

Introduction

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The concept of community has long tempted medievalists, especially those interested in the history of villages and guilds. Perhaps there is something reassuring in the notion of a bond of mutual obligation between individuals in a world characterized by social hierarchy and economic scarcity. Recently, however, some scholars have voiced objections about the assumptions behind such easy reassurances—the ramifications of its privileging of harmony over tension and conflict, and the ubiquity of its application to all kinds of association, whether village, town, parish, county, or guild.¹ The four essays presented here build on such criticisms, with one (by Christine Carpenter) questioning the very value of the concept of community. In its own way, each essay problematizes community by consciously considering how various groups (gentry, villagers, guild members) dealt with divisive elements such as social hierarchy, economic dislocation, social tension, and outsiders.

While all the contributors agree that communities entail a sense of belonging and mutual obligation, their view of the workings of community differ. Geographic limits represent an acceptable boundary for the village and fraternity communities discussed by Christopher Dyer, Elaine Clark, and Gervase Rosser, but Carpenter, rejecting the early modern notion of a “county community” of gentry, argues for an experiential rather than a geographical definition of the gentry’s world. Voluntary association, moreover, characterizes the guild communities examined by Rosser, in contrast to the villagers and gentry treated by

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¹ See, e.g., Richard Smith, “‘Modernization’ and the Corporate Medieval Village Community in England: Some Sceptical Reflections,” in *Explorations in Historical Geography*, ed. A. R. H. Baker and D. Gregory (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 140–79; Miri Rubin, “Small Groups: Identity and Solidarity in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode (Wolfeboro Falls, N.H., 1991), pp. 132–50.

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the other three contributors. All four essays, however, give particular attention to the negotiations whereby hierarchies were accommodated within communities. Carpenter argues that we must include the nobility in studies of the gentry community in order to see more clearly the effectiveness of links between the central government and the locality. The important role of the peasant elite in maintaining internal cohesion in the medieval village, whether by coercion or by other means, is acknowledged by Dyer who, along with Clark, notes the self-interest that probably motivated village elites to enforce national measures like the Statute of Laborers. Both Clark and Dyer also recognize how the intervention of lords affected a village's sense of community. Rosser reveals how hierarchy mattered even within the smaller communities of guilds and fraternities, with humbler guild members taking greatest advantage of the ideology of fraternal harmony promoted at annual guild dinners. Although the dinners recognized hierarchies in the different dress, seats, or food of the more elite members, they also provided a dignified and respectable forum where the rhetoric of community validated relationships across social and economic boundaries.

In showing how different communities responded to changing economic or demographic circumstances, the contributors stress the dynamic rather than static aspects of community. Carpenter notes that the growing frequency of assertions of community by county gentry may represent a reaction or "rhetoric of resistance" to the demands wrought by the increasing centralization of government. Clark deliberately searches for the shifting bonds of solidarity by asking how rural communities responded to powerless and vulnerable persons such as the infirm, elderly, orphaned, poor, and vagrant. When faced by hard times, villagers survived by drawing on their greatest resource, their sense of community (although manorial policy more often than private charity arranged for the welfare of the disadvantaged). Similarly, Dyer maintains that the village community asserted its unity more strongly in the troublesome late Middle Ages when economic and social differentiation became more marked, when the expectations of the central government mounted, and when demographic crises challenged the village's social cohesion. For Rosser, late medieval social change promoted guild formation while the ritual of guild dinners helped smooth the internal divisions of late medieval communities.

To one degree or another all the essays reject the older structural-functional approach to community that emphasized organic unity and harmony above all else. In recognizing the role of hierarchies and acknowledging the tensions that accompanied the sense of community, these newer interpretive frameworks encourage a more pragmatic and

nuanced view that perceives community, not as an organic state, but as one negotiated and renegotiated to suit the self-interests of its participants. Carpenter is distrustful of the way that community has been employed in relation to the gentry, yet her revisionism still acknowledges the need to attend to the gentry's interrelationships and common aspirations. Clark, Dyer, and Rosser continue to favor the concept of community to describe the social cohesion and mutual ties of dependence in medieval villages and guilds. All four authors illustrate the complex (and changing) vertical and horizontal ties that linked members of a community not only with each other but also with outsiders. In framing community as a question, these essays open new and useful avenues for scholars seeking to characterize the fundamental traits of medieval social groups.