

CHAPTER 11

Conclusions

In concluding this study, we can return to the two research questions introduced in Chapter 1: What goods did medieval households consume, and what factors influenced these patterns of consumption? In broad terms, this study has demonstrated that households acquired and used a wide range of goods, which generally became more varied over time. We see, for example, a diversification of items associated with cooking and eating, the growing popularity of fixed tables and varied types of bed. Clothing, too, changed as fashions developed, and we can observe the persistence of loose-fitting items such as tunics alongside the introduction of tighter items such as jerkins. Yet, as our analysis demonstrates, patterns of consumption were not uniform. The discussions in Chapters 9 and 10 show how a variety of factors appear to have determined priorities and preferences, chief among these being the household economy. While the evidence provided by the escheators' and coroners' records shows diversity in the acquisition of furniture and metalware in particular, the archaeological dataset highlights further variability in the presence of smaller items. The contrasting examples of quern stones, the distribution of which appears related to regulatory regimes around the imposition of suit of mill, and whetstones, determined by a mix of market access and regional variability in geology, illustrate clearly that medieval consumption was shaped by a variety of influences. In closing this study, we wish to return to a number of the themes introduced in Chapter 1, to consider how this data and the analysis presented here can progress our understanding of the relations between medieval households and their possessions.

Medieval consumption and the 'consumer revolution'

A principal area of concern discussed in Chapter 1 is the degree to which a revolution can be observed in consumption in the later middle ages and, relatedly,

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the extent to which medieval consumption is distinct from (early) modern consumption. Viewed in the round, our evidence leads us to question the extent to which we see clear or straightforward evidence of an acceleration in the quantity and range of goods consumed in the century after 1370, or their progressive spread into a growing number of social groups. More broadly, there are few grounds for a simple story of a rise in the number of goods and the accessibility of these goods and, relatedly, a stronger degree of reliance on the market for commodities.

Our data instead demonstrates that an increasing variety of goods were available through our study period as a whole, but also that certain types of goods fell out of favour, a finding corroborated by Sear and Sneath's (2020, 302) analysis of the origins of the consumer revolution. We see, for example, the decline of specialist ewers and basins for handwashing through the early fifteenth century, and the replacement of posnets with skillets and saucepans through the sixteenth century. Among the archaeological objects, stone mortars appear to relate only to the period before c.1450. Pewter tableware was present throughout our study period, but one may observe quite clearly that it comes to be consumed more widely and occurs in a greater variety of forms. Through the sixteenth century, we can observe the increasing diversity of cooking ware with, for example, the introduction of kettles. Bedding too becomes more complex, with the introduction of truckle beds and a greater prominence of soft furnishings, while the escheators' and coroners' records reveal a shift to fixed tables in preference to trestles. This diversity can also be seen in the archaeological evidence through the introduction of new knife forms. Clothing, too, developed: both the lists of forfeited goods and the archaeological evidence demonstrate the introduction of new styles. Even so, among the escheators' records, the mean number of functional categories of goods present in lists consistently ranges from four to six between the 1380s and 1430s (the decades for which there is sufficient data), with little fluctuation in the proportion of household wealth invested in the main categories of goods: cooking equipment, tableware and bedding. However, as our analysis in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 demonstrates, when considered in terms of the diversity of goods present and the number of households possessing these items, a clearer pattern of increasing diversity and availability becomes apparent across our longer 200-year plus period. There is a strong contrast between the mid-fifteenth-century escheators' lists and the coroners' records. This may relate to differences in the way that records were created in the two regimes of felony forfeiture, but also implies that the later fifteenth century was a key period of transformation in consumption in which new types of goods emerged. This suggests that roughly similar proportions of household wealth were spent on these goods, but the quantity and range of goods to which this investment relates expanded.

The diversification of goods can, in most cases, be equated to a process of specialisation; new types of furniture, kitchenware and tableware do not typically fulfil new functions, but rather relate to specific functions in a more exclusive

way: a dining table rather than a multipurpose trestle table, a kettle rather than a multipurpose pot. The archaeological evidence for buildings, as well as the occasional references to specific rooms in the coroners' records, demonstrate that these twin processes of object diversification and functional specialisation did not occur in isolation. They correspond with changes to domestic architecture, especially the enclosing of domestic space discussed by Johnson (1993). In her analysis of early modern wills from Kent, Elisabeth Salter (2006, 67–8) suggests that the relationship between domestic space and objects is a complex one, and that it is the possessions which make the rooms, rather than the other way around, a proposal supported by references to the bequeathing of whole 'rooms' (such as 'my chamber') and the highlighting of goods which are seemingly out of place. This insight is important as it demonstrates that we are not seeing an expanding world of goods to meet the needs of new architectural forms, or indeed changes in architecture to accommodate more diverse goods, but rather a broader societal shift, a fundamental move from the multipurpose hall and the multifunctional, portable objects it entailed, to a specialisation of space, goods and domestic roles. As Hamling and Richardson (2017, 109) highlight, this was a long-term process of change and adaptation rather than a simple process of 'modernisation'; spaces, objects and household economy moved in dialogue with each other. Because middling houses functioned as places of work, into which outsiders entered, there was an increasing need for private or specialised spaces (Hamling and Richardson 2017, 61), and it was in these middling houses, where households had the ability to invest both in architectural modification and the range of goods required for tasks such as food processing, that this diversification appears most marked.

Our analysis of the ownership of domestic and economic goods (Chapter 9) demonstrates how wealth, arguably a proxy for social status, was a key determinant of patterns of investment. We suggested that higher proportions of the incomes of lower status households were invested in domestic goods than was the case with middling households, which invested more strongly in economic goods. In part this can be related to patterns of labour. On the one hand, wages facilitated the ability of lower status households to acquire domestic goods, while, on the other, as other households became places of work, the need for labouring households to invest in economic goods was weaker. Although in some cases these household goods were limited to the necessities – basic cooking ware and bedding – as discussed in Chapter 9, there is also evidence for these lower status households investing in goods which might be considered luxuries.

As we see greater specialisation in domestic space and the erection of barriers – albeit permeable ones – between the 'private' and 'public' spaces of the medieval home, so we see an increasing range of goods associated with the latter distinction. The discussion of chests, and in particular the occurrence of locks, influenced by the work of Sarah Hinds (2018) and Katherine Wilson (2021), shows how the meaning of objects could change in relation

to commercialisation but also to the contexts and ways in which these goods were encountered. The increasing concern with privacy was translated into an increasing concern with security, with these objects as items associated with concealment and enclosure rather than display. In turn, we see the emergence in the coroners' records of goods associated with display: almeries, cupboards and sideboards, which can perhaps be associated with the rising use of pewter vessels.

These examples are not suggestive of a break, or a revolution, in household consumption. Rather, we can conceive of domestic consumption as one component of a developing socio-economic context, reflected by, but also shaped by, changes in architecture, patterns of work and property ownership in the centuries after the Black Death. This is perhaps best exemplified by the emergence of a middling sort. Our findings therefore correspond with those of Sear and Sneath's (2020, 300) analysis in which they conclude that the evidence of wills and probate inventories does not suggest a 'dramatic consumer revolution' in the later medieval or early modern periods. There is a risk of using our data to simply push back the date of developments commonly associated with the early modern period. However, it is more productive to view our data as providing a new insight into the long-term and progressive nature of change, rather than simply proposing a new date for that moment of change. In this regard, it is perhaps plausible to argue that the proliferation of wills and inventories from the sixteenth century has created a false horizon for changes which have deeper roots and, as the disappearance of objects such as mortars and ewers show, are often cyclical rather than linear.

The increasing commercialisation of the middle ages certainly increased the opportunities for households to engage with the market and acquire new types of goods. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of pewter ware, which became fairly widespread. The variability in the range and quantity of goods acquired may suggest that these items were acquired outside of the market (for example through inheritance), but equally suggest a flexible market, where it was possible to acquire single items rather than investing in whole sets. Initially, fairs may have provided a means for these goods, produced in the larger urban centres, to circulate. The evidence from Wiltshire does not suggest that market access was a particularly important factor in determining the presence of pewter items in households, and if this were replicated across the country it would be logical to propose that goods were able to circulate fairly widely and were available to most households with the means and desire to acquire them. Even so, the evidence for dress demonstrates that the dangers of consumption, for destabilising the social order, were recognised, and transgressions did occur.

While certain goods circulated widely, the archaeological evidence points to examples of goods which were less widely available, showing how the reach of markets, although extensive, was not fully developed. As discussed in Chapter 9, the marketing trajectories of imported stone items, which likely came in relatively small quantities, can be traced through networks emanating from the

principal ports. Whetstones are likely to have been relatively cheap goods, while mortars may have been inexpensive, but their use was reliant on access to herbs and spices. The distribution of these goods perhaps highlights the limits to the development of commercial networks; economies of scale did not yet exist to produce and import whetstones in quantities which would be profitable, and demand for mortars was reliant on the ability of households to engage in longer-distance trading networks for exotic condiments, or to access the medicinal and culinary knowledge associated with their use. Similarly, the easterly focus in the distribution of chests in the earlier part of our period, when dendro-provenancing of surviving examples suggests a use of imported wood, implies that redistribution networks were not fully developed, or that levels of demand were not as intense as they would later become. These examples, along with that of sumptuary legislation, demonstrate the contrasts with comparatively unregulated modern mass consumption; imported goods provide evidence of particular articulations of globality, of 'global' networks which seeped into the material experiences of households in medieval England while lacking the intensity of those of modernity.

Rather than claiming a medieval revolution in consumption, the evidence presented here is more suggestive of processes of longer-term socio-economic transition. Consumption cannot be considered outside of changes to the organisation of labour and architectural change, for example. While commercial networks grew and stabilised, the intensity of economic activity had not reached a tipping point at which, for example, there was an economy of scale sufficient for the profitable mass importation and exchange of cheap imported goods. Later medieval consumption had its own limitations: it was performed at a lower intensity, and it was strongly regulated. At the same time, however, the way in which commodities entered homes and were shaped by, and became agents of, social change is not unrecognisable to the modern eye; the insights into medieval consumption provided by these records show it to be distinctive but familiar.

Consumption and household economy

Patterns of ownership of domestic and economic goods (Chapters 9 and 10) suggest that the economic base of a household was the key determinant of its consumption behaviour. Our analysis suggests that those of middling wealth invested heavily in economic goods, typically animals, but also arable cultivation and craft production, at the expense of investment in non-essential domestic goods. In contrast, poorer households, which did not possess the capital to invest in or maintain animals, and perhaps engaged in waged labour using the tools of their employer, could occasionally acquire unusually high quantities of plate and bedding. Wealthier households had the capacity to acquire both economic and domestic goods, and typically had the most diverse range of

objects. This would imply that these wealthy households, which generally had the largest groups of animals and may have had extensive arable holdings, also had the highest potential to generate profit, widening the wealth gap between agriculturalist households.

The evidence for animal husbandry perhaps most vividly highlights variability in the modes of household production. We can observe one group of agriculturalists in both small towns and countryside who had a small number of animals, seemingly to meet the needs of the household: a cow for dairying, a small flock of sheep or a few pigs. These can be contrasted with the larger agriculturalists who were producing meat, crops and secondary products for the market. Production for the market can be seen particularly in the evidence for textile production within our dataset (Chapter 8). Particularly in areas such as Northamptonshire, contrasts have been drawn between households which appear to have processed their own wool, and larger agriculturalists who sold on wool, as well as those households engaged in the processing of wool, either for household use or for the market. Our evidence probably does not reveal the presence of wool acquired for piecework, as this would have been the possession of the employer, but these households would have had to invest in spinning wheels in order to operate as commercial producers.

Investment in the infrastructure and materials of production can be seen in the archaeological evidence for tanning and retting pits, as well as in the escheators' and coroners' records in the form of investment in looms, or skins for tanning. Where the leather industries are concerned, contrasts can be seen between town and country, with rural light leather workers engaging in a mixed economy of agricultural and craft production, a pattern which can also be seen in the evidence for metalworking discussed in Chapter 8. The high standards of living obtained by artisans such as the smith Robert Sprakelyng, whose household practised such a mixed economy, demonstrates the levels of profitability and therefore consumption potential, which could be obtained through catering to the needs of the growing market for commodities.⁵⁵⁵

Our evidence relating to the processing of foodstuffs is more limited. The evidence for brewing within our datasets suggests that it was supplementary to agricultural production, and that such 'by-work' is most typical of those households of middling or higher levels of wealth. Indeed, for the early modern period, Buxton (2015) highlights the need for space and specialist equipment as a limiting factor in poorer households engaging in activities such as brewing or baking. Certainly, evidence for investment in dairying, baking and other food processing activities is very limited, suggesting either a reliance on communal facilities or produce available on the market. While the poorest households in the dataset were investing in domestic, rather than economic, goods on the whole, it is important to remember that it is these households that were

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also likely to be most reliant on the market for foodstuffs (although they may have received foodstuffs from employers, for example during harvest time).

The evidence for the acquisition of bedding and tableware in relation to household economy paints a picture of variation. Of particular interest is the acquisition of small quantities of tableware, below the levels of a full 'service'. This may suggest selective acquisition to meet the needs of a household, the acquisition of these goods as stores of wealth, or, perhaps the acquisition of these goods outside of the market. The data suggests that it is not simply the case that wealthier households had more plate, but rather they present a more subtle picture, where households with different types of economic basis had different needs, inhabited different kinds of spaces and, as such, acquired these items in specific ways, as argued in Chapter 9.

Our period therefore sees an increasing alienation of production, but is also characterised by households with broad economic foundations. The profitability of economic activities was related to the scale of production which could be achieved, opening up the potential for inequality to emerge. Even so, possessions do not simply reflect the wealth of households, but rather households chose to dispose of wealth in a variety of ways, influenced both by the immediacy of market engagement but also the longer-term nature of investment in animals or land (and the obligations that they brought) or craft resources. It was, of course, the solidification and development of commercial networks which provided the context both for the acquisition of goods and household economy, and it is to the influence of the market which we can now turn.

Markets and towns

Our analysis of the relationship between consumption behaviour and market access in Wiltshire (Chapter 10) suggests that market proximity was not a major determinant of consumption behaviour in the county, although this varies in relation to particular sets of goods. Cooking ware appears to have circulated widely, and tableware appears to become more widely available in the sixteenth century, while non-essential soft furnishings may have had to have been acquired in urban markets, unless they were produced by the household. Archaeological evidence does, however, show how the availability of certain objects was limited; the exclusive occurrence of mortars at Gomeldon, a village only a few miles from Salisbury, and, at the national scale, the distribution of imported whetstones are particularly vivid examples.

The different forms of evidence show how households were enmeshed in a variety of commercial networks, from the local to the international, and that the accessibility of goods could vary within and between regions. The focus of chests and locks in eastern England is one example; however, other goods were much more widely distributed, such as the ubiquitous dog-head ewers discussed in Chapter 4. Markets and fairs can be considered as economic

lubricants, creating possibilities for households to encounter goods and enfold them into their household practices and environments. We can, however, observe some regional variability. None of the escheators' lists from Cumberland and Westmorland or Northumberland include items of plate or elaborate items of bedding. Although the records from these localities are dominated by animals, agricultural produce and tools, meaning this feature may be an artefact of seizure practice, a further factor could be the comparative isolation of these households from the commercial centres of midland and southern England. In contrast, the range of goods in households in the south-west are fairly varied, perhaps demonstrating the strong links between the south-west ports and the London region (Allan 1984, 118; see also Sear and Sneath 2020, 302–3 on regionality in consumption patterns over the long term).

The market also played a role in shaping household economies. We see in the historical and archaeological datasets the orientation of production to the demands of the market, be that in the intensification of pastoral husbandry, or craft specialisation. The analysis presented in Chapter 9 demonstrates complex patterns of variability in the domestic economy of rural and small-town households. While in general terms, it can be argued that the majority of households considered within the study conform to what Goldberg (2008) characterises as a 'peasant' mode of consumption, with an emphasis on economic and essential goods, consumption habits varied in accordance with a range of factors including market access, household wealth and economic activities. A strong distinction between small-town and rural evidence is difficult to sustain. As discussed in Chapters 8 and 9, and as is to be expected, we can observe higher levels of craft specialisation in small towns, but rural households were engaged in metal extraction and the textile and leather trades, so this is not a clear divide. In small towns, there is evidence for engagement in agricultural production and while this mostly took the form of small groups of animals, there are small-town households which engaged in more intensive livestock rearing. In small towns and in the countryside, the market does not appear to have stimulated polarised specialisation, but rather households typically maintained a mixed economy, albeit on a spectrum of economic activities. The evidence from Salisbury provides a contrast in this regard, with good evidence for economic specialisation by households in this large town, although the range of excavated objects suggests that even here households engaged in a variety of productive activities which might have been variously targeted at the market (e.g. non-ferrous metalworking) or intended for household consumption (e.g. spinning).

Contrasts between town and country are apparent in the acquisition of cooking equipment, with the occurrence of roasting equipment in poorer small-town households perhaps relating to the greater availability of meat on the urban market. The coroners' records present a picture of increasing small-town/rural polarisation in the acquisition of domestic goods, which may in turn relate to a growing distinction between small-town and rural economies emerging in the sixteenth century (e.g. Everitt 1974). Within the Wiltshire sample, a distinction

can be seen between the archaeological objects from Salisbury and those from elsewhere in the county, suggesting that there was a greater diversity of objects available on the market here, although this is not borne out so clearly in the escheators' and coroners' records. This may be related to the pattern observed in the relationship between the acquisition of tableware and market proximity, which becomes less marked in the sixteenth century, potentially indicating an elevated role for urban markets in provisioning rural households.

The evidence for clothing perhaps provides the best means for considering both difference between town and country and also the influence of larger centres on rural consumption. In Wiltshire, lace ends are rare outside of Salisbury, and the coroners' records imply that new fashions were embraced more enthusiastically in the urban setting. Lace ends are, however, found at rural sites, although they are particularly prevalent in the hinterlands of the major urban centres of Norwich, York and London, perhaps suggesting urban influences on rural consumption. A similar pattern has been identified in Kent in Salter's analysis of dress items found in wills. The evidence for footwear, as best exemplified by the assemblage from Selby, shows an adoption of trends first seen in London, albeit with some time lag.

The data does not suggest a simple relationship between markets and patterns of consumption. The example of chapes shows that new fashions could emanate from major urban centres into the surrounding countryside, yet the evidence from Wiltshire shows that this was not a universal pattern. Strong distinctions between consumption in the countryside and smaller towns are not immediately apparent, with wealth and household economy seemingly being more significant determinants of consumption behaviour. While goods did not flow through marketing networks evenly, meaning that more remote households may not have had immediate access to items such as pewter tableware, the evidence from Wiltshire suggests that this diminished over time. The most significant pattern appears to be the increasing polarisation of small-town and rural household economies in the sixteenth century, which can also be seen to a degree in the evidence for consumption. In relation to bedding, for example, we see poorer small-town households investing in a more diverse range of goods than their rural counterparts, although this distinction is not apparent among the wealthier households.

People and things

So far, the discussion of consumption has largely been framed in economic terms. However, it is important to consider both the motivations for consumption, as well as the possibility of the circulation of goods outside of the market. Evidence for the latter is circumstantial, but is suggested in the escheators' and coroners' records both by references to old or worn objects, and unusual combinations of objects. Old and worn objects include cooking vessels, bedding

and items of furniture. All of these could conceivably have been purchased secondhand, had a long use-life within the home, or have been items inherited or passed on to a household through marriage or some other mechanism. It is likely that many of the objects within households were 'old' and this has only been noted by the escheator or coroner where it has an impact on the valuation assigned to these goods. Items such as bedding were commonly passed through the female line (see Chapter 5). While it is impossible to identify these items, it is important to acknowledge that goods circulated outside of the market and also that people themselves moved between urban and rural households, which may account for a degree of the 'blurring' between the possessions of those living in town and country. Tentative evidence for inherited or curated goods might be seen in the occurrence of ewers in lists dating to the period after which these items appear to have fallen out of popular use.

Ewers, as well as silver (or pewter) spoons and other items of tableware, can be considered a category of non-essential goods which were acquired by households in town and country across the social spectrum. As discussed in Chapter 4, the motivation for acquiring these goods can be brought into focus through a consideration of their design, material and use. It is common for items of pewter tableware to be considered as stores of wealth and also as items for display, creating an image of prosperity which may be important in negotiating social standing within a community, or credit relations with external parties. Archaeological analysis allows us to consider the design and iconography of these items and to put forward alternative explanations, which may complement, rather than contradict, such interpretations. The liturgical references associated with handwashing, the turn to domestic devotion and ultimately the Reformation all provide a context for the increasing visibility of devotional activity within the home, with all these objects potentially providing additional or alternative material media for devotional activity. Interdisciplinary perspectives therefore open up potential to consider alternative interpretations, in which consumers were not simply beholden to the economic value of goods, but can be understood as having varied and complex motivations behind their choices.

The evidence for clothing does provide an insight into the ways in which people fashioned visible identities. The contrasts between town and country, and within the hinterlands of larger centres, in the adoption of new fashions suggests varying levels of social capital could be built up through presenting oneself in a particular way. While the escheators' records suggest a general adherence to sumptuary legislation, investment in coloured or furred gowns suggests that some dared to transgress, presumably being ambivalent about the potential consequences. While the majority conformed and were perhaps wary of the consequences of consumption, commercial growth, increasing economic freedom (for example the ability to acquire rural land) and levels of personal wealth furnished consumers with the agency to acquire goods which challenged the social order and made statements about their social standing and wealth.

We can consider therefore that the changes in the availability and accessibility of goods identified through these analyses created opportunities for material goods to be manipulated in a range of ways. They could be used as symbols of wealth, as indicators of taste, expressions of agency and individuality, or provide opportunities for distinctive material experiences which transcend the importance of the object in purely economic terms. In this way, objects do not simply reflect economic and societal change, but were active participants in these developments, being components of the social relations through which the medieval social order was recalibrated.

Interdisciplinary perspectives

The ‘Living Standards and Material Culture’ project was conceived of as an explicitly interdisciplinary endeavour, and in closing it is worth reflecting on the benefits of such an approach for understanding medieval consumption, society and economy. At a basic level, the archaeological and historical datasets provide different insights into the possessions of medieval households, which rarely overlap. Archaeological objects are often the small items ignored by the escheator or coroner. In contrast, the lists of forfeited movables include objects such as textiles or metalware which would have been recycled or decayed, making them rare occurrences in the archaeological record. At a basic level, the data presented here offers a reminder of the dangers of basing conclusions on a single source of evidence, and demonstrates the richer insights which can be provided by drawing data of different types together.

It was always our ambition to extend our interdisciplinary analysis beyond this basic exercise of ‘filling in the gaps’, to try to understand what interdisciplinary study can bring to our understanding of systems of value and medieval experiences of the material world. There are instances where this perspective has allowed us to present a more informed interpretation: it was only possible to understand the occurrence of querns in Kentish households as observed through the escheators’ records against the distribution of such items in the archaeological dataset, for instance. Our understanding of silver and pewter spoons is informed both by their occurrence in particular types of households, but also through developing an understanding of the iconography and appearance of these items, which allows us to consider them as tactile and immensely personal objects, rather than simply as items for display or wealth storage.

Archaeological evidence also allows for a stronger consideration of how objects function within space and reveals the ongoing processes of architectural modification which took place across our period. Just as the ‘consumer revolution’ should not be considered a single event, so too the ‘modernisation’ of domestic architecture can be seen as the result of longer-term processes, as discussed in Chapter 9. The deeper understanding of domestic space provided by excavated houses allows us to understand better some of the patterns

observable in the possessions of medieval households; for example, the declining importance of trestle tables as spaces became more specialised. Evidence of building fittings also allows us to understand how households made changes to domestic architecture, and the consequences of this in terms of their ability to invest in movable goods, particularly non-essential items.

Finally, archaeological evidence has contributed considerably to our understanding of production and the household economy (Chapter 8). Archaeological evidence provides an excellent source of information on technological processes. However, considering this in relation to the wider evidence for mixed household economies provided by the escheators' and coroners' records frames this evidence in different ways. A focus on a mixed household economy necessitates a greater consideration of the landscape context of technological infrastructure, how it relates to agricultural land, processes of enclosure and also how activities might have been undertaken seasonally around the agricultural calendar.

Closing thoughts

The analysis presented in this study offers a picture of the material world of the medieval household as vibrant, complex and variable. It is clear from the analysis of a hitherto largely unknown body of source material – the escheators' and coroners' records – that we have underestimated the variability and complexity apparent in the possessions of households in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. This situation arose due to the limited availability before now of written sources listing the goods of low status households, and to the relatively narrow range of objects which survive archaeologically. Even so, archaeological evidence has enriched our understanding of the documents, highlighting areas in which certain object types are underrepresented, but also demanding that we consider the references to things in these lists in more than economic terms. While the commercial intensification of the middle ages created a context for this consumption behaviour, it is apparent that this behaviour was determined by more than the simple availability of goods and the presence of the infrastructure through which they circulated. A key theme to emerge from this study is the need to consider the productive and consumption activities of households together, to understand household economy in the round. The acquisition of luxury goods by non-elite households, including some of the poorest in our sample, demonstrates the need to critique simplistic links between objects and social status, and to shift focus to the household as a site of a complex range of material engagements, all of which played a role in shaping rural experiences in this period of economic, religious and social transition.