Any attempt to compare the situation of Polish and English peasants at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period presents historians with many problems. The problems arise not only from an obvious geographical distance and the lack of direct interaction between the two peasant communities, but also, if not most of all, from dramatic differences between our knowledge of the life of Polish and English peasants respectively. Historical research in the field of the situation of peasants in England, which is conducted not only in the United Kingdom, has established an illuminating and instructive pattern to follow. Access to very rich sources and a long-established interest in the problem of the peasantry have resulted in the development of effective methods, new trends and standards. The emergence of this pattern clearly also benefits Polish historians, especially since the old historiographical tradition connected with such outstanding researchers as Jan Rutkowski, Jerzy Topolski, Antoni Mączak, Leonid Żytkowicz, or Andrzej Wyczaniński, has recently been much neglected.

At first sight, Polish and English peasant economies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were at two radically different levels of development. However, it seems that in reality, and contrary to the opinion of some Polish historians, differences were not so significant and the process of establishing a famous dividing line along the river Elbe had just begun.

In this chapter the focus is on the comparison of some selected aspects of the life of Polish and English peasants at the turn of the Middle Ages and the early modern period. These will include: social structure, legal position, size of holdings, overall economic situation, and diet.

A Polish historian who attempts to understand and then describe in his mother tongue the structure of English society as a whole is inevitably bound to fail. The situation does not become any better when he focuses his interest on a particular group of this society, namely, peasants. Since the publication of a famous book by Alan Macfarlane, the
use of the term ‘peasant’ has been a matter of controversy. Although it is still widely used in literature, it appears that each historian has his own definition of the term. When we study them, we are tempted to paraphrase the title of Peter Laslett’s book *The World We Have Lost* and say that English terminology concerning peasants resembles the world (in which) we have lost ourselves.

English peasants in the late Middle Ages were divided into several categories based on property right and personal freedom. One of them was the group of freemen, that is technically free of lordship, who at the end of the thirteenth century made up about 30 per cent of the population in central England, but their number would gradually decline. At the very end of the Middle Ages such freemen could be found only in isolated areas where drainage or clear cutting processes were still taking place, but “the model English peasant was a tenant of the king, of an ecclesiastical, monastic or lay (non-royal) land lord.”

Tenants were divided into freeholders, leaseholders, copyholders and villains. Differences between them reflect their different measures of freedom, different rights to land, and different levels of burdens. Bearing this distinction in mind, for the purposes of this chapter definitions from *A Dictionary of Historical Terms* will be adopted. That has the advantage of presenting this otherwise complex terminology in a relatively simple and clear way.

“In 1215 Magna Carta recognized persons holding freehold estates as having the right of freeman. The term is used today to denote land held at least for life, and occasionally indicates land which the owner is free to do what he likes with.”

A copyholder “held a written title to his land and a copy of his admission was kept on the manorial court roll. The property of copyholder dying intestate and without issue reverted to the lord of manor.” Villein was “an unfree peasant bound to his lord, who in return for land, gave his lord service and dues...”

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