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LIVING STANDARDS AND MATERIAL CULTURE IN ENGLISH RURAL HOUSEHOLDS 1300 –1600

By ALICE FORWARD¹ and BEN JERVIS¹

Chris Briggs (University of Cambridge) and Ben Jervis (Cardiff University) were recently successful in an application to the Leverhulme Trust to undertake an interdisciplinary research project looking at the archaeological and historical evidence for medieval objects from rural households between 1300 and 1600. This project was preceded by a pilot study (Jervis *et al.* 2015) and this second phase of work, running from 2016 to 2019, will broaden these initial results. Two hypotheses are being proposed: firstly, that the demographic losses following the Black Death of 1348–1349 and subsequent epidemics led to a rise in living standards, as evident in the quantity and variety of goods possessed by households. Secondly, that the rural population of medieval England had a sophisticated material culture. This has implications for understanding the extent to which a ‘consumer revolution’ occurred in the later middle ages or early modern period.

The pilot study looked at six counties in the south-east Midlands, but the full project will cover fifteen counties scattered across England: Devon, Cornwall, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Kent, Middlesex, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Suffolk, Norfolk, Worcestershire, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Westmorland, and Cumberland. In Hampshire and Worcestershire, urban centres will also be studied.

The historical evidence is being sourced from Escheator and Coroner’s records as these tend to represent a greater diversity of the medieval and early post-medieval population than, for example, inventories of manorial estates. The archaeological evidence is being gathered from excavation reports. In order to capture

as much data as possible, the Historic Environment Records for each county are being interrogated and a request for data has been submitted for all records that are dated as between 1200–1700 AD or include the term ‘medieval’. Objects which fall within the period of study (1300–1600) and are from a stratified medieval or early post-medieval context are documented within the project database. For Worcestershire and Hampshire medieval objects which are unstratified and residual will also be included.

Incorporating the two datasets will enable a holistic approach to medieval materiality and the concept of value. The dream would be to find a household recorded in the historical documentation that has also been subject to excavation. In the absence of such a scenario, specific case studies where both datasets help us to clearly develop a deeper understanding of objects and ownership in association with an individual or a household will be sought.

If anyone has any sites they wish to bring to our attention then please contact either Alice Forward (forwarda2@cardiff.ac.uk) or Ben Jervis (jervisb@cardiff.ac.uk). We also have a project blog (medievalobjects.wordpress.org) where you can find further information and follow the progress of our research.

Bibliography

Jervis, B., Briggs, C. and Tompkins, M. 2015. Exploring text and objects: Escheator’s inventories and material culture in Medieval English rural households, *Medieval Archaeology* 59 (1): 168–92.

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