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National Income in Domesday England

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Introduction

In 1086, for the first time in recorded history, it is possible to reconstruct and provide a benchmark estimate of the national income of an economy from manorial data. A record following the watershed in English history that accompanied the successful invasion of William the Conqueror, the Domesday Book provides a broad set of information relating to England in 1086. No survey on the scale of Domesday was to be conducted for many centuries following its completion. The next attempt to provide a national survey of England, the 1279 Hundred Rolls, was abandoned before completion and only a proportion of the original returns have survived (Kosminsky, 1956; Raban, 2004).

The estimation of Domesday income has had a central place in the work of Nicholas Mayhew on the connections between money supply, national income, prices and wages (Mayhew, 1995a, pp. 55–75; 2013a; 2013b, p. 22). Graeme Snooks (1995) has also attempted to benchmark Domesday income and chart changes in the English economy over the long run. To do so, both authors have used Henry Clifford Darby’s total of Domesday income (Darby, 1977) as a measure of seigniorial income and then, based on secondary sources, make estimates of the extent of non-seigniorial income. Snooks makes austere assumptions to come up with a figure of £147,000, while Mayhew provided estimates that size the British economy at between £300,000 and £400,000. Recently, Mayhew has used a fresh analysis of Domesday agricultural income in the demesne and non-demesne sectors to propose a higher estimate of about £400,000 (Mayhew, 2013a, pp. 205–10). Mayhew tests his estimates against a model of medieval monetization based on the Quantity Theory of Money, while Snooks uses aggregated data from the Domesday Book to estimate income levels and then simulates economic change over time. These attempts to establish the size of the Domesday economy have substantial limitations, principally that they make quite ad hoc estimates of the extent of the non-seigniorial economy.
Taking advantage of data generated by two substantial projects that provide full manorial-level information from the Domesday Book, this study provides a methodology to derive the full extent of Domesday seigniorial (made up of the King’s lands, ecclesiastical and those lands held by tenant-in-chiefs and their recorded sub-tenants) and non-seigniorial arable incomes. I shall also compile the rich information contained within the Domesday Book to provide estimates of the size of the pastoral economy, property holdings, mills, and other important asset returns (both in monetary terms and ‘in kind’), being careful to contextualize this within developments in Domesday scholarship.

Having an estimate of the Domesday economy in toto, I shall then compare and contrast these with other Domesday estimates, both provided in this study under differing assumptions and from earlier work, and figures from the earliest subsequent period where a robust benchmark is possible, circa 1300. I also incorporate contemporary accounts and dendroclimatological data, which agree that 1086 was a year with well above average rainfall, and determine their potential impact on agricultural production in order to provide an additional comparative estimate, accounting for climatic conditions. The availability of a substantial resource of medieval data sources coupled with Domesday provides considerable scope to chart very long-run movements in income, together with a further evaluation of the Domesday text.

The Domesday Book and Domesday scholarship

The 900th anniversary of the Domesday survey in 1986 ushered in a new era in academic research, with a renewal of scholarly interest focused on this pivotal source. In a series of papers, John McDonald and Graeme Snooks were the first to apply more sophisticated statistical methodologies, as opposed to the tabulations that were previously used to analyse the Survey (McDonald and Snooks, 1985a; 1985b; 1985c; 1986). Commentators argued that ‘statistical analysis, coupled with micro-economic theory will have an important role to play’ (Hamshere, 1987, p. 265) and that Domesday statistical studies would ‘bring the disciplines of history, economics and geography [together]’ with the aim of generating ‘exciting school and tertiary education projects’ (McDonald and Snooks, 1985c, p. 147). Neither research nor teaching applications have, however, been forthcoming. As a survey of the Domesday historiography points out, ‘the economic approach to the Domesday evidence imploded in the hands of Snooks and MacDonald; it seems that no-one dares to follow them without a secure grounding in statistics denied to most historians’ (Holt, 2001, p. 20). The literature, however, has provided a number of reasons why, beyond a lack of statistical acumen, this has been the case. Rather than a phobia for numbers, a series of alternative explanations exist. These can be related to four facets of the Domesday research