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Thirty Years after Lopez, Miskimin, and Udovitch

Some thirty years ago, Robert Lopez, Harry Miskimin, and Abraham Udovitch boldly set out to depict the economic panorama of post-plague Europe and the Middle East in their article, "England to Egypt, 1350–1500: Long-Term Trends and Long-Distance Trade."¹ Within the confines of England, Italy, and Egypt, they described a widespread pattern of economic deterioration. This degeneration, they argued, was the product of several factors. One of these was the little ice age.² The little ice age was a period of climatic change that broke the warm spell in northern Europe and brought with it drenching rains and horrifically cold winters. In England, this heavy rainfall coupled with icy winters ushered in a famine the like of which had never been seen before or since.³ In other areas, such as southern Europe, it may have accelerated soil erosion. In the Middle East and Central Asia, they speculated that it might have ushered in a dry spell that brought similar catastrophic famines to these regions. Another factor that affected all of these regions was the intensification of warfare.⁴ From the Hundred Years War in Europe to the campaigns of Tamerlane in the Middle East, warfare brought with it widespread devastation to urban and rural areas alike. Finally, they argued that plague ushered in a major demographic retrenchment that was followed by a severe and widespread economic depression.⁵

Lopez, Miskimin, and Udovitch focused on two major aspects of the subsequent economic depression: social stratification and the lack of bullion engendered by the imbalance of trade flows between East and West, North and South.⁶ Economic dislocation, they argued, brought with it an end to the comparatively open and democratic society of the age of prosperity and separated society into two

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¹Robert Lopez, Harry Miskimin, and Abraham Udovitch, "England to Egypt, 1350–1500: Long-Term Trends and Long-Distance Trade," in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. Michael Cook (London, 1970), 93–128.

²*Ibid.*, 94.

³*Ibid.*, 96. See also William Chester Jordan, *The Great Famine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴Lopez et al., "England to Egypt," 95.

⁵*Ibid.*, 94.

⁶*Ibid.*, 95, 106, 111, 114.



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DOI: [10.6082/M1319T1W](https://doi.org/10.6082/M1319T1W). (<https://doi.org/10.6082/M1319T1W>)

DOI of Vol. VIII, no. 2: [10.6082/M12F7KHB](https://doi.org/10.6082/M12F7KHB). See <https://doi.org/10.6082/KDWH-BN42> to download the full volume or individual articles. This work is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC-BY). See <http://mamluk.uchicago.edu/msr.html> for more information about copyright and open access.

differentiated compartments. At the top were the rich and powerful few and, at the bottom, were the hard-pressed and degraded multitude.

The second focal point of their argument follows from the first: the enriched upper stratum of society poured money into the luxury goods of long-distance trade. The result of this trade was that gold and silver flowed from Northern to Southern Europe.⁷ From Southern Europe, it flowed to the Levant.⁸ From the Levant, the drain of bullion finally found a resting place on the shores of India, from which highly valued spices were exported.⁹

Their analysis of the economic dislocations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries beg for a fresh scrutiny. I will challenge here both the importance of these international trade flows and the universality of economic stratification in Western Europe and the Middle East.

I will focus on other factors that test their depiction of this period as one of unremitting depression and stratification in all the areas that they study. Lopez, Miskimin, and Udovitch found an equally dismal scenario in England, Italy, and Egypt. I will contest some of their findings here by comparing the situation in England with that in Egypt, illustrating the important contrasts in the economic reaction of both economies to depopulation from the Black Death. This analysis will, at the same time, shift our focus away from long-distance trading patterns to the more significant developments that were taking place in the domestic economies of these two regions.

Regarding the situation in England, Harry Miskimin offered a picture of economic depression aggravated by increasing disparities in the incomes of the upper and lower stratum of society. This was coupled with increasing purchases by the upper class of luxury goods flowing in from the south. I contend that this picture is at best incomplete, and in many areas contradicts more recent research on the economic profile of England after the Black Death.

By any economic measure of income, the most prosperous caste in England was the landholders. If a rising disparity between rich and poor became evident, one must then ask if this upper stratum of society benefited or lost from events that followed plague depopulation. If it is Miskimin's contention that the upper stratum of society became relatively wealthier in the wake of the plagues, then we must look to this class to discern a pattern of wealth distribution from the poorer classes to the richer ones.

Plague depopulation in England brought with it a situation in which landholders found themselves challenged by the relative scarcity of rural labor and abundance

⁷Ibid., 101–6.

⁸Ibid., 109–10, 114–15.

⁹Ibid., 128.



of arable land. Landholders were faced with conditions in which the price scissors threatened their economic status. On the one hand, the decrease in grain prices ate away at their revenues. On the other hand, peasant demands for reduced rents and higher wages exposed them to increased costs of production.¹⁰ English landlords attempted in vain to battle with the economic demands of scarce labor, but their failure to effectively band together over a long period of time meant that market forces eventually ruled the day.¹¹ Wages rose, rents decreased, and both of these phenomena took place within the context of falling grain prices.¹² Landlords, not their peasants, were squeezed by the new economy which arose in the wake of the plague. Not for nothing is the fifteenth century known as the "golden age of the peasantry." This was not an era of rising disparities in income; it was, in fact, quite the opposite.

On another economic level, Harry Miskimin glides over dramatic changes that were taking place in the English economy. The collapse of the manorial system, rising per-capita incomes, and scarcity of labor created opportunities for peasants to become producers in rural industries that were cropping up.¹³ Most notable is the rise of the cloth industry. Here, finished goods took the place of unfinished wool in the export industry. Granted, the overall revenues from wool and cloth exports dropped, but one must keep in mind that population had dropped significantly at the same time. Per-capita exports of finished goods certainly increased, and the

¹⁰See, for example, N. J. Mayhew, "Population, Money Supply, and the Velocity of Circulation in England, 1300–1700," *Economic History Review* 48 (1995): 238–57; Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989), 151–87.

¹¹John Hatcher, "English Serfdom and Villeinage: Towards a Reassessment," in *Landlords, Peasants, and Politics in Medieval England*, ed. T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1987), 247–84; R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1993), 200, 219–21; Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester and New York, 1994), 238; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 42, 147; Rodney Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 2nd ed. (London and Basingstoke, 1983), 39, 42, 56–57; E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England c. 1380–c. 1525* (New York, 1996), 3; Z. Razi, "The Myth of the Immutable English Family," *Past and Present* 140 (1993): 257–58.

¹²Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 42, 97, 146–47, 221; Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords*, 147, 160; Razi, "The Myth," 253–54, 256–57; Rodney Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), 24, 35–38, 64–67; idem, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London, 1985), 13.

¹³Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 47, 255–57, 265, 277; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 210; Peter Kriedte, *Peasants, Landlords, and Merchant Capitalists: Europe and the World Economy, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1983), 6–7, 13, 29, 100; Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 13, 40, 52, 82; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 185.



new phenomenon of exporting finished cloth was one that would never be reversed.¹⁴ Of equal or greater importance was the increase in demand and supply in the domestic market for cloth, due to higher incomes below the economic strata of the landlords. The rise of the peasantry equaled the rise of a new class of consumers that buoyed England's economy in the fifteenth century.¹⁵

England's economy was not suffering from rising income disparities, nor was it suffering from a collapse in trade; domestic consumption more than made up for the loss of raw wool exports. Was this even an economic depression, as Miskimin maintains? The answer here would again be no. The profile of a classic economic depression is missing. Rising wages and rising profits in the arena of proto-industry are hardly hallmarks of an economic depression. An overall rise in per-capita income also serves to negate the profile of a classic economic depression.¹⁶ I would argue that post-plague England in fact went through a positive period of what we would now call "structural adjustment." We will look at this again as we turn to study the case of Egypt after the Black Death.

Egypt provides us with a sharp contrast to events that took place in England. Here, landlords were highly successful in squeezing the peasantry in the wake of the plague. The reasons for this lie in the complex mechanism of landholding that existed in Egypt. Egyptian landlords were economically less tied to their individual estates due to frequent transfer of estates from one hand to another, the lack of inheritance, scattered holdings, and, above all, the filtering role played by the Egyptian urban-rural bureaucracy.¹⁷ The net result was that Egyptian landlords

¹⁴Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1988), 376–77.

¹⁵Mavis Mate, "The East Sussex Land Market and Agrarian Class Structure in the Late Middle Ages," *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 48, 60, 65; Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 149–50; Mayhew, "Population," 249; Britnell, *Commercialisation*, 202, 220; Steven Epstein, "Cities, Regions, and the Late Medieval Crisis: Sicily and Tuscany Compared," *Past and Present* 130 (1991): 5–8. See also John Langdon, "Lordship and Peasant Consumerism in the Milling Industry of Early Fourteenth-Century England," *Past and Present* 145 (1994): 3, 4, 7, 41.

¹⁶At this point, not only had the marginal and average product of labor increased significantly, but the total agrarian product and even landlord revenues were reaching and exceeding their pre-plague levels. See Mayhew, "Population," 244 (Table I for comparison of 1300 and 1526 output in monetary terms), 248 for his comment on living standards in the early sixteenth century, and 250–51 for more analysis of the full recovery in absolute terms in the early sixteenth century. To mention one local case, Durham priory provides an interesting example of an area that had suffered heavy losses in the fifteenth century (not only from the plague but also from Scottish raids) and was now in full recovery. See R. B. Dobson, *Church and Society in the Medieval North of England* (London, 1996). At this point the output of tin and lead were back up to their pre-plague levels as well, and were soon to expand much further in scale. See Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 103–4.

¹⁷Aḥmad ibn 'Alī al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā fī Sinā'at al-Inshā'* (Cairo, 1913–19), 13:118–23;



were able to successfully collude and squash peasant demands for reduced rents.¹⁸ However, Egyptian landlords won little more than a Pyrrhic victory. As Udovitch correctly points out, the Egyptian agrarian economy was ruined by the plague, its revenues falling from some nine million dinars to little more than a million dinars over a century and a half.¹⁹ The beleaguered peasants fled their lands, flocking to urban centers as the irrigation system slowly collapsed around them.²⁰ No one stood to benefit from this situation, and the profits of the spice trade offered the elite only a token compensation for the returns they lost in Egypt's hitherto rich agrarian sector.

Furthermore, pressure on urban centers from rural flight, coupled with the collapse of the irrigation system, seems to have led to a situation in which the price scissors were the reverse of those found in England. Grain prices rose and wages, at least in the mid-fifteenth century, seem to have dropped in the wake of

Carl Petry, "A Paradox of Patronage during the Later Mamluk Period," *Muslim World* 73 (1983): 188; Taqī al-Dīn al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Sulūk li-Ma'rifat Duwal al-Mulūk*, ed. Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāh 'Āshūr (Cairo, 1957–73), 3:563; Muḥammad Muḥammad Amīn, *Al-Awqāf wa-al-Ḥayāh al-Ijtimā'iyah fī Miṣr* (Cairo, 1980), 72; Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *'Inbā' al-Ghumr bi-Anbā' al-'Umr*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī (Cairo, 1969–72), 6:134; al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Cairo, 1853–54) 1: 90; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 3:501; Sato Tsugitaka, "The Evolution of the Iqtā' System under the Mamluks: An Analysis of al-Rawk al-Ḥusāmī and al-Rawk al-Nāṣirī," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko (the Oriental Library)* 37 (1979): 99–131; idem, *State and Rural Society in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 1997); Hassanein Rabie, *The Financial System of Egypt A.H. 564–741/A.D. 1169–1341* (London, 1972), 56; Jennifer M. Thayer, "Land Politics and Power Networks in Mamluk Egypt," Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1993, 45–46; Cairo, Wizārat al-Awqāf (Ministry of Religious Endowments [hereafter W. A.]) Waqfīyah 1019; W. A. Waqfīyah 901; W. A. Waqfīyah 92; W. A. Waqfīyah 3195; W. A. Waqfīyah 883; W. A. Waqfīyah 140; W. A. Waqfīyah 809; W. A. Waqfīyah 720; Ibn Mammātī, *Kitāb Qawānīn al-Dawāwīn*, ed. A. S. Atiya (Cairo, 1943), 297–306; al-Maqrīzī, *Khīṭaṭ*, 1:61; Khalīl ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī, *Kitāb Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik wa-Bayān al-Ṭuruq wa-al-Masālik*, ed. Paul Ravaisse (Paris, 1894), 78, 129–30; al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 3:522–26, 4:18; 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Abī Bakr al-Suyūṭī, *Ḥusn al-Muḥāḍarah fī Akhbār Miṣr wa-al-Qāhirah* (Beirut, 1997), 2:131; Carl Petry *The Civilian Elite of Cairo in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981), 15–36, 203–20.

¹⁸ Al-Qalqashandī, *Ṣubḥ*, 3:519–22; Ibrāhīm 'Alī Tarhkān, *Al-Nuẓum al-Iqtā'iyah fī al-Sharq al-Awṣaṭ fī al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* (Cairo, 1968), 100, 482; al-Zāhirī, *Zubdat Kashf al-Mamālik*, 107, 130; al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4:345; Thayer, "Land Politics," 134.

¹⁹ Lopez et al., "England to Egypt," 115.

²⁰ Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1977), 163–65; William Tucker, "Natural Disasters and the Peasantry in Mamluk Egypt," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24 (1981): 215–24; Boaz Shoshan, "Grain Riots and the 'Moral Economy' in Cairo: 1350–1517," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10 (1980): 462–67; Ira Lapidus, "The Grain Economy of Mamluk Egypt," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 12 (1969): 11–14; Sa'īd 'Abd al-Fattāh 'Āshūr, *Al-Mujtamā' al-Miṣrī fī 'Aṣr Salāṭīn al-Mamālik* (Cairo, 1993), 45–46.



the plagues.²¹ England and Egypt provide us with a mirror in which opposite outcomes arose from the same exogenous input.

But there is more that should be said here about the output of “proto-industrial” goods, particularly textiles, the engine of pre-modern manufacturing. Miskimin correctly points to the growth of a finished cloth industry in England, and Udovitch correctly points out that the cloth industry in Egypt suffered from both decreased output and higher prices. These changes within the domestic market signaled major transformations in economic development. Why was English cloth both cheaper and more abundant in the wake of the plagues, while Egyptian cloth became both scarcer and more expensive?

The reasons lie in different changes in aggregate supply and demand curves and I would like to turn your attention to graphs that illustrate the trend in both economies. This particular example analyzes the supply and demand for wool in the domestic economies of England and Egypt before and after the Black Death. Taking a 50% loss of the population as a given for our hypothesis, we can see the alternative outcomes for both countries.²²

For England, the quantity of arable land and hence grain for the domestic market decreased, but not as much as population. Following the plagues, there was more land available for the production of wool for finished cloth on the domestic market. The amount of land devoted to pasture for wool actually increased after the plagues.²³ This was due to the fact that the lower demand for grain had increased the amount of land available for other products. (See Fig. 1.)

Because the grain supply decreased less than the population (demand), the equilibrium point moved down and to the right. (See Figs. 2 and 3.) There was less grain being grown, but at a cheaper price. Because of the redistribution of income down the social scale, there were now more consumers demanding finished

²¹See my forthcoming book, *The Black Death in World History: The Case of England and Egypt* (Austin, in press).

²²Ibid.

²³Slicher Van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe* (London, 1963), 14; Mate, “East Sussex Land Market,” 57–60. Mate notes that some lords reversed their practice of trying to increase surplus extraction and instead tried to increase, and, where possible, diversify production. Mate particularly singles out the knightly families as being especially active in this process. See also Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 45. Hilton also notes that more landlord income was reinvested in agricultural buildings (ibid., 213–14) and Dyer estimates that the percentage of revenue reinvested by landlord aristocracy in buildings for agricultural use more than doubled between the early fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century (from 5% to more than 10%). See Dyer, *Living Standards*, 80. That landlords began to keep their own accounts and concentrate on fewer estates, rather than relying exclusively on reeves and bailiffs, is also indicative of increased concentration on flexible and rationalized production (ibid., 94, 100).



cloth and hence the demand for wool was greater.²⁴ At the same time, the supply of domestic wool had increased. The equilibrium point moved down and to the right: more wool was available at a lower price.

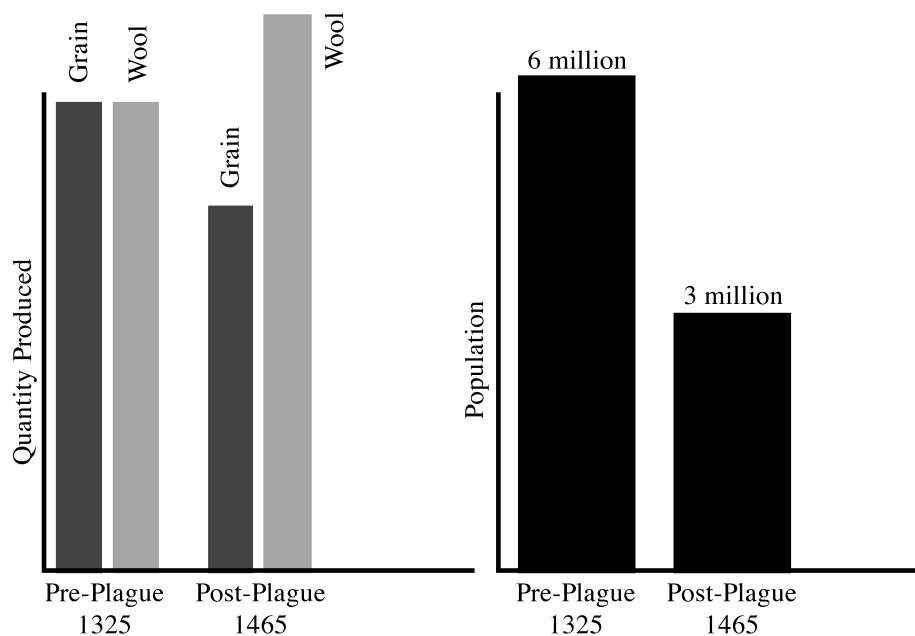


Fig. 1. Output of grain and wool in England. Population of England.

²⁴Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 158–59.

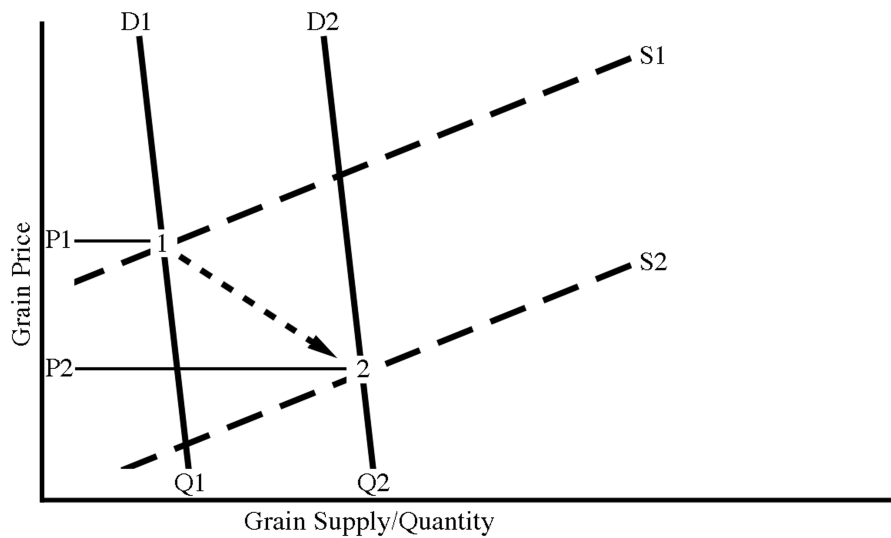


Fig. 2. Grain supply and demand in England.
D=Demand S=Supply P=Price Q=Quantity

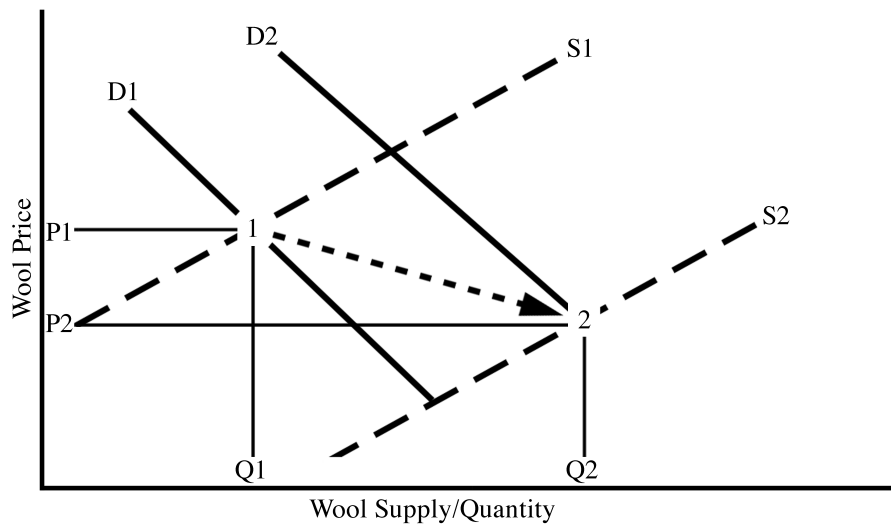


Fig. 3. Wool supply and demand in England.

Egypt's profile for the same two goods looks quite different. The quantity of arable land and hence grain for the domestic market had decreased more than the



drop in population. (See Fig. 4.) The supply of grain had decreased more than the number of plague survivors; hence you now had not only less grain, but the grain that was available cost more.²⁵ The equilibrium point for grain moved up and to the left, now selling at a higher price. (See Figs. 5 and 6.) At this point the differential elasticities of the demand curves become important. Regardless of the price, people will always demand a certain amount of basic nutrition, in this case grain, and hence the demand curves are steeper than those for wool, which people can forego during extremely hard economic times. The demand curves for wool are accordingly more elastic, closer to the horizontal than the vertical. Because the demand for grain is less elastic, it will tend to “crowd out” the demand for wool. If only so much land was available in Egypt’s ruined irrigation economy, wool was sacrificed to make space for grain.

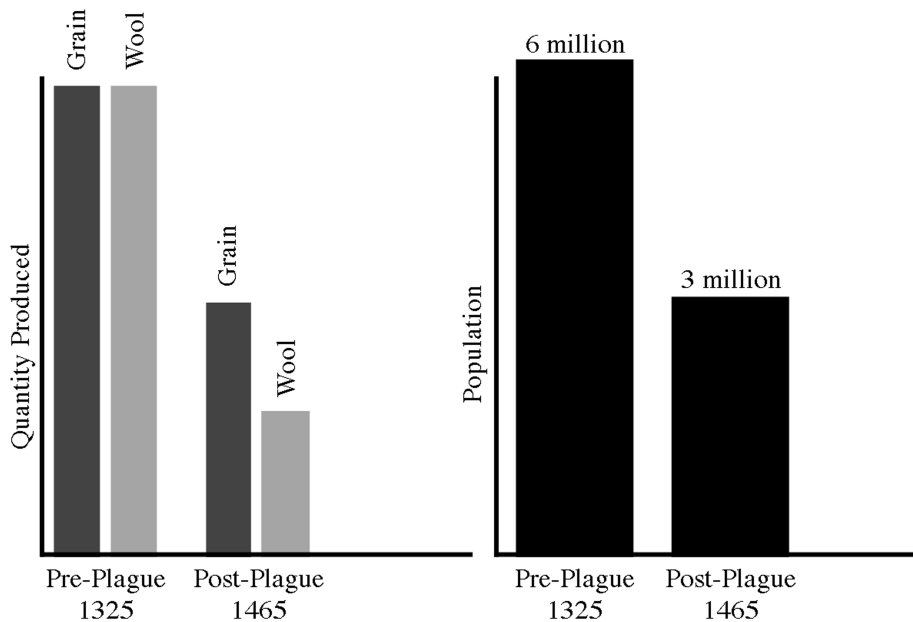


Fig. 4. Output of grain and wool in Egypt. Population of Egypt.

²⁵See Borsch, *The Black Death*.



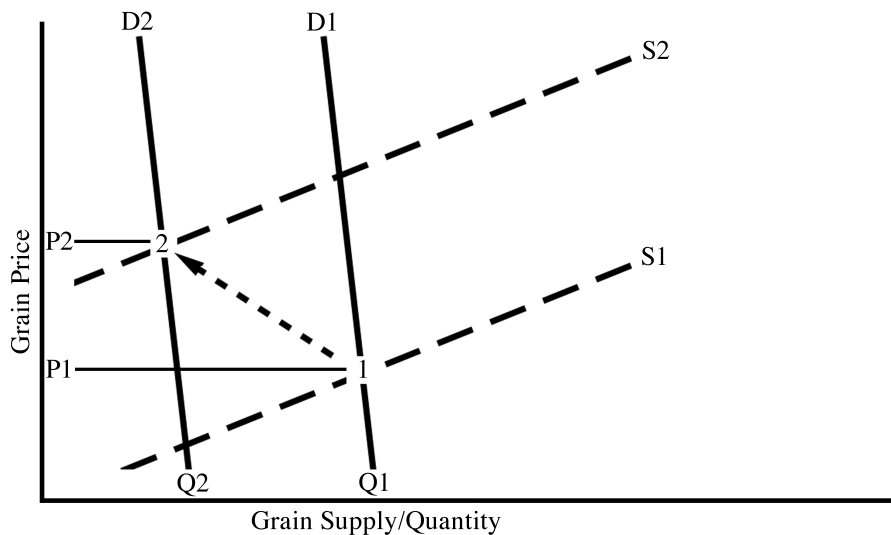


Fig. 5. Grain supply and demand in Egypt.

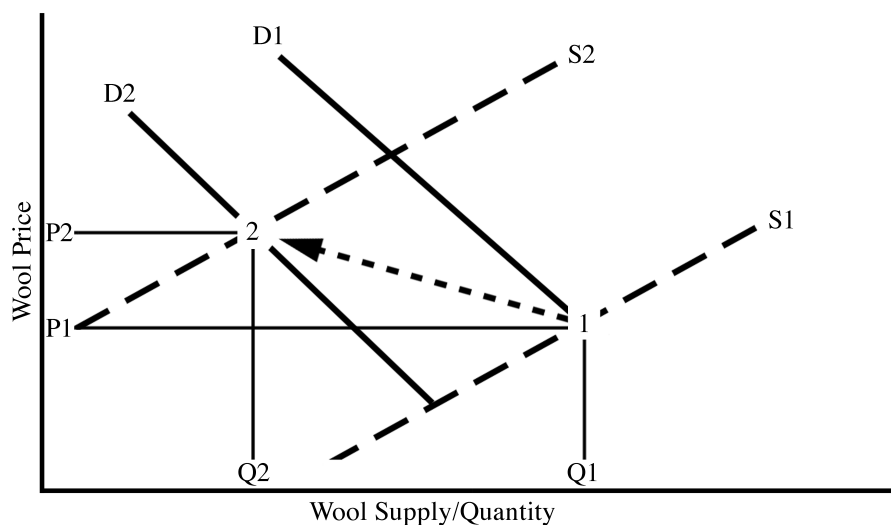


Fig. 6. Wool supply and demand in Egypt.

The significantly reduced supply of wool was actually great enough that there was now not only less wool, but it was selling at a higher price. This was despite the



fact that demand for finished cloth by impoverished consumers had decreased. The equilibrium point moves up and to the left: less wool selling at a higher price.

I have belabored this point to demonstrate how these two economies were moving in opposite directions. England was developing a more commercialized domestic market while the other economy, Egypt, was going through a process of de-commercialization.²⁶ This process can be seen in a number of other areas besides the production of wool. Examples can be seen in the reduced production of flax and sugar in the Egyptian economy,²⁷ and increased production of pig iron and other manufactured products in the English economy.²⁸

To sum up, the picture presented here challenges the universality of trends that Lopez, Miskimin, and Udovitch presented. Economic developments in England were not so dismal as depicted by Miskimin; social stratification and bullion flows did not play the role that he contended they did. On the other hand, developments in Egypt seem to have been far more disastrous than that portrayed by Abraham Udovitch. Bullion flows, as significant as they were, pale in comparison to developments within the domestic economy, and social stratification played a far more marginal role in England, even as it may have played a more significant role in Egypt. These opposing outcomes should be the focus of future research in this area as scholars attempt to find a discernible global pattern of the calamitous fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

²⁶See, for example, al-Maqrīzī, *Sulūk*, 4:705.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 256, 280, 603, 663, 709–10, 737.

²⁸W. R. Childs, "England's Iron Trade in the Fifteenth Century," *Economic History Review* 34 (1981): 25–47. See also Hilton, *English Peasantry*, 38, 86–89. Hilton also points to relative expansion in other areas of rural industry such as brewing, tanning, and metallurgy in the making of iron implements.

