

Medieval England twice as well off as today's poorest nations

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New research led by economists at the University of Warwick reveals that medieval England was not only far more prosperous than previously believed, it also actually boasted an average income that would be more than double the average per capita income of the world's poorest nations today.

In a paper entitled *British Economic Growth 1270-1870* published by the University of Warwick's Centre on Competitive Advantage in the Global Economy (CAGE) the researchers find that living standards in medieval England were far above the "bare bones subsistence" experience of people in many of today's poor countries.

The figure of \$400 annually (as expressed in 1990 international dollars) is commonly used as a measure of "bare bones subsistence" and was previously believed to be the average income in England in the middle ages.

However the University of Warwick led researchers found that English per capita incomes in the late Middle Ages were actually of the order of \$1,000 (again as expressed in 1990 dollars). Even on the eve of the Black Death, which first struck in 1348/49, the researchers found per capita incomes in England of more than \$800 using the same 1990 dollar measure. Their estimates for other European countries also suggest late medieval living standards well above \$400.

This new figure of \$1,000 is not only significantly higher than previous

estimates for that period in England – it also indicates that on average medieval England was better off than some of the world's poorest nations today including the following (again average annual income as expressed in 1990 dollars).

- Zaire \$249
- Burundi \$479
- Niger \$514
- Central African Republic \$536
- Comoro Islands \$549
- Togo \$606
- Guinea Bissau \$617
- Guinea \$628
- Sierra Leone \$686
- Haiti \$686
- Chad \$706
- Zimbabwe \$779
- Afghanistan \$869

University of Warwick economist Professor Stephen Broadberry, who led the research said:

“Our work sheds new light on England’s economic past, revealing that per capita incomes in medieval England were substantially higher than the “bare bones subsistence” levels experienced by people living in poor countries in our modern world. The majority of the British population in medieval times could afford to consume what we call a “respectability basket” of consumer goods that allowed for occasional luxuries. By the late Middle Ages, the English people were in a position to afford a varied diet including meat, dairy produce and ale, as well as the less highly processed grain products that comprised the bulk of the “bare bones subsistence” diet.”

He also said:

“Of course this paper focuses only on average per capita incomes. We also need to have a better understanding of the distribution of income in medieval England, as there will have been some people living at bare bones subsistence, and at times this proportion could have been quite substantial. We are now beginning research to construct social tables which will also reveal the distribution of income for some key benchmark years in that period”

"The research provides the first annual estimates of GDP for England between 1270 and 1700 and for Great Britain between 1700 and 1870. Far more data are available for the pre-1870 period than is widely realised. Britain after the Norman conquest was a literate and numerate society that generated substantial written records, many of which have survived. As a result, the research was aided by a wide variety of records – among them manorial records, tithes, farming records, and probate records."

Professor Broadberry further said that:

“Our research shows that the path to the Industrial Revolution began far earlier than commonly has been understood. A widely held view of economic history suggests that the Industrial Revolution of 1800 suddenly took off, in the wake of centuries without sustained economic growth or appreciable improvements in living standards in England from the days of the hunter-gatherer. By contrast, we find that the [Industrial Revolution](#) did not come out of the blue. Rather, it was the culmination of a long period of economic development stretching back as far as the late medieval period.”

More information: The research is entailed *British Economic Growth, 1270-1870*. The full paper is available at:

www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/eco...tishgdplongrun8a.pdf

Provided by University of Warwick

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