SERVILE MIGRATION AND GENDER IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND: THE EVIDENCE OF MANORIAL COURT ROLLS

Text, tables and appendix: 9,760 words
Footnotes: 2,200 words

I

Migration is an important historical phenomenon, culturally, economically and demographically, and so understanding migration is essential to understanding past societies.[1] Historians of medieval England concur that 'the notion medieval villagers spent all their entire lives rooted to one plot of soil has of course long been discarded….only a minority of rural people…spent their entire lives in the same community'.[2] Local populations turned over frequently, and perhaps 75% of tenant families were replaced every two generations.[3] Nevertheless, most movement was highly localised, with around two thirds of migrants settling within a dozen miles of their home village.[4] Migrants tended to be non-inheriting sons and daughters, servants, craftworkers and the poor, aged between their mid-teens and mid-30s.[5] Thus migration in medieval England was substantial and essential, but mainly took place over short distances.[6] Yet, beyond these confident generalisations, we know little about either the direction, or the personal experience, or the life-histories of migrants.[7] The very quality that makes migrants important—their mobility—also makes them very hard to trace in medieval sources.[8]

Despite the gaps in our knowledge and the shortcomings of the sources, assumptions about peasant migration form a central plank in two current debates about social and economic change in late-medieval Europe. Some historians have suggested rising and high levels of rural-urban migration were key variables in the decline of serfdom and the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) in regions of northwest Europe (see section II below). There is much to commend in these arguments, although they are based primarily upon a priori reasoning, augmented by mathematical modelling and anecdotal information, rather than hard figures. There is no evidence for the proportion of rural migrants heading to towns in any part of late-medieval Europe, nor proof that it was higher in the northwest than the rest of the continent and rising after the Black Death. Towns certainly proved attractive to *some* late medieval migrants, but we do not know—and can

[1] P.Clark and D.Souden, 'Introduction', in P.Clark and D.Souden, eds., *Migration and society in early modern England* (London, 1988), p.7; L.R.Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525* (Cambridge, 1991), pp.159-60; D.Postles, 'Migration and mobility in a less mature economy: English internal migration, c. 1200–1350', *Social History*, 25 (2000), p. 285; C.Dyer, 'Were late medieval English villages self-contained?', in C.Dyer, ed., *The self-contained village. The social history of rural communities 1250-1900* (Hatfield, 2007), pp.6-27.

[2] Poos, *Rural society*, p. 159; R.Thompson, 'Early modern migration', *Journal of American Studies*, 25 (1991), pp.61-6; Clark and Souden, 'Introduction', pp.7-20.

[3] Poos, *Rural society*, pp.159-62; J.A.Raftis, *Peasant economic development within the English manorial system* (Stroud, 1996), pp.18-20; C.Dyer, *Lords and peasants in a changing society: the estates of the bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540* (Cambridge, 1980), p.366; C.Dyer, *Making a living in the Middle Ages. The people of Britain 850-1520* (New Haven, 2002), p.354.

[4] P.J.P.Goldberg, *Women, work and life cycle in a medieval economy: women in York and Yorkshire c.1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992), p.282; R.K.Field, 'Migration in the later Middle Ages: the case of some Hampton Lovell villeins', *Midland History*, 8 1983, p.42; Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, p.366; Poos, *Rural society*, pp. 162-3; D.Postles, 'The pattern of rural migration in a Midlands county: Leicestershire c.1270-1350', *Continuity and Change*, 7 (1992), pp.139-62; M.Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk. An economic and social history* (Woodbridge, 2007), p.162; J.Whittle, 'Population mobility in rural Norfolk among landholders and others 1440-1600', in Dyer, ed., *Self-contained village*, pp.28-32.

[5] Poos, *Rural society*, pp.164-79; Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp.292-3; J.Whittle *The development of agrarian capitalism. Land and labour in Norfolk 1440-1580* (Oxford, 2000), pp.162, 209, 273-4.

[6] W.Childs, 'Moving around', in R.Horrox and W.M.Ormrod, eds., *A social history of late medieval England 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), pp.268-9.

[7] Postles, 'Migration and mobility', pp.285-6, 296, 299.

[8] The best survey is Postles, 'Migration and mobility', pp.287-92.

never know—the absolute levels of migration or, indeed, whether after the Black Death the proportion of migrants heading for towns increased. There is insufficient quantifiable evidence to confirm one way or another.

The limitations of the surviving evidence, and a pervasive scepticism among historians about the capacity of the extant sources to yield much worthwhile information, explain why little has been written on the nature, extent and significance of migration into English towns. Urban sources provide few clues about the origins or status of immigrants.[9] Furthermore, most of the published studies are characterised by a gender bias, according to Maryanne Kowaleski: 'studies of migration have focused almost exclusively on men…documentary sources are less revealing about female migration, but historians have not, in any case, paid much attention to the information they offer on women'.[10] As she states, 'the gendered impact of migration deserves far more attention'.[11] Thus, as one of the leading authorities on late-medieval migration has concluded, 'there is still much room for additional information'.[12]

Any new research offering information about the distance and direction of migration in the century or so after the arrival of the Black Death in England is therefore welcome, especially if it sheds light on the relative importance of towns and on differences in the gendered pattern of migration. This study uses the record of migrant serfs contained within manorial court rolls from a sample of twenty manors in East Anglia and south-central England to cast light on the distance of migration, movement to towns, and differences in male and female experiences of migration between the arrival of the Black Death (1348-9) and the end of the fifteenth century. In doing so, it demonstrates the potential of manorial court rolls as a source of both quantifiable data and qualitative information on this neglected but essential subject.

II

The debate over serfdom grapples with the conundrum that it declined after the Black Death in some areas of Europe, yet was largely unchanged or even strengthened in others. Why did the dramatic fall in population and resultant shortages of labour result in such divergent regional outcomes? There are many possible explanations, but one line of argument stresses the ability of serfs to migrate to towns as a key factor in determining whether serfdom remained viable under conditions of labour scarcity. Acemoglu and Wolitzky suggest that towns in eastern Europe were few in number and relatively small, which meant that serfs possessed few alternatives ('outside options') in the labour market and consequently seignorial enforcement of serfdom continued to be cost-effective. In contrast, the dissolution of serfdom under the same conditions in areas of northwest Europe was due to the presence of larger and more numerous towns, which presented serfs with greater options in the labour market and made serfdom too expensive to enforce.[13] Other historians have also posited a positive correlation between increased rural-urban migration and higher levels of economic performance after the Black Death. For example, Pamuk argues that the combination of greater mobility of labour in northwest Europe and increased technical innovation within towns led to higher incomes and real wages, and Voigtlander and Voth attribute higher incomes per capita

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[9] S.Reynolds, *English medieval towns* (Oxford, 1977), p.69; R.H.Britnell, *Growth and decline in Colchester 1300 to 1525* (Cambridge, 1986), pp.96, 204; D.G.Shaw, *Creation of a community. Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp.58-9; G.Rosser, *Medieval Westminster 1200–1540* (Oxford, 1989), pp.171-2, 177-9, 182-3.

[10] M.Kowaleski, 'Gendering demographic change in the Middle Ages', in J.Bennett and R.Karras, eds., *The Oxford handbook of women and gender in medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2013), p.190.

[11] Kowaleski, 'Gendering', p.191.

[12] Postles, 'Rural migration', p.139.

[13] D.Acemoglu and A.Wolitzky, 'The economics of labour coercion', *Econometrica*, 79 (2011), pp. 5550-600; D.Acemoglu and J.A.Robinson, *Why nations fail. Power prosperity and poverty* (New York, 2012), pp.99-101.

there to increased urbanisation and its wider demographic consequences.[14]

The second—and not unconnected—debate involves the emergence of the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) in regions of northwest Europe in the century or so after the Black Death, in which a high proportion of women married later in life or not at all. The consequent lower birth rates, smaller families, greater parental investment in children and higher disposable incomes drove levels of human capital formation and GDP per head upwards. One possible explanation is that the availability of employment and better rates of pay drew a higher proportion of women into the labour market, mainly in commercial pastoral husbandry and in towns, where young women found work in domestic service, brewing, textile manufacture and the clothing trades.[15] Working women, especially those in life-cycle servanthood, were likely to delay marriage or not marry at all, reducing birth rates and encouraging the formation of the EMP in northwest Europe.[16] Such employment opportunities were not as widely available to women in southern and eastern Europe and consequently, it is argued, the EMP did not develop there.[17]

Where does the experience of late medieval England fit into this broad scheme? Certainly, serfdom dissolved here after the Black Death and it is widely argued that the EMP became its dominant demographic system sometime in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[18] Furthermore, historians of medieval England have long suspected that rural-urban migration did increase after the Black Death.[19] For example, Goldberg observes that 'towns were especially attractive to rural migrants in the century after the Black Death', and Raftis argued that the flow of rural migrants from the Ramsey abbey estates to towns accelerated in the late fourteenth century.[20] Towns are deemed to have been particularly attractive to serfs, because they offered *de facto* freedom from the oppressions of rural serfdom.[21] Under the common law a serf who resided for a year and a day in either a royal borough or certain seigniorial boroughs could claim 'borough

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[14] S.Pamuk, 'The Black Death and the origins of the Great Divergence across Europe, 1300-1600', *European Review of Economic History*, 11 (2007), pp. 309-13; N.Voigtlander and H-J.Voth, 'The Three Horsemen of Riches: plague, war, and urbanization in early modern Europe', *The Review of Economic Studies*, 2013, 80, pp.774-811.

[15] Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp.6-8, 82-202; S.H.Rigby, 'Gendering the Black Death', Gender and History, 12 (2000), pp.746-7; J.Humphries and J.L.Weisdorf, 'The wages of women in England, 1260-1850', *Journal of Economic History*, 75 (2015), pp.410-26;

[16] Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp.333-45; N.Voigtlander and H-J.Voth, 'How the West "Invented" Fertility Restriction', *American Economic Review,* 103 (2013), pp.2227-64; J.Foreman-Peck and P.Zhou, 'Late marriage as a contributor to the industrial revolution in England', *Economic History Review*, 71 (2018), pp.1073-99.

[17] T.de Moor and J.L. van Zanden, 'Girl power: the European marriage pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period', *Economic History Review*, 63 (2010), pp.1-33. For critical responses, T.K.Dennison and S.Ogilvie, 'Does the European Marriage Pattern explain economic growth?', *Journal of Economic History*, 74 (2014), pp.651-93; J.M.Bennett, 'Wretched girls, wretched boys, and the European marriage pattern in England (c. 1250–1350)', *Continuity and Change*, 34 (2019), pp.315-47; J.Edwards and S.Ogilvie, 'Did the Black Death cause economic development by 'inverting' fertility restriction?', *Oxford Economic Papers*, 2021, 1-19.

[18] M.Bailey, *The decline of serfdom in late medieval England. From bondage to freedom* (Woodbridge, 2014); for the EMP, see fn16.

[19] Z.Razi, *Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish: economy, society and demography in Halesowen 1270-1400* (Cambridge, 1980), p.118; R.H.Britnell, *The commercialisation of English society 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1993), p.220.

[20] P.J.P.Goldberg, 'Life and death: the ages of man', in R.Horrox and W.M. Ormrod, eds., *A social history of England 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), p.420; Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, p.99; R.H.Britnell, *Britain and Ireland, 1050-1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004), pp.205-6.

[21] R.H.Hilton, *The decline of serfdom in late medieval England* (London, 1969), pp. 33-5; Razi, *Life, marriage*, pp. 116-17; E.B.Fryde, *Peasants and landlords in later medieval England* (Stroud, 1996), pp.116-17; J.Hare, *A prospering society. Wiltshire in the later Middle Ages* (Hatfield, 2011), pp.121-2.

privilege' and thereby obtain *de jure* freedom.[22] Contemporaries, too, believed that towns were the principal destination of serfs. A Commons petition in 1385 bemoaned that 'villeins and neifs…do fly within cities, towns and places enfranchised…to the intent to make them free', and another in 1397 alleged that urban authorities were actively detaining serfs.[23] Yet there is little hard evidence to substantiate such claims, although the small number of academic studies to have addressed them provide qualified support to the belief that fleeing serfs preferred urban centres.[24]

The view that female migrants also preferred urban destinations is also widely held. For example, Mate regarded towns 'as a magnet for women' and 'many young girls flocked to a town in search of employment'.[25] Kowaleski, too, argues 'women were especially attracted to towns', although we can never know whether they were pulled there by the prospect of work and a freer lifestyle or pushed out of rural areas because of unfavourable inheritance customs, prejudice and lack of opportunity.[26] Female migration into towns is held to have increased after the Black Death, as women grasped expanding opportunities in life-cycle servanthood.[27] In reality, however, hard evidence to support these views is patchy. Contemporary ecclesiastical depositions describe the movement of some women to towns, but the sample size is very small and difficult to quantify, and evidence from poll tax returns in 1377 suggests a dearth of unmarried women in some rural areas and a surfeit in some towns.[28] Just one study has attempted to quantify the scale of movement from a single village, revealing that nearly half the female migrants from early fifteenth-century Warboys went to towns.[29]

These assumptions that rural-urban migration was high and rising in post-Black Death England are also consistent with academic opinion on urban fortunes in post-plague England.[30] Although towns were undoubtedly smaller due to recurrent bouts of epidemic disease, in general they fared relatively well until the early fifteenth century. Increased income per head and higher levels of disposable income among the lower orders of society generated demand for basic consumer goods—clothing, bedding, domestic utensils—manufactured by artisans, most of whom were based in towns. In addition, demand for English textiles soared at home and abroad. As a result, the proportion of the urban population remained broadly constant at c.20%, and a handful of specialist towns were actually larger in 1400 than they had been in 1340. This could only have been achieved

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[22] P.R.Hyams, *King, lords and peasants in medieval England. The common law of villeinage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries* (Oxford, 1980), pp.167-9; A.Ballard, *British borough charters 1216-1307* (Manchester, 1923) pp.136-7;

[23] C.Given-Wilson, 'Service, serfdom and English labour legislation, 1350-1500', in Anne Curry and Elizabeth Matthew, eds., *Concepts and patterns of service in the later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000), p.23; *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. II, p.38.

[24] E.D.Jones, 'Villein mobility in the later Middle Ages: the case of Spalding priory', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 36 (1992), pp.161-3; Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, p.99 states 'market towns predominate over rural villages as the *terminus ad quem* of emigrants', without further quantification.

[25] M.Mate, *Daughters, wives and widows after the Black Death. Women in Sussex 1350-1535* (Woodbridge 1998), pp.41-8, quote on p.41; M.Mate, *Women in medieval English society* (Cambridge, 1999), p.47; see, for example, Shaw, *Creation of a community*, p.100; Rigby, 'Gendering', p.747; Bennett, 'Wretched', p. 319.

[26] Kowaleski, 'Gendering', p.191.

[27] For example, Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp. 6-8, 280-304; Rigby, 'Gendering', pp.746-7; Bennett, 'Wretched', pp. 317-18.

[28] Poos, *Rural society*, pp. 164-79; Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, pp. 162, 209, 273-4; P.J.P.Goldberg, 'Female labour service and marriage in the later medieval urban north', *Northern History*, 22 (1986), pp.20-1; Goldberg, 'Marriage, migration, servanthood and life cycle in Yorkshire towns of the later Middle Ages', *Continuity and Change*, 1 (1986), pp. 141, 147-9; Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp. 305-18.

[29] A.R. DeWindt, 'Leaving Warboys: emigration from a fifteenth-century English village', in C.N. Goldy and A. Livingstone, eds., *Writing medieval women's lives* (New York, 2012), pp. 95-100.

[30] For what follows, see Britnell, *Colchester*, pp.48-160; Dyer, *Making a living*, pp. 298-329; G.L.Harriss, *Shaping the nation: England 1360-1471* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 273-8; R.H.Britnell, 'Town life', in Horrox and Ormrod, *Social history*, pp.144-54; S.H.Rigby, 'Urban population in late medieval England: the evidence of the lay subsidies,' *Economic History Review*, 63 (2010), pp.393-417.

by immigration.

Hence, while there are many reasons to suppose that rural-urban migration rose in England after 1350, there is little hard confirmatory evidence. Consequently, any quantifiable evidence that rural serfs, and especially women, preferred urban destinations would be welcome. Such evidence is available from English manorial court rolls, which survive in large quantities from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

III

In English legal theory hereditary serfs (*nativus/nativa domini de sanguine*) were not allowed to leave their home manor, but in practice they frequently did so either temporarily or for extended periods. The absent serf was expected to render 'chevage', usually an annual payment to their lord, which licenced the absence and asserted overlordship of the serf. Where chevage was enforced strictly, the serf was required to return to one manorial court each year to swear fealty to the lord, to confirm his or her place of residence, and to make another payment authorising their absence for the next year.[31] When a serf left the manor without paying chevage and therefore without seigneurial permission, the lord had four options: either to send a posse to retrieve the serf physically; or to obtain a legal writ to force return; or to record the serf as an unlicenced migrant in the manorial court and put pressure on relatives to secure either a chevage payment or a permanent return; or, finally, to do nothing. The serf who had flown the manor without paying chevage and without hindrance had acquired *de facto* freedom, because English serfs were serfs only of their, and not of any other, lord.

The record of annual chevage payments and unlicenced absences was maintained in manorial court rolls, sometimes with details about individual destinations. The inclusion of such information within thousands of manorial courts means that they are unquestionably the most abundant source for medieval rural migration. Yet, despite this, relatively few studies have utilised this information extensively or systematically, and those historians who have made use of the material tend to deploy it to estimate the distances of movement.[32] Even Raftis, who did most to pioneer its use, neither quantified the information nor paid much attention to the destinations of women.[33]

The reluctance to make use of this potentially rich source is due to various reservations about the reliability and utility of the information it contains. First, historians have supposed that many court rolls (especially from the pre-plague era) do not contain much information about flown serfs, and, among those which do, most fail to record their destination, which limit their potential severely.[34] Second, historians familiar with the sources have stated that the information about migration is dominated by men. According to Razi, 'the data about female mobility obtained from the court rolls [of Halesowen Warks.] are scanty', whilst Raftis devoted barely four pages to female migration on the Ramsey abbey estate.[35] Third, concerns about the fluidity of surnames and the accuracy of scribal recording of names and places convinced Fryde that any statistical assessment of migration from court rolls is 'full of pitfalls'.[36] Fourth, doubts have been expressed about the accuracy of the information contained in presentments for absence, because some courts did not know or regularly update the serfs' whereabouts and so the same serfs were recorded religiously and fallaciously as being in the same locations year after year.[37] Fifth, recorded migrants are likely to be dominated by

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[31] Hyams, *King, lords and peasants*, pp.34-6; Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, pp.42-6.

[32] See the studies cited in fn.4, plus Jones, 'Villein mobility', pp. 151-66.

[33] J.A.Raftis, *Tenure and mobility* (Toronot, 1964), pp.145-80. Although see DeWindt, 'Leaving Warboys'.

[34] Postles, 'Migration and mobility', pp. 289-90.

[35] Razi, *Life marriage*, p. 120; Raftis, *Tenure and mobility*, pp. 178-82. Also Goldberg, *Women, work*, pp. 280-1, 293.

[36] Fryde, *Peasants and lords*, p.123 fn.73.

[37] Raftis, *Tenure and mobility*, 154; Field, 'Hampton Lovell', p.35; Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, p.42; E.B. DeWindt, *Land and people in Holywell-cum-Needingworth. Structures of tenure and patterns of social organization in an east Midlands village 1252-1457* (Toronto, 1971), p 181; Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, p.155.

those serfs willing to stay in touch and most easily tracked, which tilts the sample towards localised movement at the expense of longer migration.[38] Finally, obtaining a sample large enough to be capable of quantification involves laborious and time-consuming research through hundreds of court rolls with thousands of individual entries.[39] The sheer effort and tedium involved in a search of possible references to migration have proved major obstacles to the collection of such information.

Yet a good deal of this scepticism is unwarranted. After years of research into court rolls, Raftis observed that, on the Ramsey abbey estates at least, the record of servile migration offers 'fairly complete information about the whereabouts of most villagers' and he remained 'confident that the shortcomings of the material can be overcome'.[40] The observation that court rolls contain few useful details about migrants and destinations holds for the pre-plague period, but information flows increased after 1350 on some manors where lords became concerned about the movement of their serfs in the new conditions of tenant and labour scarcity.[41] Furthermore, examples of the ossification and falsification of the information about serfs' whereabout are striking, but they are untypical and mainly confined to the later fifteenth century: most earlier court series contain unambiguous evidence of refreshing and updating their information regularly.[42] On those very rare occasions when court rolls of both the home and the destination manor survive, their information about the serf can be corroborated.[43] The information from entries relating to chevage or absence in court rolls can also be supplemented by details contained within some merchet payments, i.e. seigniorial licences for serfs to marry. Although this incident was declining in frequency after 1350, some entries do state the place of residence of the groom. This information can also be reliably used to chart the movement of female serfs.

Most important of all, some series of court rolls provide a great deal more information about destinations and women than has previously been realised. At one level, this material can be used qualitatively to construct life-cycle histories of some serfs, providing insights into their motives for and patterns of movement. At another level, it can generate large enough samples to warrant some quantitative analysis about the distance and direction of movement, and whether towns were the primary destination of serfs in general and of women in particular. Hitherto, most of the research on medieval migration has focused on urban records, utilising locative surnames in lay subsidies (before 1334) and registers of admissions to the freedom of a borough to identify the origins of immigrants.[44] The point about manorial court rolls is that they are the only *rural* source of information, providing data about movement out of stated rural settings as opposed to information from specific urban settings about the origins of recent immigrants. So the data about migration from manorial courts rolls is reliable and capable of yielding insights that no other source can provide. The main caveat is the typicality of the servile sample. In c.1350 serfs comprised 40% of the population of England, c.20% at most in 1400, and a couple of percent in c.1500.[45]

MAP 1 ABOUT HERE

The core of the sample used here is provided by nine manors (Map 1): three on the estate of the cellarer of the abbey of St Albans (Codicote (Herts.), Norton (Herts.) and Winslow (Bucks.)), two from

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[38] Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, p.41; Whittle, 'Population mobility', p.44.
[39] Hare, *Prospering society*, p.123.
[40] Postles, Migration and mobility', p.290; Raftis, *Warboys*, p.144; Raftis, *Tenure and mobility*, pp. 154-5.
[41] Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, pp. 43-5, 141-4, 161, 179-80, 204-5, 218, 226-9, 266-73.
[42] Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, p. 115.
[43] Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp. 148-9; M. Bailey, *After the Black Death. Economy, society and the law in fourteenth-century England* (Oxford, 2021), pp. 310-1.
[44] P. McClure,'Patterns of migration in the late middle ages: the evidence of English place- name surnames', *Economic History Review*, second series, 32 (1979), 167–82; S.H. Rigby, 'Urban society in early fourteenth-century England: the evidence of the Lay Subsidies', *Bulletin of the John Ryland Library*, 72:3 (1990), pp. 169-84.
[45] Bailey, *After the Black Death*, pp.265-6.

the estate of the abbot of Bury St Edmunds (Chevington (Suffolk) and Hargrave (Suffolk), two from the estate of the Dukes of Norfolk (Dunningworth (Suffolk), Staverton (Eyke, Suffolk)) and one from the estate of Ramsey abbey (Warboys (Hunts.)) and one from a lay gentry lord (Bredfield (Suffolk)). They were selected for the wealth of information they contain about migrant serfs and for a long run of extant court rolls: indeed, nearly fifteen hundred courts have survived for these nine manors, producing 502 discrete destinations. The clustering of four manors in Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Huntingdonshire also provides a regional contrast with the four Suffolk ones. In addition, smaller samples from four east Midlands and twelve East Anglian manors which have only fragmented court roll series or limited information about servile destinations have been used to flesh out particular points and to aggregate gender differences in urban destinations.[46]

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The evidence presented in Tables 1 and 2 illustrates that after 1350 the information about servile migrants increases markedly. Table 1 confirms that pre-1350 the recording of servile migration was relatively uncommon.[47] Even those manors that did record absences seldom averaged more than 0.5 entries per court. This situation changed dramatically after the arrival of plague, when the frequency of the record of flown serfs increased sharply on some manors. At Winslow, for example, the number rose from an average of 0.07 recorded absences per court in the second quarter of the fourteenth century to 5.56 in the third quarter. Here, as on many manors, presentments for absent—not chevage—drove the rising frequency.[48] The change reflects heightened seigniorial sensitivity about migration in an era of labour and tenant shortages, even if lords proved ineffective at securing either the return of their serfs or a chevage payment.[49]

Table 2 quantifies the proportion of all entries that include the location of the serf on nine manors. It confirms the view that pre-Black Death court rolls seldom specified the destinations of migrants, but also reveals that thereafter the proportion of entries including the location of serfs rises sharply. For example, not a single destination is recorded in the extant pre-1348 courts of Codicote, Dunningworth and Winslow, but in the second half of the century 60%, 56% and 45% respectively of all absences did specify the location of migrant serfs. Table 2 also quantifies the proportion of all cases involving women, and confirms that they were seldom recorded in pre-plague courts: indeed, five manors (Bredfield, Codicote, Dunningworth, Winslow and Norton) contained no references at all to flown women. By contrast, information about women becomes more common after 1349, constituting between one quarter and one third of all recorded absences on some manors.[50]

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Thus, post-plague court rolls can yield a large sample of destinations and women capable of valid statistical analysis, although the paucity of pre-plague destinations prevents any worthwhile comparisons of change over time. Nevertheless, the example of Upper Heyford (Oxon) provides a salutary reminder that many manorial courts do not contain much useful information on these matters.[51] For whatever reason, some lords did not make much effort to impose chevage or document the whereabouts of their serfs, which underlines the wide variability with which English

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[46] The data are presented in Table 6: distances of travel are provided in Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 162. Only East Anglian manors with over 30 separate destinations are included in table 5.
[47] Bailey*, Decline of serfdom*, pp.43, 111, 161, 204.
[48] Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, pp.44-5, 180, 190.
[49] Bailey, *After the Black Death*, pp.104-5.
[50] At Holywell (Hunts.) 15 people were recorded as absent, including one women, in 1311-1339, yet in 1400-13 60 were recorded, including 11 women, DeWindt, *Holywell*, p. 177.
[51] Likewise, the extensive court roll series from Sutton and Ufford (Suffolk) offer few details about flown serfs (see Table 6).

lords enforced this aspect of serfdom.[52]

How reliable is the information about destinations in those courts that did maintain good records? There is no doubt that the sample is confined mainly to those serfs who wished to retain contact with their home manor by opting to pay chevage, probably to retain an interest in a landed inheritance on the manor, and to those with family who were still active on the home manor and perhaps under seigniorial pressure to yield information about their whereabouts. Nevertheless, there are many signs that the information recorded in the rolls about locations is reasonably reliable and that it was usually updated. Some serfs, such as Alice Parman of Chevington, are tracked moving to a different location in successive years (see below). Similarly, there are strong indications that scribes were increasingly acquiring a tighter and more accurate conceptualisation of geography, by including greater precision to remove ambiguity about destinations. For example, in 1389 a Hargrave court recorded that Margaret Foul had migrated to 'Ely Sutton', to avoid any confusion with the countless other places named Sutton in England, Henry Clarke was said to be resident in 'Harkstead next to Ipswich' to eliminate mistaking it for Hawstead near Hargrave, whilst in 1401 the Oxe brothers of Eyke were recorded as having moved to 'Stratford next to Glemham'.[53] The county of a village was sometimes included for the same reason. For example, in the early 1350s Amicia Baron of Hargrave was reported to be living 'in the county of Huntingdon in Weston in le Wolde', while in 1445 Richard Spink had moved from Cratfield (Suffolk) to 'Weston iuxta Baldock in the county of Hertford'.[54] In 1440 Walter Tough of Eyke resided in London '*super pontem*', and John Hacoun was also in 'London in Wodestrete in the parish of St Alban'.[55] The greater precision of geographical details in the post-plague period is striking, and generates confidence that the destinations of the majority of migrants can be securely identified.

IV

The best series of manorial court rolls provide enough fragments of information to offer some partial and qualitative reconstructions of the personal experience of migration. In particular, they enable exploration of the phenomenon of 'circular migration', whereby individuals move away from a location but eventually return after a series of moves.[56] This pattern of movement was a common feature of rural migration in the early modern period, but there has been little scholarly work to ascertain whether it was also common in the later Middle Ages. The general presumption has been that servile migrants were highly *unlikely* to return to their own manor. This is logical and reasonable if one assumes that servile flight was driven primarily by a desire to be free from the oppressions of serfdom, because serfs were unlikely to return voluntarily to a condition of onerous servitude. The only study to address this point directly concluded that circular migration was rare among the serfs of Ramsey abbey: just 21 out of hundreds of observed migrant serfs returned to their home manor, and even these were taking 'an accidental step in their wanderings' rather than making a definitive decision to return home.[57]

There are, however, two grounds for questioning the reliability of this conclusion. First, it is based on the presumption that the oppressions of English serfdom after 1348-9 were severe, yet an emerging body of scholarship has shown that servile incidents and tenures rapidly dissolved after the Black Death.[58] If this is correct, then the obstacles and disincentives to serfs returning to their

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[52] Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, pp.266-70.
[53] SROB E3/15.10/1.19, court held in November 1389; SROI HD1538/357/4 m.5.
[54] SROB E3/15.10/1.1; CUL Vanneck Mss., Box 3, court held Whitsuntide 1445.
[55] SROI HD1538/357/4 m.31, court held November 1430. St Alban Wood Street lies between London Wall and Gresham St.
[56] Clark and Souden, 'Introduction', pp.16-17.
[57] Raftis, *Tenure and mobility*, pp.154-5, 173-4; Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, p.116.
[58] Bailey, *Decline of serfdom*, pp.307-22; M. Bailey, 'Tallage-at-will in medieval England', *English Historical Review*, 134 no.566 (2019), pp.46-52.

home manor after a while were a good deal smaller than was once assumed. Second, in the Ramsey abbey case study a returnee was defined very narrowly as a serf who was explicitly designated within the court roll as either '*revenit*' or '*modo in villa*', and did not consider the possibility that serfs could have returned home without being so labelled. The latter are admittedly very difficult to trace, precisely because their return was not explicitly recorded: they would only be visible to the historian if they became engaged in some activity that attracted the attention of the court, if that court roll has survived, and if the researcher wades carefully and painstakingly through hundreds of court entries to locate such a reference.[59]

The potential for circular migration can be illustrated through a case study of Walsham (Suffolk). The manor was held by a lesser lay landlord in a region of relative freedom, where the incidents of serfdom were disappearing in the second half of the fourteenth century, and therefore the obstacles to a return were lower than they might have been on, say, the more conservative Ramsey abbey estates. Indeed, the lord of Walsham manor was much less interested in flown serfs than the abbot of Ramsey. Between 1350 and 1400 chevage was not levied at Walsham, and only thirteen serfs were presented as absent (Table 3). The manor did not note the return of a flown serf explicitly. However, the small number of flown serfs at Walsham, together with the survival of a long and relatively complete series of court rolls, makes the reconstruction of their movements—and any incidental evidence for their return—manageable.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Six of the twelve recorded Walsham migrants returned to the manor after a while, two more had established themselves in the service of the lord of the manor in some capacity, and John Robetel might have returned just prior to his death. Hence this example demonstrates that if we scrutinise every entry in a court roll series for evidence of a specific serf's return, rather than relying exclusively on the scribe of the court noting a return, the proportion of flown serfs returning to their home manor is higher than has been assumed previously. Clearly, more case studies are needed, but the phenomenon of circular migration was possibly common in the later Middle Ages.

Why did servile migrants return to their own manor, when staying away would have meant that they would enjoy *de facto* freedom? Four of the six Walsham returnees returned to take up land, so this was clearly an important motive. This can be illustrated through the careful reconstruction of the activities of two particularly well-documented serfs—who were also 'circular migrants'—from two other manors. In May 1353 Henry Ponteys was first presented as absent from Winslow and then recorded as such every year until December 1360.[60] No destination for him is given, and the June 1355 court noted explicitly that his whereabouts were unknown. After eight years away from Winslow, Henry returned in the wake of the second outbreak of plague to be admitted in November 1361 into a messuage and a virgate of customary land, following the death of William Ponteys his 'kinsman', and he also paid 3s. 4d. to obtain a licence to marry. In June 1363 he acquired a messuage and half a virgate in nearby Shipton, and thereafter was active in the land market. Henry died in 1376 was succeeded by Robert his son.[61] Hence, Henry was a migrant for at least seven years in the 1350s as a single young man; he then returned to his home manor to marry and to take up a sizeable landed inheritance: he then spent the rest of his life there. Similarly, in 1415 John Eyr left Cratfield for Trimley (Suffolk), some 30 miles away, and paid chevage each year until 1426, but returned to his home manor and accumulated land there during the 1430s. Then, in 1439, he returned to Trimley

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[59] Even this is not foolproof, because it is possible that a serf had returned but had no business worthy of record in the court, or had returned and (say) had been admitted into a landholding, but the roll documenting the specific court session has not survived.

[60] Noy, *Winslow I,* pp. 280, 297, 303, 310, 318, 321, 332, 336, 340, 344.

[61] Noy, *Winslow I,* pp. 358-9, 368, 373, 409, 413, 429, 454.

and died there the next year.[62] The move back to Trimley at the very end of his life is curious, and suggests that he retained some interests there.

Marriage is well-attested as a key motive behind female migration, and usually resulted in a permanent departure from the home community, but in late-medieval England women could inherit land and this sometimes led to their return home. For example, Felice Albyn of Winslow was first recorded as absent in 1426 living in Towcester (NHants.), when the court's interest in her was triggered by the death of her father. Nothing happened until June 1430, when Felice paid a merchet of 3s.4d. in order to marry and the court recorded that she was now of full age (the age of majority for women in Winslow was 16) and so was liable to inherit her father's holding. She was formally admitted to the holding in May 1431. Yet she continued to live in Towcester until 1432, then moved to Hardwick (Bucks.). In 1434 she returned to Winslow, whereupon she transferred part of her family holding to an unrelated third party.[63] Felice appears to have entered domestic service in Towcester at a young age, married before the end of her teens, ran the family holding from Hardwick for two years, then returned to live upon the manor.

Felice Albyn's case shows that migrants might retain contact with their home manor as landholders who sub-let their holding. This is also revealed through the case of Nicholas Thornburgh who first married in 1336 then emerged as a significant customary landholder in Winslow.[64] His wife probably died of plague, because in late 1349 Nicholas remarried and left: in June 1351 he was in default of the court and in May 1352 he was described as a fugitive living in London. For the rest of the 1350s Nicholas lived in London while continuing to hold customary land in Winslow. In May 1353 he sublet his lands to Walter Kyng for a term of years, and thereafter is recorded as either in default of suit of court or as being presented for absence. Nicholas attended the Winslow court in November 1361 and surrendered all his land to Richard Couper. Couper in turn offered surety that Nicholas would pay 6d. chevage per annum thereafter, which was duly paid until 1364 when Nicholas stopped payments and the court ceased to have any interest in him.[65] Hence Nicholas had retained his landed interests in Winslow for ten years while resident in London, presumably to preserve a range of options, until the point when he decided definitively that his future lay elsewhere and severed all links with his home manor.

Reconstructing sections of the life histories of migrant serfs from manorial court rolls is time-consuming, challenging and inexact. It can only be successfully undertaken for a small number of serfs, and the information it yields cannot easily be quantified. We cannot know the reasons why migrants decided to head for a particular destination, what they did there, or even, in some cases, where they had gone on their travels. It does, however, reveal that circular migration was more common than Raftis realised, and that the prospect of a landed inheritance—and perhaps a return to the family—could maintain a bond between a flown serf and their home manor.

The discovery that two Walsham migrants found work away from the manor yet remained in the service of their lord hints at the importance of social networks based on the seignorial household or estate in determining the direction of movement, presumably because these could be relied upon to supply secure information about the availability of land and work outside the home village. Raftis made a similar point when observing that a sizeable minority of Ramsey abbey serfs headed to other manors on the estate.[66] The same pattern is discernible on the two manors held by Bury St Edmunds abbey within our sample. Serfs from the abbot's manor of Chevington went to 31 discrete destinations, ten of which (32%) were demesne manors held by various obedientaries of the abbey. Those from Hargrave went to 61 destinations, 18 of which (30%) were abbey manors. For example, in the mid-1380s Thomas Gipping left Hargrave to settle in Redgrave (Suffolk, another abbatial

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[62] CUL Vanneck Mss., Box 3, courts held January 1416, November 1426, courts in 1433 for acquiring land, October 1439 and October 1440.

[63] Noy, *Winslow* II, pp.494, 526, 533, 559.

[64] Noy, *Winslow I,* pp.70, 85, 94, 118, 142, 167.

[65] Noy, *Winslow I,* pp.228, 265, 274, 265, 289, 294, 300-1, 305, 313-14, 317, 337, 360, 381.

[66] Raftis, *Tenure and mobility*, pp.156-7, 160-6.

manor) and remained there until 1392, when he moved to nearby Stanton (Suffolk): described as a '*claviger*', for the next five years he is stated to be residing in the household of the chamberlain of the abbey (who held the manor of Stanton).[67] A century later in 1493 Andrew and Ralph Howes of Cratfield refused to pay chevage to their home manor of Cratfield, held by the Duke of Norfolk, because they were actually resident in the Duke's own household at Framlingham castle.[68]

Flown serfs are sometimes described in court roll entries as being resident with a specified third party, although this detail is not included with any consistency or frequency. It probably indicates that the migrant was employed in servanthood. Live-in servants were invariably young, single, employed on annual contracts and engaged in a range of domestic and productive activities. Historians have tended to focus upon the extent and significance of female servanthood, yet male servants were equally common.[69] A reconstruction of the movements of one well-documented serf illustrates this point admirably. Alice Parman left Hargrave sometime in the early 1380s, and in April 1385 was resident nine miles away in Lackford (Suffolk) 'with a certain brewer'. The next year she moved to Long Melford (15 miles from Hargrave), and then between 1386 and 1391 remained absent from the manor in unknown location(s). In 1392 and 1393 she was reported as living in Moulton with Alice Prior, and in October 1394 moved to live with Agnes Parman in nearby Dalham, and paid 5s.4d. for giving birth (twins) out of wedlock. Finally, in 1398 Alice paid a 40d. licence to marry Thomas Freeman of Dalham.[70] Hence it appears that Alice was in domestic service on annual contracts for perhaps nine years from the mid-1380s until the early 1390s, moving within a 15-mile radius of home, before living with a close relative in Dalham five miles from Hargrave having become pregnant. Within four years she had married a man from that village, then disappears from the historical record.

Occasionally the details of absentee serfs include the status of the person with whom they resided, which reveals that some high status lords were among those receiving the flown serfs of other lords. The nature of the relationship is seldom stated, although presumably the serf was a servant within the latter's household. For example, in 1359 Walter Algar of Hargrave was with the abbey of Crowland (Cambs.), in 1355 William Howes of Winslow was in the service of the abbey of Woburn (Beds.) and in 1423 William Fletcher of Lidgate (Suffolk) was with the prior of Barnwell (Cambs.).[71] In 1353 John Childmere of Codicote was 'with lord Walter Manny in Knebworth' (Herts.): Walter was one of Edward III's most celebrated soldiers and was the lord of a manor in Knebworth.[72] In the 1370s two serfs of the cellarer of St Albans abbey were 'in the court of the lord King'.[73] In 1412 William Boton of Norton was absent 'with the Prince', and any doubt about the prince's identity is dispelled by the explicit statements in 1413 and 1414 that William was now 'in the court of the King'.[74] Another striking revelation is that the lord of the manor of Rousham (Oxon)—none other than Sir William Shareshull, Lord Chief Justice and architect of the Statute of Labourers—had received two flown serfs from Upper Heyford in the late 1350s and continued to harbour them for most of the 1360s.[75] These examples reinforce the view that English lords at all levels within the

[67] SROB E3/15.10/1.19, courts held June 1387, November 1389, October 1392 and June 1397.

[68] CUL Vanneck Mss. Box 3, court held Whitsuntide 1493.

[69] Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, pp.260, 273-4.

[70] SROB E3/15.10/1.19.

[71] SROB E3/15.10/1.5a, court held April 1359; Noy, *Winslow* I, p.303; SROB E3/11/1.4, court held April 1423.

[72] BL Stowe Ms.849, court held 3 May 1353; *Victoria County History of Hertfordshire* volume 3 online, accessed 14/5/21 https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/herts/vol3/pp111-118.

[73] Hugo Salcok of Codicote and Thomas Bate of Norton, BL Stowe Ms.849, court held 14 December 1374; Foden, *Norton*, p.184. In June 1401 Thomas Payn of Dunningworth was with Sir John Russell, who was lord of a manor in Chillesford, SROI HD1538/207/4, W.A. Copinger, *The manors of Suffolk, vol. 5* (Manchester, 1909), p.120.

[74] Foden, *Norton*, pp. 228, 231-2.

[75] M.Bailey, 'The myth of the seigniorial reaction in England after the Black Death', in M.Kowaleski, J.Langdon, and P.Schofield, eds., *Peasants and lords in the medieval English economy. Essays in honour of Bruce Campbell* (Turnhout, 2015), pp.162-4.

social hierarchy routinely competed with each other for workers and tenants, and seldom returned flown serfs to their lords.[76] If there had been a legal requirement to return flown serfs, or a culture of doing so, then enforcing English serfdom after 1348-9 would have been a good deal more cost effective.

V

Recent research into other pre-industrial societies has explored in enterprising new ways how the experience of epidemic disease in general, and the Black Death in particular, caused villagers to migrate to towns in increasing numbers and proportions.[77] Voigtlander and Voth suggest that the labour shortages in Europe following the Black Death resulted in an upsurge in migration to towns, as peasants were attracted by higher wages, greater employment opportunities and freedom from servitude. They argue that as a consequence the urbanisation rate of Europe doubled between 1300 and 1400—while that of China remained constant—and that higher death rates in cities checked population growth and therefore locked Europe into higher per capita incomes and the pathway to modern economic growth: in these ways, 'the Horsemen of the Apocalypse effectively acted as Horsemen of Riches'.[78] Acemoglu and Wolitzky posit that the cost-effectiveness of coercion in the post-plague conditions of labour scarcity determined whether serfdom dissolved or persisted, which in turn was determined by the interaction of two variables, 'output price' and 'outside options'. They suggest tentatively that in eastern Europe after the Black Death agricultural prices were high, and outside options for serfs were low, which made coercion viable and therefore serfdom continued. In contrast, serfs in parts of western Europe enjoyed 'significantly increased outside options' due higher levels of urbanisation, which reduced the cost effectiveness of coercion and caused serfdom to dissolve over time.[79]

There are two main challenges when attempting to test these hypotheses in relation to medieval England. As we have seen, we lack sources for the direction of migration in the pre-plague period, which means that there is little hard evidence that after 1350 rural-urban migration increased. As van Bavel et al. observe, 'quantitative empirical evidence to flesh out these arguments still remains scarce'.[80] The second is that England's urban characteristics fall well below the generalisations for northwest Europe described above. English medieval historians agree that its urbanisation rate probably held steady at c.20%, or at best rose slightly, between 1300 and 1400.[81] Furthermore, its rate was modest to low by European standards. Indeed, the two most recent, and independent, estimates by Campbell and de Pleijit and van Zanden reckon that until the seventeenth century England's urbanisation rate was comparable to many areas of eastern Europe and well behind the pacesetters in northwest Europe.[82] Thus urbanisation in England was too low to cause serfdom to disappear in line with the Acemoglu and Wolitzky model, and too flat to drive per capita incomes upwards in the Voigtlander and Voth model. Yet there is no doubt that serfdom dissolved there, and that incomes per head rose sharply in the late fourteenth century.[83] The evidence for servile

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[76] Bailey, 'Myth', pp.160-4.

[77] B.van Bavel et al., *Disasters and history* (Cambridge, 2020), p.131.

[78] Voightlander and Voth, 'Horsemen', pp.776 (quote), 780-1, 784.

[79] Acemoglu and Wolitzky, 'Labour coercion', pp.555-8, 563, 577-8.

[80] van Bavel et al., *Disasters and history*, p.131.

[81] See the works cited in fn 33, plus Bailey, *After the Black Death*, p.56.

[82] B.M.S.Campbell, *The Great Transition* (Cambridge, 2016) pp.121-5, 378-82 estimates England's urbanization ratio (based on the percentage of inhabitants living in cities <10,000 people) at 4.4% in 1300, 5.7% in 1400 and 4.6% in 1500, compared to 13.8% and 29.5% for the Netherlands and 21.4% and 21% for Italy. A. de Pleijit and Z.L.van Zanden, 'Accounting for the "Little Divergence": What drove economic growth in pre-industrial Europe, 1300-1800?', *European Review of Economic History*, 20 (2016), fig.5 estimate that pre-1600 less than 3% of the English population lived in such cities, which was comparable to Poland but well behind Italy (10%) and Belgium (30%).

[83] Bailey, *After the Black Death*, pp.290-307.

migration in manor court rolls offers an opportunity to address this conundrum. Were serfs fleeing mainly to urban centres, and were servile women especially attracted to towns and servanthood?

The data in Tables 4 and 5 reinforce the established view that most medieval migration was localised: an average of 48% of all destinations on the core sample of nine manors were within 10 miles.[84] In contrast, an average of 27% were greater than 20 miles. It is not possible to know if the average distance travelled by migrants was greater after the Black Death, because the paucity of information from pre-1348 court rolls prevents any like-for-like comparison. The best information for assessing the distances of pre-plague migration is derived from the inferences within the locative surnames of taxpayers listed in lay subsidies. Analysis of this material from four counties presents a remarkably consistent pattern, in which no more than 20% of rural migrants travelled further than 20 miles.[85] In contrast, the data for servile migration data reveals that the proportion travelling over 20 miles is consistently greater, closer to 30%. Although we must be wary of comparing directly the apples of pre-plague locative surnames with the pears of post-plague flown serfs, the evidence suggests that rural migrants were prone to travel further after the plague.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Longer distance migration is usually associated with travel to towns. The data show that an average of 39% of servile destinations were urban from the four south Midlands manors, although this rises to 47% if Winslow is discounted: Winslow was a large manor with a borough at its core, which might distort this sample.[86] As a point of comparison, the destinations of 207 flown serfs from four Ramsey abbey manors (located in the same region) between 1400 and 1458 were assessed using the same methodology, of which 40% were urban.[87] The information from the East Anglian sample (Table 5) reveals a different picture. The proportion of urban destinations is consistently lower, averaging 28% across the five manors. This figure is consistent with the 30% average drawn from the additional sample of twelve East Anglian manors (Table 6). Clear and consistent regional distinctions in patterns of migration are apparent between the south Midlands and East Anglia.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Are any differences apparent between male and female migratory patterns? In general, women tended to migrate over shorter distances: a higher proportion of women stayed within 10 miles of the home manor, and a higher proportion of men moved beyond 20 miles, on six of the nine manors in the sample. Once again, a clear regional variation is apparent when comparing the proportion of women heading to urban destinations. A significantly higher proportion of women than men headed to towns on all four of the south Midlands manors, and an overall average of 59% of female and 34% of male destinations (Table 4). In contrast, the average proportion of female urban destinations was much lower in the East Anglian sample (22%), which, furthermore, was lower than for males (28%, Table 5). The proportion of women heading for towns was only decisively ahead of males on one East Anglian manor (Bredfield). This trait is confirmed by the wider sample of twelve East Anglian manors (Table 6), where the proportion of male urban destinations (30%) is also higher than female (28%).

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

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[84] The methodology is described in Appendix 1.

[85] Postles, 'Pattern of rural migration', tables 5 and 9; R.McKinley*, Norfolk and Suffolk surnames* (Chichester, 1976), pp.76-7.

[86] The Warboys figures in Table 4 cover 1400-58, compared with the 1400-29 of DeWindt, 'Leaving Warboys', pp.102-4, where 48% of women and 49% of men went to urban centres.

[87] Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, pp.100-2 listed destinations of serfs from Abbots Ripton, Broughton, Upwood and Wistow, here subjected to analysis as per Appendix 1.

Thus the data (Tables 4 to 6) reveal six main trends. First, most migration in the later Middle Ages was localised, i.e. within a dozen miles of the home manor. Second, women tended to migrate over shorter distances than males. Third, a clear majority of rural migrants moved to other rural communities, not to towns. Fourth, just under one half of all migrants headed for towns in the south Midlands, and decisively higher proportions of women than men. Fifth, less than one third of East Anglian migrants headed to towns, and a marginally higher proportion of men than women opted for urban destinations. Finally, clear differences in patterns of migration exist between the south Midlands and East Anglia.

The challenge is what to make of these figures, because comparable data are so thin on the ground. The fact that a large majority of English serfs did not migrate to towns must testify to the availability of opportunities to acquire land and obtain employment within rural communities. There were, to use Acemoglu and Wolitzky's phrase, manifold 'outside options' within the English countryside to complement those available in towns. The willingness of a sizeable minority of migrating serfs to remain on the estate of their lord, and of others to return to their home manor after a few years away, indicate that English serfdom—while disagreeable and demeaning—was not sufficiently onerous or restrictive in economic terms to prompt widespread evasion or a determination to obtain personal freedom. Put another way, the institutional structure of English serfdom was not sufficiently restrictive either to prevent serfs from leaving the home manor or to stifle opportunities to obtain work in rural communities.[88]

The example of England suggests some revision to Acemoglu and Wolizsky's concept of 'outside options' to include the presence or absence of employment opportunities within the countryside. A similar point emerges from Klein and Ogilvie's study of early-modern Bohemia, where serfdom *was* successfully tightened in conditions of labour scarcity. This was due in part to low levels of urbanisation, but also to wider institutional arrangements that inhibited the development of non-agricultural employment in rural areas.[89] The English and Bohemian examples encourage us to think more in terms of a broad framework of opportunities and obstacles to movement—rural, urban, cultural, institutional—within which serfs made their decisions about whether and where to migrate.[90]

The data also underline the existence of regional variations in patterns of migration in late medieval England, which Clark also identified for the early modern period. He found that levels of migration in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire were lower than in Norfolk, Suffolk and Kent, and attributed the difference to factors such as the quality of road and river communications, varying levels of urbanisation, proximity to London, and inheritance customs.[91] Lower levels of rural-urban migration in late-medieval East Anglia than in the central Midlands may well reflect greater opportunities in the former for migrants to obtain land and employment in rural areas. First, land was more accessible and transferable in East Anglia than the Midlands: small slivers of land were readily available through either purchase or direct seigniorial grant, tenurial forms were more varied and flexible, and the proportion of smallholders was greater in many communities. Consequently, incomers could more easily establish a foothold in a new community and supplement the produce of their smallholding from paid employment.[92] Second, a wider range of industrial and retail activities

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[88] Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, pp.309-10; Raftis, *Peasant economic development*, pp, 113-14; Raftis, *Warboys*, pp.130-43; Poos, *Rural society*, pp.162-4.

[89] A. Klein and S. Ogilivie, 'Occupation structure in the Czech lands under the second serfdom', *Economic History Review*, 69, 2 (2016), pp.493-508.

[90] S.Ogilvie, 'Choices and constraints in the pre-industrial countryside', in C.Briggs, P.T.Kitson, and S.J.Thompson, eds., *Population, welfare and economic change in Britain, 1290–1834* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 269-306.

[91] P.Clark, 'Migration in England during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century', *Past and Present* 83 (1979), pp.66-7, 75-9.

[92] J. Whittle, 'Individualism and the land-family bond: a reassessment of land transfer patterns among the English peasantry c.1270-1580', *Past and Present*, 160 (1998), pp.49-59; P. Schofield, 'Tenurial developments and the availability of land in a later medieval community', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), pp.250-67.

was available in the East Anglian countryside, mainly in textile manufacture but also in commercial pastoral farming.[93] The scale of these opportunities explains how some serfs developed active interests in more than one community simultaneously.[94] The opportunities for rural work applied especially to East Anglian women, where employment was widely available in traditional female occupations such as brewing, dairying and textiles.

Finally, there are no data from anywhere in late medieval Europe with which to compare the discovery that 33% of servile urban destinations were towns. The only comparable English data are Clark's work on Norfolk male deponents between 1600 and 1750, of whom 17.9% born in wood-pasture parishes, and 23.9% of those in sheep-corn parishes, moved to towns.[95] If early modern male deponents can be compared reliably with medieval servile migrants, then levels of rural-urban migration were undoubtedly higher among the latter. It also seems instructive that the proportion of servile urban destinations (33%) was notably higher than the proportion of the population living in towns (20%). Likewise, 59% of all female destinations in the south Midlands were towns, supporting the argument that women were drawn to urban centres substantially and disproportionately. A surfeit of women in south Midland towns, and a deficit in the countryside, could have carried regional implications for fertility restriction and the possible emergence of the EMP. Yet some caution is advisable. The proportion of East Anglian women heading to towns was substantially lower. England's urbanisation rate did not obviously rise. One third of rural migrants heading to towns was not sufficiently high to have transformed either urban fortunes or English economic performance in the later Middle Ages.

VI

This article has provided new information about migration in late-medieval England, an important subject that has attracted little research due to the paucity of reliable information. Hitherto, the most plentiful source for rural-urban migration—the record of movement of hereditary serfs in manorial court rolls—has been under-utilised, because of doubts about its accuracy and reliability. We have argued that many of these doubts are unfounded for the best documented manors, although even on these the record is biased towards those serfs who maintained some contact with their home manor. The quantity of information about flown serfs increased after the Black Death of 1348-9, their whereabouts were recorded more frequently and precisely, and nearly a third of such references related to women. As such, this material is the most abundant, accurate and reliable record of rural migration—and of female migration especially—available to late-medieval historians.

The most informative court rolls surviving in the most complete series enable the life histories of individual migrants to be partially reconstructed. These indicate that circular migration, whereby a villager left their home community in their youth then returned a few years later, was probably common in the later Middle Ages. They also reveal that a sizeable minority of serfs moved to other manors on the estate of their own lord, presumably because these social networks—along with familial links—provided reliable information about employment opportunities elsewhere.

Statistical analysis of a core sample of nine manors in two regional clusters between 1350 and 1500, augmented by a further four manors in the south Midlands and twelve manors in East Anglia, identified a number of distinct trends. Most migration was localised, within a dozen miles of the home community; women tended to migrate over shorter distances than males; and 67% of all servile destinations were rural. Within these broad trends, clear regional variations are apparent: in the south Midlands 39% of all migrant destinations were towns, and significantly higher (59%) for women, whereas just 30% of East Anglian destinations were urban, and the proportion for women (22%) was even lower.

Villagers in late medieval England may have regarded serfdom as disagreeable and demeaning, but

[93] M.Bailey, *A marginal economy? East Anglian Breckland in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp.158-91; Poos, *Rural society*, pp.11-72, 181-228; Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, pp.152-75, 219-27, 265-79.

[94] Bailey, *After the Black Death*, pp. 310-11. Poos, *Rural society*, pp. 162-4

[95] Clark, 'Migration in England', table 10.

flight from its burdens does not seen to have been a principal reason for leaving, given that many returned to their home manor or moved around the estate of their lord, and only a minority went to towns where their legal freedom would be assured. Lords had little success in forcing flown serfs to return, and other lords—including the king—routinely employed the serfs of other lords rather than returning them. In seeking explanations for different trajectories in the decline of serfdom within Europe, attention should be given to the nature of regional differences in the institutional structure of serfdom and in the framework of opportunities available to serfs within the countryside. In England in general, and East Anglia and the south-east in particular, the structure of serfdom permitted the acquisition of land and the availability of paid work in rural settings, and these opportunities increased markedly after the Black Death, when even servile land was being converted to flexible and monetarized tenures.

Without comparable data, it would be imprudent to draw strident conclusions from the discovery that around 33% of serfs headed for towns. The proportion is significantly higher than both the proportion of contemporary people living in towns and the proportion of urban-bound Norfolk males in the early modern period, which supports the view that urban employment was important and attractive to late medieval rural men and women. Yet the majority of serfs stayed in rural settings, and England's urbanisation ratio did not obviously rise during this period. The high proportion and clear preference for towns among female migrants in the south Midlands contrasts with a much lower proportion—and lower than male migrants—in East Anglia. In both regions, the proportions were broadly similar to those of males. A sizeable minority of women certainly sought out opportunities in urban servanthood, but the majority found work—often within marriage—in the countryside.

TABLE 1 Number of chevage payments and presentments for absence per court on seven manors, 1249-1502

Manor	Range of Years	No. of Courts	Number of Chevage Payments	Number of Presentments for Absence	Combined per court
Bredfield	1325-49	95	17	8	0.26

Bredfield	1350-1508	226	119	111	1.02
Codicote	1327-49	53	14	9	0.43
Codicote	1350-75	57	0	247	4.33
Dunningworth	1330-49	21	0	1	0.05
Dunningworth	1350-99	102	9	18	0.27
Dunningworth	1400-99	158	232	61	3.90
Winslow	1327-48	46	2	1	0.07
Winslow	1349–77	55	3	308	5.56
Winslow	1423-60	46	2	157	3.43
Norton (Herts.)	1249-1348	185	9	30	0.21
Norton	1350-1453	135	2	727	5.41
Hargrave	1383-1402	32	30	69	3.09
Hargrave	1405-1502	126	64	22	0.68
Upper Heyford	1350-80	38	0	132	3.47
Upper Heyford	1426-96	17	0	0	0

Sources: Bredfield, Suffolk Record Office, Ipswich (hereafter) SROI, HA91/1-2; Codicote, British Library (BL), Stowe Ms.849; Dunningworth, SROI HD1538/207/1-9; Hargrave, Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds (SROB), E3/15.10/1.1-1.27; P.Foden, trans., *Records of the manor of Norton in the liberty of St Albans 1244-1539*, Hertfordshire Record Society 29 (2013); Upper Heyford, New College, Oxford, 3821-3825; D.Noy, ed., *Winslow Manor Court Books, Part I: 1327–1377; Part II: 1423–1460*, Buckinghamshire Records Society Publications, 35 and 36 (2011).

TABLE 2 Percentage of chevage and presentments for absence that include the location of the serf and that record women on nine manors, 1249-1508

Manor	**Range of Years**	**% of all chevage/PA cases which record the location of serf**	**% of all chevage/PA cases recording women**
Bredfield	1325-49	16%	0
Bredfield	1350-1508	70%	16%
Chevington	1352-1418	54%	11%
Codicote	1327-49	0%	0%
Codicote	1350-77	60%	26%
Dunningworth	1330-49	0%	0%
Dunningworth	1350-99	56%	0%
Dunningworth	1400-90	93%	1%
Winslow	1327-48	0%	0%
Winslow	1349-77	45%	15%
Winslow	1423-60	72%	30%
Norton	1249-1348	7%	0%
Norton	1350-1453	82%	25%
Hargrave	1383-1502	58%	32%
Warboys	1290-1347	56%	10%
Warboys	1400-1458	80%	33%

Upper Heyford	1350-80	3%	3%

Sources: as per table 1, plus Chevington, SROB E3/15.3/1.1a-1.35; J.A.Raftis, *Warboys. Two hundred years in the life of an English village* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 145-50.

Table 3: Recorded flight of all serfs from Walsham (Suffolk) 1350 to 1420

Name	Year(s) recorded absent	Presentment for absence
John Robetel	1350	Absent, in Bacton Died 1353, holding nothing within the manor
John Peyntour	1351	Absent, location not stated No evidence for return
John Patel	1353	Absent, in Colchester (Essex) Returns by 1359, sells inheritance to brother in 1362
Walter Robhood	1361	Absent, location not stated Returns by 1365 to hold land
Henry Osbern	1361	Absent, location not stated Returns by 1367 to hold land
John Rampoyle	1361 - 63	Absent, location not stated 1361-2 1363 'in the lord's service at Parham'
John Clevehog	1361 - 64	Absent, location not stated No evidence for return
William Clevehog	1361 – 64	Absent, location not stated Returns by 1369
Nicholas Clevehog	1361 – 64	Absent, location not stated No evidence for return
William Osbern	1361 and 64	Absent, location not stated Returns in 1365 to hold land
Agnes Osbern	1390	Absent, location not stated 1393 marries man in lord's household
Margery Osbern	1390	Absent, location not stated No evidence for return
Robert Osbern	1392	Absent, location not stated Returns by 1409

Source: R.Lock, ed., *The court rolls of Walsham-le-Willows 1351-99*, Suffolk Records Society 45 (2002); SROB HA504/1/10.1-10.12.

Table 4. Distances of migration and percentage of urban destinations, by gender, on four south Midlands manors, 1350-1460

MANOR (time span)	**No. of destinations**	**within 10 miles**	**11 - 20 miles**	**over 20 miles**		**% to towns**
NORTON (Herts.) 1350-1453						
all migrants	93	59%	6%	35%		48%
female migrants	21	62%	14%	24%		52%
male migrants	72	58%	4%	38%		47%

CODICOTE (Herts.) 1350-1377						
all migrants	22	36%	32%	32%		41%
female migrants	3	0	0	100%		100%
male migrants	19	42%	37%	21%		32%
WINSLOW (Bucks.) 1350-1460						
all migrants	68	66%	18%	16%		15%
female migrants	15	53%	34%	13%		27%
male migrants	53	70%	13%	17%		11%
WARBOYS(Hunts.) 1400-1458						
all migrants	87	51%	18%	31%		52%
female migrants	38	61%	13%	26%		58%
male migrants	49	43%	22%	35%		47%

Sources: as per Tables 1 and 2.

Table 5. Distances of migration and percentage of urban destinations, by gender, on five East Anglian manors, 1350-1500

MANOR (time span)	**No. of destinations**	**within 10 miles**	**11 - 20 miles**	**over 20 miles**		**% to towns**
BREDFIELD 1350-1483						
all migrants	33	48%	33%	18%		30%
female migrants	13	38%	31%	31%		46%
male migrants	20	55%	35%	10%		20%
CHEVINGTON 1352-1500						
all migrants	31	19%	48%	33%		35%
female migrants	6	50%	50%	0		17%
male migrants	25	12%	48%	40%		35%
DUNNINGWORTH 1350-1484						
all migrants	42	60%	21%	19%		29%
female migrants	5	60%	20%	20%		20%
male migrants	37	59%	22%	19%		30%
HARGRAVE 1351-1500						
all migrants	61	43%	34%	23%		21%
female migrants	27	55%	30%	15%		19%
male migrants	34	32%	38%	30%		24%
EYKE **1350-1500**						
all migrants	65	52%	15%	33%		26%
female migrants	13	61%	8%	31%		8%
male migrants	52	50%	17%	33%		31%

Sources: as per Tables 1 and 2, plus Eyke (Staverton manor) SROI HD1538/XXXX.

Table 6: Number of flown serfs to recorded urban destinations on twelve East Anglian manors 1348 to 1500

Manor	No. of male destinations	Of which, towns	No. of female destinations	Of which, towns
Aldham 1349-1476	23	8	5	0
Beeston Regis 1384-1492	15	5	4	1
Cratfield 1401-1497	22	10	8	1
Felsham 1350-1412	7	1	2	1
Harleston 1413-1479	12	3	2	2
Holbrook 1378-1485	6	4	1	1
Lidgate 1391-1481	23	1	4	0
Norton (Suffolk) 1422-1500	8	4	6	2
Sutton 1401-1500	2	0	2	0
Ufford 1353-1377	14	3	9	1
Walsham 1350-1430	3	1	7	2
Winston 1349-1484	6	2	4	4
Totals	**141**	**42**	**54**	**15**
All migrants	**195**	**57**		

Sources: Aldham, CUL Vanneck Mss. Box 1, SROI HA68/484/135, 315; Beeston TNA DL30/102/1392 to 1407; Cratfield, CUL Vanneck Mss. Box 3; Felsham, SROB 1700/1/1 to 3; Harleston, SROB E3/15.17/1.1; Holbrook, SROI S1/10/9.1 and 9.2; Lidgate, SROB E3/11/1.1 to 1.5; Norton SROB 553/1 to 5; Sutton, SROI HB10/427/4/1; Ufford SROI HD1538/394 and 395; Walsham, see Table 3; Winston, CUL EDC 7/19/Boxes 2 and 3.

Appendix 1: Methodology for Tables 4, 5 and 6

A named flown serf residing and staying in a named place counts as one destination. If a serf is recorded in the same place for ten consecutive years, then that place counts as one destination, not ten. If the same serf then goes to another place for three years, and returns to the previous location, then this counts as three destinations: hence the same serf in London for ten years, Aylesbury for four, then London again for seven years register as three separate destinations. Distances based on Google Maps shortest reasonable travel mileage from the home manor. Where a place name is not unique and no county is given, then measured to the nearest such location. If the placename is illegible or unidentifiable, then it is not included. Where merely another county is given ('X remains in the county of Kent') or 'overseas', then included as >20 miles but not as urban. The number of such references is very small.

The definition of a town might require an essay in itself, although see S. Rigby*, English society in the later Middle Ages: class, status and gender* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 145-6, D. Palliser, 'Introduction', in D. Palliser, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, volume I, 600-1540* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 4-7, and C.Dyer, 'Small towns 1270-1540', in Palliser, *Urban history*, pp. 505-17. The starting point for determining whether a settlement was urban in the later Middle Ages in Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire is C. Dyer and T.R. Slater, 'The Midlands', in Palliser, ed., *Urban history*, map 22.9; in Hertfordshire, T.R. Slater and N. Goose, eds., *A county of small towns* (Hatfield, 2008); in Suffolk, Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, p. 122; and my own researches for Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire and Norfolk. If there is any doubt about the urban status of a destination, it is included as a town so that the proportion of towns is not understated by setting a high qualification bar for what constituted a town: in other words, the resultant figures are more likely to overstate urban destinations than not. Hence a place such as Holm, which was a small and speculative planted borough in thirteenth-century Huntingdonshire, but did not survive the Middle Ages as a town, is included. Likewise, the market village/town of Debenham (Suffolk) is classified as a town.