

DAVID AUSTIN

## The Presence of Poverty: Archaeologies of Difference and Their Meaning

I shall want to understand what we mean by poverty in a medieval sense and to understand whether or not we can in any physical way, through archaeology, make the poor visible, bring their signs to light. I will begin by making some general assertions: poverty as a term suggests a state of being, an allegoric abstraction or a mode of behaviour, and at the same time poverty can imply some kind of institutional presence; whereas the poor are individuals in need. Poverty, some would also argue, is a relative condition (Little 1978, 28), even to the extent that it is relative within classes or categories of society, and it would follow that archaeology, as the study of the material past, must make much of the comparative differences that exist in the surviving fabric of the Middle Ages. Those physical remains, however, are usually so composed that they permit us to talk more easily of the general structures of society, than about individuals and the physical and material actions with which they are directly associated. So we may identify poverty as an institutionalised presence more readily than we may find the poor virgin, the poor knight or even the economically poor. Reference to these kinds of individuals, familiar tropes in medieval art and literature as other papers in this collection show, reminds us also that the actions of individuals can be as much affective as they are environmentally or socially determined, and they can be momentary within the *longue durée*. Thus things, the matter of archaeology, can be adopted as signs of poverty, vocabulary articulated through a grammar of context we can often only derive from art and the written word. Things may also be a mask on the truth of condition, externally adopted to deceive the social audience about the circumstances of individual or family.

So archaeology must deal with two main issues in this theme: we have to make clear the nature of material difference and we must then attempt to understand what meanings such differences may have had in the contexts in

which they are found. This is the practice of interpretation, which lies right at the core of our discipline. Within the practice, however, the methodologies of difference are essentially those of typology, taken as a fundamental norm of quantitative science. Thus with ceramics, for example, easily the most universal of artefact types from excavation, the visible characteristics are structured and ordered, and interpretations are induced empirically by application of often unexpressed understandings of human nature. So a Hispano-Moresque vase (fig. 1), distinguished by glaze, decoration, form and substance, and found in a Lincolnshire monastic drain is associated with wealth and high-class activity because it has travelled a long way from Spain, is rare and has its presence at the heart of a rich institution. Such judgements are made, however, on the basis of modern criteria of value and function. We actually know little about medieval senses of value whether monetary or aesthetic for artefacts which scarcely have presence in documents and whose appearance in art is often ambiguous, certainly before the more representational painting of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The problem is, therefore, that we have tended to privilege intrinsic character over context and that, as such, we have thus tended to interpret in terms of institutions and absolutes of meaning with reference to those of modernity rather than attempting to see the individual act and the relativities of place and time.



Fig. 1: Hispano-Moresque jug from excavations at Stamford, Lincolnshire (photo: author)

So, we are bound to ask, can we, and how do we, identify difference and then interpret it as the presence of poverty or indeed the presence of the poor human being? Since the economically poor, for example, formed, according to most historians, a very large proportion of the medieval population (one third to one half), this is a serious issue for archaeologists wishing to engage with the other medievalist discourses. However, I am not hopeful that we can succeed in any empirical sense. This may either be because our methods are defective, as I have intimated, or that during the Middle Ages the marks and signs of poverty had no specific kinds of materiality that could survive to us in the present. Indeed a search of the discourse of medieval archaeology reveals little study or even reference to the issue of poverty. The poor had no pottery only used by them; there were no metal objects only they would have; they could dwell in a ditch or the crevice of a castle. In terms of things, indeed, the poor had little; what they had already showed signs of decay; and this was often handed down for secondary use. Indeed this last point raises another fundamental issue about artefacts: they have life cycles and complex existences of their own and may be used or inhabited in a variety of circumstances by many people of varying conditions. Archaeological deposits are the contexts of final use: and they are fragmentary, jumbled, terminally decayed with primary use usually indistinguishable from secondary.

Even when we deal, not with artefacts, but the material remains of the person itself we are again in difficulty, if we seek to find poverty. In terms of marks about the body, much that was associated with poverty, such as sores, emaciation, old age or disfigurement was only skin deep or in the softer tissues, and others, such as madness or despondency existed only in the fabric of the mind. For the archaeologist there is nothing more malnourished or emaciated as a skeleton, the usual material survivor of the body. We cannot find hunger or idiocy; old age is a condition of most; disease may be found in the bone through pathology, but this is deeply problematic and hard to associate with any specific ailment of poverty. Indeed, disease, in the Middle Ages was viewed as a judgement of morality and Christian virtue rather than a direct result of poverty. This is a perception of modernity. A man or a woman may be made poor by disease, but rarely was disease seen as the product of poverty.

*The tradition of poverty in medieval archaeology*

Medieval archaeologists, especially those like me who excavate settlements and landscapes, have been influenced mainly by an empiricist economic history in Britain, especially those of us who have worked on rural sites. This is because medieval archaeology was created as a sub-discipline when this mode of explanation was in the ascendancy and because much of the motivation for digging came from the desire to identify the peasant way of life. The other and elder discourse of medieval archaeology was architectural and art history. The problem for the economic historian was that the poor in the sense that Chris Dyer uses ('those subject to life-threatening deprivation') were almost invisible as people from the most useful economic documents and had to be inferred from generic analyses (Dyer 1989). For Titow the defect in documents masked a bleak reality:

... customals, rentals and similar documents completely disregard the landless elements of the community and give us only the total tenant population. They thus present a picture which is rosier than the reality.... Fortunately this defect can be partly remedied...About 1248 [in the manor of Taunton] the amount of land per person was only some 3.3 acres, and this had probably dwindled by about 1311 to some 2.5 acres per head at the most. This represents a truly desperate state of affairs, and if it is remembered that there were great inequalities of distribution, the majority of the peasants must have been far worse off than these figures suggest. (Titow 1962, 3)

Hoskins was even bleaker:

A country in which between one-third and two-thirds of the population were wage-earners, and a considerable proportion of the remainder subsistence farmers; in which about one-third of the population lived below the poverty-line and another third lived on or barely above it; in which the working-class spent fully 80 to 90 per cent of their incomes upon food and drink; in such a country the harvest was the fundamental fact of human life. (Hoskins 1953-4, 34)

Elsewhere he wrote:

Fully two-thirds of the urban population of England in the 1520's lived at or very near the poverty line. Life was somewhat easier in the rural areas for a variety of reasons, but even here some 40 to 50 per cent of the popu-

lation were wage-earners, and many others were small peasant farmers entirely at the mercy of Nature. (Hoskins 1963, 84)

The mantra for the economic historian of the central and later Middle Ages was that the lower orders of the peasant population were at the mercy of harvest failure, natural disaster, war and disease. This affected the cottage holder and the landless in particular. In the debate also about the origins of capitalism, this situation was seen to become worse in the later fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and required the intervention of the state and more sophisticated processes of discrimination within the charitable institutions. Most of what the economic historians wrote about poverty, other than the basic statistics of their presence, was about the strategies of survival and the systems of charity which gave support.

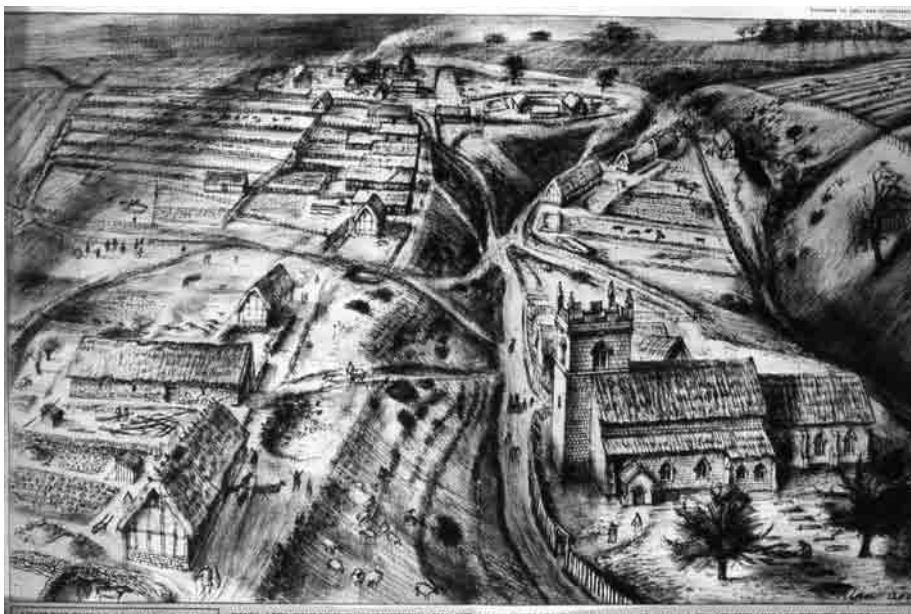


Fig. 2: Reconstruction of the Village of Wharram Percy, East Yorkshire by Alan Sorrell (Illustrated London News, no. 6485, Nov. 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963 centrefold!)

I grew up as an archaeologist, therefore, with a dark and desperate view of the life of the peasant and our reconstructions and narratives reflected this as we can see in Alan Sorrell's reconstruction of Wharram Percy (fig. 2). Our interpretations followed this Marxian vision of Apocalypse with the Four Horsemen rampant. However, the burden of more recent analysis rather

suggests that the poor managed perfectly well somehow and at the end of a long chapter on poverty and charity Chris Dyer could express surprise and bewilderment, writing that: ‘The survival of the medieval poor still remains something of a mystery.’ (Dyer 1989, 257) But survive they did, and in droves.

The position we have arrived at, therefore, in archaeology is that poverty and the poor are hard to detect in economic documents and even harder in the material past. I should also say that the poor identified in philosophy, theology, art and literature and explored elsewhere in this volume has intruded little into our discourse.

We archaeologists have tended to accept the primacy of economic and functional explanation and have taken this as our temporal template. Given the subject of this seminar, therefore, it is ironic that poverty has been scarcely addressed in our work. We can quote, perhaps, the best general book on the archaeology of medieval towns written by John Schofield and Alan Vince. In their conclusions about future study in this field, they identified the poor as a class about which we know virtually nothing archaeologically and, drawing attention to the zonality of poverty, using a map of the poor districts of Siena created from documents, they went on to say:

But how can archaeology identify rich and poor sites, or rich and poor households? We have not yet worked out the criteria ... Normal archaeological finds, especially pottery, were not particularly good indicators of wealth, and the archaeologist must look elsewhere to study this variable. There should be more studies of the ‘bottom-up’ view of the medieval town. (Schofield and Vince 2003, 254-5)

Schofield and Vince, however, can offer no practical, archaeological ways in which we achieve this and I am sceptical that we can in any evidential or empirical sense.

Also, as modern historians have shown, the poor were not a single, coherent cohort of folk. There was variation from place to place, and its appearance and meaning changed through time. New forms of poverty and what some have called ‘moral panic’ came with the break-down of the medieval agrarian and tenorial system and the consequent failure of the traditional structures of society and their support. As criteria of access to land moved from those of customary rights to those of property the process of exclusion was accelerated. The poor of the town’s market economy were also more evident than those of the countryside whence many of the urban came.

This is an argument which shows again the strong influence of twentieth century thought in which structures are privileged over agency and the plight of the underclass is romanticised and exonerated. I want to hold onto this issue of structure and agency because it is of vital concern as to how we can interpret archaeological information to achieve a perspective on poverty which may, as I have suggested already, have been, in the medieval world, more a matter of agency than structure.

In later Anglo-Saxon and medieval texts the poor were apparent, but without status and legal definition. Nor was there legal provision for them within the feudal state and this remained the case until the early sixteenth century. This means that they are not incorporated into the frameworks of medieval documents, except as the incidences of individual action whether as reality in coroner's records or as metaphor and allegory in poetry and holy texts.

There are, on the other hand, thieves, widows, the landless, poor travellers, refugees, the sick, parentless children and slaves in Anglo-Saxon and medieval manorial acts. Traditional rural society and urban institutions cared for the poor: it was the responsibility of either the kin or the powerful, both lay and clerical through charity, *elemosina* (alms), for which the reward was heavenly redemption. These were, however, acts in relation to the individual and not corporate actions in relation to people of a particular status or class. That was a product of modernity and the modern state.

In summary here then I would say that the archaeological relationship with medieval poverty in all its guises has been largely economic in nature and non-specific, and is structural in argument rather than having a regard for agency.

I would go further. Poverty has not actually been addressed as a social or philosophical theme by archaeologists – in other words, most of what we may term the medieval allegorised elements of the human condition of poverty have not been studied as such. In seeking the material evidence of poverty, as we shall see, there is little empirically we can use. Yet this would be true also of chastity, faith, greed, avarice, madness, vanity or any other of the states of the human condition and mind. What we can attempt to do is employ inference, but usually what we are driven to is a selection from our array of things which can represent these elements of a medieval vocabulary: in other words, archaeology as *glossarium*.

*Modernity*

We have also another problem when trying to form a relationship with the material we discover in our excavations or in the surviving buildings and landscapes we survey: that is, modernity. It affects our empirical interpretations, because they are still, however unconsciously, drawn from our individual and collective experience. We see a thing and we try to imagine or envisage how it worked in the medieval world. To do this we have to navigate past ourselves - not easy.

There is, at the moment, a considerable interest in poverty on the world scale by national and international governments as well as by non-governmental organisations and private individuals. This is manifested in a whole variety of ways in the European experience and constructed in the context of global capitalism, with the belief that we can do something about it and even eradicate it. Poverty reaches our television screens as images of mass starvation, of natural disaster, of war, of plague and of exploitation in faraway places. Our perceptions and judgements of these images are tempered by our own domestic histories and sense of identity – these are, in my part of Europe, predominately Protestant and capitalist in content, although now being radically tempered by multi-culturalism and class-structured ethnicity.

For us in Britain our contemporary ideas of poverty begin in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, although some would argue it can be tracked back into the later fourteenth. There are many texts which make observations to Parliament that express bewilderment about how poverty appears to be on the increase despite the growing wealth brought by commerce and the changing nature of production.

Modernity, I shall argue, has a complex engagement with poverty: institutionalised to the extent of replicating it, criminalized, marginalized, patronised, and torn between thinking it is the fault of the individual and believing that it can be redeemed, even transformed or ‘cured’, through the intervention of the state and its proxy charities. The primary concern and discussion within the state was about vagrancy which might spawn an underclass capable of rebellion, and its early efforts were aimed at stamping this out. The Dissolution of the monasteries and the ending or transformation of their extensive networks of alms-giving also increased the impetus.





Fig. 3: William Hogarth: Two illustrations from the series illustrating the moral narrative of Idleness and Industry (Plates first published 1795-6, Hogarth 1806)

There was a rapid move through the sixteenth century toward the introduction of the Poor Law in 1601 and this changed the perception forever: the poor were the failures, marginalized, semi-criminal and indigent. Their por-

trayal in the Protestant work ethic, as in the moralistic engravings of Hogarth in the eighteenth century, was morally judgemental and vicious: two illustrations from his series on Idleness and Industry clearly demonstrated that idleness leads to poverty, degradation and execution at Tyburn (fig. 3). Such illustrations gave us also a powerful array of material indicators of poverty: squalor, decay, corruption, prostitution, vermin and drunkenness. By the enactment of 1601 and again in 1623, the parish became the unit of administration, entrusted to overseers who, with the church wardens, were required to assess and levy a compulsory poor rate on all householders. With these funds the aged were to be relieved and provided, if necessary, with cottages on the waste, poor children were to be apprenticed and the able poor set 'on work'. Off the back of all this a whole superstructure of state administration was put in place in the first half of the seventeenth century. The responsibility for the poor was thus delegated by the state to a middle class bureaucracy, rather than being more directly the moral and spiritual responsibility of the elite as it had been in the Middle Ages. The rural poor became physically located at the margin on land not possessed as property. This was accentuated by the move to squatting on common, usually waste, land. By this means the poor became more visible, on roadsides, upland rough pastures, fen edges, unused or derelict land. As such they were being formed into an identifiable, depersonalised cohort with new kinds of stigma and presence.

In the nineteenth century, a New Poor Law of 1834 came into existence on rationalist principles outlined by Jeremy Bentham: poor relief should only be granted to the 'deserving poor'. Those who were able-bodied together with their dependants, should be put to work in well-regulated workhouses under conditions inferior to those of the humblest labourers outside: 'every penny bestowed that tends to render the condition of the pauper more eligible than that of the independent labourer is a bounty on indolence and vice'. But with the nineteenth century too came the Romanticisation and the idealisation of the poor: William Wordsworth's *Matthew*, John Clare's own poor mad self, Henry Mayhew's *London Poor*, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude*, all provided tragic hero figures on whom the likes of Charles Booth, Seebohm Rowntree and Thomas Barnardo built the foundations of the philanthropic institutions of the poor we still have today in Britain. Romanticisation and redefinition of the underclass and its struggle led also to socialism and a poetics of Marxism: Auguste Pugin made a graphic comparison of rationalist and scientific reactions to institutionalised poverty with those of the Middle Ages (fig. 4) and William Morris in *News from Nowhere* saw the solution to the existence

of the underclass and its endemic poverty as a return to the golden age of craft, the thirteenth century in which, ironically for us medievalists, none would be poor. The black-and-white images to accompany this were those of Dorè's London (fig. 5).

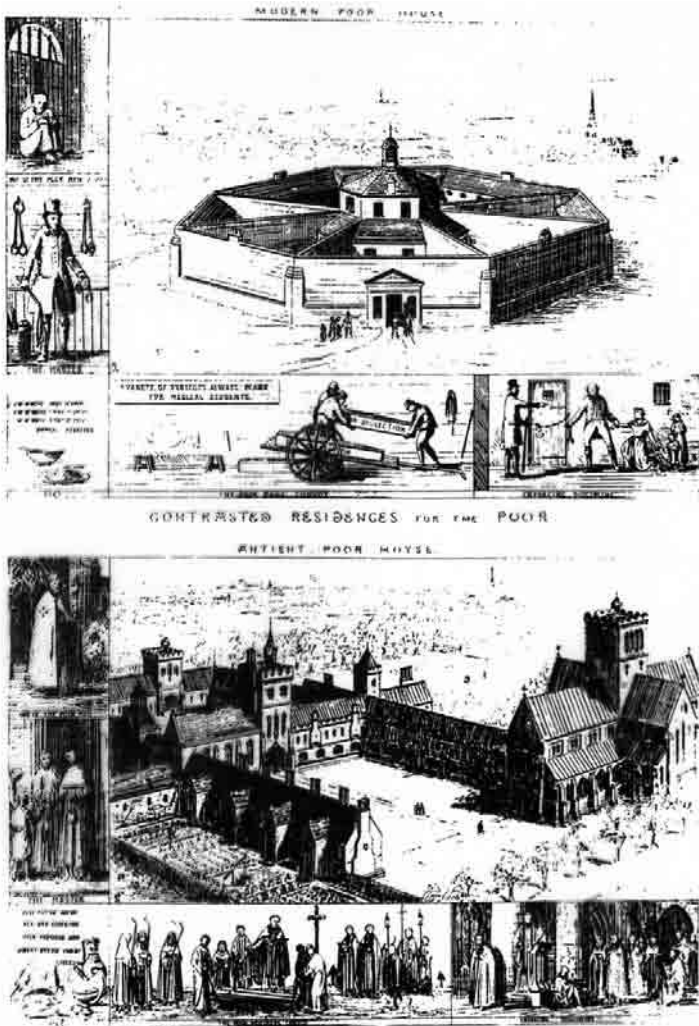


Fig 4: Auguste Pugin's comparison: above, the (hateful) poor-house of the modern regime of the New Poor Law of 1834 with its inhuman and scientific systems; below, the (ideal) medieval hospital with its beautiful architecture and Christian Charity. (Pugin 1836; 1973)



Fig. 5: Gustave Doré: East End alley (Doré & Jerrold 1872)

Today our western images of poverty are modulated by the filters of modernity: failure, criminalisation, institutionalisation and romanticisation: in Tom Stoddart's, again black-and-white, image, taken at a feeding station in Sudan, the path of inheritance from the Poor Law to the globalised representation of poverty in the world system is clear (fig. 6). In our own moder-

nity it is this range of images which stands in the forefront of our minds when contemplating the poverty and the poor of the Middle Ages. Our intellectual task is both to understand medieval poverty in terms of our own experience, and yet still to acknowledge and represent that it was different and coloured by other perceptions, sentiments and ideologies.



Fig. 6: Dives and Lazarus – A starving child looks on as a relatively rich man walks off with a bag of maize that he had spent hours waiting for at the emergency feeding centre, Ajiép, Sudan, August 1998 (Photograph courtesy Tom Stoddart/Getty Images)

### *An Archaeology of Difference*

So far I have argued that the very methods of identifying and codifying difference in archaeology, the economic and structural burden of our interpretations and the filters of modernity have made any material view of the medieval poor difficult to achieve. I would further contend that we are unlikely to find a trustworthy, empirical path to identifying the presence of the poor simply in artefacts, architecture or corporeal remains. The only exceptions to this we must consider are the architectures of professed poverty and institutionalised alms: the monastery and the hospital.

That the great monasteries of Europe are institutions based on poverty is true in both an ideological and even a practical sense for many of those who took the vows. The life of prayer and work was the action of individuals and corporations, but shaped in the spaces of great richness and power. The habitus of monastic poverty, whether precinct or countryside, was designed to

produce, reproduce, consume and display wealth and authority. This is not the place for a critique of monastic archaeology or indeed medieval monasticism, but the contrastive duality of the simultaneous presences of the mentalité of poverty and the materiality of wealth serves only to strengthen our interpretative dilemma.

This may also be so for medieval hospitals, many of which were established by the monasteries. The hospital was, in principle, ‘a guest-house free to all-comers, where the poor travellers as well as the sick, infirm and aged could be sure of finding shelter and provision for their needs’ (Godfrey 1955, 15). The act of alms was for the support of indigent individuals as they were, in theory, presented at the gate of the hospital, and, initially, this provision was conceived as personal and transitory. The traveller would pass on, the sick would be healed and the aged die. Later, however, and then only for specific groups of people, usually those privileged in some kind of way, they were seen as shelters for the pensioned: in other words for those who had paid their dues and who had made themselves worthy through Christian service and action. Thus hospitals and their architectures became places of permanent shelter and signs of opportunities for the civic display of alms, of patronal wealth and corporate authority.

These two sets of institutions are, in architectural form, the grand material signifiers of medieval poverty, and yet they are not poor: quite the opposite in any visual sense we can recognise. Yet this is what they **intended**, although this is not what they **meant**, even to the medieval observer. Poverty, therefore, can, however complexly, be made historically material, but the poor cannot. But let us remember that although poverty may be absolute and permanent, the poor are relative and transitory. This leads me to two questions:

1. How can we make physically apparent the narratives of the medieval poor – what does the material past signify? Already I have suggested that this is hard to achieve empirically, but maybe there is another question:
2. Should we, despite the empirical problems of evidence, nonetheless contribute to the assemblage of images of the medieval poor by selecting some archaeological things and material contexts to represent their undoubted presence in the past? This has dangers for archaeologists not least in justifying the criteria for selection, whether to achieve signification or representation.

To illustrate this I will finish with four pieces of archaeology taken from my own experience and leave you with some impressions and questions. I shall

touch on some things that may be seen as indicators of poverty or at least of the circumstances and contexts of poverty: marginality, inequality, squalor, and damnation. The images may thus be a device to see poverty and the relics of the poor beyond the refracting lenses of Bentham, Doré or Stoddart.

### 1. The settlement at the margin – marginality and productive vulnerability

Okehampton Park contains the earthwork remains of medieval agriculture and settlement on the northern rim of Dartmoor in south-west England and one complete farmstead within this relic landscape was excavated (Austin 1978). The settlement was established in perhaps the later eleventh or twelfth century and abandoned in the late thirteenth or fourteenth. I have argued elsewhere that the social organisation of the spaces within the houses and yards represent a familiar and habitual structure for people occupying the economic margins of production at an optimum moment in the economic cycle of the Middle Ages (Austin and Thomas 1990). What I could also now argue with others is that the space constitutes a set of social relations familiar to a range of classes, although the material expression is located in the specific cultures of the region. What we must ask here is whether the material remains associated with the family who occupied these spaces were those which might be interpreted as signs of poverty. Whether they are or not, can they be offered here to represent the poor in medieval rural society? In terms of the absolutes of material culture, the buildings have stone walls, but they are unmortared; the roofs were thatched, but relatively low; the animals lived under the same ridge line, but the human spaces were still quite large; there was heat from the central hearth but fuel may have been uncertain; the pottery was plain or simply decorated, but was plentiful and some of the same assemblages could found in Okehampton Castle, three kilometres away. The organisation of the agriculture suggests not simply adequate arable production for subsistence, but adequate access also to the pastures of the adjacent commons and moors for their stock. Much seems potentially comfortable, but the people were at the margins of arable capacity and at the lower end of the tenurial scale. They had roofs over their heads, but life must have been precarious at the mercy of bad weather or soil infertility, and in the end the settlement failed, although this may not have been for climatic or even economic reasons. In other words, the material culture is contradictory and hard to interpret, yet here we are in some of the toughest environments in the English landscape.

There is also another issue: the buildings and their yards were occupied by a family, but as Goody pointed out many years ago, such families have

life cycles of circumstance and we cannot tell from one moment to the next what lives were led by the people who occupied these spaces (Goody 1982). A stem family would at their greatest extent have had aged and corrodial grand-parents (one building had a separate space definably theirs), as well as unmarried siblings and the core family itself. In a marginal world there were also likely to be those who had a more ephemeral existence: the illegitimate and the illegal as well as the labourers of the underclasses. There were out-houses and peripheral spaces even in this marginal world which might have been occupied by an array of individuals. These are the questions archaeology can so rarely answer: who, in terms of individual people, actually lived there and how poor did they feel? Surely the family must have felt poor in comparison with many of those around them, some at least of the occupants of the castle and the town. They must also have felt inferior to the freeholders of Devon who drove their cattle by right on and off the high moors up the lanes between their fields and through their yards.

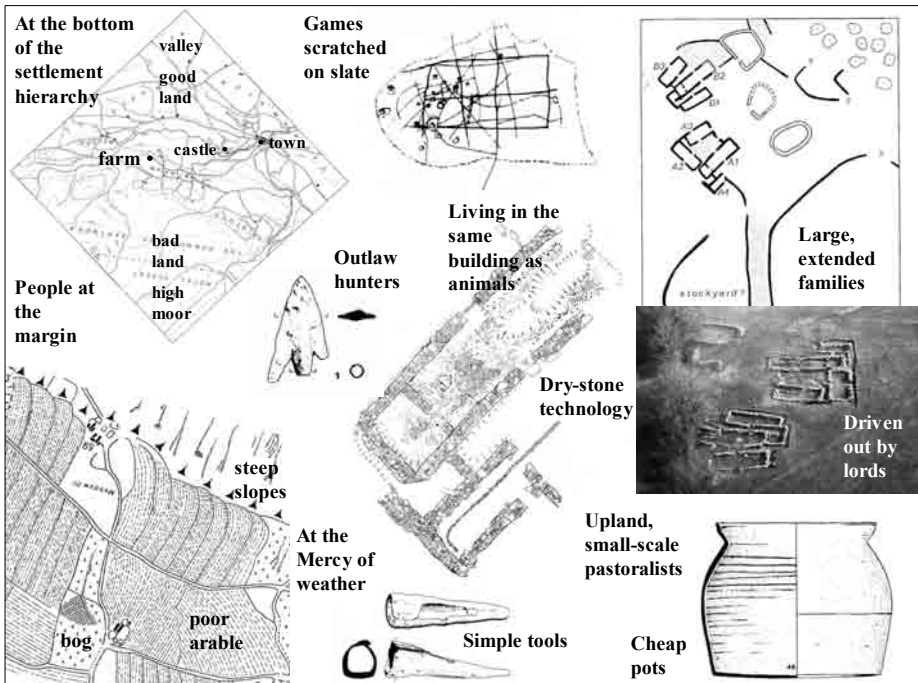


Fig. 7 *Imperatrix Fortuna*:  
a representation of poverty at the margin: Okehampton Park, Devon



With all this uncertainty, however, we can be sure that, if the historians are right in asserting that between one third and one half of the population of England lived below or close to the poverty line, then these people on the edge of Dartmoor were among them. So if we assemble the array of materials we can physically associate with them and present them as an image (fig. 7), then they do at least represent medieval poverty. What they should represent is the medieval mind's own perception of their vulnerability, at the margin, to Imperatrix Fortuna, whether it is famine, climate or the will of their lords.

## 2. Inequality: the presence of the poor in the home of the powerful

Turning to a harder case, the excavations at Barnard Castle in Teesdale, north-eastern England, produced a huge amount of material culture and architectural fragments. In a paper in a previous publication in this series (Austin 1998), I discussed how the meaning of spaces within a great castle was contingent on viewpoint and the oscillating circumstances of habitation. So did the poor have a place even here? There was certainly the poor Queen, Devorgilla, Lady of Galloway and wife of John Balliol who spent her sad widowhood in the castle, and the poor Knight, Alan of Galloway her cousin, kept incarcerated in the same place for the whole of his adult life to prevent him being a threat to her lordship of south-western Scotland. There were also the economically poor, the peasant criminals brought before the lord's court and the agricultural labourers on the demesne farm housed within the walls of the Outer Ward. There were lesser servants, bakers' and cooks' assistants, 'gong-farmers' (boys who cleared the garderobes) and those who cleaned and prepared the rooms and courtyards. If we ask who handled the pottery in the castle, who prepared the food whose waste we discovered in the excavations, or who made the nails and hinges and pins that littered the surfaces, it is likely that many of them might be called the poor and have lived much of their lives in poverty.

In the main report on the excavations (Austin, forthcoming) I have begun to examine the deposits found to 'see the acts' of such people so that we may begin to approach the relationships of individuals to the spaces they occupied. Almost certainly the poor were there, but did their surroundings stop them being in the category of poverty during the time they inhabited these spaces? However, if we add to the images representing medieval poverty by creating an array of materiality that might have been used by the poor in the context of a castle, is that legitimate? Is it a true representation? The huge

quantities of low-grade pottery, and the mountains of waste products of butchery, food preparation and consumption as well as the garderobe shafts, small chambers, kitchens, bakehouses, stables, out-houses and low overhangs of stair-cases and parapets where the poor may have worked and had their abode, may all be set alongside the assemblages of Okehampton Park, however unexpectedly, within the realms of medieval archaeology (fig. 8).

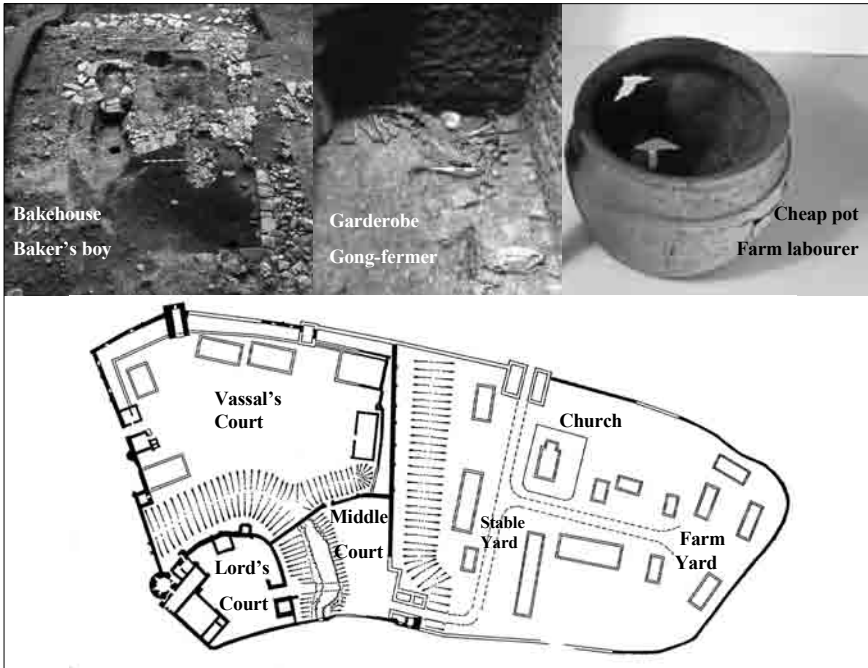


Fig. 8: *Dominus povertatis*: a representation of the poor at work in the castle: Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, caput of the Balliols, one of the richest and most powerful families in England and Scotland in the later 13<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Squalor and the environments of urban poverty

The increased visibility of the poor and of the forms of poverty, many historians have argued, came with the rush to urbanism at the end of the Middle Ages and into the modern era. Archaeology has made massive interventions into the material culture of medieval urban Europe and it is striking in one major respect: the quantity of rubbish retained and re-cycled within the urban environment was massive. Under certain conditions, particularly those of water-logging in harbour or riverside locales, towns and cities took on the

characteristics of ancient tells, building themselves higher onto the decay and partial preservation of former buildings and rubbish dumps. Under other conditions rubbish was managed in systems of pits which pock-mark the excavated areas of burgrave plots. At other times it was simply dumped in vacant lots and common ground. The need to dispose of waste in these 'private' and 'personal' or even 'anti-social' ways was driven in part by the lack of strong corporate management of towns and cities and in part by the often restrictive nature of access to even the nearest pieces of countryside. With urban areas also centres of production some of these deposits were also noxious if not completely toxic: the by-products of metal-working, tanning, lime-burning, pottery firing, dyeing and many others left many places hard to inhabit. In short, the overall impression gained by archaeologists is that towns and cities lived always on the brink of squalor. For an archaeologist this is wonderful, because the deposits are so rich in material culture, but for those inhabitants unable to buy their way to the life of the burgrave or the gild-worker, the struggle to keep away from the degradation of filth was sometimes tough.

One example of such a set of deposits was a couple of burgrave plots in Southgate, Hartlepool, a port town on the Durham coast of the North Sea, in north-eastern England. I have a photograph (fig. 9) of the level at which I stopped excavating in 1972. I have always used it to represent urban existence and its contrasts with the rural. The image shows dark black organic-rich deposits as the floor surfaces of small late thirteenth-century rooms within two larger buildings set either side of a small narrow alley, the classic *gasse* of north European seaports. These deposits are rich in finds of pottery and other rubbish interleaved with laminated levels of sand and dark organic material caused by the regular inundations of this inhabited area by storm surge incursions of the North Sea. Documentary sources tell us also that nearby was a large processing plant for fish which was an important money-earner for the Prior and Convent of Durham Cathedral Priory. The image then is of small dark spaces, squalor, damp, industrial processes and impermanence. We can interpret the conditions of life, but did the poor live here? We cannot be sure, but we may be able to accept that this is a viable representation of the circumstances, the structures of poverty.



Fig. 9: *Burgus squalidus*: ‘An abominable smell abounding in the said city more than in any other city of the realm from dung and manure and other filth and dirt wherewith the streets and lanes are filled and obstructed’ Edward III legislating for York (cited in Platt 1976. 70). Here the alleys and buildings of downtown, harbour-side Hartlepool under excavation in 1972. (Photo: author)

#### 4. Damnation

One last image brings us to the final stripping away of all the material signs of wealth or poverty: to death itself. Archaeologists have revealed the serried ranks of skeletons in rural and urban graveyards the length and breadth of Europe. Yet these were in themselves only the residues of once corporeal existences and yet they were also a potent medieval symbol of a great transition, the separation of the soul from the body and its eventual judgement. Then there was no greater poverty than the damnation of the soul and no greater wealth than its redemption. In the photographs of cemetery excavations the skeletons are, for the most part, hard to distinguish in terms of poverty or wealth. Sometimes we may suspect that the pathology of a skeleton displaying the signs of rickets may be evidence for a deprived existence and traces of osteoarthritis an indicator of a hard life, but we actually cannot know this and the occurrence of both among the better off is known in more modern and documented medical case histories.



Fig. 10: *Mors in profundis*: The bones of a new-born child were found in this pit (lower photograph) set below the floor of a peasant house in the north row (upper photograph) at Thrislington, County Durham: once a storage pit, it was filled with rubbish in the dying days of its existence. (Photos: R. Daggett)

Yet we may among all this evidence be missing the greatest of all poverty: the poverty of the soul in certain damnation. All those interred in the excavated cemeteries will have received the sacrament of the mass for the dead and the Christian rite of burial in the 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection', as the English prayer book says. The image I produce is the photograph (fig. 10) of a stone-lined pit in a thirteenth-century peasant house in a village called Thrislington in northern England (Austin 1989). It is an elaborate storage pit, set below the floor of a room in a comfortable house, probably occupied by a freehold tenant of this small manor. The pit and its contents of grain and other food was part of the strategy of avoiding disaster and with it the onset of poverty. The irony was that in the top of the final back-filling of this pit designed to stave off poverty were laid the remains of an immediately post-foetal child, probably lost in the moment of child-birth. Laid where it was, it was unbaptised; it may also have been illegitimate; it was certainly damned by its original sin and shorn of everything both material and spiritual.

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