Abstract/Résumé analytique

The Emergence of Concentrated Settlements in Medieval Western Europe: Explanatory Frameworks in the Historiography

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There is now a general scholarly consensus that the concentration of rural people into settlements in Western Europe (as opposed to dispersed or scattered habitations across the countryside) occurred in various stages between the eighth and twelfth centuries, though with regional divergences in precise timing, speed, formation, and intensity. What is clear from the literature is that a “one-size fits all” model for settlement development across Western Europe is not possible. Concentrated settlements appeared in certain parts of Europe for different reasons. This article discusses the strengths and limitations of four of the most influential frameworks for explaining patterns of medieval settlement concentration and their relation to social and economic change. The frameworks under analysis emphasize, respectively, power, coercion and lordship; communalism and territorial formalization; field-systems and resource-management; and urbanization and market-integration.

Il existe maintenant un consensus général érudit que la concentration des habitations en Europe occidentale (par opposition à des habitations dispersées et éparpillées dans les campagnes) se fit par diverses étapes entre le huitième et le douzième siècle, avec quand même des divergences régionales quant au moment précis, à la rapidité, la mise en place et l'intensité. Ce qu'on sait maintenant avec certitude, tirant une conclusion de la documentation, c'est que le modèle « taille unique » n'est pas possible lorsqu'on considère le développement des implantations en Europe de l'Ouest. Des agglomérations concentrées firent leur apparition dans certaines régions de l'Europe pour des raisons différentes les unes des autres. Dans cet article, nous examinons les mérites et les limites des quatre cadres les plus persuasifs qui expliquent les modes de concentration de ces implantations médiévales et leur rapport aux changements sociaux et économiques. Pour expliquer le processus de la concentration de ces habitations, ces cadres soulignent respectivement : le pouvoir, la contrainte et la seigneurie; la formalisation des territoires et communautés; la gestion des ressources et le système des champs; et, finalement, l’urbanisation et l’intégration des marchés.
The collapse of the economic and political structures connected to the Western Roman Empire led to a population nadir in many parts of Western Europe by the sixth and seventh centuries. Although recent literature has warned against exaggerating the extent of this decline, it is widely accepted that many regions experienced contraction in settlement in the centuries directly after the end of the Roman period. Land went out of cultivation and formerly wooded areas regained their trees. Many settlements were totally abandoned, including towns. Some scholars have noted for certain regions that a contracted and low-level population remained in place over a number of centuries — for example all the way up to the eleventh century in Northern Apulia in Southern Italy.


6 G. Volpe, Contadini, pastori e mercanti nell’Apulia tardoantica (Bari, 1996); J-M. Martin, La pouillé du VI e XIII siècle (Rome, 1993).
After the settlement decline connected to the demise of the Western Roman Empire, the view that is currently most widely disseminated is that the concentration of rural people into villages in Western Europe (as opposed to dispersed or scattered habitations across the countryside), occurred across various stages between the eighth and twelfth centuries. The shift in settlement to new, potentially more fertile sites, may have begun in earnest from 700 onwards. The actual chronology of this process varied according to region, with the formation of concentrated settlements beginning earlier in some areas of Western Europe and later in others. In some areas settlement concentration took the form of nucleated villages (people compacted around a main focal point). In other areas houses were laid out in a linear row perhaps along a dike, main street, or waterway, while elsewhere the concentration of habitation seemed to come together from multiple foci. It is important to note that this process did not necessarily predicate higher population densities in the concentrated settlement areas (in comparison to the dispersed or isolated settlement areas) but instead a rearrangement of the settlement structure.

The term “concentrated village” has been consciously avoided in this article, because there is still some debate as to what constitutes or defines a “village.” A semantic debate, particularly among French historians and archaeologists, has been played out for some time. Indeed, some scholars such as Chris Dyer recognize that settlement concentration in England did occur before the classic “nucleation period” of the ninth to twelfth centuries, but still do not describe these Anglo-Saxon clusters as “villages” — in fact, he has explicitly used the term “non-villages.” Similarly, Robert Fossier called these early-medieval settlements incomplete or “proto-villages.” In contrast, other scholars such as Chris Wickham...
do use the term “villages” for these earlier settlements — but more conceptually as a marker of the crystallization of local collective identity rather than of geography. In that sense, the definition of “concentrated settlement” used in this article is (deliberately) quite broad and is taken to mean the coming together of people residing in close geographical proximity to one another. “Concentrated settlement” in this paper takes in all degrees of concentration: from those large villages which were rigidly planned and systematically ordered to loose informal clusterings of people around a small focal point on the other.

Historians and archaeologists have long been interested in explaining the process of settlement concentration. What is clear from the literature is that a “one-size fits all” model for settlement development across Western Europe is not possible. Concentrated settlements appeared in certain parts of Europe for different reasons. Not only were the chronologies highly divergent but sometimes the actors or agents of settlement change were different. While for some areas scholars have emphasized the role of elites such as manorial lords in instigating the concentration of habitation, others have seen the development “from below” by asserting the capacity of rural peasants to initiate the process themselves. Nonetheless, while it is clear that there is no one explanatory model for the whole of Western Europe, a number of thematically and conceptually coherent explanatory frameworks can be discerned from the historiography. This article discusses the four most influential ones, highlighting how each helps us to better understand social and economic change in the medieval period, while also pointing out their limitations or inconsistencies. They are classified according to their main areas of emphasis: (i) power, coercion, and lordship; (ii) communalism and territorial formalization; (iii) field-systems and resource-management; and (iv) urbanization and market-integration.

I. Power, Coercion, and Lordship

One way in which the concentration of rural settlement has been framed is through the lens of applied power and coercion. There are a number of key facets to this kind of explanatory framework. First of all, in terms of “agents of settlement change,” this model gives more precedence to “elite” members of medieval society and emphasizes the impact of powerful lords or ecclesiastical institutions in moving people into concentrations. Second, in terms of timing, this framework often gives more precedence to the high Middle Ages, since this was the period when the classic system of localized feudal lordships crystallized across most parts of Western Europe. Third, with regard to the dynamism and speed of the settlement

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concentration process, this framework is prone to seeing rapid and intense changes in the settlement structure — perhaps as testaments to the “sweeping” or radical changes imposed by powerful elites.

In this type of explanatory framework, elite interest groups such as manorial or seigneurial lords used their (often extra-economic) power to stimulate the movement of populations into rural centres. A famous example of this kind of approach is the vast literature now compiled on *incastellamento*, which occurred roughly between the tenth and twelfth centuries in various parts of Western Europe.\(^\text{17}\) Essentially *incastellamento* was a process of castle building, but the term also refers generally to the fortification of habitation. According to the theory, in seeking to dominate the countryside, express their power and jurisdiction, and confirm their extra-economic privileges, seigneurial lords forced communities into concentrated settlements; often with the castle or fortified manor house as the focus point, and sometimes with the inhabitants residing within the settlement walls. As a result, this theory fits into the wider story of territorial crystallization in the high Middle Ages with the formalization of seigneurialism and local lordships.\(^\text{18}\) As the old larger Carolingian estates broke up in the tenth century, a patchwork of lordships and manors emerged in their place, often (though not always) exploiting demesnes using serf labour.\(^\text{19}\) The formalization of local seigneurial territories prefigured the appearance of rural communes in many places, as local solidarities slowly crystallized around physical or conceptual nuclei — the manor, the castle, or even the local church.\(^\text{20}\) Thus, the concentration of settlement did not always result from the power of the *signoria* itself, but was more attributable to the growing sense of coherence and local identity of the inhabitants of the formalized territory focused on seigneurial centres.\(^\text{21}\) Furthermore, by placing so much emphasis on the feudal revolution, this framework has led some scholars to assume (perhaps incorrectly) that much of the early medieval landscape was characterized by scattered settle-


ment. Some have even explicitly stated that “villages” only appeared in Europe from around CE 1000 onwards.

Particularly in France, Spain, and Italy, the link between the castle, the concentrated settlement, and the expression of power and authority is very strong in the historiography. One of the recurring themes is the rise of territorial lords such as dukes, barons and counts vis-à-vis the declining influence of a central authority. In Northern Italy, the castles initially spread through the tenth and eleventh centuries and became the seats of territorial lords or very powerful feudal families. After this initial development, a second phase of castle-building by local seigneurial lords began, often with very ordered and regular arrangement of housing. Similarly in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula (which later in the 1200s became known as Castile), castles spread quickly in the tenth century through the growing influence of powerful counts. In Catalonia, concentrated sites initially crystallized around churches — the context of conflict between competing secular and ecclesiastical jurisdictions. They also emerged around pre-existing castles. Later, entirely new fortified villages were created (vilanoves) by counts or lords in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, although many castles were built without creating changes in the settlement pattern. A number of existing settlements were

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abandoned in order to move into the seigneurial concentrations. In some places, high levels of chronological precision have been offered: scholars have situated the main move towards incastellamento in the Abruzzo of Italy and the Massif Central of France in the fifty-year period between 970 and 1020. In some places, incastellamento and settlement concentration took off slightly later than the eleventh century; this was the case for Aquitaine in southwest France. Although it has been suggested that in southern Italy, incastellamento was most pronounced in those areas dominated by great landowning monasteries such as Montecassino, which wanted to create new settlements for territorial control and protection, Graham Loud cautioned against over-exaggerating this development. It is clear that monasteries such as San Vincenzo did use fortified settlements as a symbol of their territorial claim to property under pressure from the Counts of Isernia, and that some monasteries such as Montevergine coerced rural producers into concentrations through harsh sharecropping contracts, yet the process of creating fortified settlements was to be found in many places across southern Italy (especially after the Norman invasion) where aristocrats were consolidating their power to the detriment of princely authority. Monasteries were thus important, but not the only or even the main forces promoting incastellamento.

It was perfectly possible, however, to see concentrated settlements and dominant lords without castles. In many works we see reference to a so-called “landscape of lordship,” whereby seigneurial lords would place their manor houses in a central location and then carefully lay out standardized plots for their tenants so

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that they would be close at hand to provide labour on the demesnes as needed.\textsuperscript{41}

Noting the close correlation between high levels of manorialization and the proliferation of large villages in the “champion lands” of Central England,\textsuperscript{42} scholars have long seen the manor as the driving force behind the concentration of settlements. It must be said, however, that the concentration of settlement was not always concurrent with the emergence of formalised seigneurialism. In the Central Dutch River Area, concentrated settlements actually emerged in the Merovingian period when the very earliest manorial \textit{curtes} were set down.\textsuperscript{43} When the manorial system broke down in the late thirteenth century in some parts of this region, certain settlements experienced strong collapses with the abandonment of farms.\textsuperscript{44} Scholars such as Jean-Pierre Devroey and Georges Despy, moreover, have shown that, although the manorial mode of economic exploitation and organization was important in crystallising clustered habitation, this process was already taking place in the late eighth and ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{45}

Although applicable in certain parts of Western Europe, the power and coercion framework for explaining the concentration of medieval settlements has some inconsistencies and limitations, as scholars have become increasingly aware. Chris Wickham was one of the first to question explicitly the \textit{incastellamento} thesis, noting in a region of Tuscany how the proliferation of fortified structures and an intense phase of castle building in the eleventh and twelfth centuries had no profound effects on demographic or settlement trends.\textsuperscript{46} Aristocrats built castles, but these ended up simply being isolated additions to an already dispersed pattern of settlement. Weak control of the territories and fragmented jurisdictions held by a number of overlapping lordships prevented any one lord from coercing inhabitants into


\textsuperscript{46} Wickham, \textit{Mountains and the City}, p. 300. Also see \textit{Ibid}, “Settlement Patterns in Medieval Italy: (1) Nucleation (Monte Amiata in Southern Tuscany); (2) Dispersal (the Casentino in Northern Tuscany),” in A. Mackay (ed.), \textit{Atlas of Medieval Europe} (London, 1997), pp. 140-41.
new villages. Following on from this, there now has been a trend in the rural histories of medieval France that shows that the process of castle building did nothing to change the existing settlement patterns. In many parts of Portugal (except the north-west), castles had no further impact for the arrangement of settlement. In Campania in Southern Italy, Graham Loud has similarly noted how Norman castles were not always principle foci for settlement, with Laurent Feller making equivalent comments for the Abruzzo. And although the formalization of seigneurialism over roughly the tenth to twelfth centuries has grounded many explanations for concentrated settlement formation in the Middle Ages, some scholars (particularly from Italy) have also suggested that the same process may just as easily have led to the emergence of fortified isolated habitations during that period.

Furthermore, an increasing amount of literature has now showed that concentrated settlements with a fortified character began to appear much earlier in the medieval period, before the so-called “feudal revolution.” In particular, much has been written on the formation of hilltop villages from as early as the eighth century in parts of Central Italy and Northwestern Spain, even if the fortifications them-
selves were modest. Much of this work is connected to archaeological studies which, in order to understand hierarchies of settlement, have examined the landscape for the evidence of the expression of power relations. In one famous excavation project, archaeologists researching the hilltop site of Montarrenti near Siena, in Tuscany, have demonstrated that even as early as the eighth century, settlements were being rearranged and reordered according to hierarchies of power. The higher status, aristocratic complex was situated at the top of the hill, while the lower status buildings of the community were strewn across the winding slopes of the hillside, continuing down to the bottom. Similar signs of social differentiation have been found for Scarlino and Poggibonsi in the ninth century.

To summarize, then, a basic point is that concentrated settlements were emerging even before the formalisation of seigneurialism of the high Middle Ages. As Chris Wickham has argued by asserting the importance of a decline in Roman taxation and increase in the freedom of the peasant rustici, signs of clustered settlement formation appear as early as the seventh century, although admittedly Wickham’s methodology has recently come under scrutiny from Mario Costambeys, who takes issue with the way certain terms from the manuscript sources such as “vicus” have been interpreted. Nevertheless, concentrated early-medieval settlements have been identified all across Southern France, not only on hilltops, but also on plains and flatlands. Moreover, fortified concentrations were present at least by the ninth century on both hill tops and sand dunes (in swampy areas) across large parts of Central Europe — particularly within the territory of the “Great Moravian Empire” including regions of what are today the Czech Republic,
Austria, and Slovakia. Occasionally, concentrations had already been developed and deserted by the eighth century. In Drenthe, in the north-eastern part of the Low Countries, settlement concentrations from the seventh and eighth centuries have been identified, while in Apulia in Southern Italy, extensive excavations of former Roman villas have shown that far from disappearing entirely after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, many of these isolated elite structures were remodelled between the sixth and ninth centuries into concentrated clusters of peasant producers. Indeed, it is now well known that isolated habitations could incorporate new farmsteads by splitting existing land units through heirs. Furthermore, the incastellamento or encellulement thesis of the 80s and 90s seemed to suggest that the new concentrated villages of the high Middle Ages necessitated abandonment of early-medieval dispersed sites — yet Spanish archaeology has now questioned that wisdom, highlighting the difficulty in turning up any physical evidence to support the case.

In that sense, the interpretive framework that places power and coercion at its centre, remains important and influential in explanations of medieval village concentration, though, thanks to new trends in archaeology, it has now broken free of the restrictive confines of the incastellamento thesis and the classic period of formalized seigneurialism. Scholars are still sure that the concept of power is important for our understanding of medieval settlement development, but increasingly we are seeing more and more links between the expression of power and moves towards settlement concentration occurring before the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is a matter of semantics whether we decide to call these earlier concentrations “villages,” though in more recent years there has been a greater tendency to do so.

II. Communalism and Territorial Formalization

In contrast to the power and coercion framework, some scholars have suggested that the most important historical processes shaping medieval settlement patterns in Western Europe came from new institutional configurations from below. This kind of explanatory framework has a number of key facets. First, in terms of “agents of settlement change,” this model assigns those lower down the social hierarchy a more active role in stimulating concentrated forms of habitation, emphasizing the capacity of farmers, peasants, tenants, labourers, and commoners to negotiate and cooperate with each other, and to engage in dialogues with “elites” in order to rearrange settlements. Second, as with the power and coercion framework, this model highlights the high and late Middle Ages as key developmental periods, partly because it was around this time across many areas of Western Europe that significant local laws, rules, and customs were written down and formalized institutionally. Third, with regard to dynamism and speed in the settlement concentration process, this framework does not tend to cast the emergence of concentrations as a rapid or intense “event,” assessing it rather as a process that developed organically and perhaps incrementally over a long term.

According to this theory, the need to regulate resources more effectively at the local level acted as a cohesive force that promoted habitation around central sites. So, for example, one study has linked the formalization of the village community (and in turn its physical crystallization) with the emergence of a more formally regulated silvo-pastoral economy and grazing rights. Other works on settlements in the Low Countries have also linked concentration with the need for collective water management, and for the protection that self-government provided for administration, justice, and taxation. Bas van Bavel depicts a situation where

… the increasing nucleation of settlement — with scattered farmsteads being rearranged into villages — and the growing density of population, both compelled and enabled villagers to work more closely together, particularly in coordinating agricultural activities and regulating access to ever scarcer resources.

In medieval Holland, village communities often overlapped with water board organizations. This point must be nuanced against work from scholars such as Chris

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Wickham, however, who have shown that the formalization of the rural commune could just as easily have co-existed with highly dispersed settlement patterns.\textsuperscript{71}

In the Northern part of the Low Countries in Groningen and Friesland, communal concerns over the dangers of flooding stimulated groups of people to build and group their houses together on large mounds known as \textit{terpen}.\textsuperscript{72} Further inland, in Drenthe and the Gooi, the \textit{marken} or \textit{meenten} (the commons) developed in close association with the crystallization of small concentrated villages.\textsuperscript{73} Participants in the collective system for regulating resources frequently resided around a small central space (like a village green) known as a \textit{brink}.\textsuperscript{74} Similar developments occurred in the medieval Campine region of Brabant, where as a result of a rivalry between the Duke of Brabant and local seigneurial lords, both parties ended up granting privileges in order to attract immigrants to their territories.\textsuperscript{75} New small concentrated villages and hamlets emerged, particularly in the thirteenth century,\textsuperscript{76} where the communities displayed secure property rights and powerful village governments capable of maintaining the commons over long periods through conflict resolution.\textsuperscript{77}

Aside from the focus on the rural commune, other more “bottom-up” interpretations of settlement concentration in medieval Europe have been offered, where the capacity for “ordinary” peasants or tenants to organize themselves was dictated by the levels of freedom and autonomy they experienced. These kinds of settlements were often developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, on the crest of widespread increases in population across Western Europe, and were based


\textsuperscript{72} M. Bierma, A. Clason, E. Kramer and G. de Langen (eds.), \textit{Terpen en wierden in het Fries-Groningse kustgebied} (Groningen 1988).


\textsuperscript{74} T. Spek, \textit{Het Drentse esdorpenlandschap. Een historisch-geografische studie} (Utrecht, 2004), I-II.


around late reclamation and colonization of previously uncultivated land. As summarized over 50 years ago by Bryce Lyon, “for well over a hundred years historians specializing in agrarian institutions of the Middle Ages have suggested that the vast land reclamation characterizing the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Western Europe contributed to the emancipation of the common man.”

Thus, in many cases, colonists were lured to new inhospitable areas by the promise of favourable concessions and privileges from, for example, the Bishop of Utrecht and the Count of Holland, who had usurped complete regalian rights over vast expanses of wasteland after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire in the tenth century, and now needed labour to complete reclamation projects in the marshes of Holland. The peasant inhabitants of the settlements obtained freedom from serfdom and full and secure property rights. These settlements often took a linear or stretched form with houses lined up along dikes and waterways. Moreover, some colonists lived in favourable jurisdictions that allowed further reclamation of wasteland.

Thus, in contrast to the *incastellamento* model which stresses the capacity of elites to use extra-economic coercion and force to move people into new concentrated settlements, this framework that emphasizes communalism instead highlights how the attraction of privileges and concessions motivated people to move into new settlements. In fact, many of the colonists in Holland’s peat-lands originated from heavily manorialized societies and were looking to escape the constrictions of serfdom further inland (for example in the Central Dutch river area). Rural communities in these freer societies often had direct control over poor relief, judicial affairs, water management; they also collected taxes, organized military duties, and maintained internal order. Jurors could be elected as representatives of the community in local courts, and rural communities frequently developed their own by-laws.

In addition, as public authorities, territorial lords often supported...
the position of colonists reclaiming land in direct antagonism to the powers of seigneurial lords. Further north of Holland, village communities in the Frisian and German coastal marshes such as Schleswig-Holstein had similar freedoms to reclaim land and settle into new concentrations, though here permission was often sought from territorial lords.84

Elsewhere in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, settlers were enticed with the promise of reductions in manorial dues into new concentrated settlements carved out of the forest.85 In parts of Southern France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, new areas of settlement known as “sauvetés” were established by monasteries and priories who offered protection and a place of refuge in exchange for bringing new land into cultivation,86 although lords also offered similar conditions in their so-called “castelnaux.”87 In a similar period in the Odenwald region of Southern Germany, the monastery of Lorsch stimulated the emergence of new linear forms of habitation by offering privileges to colonists.88 At Paderborn in the Westphalia of Northern Germany, skilled builders were coaxed into settling into new concentrated settlements with the promise of receiving excellent wages and secure property rights in exchange for carrying out Bishop Meinwerk’s building projects.89 Similar concessions and freedoms (although not nearly to the same extent) guided German colonization east of the Elbe,90 and tenants with harsh obligations as serfs in the Rhineland looked to escape by seeking these free tenures.91 For example, privileges from the Prince Bishop of Passau such as fewer taxes and dues on the movement and transfer of land, enticed settlers into difficult forested areas

in Bavaria in the 1300s, stimulating very distinctive linear settlements known as Waldhufendorfen. 92

One of the fundamental characteristics of this kind of explanatory framework is the prominence given to “late” land reclamation and colonization. Thus, it is clear from the outset that the “communalism” as a concept can only really be applicable to a certain number of settlements that developed from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries onwards. However, even when talking explicitly about new concentrated settlements created from high- or late-medieval reclamation activity, one still has to wonder whether the framework can be applicable across Western Europe. In fact, in some areas, some scholars have linked the desire for freedom and autonomy from manorial or seigneurial jurisdictions not to the concentration of settlement, but to the emergence of new forms of dispersed or isolated settlement. Work on the woodland assarts of the high Middle Ages is a case in point. 93

Aside from that basic point, however, it bears mention that, although the increasing colonization of new territories and upward population trends characterized the period of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the new rural settlements that resulted cannot always be explained through reference to a quest for freedom or autonomy. Indeed, even during the late Middle Ages, lords could invest heavily in marshland colonization activity. 94

In fact in some areas such as the Po Valley in Northern Italy, newly constructed villages from the high Middle Ages onwards fitted very nicely into the larger story of the subordination of the countryside to the political and economic aims of cities. 95 Peasant reclamation initiatives did not bring widespread freedoms or the “emancipation of the common man” as suggested in Bryce Lyon’s influential article. Although seigneurial lordships and manorialism withered away very early in North and Central Italy, the old elements of rural repression were replaced by new forms of urban domination. 96 In Northern and Central Italy, the urban population doubled between 1000 and 1300 — a higher rate than elsewhere in Western

95 M. Campopiano, “Land Clearance and Water Management in the Po Valley in the Central and Late Middle Ages (Ninth-Fifteenth Centuries): The Role of Rural Communities,” Journal of Medieval History (forthcoming 2013).
Europe (except Holland and Flanders). As these urban agglomerations increased in size, number and stature, the number of “non-productive” or dependent citizens also grew. Cities realized they had, on the one hand, to create direct explicit legal relationships with their hinterlands, and, on the other hand, to exploit these hinterlands more intensively. In that sense, urban institutions, governments and burghers became the new “feudal lords” of the late Middle Ages and early modern period in Europe. This was not a sharp discontinuity with previous forms of social and political organization. The distinction between “urban” and “rural” elite interest groups was not always clear-cut; frequently rural signori with land and castles in the contadi were at the same time urban citizens or burghers. In that way rural lordships were easily integrated into new cadres of control established by cities. Cities extended their control over an expanding contado by reclaiming more land, but supported these colonization activities through jurisdictions that subsumed rural communities into their governmental structure. Land reclamation became an effective way to legitimize urban control and socio-political influence over the countryside in the Po Valley.

Just as seigneurial lords had done before them, urban governments tried, in the interests of water management, to extract labour from rural communities. In the second half of the eleventh century, Pavia asked nearby inhabitants of the villages to work the locks of the Ticino River. As a result of Verona’s food-supply problems in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the commune reclaimed new land by settling colonists within “free boroughs” such as Villafranca in 1184 or at Palù, where newcomers were each given a standardized plot on which to work and build a house. Elsewhere, at the swamps of the commune of Verona, wasteland was

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bought by a professional and commercial consortium of Veronese citizens, as well as by a group of aristocrats and office-holders. Urban investment stimulated similar reclamation and formation of new settlements in the contado around Cremona, while cities such as Milan invested in the construction of canals to expand field irrigation.

As early statutes attest, rural communities essentially became compelled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to colonize unclaimed land. For example, the statutes of Reggio Emilia ordered the assarting of trees near the village of Rivalta. Cities also struck up agreements with large rural landowners: a case in point is the pact between Bologna and a consortium of lords which aimed to entice villages into working on a canal that would bring water from the Reno River to the city. The statutes of Parma in the 1200s compelled the rural communities — which benefited from the canal connecting Sant’Ilario, Taneto, and Prato Ottesola — to maintain the structure. The statutes of Ferrara around the same time show that officials of the city had to discuss with inhabitants of local villages any matters regarding the improvement of water management, and furthermore, that rural communities had to provide a labour force to work the river embankments. In Reggio Emilia consuls from the rural communities had to appear in front of courts every month to report malfunctions in the infrastructure. Some village statutes were actually integrated into the Public Water Statutes of Milan in the 1300s. Thus in sum, the late-reclaimed settlements that developed may have had “charters of freedom” in the sense they were free from repressive rural lordships, but they were still subordinate to the financial and political power of the urban administrative apparatus. The line between “freedom” and “coercion” in connection with settlement development has become rather blurred through recent research.

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III. Field Systems and Resource Management

One of the classic approaches to the history of settlement in medieval Western Europe stresses the role that field organization played in the process. In particular, scholars have frequently associated the movement of rural people into concentrated settlements with the establishment of open-field systems, which distributed basic agricultural holdings in unenclosed parcels. However, unlike the two explanatory frameworks described above, some of the key attributes of this paradigm remain unclear. With regard to the “agents of settlement change,” there is still much debate and lack of clarity about who was responsible for laying out the open fields. Did manorial lords instigate the system? Was it a logical response of common rural people to their economic situation? Or was it a joint effort? The origins of the open field system are difficult to ascertain, partly because the intention to rearrange the fields in this way is not revealed in many documentary sources. Complicating matters is the fact that the chronology, speed, and intensity of open-field formation appears to be highly divergent across regions, thus making it even more difficult to establish causality. We know that settlement concentration and the establishment of open fields are linked in many places, but we are uncertain about which came first and about whether the two processes have separate or common origins.

That open fields and concentrated settlements complement each other has at least been established on an abstract level. The theoretical benefits of living in concentrations at the heart of scattered plots in open fields have frequently been seen as promoting “logical” decisions based on economic and ecological reasoning. Essentially, the open-field system helped medieval rural societies withstand the possibility of “Malthusian crises” caused by increasing population pressure on finite amounts of land. Indeed, its proliferation may even have gone hand-in-hand with exceptional population growth between the tenth and thirteenth centuries, although it did emerge in some areas earlier than the ninth century. Some open fields started small and then expanded through assarting. According to the theory, as population levels increased, the need for rural inhabitants to divide their resources more equitably became more acute. The open fields allowed for a more egalitarian division of land as every household’s holdings were divided into small

morsels scattered across the fields, while the community often lived in a concentrated settlement at the heart of these fields. Not only did scattering make transport and labour costs more equal, but it was also an exercise in risk-management as no single person could monopolize the best soils; if one field harvest failed, this was not disastrous. The same risk-limitation concerns still informs the persistence of fragmented land distributions in parts of Asia and Africa today.

The open field system could also lead to sustainable ecological management. A variation of the open field system, the system of “common fields” allowed one of the fields (usually one out of three) to remain fallow on a rotating basis, thereby not exhausting the nutrients of the soil. Furthermore, this system pushed people towards collective regulation of the harvest, which in turn prevented grain theft and ensured orderly grazing on the stubble. It also fostered collective action: local people often banded together into small groups to manage plough-teams, while oxen — which were expensive — were sometimes collectively acquired. In the common-field system too, each participant had a number of obligations and restrictions to respect: animals, for example, could only graze on the fields at certain times of the year. The community members themselves often enforced such regulations, although in some places, more formal councils were involved. In

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130 D. Curtis, “Tine De Moor’s ‘Silent Revolution’. Reconsidering her Theoretical Framework for Explaining the Emergence of Institutions for Collective Management of Resources,” International
short, the idea is that the open fields and concentrated settlements complemented each other in a "rational" system based on the limitation and equitable social distribution of risk.\(^{131}\)

The association of the open field system with the development of concentrated settlements is supported to some extent by their simple geographical coincidence. A number of insightful maps have been able to plot the general locations where open fields (in a variety of forms) developed, and many (though not all) match up with characteristic concentrated settlement landscapes — even if this is rather crude.\(^{132}\) One of the classic associations could be seen in the Midland Belt of Central England: mapping based on the overlaying of nineteenth-century cadastral surveys has shown the clear combination of open fields and large villages.\(^{133}\) Interestingly, this form of agricultural organization was introduced to some of the earliest English colonies in Massachusetts, even if the experiment proved to be short-lived.\(^{134}\) The system of fragmented unenclosed parcels was also a feature across large parts of Southern Italy and generally matched up with the regions characterized by large concentrated settlements known as “agro-towns” (essentially towns with agricultural functions), although this concentrated town structure did not necessarily proliferate in the Middle Ages.\(^{135}\) The correlation between open fields and concentrated settlements is often also driven home by comparing concentrated settlements with dispersed or isolated settlement structures. In the southern part of the province of Limburg in the Low Countries, tenant farmers lived on isolated farms on consolidated blocks while nearby peasants with fragmented smallholdings lived in villages and hamlets.\(^{136}\)

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph to this section, however, there are a number of problems, limitations, and inconsistencies involved in merely linking

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\(^{133}\) Wrathmell and Roberts, \textit{Region and Place}, pp. 1-10.


the two processes of open-field formation and concentrated settlement together. No kind of causality has been reached yet — at least not convincingly for large areas. Did the establishment of the open fields really lead to the concentration of settlement, or can this be turned on its head? Perhaps the establishment of concentrated settlements in Western Europe in turn necessitated a change in the organization of the fields. Certainly some literature does point to the rapid restructuring of settlement after the establishment of the open fields in some regions. In areas of Central England, for example, it has been argued that from the eleventh century Norman lords planned new orthodox forms of open fields, and that these tenurial changes consequent led to a rapid transformation of settlement structures. 137 Often this kind of intense change in the field system and settlement structure is indicative of an element of planning from above. 138 The entire restructuring of settlement into concentrations as a direct result of the establishment of new open fields has been a dominant feature of important work on the medieval English landscape. 139

Yet, does this kind of theory mean that the pre-existing habitations before the establishment of the open fields were dispersed or scattered across the landscape? Certainly this has been argued for some places, 140 but the point is that more and more scholars are becoming aware that settlement concentration may have occurred in the early-medieval period before the establishment of open fields — even if we still accept that the open fields often brought about further changes to the settlement structure. Some scholars have actually shown settlement concentration to be a long-term process that encompasses a number of different phases or smaller shifts. Concentrated settlements in areas of open fields often had an element of concentration before the fields were even adopted, sometimes taking the form of early informal clustering around points of pasture or meadow. 141 Probably we

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should not be too surprised at this, given that some recent research is also showing that open fields were frequently laid out by incorporating older (perhaps prehistoric) landscape arrangements.142 The “interrupted” or “incremental” view of medieval settlement concentration has also been used by Frans Theeuws for the early-medieval region of the pagus Texandrië (roughly coterminous with the sandy area of Belgian and Dutch Brabant).143

Still further problems emerge. Even if we do accept the general premise that open fields and concentrated settlements were linked during various stages of the Middle Ages, there is still no consensus as to why open fields were adopted in some parts of Western Europe, but not in others. We know, of course, the “theoretical benefits” of the social distribution of risk, but we do not know why some societies apparently did not care about risks (highly unlikely) or chose alternative methods for limiting their exposure to crises. Stephen Rippon144 has recently listed as many as seven different explanatory variables for understanding the proliferation of open fields including ethnicity, estate fragmentation, the balance of arable and pasture, cultural emulation, products of antecedent landscapes, lordship, and soil types145 — and probably to those we could add factors such as population pressure,146 the emergence of integrated grain markets,147 and fragmentation of landownership.148 Some of these factors, such as ethnicity, have furthermore been readily dismissed; others, such as “soil type” are problematic given that the same soil type is sometimes found in areas with divergent settlement developments.149 The simple equation of open fields and concentrated settlements becomes even more complicated when we take into account the existence of small pockets of dispersed or scattered settlement in areas which had open fields,150 or those areas

which had open fields integrated within other types of field organization such as private enclosures\textsuperscript{151} or the infield-outfield system.\textsuperscript{152} Small hamlets and dispersed farmsteads, moreover, existed simultaneously and were often interspersed with concentrated settlements,\textsuperscript{153} in the same way that concentrated settlements could be found dotted among dominant patterns of dispersed settlement.\textsuperscript{154} One final limitation of this explanatory framework is that most of its proponents do not work outside their “national” research traditions or engage in systematic comparative analysis.\textsuperscript{155} The British tradition of research into the open fields is arguably the most well-developed, but one problem (as with much British rural history) is that it runs separate and is not embedded within research on open fields in the European mainland.\textsuperscript{156}

\textbf{IV. Urbanization and Market Integration}

Scholars have also accounted for settlement concentration through reference to the increasing commercialization of the medieval economy. In considering “agents of settlement change,” research in this category has looked more deeply at “absentee” social groups — for example, at the role of “outside” urban forces in stimulating new forms of settlement concentration in the countryside. Second, in terms of chronology, this framework often gives more precedence to the high Middle Ages, when parts of Western Europe started to become more urbanized and stronger political and economic links began to emerge between town and countryside. Third, with regard to the dynamism and speed of the settlement concentration process, this framework tend to highlight rapid and intense changes in settlement structure; such as the process through which new settlements were founded quickly in response to favourable grants to establish market centres.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{152} R. Dodgshon, “West Highland and Hebridean Landscapes: Have they a History without Runrig?,” \textit{Journal of Historical Geography}, 19 (1993), pp. 383-98.
\end{itemize}
In an extensive literature, scholars have suggested that some rural regions enjoyed the fruits of increasing integration with urban markets, with the growth of towns and their markets promoting the development of commercialized agriculture as well as the development of new forms of non-agricultural production in rural areas. Even in poorly urbanized areas such as Apulia in southern Italy during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the establishment of small centres such as Troia and Foggia was enough to stimulate economic activity in the countryside and foster the emergence of new small settlements with concentrated points of production. Many new late-medieval settlements appeared as a result of shifting trading patterns. In Sicily, for example, some settlements were tied to the formation of permanent markets, while others were more transient and temporary and linked to rural fairs. The transitory nature of some of these new settlements was especially visible in parts of southern France, where many rural centres went into a cycle of decline and re-emergence. Some coastal settlements emerged in relation to specialized non-agricultural activities such as fishing, while in some mountain areas, the high- and late-medieval concentration of settlement resulted from increased urban demand for mountain produce such as meat, wool, and wood. In peat-rich and marsh areas, river-borne trade was encouraged by the construction of lodes linking small rural market centres to navigable waterways.
Often urban demand had an impact on the countryside, with many new small concentrated settlements springing up across Western Europe as rural market centres and trading posts grew in number during the high Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{164} Commercial influences from London had a significant impact on settlement development in the rural hinterlands.\textsuperscript{165} Sometimes powerful sectional and group interests shaped this process.\textsuperscript{166} Lords often granted explicit privileges to certain settlements in the hope of stimulating the economy of market centres, and profiting from the trade in turn.\textsuperscript{167} Some concentrated settlements expanded into small towns as a result of their status as compulsory trading venues for their hinterlands.\textsuperscript{168} In the south of France, lords even created \textit{bastides} with the prime intention of securing a reservoir of taxes on all trade performed at the market.\textsuperscript{169} They served the function of regulating and stabilising traffic in food and textile produce.\textsuperscript{170} In Lombardy, the weak position of territorial lords such as the Sforza in the mid fifteenth century led eventually to jurisdictional autonomy for a number of new rural communities, which subsequently formed their settlements around markets.\textsuperscript{171} In effect, people began


\textsuperscript{170} Many of these areas were built with clear grid or circular (“circulades”) plans, and it has been suggested quite recently by scholars that the largest of medieval rural settlements were often inspired by towns founded earlier in the Middle Ages. See C. Higounet, “Les origines et la foundation de la bastide de Vianne (1284),” \textit{Revue de l’Agenais} (1984), pp. 5-24; K. Pawloski, “Villes et villages circulaire du Languedoc,” \textit{Annales du Midi}, 9 (1987), pp. 407-28; C. Cyer and K. Lilley, “Town and Countryside, Relationsips and Resembalnces,” in Christie and Stamper (eds.), \textit{Medieval Rural Settlement}, pp. 81-98.

to congregate around village squares, greens, or piazze, in a growing culture of barter and trade, and some of these central trading areas can still be recognized even today.

One of the limitations of this framework is that while commercialization may have stimulated the growth of new market centres, around which rural people began increasingly to congregate, it also may explain the complete break-down of coherent villages. One of the consequences of commercialization in late-medieval Western Europe was land consolidation and accumulation. Thus, for example, urban expropriation of rural property-holders in the late-medieval Florentine contado, coupled with harsh fiscal oppression and the imposition of the onerous demands of mezzadria (sharecropping), led to mass migration from the countryside into Florence. As a result, village settlements collapsed and farm plots were abandoned. The rural poor eventually populated the impoverished suburbs of Florence, often to the south and the east. A similar trend can be seen in many of the city-states of Northern Italy in the transition from the late Middle Ages to the early modern period as the urban expropriation of peasant lands became a general phenomenon. Commons were encroached upon. In Lombardy, 57 percent of the land in the Cremonese contado was owned by burghers of Cremona (and that...
excludes urban ecclesiastical institutions), while in the Venetian terraferma, urban citizens owned between one-half to two-thirds of the land. A similarly high proportion of the land was controlled by urban interest groups in the late-medieval territories of Parma, Piacenza, and in particular, Bologna. As a result, newly proletarianized rural-dwellers had little option but to migrate to the various cities and towns. In fact, it has been shown that in tougher economic periods, the swarm of rural people upon the cities in search of work and food was so great that many urban governments closed their gates to keep out beggars and vagrants.

Of course, widespread rural-urban migration put more pressure on those who decided to remain in the countryside, as peasant assistance in the maintenance of complex hydraulic works completely unravelled. The consequence was increased susceptibility to flooding, which in turn caused a vicious cycle of outward migration and rural settlement collapse. In that sense, although commercialization may have stimulated the development of new concentrated rural settlements in the high and late Middle Ages, this process was not inevitable. Indeed, the exact same level of commercialization in other areas brought about the opposite trend — a contraction and sometimes even collapse of the settlement structures.

V. Conclusion

Three key points can be taken from this historiographical review of research on the emergence of concentrated settlements in Western Europe. They pertain respectively to the periodization of settlement concentration; to “agents” during settlement change; and to the intensity and speed of settlement formation.

Approaches that have emphasized “power and coercion” and the “arrangement of field systems” have been extremely influential in explaining settlement concentration in medieval Western Europe. However, recent research has shown the limitations of both frameworks to be broadly similar. One of the key issues is chronology. Concentrated settlements are now being found all across Western Europe prior to the great phase of formalized seigneurialism (roughly beginning from the tenth century). Similarly the concentration of settlement is also being found in certain places prior to open-field formation (which in itself has a highly divergent chronological development). To some extent at issue is the definition we give to


183 Curtis and Campopiano, “Medieval Land Reclamation.”
the term “concentrated settlement” and the distinctions we might draw between it and a term such as “village.” I have intentionally defined “concentrated settlement” very broadly, bearing in mind that different degrees of settlement concentration developed over time. Settlement concentration occurred in many regions of Western Europe before the emergence of incastellamento. That is not to diminish the importance of incastellamento in certain areas: the fortification process may have simply intensified processes already taking place. The same goes for the emergence of the open fields. The loose clustering of people into concentrated habitations may have occurred in some places before the development of the open fields, but that is not to deny the eventual importance of these last. The field rearrangement process may have likewise intensified processes which were already in their incipient stages. Alternatively, open fields may have entirely disrupted the settlement pattern and led to newly located and arranged concentrated settlements.

This issue of the “degree” of settlement concentration is an important one. Indeed, it is this point that explains why the four explanatory frameworks have not and should not be presented in opposition to one another. In fact the divergent agents, periodization, and speed of the settlement concentration process across regions of medieval Western Europe demonstrate that the process was incremental and uneven. Frameworks for settlement concentration across Western Europe thus only make sense with proper regard for period, geography, and social context. It is possible that all four of the explanatory frameworks outlined here could apply to a given settlement at different points in its development. To be sure, the frameworks are interchangeable and overlapping. The open fields may have led to the emergence of new concentrated settlements, but these open fields may have been devised and laid down through powerful and dominant interest groups. Territorial formation and the formalization of communalism at the local level may have led settlements to crystallize, but this apparently bottom-up process could easily have been a response to the growing power and sharpness of seigneurial jurisdictions. The recasting of fields may have led to the reorganization of settlement in some places, but this may have been a process already linked to increased urban demand and commercialization: peasants either wishing to produce more or to protect themselves from the market (depending on one’s interpretation of the function of the open fields). Indeed, the principal frameworks for understanding the formation of medieval concentrated settlements are mutually reinforcing and, perhaps most significantly, cannot be viewed in isolation from one another.

Daniel R. Curtis received his PhD from Utrecht University. His first book is to appear in Ashgate’s “Rural Worlds” series in 2014 under the title Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-Industrial Settlements. At the moment he is funded by a British Academy (Leverhulme) Small Research Grant, and is currently working on a project reconstructing aspects of household structure, marriage patterns, and levels of domestic service in Southern Italy during the long eighteenth century.