, these chapters analyze the commercial orientation of different occupational and political groups. Part 3 examines in three chapters the commercial networks that linked local and regional trade. The first discusses arrangements within the economic infrastructure, such as municipal regulation, tolls, extension of credit and debt enforcement, that either reduced or raised the costs of doing business for both residents and outsiders. The second employs the unusually detailed local customs of the port of Exeter to trace the town's commercial links by sea, especially the vastly understudied coastal trade which in Exeter accounted for about 70 per cent of all maritime trade. Most importantly, the inland distribution of imports is analyzed to illustrate the dynamic relationship between a distributive center and its hinterland. The last chapter attempts to characterize the hinterland by identifying the occupations, status, commercial activities, regional orientation, and distance from Exeter of regional traders. Two detailed case studies are offered to illustrate the complexity of the networks of trade that linked Exeter to its surrounding regions: one

on the meat, livestock, hide and skin trade and the other on the fish trade.

Much of this study relies heavily on a prosopographical methodology that analyzes data from diverse sources to study the characteristics of particular groups within a population.¹⁰ By creating collective biographies of specific groups of traders active in medieval Exeter, this methodology makes it possible to address questions regarding the identity (status, occupation, residence) of buyers and sellers, the goods they exchanged, where they traded, and how they marketed their goods. Some of the groups analyzed in this way include the members of Exeter's merchant oligarchy, the 525 identifiable Exeter householders in 1377, the over 9,000 creditors and debtors who appeared in the Exeter borough courts in 1378–88, the roughly 1,500 importers active at the port of Exeter in the early and late fourteenth century, and the some 190 dealers in fish and 200 dealers in hides and skins at Exeter in 1370–90. Since many of these traders resided outside of Exeter (for example, 20 per cent of the debt litigants, 80 per cent of the fish dealers, and 85 per cent of the importers), this methodological approach also sheds much light on regional networks of trade centered on Exeter.

While this study offers an analysis of the local markets and regional trade of only one town, the sources and methodology employed here might fruitfully be used in studying networks of exchange elsewhere in medieval England. Comparisons with other towns are increasingly possible because of the recent interest in small towns and new publications on larger towns such as Colchester and Winchester.¹¹ This study's findings on the operation and significance of coastal trade also need to be incorporated into our understanding of the role of maritime trade in the economies of port towns and of medieval England as a whole. Indeed, the conclusions which emerge from this analysis regarding the internal organization of Exeter's local markets, the structure of its inland trade networks, and its role as a center of exchange can in large part be extended to many other provincial towns. In its emphasis upon the significance of local markets, the dynamic relationship between town and country, and the focus on regional networks of trade, it is hoped that this study also suggests some profitable lines of inquiry for historians of the medieval English economy.

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 for a longer discussion of this methodology and the sources employed in this study. Appendix 3 presents the data at the heart of the prosopographical analyses in Part 2.

¹¹ For small towns, see Hilton 1982, 1984, 1985, and Raftis 1982, 1990; for larger towns, see Keene 1985; Britnell 1986b; Rosser 1989; Bonney 1990; Shaw 1993.