



# 1

## Introductory Remarks

Julia Bruch, Ulla Kypta, and Tanja Skambraks

This book is aimed at students and researchers of history and economics alike. It provides a concise overview of current approaches, methods and sources in premodern economic history, focusing on the time between c. 1300 and c. 1600. To demonstrate how research in premodern economic history can be done in practice, we present sample studies that analyse different economic aspects of the Holy Roman Empire. Studies on this large area still need to be connected to the grand narratives of premodern economic history, like the rise of the West, the industrious revolution, or

---

J. Bruch  
University of Cologne, Cologne, Germany  
e-mail: [bruchj@uni-koeln.de](mailto:bruchj@uni-koeln.de)

U. Kypta  
University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland  
e-mail: [ulla.kypta@unibas.ch](mailto:ulla.kypta@unibas.ch)

T. Skambraks (✉)  
University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany  
e-mail: [anja.skambraks@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:anja.skambraks@uni-mannheim.de)

the evolution of a market economy. In sum, our book has a twofold objective: We want to provide an access to methods and sources for studying premodern economic history as well as give an insight into recent studies of the German premodern economy, thereby paving the path to reconnecting German premodern economic history with the grand narratives that have been developed mainly for Western European regions, like Italy, Flanders, France and England.

The premodern economy is one of the most fascinating and most challenging subjects of study: Analysing it includes the study of history as well as economics. That might sound like a truism. But with the increased use of mathematical models in economics and economic history in the second half of the twentieth century, economic history has been done quite differently depending on whether it was situated in an economics or at a history department. By bringing both perspectives together in one book, we would like to strengthen a strand of current research which reconnects with an even older tradition in economic history: Starting with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prominent scholars such as Max Weber or Gustav von Schmoller have regarded the economy not as a well-defined section of society, but as a part of society which is intricately entangled with politics, social history and questions of ethics. During the past hundred years, there have always been scholars who were convinced that economic activities follow specific rules, but that they cannot be understood if they are not seen as embedded in a society with its specific resources, institutional set-up and norms of behaviour. Albert O. Hirschman and Amartya Sen, for example, rank among the prominent proponents of this view of the economy.

Accordingly, economic history serves as one perspective to study past societies. Recent debates emphasise that to understand economic history, we need both the bird's-eye view and the studies of individual or small group's choices, practices and decisions. The focus on the individual, embedded in cultural traditions, institutional constraints and social obligations, complements the macro-perspective on population movements, aggregate supply or demand, or averages of real wages: Those who want to understand and explain the premodern economy have to comprehend economic processes such as the workings of supply and demand or the concept of inflation. At the same time, researchers of the

premodern economy have to grasp the features and basic concepts of a society which is to a certain degree foreign to their own. They have to understand, for example, unfamiliar mentalities with regard to interest rates, or conceptions of a society with a preordained social order. It is also relevant to have a basic understanding of how to read and interpret premodern types of sources.

In sum, to understand and analyse the premodern economy, historians and economists have to work together. This book lays the ground for such a cooperation: It is one of the first to present in one book historians' and economists' work on the premodern economy. The overview of methodological approaches, sources and research discussions will hopefully give historians and economists alike some orientation in the field. In short, the question this book answers is: How can we do premodern economic history? We tackle this question from a very practical perspective: We show how premodern economic history has been studied during recent decades. This brings into view a wide range of methodological approaches and sources.

The practical examples presented here (Chaps. 6, 7 and 8) analyse the Holy Roman Empire during the period c. 1300–1600. The region and the time frame were chosen because both offer a very colourful perspective on economic history: As a non-centralised, rather fragmented European region, reaching from Burgundy in the West to the Baltic Sea in the East and from the North Sea to Italy in the South, the Holy Roman Empire comprised a variety of regions and forms of government.

The period between c.1300 and c.1600 stands out as an epoch of special interest in two regards: First, the quantity and quality of sources that survived differ from the sources that were preserved from the periods before and after: By far more sources have survived from this period than from any earlier period in history, and they cover a greater range of economic phenomena. Merchants became sedentary during the Commercial Revolution of the High Middle Ages. Thus, their business organisation developed into more complex structures as they had to write down accounts as well as letters to their business partners. A differentiated administration emerged in many towns, and the urban council and personnel produced serial, administrative sources. The landlords also began to introduce written records into their administration, while the

monasteries were being able to draw on a tradition dating back to the Early Middle Ages. Hence, for the first time we are able to grasp everyday economic practices and to collect data from serial sources. Nevertheless, these sources do not provide statistical data in the modern sense. They were not recorded in order to be evaluated with statistical methods. In sum, the sources have to and can be analysed with a number of different methodological approaches. Researchers who want to study the premodern economy between 1300 and 1600 thus have to reflect meticulously on the methods which they employ.

Second, these three centuries are of interest because they span the time between two periods of fundamental transformation of the European economy. During the fourteenth century, important external factors changed the conditions and constraints for economic activity in Western Europe and Germany: The first indications of the Little Ice Age changed the climate, and longer periods of coldness and more rain modified the conditions for agriculture which lay at the foundation of the premodern economy. The Black Death ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1351, always bringing very high death rates with it and profoundly changing the resources of economic productivity and distribution (see section “Population, Demography and Economic Growth” in Chap. 2). Furthermore, the Commercial Revolution that had changed the way business was done came to an end (section “Commercial Revolution” in Chap. 2). New techniques and tools of administration and trade had been developed and were spreading throughout Europe. In the German lands, more and more towns had been founded, which modified and enriched the economic structure and its institutions (section “Urbanisation” in Chap. 2). Certain agricultural regions were developing into special cultivation areas, with a close connection to urban (consumer) markets, division of labour and a joint organisation of production and distribution.

After 1600, the set-up of the European economy changed profoundly again. Roughly a century after the first wave of European colonisation had started, its effects and consequences began to transform the economic system in Europe: Economic activities became oriented towards the Atlantic Ocean, and the longer and riskier endeavours all around the world prompted the emergence of new kinds of business organisations

such as chartered companies. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) devastated large parts of the German lands and massively reduced the population. The period between c.1300 and c.1600 is thus characterised as premodern in the sense that this economy was distinctly not a modern one, while in retrospect we can assess that some features of a modern economy were preconfigured during those centuries, such as division of labour, the difference between town and country, or the financing of large enterprises. Many grand narratives of economic history therefore focus on this period: It has been regarded as a prequel to modernity, a time of take-off of the European economy, a time of transition to capitalism. At the same time, premodern economy and society were different enough from our own to be studied in their own right, that is: not only as a run-up to the modern economy but also as an interesting case of how a different economy did work, how it could function and how it differed in outcomes.

The core of the book is formed by 68 reviewed sample studies analysing the economic history of the Holy Roman Empire c. 1300–1600 with a range of methodological approaches and sources (Chaps. 6, 7 and 8). The reviewed sample studies have been selected according to three criteria: First, they focus on the economic history of the premodern Holy Roman Empire. Research on the economy of the Holy Roman Empire is thriving but could be better integrated into the broader international debates on economic structures and transformations in premodern times. Hence, we outline these debates in Chaps. 2, 3, 4 and 5 and then give examples of studies which could contribute fruitfully to these debates in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8. Second, we selected the studies with the aim to offer a broad panorama of possible methods to do economic history. We aimed at including (a) methods which are traditionally used in historiography and in economics, such as prosopography, source interpretation and hermeneutics, or regression analysis, game theory and institutional analysis; (b) methods whose use is currently debated, such as network analysis (is it possible to do network analysis in premodern times?) or comparison (how does a comparison affect the subjects which are being compared?); (c) newer, experimental or less prominent approaches such as digital mapping or analytical bibliography; (d) methods that historians and economists routinely use but sel-

dom explicitly discuss, such as classification, microhistory, source presentation, the micro-exemplary method, modelling or descriptive statistics; (e) methods imported from other disciplines such as archaeological methods or die analysis. Taken together, the reviewed sample studies show how research on premodern economic history both relies on well-tested and established methods and maintains its innovative power to think of and employ new approaches.

The third criterion for selection was the diversity of the sources. We want to show how broad the spectrum of sources is that can be used for economic history. The studies use well-known source genres such as accounts, rural register and wills were used, but also at first glance unusual sources such as artefacts or theological tracts (see Chap. 10). Nearly all the different methods and sources appear in more than one reviewed sample study; thus the reviewed sample studies present different ways of working with the same method or analysing a specific type of source. Hence, the reviewed sample studies give an overview of current research on the economic history of the premodern Holy Roman Empire, and they offer numerous examples how economic history can be done using different methods and exploiting a variety of sources. This book can of course only offer a selection of studies, and hence present a choice of possible methodological approaches and sources for doing premodern economic history. Even with the three criteria outlined above, the choice remains subjective to a certain degree. But since we were 11 main authors and 16 further contributors working together, all choosing the studies we found interesting and enriching according to the three criteria, the subjectivity was at least multiplied. However, numerous other reviewed sample studies could also have been selected and would have broadened the picture of research even more.

The reviewed sample studies organise the rest of this book: The methodological approaches and sources presented in Chaps. 9 and 10 are the ones used in the reviewed sample studies. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide an overview of important grand narratives (2) and an introduction of current discussions in premodern economic history (3–5). Grand narratives (Chap. 2) are the grand themes of economic history that form the background of many studies analysed in this book: The Great

and Little Divergence, urbanisation, the relationship between population, demography and economic growth, the Commercial Revolution, the emergence of capitalism, transaction costs and institutions, trust and materiality.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 set the frame for the reviewed sample studies presented in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8. We give definitions of terms mentioned in the reviewed sample studies (for instance, credit, money, the market, crafts, landownership) and present an overview of the current state of research. We provide background knowledge for three main areas of the economy—production (3), markets (4), and money and credit (5). Production forms the basis of every economy, all the more in premodern times (see Chap. 3). The reviewed sample studies on production (6) presented here discuss how food and other commodities were produced, and how the particular premodern way of producing shaped the economy and society. Food and other goods were exchanged on urban or rural markets. In premodern times, other forms of distribution existed besides the market. Here, we focus on market exchange since the main interest of economic historians has been concentrated on studying this particular form of exchange (see Chap. 4). The distinction between market exchange and other forms of exchange often remains blurry, however, and the different forms remained interconnected. The reviewed sample studies on the market discuss different players on the market, the rules and norms of market exchange and the commercialisation of the German economy (see Chap. 7). If goods were exchanged via the market, they had to be paid in money or kind. During the time we focus on here, most parts of the Western European and German economy can be regarded as money economies (see Chap. 5). Money, its different forms and values, and the way it was used and conceptualised thus played an important part in the workings of the premodern economy. Due to the scarcity of coins in premodern times, credit and debt played a fundamental role in economic transactions. The reviewed sample studies on money and credit deal with both immaterial and material dimensions of money and credit (8), showing the variety of financial practices, the strategies for survival and profit-making applied by premodern people. In total, Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 contain a number of 68 studies in the form of meta-studies showing how current

and more traditional researchers have applied different methods and have dealt with the source material. They show how the methods have been put into practice, and with what results the sources have been analysed.

Chapters 9 and 10 consist of two glossaries: one of methods and the other one of sources. The first gives a short general introduction into the methods that are employed in one or more reviewed sample studies (see Chap. 9). It is designed as a toolkit for analysing sources for studying the premodern economy and depicts methodological strategies and approaches. Each entry gives a short overview of how the respective method works. Further readings are given for everyone who wants to employ this method in her own research. The glossary of sources (Chap. 10) is complementarily designed to offer some orientation in the vast number of different types of sources which survived from the time from 1300 to 1600. Since the methods and sources sketched here are the ones that are used in the reviewed sample studies, the reader can find at least one example for how each source type and each methodological approach listed in the glossaries has been employed in practice.

This book should at best be read alongside thematic introductions to the events, facts and figures of the premodern economic history and the Holy Roman Empire. A number of classical and very useful handbooks do exactly that, for example, Cipolla (1976), Epstein (2009), Malanima (2009), Persson (2010) and Buchheim, Fouquet, Schulz (2004). Scott (2002) gives a thematic introduction into the German economy 1300–1600. In this book, we provide some useful instruments for a better orientation in the field of premodern economy. Conclusively, we hope that our readers see this book as a starting point for further research on more studies, methods and sources, and that this book might encourage readers to dig deeper into premodern economic history.

**How to use this book?** All parts of this book can be used separately: You may read Chaps. 2, 3, 4 and 5 to get an overview of the grand themes and current debates in economic history; you may study Chaps. 6, 7 and 8 if you want to see how historians and economic historians work in practice, or you can consult Chaps. 9 and 10 if you want to get an impression of the diversity of methods and sources that economic



historians employ, for instance if you are looking for an appropriate methodological approach or sources for your own research. Due to numerous cross-references between the sections, all parts can also be used in connection to each other. For instance, if you search for a specific method, you will also find references to the respective studies described in Chaps. 6, 7 and 8. All entries in the glossary, both for sources and methods, are in alphabetical order. The source keywords are further classified by type of source. The reviewed sample studies are arranged according to the three main themes: production, market, and money and credit. Each chapter lists the reviewed sample studies in alphabetical order of the author's name. Of course, these three themes overlap, so the assignment of some of the reviewed sample studies to just one of the thematic strands can be debated. However, for the sake of a clear structure, we assigned each study to only one of the three main themes.

This book benefited from the work, help and advice of many colleagues. We thank all authors involved in the writing of this book. First and foremost, we thank all colleagues who were working with us from 2015 to 2018 as members of a research group entitled “Handeln, Kalkulieren, Wahrnehmen. Für eine neue Methodik der Spätmittelalterlichen Wirtschaftsgeschichte”, founded by the German Research Foundation (DFG): Ulf Christian Ewert, Angela Huang, Stephan Köhler, Niels Petersen, Kathrin Pindl, Christian Scholl, Sebastian Steinbach and Marco Veronesi.

We also express our gratitude to all external authors supporting this work by inspiring contributions: Max-Quentin Bischoff, Eva Brugger, Ivonne Burghardt, Eva Cersovsky, David Chilosi, Karina de la Garza-Gil, Sabine von Heusinger, Benjamin Hitz, Hiram Kümper, Martin Kypta, Simon Liening, Carla Meyer-Schlenkrich, Paul Schweitzer-Martin, Ulrich Müller, Sven Rabeler and Mark Spoerer. Besides, a number of guests and colleagues enriched our work by fruitful advice and discussion during our meetings: Laurence Fontaine, Giacomo Todeschini, Oliver Volckart, David Chilosi, Lars Boerner, Dorothee Rippmann, Werner Trossbach and Annette Kehnel.

Generous support was also given to the project by Gerhard Fouquet, Thomas Ertl, Mechthild Isenmann, Eberhard Isenmann, Franz Irsigler, Michael Rothmann, Jochen Streb and especially Simon Teuscher.

## References

- Buchheim, Christoph, Gerhard Fouquet, and Günther Schulz, eds. 2004. *Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte. Arbeitsgebiete, Probleme, Perspektiven*. Stuttgart: Steiner.
- Cipolla, Carlo M. 1976. *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Society and Economy. 1000–1700*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Epstein, Steven A. 2009. *An Economic and Social History of Later Medieval Europe, 1000–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malanima, Paolo. 2009. *Pre-modern European Economy: One Thousand Years (10th–19th Centuries)*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Persson, Karl Gunnar. 2010. *An Economic History of Europe. Knowledge, Institutions and Growth, 600 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scott, Tom. 2002. *Society and Economy in Germany, 1300–1600*. Basingstoke/ New York: Palgrave.