SUB-PeASANT STRATA IN RURAL SOCIETIES OF LATE MEDIEVAL EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

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Scholarly publications dealing with non-peasant landless strata or those having small, insufficient plots at their disposal still convey, in a rather generalizing fashion, a picture of the rural scene in late medieval East Central Europe largely dominated by middle and large farms. To what extent this scene was socially differentiated is often overlooked, and the role played by sub-peasant strata in certain regions frequently neglected. The present contribution examines landless non-peasant strata and those with insufficient plots in three ways: First, their true share of the population is discussed. In the second place, the variety of sub-peasant social strata with regard to their legal status, economic situation, and the size of what plots they had is revealed. Finally, the author devotes his attention to the problem of distinguishing between peasant and sub-peasant households, which has frequently been discussed, and to the economic and social links between both groups. Summing up, one may conclude that the general assumption of a far-reaching dominance of households with plots big enough as to be referred to as peasant can no longer be maintained and that one has to differentiate along regional or even local lines even when referring to late medieval East Central Europe.

VILLAGE COMMUNITY AND VILLAGE HEADMAN IN EARLY MODERN BOHEMIA

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What role did the village community play under the “second serfdom”? Did powerful overlords stifle communal independence, as traditional “manorial dominance” theories assume? Or were village powers largely untouched, as claimed by recent “communal autonomy” approaches? This article addresses these questions by focusing on the pivotal figure of the village headman (German Scholtz, Schultheiß, or Richter; Czech rychtář). Analyzing a large, micro-level database for the north Bohemian estate of Friedland/Frýdlant (c. 1580 – c. 1740), it examines how village headmen operated in everyday life – how they were appointed, what economic privileges they enjoyed, how their village courts worked, what powers they exercised outside their courts, and which social strata they were affiliated with. The second serfdom, it finds, was based on neither “manorial dominance” nor “communal autonomy,” but rather on communal-manorial “dualism” – close collaboration between manor and commune, huge privileges for village headmen and communal elites, and few safeguards for weaker villagers such as women, migrants, and the lower social strata. Strong communes were complicit with strong overlords in administering and sustaining the second serfdom.