Migrants and Borders in the Medieval English World

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Introduction

'Migrations', we are told, 'are as much part of the human condition as birth, reproduction, sickness and death' (Bade, 2003, p ix). To acknowledge migration – by which I mean an expression of mobility usually involving permanent relocation – as a historical constant is not to dispute that it had distinctive features in different ages and in different parts of the world. Nor is it to suggest that anxiety about it is characteristic only of some societies in recent times. Debates about present-day migration stand to benefit from greater engagement with the historical dimensions of the issue, not because the past provides answers to the questions we ask about our current concerns, but because 'the long view' encourages us to move beyond judgement to understanding. Migration in its various forms – immigration, internal migration, emigration – in the context of the UK in the 21st century is different in a host of obvious and important ways from migration in medieval England, yet some appreciation of the latter has the potential to enrich consideration of the former.

If this is to be achieved, the issue of terminology must first be addressed. There were no equivalents in the languages of medieval England – Latin, English and French – for the words 'migration', 'borders', 'citizenship' and 'race' as we use them today. Historians, in negotiating the challenges presented by linguistic change over time, seek to avoid anachronism while escaping the constraints that strict adherence to the vocabularies of an earlier age imposes (Davies, 2003; Armstrong et al, 2022). They recognize that the permanent relocation of newcomers, the presence of territorial boundaries, the notion of subjecthood and the recognition of the existence of different

peoples were all medieval commonplaces. At the same time, however, they see the 12th- and 21st-century manifestations of these phenomena as distinct. Bernard Gueneé has observed that '[h]istorians find the awarding of prizes for modernity irresistible', but an acceptance of the reality that mobility, including migration, is as old as our species surely lessens the temptation to burden consideration of the past of this topic with the particular concerns of the present (1985, p 18).

Consideration of migration in today's UK, for instance, to a considerable extent concentrates on the crossing of the borders that give the nation state its meaning (Ellenblum, 2002; Anderson, 2024). Medieval England was not a nation state (Watts, 2002). Furthermore, the borders of the English kingdom were not the borders of the king of England's territories: at various times in the Middle Ages the monarch claimed, and often exercised, authority over the other countries of the British Isles as well as adjacent and more distant parts of France (Gillingham, 2014). The borders of the kingdom of England and of what some historians call 'the first English empire' were not static and were not imagined to exercise a function related to migration control (Davies, 2000). Yet kings of England showed interest in regulating who moved into and out of their kingdom – sometimes promoting such movement, at other times limiting it – and recognized that their ability to display their power in this context helped shape the nature of their rule as well as the fortunes of their lands.

Recent scholarship on the 'global Middle Ages' has demonstrated that human mobility in the medieval period was more widespread than has often been imagined (Holmes and Standen, 2018). The traditional and still prevalent idea that 'in pre-modern times the default assumption was that nobody was allowed to travel anywhere – often not even to the next town – without official permission' (Harford, 2021, p 16) is being superseded by one urging that 'we assume mobility in the medieval past unless or until the evidence invalidates this null hypothesis and demonstrates stasis' (Horden, 2007, p xxxiv). Helpful as this 'mobility turn' (Urry, 2007; Anderson, 2024) is in reframing our perception of the scale of human movement in the past, it must be fine-tuned in relation to migration. It may be true, as Horden suggested, that in the Middle Ages 'almost everyone was mobile' (Horden, 2007, p xxx), but not everyone who was mobile sought to move permanently. This explains why this chapter is not concerned with English pilgrims who visited Santiago de Compostela or Rome, English schoolmen trained at Paris and other continental universities, English traders who resided for periods in merchant colonies at Cologne and elsewhere, or English royal administrators and soldiers whose employment involved service outside of England. In all these cases, the presumption was that the individuals concerned would return home; their sojourns abroad spoke to their mobility, not to any commitment on their part to permanent

relocation beyond the kingdom. In contrast, this chapter focuses on those whose mobility constituted what one historian has called 'a one-way ticket' (Khazanov, 2015, p 359).

Medieval migration often involved traversing frontiers, and the study of frontiers has long been a preoccupation of medieval historians (Bartlett and Mackay, 1989; Power and Standen, 1999; Abulafia and Berend, 2002). Medieval charters recording the transfer of land reveal the deep interest of the parties involved in identifying with precision the boundaries between neighbouring parcels of real estate (Berend, 2001). But designating the borders of larger territorial/political units – duchies, kingdoms and empires, for instance – was not to be achieved by simply upscaling thinking that prevailed at the level of the village or the manor. Linear frontiers delimited by natural features such as rivers were to be found in various parts of the medieval West, such as Normandy–France and England–Scotland, but much more common were zonal frontiers. Since Carolingian times, these had been designated by the term 'mark' or 'march', from which we have 'Denmark' and, closer to home, 'the Welsh Marches' (Power, 1999; Barrow, 2003; Lieberman, 2010). Indeed, even a linear (as opposed to zonal) frontier such as that established between England and Scotland in 1237 came to be enclosed within a larger frontier zone that operated its own 'march laws' (Neville, 1998; Armstrong, 2022). Whether 'frontier societies' developed in some of these zones – whether, in other words, we should see 'the frontier not simply as a place but as a set of attitudes, conditions and relationships' – has intrigued historians and is often discussed in relation to the militarized nature of these places (Abulafia and Berend, 2002 p 34; see also Frame, 1989). Undoubtedly, the persistence of sporadic armed conflict in many marches had consequences for patterns of settlement and migration (Barrow, 1989; Frame, 2012). Intermittent warfare on the Anglo-Scottish border and in parts of northern France contested between the French and English in the 14th and 15th centuries, for instance, led to the depopulation of parts of these frontier zones (Allmand, 1983; Ellis, 1999).

There was, therefore, a link between frontiers and mobility in England and its empire in the Middle Ages. To appreciate how different that link was from what prevails today, one need only consult the website of the UK Border Force, where one reads that '[w]e secure the UK border by carrying out immigration and customs controls for people and goods entering the UK' (Border Force, nd). Medieval frontiers were not 'secure'; they were open, and they operated no 'controls' on the temporary or permanent movement of people across them (Ormrod et al, 2019). We must look elsewhere than its borders if we wish to understand England's medieval migration history. We must look instead at the centre, since in a king-centred polity it was with the monarch and his government that the power lay to influence the permanent relocation of people. This chapter therefore focuses on three

groups whose experiences of migration were shaped by the royal will: exiles, colonists and labourers who moved in search of work.

Exiles

Medieval Christians, familiar with the story of the expulsion of their first parents from the Garden of Eden, recognized migration in the form of exile as the original punishment for human sinfulness. However, the exile that began when '[t]he Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you"' (Genesis 12:1), was clearly not motivated by divine displeasure. The idea that exile might have a positive dimension was also to be found in the classical heritage that the medieval West cherished. In detailing the struggles and achievements of Aeneas, Virgil offered a powerful story of defeat and exile that concluded in triumph. It was no wonder that when the barbarian peoples of the West began to write of their origins from the seventh century onwards, they portrayed themselves as descendants of migrants who had suffered and struggled before securing the lands which they subsequently called home (Geary, 2003).

The ability of kings to send their enemies into exile attested to their power in a particularly visible manner (Gibney, 2020). Reflecting on King Edward I's (1272–1307) expulsion of England's Jewish population in 1290, one chronicler remarked: 'You have achieved in one day what the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt failed to do' (Scales, 2007, p 299). For the elite of medieval England, exile, either as punishment or as a means to avoid it, was a familiar feature of political life. The upheavals of the 11th century, both before and after 1066, led to members of Earl Godwin's family and supporters and descendants of King Edward the Confessor (1043–1066) relocating to parts of Europe as far flung as Ireland, Scandinavia, Hungary and the shores of the Sea of Azov (Barlow, 2002; Parsons, 2019). In like manner, exiling supporters of the king against his will represented a very public challenge to royal power. Magna Carta, issued by a reluctant King John (1199–1216) in 1215, contained a clause ordering the removal from the kingdom of named individuals described as *alienigena* – that is, outsiders, aliens, of foreign origin – who were deemed to be a bad influence on the monarch. This marked the first appearance of this significant term in an official English record (Davies, 1984). The expulsion from the kingdom of foreign royal favourites by opponents of the king was a feature of the troubled reigns of Henry III (1216–1272) and Edward II (1307–1327), but as events in the reign of Richard II (1377–1399) demonstrated, exile was not a political weapon reserved solely for use against foreigners. In the late 1380s, Richard's enemies secured the exile of his leading favourites, Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, and Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, and when

Richard returned to the ascendant in the second half of the 1390s, he in turn exiled his aristocratic opponents (Saul, 1997; Prestwich, 2005).

In medieval England, as a result of the development of the legal procedure known as abjuration of the realm, exile was not an experience confined to the nobility. Reaching its mature form in the reign of Henry II (1154–1189), abjuration of the realm – 'this picturesque episode of medieval justice', as Maitland called it (quoted in Pollock and Maitland, 1968, p 590) – saw those accused of felony (usually robbery or murder) and those who had sought sanctuary in church property swear before the local coroner that they would leave England immediately, never to return on pain of death. This form of outlawry was a punishment, but it was also an act of royal mercy in that it spared the life of the guilty party and forbade attacks on him or her. It thus resembled God's judgement of Cain following the murder of Abel: 'You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer over the earth … And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him' (Genesis 4:12, 15; Jordan, 2015). Most felons who abjured were poor, and the lands and chattels they forfeited to the Crown once they had sworn the oath were usually of little value. Perhaps 10 per cent of abjurers were women, and in some instances, husbands and wives abjured together. The procedure offered to individuals and families with little to lose the opportunity to start a new life abroad, but was usually ruinous to those who already enjoyed local status (Shoemaker, 2011; McSheffrey, 2017).

Maitland believed that as a result of abjuration, 'large numbers of our felons were induced to relieve England of their presence and were shipped off at Dover to France or Flanders' (quoted in Pollock and Maitland, 1968, p 591), while Hunnisett argued that

> it would be surprising to discover that more than a minute proportion of all abjurors ever left the kingdom or even reached their ports. What must have happened in the vast majority of cases is that the abjurors sooner or later left the highway and took up residence unmolested elsewhere. (Hunnisett, 1961, pp 48–9)

Most recently, Jordan has argued persuasively that evasion of exile was the exception rather than the rule and has suggested that in the period from 1170 to 1330, at a conservative estimate, 'approximately 75,000 men and women were sent into perpetual exile through abjuration' (2015, p 26).

An aspect of abjuration and of other forms of exile pertinent to the issue of migration and borders concerned the destination of those who were expelled. From the time of King John, the principle prevailed that one and the same law (*una et eadem lex*) operated in the kingdom of England and the lordship of Ireland. Yet the great legal commentary on English common law, *Bracton*, which was probably composed in the 1230s, made clear that

in relation to abjuration, each component of the king's domains remained legally distinct (Hand, 1967). Abjured felons from England could, and did, relocate to Ireland, free from fear of further punishment for their felonies, while England became home to felons who had abjured in Ireland (Jordan, 2015). Abjured English felons were also to be found in the king's French lands. During his sojourns in Gascony in 1242–43 and 1253–54, Henry III granted scores of pardons to felons who had abjured there having committed murder in England (Hurnard, 1969). When the disgraced chief justice of the common bench, Thomas Weyland (c 1230–98), was permitted to abjure the realm in 1290, he promised on oath never to return to England or any other of the king's territories, and made his way to Paris (Brand, 1992; Freeman, 2007).

The destination of exiles from England during the political conflicts of Richard II's reign mattered to those who forced them from the kingdom. The king's noble favourites, the earls of Suffolk and Oxford, were expelled beyond the king's territories – the former died in Paris in September 1389, the latter expired in or near Louvain in the duchy of Brabant in August 1392. The six judges who were exiled at the same time for having supported the king's legal rights against his enemies, on the other hand, were ordered instead to remove themselves permanently to Ireland, and were referred to subsequently as 'justices qe demourent bannyz en Ireland' (the justices who remain exiled in Ireland; Given-Wilson, 2005, p 263). Anthony Goodman's (2011) droll remark with reference to one of the judges, Sir John Cary, that 'parliament eventually decided that life exile in Ireland was an appropriate substitute for death', perhaps misses the larger point that the 'internal exile' of the judges meant something different than expulsion beyond the king's lands. Richard II seems to have understood this: at the Revenge Parliament of 1397, which saw him seek to destroy those who had opposed him a decade earlier, he ensured that the earl of Warwick was banished to the Isle of Man and that John, Lord Cobham, was sent to Jersey, with both islands being described as 'hors du roialme' (beyond the realm; Given-Wilson, 2005, pp 416, 420). Henry Bolingbroke, too well connected to be allowed to remain in the king's lands, was instead expelled beyond them and moved to Paris, from where he launched the coup of 1399, which saw him crowned as King Henry IV (1399–1413) (Given-Wilson, 2017). It appears that for both the humble and the exalted, the complicated nature of the borders of the English king's lands involved opportunities and dangers.

Colonists

For the inhabitants of medieval England, colonization was a form of mobility with a pedigree similar to that of exile, featuring as it did in both the Bible and in classical texts. 'Colony' and the words derived from it have the root

meaning of working the land, and medieval Christians remembered that '[t]he Lord God took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (Genesis 2:15; Crooks, 2022). They also knew that God had later reminded the Israelites: 'I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards which you did not plant' (Joshua 24:13). Colonization in the medieval West, unlike the introduction of the first parents to Eden, involved taking land from those who already held it. When, in the 1590s, Edmund Spenser justified English policies in Ireland with the remark 'for it is usually in the Conquest of anye Countrye that manie of the Conquerers doe plant them selves in the lande of the Conquered', he encapsulated succinctly an approach to colonization that had an ancient pedigree (Hadfield, 1993, p 398; Veracini, 2010; Wilson, 2018). In the century and more before Duke William conquered England in 1066, rulers of Normandy had settled their vassals on the lands they conquered from their neighbours in Brittany and Maine, and they adopted a similar approach to securing their position in the British Isles after the Conquest (Searle, 1988; Hagger, 2017). Under its Norman kings, England became a colonized land into which, at the behest of William I (1066–1087) and his sons and successors, communities of Jews from Rouen, as well as large numbers of Flemings and inhabitants of various parts of northern France, moved and put down roots (Golding, 1994; Holt, 1997).

These kings also used colonization as a means of securing territories taken from neighbouring rulers in the archipelago. At the time of the Conquest, Cumbria was in the hands of the King of Scots, but in 1092 King William II (1087–1100) of England captured Carlisle and expelled its Scottish ruler. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports that he then 'sent many peasants there with their wives and livestock to live there and cultivate the land' (quoted in Bartlett, 2000, p 82). The approach was articulated in a royal charter for the first time in 1171–72. Granting his newly acquired city of Dublin to 'my men of Bristol', King Henry II (1154–1189) declared that the Bristolians were to have it 'ad inhabitandam' (for the purpose of living in; Duffy, 2005). Edward I's (1272–1307) conquest of Wales, which was complete by 1284, was followed by the settlement of large numbers of English peasants and townsfolk, some from as far away as Kent, around Denbigh and Ruthin in the north of the country (Korngiebel, 2007). As part of this campaign, displaced Welsh peasants were resettled in the vicinity on land of inferior quality, in a process which Rees Davies has described as 'more like internal exile than fair exchange' (1974, p 11).

Edward I's attempts to conquer Scotland after 1296 were rooted in the same way of thinking. Following his capture of Berwick and the massacre of its inhabitants in March 1296, he summoned representatives of 24 English towns to meet him at Bury St Edmunds in November of that year to advise him on

how to make his ongoing resettlement of Berwick with English colonists a success (Tout, 1919; Watson, 1998). Efforts were also made to plant English settlers in Berwickshire and Lothian by King Edward III (1327–1377) after he renewed his grandfather's efforts to conquer the northern kingdom after 1333 (Brown, 2007; MacInnes, 2012). Edward III also saw colonization as crucial to the success of his policies in France. 'I wish to repopulate Calais with pure-blooded English', a later chronicler reported the king declaring after the capture of the town in August 1347 (Rose, 2008, p 1).[1] Edward issued a proclamation in the northern and eastern counties of England appealing for colonists to move to the town, promising them liberties and commercial privileges if they did so and, in imitation of his grandfather's actions after the capture of Berwick, summoned representatives of English towns to meet him at Calais to advise him on its future. Almost 200 grants of tenure were issued in a short space of time to English settlers, and an English presence was established that endured for two centuries (Greaves, 1918; Le Patourel, 1984). Finally, after his victory at Agincourt in 1415, Henry V (1413–1422) sought to colonize with English subjects those parts of Normandy and adjacent territories – the *pays de conquête* – that he took from the French. It was his stated wish following his capture of Harfleur in 1417, a chronicler reported, to 'stuffe the toun with English peple' (Allmand, 1968; see also Massey, 1984).

Not all English migrants who settled in new lands did so as part of efforts by the English Crown to extend its territories. It would be inaccurate, for instance, to describe the large numbers of English peasants, town dwellers, knights and clergy who in the century after c 1150 were enticed by successive kings of Scots to settle north of the border as 'settler colonists' (Sharma and Wright, 2008; Veracini, 2010; Oram, 2011). Nor were all the lands claimed by English kings acquired by conquest – Aquitaine/Gascony and Ponthieu, for example, came to the Crown through marriage and witnessed little settlement by English folk. But in those places that were acquired by conquest, the exercise of royal authority and the presence of English colonial subjects were viewed as inseparable. For this reason, the migration to England in the 14th and 15th centuries from Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and from the 1440s Normandy also, of large numbers of peasants and townsfolk of English settler stock, was viewed by the Crown and by Parliament as a serious problem. Noting the campaigns to repatriate Irish-born residents living in England in the 1390s, the St Albans chronicler Thomas Walsingham wrote that 'such a multitude had come to England in the hope of gain that [Ireland] was almost emptied of cultivators and defenders', with the result that parts of the island no longer obeyed the king (quoted in Frame, 2006, p 452). A petition from the Irish parliament to the king in 1421 argued that because so many 'tenants of the land, artificers and labourers' had moved from Ireland to England, 'the husbandry of your said land is greatly injured

and disused, and your said lieges greatly weakened in their power of resisting the malice of your said enemies' (Berry, 1907, p 569). Laws passed by the parliament in Ireland to prevent people moving to England, and the king's commands that people from Ireland residing in England should return across the Irish Sea had little impact on the situation. England's medieval borders remained open and as its empire shrank the kingdom became home to many migrants whose ancestors had set out from England to other parts of the British Isles and to parts of France as colonists in earlier times (Ormrod and Mackman, 2017).

Labourers

Late medieval England became home not only to migrants from other parts of the English empire, but also to individuals and families who moved there from adjacent and in some instances more distant parts of Europe. Anxiety about the political allegiance of such people at a time when England's war with France was going badly was one motivating factor behind the introduction in 1440 of an alien subsidy (the first of its kind in Europe), the purpose of which was to identify and raise revenue from those residing in the kingdom of England who had been born beyond its borders. Initially, even English subjects who had been born in other parts of the Plantagenet lands were included in its remit, but the howls of protest of those concerned quickly reached the ear of the king and they were speedily removed from its provisions (Ormrod et al, 2019). England's medieval immigrants entered the kingdom in search of a better life. This was a motivation they shared with those individuals born in England who chose to relocate within the kingdom. Exiles, colonists, various pied noir groupings and immigrants from beyond the empire were part of medieval England's migration story. Most of those who migrated in medieval England, however, were born there and died there. In an age of open borders, and one in which the 'methodological nationalism' of which Bridget Anderson writes in the introduction to this volume was absent, no very sharp distinction was drawn between 'internal' and other forms of migration in medieval England (Dyer, 2020). It may be fruitful to see the alien subsidy initiative of 1440 in part, at least, as the latest in a series of attempts by the Crown, beginning in the middle of the 14th century, to influence patterns of labour mobility.

'The Black Death', it has recently been argued, 'provides a prominent and early example of a government taking decisive action at a moment of national crisis to protect what it regarded as the welfare of its peoples and to promote its notion of a good society' (Bailey, 2021, p 334). A crucial expression of this policy was the Statute of Labourers, enacted in 1351. In response to the removal by death from plague in the previous three years of some 40 per cent of the workforce, the Statute sought to increase the supply of labour

and limit its cost by, among other provisions, requiring labourers to remain in their villages and enter only into long-term work contracts with their employers (Steinfeld, 1991). In other words, the Crown used parliamentary legislation to try to limit the scale of mobility within the kingdom (Palmer, 1993; Hatcher, 1994). Attempts later in the century to force Irish-born residents in England to return to Ireland, and from 1440 to identify and tax workers who had been born abroad, stemmed from the same desire on the part of the Crown to direct and control the movement of labour.

This mobility had been a feature of English society for centuries before the advent of plague in 1348 (Postles, 2000). So prevalent was it that one historian has remarked that '[l]abour seems sometimes to have flowed almost at random, as if movement occurred for its own sake' (Dyer, 2005, p 226). Unfree tenants, that is serfs or villeins, who accounted for some 40 per cent of the peasantry by the late 13th century, had always been among those who relocated within England, either to towns or to other parts of the countryside, despite theoretical restrictions on their freedom of movement. In the 13th century, when the population was rising and pressure on land was increasing in some areas, it suited some lords to turn a blind eye to the departure of a number of their serfs, though this may in turn have increased the proportion of town dwellers in places such as London and Norwich who were living in destitution (Bailey, 2014; Campbell, 2016). It seems probable that the scale of peasant migration increased after the Black Death, and this has plausibly been identified as the most important factor in the rapid decline of serfdom in the kingdom in the late 14th century (Razi, 1993). In the wake of plague, lords sought to curtail the mobility of their unfree peasants, and the Statute of Labourers 1351 and the Statute of Cambridge 1388, which required labourers who left their manors to carry with them letters stating why they were travelling and when they would return, were designed to help them in this regard (Clark, 1994).

Campaigns to discover and forcibly return flown villeins to their native manors were undertaken by some lords following the enactment of these statutes, but no momentum in this regard could be sustained by these individuals, and the policy was clearly a failure (Schofield, 2003). Those lords and town officials who welcomed migrant serfs were under no obligation to return them to their 'true' lords, and – despite parliamentary statutes – the legal system did not offer much help in the retrieval of those who relocated. A lord had only four days in which to find and bring back an unfree tenant who had fled before being required to purchase a common law writ of recovery to help achieve this end. This involved unwelcome expense and was no guarantee that, once returned to his native manor, the serf would not simply flee again at the next opportunity. The frustration encountered by the aggrieved lord as he sought to curtail the mobility of his unfree peasants, only to find that the authority of his own manorial court had been

undermined by Parliament, is captured nicely in Mark Bailey's observation that '[t]o make matters worse, an English lord who retrieved a serf already bound in a contract of employment with a third party was vulnerable to legal challenge for breaching the contract clause of the Statute of Labourers' (Bailey, 2021, p 105; see also Given-Wilson, 2000).

Migration was not confined to villeins; free peasants, artisans and traders were also on the move in late medieval England. The young were so noticeably mobile that it has been suggested that 'mobility may be perceived as a facet of youth'. This included young women, and the incidence of female migration, especially to towns, was extensive (Goldberg, 1992; Goldberg, 2004, p 91). Population densities in different parts of the kingdom were altered as a result of the permanent relocation of so many individuals and families in the century and a half after 1348. The thriving cloth industry of the south-west of England enticed migrants to the region, while the transition from arable to pastoral farming in the east midlands reduced employment opportunities and promoted movement elsewhere (Dyer, 2005). Towns had been unable to sustain their population levels even before 1348 and always needed to attract newcomers if they were to survive. In the era of plague, registers of freemen and toponymic surnames suggest that in most English towns first- or second-generation immigrants constituted at least a third of the population (Dobson, 2000). Smaller towns in most cases attracted migrants from within a 12-mile radius, but 'regional capitals', such as Exeter, York, Winchester and Norwich drew up to half of their immigrants from a distance greater than 20 miles (Postles, 2000; Childs, 2006). Bristol's migration hinterland was even larger, and Peter Fleming (2007) has suggested that in the early 15th century between 5 and 8 per cent of its inhabitants were Irish born.

Conclusion

Fleming has drawn attention to the hostility displayed towards its Irish community by the authorities in Bristol in the late Middle Ages, while attacks on foreigners, of which the massacre of London's Flemish community in the course of the Peasants' Revolt of the summer of 1381 is the most notorious, were, it has been argued, 'a more frequent occurrence than the fragmentary and scattered scholarly literature on the subject might lead readers initially to suppose' (Scales, 2007, p 286). On the other hand, recent and intense scrutiny of the experience of 'aliens' in England in the late Middle Ages – which in this context means subsequent to the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 – suggests that animosity towards foreigners was rare and arose from local economic problems rather than a more general xenophobia. In a minority of cases, migrants were known to their neighbours by the surnames 'Scot' or 'Irish' and might be targeted for harsh treatment at moments of

political tension, but what has more often caught the eye of historians is the 'apparently high levels of assimilation and toleration of immigrants found in England during the later Middle Ages' (Ormrod and Mackman, 2017, p 10; see also Bolton, 2000).

It was certainly the case that it was not only around migrants from beyond the kingdom's borders that disputes within urban communities might revolve. Samuel K. Cohn Jr has drawn attention to the 'struggles between newcomers, who had immigrated to Shrewsbury from its hinterland since the Black Death, and the town's old order on the eve of England's second wave of pestilence in 1361' (2013, p 124). Initially at least, all newcomers were strangers and the suspicion of the mobile stranger, which was widespread in medieval society, did not distinguish in a consistent manner between those who were English born and those of foreign origin. In *Piers Plowman*, successive versions of which were written between the 1360s and 1380s, William Langland wrote: 'Truth's command to Piers was to stay at home and plough his fallow lands' (Schmidt, 1992, p 75). The most popular tales circulating in late medieval England concerned Robin Hood, a put-upon yeoman who never strayed far from his own neighbourhood and wished only to leave his refuge in the forest, go home and be left to mind his own business (Keen, 2000; Crook, 2020).

If those who did not wander were seen in a positive light, the stranger was viewed with intense distrust. Christ had told his listeners: 'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For … I was a stranger and you welcomed me"' (Matthew 25:34–5). But the Christians of medieval England did not find welcoming strangers easy, whether they originated within or beyond the borders of the kingdom. One of the earliest English law codes, that of Wihtred, king of Kent (c 695–96), decreed: 'If a man who has come from afar or a stranger goes off the road, and if he neither shouts nor blows a horn, he is to be considered a thief, either to be slain or redeemed [by a fine]' (Neville, 2007, p 207). Some five hundred years later, the Assizes of the Watch, enacted between 1233 and 1253, laid down that in the summer months each vill was to employ at least four watchmen, whose job it was to take any passing stranger into custody and pursue them if they fled. Offering hospitality to a stranger without providing a pledge was also frowned upon, being restricted to a single day. Court records, which survive in abundance from the late 13th century onwards, suggest that a link between the presence of strangers and criminal activity was firmly in place in the communal imagination. At the Bedford eyre (circuit court session) held in 1287, for instance, 'almost every criminal was said to be either a vagrant or a stranger' (Summerson, 1979, p 326).

Before the 14th century, the various words for 'stranger' in use in England – which included terms best translated as 'foreigner' – implied no distinction

between people born in the kingdom and those born elsewhere. By then, however, it was commonly held that Englishness was defined by place of birth and parentage, and over time the word 'alien' came to be used more frequently to identify strangers who were not from England (Ruddick, 2013; Ormrod et al, 2019). But England's borders remained open and throughout the Middle Ages people from England migrated to other countries just as migrants arrived in the kingdom from the rest of the British Isles and from mainland Europe. The nature of borders and migration in medieval England was different from their nature today. But the migrant's tale from any era is fascinating, instructive and, Scripture promises, potentially revelatory: 'Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares' (Hebrews 13:1–2).

Note

[1] 'Blood' in this context relates to ancestry, customs and place of birth, rather than to ideas of race based on biological 'purity' (see Ruddick, 2013).

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