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## CITIES, REGIONS AND THE LATE MEDIEVAL CRISIS: SICILY AND TUSCANY COMPARED\*

The most significant achievement of the so-called "Brenner debate" is arguably Robert Brenner's sophisticated restatement of the Marxist theory that the late medieval economic and social crisis laid the ground for the transition to capitalist forms of production.<sup>1</sup> Central to his argument is that institutional constraints on class conflict explain the different outcomes of similar phenomena of demographic collapse. To make his point, Brenner contrasts very large social and demographic aggregates: England against France, western against eastern Europe.

Both Brenner and his critics are, however, silent concerning two questions which must be answered before a satisfactory explanation of the late medieval crisis can be given. The first question concerns economic development. Throughout the debate the economy is treated as a "black box". Brenner's concern is to show that capitalist property rights over the land could evolve given certain institutional conditions, present notably in England. He does not discuss, however, the actual dynamics of this process of transformation and social differentiation, which must have occurred as the result of unequal access not only to institutional power, but also to means of production and to markets. Brenner addresses the main issue for the economic history of this period — did "stagnation", "expansion" or something altogether different occur? — only briefly and inconclusively, and he comes close to providing a purely epidemiological explanation for the "lag of at least a century" before "a new demo-economic upsurge" took place.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, by contrasting very large geographical

\* I wish to thank the participants in the seminar on Italian history at the Institute of Historical Research, London, and of the seminar at the Department of Political Economy of the University of Siena, Rita Astuti, Paolo Cammarosano, John Hatcher, Shleight Ogilvie, Anna Teicher and Chris Wickham for comments and criticisms. The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>1</sup> R. Brenner, "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 213-327.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 267-73. In fact Brenner suggests that demographic stagnation was mainly the result of a combination of recurrent epidemics and heightened seigneurial (including state) exploitation. The second part of this explanation, however, is hard to reconcile



aggregates, Brenner allows little scope for analysing social and economic change at a lower level of generalization.

The second important question which the "Brenner debate" fails to address is the role of cities, and more generally trade, in the crisis. The function of urban commercial capital and of trade and consumption in the transition to capitalism is a notoriously treacherous issue for Marxists, who have tended to skirt it by arguing that basic social and productive relations in medieval society were defined through access to land, and that towns were economically subordinate because they depended on the surplus which lords could extract from the peasantry.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that Marxists addressing the problem of the crisis and the "transition" to capitalism have generally concentrated on the least urbanized areas in medieval Europe. The most notable absence from the debate is, of course, central and northern Italy.

The purpose of this article is threefold. Section I offers a simple model of the effects of the crisis on the late medieval economy. The model integrates some conclusions drawn from the "Brenner debate", but concentrates on the interaction and feedback between demographic change, social relations and institutional forces at the regional level. I argue that this was a period characterized on the whole by intensive economic growth through regional specialization, although the model can also account for relative regional decline or stagnation.

Secondly, I suggest ways in which the traditional Marxist emphasis on relations of production can be integrated and expanded by paying greater attention to the question of distribution and markets and their impact on economic growth. I do this by examining the role of urban centres in the market structures and economy of two Italian regions, Tuscany and Sicily, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Section II). I compare, first, patterns of demographic decline and growth; secondly, the nature and structure of urbanization and the

influence of urban institutions on this; thirdly, market structures; and fourthly, economic development and regional specialization.

Tuscany is commonly regarded as one of the most urbanized and developed regions in medieval Europe; Sicily, in contrast, is supposed to have been transformed into a predominantly agricultural and stagnant economy by the late medieval crisis. I argue that this view is incorrect, and suggest that during the late Middle Ages the relative economic strength of the two regions was contrary to received opinion. The third purpose of this article is thus to contribute to the current debate on the origins and nature of Italy's north/south divide.

# I

The current historical orthodoxy, established by Michael Postan, Wilhelm Abel and others,<sup>3</sup> is that the late Middle Ages — and in particular the fifteenth century — were a period of economic stagnation or depression. Dissenting voices have been raised, but critics have usually been concerned with quoting counter-examples of innovation and growth rather than providing alternative general explanations.<sup>4</sup>

The main "stagnationist" models are those developed by Postan and H. A. Miskimin. Both accept that the massive loss of population caused by the Black Death and its aftermath favoured a retreat from "marginal" land less suited to staple crops.<sup>5</sup> However, Postan's further assumption, that peasants were subsistence-oriented and resorted to trade only under compulsion, predicts that peasants would tend to desert areas unsuited to arable farming, settle on more fertile land, but eschew opportunities for economic diversification. Postan therefore argued that improved peasant conditions after the Black Death led to a *retreat* of the burgeoning middle-ranking peasantry

(n. 2 cont.)

with the fact that population began recovering several decades earlier in France than in England, where seigneurial and state pressure seems to have been weaker. See J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530* (London, 1977), pp. 63-7; A. Huguonnet-Nadal, "Le rélevement", in J. Dupâquier (ed.), *Histoire de la population française*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1988), i, pp. 371-3.

Brenner, "Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", p. 241; R. H. Hilton, "A Crisis of Feudalism", in Aston and Philpin (eds.), *Brenner Debate*, p. 128. This failing is noted also by P. Kriedte, "Spätmittelalterliche Agrarkrise oder Krise des Feudalismus?", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vii (1981), pp. 63, 67-8, with reference to G. Bois, *The Crisis of Feudalism: Economy and Society in Eastern Normandy, c. 1300-1500*, Eng. trans. (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> W. Abel, *Agricultural Fluctuations in Europe: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, trans. O. Orlish (London, 1980), pp. 70-9; M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 63-79; B. Sticher van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850*, trans. O. Orlish (London, 1963), pp. 142-4; G. Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. C. Postan (London, 1968), pp. 308-11.

<sup>4</sup> W. Eberhard, "Die Krise des Spätmittelalters: Versuch einer Zusammenfassung", in F. Seibt and W. Eberhard (eds.), *Europa, 1400: Die Krise des Spätmittelalters* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp. 303-8.

<sup>5</sup> On the "margin", see M. Bailey, *A Marginal Economy? East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 1; C. Dyer, "'The Retreat from Marginal Land': The Growth and Decline of Medieval Rural Settlements", in M. Aston, D. Austin and C. Dyer (eds.), *The Rural Settlements of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 45-57.



into subsistence: trade and markets were *weakened* by depopulation. He assumed that peasants (and to a lesser extent wage-labourers) did not direct their rising incomes to increase consumption or to exploit expanding economic opportunities, but were stuck in a cultural framework of (irrational) subsistence with unchanging consumption preferences.<sup>7</sup>

Miskimin seems to assume a form of peasant irrationality quite contrary to "subsistence-maximization", namely the peasantry's inability to stop spending at a loss. He has argued (mainly on the basis of English evidence) that the rise in the price of manufactures relative to agricultural prices between 1350 and 1400 was the result of "hedonistic consumption patterns". Increasing demand for urban manufactures caused a massive bleeding of financial resources from the countryside to the towns, which ultimately stabilized urban prices by lowering rural demand.<sup>8</sup> Faced with contracting rural markets, fifteenth-century urban economies stagnated.

Both models of economic stagnation, therefore, postulate some form of peasant irrationality. Although, as I have suggested, Brenner does not directly address the issue of economic conditions during the period of demographic depression, the Postanite assumption that peasants were subsistence-oriented is none the less crucial to his model of the transition from simple economic reproduction to "self-sustained growth".<sup>9</sup>

Brenner assumes that "production systems based on small peasants in possession of their means of subsistence were a barrier to the qualitative agricultural development required for sustaining economic growth in the early modern period". Peasant landholders constrained economic development because they possessed insufficient land and

<sup>7</sup> M. M. Postan, "The Fifteenth Century", in M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 41; M. M. Postan, "The Trade of Medieval Europe: The North", in M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich and E. Miller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, 1941-88), II, p. 195; Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, pp. 140-1, 274-5.

<sup>8</sup> H. A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300-1460* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 86-92; H. A. Miskimin, "Monetary Movements and Market Structure: Forces for Contraction in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century England", *J. Econ. Hist.*, xxiv (1964), p. 490.

<sup>9</sup> Brenner, "Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", pp. 214, 232, 236, 306-7; R. Brenner, "The Social Basis of Economic Development", in J. Koeniger (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge and Paris, 1986), pp. 23-53. Brenner's assumption is criticized by J. P. Cooper, "In Search of Agrarian Capitalism", in Aston and Philpin (eds.), *Brenner Debate*, pp. 149-50, 188. For the quotes that follow, see Brenner, "Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism", pp. 306-7, 214.

investment capital, and because they were totally "risk-averse"; in other words, they were unwilling to engage voluntarily in production for trade because of the risks inherent in wide price fluctuations resulting from imperfect markets. European peasants consequently responded to rising population pressure after the mid-fifteenth century by reducing their investments in commercial crops and by taking refuge in economic self-sufficiency.

Brenner offers two necessary preconditions of economic growth through competition and specialization: "the breakdown of systems of lordly surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion", and "the undermining of peasant possession or the aborting of any trend towards full peasant ownership of land". He thus predicts a positive correlation between weak or non-existent peasant property and economic growth.

A basic premise of the model I propose is, on the contrary, that economic behaviour cannot be inferred directly from patterns of land tenure. Formally similar tenurial arrangements can incorporate very different economic strategies on the part of either landlord and tenant: sharecropping, which can embody both purely subsistence strategies or *de facto* capitalist relations of production, is a well-known example.<sup>10</sup> The link connecting tenurial arrangements with economic strategy is provided by the institutional structures which shape peasants' access to markets. In other words, before we can decide what kind of economic strategy a (smallholder or tenant) peasant family is pursuing, we must examine the constraints and incentives which define its relations with the market, on the assumption that its behaviour can be explained as a "rational" (although not necessarily fully informed) response to those constraints.<sup>11</sup> Similar property relations will provide different incentive structures for peasants depending on the wider institutional context in which production takes place; weaker or stronger urban powers, for example, can affect the terms of trade between agricultural and manufactured products and significantly alter constraints on commoditization and trade.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See G. Gioretti, *Contadini e proprietari nell'Italia moderna*, 2nd edn. (Turin, 1974), chs. 2, 5.

<sup>11</sup> J. E. Stiglitz, "Rational Peasants, Efficient Institutions, and a Theory of Rural Organization: Methodological Remarks for Development Economics", in P. Bardhan (ed.), *The Economic Theory of Agrarian Institutions* (Oxford, 1989), p. 27. My own assumptions follow the "thin" rational-choice theory as set out in G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 1978), p. 152.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. C. A. Smith, "Regional Economic Systems: Linking Geographical Models and Socioeconomic Problems", in C. A. Smith (ed.), *Regional Analysis, I: Economic Systems* (New York, San Francisco and London, 1976), p. 43. For a theory of class



A consequence of this assumption is that, given the opportunities, peasants will in general tend to exploit new and more favourable conditions in the market-place; if they do not do so, there are valid economic reasons for such behaviour. This postulate can explain increasing evidence for the development of economically integrated regions and greater locational specialization in Europe after the Black Death.<sup>13</sup> It accounts more generally for the expansion of rural manufactures in this period, ignored by Miskimin and Postan, and suggests, for example, that the closing of the price-scissors after 1400 reflects a slow adaptation of urban and rural supply to the relative increase of demand for manufactures, rather than a reduction of rural demand for the latter, as argued by Miskimin.

In sum, we have on the one hand a model, presented most forcefully by Postan and Brenner, which states that peasant landholders *as such* respond to economic opportunities and/or economic pressure by taking refuge in self-sufficiency; and on the other my own formulation, advocating a less deterministic approach to the relationship between tenurial patterns and economic growth. Both models make predictions about peasant behaviour, and both can be tested against the evidence for late medieval Sicily and Tuscany.

I suggest that the effects of the late medieval economic crisis — the expression of a massive social conflict over distribution of resources — be interpreted as follows. The demographic crises between the mid-fourteenth and mid-fifteenth centuries provided an unprecedented opportunity to abandon land assigned to staple crops during the earlier period of demographic expansion, but ecologically unsuited to them. The "retreat from marginal land" meant that areas unsuited to cereal crops faced a larger labour surplus than more

suitable areas. The declining cost of labour in these "marginal" areas made it convenient to diversify into more labour-intensive and specialized agricultural and manufacturing activities. All this is quite straightforward and, with the exception of the last inference, is accepted by most historians. Three crucial and interrelated conditions had to operate, however, for the new opportunities to be taken up on a significant scale and specialization to be irreversible.<sup>14</sup>

First, demand for mass commodities (non-staple foodstuffs and cheap manufactures, especially cloth) had to expand relatively rapidly and significantly. There is indeed increasing evidence for much of rural Europe both of rising consumption and of expanding manufactures and trade in the decades following the Black Death. These phenomena did not cease (and were often more pronounced) after 1400.<sup>15</sup> Such major changes in aggregate demand, which were predicted on a redistribution of incomes down the social pyramid — the result not of neutral forces of demand and supply, but of acute class, sectoral and individual conflict over access to and distribution of resources — depended critically on two further conditions.

On the one hand, the Malthusian "homeostatic" balance between population and resources had to be temporarily in abeyance. A major consequence of the Malthusian assumption that population movements follow changes in the volume of available resources is that changes in income distribution do not affect the economy in the long run: after a short time-lag the population readapts itself to the existing volume of resources, leaving *per capita* consumption unchanged.<sup>16</sup> A peculiarity of the late medieval crisis is, however, that for at least a century the "homeostatic" nexus was broken. The Black Death and its aftermath were not endogenously-generated positive checks, which acted to brake or reduce an over-populated economy, after which demographic growth could resume; the plague acted as a repeated exogenous brake on the population, first by

<sup>13</sup> cf. *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> bargaining-power setting terms of trade between town and countryside, cf. E. J. Nell, "Economic Relationships in the Decline of Feudalism: An Examination of Economic Interdependence and Social Change", *History and Theory*, vi (1966), pp. 313-50.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, G. Ascoli and A. Grant, "The Medieval Countryside: Efficiency, Progress and Change", in G. Ascoli and A. Grant (eds.), *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 213-54; R. H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Cheshire, 1300-1525* (Cambridge, 1986), esp. pp. 131-2, 246; Bailey, *Marginal Economy*, 1302-1390 (Leiden, 1987); W. P. Blockmans, "Stadt, Region und Staat: Ein Dreiecksverhältnis: Der Kasus der Niederlande im 15. Jahrhundert", in F. Selb and W. Eberhard (eds.), *Europa, 1500: Integrationsprozesse im Widerstreit: Staaten, Regionen, Personennetze*, (Christenheit (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 211-26; T. Scott, *Freiburg and the Breisgau: Town-County Relations in the Age of Reformation and the Peasants' War* (Oxford, 1986); T. Scott, "Economic Conflict and Co-operation on the Upper Rhine, 1450-1600", in E. I. Kouri and T. Scott (eds.), *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe* (London, 1987), pp. 210-31.

<sup>14</sup> Note that this model suggests that the belief that specialization is caused solely by population growth — as in K. G. Persson, *Pre-Industrial Economic Growth: Social Organization and Technological Progress in Europe* (Oxford, 1988) — is not necessarily correct.

<sup>15</sup> For another interpretation of the late Middle Ages as a period of economic growth, see J. Topolski, *Narodowy kapitalizm w Europie XIV-XVII wieku* [The Origins of Capitalism in Europe, Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries] (Warsaw, 1965); Italian texts, *La nascita del capitalismo in Europa: crisi economica e accumulazione originaria del XIV e XVII secolo* (Turin, 1979), pp. 49-134.

<sup>16</sup> Persson, *Pre-Industrial Economic Growth*, pp. 65, 84, *passim*. On homeostasis, see E. A. Wrigley, "Homeostatic Regime", in C. Wilson (ed.), *The Dictionary of Demography* (Oxford, 1985), p. 97.



reducing it rapidly and dramatically, and later by keeping it at low levels until the mid-fifteenth century or later.<sup>17</sup> Consequently the normally positive, Malthusian effect on demographic growth of a redistribution of wealth towards the lower-to-middle strata was stifled. The century-long lag between demographic decline and recovery sustained a higher standard of living than formerly. This lag is very similar to that which occurred in seventeenth-century England, when it is said to have helped "promote structural change in the economy".<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, favourable institutional constellations — which included the character of the state, the nature of urban power, the structure of relations of production and of the market — were necessary to channel distributional conflict to an aggregate result beneficial to the lower-to-middle classes. Specialization through trade was constrained by the institutions peculiar to each region; ultimately it was the relative flexibility of these structures which oriented long-term regional developments, by providing different degrees of incentive to production and trade and by allowing "mass" demand for more specialized commodities to increase.

The diverse effects of these institutional constellations on market structures, and thus on individual and sectoral economic opportunities, also explain increasing regional differences after the mid-fourteenth century. This point will emerge very clearly from the discussion of the two regional cases, Sicily and Tuscany.

Although specialization through international trade tended to increase *between* regions, increasing specialization *within* individual regions was both qualitatively and quantitatively more important. Local differences in factor endowments — in the land and people available — were increasingly exploited; small areas began to specialize in agriculture or manufacture, relying less on local production to meet all subsistence needs; markets expanded and became more integrated.

<sup>17</sup> Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*. Other reasons for demographic stagnation may have been a lowering of nuptiality or an increase in the age of female marriage, caused by increasing opportunities for female employment in a labour-scarce economy. For suggestions in this direction for England, see P. J. Goldberg, "Female Migration to Towns in the Later Middle Ages", *Social Hist. Soc. Newsletter*, no. 14 (1989); C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 146, but see Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>18</sup> E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541-1871*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1989), pp. xxix-xxx, 438-43; E. L. Jones, "Agricultural Origins of Industry", *Past and Present*, no. 40 (July 1968), pp. 58-71.

Specialization within regions prevailed for two reasons. First, town/country relations, which crucially influenced the course of late medieval development, were most effective at a regional rather than supra-regional level.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, the region is where the most effective and strongest political and administrative organization took shape during the late Middle Ages; this was true even in England, whose central government was the most ancient in Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Besides allocating resources through taxation and direct economic intervention, the state affected the distribution of wealth by influencing the structure and size of markets. In a society bounded by high transfer and transaction costs for trading low-value and bulky commodities by land over long distances, political intervention in trade was crucial for the latter's survival and growth. In comparison with technological constraints on transport, which were very strong and in the short term inflexible, institutional bonds within a politically defined region could be changed more easily under social and economic pressure. It is therefore to regional differences in institutional rather than technological constraints that we must look to assess the impact of transaction costs on economic development in this period.

Specialization via trade could take place most effectively within such institutionally homogeneous areas, because at this level institutional distortions of prices (tariffs) were weakest and their impact on transport costs could be most easily reduced; information on differences in (real) production costs was more easily available to individual producers and traders. Information costs associated with pricing were also lower within one region than between many.<sup>21</sup>

Exemption from tolls could only be obtained from public authority. Except where a powerful central monarchy could enforce a reduction of imposts on trade throughout the kingdom, however, sovereigns tended to devolve trade regulation to local or regional powers. Where regional states developed, cost-reducing privileges could only be employed within the region itself.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the creation of regional or territorial

<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Frothing and the Brezgan*.

<sup>20</sup> R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1983); M. J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careers: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gaucelm and the Green Knight* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. D. North, "Location Theory and Regional Economic Growth", *Jl. Polit. Econ.*, lxxii (1955), p. 245, on the "critical" role of transport costs for regional economic development.

<sup>22</sup> See L. Frangiam, *Milano e le sue strade: costi di trasporto e tipi di commercio dei prodotti milanesi alla fine del Trecento* (Bologna, 1983).



states in Italy and long-term economic development is beginning to be explored, but there is a tendency to view the territorial state as a neutral container, in which the welfare goal of optimum resource-allocation operated through unfettered competition and economic "rationalization".<sup>23</sup> I suggest instead that we can explain long-term development only by taking into account those institutions — the state, urban jurisdiction, and the structure of property rights — which actively constrained and directed the allocation of resources within society.

This leads us to the second problem raised above, namely the role of cities in the crisis. I shall address this below by comparing the regional economies of Sicily and Tuscany.

Over the past two decades the traditional historiographical emphasis on Italian communal achievements before 1350 has begun to weaken. Focusing on the post-Black Death period and posing the questions of the early modernists — why did economic growth cease, or slow down, in communal Italy after 1350? — historians have begun to dispute some long-standing assumptions. Philip Jones and Ruggiero Romano in particular have stressed long-term continuities within urban society, and have questioned the claim that this society was "bourgeois" and hence economically progressive. However, the belief that northern Italy had a more highly developed economy than the south, and that the divergence can be largely ascribed to the different roles of towns and "bourgeois" mercantile interests in the two areas, has not been abandoned.<sup>24</sup> This theoretical ambiguity is most apparent in the debate on the "transition" from feudalism to capitalism. Within the various explanations of Italy's "failed tran-

<sup>23</sup> D. Herlihy, "The Distribution of Wealth in a Renaissance Community: Florence, 1427", in P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 131-58; P. Malanima, "La formazione di una regione economica: la Toscana nei secoli xiii-xv", *Storia e storia*, vi (1983), pp. 229-69; P. Malanima, "Politica ed economia nella formazione dello stato regionale: il caso toscano", *Studi veneziani*, new ser., xi (1985), pp. 61-72; M. Mirri, "Formazione di una regione economica: ipotesi sulla Toscana, sul Veneto, sulla Lombardia", *Studi veneziani*, new ser., xi (1985), pp. 47-59; M. Tangheroni, "Il sistema economico della Toscana nel Trecento", in S. Gensini (ed.), *La Toscana nel secolo xiv: caratteri di una civiltà regionale* (Pisa, 1988), pp. 41-66.

<sup>24</sup> P. Jones, "Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: la leggenda della borghesia", in R. Romano and C. Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, i (Turin, 1978), pp. 185-372; R. Romano, "Una tipologia economica", in R. Romano and C. Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, 6 vols. (Turin, 1972-6), i, pp. 253-304. On southern Italian backwardness, see P. Jones, "La storia economica: dalla caduta dell'impero romano al secolo XIV", in Romano and Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, ii, pt. 1, pp. 1467-810; S. R. Epstein, *Italy and its Markets, 1300-1500: Regional Development and Social Transformation* [provisional title] (Cambridge, forthcoming 1991), ch. 1.

sition",<sup>25</sup> which all take as their starting-point the late medieval social and economic crisis, two crucial axioms can be identified.

The first of these is the overriding and positive influence of urban political and economic institutions in medieval times. Accordingly the stronger these institutions, the higher the rate of urbanization (expressed as the proportion of the population living in towns and not employed in agriculture); the higher this proportion, the more developed (specialized) the economy. The lack of strong communal institutions in the south — and by implication, its low rate of urbanization — explains its economic and social backwardness. In the north the cities conquered the countryside; in the south the countryside smothered the towns. The axiom thus rests on a starkly drawn dichotomy between town and country, the former the seat of mercantile capital and economic dynamism, the latter a stagnant backwater to be coerced into development.<sup>26</sup>

These explanations of the late medieval crisis seem to make urban institutions responsible both for northern Italy's expansion and for its subsequent stagnation. The difficulty has been solved by ascribing economic growth to urban influence and stagnation to the psychological and cultural limitations of the late medieval burghers, who (re-)adopted "feudal" or aristocratic values.<sup>27</sup> This solution to the problem, however, raises as many new questions as it appears to solve. Why should aristocratic, anti-mercantile values prevail only after the Black Death? Why did the benign influence of urban institutions apparently cease after 1347-50? I shall argue below that the answer to these and other questions lies not in the postulated changes of preferences (or values), but in the way different institutional structures were exploited by various groups in society to meet changing economic conditions following the Black Death.

The second axiom of explanations of the Italian crisis concerns the different rates of economic development in southern and northern Italy. Medievalists have for some time concluded that contemporary southern "backwardness" can be traced back to the influence of, variously, the Normans, the Hohenstaufen, the Angevins or the Aragonese. Royal neglect of, or active enmity towards, southern towns is often quoted as one of the main reasons for the latter's weakness.

<sup>25</sup> Above, n. 24; E. Sereni, "Agricoltura e mondo rurale", in Romano and Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, i, pp. 133-252; M. Aymard, "La transizione dal feudalesimo al capitalismo", in Romano and Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, i, pp. 1131-92.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, "Economia e società", pp. 201-3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 361-72.



and consequently for economic weakness in general. By implication the south must also have been scarcely urbanized. More recently, international (or inter-regional) trade has become the main villain of the piece: through "unequal exchange" and deindustrialization, the medieval south was forced into a "colonial" mould based on the export of primary agricultural goods in exchange for manufactures.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the causes of this backwardness, historians have no doubts that it existed. Romano and Emilio Sereni, indeed, argue that the late medieval crisis widened the north/south divide. For Romano, feudal powers were reinforced throughout the south: "there appears absolutely no element which might be considered implicitly or explicitly, directly or indirectly to be liberating".<sup>29</sup> In the north, by contrast, the crisis effected a number of positive changes: individual peasant freedom, more productive agrarian contracts, cottage industry and petty commodity exchange. Formulating the late medieval crisis within the "development/underdevelopment" scheme of interpretation, Sereni suggested that the crisis was significant because it intensified economic differences *between* regions. This potentially fruitful suggestion, however, was not followed up.

I propose to test my model of the crisis by addressing the empirical foundations of these two axioms: the central and positive role of cities in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian economy, and the widening gap between north and south as a consequence of the late medieval crisis. In particular, I suggest that we can go some way in explaining the different regional outcomes of the crisis by questioning one link in the chain of argument summarized above, namely, the positive effect of strong urban institutions on economic development.

To do this it is necessary to draw a distinction between urbanization (the consequence of economic specialization) and urban institutional powers or jurisdictions (the outcome of social and political processes). In so far as the latter affected modes of access to and distribution of resources, they constituted nothing more than a collective (and usually stronger) equivalent of Brenner's "systems of lordly surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion". In other words, if

<sup>28</sup> H. Breese, *Un monde méditerranéen, économie et société en Sicile, 1300-1450*, 2 vols. (Bibliothèque des Ecoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, ecklii, Rome, 1986). See also Epstein, *Society and its Markets*, ch. 1; S. R. Epstein, "The Textile Industry and the Foreign Cloth Trade in Late Medieval Sicily (1300-1500): A Colonial Relationship?", *Jl. Medieval Hist.*, xv (1989), pp. 141-83.

<sup>29</sup> R. Romano, "La storia economica dal secolo XIV al Settecento", in Romano and Vivanti (eds.), *Storia d'Italia*, II, p. 1847. See also R. Romano, "L'Italia nella crisi del secolo XIV", *Nuova rivista storica*, I (1966), pp. 580-95.

they had the powers to do so, medieval towns would act just as "feudally" as any territorial lord to divert resources to their own benefit. On the other hand, under different institutional conditions towns could have more beneficial effects on the surrounding economy.<sup>30</sup>

Urban exploitation, however, differed from seigneurial exploitation in at least one important respect. Whereas the main focus of "lordly surplus extraction" was at the point of peasant *production*, urban jurisdictional powers were exerted most forcefully and effectively (although not uniquely, as the discussion of Tuscan sharecropping will show) at the point of *distribution*. Urban "extra-economic compulsion", in other words, attempted to determine the flow of resources by controlling factor and product markets. This is, of course, not a new consideration,<sup>31</sup> but it has not previously been integrated into a general model or "economic theory of the feudal system".<sup>32</sup> In this article I suggest some hypotheses as to how the analysis of market structures can contribute to such a general theory.

Following the premises set out above, I define the two regions in straightforwardly political terms. "Tuscany" refers only to Florentine Tuscany, whose boundaries were defined in 1421 by the conquest of Livorno; Lucca and Siena are not discussed. Sicily refers to the island only. Economic relations clearly did not stop at political frontiers in this period, but it is also true that import and export tolls weighed especially heavily on the prices, and hence the nature, of the goods which crossed those borders. During the later Middle Ages Sicily

<sup>30</sup> Criticisms of the artificial distinction between town and countryside can be found in G. Chittolini, "Alcune considerazioni sulla storia politico-istituzionale del tardo Medio Evo: alle origini degli 'Stati regionali'", *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, II (1976), pp. 401-19, quoting R. Villari, "Caratteri originali e prospettive di analisi: ancora sulla Storia d'Italia Einaudi", *Quadern storici*, IX (1974), p. 546; P. Abrams, "Towns and Economic Growth: Some Theories and Problems", in Abrams and Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in Societies*, pp. 9-33; Scott, *Freiburg and the Breisgau*, pp. 1-4. See also the puzzled comments by P. Mathias and J. De Vries on the contrasting approaches in northern and southern European historiography to the influence of towns on economic development, in A. Guarducci (ed.), *Sviluppo e sottosviluppo in Europa e fuori d'Europa dal secolo XIII alla Rivoluzione industriale* (Atti delle Settimane di Studio, Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica "F. Datini" di Prato, X, Florence, 1983), pp. 222-3, 225-6; the explanation may lie in the nature of the institutions regulating town/country relations in different European regions.

<sup>31</sup> A. B. Hibbert, "The Economic Policy of Towns", in Postan, Rich and Miller (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, III, pp. 197-8.

<sup>32</sup> As I suggested above (p. 4), Marxists have concentrated on "production and reproduction" to the detriment of "circulation and consumption"; Bois, *Crisis of Feudalism*, "Foreword", p. ix. Bois himself avoids discussing trade and demand.



had the status of an autonomous region, and toll exemptions on trade applied only within the island itself. Contraband was common,<sup>33</sup> but one can assume that where cross-border trade became important for local populations, either the people involved or the state would regularize it through the usual institutional channels. Where these regulations are lacking, we can assume that cross-frontier trade was not very significant or that (for technical or other reasons) it was too hard to regulate.

A clear example of the connection between trade and institutional response is the relationship between Messina and its hinterland and southern Calabria, which was crucial to both areas' prosperity. When the kingdoms of Sicily and Naples were split after Alfonso V's death in 1458, all trading agreements between the two were rescinded except for those between Sicily and southern Calabria: local interests were too powerful to be subjected to the political and fiscal pressures of the state.

Because transaction costs for trade in cheap, bulky commodities for mass consumption were more easily reduced within institutionally homogeneous regions than between them, developments *within* regions were the most significant. Consequently I shall dwell more on domestic developments than on the role of inter-regional trade.

## II

### 1) *Demographic Patterns*

Aggregate demographic movements provide a first approximation to the question of economic development and (sub-)regional diversification. For comparative purposes, I take the demographic *growth rate* as a rough index of economic performance. This is justifiable on three counts. First, I accept the Malthusian tenet that *in the long run* pre-industrial populations tended to expand given the resources for doing so. We saw above that, for reasons which are still not understood, the link between population and resources seems to have been broken for a long time after the Black Death. I assume, however, that when

the population began once more to increase in the mid- or late fifteenth century (in England possibly even later), this link was re-established.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, long-term rates of demographic growth were influenced most strongly by the social and institutional factors which affected individual and familial economic opportunities. Finally, exogenous factors such as epidemics were distributed randomly inside and between regions with common ecological boundaries; no one region would on average and in the long run be hit more severely than any other.<sup>35</sup>

By the fourteenth century Sicily was divided for administrative purposes into three subregions called *valli*: val di Mazara to the west, val di Noto to the south-east and val Demone to the north-east. Although *valli* were established for administrative purposes, they also quite accurately reflect Sicily's main geographic, demographic and economic subregions. I therefore adopt these divisions to analyse regional differentiation.<sup>36</sup>

Population trends in late medieval Sicily were as follows. Towards 1282 the population was about 850,000, which at an average density of 30.4 persons per km<sup>2</sup> placed Sicily on a par with Lombardy, the Veneto and the Parisian basin.<sup>37</sup> Between 1282 and 1374-7 Sicily lost up to 70 per cent of its population. The population declined further until the early fifteenth century, and then stabilized and began very slowly to recover. From the mid-fifteenth century Sicily's population experienced an extraordinary demographic recovery, which took it in approximately sixty years from c. 350,000 to c. 500,000-550,000 inhabitants. The natural rate of increase (after adjusting for immigration) was close to 1 per cent per year.<sup>38</sup>

Various important changes in population distribution took place

<sup>34</sup> Note, however, that I do not assume that population density is a good comparative measure of a society's wealth.

<sup>35</sup> J.-N. Biraben, *Les hommes et la terre en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*, 2 vols. (Paris and The Hague, 1975), I, pp. 105-10.

<sup>36</sup> All documentary references for the discussions of Sicily are to be found in Epstein, *Sicily and its Marches*.

<sup>37</sup> J. C. Russell, *Medieval Regions and their Cities* (Newton Abbot, 1972), p. 235, for comparative figures.

<sup>38</sup> Such a high rate of increase was not unusual for the Mediterranean regions in this period. Cf. E. Barant, *La démographie provençale du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: avec chiffres de comparaison pour le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1961), pp. 86, 88-9, 90-4 (annual gross rate of increase of 1.74 per cent for Provence in 1471-1540; my calculations); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Paris, 1966), I, pp. 190-1 (annual gross rate of growth of 1.09 per cent for a few Languedocian communities in 1500-60; my calculations). Note, however, that these figures have not been adjusted for immigration.

<sup>33</sup> E. Fasano Guarini, "Potere centrale e comunità soggette nel Granducato di Cosimo I<sup>o</sup>", *Rivista storica italiana*, lxxxix (1977), pp. 502-3; T. Dean, "Venetian Economic Hegemony: The Case of Ferrara, 1200-1500", *Studi veneziani*, new ser., xii (1986), pp. 43-98. For Lombards' smuggling cheap merchandise into the Florentine contado, see R. Poehlmann, *Die Wirtschaftspolitik der Florentiner Renaissance und das Prinzip der Verkehrsfreiheit* (Leipzig, 1878), p. 150, doc. v (1454); B. Dini, "Le vie di comunicazione del territorio fiorentino alla metà del Quattrocento", in *Mercati e consumi: organizzazione e qualificazioni del commercio in Italia dal XII al XV secolo* (Bologna, 1986), p. 289.



in the same period. The contrast between rural and urban decline was very stark. Between 1276 and 1374 the ten largest towns lost nearly 70 per cent of their population, but the countryside resisted far better, losing just over 40 per cent of its inhabitants. The most severely hit area was val di Mazara, which sank from about 40 per cent of the population in 1282 to less than a third; since it was the largest *vallo*, it also became the most sparsely populated. Val Demone was hit the hardest during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but it also recovered very fast and remained the most densely populated *vallo*. By resisting the demographic crises most successfully, val di Noto moved from third to second most densely populated *vallo* and from less than 20 to over 30 per cent of the population. These patterns are noteworthy for two reasons. In the first place, the crisis brought about a shift in demographic distribution from western to eastern Sicily; this new pattern was not reversed until the eighteenth century. Secondly, the population recovered fastest in the areas (particularly val Demone) where peasant free property was strongest. I shall come back to this point presently.

The general outlines of late medieval Tuscan demography are well known. In 1427 the Florentine state had 275,000-280,000 inhabitants. Assuming an average loss of two-thirds of the urban population and 55-60 per cent of the rural population over the preceding century,<sup>39</sup> towards 1330 the same territory would have had a population of c. 665,000-720,000. Before the Black Death, average population density would have been 60-6 persons per km<sup>2</sup>, nearly double the figure for Sicily and one of the highest for such a large region in medieval Europe.

When the Tuscan population began to recover in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, both Florence and its immediate *contado* lagged behind the rest of the state, and the smaller towns grew more slowly than the countryside; this tendency persisted until the mid-sixteenth century. Even in the countryside, however, the highest annual rates of growth were lower than in the whole of Sicily.<sup>40</sup> Since the population of the Florentine *contado* did not increase as rapidly

as did that of the more outlying parts of the state, there seems to be a definite correlation between the weakness of urban control over the countryside and of urban property, and rural resilience and expansion. In other words, in Tuscany as in Sicily, demographic growth is strongly correlated with peasant smallholding.

Tuscany did not regain demographic pre-eminence in early modern Italy. Before the Black Death, Florence was the third or fourth largest Italian city after Venice, Milan and Genoa; by the mid-sixteenth century it ranked between seventh and ninth among Italian cities.<sup>41</sup> On the assumption of a positive correlation between long-term demographic growth rates and economic development, Florentine Tuscany's late medieval and early modern economy would seem to have lagged behind that of all other major Italian territorial states including Sicily.<sup>42</sup>

In Tuscany (unlike Sicily) rates of rural and urban decline after the Black Death were not very different. Cities on the whole held up very well; Florence in particular maintained or slightly increased its share of the *contado*'s population. Since as a rule towns had a higher natural rate of mortality than the countryside, they could only sustain their population as well as they did by attracting rural immigrants (suggesting that the mortality-induced rate of rural decline was lower than appears). Charles De La Roncière has calculated that Florence witnessed a net population increase of 14,000 between 1349 and 1379, despite the great losses during the 1363 epidemic.<sup>43</sup> With the possible exception of Florence, however, whose cloth industry seems to have successfully weathered population losses, immigration does not seem to have been caused by urban labour shortages,<sup>44</sup> for there is no evidence so far of growing urban manufactures in post-Black Death Tuscany. Generally speaking, indeed, rural depopulation should have made peasants better off and more willing to stay on the land.

In fact quite the contrary happened. Far from improving their condition, peasants in the environs of cities became increasingly

<sup>39</sup> G. Pinto, *La Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo: ambiente, economia rurale, società* (Florence, 1982), pp. 68, 77.

<sup>40</sup> D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven and London, 1985), pp. 73-8 (rural gross rates of growth of 0.82 per cent or less; see above, n. 38); M. Della Pina, "L'évolution démographique des villes toscanes à l'époque de la naissance et de l'affirmation de l'état régional (xve-xviii siècles)", *Annales de démographie historique* (1982), pp. 43-53.

<sup>41</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, pp. 77-8; P. Barroch, J. Baron and P. Chèvre, *La population des villes européennes de 800 à 1850* (Geneva, 1988), p. 278, gives it fifth place in 1500.

<sup>42</sup> M. Giménez and L. Sadrà, *L'Italia delle città: il popolamento urbano tra Medioevo e Rinascimento (secoli xiii-xvi)* (Florence, 1989), pp. 128-36, argue this from data on urbanization.

<sup>43</sup> C. M. De La Roncière, *Florence: centre économique régional au xve siècle*, 5 vols. (Aix-en-Provence, 1976), II, pp. 656-8.

<sup>44</sup> As argued by Miskimin, *Economy of Early Renaissance Europe*, pp. 81-92; H. A. Miskimin, "A Response to Professor Reed", *Jl. European Econ. Hist.*, VIII (1979), pp. 487-93.



impoverished, the distribution of wealth became increasingly skewed, and many peasants ultimately lost their land altogether.<sup>45</sup> The main cause of expropriation was taxation. Florence's fiscal policies during the period of territorial expansion between 1350 and 1450 were harsh and oppressive, both towards the countryside and towards subject towns and cities; at the same time, subject towns maintained fiscal domination over their *contadi*.<sup>46</sup>

The peasantry's impoverishment, and the strong provisioning policies of towns (of Florence especially, but also of the other subject urban centres which only slowly lost some of their prerogatives to the metropolis), explain better than rising industrial demand and the strong attraction exerted by towns over the countryside after the Black Death.

Rates of population growth and patterns of demographic distribution in Sicily and Tuscany were significantly different, suggesting that, in the long term, economic development also diverged. In order to address this problem, however, we must first try to answer the apparently narrower question of why patterns of rural and urban decline differed so sharply in the two regions, for part of the answer to the wider problem lies here. Differences in demographic patterns point to differences in urban institutions, and it is to these that we now turn.

## 2) Urbanization

In pre-industrial societies, the rate of urbanization is often taken as an index of economic development, reflecting the extent of specialization in agriculture and manufacture. For a basically closed economy with negligible food imports, it is used as an aggregate measure of agricultural productivity, on the assumption that urban dwellers are mainly or fully employed only in manufacture and services. This view, however, takes little account of the institutional preconditions of urbanization in pre-industrial societies.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> D. Herlihy, "Santa Maria Impruneta: A Rural Commune in the Late Middle Ages", in N. Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence* (London, 1967), pp. 242-76; E. Cantù, *I castelli agrari della Repubblica fiorentina e il casato particolare toscano (secoli xiv-xv)* (Rome, 1966), p. 78 (late thirteenth century); L. Koref'nikova, "Tendenze progressive e regressivo nello sviluppo socio-economico della Toscana nei secoli xiii-xv (campagna ecclesiastica nella lotta contro l'indipendenza)", in Guarnacci (ed.), *Sviluppo e sottosviluppo*, pp. 124-7.

<sup>46</sup> M. B. Becker, "Economic Change and the Emerging Florentine Territorial State", *Studies in the Renaissance*, xiii (1966), pp. 7-39; M. B. Becker, "The Florentine Territorial State and Civic Humanism in the Early Renaissance", in Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine Studies*, pp. 109-39; see also below, pp. 27-8, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Above, n. 30.

I suggested above that institutional relations between town and countryside influenced medieval urbanization very strongly.<sup>48</sup> Although urbanization depended in general on an exploitative relationship with the rural economy, its consequences for long-term development have not been investigated in a comparative framework, relating specific institutional constellations to different market structures and urban patterns. In order to analyse the organization and structure of regional marketing systems around urban centres, I shall refer to some recent developments in central-place theory which analyse changes over time in the institutional constraints affecting the flow of resources among a region's settlements on the basis of population distributions (urban hierarchies).<sup>49</sup> Whereas analysis of commercial franchises and other qualitative data can at most indicate the *existence* of trade, central-place theory helps analyse differential *flows* of trade.

If applied with no qualifications, the positive correlation between urbanization and economic specialization would be hard to justify for medieval Sicily. Except in val Demone, by the mid-fourteenth century a large proportion of rural inhabitants had moved behind town walls; a significant share of the "urban" population was therefore presumably still employed full-time in agriculture. In addition, the stable rate of urbanization masks the extent to which manufactures expanded after 1350 — that is, the extent to which the proportion of city-dwellers employed in agriculture actually diminished. A rate of urbanization calculated on the basis of a more or less arbitrarily defined urban threshold is therefore not, for Sicily, a very accurate index of changes in sectorial specialization; on the other hand, increasing non-agricultural employment means that the accuracy of the index increases over time.

I have consequently adopted the ten largest towns in Sicily at any one time as the base for calculating the rate of urbanization. The smallest of these at any date had no fewer than 1,100 taxed hearths (5,000-6,500 inhabitants including exemptions).<sup>50</sup> On this base, at no

<sup>48</sup> Above, pp. 14-15.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, "Regional Economic Systems"; Scott, *Friehburg and the Breisgau*, introduction. The attempt by Russell, *Medieval Regions and their Cities*, to define regions on the basis only of demographic data bears little relation to historical reality. For example, Palermo's influence in the thirteenth century is made to range as far as Naples and the southern mainland (*ibid.*, pp. 52-61); further criticisms in Herlihy and Klapisch-Zabot, *Tuscans and their Families*, pp. 57-8.

<sup>50</sup> These figures record urban agglomerations, including urban districts, suburbs and outlying hamlets, rather than cities alone. Bairoch, Bairoch and Chevre, *Population des villes européennes*, pp. 254, 291, give a population of 2,000 as the threshold to urban







Val di Noto is striking for its *lack* of a city with stable metropolitan ranking until the end of our period. Terranova (with over 4,000 hearths) appears in this guise in the 1276-7 tax return, but, by the late fourteenth century, Saracen attacks and the plague had reduced it to little more than a hamlet. Catania probably took its place during the latter half of the fourteenth century, but by the mid-fifteenth century it had been surpassed by Noto, itself overtaken by Syracuse after 1478.

The explanation for this apparent urban entropy may lie, once again, with political and institutional rather than purely economic factors. Val di Noto lacked a stable political or administrative capital. Terranova may have had this function in the latter half of the thirteenth century, but by the mid-fourteenth century it had been replaced by Catania, the main seat of the Alagona family which controlled the south-east of the island. Following the Aragonese reconquest Catania's importance declined, but no substitute arose to take its place in val di Noto. Syracuse's pre-eminence was probably the result of being the capital of the *Camera reginale*, but its political and even economic influence was bounded by the limits of the queen's lordship. There was thus little chance of it achieving the strategic and political importance of Messina and Palermo, or extending its influence over the whole *vallo*.

Table 2 reports the coefficient of variation (c) around the mean community size for each *vallo*. The smaller the coefficient, the less hierarchical the region's urban system is (in other words, resources are distributed more equally). The low value of the coefficient for val di Noto points to a relative lack of urban hierarchy in the area. Whereas in val di Mazara and val Demone hierarchy tended to increase in the fifteenth century, in val di Noto hierarchy appears to have decreased.

The general decline of this measure between the late thirteenth century and 1439 demonstrates the considerable changes in urban patterns and, one may deduce, market structures which took place in this period. In particular it highlights the reorganization of sub-regional markets in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries following the loss of a primate centre in val di Mazara and val Demone. The slow rise of the measure during the fifteenth century, by contrast, suggests a process of consolidation of the gains in urban and market organization and integration within *valle*, and a slow increase in the primate function of Messina and Palermo, particularly of the latter after it reacquired its status as capital.

TABLE 2  
URBAN HIERARCHIES BY VALLO, 1277-1497\*

|   | 1277  |       |       | 1374-7 |                |   | 1439  |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|-------|--------|----------------|---|-------|-------|-------|
|   | M     | N     | D     | M      | N <sup>a</sup> | D | M     | N     | D     |
| Σ | 170.3 | 82.4  | 63.8  | 527.3  | 456.3          | — | 34.4  | 32.7  | 16.5  |
| s | 357.4 | 92.9  | 161.5 | 759.8  | 578.8          | — | 38.1  | 42.6  | 26.9  |
| c | 209.9 | 112.7 | 253.1 | 144.1  | 126.8          | — | 110.8 | 130.3 | 163.0 |

  

|   | 1464  |       |       | 1478  |       |       | 1497  |       |       |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|   | M     | N     | D     | M     | N     | D     | M     | N     | D     |
| Σ | 45.8  | 42.0  | 18.7  | 59.0  | 55.5  | 25.2  | 67.5  | 68.2  | 35.3  |
| s | 60.4  | 54.1  | 33.1  | 79.5  | 66.9  | 48.2  | 90.3  | 84.2  | 64.4  |
| c | 131.9 | 128.8 | 177.0 | 134.7 | 120.5 | 191.3 | 133.8 | 123.5 | 182.4 |

\* Notes and sources: Sources as Table 1.  
M = val di Mazara; N = val di Noto; D = val Demone; Σ = mean size (hearth/s); s = standard deviation from the mean; c = coefficient of variation (100s/Σ). Note that Σ and s are calculated on the basis of tax allocations, except for 1374-7, where figures refer to numbers of hearths.  
<sup>a</sup> Includes estimates for Avola, Buseceni, Ferula, Adernò, Pietraperzia, Giarratana, Francavilla and Catania.

Despite its increase in the course of the fifteenth century, metropolitan primacy was less extreme than in the late thirteenth century. This was partly because Sicily's political unity with the mainland had been broken, thereby reducing the potential geographical range of attraction of both cities; but it was mainly the effect of greater economic integration through specialization beginning in the mid-fourteenth century.

A feature distinguishing Sicily from, probably, most European regions was the rapid change in urban ranking. In the course of two centuries only three cities — Palermo, Messina and Trapani — were consistently among the region's top ten. Only after 1374 are three or four further cities stably among the largest (Piazza, Noto, Syracuse and, more briefly, Catania). As with relative demographic distribution between *valle*, the most important changes in urban ranking occurred between the late thirteenth and the late fourteenth centuries, with a pronounced shift in urban concentration from western and central to eastern Sicily. Whereas in the late thirteenth century seven out of the ten largest cities were situated in val di Mazara, two centuries later the proportion had dropped to two out of ten. Val di Mazara's position as the most urbanized area was now occupied by val di Noto, with six of the ten largest cities.



Such rapid changes in urban ranking imply either a remarkable geographical mobility of the population, or extraordinary differences in natural rates of increase among urban residents. Since there are no grounds for believing the latter, it seems that the main cause of fluctuations in urban ranking was individual mobility. This can be traced to at least two general causes. The first was the scarcity, except in val Demone, of peasant free property; the disappearance of serfdom during the thirteenth century did not endow the Sicilian peasantry with its own land to cultivate. The second reason for mobility was connected with the nature of urban power over the surrounding countryside. Despite a strengthening of this power after the mid-fourteenth century, urban control was usually too weak to ensure the constant food supplies, let alone the corporative monopolies, which normally ensured medieval towns their function and status; the guilds established in the fifteenth century seem to have lacked territorial monopolies. Towns also received little income from taxation, which could be another source of attraction for immigrants; at best Sicilian towns could petition the crown for short-term tax-exemptions for immigrants. Migratory pull factors tended to prevail over push factors, pull factors were not institutionally determined, and the cost to individuals of migration itself was relatively low. Because of their relative institutional weakness, Sicilian towns tended to compete for human resources; factor endowments tended to prevail over political privileges in shaping a town's economic prosperity. Between 1300 and 1500 no city dominated the rest or enjoyed an outstanding position on account of its political functions.

Palermo, the capital again after the 1430s, expanded largely thanks to the presence of government and, after a revolt in 1450, to its privileged food provisioning, but did not regain full primacy before 1500. Messina, the second largest city, had long enjoyed provisioning privileges because of its vital strategic position on the Straits. Despite their metropolitan function, however, Messina and Palermo did not wield the same powers of control and exploitation of the *contado* found in northern Italy. The rapid changes in size and ranking of individual towns indicate a far more fluid situation, whose complexity was accentuated by the existence in Sicily of three urban systems centred on the *valli*.

Analysing Tuscan urbanization using these same methods casts considerable doubt on David Herlihy's and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber's statement that "the demographic preeminence of Florence within Tuscany was based perhaps less on its role as a regional

metropolis, and more on the interregional and international functions it assumed".<sup>53</sup> It is not clear *either* that Florence's pre-eminence was based on such supra-regional functions, *or* that Florence indeed *had* such functions. In any case, the benefits of any such functions were not allowed to filter outwards and downwards into the metropolitan hinterland.

On the criterion of average population density reported above, Tuscany would seem to have had a more productive economy than Sicily. If we look at urbanization, however, this conclusion changes. Taking the ten largest towns as expressing the rate of urbanization, 27 per cent of Tuscans lived in cities; if centres with over eight hundred inhabitants are to be considered urban, as Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber argue, urbanization in 1427 rose to a very high rate of 34 per cent.<sup>54</sup> This was no more than in Sicily, however, where the proportion of inhabitants of towns with over 1,100 taxed *hearth*s only briefly fell below 30 per cent over a period of two centuries. Indeed we shall see that Tuscany's inferior agricultural productivity suggests that its rate of urbanization was *lower* than in Sicily.

As a result of its fiscal and territorial policies,<sup>55</sup> between the late 1330s and 1427 Florence's demographic primacy increased by nearly 15 per cent. It is indicative of the mechanisms through which this relocation took place that Florence's former satellites maintained their relative importance, and that gains were made mainly against Arezzo and Pisa, which were conquered during this period. Their integration into the metropolis's sphere of influence resulted in a net loss of population and of economic power.<sup>56</sup> By 1427 Florence's regional domination was undisputed. At this date Florence, with 38,000 inhabitants, was followed by Pisa with less than a fifth that number, and by a series of even smaller towns.<sup>57</sup>

The damaging effects of Florentine tax policies on the Tuscan

<sup>53</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, p. 58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> G. Pinto, "Appunti sulla politica annonaria in Italia fra xiii e xv secolo", in *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* (Florence, 1985), pp. 638-9; Dani, "Vie di comunicazione", p. 292.

<sup>56</sup> Estimates are based on a comparison of the relative size of Florence, Pistoia, S. Gimignano, Volterra, Prato, Pisa and Arezzo. Population estimates are drawn from De La Roncière, *Florence: centre économique régional*, II, pp. 644-96; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, pp. 54-8. I have adopted De La Roncière's estimate of 100,000 for Florence's population in 1338. On this basis, between 1338 and 1427 Florence increased its share of the urban population from 52.5 to 60.9 per cent; Pisa and Arezzo's share slipped from 25.2 to 18.3 per cent.

<sup>57</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, p. 58.



economy were reinforced by the fact that urban tax privileges over the countryside were unaffected by the growth of the territorial state.<sup>38</sup> Florentine policies were characterized by remarkable institutional inertia, and the already precarious allegiance of local urban oligarchies to Florence would have been completely undermined if a serious attempt to introduce greater fiscal equity between town and countryside had been made. The constant drain of wealth from the countryside to the cities and from the cities to Florence thus tended to reverse the pattern common to most of post-Black Death Europe.

Although Florentine rural *estimi* (tax returns) before 1427 reflect minor fluctuations of small rural communities inaccurately because of tax evasion, changes in individual income and so on,<sup>39</sup> there is no evidence for fluctuations in settlement size of the magnitude found in Sicily, particularly not as far as the main cities are concerned. On the contrary, it appears that the ten largest Tuscan cities (excluding of course Siena and Lucca) remained the same throughout the later Middle Ages. One can agree with Herlihy that the earlier system of competing communes was economically inefficient, but this was the result of communal territorial *monopolies*. Before their subordination to Florence, these centres performed the same function within their territories which Florence would later perform for them.

### 3) *Market Structures*

It was suggested in the first part of this article that urban institutions played a very important part in long-term economic development by diverting resources away from the countryside or from subordinate towns. The more unbalanced the distribution of institutional powers was, the more skewed was the distribution of resources, with potentially deleterious effects on the economy of the region as a whole. I also suggested, however, that the specifically urban form of "extra-economic compulsion" was exerted at the point of distribution. It is thus to the structure of the regional market that we now turn.

A precondition of specialization is competition through trade. For competition to be effective, a relatively integrated market free from heavily distorting tariffs has to exist. In late medieval Sicily as elsewhere, regional unification was slow, marked by setbacks and

certainly incomplete; none the less, between 1300 and 1500 the costs of trade in the home market were significantly lowered.

Economic integration was hindered by the plethora of tolls imposed by feudal lords and by the monarchy itself. By 1300 the crown had granted a number of privileges reducing or abolishing tolls on domestic trade in foodstuffs, principally wine, but also grain, initially for Messina and by the 1320s and 1330s for Palermo also. As a result of the war against the Angevins of Naples, however, the crown was too weak to enforce these privileges, and feudal lords disregarded them with impunity. The state itself may have delayed economic integration by exacting an export tax on grain shipped for the domestic market.

Between 1350 and 1390 Sicily's political unity was destroyed. As a result of the monarchy's weakness, the country slowly slid into civil war. Rival factions organized into aristocratic clans fought for control over the king and for the state revenues such control entailed. In 1362 Sicily was divided into four spheres of influence, which soon became *de facto* subregional lordships.

Political instability led to the disruption and fragmentation of the domestic market. This is reflected in the breakdown of the monetary system: from the 1350s on, each territorial lord was minting his own petty coinage. Parallel to the disintegration of the island's markets, urban control over the rural hinterland (*districus*) began to increase. The development of urban territories continued throughout our period and involved all major towns, both feudal and under royal administration.

The main object of a *districus* was to provide a town with regular food supplies, and to a lesser extent to exert jurisdictional powers which entailed filling administrative posts, exacting dues over weights and measures, and administering petty justice. Towns commonly set local food prices, and control of a district could also provide an outlet for urban manufactures or for surplus grain supplies originally acquired by the town for its own needs. With the exception of Messina, however, the development of districts did not in the long term (particularly after the reinstatement of the monarchy) significantly increase the rather weak control Sicilian towns had over their hinterlands.

The Aragonese reconquest in the 1390s provided the institutional framework and the political backing for a reunification of the regional market. Laws were passed forbidding encroachments on trade by feudal lords and local communities. In 1398 Martin I re-established

<sup>38</sup> E. Fasano Guarini, "Città soggette e contadi nel dominio fiorentino tra Quattro e Cinquecento: il caso pisano", in M. Mirti (ed.), *Ricerche di storia moderna, I* (Pisa, 1976), pp. 1-94, esp. pp. 48-54.

<sup>39</sup> Conti, *Catasti agrari*, ch. 1.



control over the domestic and foreign trade in grain, and abolished the tax on grain traded by sea within Sicily itself, thereby preparing the ground for a more integrated grain market free from tariff distortions. His measures were strengthened in the 1430s and again in 1450-1, when Alfonso V intervened more generally to uphold free trade.

Market integration and intra-regional trade were intensified through toll exemptions, including rights to hold local and regional fairs. Toll exemptions in Sicily were granted only to towns belonging to the royal demesne, often in return for political aid or loyalty. Since they involved some loss of income for the crown, requests for exemptions were sometimes refused. Fairs, on the other hand, were granted willingly because they increased royal income both directly (goods taken to the fair had to pay tolls on the way) and indirectly (trade stimulated economic growth). Requests for toll exemptions and for fairs reflect both actual and predicted fluctuations in trade; however, since fairs were granted to any petitioning community or lord without any of the administrative constraints common to toll exemptions, they tend to reflect general economic trends more accurately.

Trends in fairs and toll exemptions can be reconstructed as follows. Thirteenth-century expansion was followed by a long recession, with particular difficulties during the period of political instability between the mid-fourteenth century and the Aragonese reconquest in 1392, and then by renewed expansion up to the early sixteenth century. More broadly still, between 20 and 30 per cent of all franchises were granted between the end of the twelfth and the end of the fourteenth century, and the remaining 70-80 per cent during the following hundred years.

Nevertheless the Aragonese crown was far from the proto-liberal or even proto-mercantilist institution it is sometimes portrayed as being. The government at times expressly exempted feudal lords from decrees against arbitrary tolls. Toll exemptions, which were granted only to demesne communities, soon applied only to trade with other towns under royal administration; the crown was unable to enforce them in lands under feudal control, which in the fifteenth century included about half the island's population. Since toll exemptions conflicted with the crown's financial interests, they were sometimes refused or repealed. Franchises, indeed, were only necessary because of the constraints on trade which still existed — highlighting the contradictory nature of policies which sought to expand trade only to tax it more heavily.

Before 1350 Tuscany seems to have included a number of basically independent markets, each controlled by a city with "primate" functions; De La Roncière's study of Florence as a "regional centre" describes the city's *contado* with only marginal references to a wider regional context. The mid-fourteenth century, when Florence's expansionist policies were set in motion, was probably a turning-point for integration.<sup>60</sup>

Florence's conquest and subordination of smaller communes was clearly favoured by the latter's weaker resistance to the effects of the plague.<sup>61</sup> The process of state formation could also capitalize on two related features, which set Tuscany somewhat apart from other Italian regions: the strength of urban control over the countryside and, as both cause and effect of this, the weakness of seigneurial power. Chittolini has shown how complex the process of expansion of the Milanese state was during the fifteenth century, because of the large number of seigneurial lordships which still flourished in the countryside.<sup>62</sup> The Florentine government faced few of these problems; it merely took over, redefined and reoriented previously established local communal institutions. The last serious non-urban threat to its authority, from the conti Guidi in the Casentino, was vanquished and submitted to taxation by the 1380s.<sup>63</sup> Once Florence had subdued all rival urban authority it dominated the region unconstrained. By the fifteenth century no competing political or autonomous economic power was in a position to dispute Florence's regional hegemony.

This hegemony is clearly demonstrated by the *Catasto* (property tax) of 1427. With 14 per cent of the state's population, Florence declared 65 per cent of the total taxable wealth; the hundred richest Florentine

<sup>60</sup> De La Roncière, *Florence: centre économique régional*; Tangheroni, "Sistema economico", pp. 46-7.

<sup>61</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, p. 72.

<sup>62</sup> G. Chittolini, "I capitoli di dedizione delle comunità lombarde a Francesco Sforza: motivi di contrasto fra città e contado", in *Frattini olim Lombardiae: studi di storia padovana in onore di G. Martini* (Milan, 1978), pp. 673-93; G. Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado: secoli XIV e XV* (Turin, 1979); G. Chittolini, "Le terre separate nel ducato di Milano in età sforzesca", in *Milano nell'età di Ludovico il Moro*, 2 vols. (Milan, 1983), 1, pp. 115-28, L. Frangioni, "La politica economica del dominio di Milano nei secoli XV-XVI", *Nova rivista storica*, lxxi (1987), pp. 253-68.

<sup>63</sup> Chittolini, *Formazione dello stato regionale*; G. Cherubini, *Una comunità dell'Appennino dal XII al XV secolo. Montecoronaro dalla signoria dell'abbazia del Trivio al dominio di Firenze* (Florence, 1972). The lack of seigneurial power may be connected with the weakness of fiefdom-vassal institutions in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. See P. Cammarosano, "Feudo e proprietà nel medioevo toscano", in *Nobiltà e ceti dirigenti in Toscana nei secoli XI-XIII: strutture e concreti* (Monte Orto, 1982), pp. 1-12.



families owned over a quarter of the capital's wealth.<sup>64</sup> Since movable, commercial wealth was the easiest to conceal and was at the same time mostly concentrated in the hands of Florence's merchant oligarchy, while living quarters, including palaces, were tax-exempt, the proportion of regional wealth controlled by the dominant Florentine families was in fact substantially higher. How this concentration came about is well known. The main mechanism operated through taxes and forced financial transfers from the countryside and subject towns, transfers which went principally to fund the state's public debt, the *Monte* — whose shareholders were nearly exclusively Florentines, and the wealthiest in the city.<sup>65</sup> Florence's financial supremacy was thus not the direct effect of its economic pre-eminence; financial capital was concentrated in the hands of the Florentine oligarchy by the purely political mechanism of taxation and forced exactions upheld by military force.<sup>66</sup>

Hertlihy has rightly argued that this distribution of wealth favoured Florentine commercial and industrial capital and tended to orient regional production around the capital's needs. But he also believes, echoed here by Paolo Malanima, that this was an improvement over the pre-Black Death situation of "numerous, free communes [which] had engaged in ferocious competition in the same economic sectors... The growth of the political and, above all, the financial power of Florence undercut this often wasteful competition and encouraged an evolution towards a more coordinated and rational use of regional resources".<sup>67</sup>

While there is little doubt that Florence used its new powers to reorient regional markets for its own purposes, it is less clear that this benefited the economy as a whole. The extraordinary intensity of political, military and fiscal pressure exerted on a relatively small territory, pressure which despite its many shortcomings might have provided more favourable institutional conditions for market integration, was never used to this end. The Florentine state was a

<sup>64</sup> Hertlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, pp. 94-100.

<sup>65</sup> Becker, "Economic Change"; M. B. Becker, "Problemi della finanza pubblica fiorentina della seconda metà del Trecento e dei primi del Quattrocento", *Archivio storico italiano*, cxvii (1965), pp. 433-66; G. Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 208-25.

<sup>66</sup> G. Pinto, "Per la storia della struttura sociale delle città toscane nel Trecento: la distribuzione della ricchezza a Firenze e a Siena", in Gensini (ed.), *Toscana nel secolo xiv*, p. 186, argues that differences in wealth between Florence and the smaller Tuscan communes before the Black Death were far smaller than they later became.

<sup>67</sup> Hertlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, p. 105 (quotation); Hertlihy, "Distribution of Wealth".

patchwork of juxtaposed customs jurisdictions possessing distinct administrations and different regulations. The situation may have actually deteriorated during the fifteenth century and under Cosimo de' Medici in the sixteenth, when a series of franchises and special privileges and exemptions were granted which turned the state into a patchwork of fiscally semi-autonomous territories.<sup>68</sup>

Such behaviour is paradoxical, however, only if one believes that the state was actively pursuing a policy of economic integration.<sup>69</sup> If instead one imputes to the fifteenth-century Florentine government no intentions beyond those of improving the position of the social group or groups it represented, while leaving existing economic and fiscal structures untouched when they did not impinge on their interests, its seemingly contradictory policies — strong intervention in areas such as the woollen industry which affected Florence's own share of the Tuscan and international markets, fiscal exploitation of the subject territories, and acceptance of the status quo in most other sectors of the economy — are easily explained.

Institutional inertia and political expediency, therefore, together with exploitative relations between town and countryside, created a set of powerful constraints on the rural producers' commercial opportunities. In such a system it could be quite rational for a peasant to be "conservative" and *not* to become strongly involved in the market-place, since the dice were loaded against him. Prices were unfavourable and risks — given relatively weak transport-networks, inefficient transmission of prices, but most especially institutional imponderables like urban price-setting and requisition — were very high. We shall see below that tenuous arrangements like sharecropping further reinforced subsistence and aversion to the market.

#### 4) *Regional Specialization*

The analysis of patterns of demographic change, of urban institutions and of market structures has established a number of important points, the gist of which is that, in the long run, the Tuscan and Sicilian responses to demographic crisis differed very significantly,

<sup>68</sup> Fasano Guarini, "Città soggette e comitati", p. 16; Dini, "Vie di comunicazione", p. 269.

<sup>69</sup> Malanima, "Formazione di una regione economica", pp. 268-9, accepts that Florence's domination set limits to regional integration and economic efficiency, but gives a generally positive assessment of long-term developments. He argues elsewhere (*ibid.*, p. 265) that economic integration was slow because central political decisions could not be implemented efficiently on the periphery of the state, thus implying that the process of "rationalization" was a result of deliberate state activities.



and that of crucial import to this difference were the urban and state institutions peculiar to each region. So far, however, some of the main contentions of the theory outlined in the first part of the article — that the most important economic consequence of the late medieval crisis was regional specialization, and that peasants responded to new conditions according to a rational evaluation of commercial opportunities rather than on the basis of unchanging subsistence-preferences — have not yet been addressed.

To the north-east, val Demone included most of the Sicilian extension of the Appennines, which lie like a great backbone between Messina in the east and Termini in the west. It was a predominantly mountainous and wooded region, with only one alluvial, grain-growing plain around Milazzo, opposite the Aeolian islands. It was also the smallest of the three *vali*, covering only about 6,700 km<sup>2</sup> of Sicily's 24,500 km<sup>2</sup>. Val di Mazara, which coincided with western Sicily, was the largest *vallo*, with over 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It was a vast expanse of clayey, sandy and tuffaceous hills particularly favourable to grain cultivation. To the south-east val di Noto, the second largest *vallo* (8,499 km<sup>2</sup>), included a mountain range, the Iblei, which kept it well watered; the soil was light and fertile and was ideal for arboriculture. It also included the largest alluvial plain in Sicily, to the west of Catania.

Agricultural specialization had to some extent already existed during the thirteenth century. A tax in kind levied in 1282 shows val di Mazara as the main wheat-producing area; eastern Sicily produced proportionately more barley. Wine surpluses were produced along the northern and north-eastern coasts, mainly in val di Noto; sheep were also more numerous in val di Noto. In general, val di Mazara dominated staple agricultural production, and most of Sicily's wheat and barley exports came from this area.

By the fifteenth century these first forms of differentiation, the result more of natural-resource endowments than of specialization through market forces, were being better defined and were extending to other sectors of the economy. Most importantly, the grain market was slowly becoming more unified. Val di Mazara, already the main grain producer in the thirteenth century, specialized further in the wake of the demographic crisis. The abolition in 1398 of the tax on domestic trade by sea increased val Demone's grain imports from western Sicily; as a result of eastern Sicily's rapid demographic growth after the 1450s, this area became largely dependent on western supplies. During the fifteenth century domestic trade from west to

east rose from 1–2 to 20 per cent as a proportion of overall shipments (including exports abroad).

Before the eighteenth century, both yield ratios (on average 10:1 in the fourteenth century) and production per hectare in Sicily were as high or higher than in the most advanced north European countries (England, Flanders and the Netherlands), and substantially better than in northern Italy or the Baltic regions. Sicilian grain was cheaper than that produced elsewhere in the western Mediterranean, and was widely exported. A number of factors contributed to this situation. First, an endemic species of durum wheat grew in Sicily, which gave very high yields and was especially resilient to storage and transport by sea. Secondly, cereals were cultivated on large-scale, relatively capital-intensive and specialized farms within a highly commercialized and competitive economy; cereal production also benefited from being closely integrated with animal husbandry, which provided cheap and abundant manure and draught oxen.

Sicily also had the advantage of relatively low transfer costs. The island's long coastline meant that small ports for loading grain (*caricaforti*) could be opened very easily, thereby reducing transport costs by land. Cheap transport by sea explains why most large cities were situated along the island's coast. The unification of the regional market, and the government's role as arbiter in setting domestic consumption prices (*mele*) and customs dues (*tratte*), further reduced the costs of information, negotiation, co-ordination and enforcement of contracts.

Easy access to outside food supply allowed eastern Sicily — the area, as remarked above, where peasant smallholdings were most common — to specialize in other products. These included wine, oil, timber, livestock and cloth. Messina became the centre of an integrated market which spanned eastern val Demone and the whole of southern Calabria. By the late fifteenth century a complex pattern of exchange had arisen, centred on Messina, whereby Messina exchanged livestock from val Demone for timber in Calabria, which it shipped to western Sicily to buy grain to feed the city.

Besides its own timber, val Demone also exported seasonal labour to Palermo's sugar industries. By the 1450s eastern Sicilian wine had also gained a sufficiently high reputation to be shipped to the royal court in Naples. In the fifteenth century urban and semi-urban cloth manufactures (some woollen, but mainly linen, cotton and fustian industries) spread in the east, especially in val di Noto; western Sicily, by contrast, tended to deindustrialize. Production of textile raw



materials was also concentrated in eastern Sicily and in particular in val di Noto. A characteristic of these new manufactures was the lack of guilds, possibly for technical reasons and because of lack of foreign competition within a rapidly expanding market.

Western Sicily developed flourishing tunny and leather industries, the latter particularly in Trapani. Trapani and Marsala also expanded coral and salt production. Mineral resources (mainly iron, alum and, to a lesser extent, salt) were concentrated in the more mountainous val Demone; the main salt-pans, however, were found in the interior and along the coasts of val di Mazara. Sulphur, which began to be seriously exploited with the development of firearms in the fifteenth century, was also concentrated in the west.

Late medieval Sicily's two main export industries, silk and sugar, also expanded strongly in the course of the fifteenth century. The sugar industry developed first in western Sicily around Palermo, and spread to the east in the 1430s and 1440s. The silk industry was, by contrast, essentially confined to eastern val Demone around Messina and was based on peasant family production. In the 1440s Messina was exporting about 24,000 lbs. of raw silk, rising to 48,000-60,000 lbs. in the 1470s and to possibly as much as 100,000 lbs. around 1506. Silk production seems to have enabled peasant smallholders in the eastern val Demone to develop a highly intensive agricultural cycle, which integrated wine, oil, flax and silk production, cloth manufacture and seasonal employment in the sugar industry. Such intensive agriculture (which relied as we saw on massive grain imports) explains the area's extraordinary demographic growth after the 1450s and its very high population density thereafter.

Such knowledge as we have about the structure and development of the Tuscan economy after 1350 refers mostly to individual towns. Regional specialization has hardly been analysed, and what has been done tends to take the view from Florence rather than looking at its region as a whole. What follows is therefore a bird's-eye view which may underestimate developments in production for the regional market.

By the early fifteenth century Florence controlled roughly half of modern Tuscany. However, with an area of 11,000 km<sup>2</sup>, its state was only 40 per cent the size of Sicily, not much larger than val di Mazara — a fact to be noted in assessing the nature and extent of the area's economic integration.

Rather like Sicily, there were "three Tuscanyes" in the later Middle Ages.<sup>70</sup> To the north and north-east the Apennines were rich in

<sup>70</sup> Pinto, *Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo*, ch. 1.

livestock and all its subsidiary products, in timber, iron and migrant labour. To the south the republic was bounded by the vast and scarcely inhabited territory of the Maremma (most of which was controlled by Siena); this area was similar to the western and south-western territory of Pisa, large tracts of which began to be reclaimed from marshland only after 1450. Most of the state consisted of the fertile alluvial plains and hills of central Tuscany, which before the Black Death was one of the most densely populated countryside in Europe.

During the latter half of the fourteenth and the fifteenth century minor towns were stifled, sometimes never to recover. The economies of Volterra and San Gimignano declined sharply;<sup>71</sup> Arezzo, particularly its cloth industry, seems also to have stagnated or declined.<sup>72</sup> Pistoia lost its international mercantile community to Florentine "competition" to become a minor iron- and leathermaking centre.<sup>73</sup>

Pisa, Florence's strongest competitor before 1350, began to weaken thereafter partly as a result of the wars with its neighbour. Its fall in 1406 had dramatic effects on the population (which declined by about 40 per cent between 1407 and 1427) and the economy. Half or more of the ruling merchant families and individuals left the city, beginning a diaspora throughout Italy and the western Mediterranean which lasted at least half a century.<sup>74</sup> Local industry, cloth manufacture in particular, was stifled.<sup>75</sup> Possibly as a result of Pisan decline on international markets after 1406, the previously quite lenient relationship between town and countryside — up to the end of the fourteenth century the latter had been more a reservoir of men than a source of grain, which Pisa mainly imported by sea — became increasingly

<sup>71</sup> E. Fiumi, *Storia economica e sociale di San Gimignano* (Florence, 1961); E. Fiumi, "Popolazione, società ed economia volterrana dal casato del 1428/29", in E. Fiumi, *Volterra e San Gimignano nel Medioevo* (San Gimignano, [1983]), pp. 194-260.

<sup>72</sup> Tanpherson, "Sistema economico", pp. 58-9.

<sup>73</sup> D. Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town* (New Haven, 1967), ch. 7.

<sup>74</sup> G. Petralia, "Crisi ed emigrazione dei ceti eminenti a Pisa durante il primo dominio fiorentino: l'ortizzazione cittadina e la ricerca di spazi esterni", in *I ceti dirigenti nella Toscana del Quattrocento* (Monte Ortole, 1987), pp. 291-352; G. Petralia, *Ranchieri e famiglie mercantili nel Medioevo toscano: l'emigrazione dei pisani in Sicilia nel Quattrocento* (Pisa, 1989), esp. pp. 83-99.

<sup>75</sup> B. Casati, "Operazioni economiche straniere a Pisa all'indomani della dominazione fiorentina (1406-1416)", in *Studi in memoria di Federico Melis*, 5 vols. (Naples, 1978), iii, pp. 193-4; P. Silca, "Pisa sotto Firenze dal 1406 al 1433", *Studi storici*, xviii (1909), pp. 133-83; F. Melis, "Uno sguardo al mercato dei panni di lana a Pisa nella seconda metà del Trecento", *Economia e storia*, vi (1959), pp. 321-65.



exploitative.<sup>76</sup> Rural recovery was very slow.<sup>77</sup> All favourable measures for Pisa and especially for its countryside date from the second half of the fifteenth century. They coincide with Florence's attempts to turn the Pisan *contado* into the granary of the Tuscan state, and with land purchases there by the Medici and other major Florentine families.<sup>78</sup> Pisa's rebellion of 1494-1509 was the culmination, and to some extent the turning-point, of a century of intense Florentine exploitation.<sup>79</sup>

The neo-classical assumption that "all things are substitutes", so that investments will shift from export markets to internal markets if the former contract, is unable to predict how long and how costly this process will be and makes no concession to structural impediments to the efficient reallocation of resources. Tuscany's institutional features strongly suggest that a rapid and efficient reallocation of resources from foreign to local markets was very unlikely to occur. In other words, the contraction of Tuscany's foreign trade after the Black Death does not seem to have resulted in any substitutive developments in the domestic economy, but to have led on the contrary to a net loss for regional welfare. By imposing commercial and manufacturing monopolies over its regional rivals in the context of a generalized contraction of European long-distance trade after the Black Death, the Florentine ruling oligarchy *reduced* the region's ability to specialize and to pay for grain imports by exporting manufactures and services.

An unintended consequence of the Florentine government's actions to eliminate competition in the sectors of the Tuscan economy where it traditionally prevailed — the production of luxury textiles for, and the supply of commercial and banking services to, international

<sup>76</sup> M. Lazzari, "La Toscana senza mezzadria: il caso pisano alla fine del medioevo", in *Contadini e proprietari nella Toscana moderna*, 2 vols. (Florence, 1979), I, pp. 294-5; C. E. Meek, *The Commune of Lucca under Pisan Rule, 1342-1369* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), ch. 3.

<sup>77</sup> F. Leverotti, "La crisi demografica nella Toscana del Trecento: l'esempio delle Sei Miglia lucchesi", in Gensini (ed.), *Toscana nel secolo xiv*, pp. 100-1.

<sup>78</sup> M. Mallett, "Pisa and Florence in the Fifteenth Century: Aspects of the Period of the First Florentine Domination", in Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine Studies*, pp. 403-41; Fasano Guarini, "Città soggette e contadi", pp. 24-7; P. Malanima, "La proprietà fiorentina e la diffusione della mezzadria nel contado pisano nei secoli xv e xvi", in *Contadini e proprietari nella Toscana moderna*, I, pp. 345-75.

<sup>79</sup> See M. Mallett, "The Sea Consuls of Florence in the Fifteenth Century", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, xxvii (1959), pp. 156-69. It seems doubtful whether the emancipation of Pisan guilds from Florentine tutelage after 1459 — for which, see M. Lupo Gentile, "Le corporazioni della arti a Pisa nel secolo xv", *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, ix (1940), pp. 198-9 — had a significant impact on the city's economy.

markets — may thus have been to transform the previous deficiencies of Tuscan agriculture into a serious constraint on economic growth. In the early fourteenth century Tuscany, and Florence in particular, had sustained its huge population with sizeable wheat imports — on average 20 per cent of Florence's needs were met this way<sup>80</sup> — which it paid for with its visible and invisible exports; domestic agriculture was unable to sustain the region's urban sector.

Although returns to seed are not a very accurate measure of agricultural productivity, in Tuscany the ratio (4.5:1) was rather low.<sup>81</sup> In addition, the long-term transformation of agrarian structures in the most fertile parts of central Tuscany into sharecropping farms, *podori a mezzadria* — a transformation enforced and upheld by urban laws and fiscal policies — emphasized peasant self-sufficiency and thereby actively *inhibited* commercialization and specialization. Everything, or as much as possible, needed to feed, clothe and equip the sharecropper and his family had to be produced on the farm. Self-sufficiency was thus not the result of successful peasant smallholder aspirations, but was a deliberate economic strategy pursued by urban landholders.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Pinto, *Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo*, p. 144.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>82</sup> Much of the literature on Tuscan *mezzadria* is derived from Giorgetti, *Contadini e proprietari*, esp. chs. 2, 3, 5. Cf. G. Cherubini, *Signori contadini borghesi: ricerche sulla società italiana del basso medioevo* (Florence, 1974), pt. 4; Pinto, *Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo*, passim; G. Piccinini, "Seminare, fruttare, raccogliere": *mezzadri e salariati sulle terre di Monte Oliveto Maggiore (1374-1430)* (Milan, 1982), esp. ch. 2. On fiscal policies in neighbouring Siena, see G. Piccinini, "I mezzadri di fronte al fisco: primo esame della normativa senese del Quattrocento", in *Cultura e società nell'Italia medievale: studi per Paolo Brezzi*, 2 vols. (Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, Studi storici, clxxxiv-clxxxix, Rome, 1988), II, pp. 665-82. Why would urban owners deliberately construct a tenurial system that inhibited food production for the city and a future market for its products? A possible answer lies in the difference between long-term social and short-term private returns inherent in *mezzadria* (in other words, in *mezzadria*'s negative externalities). *Mezzadria* was very profitable to individual landholders because it gave high rates of return at low investment costs (most improvements were carried out with peasant labour), food for subsistence and for speculation on urban markets. Indeed, the more *mezzadria* spread, the more restricted the food market became, with the result that opportunities for speculation increased. The state was, however, unwilling to reduce *mezzadria*'s externalities for at least two reasons. In the first place, the oligarchy in power was composed of *mezzadria* landlords; secondly, *mezzadria*'s long-term negative effects must have been unforeseen. As to the effects of *mezzadria* on local cloth manufactures, I have already suggested reasons why Florentines would be uninterested in developing them. In sum, although there undoubtedly was deliberate collusion between landlords and the state, such that the state upheld *mezzadria* legally and fiscally, we cannot impute the latter with *deliberately* damaging general welfare (although by providing fiscal benefits to *mezzadri* the government was deliberately redistributing wealth away from tenants and small rural landholders).



Partly as a result of these developments in tenurial arrangements, Tuscan agriculture was unable before the 1420s and 1430s at the earliest to benefit significantly from the enormous demographic losses and land desertion. Agriculture was beset instead by a series of crises which forced Florence to import grain from abroad for nearly a century after the Black Death.<sup>83</sup> Signs of rising productivity (reflected in declining or stagnant wheat prices) appear only in the early fifteenth century, decades after most other European regions. Towards the middle of the fifteenth century Tuscany was briefly able to export some grain in favourable years; when the population began to recover, however, agricultural response was inadequate and famines were once again common.<sup>84</sup>

Malanima has recently argued that sharecropping also inhibited the development of a rural woollen industry, by not allowing the peasant family any spare time in the year's agricultural cycle to work a loom.<sup>85</sup> Silk production (including spinning or reeling), by contrast, could thrive because sharecroppers could easily integrate growing mulberry trees into their seasonal work. The lack of rural cloth industries, in other words, is imputed to purely technical reasons.

It seems on the contrary that the reasons were mainly institutional. Sharecroppers produced linen cloth for domestic consumption and spun or reeled silk.<sup>86</sup> It is far from clear why they could find time for these activities and not for producing linen or other cloth for the market. Around neighbouring Siena, for example, female sharecroppers commonly spun linen and wove wool. The landlord provided the raw materials, the women provided the labour and covered production costs, and output was divided equally.<sup>87</sup>

Did Florentine Tuscany in fact lack this kind of arrangement? The belief (based mostly on evidence for Florence itself) that in reaction to the economic crisis Italian cloth industries took refuge in luxury production is clearly mistaken.<sup>88</sup> Both the model of the crisis set out

<sup>83</sup> Pinto, *Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo*, pp. 145, 148-53; G. Pinto, "Commercio del grano e politica annonaria nella Toscana del Quattrocento: la corrispondenza dell'Uffizio fiorentino dell'Abbondanza negli anni 1411-1412", in *Studi di storia economica toscana nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento in memoria di Federico Miceli* (Pisa, 1978), pp. 257-9.

<sup>84</sup> R. Goldthwaite, "I prezzi del grano a Firenze dal xiv al xvi secolo", *Quaderni storici*, x (1975), pp. 5-36; Pinto, "Appunti sulla politica annonaria", pp. 630-1.

<sup>85</sup> P. Malanima, *La decadenza di un'economia cittadina: l'industria di Firenze nei secoli xiv-xviii* (Bologna, 1982).

<sup>86</sup> J. Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence: Provincial Society in Renaissance Pistoia* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>87</sup> Piccini, *Seminare, fruttare, macchiare*, pp. 117-20.

<sup>88</sup> Epstein, "Textile Industry", pp. 146-9.

at the beginning of this article and developments elsewhere in Italy and Europe suggest that new manufactures for the regional market were likely to develop also in Tuscany. Disregard for these lesser manufactures has meant, for example, that the possibility that exported industries converted to production for the Tuscan market, in response to the Florentine monopoly in the high-quality sector, has not been explored.<sup>89</sup>

On the other hand, the spread of sharecropping (*mezzadria*) prevented a significant redistribution of incomes between land and labour after the Black Death: the half share of the product paid as rent was as high as average peasant dues (including taxes) *before* the Black Death elsewhere in Europe.<sup>90</sup> Increasing rural impoverishment, particularly of sharecroppers, in the fifteenth century may consequently have held back "the development of a strong local market for inexpensive manufactures".<sup>91</sup>

In addition to weak demand for cheap textiles, the political and economic stranglehold of Florence and its oligarchy over its region may explain the apparent lack of a rural textile industry. *Mezzadria*, which did at the time structurally exclude agricultural production from the effects of market competition, did not necessarily exclude cloth-manufacturing on a part-time basis, as developments around Siena show. The apparent lack of cloth production by Florentine *mezzadri* may have been the indirect result of policies which were beyond the individual peasants' and landlords' control. The Florentine ruling classes were, perhaps uniquely for Italy at the time, in the position effectively to destroy rival industrial or commercial activity by enforcing favourable protectionist legislation<sup>92</sup> and by systematically diverting wealth away from the countryside and other towns to themselves. On the one hand, with the exception of Prato all competing cloth industries producing for export seem to have been destroyed; on the other, little capital was available outside Florence to invest in other manufactures. The Florentines themselves may have had little

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence*, pp. 104-5, 107-8 (wool manufacture in Pistoia). There are some references to rural cloth production in De La Roncière, *Firenze: centre économique régional*, iii, pp. 800-1.

<sup>90</sup> Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, pp. 140-1; S. R. Epstein, *Alle origini della fattoria toscana: l'ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala e le sue terre (c.1250-c.1450)* (Florence, 1986), pp. 166, 274.

<sup>91</sup> Herlihy, "Distribution of Wealth", p. 155. On rural poverty, see Herlihy, "Santa Maria Imperatrice", M. S. Mazzi and S. Ravagli, *Gli uomini e le cose nelle campagne fiorentine del Quattrocento* (Florence, 1983).

<sup>92</sup> G. Guidi, *Il governo della città-repubblica di Firenze del primo Quattrocento*, 4 vols. (Florence, 1981), ii, pp. 81-2.



interest in diversifying from a luxury industry they dominated and largely thrived on into cheap rural production with small profit margins.

Signs of regional specialization do, of course, exist for Florentine Tuscany,<sup>93</sup> but specialization involved intensifying existing activities more than developing new ones. Pisa developed its soap industry, mainly for Florentine consumption; its arsenals expanded in response to Florentine demand. The Pisan plain, which began to be drained after the mid-fifteenth century, was slowly transformed from cattle pasture into a Florentine "granary"; *mezzadria* was introduced under the auspices of the Medici, Strozzi and other Florentine patricians. Pistoia expanded the iron industries in its hinterland and exploited nearby livestock in the Apennines to develop a leather industry. The Apennines provided the region more generally with timber, livestock, wool, cheese and meat; sheep transhumance to the Maremma increased.<sup>94</sup> Petty artisans disappeared from the smaller Apennine communities, possibly as a result of improvements in the regional division of labour.<sup>95</sup> Vineyards, olive groves and fruit orchards expanded, and their quality improved.<sup>96</sup> Florence itself weathered the crisis in the international cloth markets by diversifying first into high-quality cloth, and following the rise in demand after 1450 also into a cheaper variety, the *panni del Garbo*, in response to Turkish demand.<sup>97</sup>

Tuscany developed a flourishing silk industry, which seems, however, to have been more highly concentrated than Sicily's within a narrow geographical area. The main centre of production outside Florence was Pescia, but its position in the Tuscan economy was, and remained throughout the early modern period, nearly unique.<sup>98</sup> The other main exception was Prato, another oft-quoted case of success in the woollen industry. From the mid-fourteenth century Pescia and its hinterland, Valdinevole, and from the late fifteenth century Prato, were given major fiscal and commercial privileges.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families*, ch. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Cherubini, *Comunità dell'Appennino*, pp. 50-4.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-3.

<sup>96</sup> Pinto, *Toscana nel tardo Medio Evo*, pp. 152, 178, 186-92.

<sup>97</sup> H. Hoshino, *L'Arte della Lana in Firenze nel basso Medioevo: il commercio della lana e il mercato dei panni fiorentini nei secoli xiii-xv* (Florence, 1980), ch. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Malanima, *Decadenza di un'economia cittadina*. See contra, Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence*, J. Brown, "The Particulate of Pescia in the Fifteenth Century", in *Cattiduganti nella Toscana del Quattrocento*, pp. 279-87.

<sup>99</sup> Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence*, pp. 119, 144-5; L. Allegra, "La storia moderna di Prato", *Quaderni storici*, xxiii (1988), p. 990.

Prato, which was integrated earlier and far more successfully within the Florentine economy than other towns, was the main woollen-producing centre outside Florence up to the eighteenth century and beyond.<sup>100</sup> The example of the two main manufactures outside Florence thus confirms my more general hypothesis about Florentine economic hegemony: these manufactures' success was the result of particularly favourable institutional conditions, which set them apart from all other Tuscan communities.

### III

Let us now briefly return to the three issues raised at the beginning of this article: regional economic specialization as a result of the late medieval crisis; the impact of medieval cities on markets and economic growth; and the origins and nature of regional differentiation in late medieval Italy.

From the late fourteenth century Sicily's different subregions began increasingly to specialize according to their natural and human endowments and to integrate in a mutually reinforcing whole. Specialization (in silk and sugar production, and to a lesser extent in wheat) took place under the stimulus of international markets, but the main impetus came from the domestic market as a result of rising lower-to-middle-class demand. High productivity in cereal production enabled Sicily not only to be totally self-sufficient, but also to export an increasing proportion of its grain output. Both the high rate of demographic expansion and the strong flow of immigrants during the second half of the fifteenth century point to an attractive and expanding economy.

In Tuscany, on the other hand, urban monopolies over trade were traditionally strong and, since Florence did not change exploitative town/country relations where they did not challenge the city's direct interests, such monopolies were little affected by the establishment of the territorial state. Production for the market was consequently unattractive to peasants. The continuing incidence of famines and rising grain prices for many decades after the Black Death suggest that peasants did not exploit the possibilities which depopulation opened up. The spread of sharecropping also lowered incentives to specialization, in part because it allowed the landlord to enforce peasant subsistence, but also because it did not permit significant

<sup>100</sup> Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence*, pp. 48-64.



improvements in tenant conditions, contrary to developments in Sicily and elsewhere in Europe.

Partly as a result of the constraints on Tuscan agriculture, differences in agricultural productivity — as reflected imperfectly in average returns to seed for wheat (10:1 or more in Sicily, 4.5:1 in Tuscany) and in agricultural balances of trade — were very striking. Whereas for a long time after the Black Death Tuscan agriculture was unable to feed a vastly reduced urban population, and was incapable of sustaining rising demographic pressure during the late fifteenth century, Sicilian agriculture managed both to support a greater non-agricultural percentage in the population and to export increasing quantities of grain with no harm to regional welfare.

In Tuscany the drain on small-town and rural resources through taxation limited investment opportunities in new manufactures and restricted demand for cheap manufactures, setting further constraints on industrial development. The substitution of one Florentine monopoly for the previous multiple urban monopolies deindustrialized Tuscany in those sectors in which Florence brooked no competition; the destruction of competition in cloth production for the international market in Pisa, Volterra and Arezzo does not seem to have been adequately compensated for by new manufactures in Prato and Pescia. By lowering regional manufacturing exports, the capacity to compensate for low agricultural productivity by importing grain from abroad was reduced. As a result, local agriculture was further insulated from outside competition.

It is likely that further research will reveal that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the economy of Florentine Tuscany did increasingly specialize and improve productivity. None the less, the fact that Florence never did regain its pre-Black Death importance, that it recovered from the late medieval population crisis far more slowly than other northern Italian regions and Sicily, and that this recovery was strongest where Florence's influence was weakest, points to fundamental constraints on Tuscany's economic growth, which even the less Florence-oriented policies of Cosimo de' Medici and his successors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seem to have been unable to reverse.<sup>101</sup> Nor must one forget that the Floren-

<sup>101</sup> See Fasano Guarini, "Potere centrale e comunità soggette"; Fasano Guarini, "Città soggette e contadi". For an overly positive view of Cosimo de' Medici's rule, see A. Anzilotti, *La costituzione interna dello Stato Fiorentino sotto il duca Cosimo I de' Medici* (Florence, 1910); followed by J. C. Brown, "Concepts of Political Economy: Cosimo I de' Medici in a Comparative European Context", in *Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell'Europa del '500*, 3 vols. (Florence, 1983), pp. 279-93.

time state was less than half the size of Sicily and that in consequence the influence of the capital's market (as opposed to its polity) in reshaping the region's economy must have been correspondingly stronger; Florence's seeming inability to do this very effectively is a further indication of the strength of the political, institutional, class and sectorial forces which prevented long-term integration and development.

The relative impact which different modes and costs of transport had on regional specialization should not be overlooked. In this respect, Sicily had a clear natural advantage over Tuscany because of the speed and cheapness of coastal traffic compared to transport overland. Once the process of specialization had begun, Sicilian integration was clearly much aided by its long coasts. Nevertheless, differences in natural endowments cannot, in the end, explain diverging regional development, for they remain mere potentialities as long as they cannot be put to good use. Before the early fifteenth century the Sicilian market was still very fragmented *despite* the opportunities provided by coastal transport; these opportunities were exploited only once political, institutional and economic conditions — such as, for example, the abolition of customs on domestic grain trade by sea after the Aragonese conquest of 1392-8 — made it possible and profitable to do so. On the other hand, we should not underestimate the capacities of Tuscany's (and Sicily's) well-developed road network to serve regional needs.<sup>102</sup>

In the introduction to this article, I suggested that the effect of medieval towns on their surrounding economy can be understood only by drawing a clear distinction between urbanization and urban institutional powers. How did urban structures affect economic development in the two regions?

Sicily was highly urbanized, but urban control over the countryside was rather weak; the region's high rate of urbanization was the result mainly of high agricultural productivity. Further evidence of the countryside's relative autonomy in relation to the city comes from the different rates of demographic decline in the two sectors. Tuscany was also highly urbanized, but by contrast had extremely strong institutional control over the rural hinterland. It was this power, rather than a substantial agricultural surplus, which enabled towns and Florence in particular better to withstand the demographic crisis.

<sup>102</sup> For Tuscany, see De La Roncière, *Florence: centre économique régional*, iii, pp. 833-946; for Sicily, A. Gualfrida, "Innesti di viaggi e trasporti", in R. Romano (ed.), *Storia della Sicilia*, 10 vols. (Naples, 1979-81), iii, pp. 469-83.



As a kingdom, Sicily benefited from the lack of strong urban monopolies over food supplies; the state simply did not allow them to develop or survive. Towns obtained privileges to provision themselves or, at most, to protect local wine production; concessions tended to enhance integration rather than local protectionism. The main restrictions on trade came from the feudal aristocracy, whose monopolies and trade customs the crown was unable or unwilling to challenge fully. The absence of monopolies probably also extended to manufacture. Cloth manufacture, which was able to withstand competition in the fifteenth century from the Lombard fustian industry, apparently lacked corporations; no protectionist measures were passed in its favour.

No city or metropolis dominated the island's economy; rapid changes in the size and rank of towns indicate that rent positions based on political or economic monopolies were rare and that competition for resources was strong. Sicily's peculiarity lay in its possessing three distinctive urban subregions, two dominated respectively by Palermo and Messina, and a third, *val di Noto*, lacking any stably structured urban hierarchy. The effect of the late medieval crisis was initially to destructure these areas and subsequently to reorganize them in a way superficially similar to the situation prevailing in the late thirteenth century, when Palermo and Messina exerted overwhelming dominance over their respective regions. But whereas in the 1270s and 1280s *vali* were bound by a few, tenuous links, which were easily severed during the political unrest of the fourteenth century, by the 1490s connections were too strong to be broken. Palermo's functions as political and administrative capital and its attendant demographic growth were unable to establish domination over the island's economy, arguably because, like other Sicilian cities, Palermo lacked the institutional means to uphold a similar hegemony.

Tuscany suffered from Florence's nearly unfettered domination. While establishing its territorial state, Florence encountered no rivals, had little need to come to terms with competitors, and so was able to substitute a general monopoly for the previous multiplicity of partially competing ones. Florence's hegemony was enforced and nurtured by taxation and upheld by military might; regional primacy depended on draining human and financial resources from the subject towns and countryside.

Although nearly half the Sicilian population was under feudal lordship, all the largest cities and towns obeyed royal authority (including the queen's). Since the demesne had a higher rate of urbaniza-

tion than the feudal territories, it must also have controlled a proportionately higher volume of trade. This advantage was sustained by the network of mutual trade franchises which was established throughout the demesne during the fifteenth century. An important prerequisite for the enforcement of trade franchises was the re-establishment after 1392 of a strong central state, whose interests did not coincide with those of individual towns and which at the same time could uphold the demesne's rights against feudal encroachment. The state was instrumental in upholding and stimulating specialization relatively free from many traditional feudal constraints.

In Sicily the state was always distinct from the cities. Although the various feudal factions which controlled the island between 1350 and 1390 had their own 'capitals', their political and economic interests did not identify with individual cities. The distinction was strengthened after 1412, when Sicily no longer had an independent sovereign. Cities enjoyed very few monopolies, and those they possessed needed to be negotiated with the central state. The state tended to favour free trade within the island for its own ends, which were both political (avoidance of artificially induced dearth) and economic (the stimulus trade gave to the economy and the free access to export markets which the crown could tax). This tendency, however, conflicted with other state interests, also political (recognition of loyalty through the concession of economic privileges) and economic (part of the state's own revenues came from tolls on internal trade). Even the landed aristocracy (which had early on moved to the towns) and the urban patriciate might at times pursue goals at odds with those of their town of residence — for example, when grain prices on the international market were higher than in Sicily and there was thus an incentive to jeopardize urban supplies.

In Tuscany the state *was* the city, or rather, it coincided to a large extent with the ruling Florentine oligarchy. In an unusually unmitigated fashion, this oligarchy bent the institutions of the state to its own purposes. Florentine ruling classes were able to exploit the weakness of alternative, non-urban centres of power and of the other Tuscan communes after the Black Death to establish their own largely untrammelled authority. By simply exploiting to their own ends previously established local communal structures, and by otherwise leaving untouched pre-existing town/country relationships as exemplified in fiscal status, they displayed considerable institutional inertia rather than the active, beneficent, quasi-mercantilist policies suggested by Matanina and Judith Brown.



The preceding analysis has shown the importance of institutional factors in directing the outcome of the crisis: institutions shaped class conflict, regulated access to resources, and set powerful constraints on the choices facing producers in the market. This last point is made very clear if we compare peasant commercial strategies (a key factor in Postan's and Brenner's accounts of the crisis) in the two regions.

We saw above that for Brenner (and implicitly for Postan also), a necessary condition for economic specialization and growth was the expropriation of the peasantry from the land, because peasants were both conservative and lacked the necessary investment capital to pursue strategies of expansion. Developments in Sicily and Tuscany, however, suggest a very different picture. In the first place, in both regions the areas where peasant landholding was strongest (val Demone and the more "marginal" areas of Tuscany) led the way in the demographic recovery after the mid-fifteenth century. Secondly, given the necessary preconditions — cheap alternative sources of food supply and favourable outlets for their produce — peasants in val Demone showed no sign of avoiding the risks associated with specializing for domestic and international markets. Lastly, evidence of subsistence strategies is found for the region (Tuscany) and the form of land tenure (sharecropping on urban-owned land) which on Brenner's account should have been most capitalistically inclined. The behaviour of Tuscan landlords was, of course, perfectly consistent with the institutional context they operated in. This context was, however, heavily influenced by urban forms of "surplus extraction by means of extra-economic compulsion", which, as Brenner states, had to disappear before sustained growth could occur.<sup>103</sup>

These examples turn Brenner's and Postan's schemes on their head — peasant smallholders were market-oriented, urban landholders were "feudal" — and validate the general assumption that peasant economic behaviour must be considered both rational and flexible in the face of different economic constraints and opportunities. In other words, one can neither deduce behavioural patterns deterministically from given property relations and tenurial arrangements, nor can one simply invoke peasant "backwardness" or, more charitably, "subsistence strategies" to explain a region's economic stagnation in the early modern period. Each local and regional situation must be examined on its own merits, for institutional conditions of trade were just as crucial a factor as tenure patterns in shaping peasant strategies for the market.

<sup>103</sup> Above, pp. 9, 82.

The conclusion, that the unmediated exploitation of countryside by town in late medieval Tuscany was the direct consequence of previous communal developments, is in strong contrast with the prevailing axiom of the beneficial economic role of medieval Italian communes. I do not intend, however, simply to stand this axiom on its head. If institutional and social constellations were such that individual towns were unable to exert the kind of unhindered "extra-economic compulsion" through taxation and monopolies on production and trade over the countryside which was the urban equivalent of seigneurial surplus extraction, towns could provide regional economies with valuable services.

The latter case is exemplified by the Venetian state, and especially by Milanese Lombardy. In these regions urban powers were balanced by, or filtered through, other centres of political and economic power, and neither Venice nor Milan were able to exert their powers unconstrainedly on the territorial state. In Lombardy and the Venetian *Terrafirma*, as somewhat differently in Sicily, this plurality of powers allowed for greater competition between formally constituted economic interests, and provided interstices between conflicting demands which could be exploited in a productive fashion.<sup>104</sup>

Whereas the Florentine Renaissance seems to have flowered at the expense of an impoverished and subdued regional economy,<sup>105</sup> the weakness of Sicily's urban institutions may have allowed the region to exploit more successfully new opportunities for development which arose out of the late medieval crisis. Contrary to received wisdom, Sicily — and probably southern Italy as well — shows few signs of the economic stagnation and "backwardness" which it has been

<sup>104</sup> Above, p. 62. A. Ventura, "Il Dominio di Venezia nel Quattrocento", in *Firenze and Venice: Comparisons and Relations, I. Quattrocento* (Florence, 1979), pp. 167-90; Dean, "Venetian Economic Hegemony". Similar considerations have recently been offered for the region of Freiburg: Scott, *Freiburg and the Breisgau*, pp. 155-62.

<sup>105</sup> R. C. Mueller, "Die wirtschaftliche Lage Italiens im Spätmittelalter", in Seibt and Eberhard (eds.), *Europa, 1400*, p. 232; C. Klipisch-Zuber, "State and Family in a Renaissance Society: The Florentine *Castro* of 1427", in C. Klipisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 1985), p. 13; A. Molho, "L'amministrazione del debito pubblico a Firenze nel XV secolo", in *Certi dirigenti nella Toscana del Quattrocento*, pp. 204-5; in explicit contrast with the views of R. Goldwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore, 1980), and Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence*, who draw a very positive picture of Florence and Peseta and, implicitly, of the Tuscan economy as a whole. Goldwaite has recently extended his conclusions for Florence to the whole of central and northern Italy, in R. Goldwaite, "The Economy of Renaissance Italy: The Preconditions for Luxury Consumption", *J. Tain Studies: Essays in the Renaissance*, II (1987), pp. 15-39.



argued were the result of the crisis; on the other hand, while the Tuscan economy was also not stagnating, its recovery from demographic disaster was slower and more contradictory.

To examine the late medieval crisis in Italy in terms of an ill-defined north/south divide is therefore misleading and ultimately mistaken. Although regional differences tended to increase as a result of the crisis, the latter neither established nor reinforced a permanently backward south, nor were these differences the result of specialization through inter-regional trade or "unequal exchange"; late medieval economies were shaped predominantly by developments internal to each region.

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