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## 12.1 The active peasant: changing the rural world, 1350-1550 Room 103

*Convener: Christopher Dyer*

*Chair: TBA*

Medieval peasants have been reassessed in recent historical writing. We no longer think of them just as victims of an oppressive social structure, or as an inert mass, but as people who constructed their own identities, responded to stimuli around them, took initiatives, and made decisions. They played a part in moulding the rural world and promoting change. This is the second of two linked sessions.

### 12.11 Frederic Aparisi Romero – Peasants in action. Political leadership and economic dynamism in the rural communities of the Valencian country during the fifteenth century

Traditionally the medieval peasantry has been seen as a homogeneous body without initiative and self confidence. However, historical perceptions of the rural community have changed in recent years thanks to a more complete and precise analysis of the inequalities among the peasantry. We now appreciate that a group of well-to-do peasants emerged in different regions of Europe. Although their presence can be detected as early as 1000AD, it is after 1350 that they become more prominent. These active peasants stood out not only by their abilities for economic management but also by their political control of the community. Furthermore, they acted as intermediaries between the community and the outside world, this is, the lord or lords, the urban merchants and the towns.

This paper aims to explore the specific characteristics of this group of the peasantry in the Valencian Country, paying attention to such different aspects as their ability to take initiatives, their economic activities or their relation with the rest of the community. This work is focused on the fifteenth century, when the kingdom of Valencia lived through a period of development and it was integrated into systems of international trade. This context of growth offered to the active peasant new ways of achieving social promotion, which we will seek to analyse and explain.

**Frederic Aparisi Romero** is PhD student at the University of Valencia. He is interested in medieval rural society. In fact, his thesis is focused in rural elites of the kingdom of Valencia in the 15th century. Furthermore, he is also interested in medieval fishing and in the Valencian lesser nobility. Apart from individual research, he belongs to Harca, a research group formed by young medievalists, which has taken part in organising sessions in different international conferences such as 12th Mediterranean Studies Association Conference (Cagliari, 2010), the XVth World Economic History Congress (Utrecht, 2010) and a session in this conference.

### 12.12 Hipolito Rafel Oliva Herrer – Peasant agency, politics and the boundaries of the political community in late medieval Castile

Eric Hobsbawm's pioneering research provides this definition for politics in a peasant's context: according to him, politics can be defined as 'the relation of peasants with other social groups ... and with more comprehensive institutions or special units – the government, the national state.

Work done on rural politics, more recently, has substantially modified the quite pessimistic view offered in those days, emphasizing the autonomy of peasant political agency. However some of the questions raised by Hobsbawm remain significant, at least if we consider them in cultural terms.

This paper tries to go further on these aspects taking as a reference the Castilian countryside in the late fifteenth century. In general terms, the political activity of peasant elite will be discussed. In particular, the channels which make possible the crystallisation and expression of a peasant

political discourse will be considered as well as the fundamental concepts that this discourse articulates.

Finally, questions such as the autonomy of peasant political discourse and the end products of peasant demands will be discussed.

**Hipólito Rafel Oliva Herrero** is Professor of Medieval History at the University of Seville (Spain). His main research interest is rural Castile in the late middle ages. He is working both on social and economic conditions, and on political culture in the countryside during the XVth century. This last topic involves the circulation of information in the rural world, the making of political identities in the countryside, and peasant politics in a more general sense. Now he is working on an English translation of his book *Justicia contra señores: el mundo rural y la política en tiempos de los Reyes Católicos* and preparing a book on peasant agency and economic development in late medieval Spain. For a detailed list of publications see: [http://investigacion.us.es/sisius/sis\\_showpub.php?idpers=10579](http://investigacion.us.es/sisius/sis_showpub.php?idpers=10579)

### 12.13 Ben Dodds – Tithe, subsistence and commercialisation

This paper will examine English peasant agriculture during the decades immediately following the Black Death using receipts from tithes in a number of parishes in southern England. The data will be used to measure aggregate output during the 1350s and 1360s and to demonstrate the increase in grain production per head of population. The composition of peasant harvests will also be examined and the extent to which peasants adjusted their production strategies in response to the changing economic circumstances will be assessed. Comment will be made on the impact of subsistence needs and commercial production in peasant agriculture in the years after the Black Death and our wider understanding of the nature of peasant agriculture will be reexamined in the light of the evidence from this unusual period.

**Ben Dodds** works in the Department of History at the University of Durham. His specialism is in late-medieval economic and social history. Following a project on north-east England, he has been working on tithes from southern England as evidence for the study of peasant agriculture.