
ECONOMICS, LABOR & BUSINESS

*When Europe
Lay Fallow*

"The Origins of European Villages and the First European Expansion" by Fredric Cheyette, in *Journal of Economic History* (Mar. 1977), Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Wilmington, Del. 19807.

As in Millet's paintings and Proust's Combray, the "immemorial village" stands at the heart of the European pastoral vision. Historians, notably Marc Bloch and Roger Dion, have argued that these "timeless" communities strewn across Western Europe originated as Roman *villas*—rural estates worked by slaves—and have been continuously inhabited ever since. As a result, scholars have tended to concentrate instead on the "rise of the cities" as a key to rapid medieval economic growth, an expansion unparalleled until the 19th century.

But Cheyette, an Amherst historian, contends that, like the Industrial Revolution, the commercial revolution of the Middle Ages "reposed upon a rebirth of agriculture." While urban areas never ceased to exist after the fall of Rome in the fifth century, the countryside, from the Mediterranean to the British fens, was "slowly emptied of its population." In place of the Roman *villas* but not necessarily on their sites, a new pattern of "nucleated" villages appeared.

Cheyette notes that, in aerial photographs of southern France, field patterns reveal barely discernible but incontestable evidence of the Roman land-allocation grid (710 meters square, known as "centuriation"). Superimposed everywhere upon the centuriation grid are the later "spider's web or cartwheel patterns" of field division, which have been the rule for at least a millennium. Roman *villa* foundations are often found in what are now open fields. Other archeological evidence indicates that many rural settlements were successively abandoned between the third and sixth centuries. Wherever one turns, says Cheyette, a discontinuity is apparent, the result of "a rhythm of repeated blows and partial recoveries."

References to walled villages first appear in documents of the 10th century but do not indicate sudden rural rearrangement. The first rural parishes were organized earlier—in the eighth century. These parishes, with their cemeteries, dues, tithes, and boundaries, "presuppose a structured territory." Cheyette speculates that a mixture of church evangelization, colonization, and simple population growth from 700 to 900 A.D. led to the pattern that exists to this day. The extent of the expansion may be gleaned from the fact that only 250 of the 2,000 villages in the Picardy region of France were founded after the 10th century. So integral was this new form of peasant life to the medieval economy, says Cheyette, that it was not abandoned "even when the plague clear-cut the countryside."