Manors, Shôen, and Peasant Revolts– Theme 2.2 Early Economies

Use the following sources to compare manors with shôen. Make a three column chart.

During the Heian period, shôen were multi-household agricultural operations, but with the following additional characteristics: Shôen were parcels of land with clearly defined boundaries that were registered with the central government; the government recognized the shôen with some degree of special treatment compared with regular "public" land. Shôen typically enjoyed favored tax treatment, and many were exempt from taxes altogether. In addition to special tax status, the "sovereignty" of the land making up a shôen was sometimes altered so that local government officials or their agents were not permitted to enter it or to regulate its internal affairs. The shôen were almost like small city-states, sovereign unto themselves. Not all shôen were completely alienated from taxes and government control, but most enjoyed a substantial degree of special treatment in these two areas. Everyone who lived on an estate had certain rights and obligations no matter what their social status—ranging from the estate owner to the managers, who represented the interests of the usually absentee landlord, down to the tenant farmers. And the economy was changing as well. As more payments were made in money, and regions became more specialized in the goods they produced, market activities increased. By the fourteenth century, because of commercial development and increased trade with other Asian countries, the Japanese rural population was able to expand their production of rice, silk, linen, salt, cooking oil, iron, charcoal, lacquer wares, and even mushrooms.

In England in this period, 90 percent of the population made their living from agricultural production. The principal social and economic unit organizing this production was the manor—an estate owned by a wealthy landowner and farmed by tenants who were either free peasants or serfs (people who owed obligations of produce or labor to the landowner). The typical manor was a large agricultural estate with fields, meadows, and forests. The lord was usually a prominent political or military figure who—with his deputies—provided government administration, police services, and justice to the people who lived in the villages attached to the manorial estate. By the end of the eleventh century, agricultural production within the manor system was increasing due to technological innovations. Increased productivity resulted in greater agricultural surpluses, which peasants then sold in markets. This led to a boom in the number and size of towns and cities, which in turn led to an increasing number of alternatives to life on manorial estates. Between 1100 and 1300, approximately 140 new towns were documented in England. Urban centers gradually began to offer opportunities to peasants from the countryside: trade in such goods as wool, cloth, and timber, handicrafts, and other jobs. This slow development of a commercial economy eventually resulted in the collapse of the manorial system in England.

Use the following sources to compare the <u>causes</u> and <u>methods</u> of peasant revolts in Medieval England (1216–1347) and Kamakura Japan (1185–1333).

There were two causes of the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381: Parliament passed a statute of laborers in 1351 to limit wages for agricultural workers; it also reduced the mobility peasants gained as a result of the decreased labor supply due to the bubonic plague epidemic. Then, the king tried to raise a poll tax in 1378 to pay for another war with France. The rebellion unified a wide range of English people, from agricultural workers to townsmen to Londoners. The revolt was extremely violent. The rebels actually executed the Archbishop of Canterbury, but when the

peasants tried to persuade the 14-year-old king Richard II to abolish the fees and obligations that tied them to manors, he refused. So, the peasants eventually gave up and went back to their villages. John Ball, a priest who spoke regularly to the people gathered in the marketplace, expressed the sentiments of the English Peasants' Revolt in 1381:

> Good people, things cannot go right in England and never will, until goods are held in common and there are no more villeins and gentlefolk, but we are all one and the same. In what way are those whom we call lords greater masters than ourselves? How have they deserved it? Why do they hold us in bondage? If we all spring from a single father and mother, Adam and Eve, how can they claim or prove that they are lords more than us, except by making us produce and grow the wealth which they spend? They are clad in velvet and camlet lined with squirrel and ermine, while we go dressed in coarse cloth. They have the wines, the spices, and the good bread: we have the rye, the husks, and the straw, and we drink water. They have shelter and ease in their fine manors, and we have hardship and toil, the wind and the rain in the fields. And from us must come, from our labour, the things which keep them in luxury. We are called serfs and beaten if we are slow in our service to them, yet we have no sovereign lord we can complain to, none to hear us and do us justice. Let us go to the King—he is young—and show him how we are oppressed, and tell him that we want things to be changed, or else we will change them ourselves. If we go in good earnest and all together, very many people who are called serfs and are held in subjection will follow us to get their freedom. And when the King sees and hears us, he will remedy the evil, either willingly or otherwise. (Froissart, Chronicles, trans. Geoffrey Brereton, [Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968], 212.)

Shôen encompassed more than large farms; they often included woodlands and fishing villages as well. With the rise of the foot soldier in the massive armies created during the Kamakura shogunate, commoners could increase their social status by challenging the local representative of the absentee landlord. Japanese laborers felt they had a legitimate right to rebel, since their expectations were not being met. But rather than resorting to rioting and destruction, Japanese rebels formed a well-orchestrated theater of protest. Before fleeing into the forests and mountains, peasants would present their landlords with petitions listing their grievances, sometimes invoking Shinto deities to support their claims:

> If we have spoken falsely, may the vengeance of all the deities, great and small, of the 66 provinces of Japan, especially that of the temple's Daishi and Hachiman and of Myojin and the related deities of the five shrines of the estate, be visited upon us. (Thomas Keirstead, The Geography of Power in Medieval Japan [Princeton University Press, 1992]: 73.)