

lock. They had little or no land, so the money they earned by laboring was critical in their economy of makeshifts. In Cecilia's household economy, indentured labor was a major problem; in a laborer's household economy, indentured labor was a major resource. Given her own particular needs, Cecilia mostly employed male laborers, but women also worked for wages. Some laborers were married; some were not. Some were old; some were not. The characteristic of wage laborers was not gender, marital status, or age, but instead poverty born of insufficient land. In contrast, servants were distinguished more by age than by socioeconomic status. To be sure, the poor were likely to go into service that the well-off, but this was a slight and inconsistent pattern, especially compared to the strong connection between service and youthfulness. Most servants were young people who hoped, by living as dependents in other people's households, to save some money. Service, in short, was usually a temporary expedient; wage labor was a critical resource that sustained some people over many years.

By paying for the labor of poor neighbors, poor strangers, and young people, Cecilia was able to manage her household economy without the help of husband and or children. Just as hired laborers completed some of the work a husband might have done, so servants replicated the work of children. But the labor market did not serve only the singlewomen, bachelors, and widows of Brigstock. Married couples also hired laborers and employed servants, since too sometimes needed extra help at harvest or regular live-in assistance. Cecilia probably resorted to the labor market more often than did her married sister Agnes, who had husband and children to help her. Yet both sisters, as precarious villagers with extensive lands and many animals, welcomed at times the hired labor of others.

THE COMMODITY MARKET

Cecilia and Agnes also eased the labor demands of their households by buying goods from others. They were able to purchase almost anything they needed: food, tools, pots, utensils, cloth, leather, furniture, wax, animals. They bought these goods from neighbors, from peddlers or merchants who passed through Brigstock, and from vendors at the weekly markets held in nearby communities. Sometimes Cecilia and Agnes found that it was easier or harder to buy certain goods; during the Great Famine, for example, food was especially and in short supply, and peddlers were few and far between. But for most of their adult lives, Cecilia and Agnes readily met their household needs by purchasing surplus eggs, meat, or wool, peasants like Cecilia and Agnes brought right much-needed cash into their households.

Like most medieval peasants, Cecilia and Agnes produced, with the help of laborers, and servants, much of what they consumed. From their fields, gardens, and woods, they gathered sufficient grain, fruits, and vegetables to feed their households. From their flocks and herds, they took skins, wool, milk, and meat for their daily use. In the kilns of Stanton, the center of a small pot-



A woman selling produce to a man who has just pulled a coin from his purse. This sort of small transaction brought much needed cash into many peasant households.

tery industry, they might have fired the pots they used at home. From the quarries outside Stanton, they found stone and rubble for the foundations of their houses, barns, and sheds. Cecilia and Agnes produced these commodities not only for consumption but also for sale—to peddlers who came through Brigstock, to entrepreneurs seeking good pottery or building stone, and directly to consumers at local markets. Many of the foods and goods that peasants sold eventually found their way to urban marketplaces, where townspeople were eager to buy them. Like most medieval peasants, however, Cecilia and Agnes not only produced and sold goods but also purchased them. Some goods were too difficult to find or make in a rural household. Since iron tools could be made only by skilled blacksmiths, cloth-production required looms, and salt could be found only in special locations, these were the sorts of commodities that Cecilia and Agnes sought to buy rather than make. Sometimes, however, they paid for goods that they could produce, but only with much inconvenience. Almost all peasant households, for example, were able to brew their own ale and bake their own bread (often using a communal oven), but many chose to purchase these foodstuffs at least part of the time.

The trade in ale offers a good example of buying and selling within Brigstock. Ale was as important as bread in the medieval diet. Because Cecilia avoided water (it was often polluted), turned milk into butter and cheese, and could not afford wine, ale was her basic liquid refreshment. She drank ale every day and throughout the day, not only as an adult but also as a child. As a grown woman, she might have drunk as much as a gallon a day. This does not mean that Cecilia and other medieval peasants passed their days in drunken hilarity. Instead it means that ale had a different function in the Middle Ages than do alcoholic drinks today: ale was, at that time, an essential part of the daily diet.³ As a result, Cecilia needed to provide herself and the other members of her household with a regular and large supply of ale. When she lived with her brother Robert, for example, they drank about fourteen gallons a week, and since they likely lived with a servant or two, they needed even more.

Producing this ale was time-consuming work. A lot of labor went into preparation: grain (usually oats or barley) had to be turned into malt, with

³Nevertheless, Cecilia and other medieval peasants did also drink ale, as many people do today, for relaxation and inspiration. But they separated the weak ales of their daily diets from the strong ales they consumed for pleasure in evenings or at holidays.

