

The Black Death and Social Metabolism: Late Medieval English Energy Consumption

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Presentation:

Prof. Richard W. Unger

Department of History

University of British Columbia

The Plague which swept across Europe from 1346 on caused massive loss of life. By 1450 only two people lived in England for every five who lived there in 1300. Such a dramatic change had an impact on many aspects of society. There are serious methodological problems in reconstructing data for the late Middle Ages but because of extensive recent research on the English economy it is possible to reconstruct changes in energy consumption per person and per unit of production between those two dates. Together with estimates of changes in land area used to generate that energy it is possible to produce a profile of the effect of population collapse on social metabolism. After the Black Death total energy consumption in England went down while energy consumption per person went up. Surprisingly, patterns of energy use changed little. People did devote a larger share of energy available to make beer, suggesting over the long term brewing was a significant contributor to the social metabolism of northern Europe.

Prof. Richard Unger, Ph.D. (Yale) teaches Medieval and Early Modern Economic History and the History of Technology at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

The use of energy and its relationship to changes in the pre-modern economy is the focus of research on developments in Europe from the late Roman Empire to the Industrial Revolution. Work concentrates on quantification and of various forms of energy consumption as well as developments in technologies which had an impact on levels and types of energy people used. Complementary is work on the patterns of change in energy consumption in Canada in the last two centuries and the role of the aluminum industry in the development of electricity generation.

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